Funny things happen when you notice book dust and red rot under your fingernails as you sit down to write an essay about digital government documents. You start thinking about where we really are as a government documents community. Lots of federal depository libraries are shoring up, if not drastically downsizing, their tangible collections. To their credit, most comply fully with their regional federal depository library (FDL) and with GPO guidelines, and are also retaining unique items from state and local governments. Larger libraries, frequently in the same geographic area as the smaller selectives in question, tend to take these discards, as is the case with my library. This means that many of us in large selectives or regional depositories are in the position of checking thousands of discarded items against local holdings, and it is dirty work. So as I inhale gov docs dust while I try to follow the latest Web 2.0 trends, my thoughts have wandered a bit. Here are some of the things I see, and I need someone else to tell me if I am on track.

First, it is interesting to see libraries adopt next generation online catalog systems such as WorldCat Local to provide a new interface to their holdings (basically using a local version of OCLC WorldCat to provide access to your own materials). This happened at our shop, and it opened up all our collections, including government resources, in ways we could not have foreseen. If your institution takes such a step, be forewarned: librarians and veteran library users may be reluctant to embrace this platform. But a vast majority of users will take to it right away and love it. Google Books is interoperable with WorldCat.org through Google’s “Find this book in a library” feature, and then WorldCat.org in turn is a direct connection to most libraries’ online catalogs and user-initiated request/interlibrary loan (ILL) operations. All of a sudden, the digital can become the tangible. People identify a book they want via the Internet (WorldCat or Google or GPO or anywhere else), and there are now fewer and fewer clicks required to obtain the book from a library or download, print, or purchase it. Isn’t this the moment we’ve been waiting for with government information? Have you checked your library’s ILL statistics lately? Many ILL departments are booming—some need to add more staff to keep up with the demand for service. Books and journals and DVDs and CDs get described online and at least some people want to hold the real artifact in their hands. In the government information realm, the lending library is probably an FDL, but the user will not know this or need to know it. Most Americans use some form of government information every day but don’t think of the act as consciously as we do. I have no doubt that the GPO’s Federal Digital System (FDsys) might one day be seamlessly interoperable with systems like WorldCat or Google Books. Why not? And print on demand is actually becoming much more of a real option, especially for those lucky devils at the University of Michigan Library with their Espresso Book machine (www.lib.umich.edu/ebm). Theoretically, federal documents, with mostly copyright-free status, have been perfect candidates for print on demand all along.

If our WorldCat Local experience has led me to many mini-epiphanies, I have also experienced some light bulb moments around basic web interface and usability issues. Recently I viewed a video of usability testing from our own ITS department. We were trying to figure out why so few people were clicking on our Reference Tools link. We pay big bucks for online encyclopedias and the like; why were these high-end tools getting low use? As I viewed each of the subjects performing the usability task, two things became clear: (1) online users rarely start their basic information searches from a library’s webpage (no big surprise there), and (2) if they do, they have no idea what Reference Tools might mean. Just nine minutes of that in-house video cut through hours of presentations about user trends, analysis of metrics, and so on. It was as if I finally got it—terms like “reference,” “periodicals,” or “monthly catalog” mean absolutely zilch to most people. I’ve still got a little mourning to do: I wanted to fix the “incorrect” user behavior and lecture the participants about the grand history of Reference Tools. But those days are gone. We don’t have to mourn: today’s users are aggressive and frequent searchers, and they’re trainable. We documents librarians are trainable too, and right now we have to train ourselves to see that the vast, vast majority of users want government information online. They are counting on us to have the expertise to help them contextualize the information, and to know where they can obtain variant editions, earlier issues of materials, and more. But they’re mostly going to want to do it themselves, and we have to help them by positioning resources (and ourselves) where they can find and make sense of them. And as the users’ advocates, we will do everything we can to make sure government resources are free and permanently available, for all levels of government.
Sometimes librarians get overwhelmed when thinking about how to best keep up with trends and developments in the library world; this might be one reason we meet too frequently (oops, some true editorializing there). How do we stay educated, current, and conversant about things? We might look to a sister association for some clues. I mentioned in my first column that I had a great experience at the Medical Library Association (MLA) conference in 2006, which came during my two-year, self-imposed hiatus from ALA conferencing. As it turns out, MLA librarians had heard about GODORT’s “Demystifying Government Sources: Government Information for the Rest of Us” preconference (ALA Annual Conference, Chicago 2005), and they were wondering if we could adapt any of it to a continuing education class for an MLA conference (www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/rts/godort/godortcommittees/godortprogram/2005preconf.cfm).

Eric Forte and I jumped at the opportunity to reach out to an organization with which GODORT has little regular contact. I used it as a mission to investigate this association known for efficiency, focus, and superior education of its members. Medical librarians sometimes list the initials “AHIP” after their names. This stands for the Academy of Health Information Professionals. Medical librarians attend continuing education classes constantly, and if the classes are MLA-certified, the librarians gain credit toward their ever-accruing Academy total. It takes fifty credits accrued over the past five years to be considered a member of AHIP. MLA is a smaller association (about 4,000 members compared to ALA’s 65,000), and I may be looking at it through rose-colored glasses. Medical librarians don’t seem to get as bogged down in process as we do, and they don’t seem to overmeet. Medical librarians understood decades ago that the future of critical information dissemination would occur online. As a group, they moved forward into online expertise carefully, but without too much wringing of hands, and they did not look back.

I have my own theories about why this is so, including the use of successful models from medicine and professional medical associations, the existence of a National Library of Medicine to coordinate the central bibliography (Index Medicus, online as PubMed), a history of corporate sponsorship from well-to-do medical companies, and a profession in which the quick, accurate transmission of information can save lives. But the bottom line is that this institution, four times the size of GODORT, has a sound structure, and we can learn from it. If you have never ventured to www.mlanet.org, take a look. See how their sections and special interest groups are organized, and learn about the academy at www.mlanet.org/academy/acadfaq.html. This may give us some totally new ideas for our strategic planning process.

I close this column with thanks to you, our members, so many of whom are in active service to GODORT right now. Truly, the simplest tasks we all carry out daily have a cumulative effect in this community. I personally thank you for your efforts, and I would like to hear about your “light bulb” moments, too.

References