

# From the Chair

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## It's Not about the Boxes . . .

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Since moving to Maryland I have internalized a number of pithy local sayings as well as a taste for crabs (although I still don't like picking them, which marks me as not a true Marylander). One of my favorite maxims is that "every donkey thinks its load is the heaviest!"

I begin with this as it captures the essence of a realization I had in preparing for a recent presentation at West Virginia University's 125th anniversary as a depository library—every decade has presented challenges for government information librarians. From microfiche distribution—which was going to be "the future of distribution"—to trying to address the shortcomings of Title 44 (*US Code*) as we moved into the digital age, we have adapted to new situations and expectations.

That said, I do think that there are some challenges currently facing the government information community that GODORT is uniquely positioned to help resolve. Many of these have antecedents in earlier decades, in some ways they are familiar challenges that come with new twists.

1. We must move beyond a focus on the containers and focus instead on service. The future of government information departments will be about e-government services. Having been involved with GODORT for years (and I hope for many more), I know that service has always been a point of pride for government documents librarians. But a future built around e-government service will demand more. It will extend to how we use and create content and help our clientele interact with that content. To be successful in the future, GODORT must work with our colleagues across ALA to create a vision for government information, including e-government, built upon service and support and not around containers.
2. In designing these new services I believe that we have a responsibility to ensure that our solutions embrace not the latest technology but the *best technology* for the need. The future (and to some extent the current) expectations of our users will be for electronic resources and not just static files but rather dynamic resources that they can capture and manipulate as they see fit using either tools that we provide or that they bring to their particular task. Libraries have always been about creating tools to access information and we need to reassert our leadership in this area.
3. We must continue to support our professional associations. The strategic planning effort underway in GODORT will, I hope, position us for the future but we must also continue to reach out to other organizations that share our values. I have tried, with some small success, this past year to build collaborative relationships within and outside of GODORT and I urge our membership to continue to build new and effective coalitions to help ensure continued access to government information at all levels. For example, I would like to see GODORT (and ALA) more directly involved in such efforts as the Open House project and with the Open-the-Government.org's *21st Century Right-to-Know Agenda*, two far-reaching and aggressive campaigns devoted to access to information.<sup>1</sup>
4. Finally, we must keep at the forefront of all that we do—and all that we advocate for—our commitment to free, permanent, and unencumbered (that is *no* embedded digital rights management software or controls) public access to taxpayer-paid research and government information. Access to information *is* a public good and a right that GODORT has always stood for and we should never back away from it even in the interest of expediencies like *public/private partnerships* or in the face of administrative intransigence.

Because I began with a "Marylandism" I'll conclude with a quote from a famous Marylander, Walter Sondheim: "There are some jobs only a damned fool will do, and if you're one, you have an obligation to accept such an assignment

when it's offered to you.”<sup>2</sup>

While I don't mean to suggest that you have to be a fool to want to be chair (well, maybe just a bit . . . ) but instead, as Sondheim suggests, being part of a community demands being responsible to and for that community. Being chair of GODORT has been busy, occasionally frustrating, and sometimes bewildering but always an honor. GODORT is a great group I am proud to be a part of. I want to extend my thanks to the members of GODORT Steering for 2007–08 for their guidance and support. They *are* the true leaders of our round table. Finally, I thank you—the membership—for the opportunity to serve.

## Notes and References

1. For more information, visit [www.theopenhouseproject.com](http://www.theopenhouseproject.com) and [www.openthegovernment.org](http://www.openthegovernment.org).
2. Walter Sondheim quoted in Michael Dresser, “Sage Adviser, Key Figure in City's Growth,” *Baltimore Sun*, Feb. 16, 2007, sect. 1a.