

ACCESS WITHIN THE UNITED KINGDOM TO U.S. GOVERNMENT INFORMATION ONLINE

By Linda E. Williamson

Abstract: The United Kingdom had had a long-standing interest in American Studies, and recent initiatives at the British Library and at the University of Oxford indicate that this is on the rise. Electronic access to U.S. government information offers the potential for increasingly timely and detailed exploration of research topics relating to the United States. It also represents the most promising contemporary breakthrough in transborder information flow. What are the actualities of U.K. access to electronic information sources released by the U.S. government? Ms. V. York's paper, "Online Access to U.S. Government Information", examines an array of data sources produced and distributed within the U.S.; this paper follows on from that, exploring whether and under what differing conditions these same data sources may be accessed within the U.K. It is assumed that this picture of U.S. electronic data availability within the U.K. is illustrative of the potential, if not the actuality, of transborder data flow to countries world-wide.

American Studies is an interdisciplinary field of considerable interest in the United Kingdom. Since the end of World War II, it has become established as a significant part of both secondary and tertiary education in Britain. In recent years, demand has risen steadily for undergraduate admission to American Studies programs¹. The principal U.K. organizations in the field are the British Association for American Studies (BAAS; founded 1955) and the American Studies Library Group (ASLG; founded 1978). Recent institutional initiatives include establishment of the David and Mary Eccles Centre for American Studies at the British Library and the proposed Oxford Institute for American Studies.

As a U.S. documents librarian working in the field of American Studies in the U.K., I am vitally interested in promoting access to U.S. official material. Not only is the U.S. government the largest publisher in the world, but it has a long-

Ms Williamson's paper was delivered at 59th IFLA Council and General Conference, Barcelona, Spain, 22-28 August 1993.

standing tradition of making its publications widely available through depository libraries in the U.S. and official exchange libraries in foreign countries². But what of the burgeoning amount of information in electronic form? What is available online here in the U.K. and how can it be accessed? That is the subject of this paper, which follows on from Ms. V. York's paper, *Online Access to U.S. Government Information*, by exploring some of the same examples which she has outlined. Where prices are indicated, please note that these were the figures on hand at the time of writing this paper, and in future may be as likely to decrease as to increase, given the rapid expansion and competition in the field of electronic information.

To begin with the databases which are offered by DIALOG, all those relating to U.S. government information are available to DIALOG subscribers in the U.K. DIALOG's European office is located in Oxford, so assistance can be obtained for the cost of a telephone call. In cases where a query cannot be answered by U.K. staff, it is relayed to DIALOG headquarters in California. This usually means the answer will not come until the next day, as U.S. West Coast time runs eight hours behind U.K.'s Greenwich Mean Time (GMT). This time difference poses no problems for online searching, however, as DIALOG files are accessible around the clock.

The same U.S. dollar prices which are charged to American customers also apply to U.K. subscribers for the annual service fee, for searching the databases, for typing output, for offline printing, and for relevant telecommunications charges. Monthly invoices show U.S. dollar charges, converted to pounds sterling in accordance with the current exchange rate. It is a great convenience for U.K. subscribers to be able to pay in local currency, and saves the costs associated with submitting payment in U.S. dollars.

Other DIALOG offerings, such as training sessions held in the U.K. and assorted publications available from the DIALOG Europe office, are priced in pounds sterling. It probably goes without saying that these pound prices have been fixed at a level sufficiently high to account for possible unfavourable (to DIALOG) fluctuations in the exchange rate. This is a common practice with firms having distribution arrangements in foreign countries, and in DIALOG's case is not exploitative of its overseas customers.

Telecommunications charges for accessing DIALOG are variable. The most expensive method is long-distance direct-dial to California, but most overseas subscribers, and certainly those in the U.K., have less costly alternatives.

DIALOG itself provides details on a number of telecommunications networks which are on offer, though pricing information is not always given. Comparison shopping and an ongoing alertness to new or changed offerings are essential for getting the best price for the service. The cheapest access of which I am aware is provided by the Internet, at present available primarily within academic institutions. Charges of \$ 3.00 per connect hour are assessed on the monthly DIALOG invoice. This compares, for example, with \$ 10.00 per connect hour for both SPRINTNET and DIALNET EUROPE services.

For libraries which collect U.S. government publications, DIALOG file 166: GPO Publications Reference File (GPOPRF) facilitates the ordering of items for sale by the U.S. Government Printing Office. Using the DIALORDER feature, a publication which is identified in GPOPRF as being in stock can be ordered online. Thus, there is no need to retype title, stock number, and price details onto order forms to be posted to Washington, D.C. This greatly expedites the transaction and reduces the paperwork, at a relatively modest cost of \$ 70 per connect minute, \$ 20 per online type/print.

For public service use, searching of DIALOG databases is generally done by a trained librarian on a fee basis. Paying for the service, especially when the cost cannot be accurately predicted, is likely to be problematic for most U.K. readers, and it poses some administrative problems for the library, as well. Alternatives are worth exploring. While discussion of CD-ROM products is out of scope for this paper, it should be noted that most of the DIALOG files mentioned by Ms. York are available on CD-ROM. A number of them, also noted by Ms. York, have been mounted for free access via the Internet, and more will likely become available through Internet channels in the future.

The above-mentioned possibilities of CD-ROM and/or Internet access exist for some of the files offered by the two other commercial vendors described in Ms. York's paper, namely LEGI-SLATE and LEXIS/NEXIS. As noted, both are very expensive. LEGI-SLATE offers the same terms to U.S. and to U.K. clients, with annual subscriptions (beginning around \$3500.00) to an assortment of individual and packaged services. LEXIS/NEXIS offerings are much more complicated, with pricing options ranging from paying for each search to unlimited searching for a fixed monthly fee. Pricing is dramatically different between the U.S. and the U.K. The publisher, Mead data Central, offers U.S. customers unlimited searching on the LEXIS and NEXIS files combined for \$1000.00 per month. In the U.K., however, \$1000.00 per month buys access to only the single NEXIS Country Information file. Costs increase for other NEXIS individual files or combinations of files. Oddly, although LEXIS files are also available, no illustrative prices are

given in the promotional literature received from the Mead Data Central International office in London. To further complicate the picture, there is another vendor in the U.K. for LEXIS files only. This is Butterworth Telepublishing, with again a different pricing structure, in pounds sterling rather than in dollars. Since large amounts of money are involved in any sort of subscription arrangement for LEXIS/NEXIS files, thorough investigation of all offerings and options would be in order before making any commitment.

Moving quickly from high price to no price, Internet access opens up possibilities for unlimited free searching on an expanding number of U.S. government data sources in electronic form. Ms. York describes a sampling in her paper; many others are available. Some of the more popular files may be offered by more than one host site; for example, U.S. Supreme Court material is available from Cleveland Freenet as well as from U.C. Santa Cruz. Here, I would echo Ms. York's enthusiasm for the GOVDOC-L LISTSERV, which frequently carries details about host sites for U.S. government data files accessible via the Internet.

For U.K. Internet users, time zone differences affect connections with U.S.-based electronic files. In the case of databases which are available virtually around the clock, a British user will not face heavy competition for access for much of the working day. From 9:00am to 2:00pm GMT, the U.S. is effectively not at work; even at 2:00pm GMT, it is only East Coast that's beginning its day; the West Coast doesn't become seriously active until 5:00pm GMT. Databases whose availability is geared toward the U.S. working day are more problematic. British users may not be able to connect until late in the workday or on into the evening, and at those times would face competition from U.S. users.

Also, it's often not a straightforward procedure to make the necessary connection to a U.S. host computer. Traffic can be heavy on the various networks through which the access code is transmitted, thus thwarting the connection. The host computer may be unavailable for any number of reasons. Without knowing the cause of a failed connection, the only recourse is to "try, try again". This may mean trying at different hours of the day and extending those trials over several days until connection is made or the acuteness of frustration calls the exercise to a halt.

It also happens that the connection may be dropped, sometimes through user error, such as failing or respond rapidly enough to the host computer, but more often for no ascertainable reason. The frustration of reconnecting can be considerable, especially if access to the desired database is through an extended series of menus or if the search strategy is especially complicated. Another frustration comes with delayed response time from the host computer, a condition due at least

in part to the path which an electronic message must travel between the U.S. and the U.K. If a U.K. user makes a mistake in typing a query and transmits it before the host computer echoes it back, it can be extremely annoying to wait for the processing of a wrong query.

All of the above irritations, however, must be weighted against the cost of the service. Much can be endured for free access, especially if the need is great, if timeliness is a factor, and if access by other means involves expenditure of money and/or time.

In sum, then, U.S. government information which is widely available online in the U.S. is also accessible within the U.K. Fee-based services may be comparatively more expensive for the U.K. market, especially if the vendor has a Europe-based office, and telecommunications charges may be costlier unless Internet access is available. The free availability of databases via Internet connection offers the greatest promise for U.K. exploitation of U.S. government information in electronic form. What is required is institutional implementation of Internet access, provision of terminals for reader access, menu systems which facilitate telecommunications connections, ongoing implementation of additions and changes in available databases, and promotion of these resources to library readers.³ Once such systems are installed in U.K. institutions with American Studies programs, the increasing availability of U.S. government information online will greatly enhance teaching and research in the field. Indeed, the very nature of research undertaken in the U.K. is likely to change with the availability of more information obtainable in a more timely fashion. The present is good and the future holds great promise, not only for the U.K., but for transborder flow of online U.S. government information throughout the world.

Notes

1. The Fulbright Commission. *The Future of American Studies in the United Kingdom*. [London: The Commission] 1991.
2. Within the U.K., both the British Library and the London School of Economics' British Library of Political and Economic Science receive full exchange sets of U.S. government documents; the National Library of Scotland receives a partial set.
3. The Bodleian Library of the University of Oxford has the exemplary system within the U.K. BARD (Bodleian Access to Remote Databases), using a system of menus, provides automatic connection to a world-wide array of sources, including those offering U.S. government data. Updating is done on a weekly basis, and

printed material helps to inform and promote use of the resources, which are accessible through public-use terminals located throughout the Bodleian system.

Linda E. Williamson
University of Oxford
Rhodes House Library
U.S. Studies Librarian
South Parks Road
Oxford OX1 3RG
United Kingdom