

editorial

New GPO: threat to research publication

This past summer the Congress took on the long over-due job of reorganizing the government's vast printing operations. But its initial efforts (as embodied in companion bills HR 4572 and S 1436) triggered spasms of anxiety in the scientific publishing community. The new bill proposed to centralize in the Government Printing Office the printing and distribution of all public documents, the goal being to achieve gains in cost and efficiency over the present system in which government agencies do much of their own printing and distribution. However laudable the intent may have been, the bill presented problems for the scientific community because the definition of "public document" in the bill included scientific papers reporting on work supported wholly or partially by the government. The bill required that any public documents must be published first by the GPO (including the scientific papers wholly or partially funded by the government) unless a non-government publisher applies for and receives a specific waiver.

In his testimony before Congress as a representative of the scientific community, Fred Spilhaus, executive director of the American Geophysical Union, pointed out that the provisions of the bill would endanger the peer-reviewed scientific journal system. In some disciplines as much as 90% of the research is government-supported, at least in part.

We are happy to report that Congress was responsive to this problem. There is now a revised bill (HR 5424) that proposes to replace the GPO with a new National Publications Agency, reflecting its broader powers. The accompanying statement of intent for this most recent bill points out specific revisions that have been made to exempt research publications from the new requirements.

Unfortunately it would appear that the bill itself has not been sufficiently reworked to make it conform with the stated intent. Thus wording in some parts of the bill still appears to contradict the intent to exempt scientific literature. Moreover, to have first publication rights for a government-funded scientific paper it would still appear necessary to obtain a waiver from the new agency. A second waiver might still have to be sought to have the right to distribute

the material after it is printed, and in some instances the bill still requires a nongovernment publisher to distribute works free of charge to each one of the over 1300 depository libraries in the country. This would mean an onerous financial obligation for most scientific journals and an impossible one for many journals whose total circulation is far less than this figure.

We understand that in January the new bill will be "marked up" by the Committee on House Administration. We urge the Committee to take this opportunity to revise the wording of the bill to agree with the intent of Congress, including addition of a clearly stated exemption for scientific literature. Effective publication of results is the final essential step in the research process. It would be unforgivable if inconsistent wording of HR 5424 were allowed to endanger the Federal government's investments in research by denying effective publication of government-funded work and at the same time seriously disrupt the primary journal system of the scientific community. The law under which the GPO currently operates was enacted in 1895. We trust that Congress can take as much time as it needs now to make certain the revised law is free of flaws and genuinely protects the public's investment in scientific research.

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