From the Chair

Where’s that crystal ball when you need it?

Kirsten Clark

It used to amuse me to read editor’s columns in major monthly magazines. Three-fourths of the time, the editor would start the column with something like, “by the time you read this….”

By the time you read this, the fashion powers-that-be will decide that the color of the year will be something called magenta vortex or iridescent hummingbird.

By the time you read this, we will have a new president but not knowing the outcome, I can safely say it will be a Democrat or a Republican.

By the time you read this, the snow will be knee deep and you will be counting down the days until May 1st when spring most likely will have sprung. (I’m just being realistic here—I do live in Minnesota.)

However, since first writing the Washington Report column as chair of the Legislation Committee a couple years ago, and now writing this GODORT chair column, I have a new found sympathy for anybody that has to expound on a topic where a crystal ball would come in really handy. I spend quite a bit of time choosing my words carefully so that not only three months from now, I don’t sound completely out-of-touch with the current situation but also ten years from now I don’t sound like a complete idiot by stating something like congratulations Hillary Clinton on your party’s presidential nomination. I’m not really being realistic here—who among us have truly gone back and read the chair columns from ten years ago?

Toward the end of this column, I will touch on where GODORT is with the three paths I want to work on during my time as chair. Before that though, I want to hedge my bets on not sounding totally off base three months from now. Since my last column, there has been a definite change in the air within Washington and Congress. Federal government budget appropriations have always been a big deal and each year there is some type of cut to government programs that directly affect how we access government information. This year, though, the cuts have hit more directly to the lives of government documents librarians.

Yes, there have been cuts in the past, but the extent envisioned by Congress this time cut to the core of some things that we in the government information field, and in the depository library program, have held dear for centuries. We argue with not only the direct hits we might experience, but also the thinking and motivation behind these hits. There is the dissolution of the Statistical Compendia Branch and the potential loss of our beloved Statistical Abstract. There is the potential cut in funding to the Government Printing Office and FDSys, which would eliminate basic access to key publications of our government. There is the current initiative to take out redundant government information websites, but with no plan to ensure that unique information is not lost when these transitions move forward.

During this past summer, postings on ALA Connect and GOVDOC-L, as well as various state, local, and national websites and groups, have been pushing all librarians to contact their representatives and senators to comment on these above issues. Several people have asked what GODORT is doing and, as I mentioned in my e-mail to GOVDOC-L, we as an organization are doing what we can. We are pulling together information. We are working with ALA to get the association’s message to Congress. The bulk of the work, though, needs to be done by the people on the line—the librarians and library staff that work on a daily basis with those wanting to access government information. Letters, e-mails, and phone calls from constituents prove to have the most clout with Congress.

Here now is where I would love to look into my “our future is so bright” crystal ball and say we succeeded. We as GODORT members and the general library profession helped convince Congress that the Statistical Abstract and similar publications are worth saving, that we helped to get full funding for FDSys and GPO restored and that we saved the world from loss of government information online.

Then I turn around and look into my “Wicked Witch of the West” crystal ball where Congress is cackling, “I’ve got you, my pretty Statistical Abstract, and your FDSys too.” We as a group of GODORT members and the general library profession did not convince Congress that the Statistical Abstract was worth saving, that FDSys is better off as a static database, and that the world doesn’t need easily accessible government information because it would be much better use of funds to have an uninformed populous who has no easy way to find out what their elected officials are doing.

But now let’s take a look into the “Reality” crystal ball. Most likely by the time you read this column, we will have seen a middle ground where we didn’t get everything we
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wanted, but we saved some things. I’m not going to speculate on what we did save, but in watching the process so far and thinking about what could be there is one thing that seems to be missing from the current conversations and that is planning not only to save what we can but also planning on how to handle the potential loss of services.

How will we—or how did we—react to the loss of services? Are we all wringing our hands and lamenting the demise of government information access? Or, are we continuing to fight and to show to Congress and others in the federal government that we aren’t going to take it. Give us lemons and we may not be able to make lemonade but we can sure make some great Arnold Palmer’s.

I will be willing to bet that three months from now, people will be asking: What is GODORT doing about the situation, and how are we stepping forward? As has been the case for the past couple months, GODORT will be doing what it can to move the issues forward. We will be pulling together information and working with the ALA Washington Office to get our message to Congress. What are you doing to help us move forward? Are you continuing to contact your Congress members to push for funding and/or to thank them for the funding they did provide? Are you looking for new ways to provide access to information we have lost? Are you seeing the potential silver linings that come out of whatever happens? And yes, you may need to get out the magnifying glass to see them.

The current budget situation in Washington in some ways echoes where we are with GODORT right now. In my last column, I talked about where GODORT has been for the past couple of years and where I see it going. I outlined three areas I wanted to work on during my time as chair: (1) moving forward on the Strategic Plan, (2) solidifying our policies on virtual membership, and (3) finding the balance point between providing enough structure to ensure that the organization moves forward while still providing flexibility to move quickly on new ideas.

Since that last column, the Bylaws and Organization Committee, with the help of the Steering Committee, has been working on the new version of the Policies and Procedures Manual to ensure that changes made in the past couple years are incorporated into a single document and provide a starting point for the year’s discussions on the Strategic Plan and virtual membership. In addition, we have also been filling out some of the committee memberships so that we have representation from as many members as possible as we look at the structure of GODORT and how we can better respond to the needs of the organization and to the changing nature of government information creation, preservation, and advocacy.

This fall, the committees will be discussing how they have done their business over the past couple of years and what, if anything, needs to be changed to ensure that the needs of GODORT are met for the next ten years. There will be continued discussion as well as potential bylaws changes brought forth at Midwinter. Just as letting Congress know how we feel about potential budget cuts to government information resources, so too do you as GODORT members need to let committees, such as the Steering Committee, know your thoughts regarding the future of GODORT. There will be opportunities for GODORT members to be a part of those discussions, both virtually and in person. Many of you have taken time to write and talk to Congress. I hope that we see the same level of discussion when looking at how GODORT can serve you all in the future.

Reference

1. Kirsten Clark, “Re: Library Journal article on GPO and census cuts,” e-mail to GOVDOC-L, August 9, 2011.

Give to the Rozkuszka Scholarship

The W. David Rozkuszka Scholarship provides financial assistance to an individual who is currently working with government documents in a library and is trying to complete a master's degree in library science. This award, established in 1994, is named after W. David Rozkuszka, former documents librarian at Stanford University. The award winner receives $3,000.

If you would like to assist in raising the amount of money in the endowment fund, please make your check out to ALA/GODORT. In the memo field please note: Rozkuszka Endowment.

Send your check to GODORT Treasurer: John Hernandez, Coordinator for Social Sciences, Northwestern University Library, 1970 Campus Drive, Evanston, IL 60208-2300.

More information about the scholarship and past recipients can be found on the GODORT Awards Committee wiki (wikis.ala.org/godort/index.php/awards).