

Submitting Organization: U.S. Department of Energy, Office of Scientific and Technical Information

Contact: Walter L. Warnick, 301-903-7996, walter.warnick@science.doe.gov

Paper Name: Public/Private Sector Competition Issues in Disseminating Information in an E-Government Environment

Category: Challenges and Opportunities | Competition/Collaboration

Format: MS Word (below)

Document Name: competition.doc

Public/Private Sector Competition Issues in Disseminating Information in an E-Government Environment

Issue Statement

The implementation of E-Government presents many new opportunities for Federal agencies to more effectively meet their mandates to make the results of their efforts readily available to the broadest possible audience in the most efficient and useful manner possible. Some elements in the private sector claim that allowing public access to the new capabilities embodied in E-Government represents unfair competition by providing a service that should be the purview of commercial publishers and information vendors.

Background

All Federal agencies have a mandate to return the benefit of their efforts to the taxpaying public. In addition to agency-specific legislation directing the dissemination of information to the public, there are also some key mandates and guidance that apply to all agencies. These include:

- USC Title 44, Public Printing and Documents, in which each agency is required to manage information resources to improve integrity, quality, and utility of information to all users within and outside the agency, including capabilities for ensuring dissemination and public access to government information (44 USC, Sec. 3506);
- Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, which defines responsibilities of the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to develop and implement management policies for the dissemination of information (44USC, Sec. 3501);
- OMB Circular A-130, Management of Government Information, which provides guidance in the implementation of the Paperwork Reduction Act, and has recently focused on issues such as collection and dissemination of information in electronic formats, respective roles of public and private sector information providers, and the pricing of information products.

The implication therein is that this return be accomplished in the most effective and efficient manner possible, with minimum burden, consistent with existing guidance, regulations, Executive Orders, and statutory requirements.

In those agencies with science-related missions, the primary product of these efforts is scientific and technical information (STI), which provides the fuel for discovery, innovation, and application that fosters U.S. economic competitiveness as well as public health and well being.

The dissemination of STI is a long-recognized role of the federal government. Centralized means of implementing this role, such as the U.S. Government Printing Office, have traditionally been considered as a minimum requirement. Most agencies have taken advantage of many additional avenues, both Federal and commercial, for making their information available to the broadest possible audience.

Situation

With the advent of the electronic information age and the technology advancement that opened exciting new ways to compile, deliver and use information, Federal agencies seized upon an opportunity to greatly expand the quality and comprehensiveness of service provided at a greatly reduced cost per customer served, and the government began a transformation into the era of E-government.

In the science mission agencies, the new tools and innovative technology applications provide a means to provide their own sponsored researchers with a means to locate, retrieve, and use information they needed to conduct mission-related research and development in support of U.S. industry and the economy in general, regardless of the source of the information.

The electronic/digital capabilities inherent in an E-Government environment has spawned a new way of conducting science, affecting how research is done as well as how it is disseminated and shared to achieve maximum benefit from R&D results.

Since science does not stop at the Federal threshold, it is imperative that research results be shared throughout the nation and the world among those who can use it in adding to the body of scientific knowledge and apply it to real-world situations to the benefit of mankind.

In an E-Government environment, the science agencies can readily provide their vast resources to the public at a very low cost per user served. E-Government represents a quantum leap to an era where scientific and technical information is a fully integrated resource in the research and development process, and accessibility is no longer a barrier to its widespread use.

Issue

With the new capabilities inherent in an E-Government environment, the science agencies are now able to meet their mandated requirements in a highly effective and efficient manner. Costs of dissemination are greatly reduced, and easy access to research results is provided at the customer's desktop.

With this transition have come arguments by some commercial publishers and secondary redistributors in the private sector that this inherent advantage of E-Government is in competition with their interests.

This argument strongly implies that E-Government as a means of transacting business in the scientific sense should be left to the private sector to develop as they see fit, at such time as they can make a profit. In the meantime, any E-Government initiatives undertaken to provide Federally-sponsored scientists with information to carry out their missions should be withheld from the broader public, even though it can be made readily available to the public at little or no incremental cost.

This argument runs contrary to both the letter and intent of Statutory mandates requiring agencies to make the results of their efforts available to the broadest possible audience by the most effective and efficient means possible, and does a disservice to U.S. citizens, who have a right to the Federal information resulting from their taxpayer investment.

There is an essential role for the private sector in information dissemination that cannot be filled by Federal agencies. The peer-review aspect of scientific publishing remains the most essential criteria in assessing and evaluating the validity and relative value of scientific discovery. Communication of science in value-added forums as provided by the private sector facilitates insight and knowledge creation. While the paradigm of "how" the private sector adds value, packages, and markets information products is changing, the need for such services will only increase as users and the volumes of information continue to grow.

It should be noted that many publishers and redistributors view this new paradigm in Federal information dissemination as a positive new event in the advancement of the Information Age, and see new opportunities for public/private sector collaboration that will benefit all stakeholders and the public at large.

Facts

Information constitutes the foundation of accumulated knowledge that fuels advances in technology, science, and economic viability.

Information dissemination by Federal agencies in an E-Government environment is a logical extension and evolution of service recognized as a responsibility of the Federal government almost since its inception.

The electronic age is here, and information dissemination in an E-Government environment is an innovative outgrowth of technology advancements that allow increased coverage at significantly lower cost.

Most Federal agencies are utilizing Web-based tools to facilitate access to scientific information via the Internet, the most universally extensive public forum in the history of the world.

Electronic information dissemination by the Federal agencies benefits not only the scientific community. It also serves both the public and private sector stakeholder community, from the information vendor who saves money by having to do less preparation in the development of his/her product to the interested citizen who holds these agencies accountable for the sound expenditure of his/her taxpaying investment.

Unrelenting technological advancement continues to drive a shift in the information publishing and dissemination paradigm.

Conclusion

In a democratic society, access to knowledge represents empowerment. The U.S. network of libraries, public schools, and sources of free government information is an expression of the value we place on information access.

The concern by some in the private sector of "unfair competition" is because agencies are now collaborating with other publishers in the private sector to make information freely available to the public at no cost. The contention of "unfair competition" is counter to the requirements of OMB Circular A-130 and other legislative requirements. The government is providing to the taxpayer the information generated from taxpayer funded R&D. The incremental cost of dissemination paid by the agencies is substantially less than the costs for dissemination in a paper-based world, therefore saving millions a year in government costs.

The key difference in the services provided is that of "value added services", the heart of competition. The government products provide the basic access to the freely available information, lacking value added services, whereas the private sector provides the value added services that encourage the customer to purchase their product.

The government-supplied information with no value added is the only opportunity for millions of students and educators and small business entrepreneurs to have access to this information which, in turn, provides for the future economic strength and security of the nation. In this regard, Federal agencies are providing access to a resource that citizens have already paid for with their tax dollars.

This vast U.S. information community must be encouraged to work in collaboration to develop effective networks that capitalize on widely dispersed sources, assimilating the

cumulative information, resources and capabilities of both the public and private sectors into widely available knowledge bases. These extensive interconnected knowledge bases provide an infrastructure for the advancement of science.