

# Comparison of Legislative Resources on *GPO Access* and Selected Government and Non-Government Web Sites

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This report compares the congressional and other legislative branch information available through *GPO Access* with that available on other relevant Government and non-government Web sites, including Web sites provided by other Government agencies and entities, such as THOMAS and committee Web sites; libraries, including public, academic, law, and private libraries; and private or commercial companies. The following factors are analyzed:

- What resources are available
- The scope of those resources
- The source of those resources

After a preliminary survey of the legislative resources available through the Internet, a representative sampling of Government and non-government Web sites was chosen for further study. In-depth comparison and analysis was conducted on four Government Web sites (*GPO Access*, the Library of Congress' THOMAS, House.gov, and Senate.gov) and three commercial, fee-based Internet services (Congressional Universe, CQ.com, and Lexis-Nexis). Most educational and library Web sites were considered to be too specialized for such a broad-reaching analysis as this one; their focus on one or two particular resources would have proven narrow in a comparison of over twenty different legislative resources. Moreover, many educational and library Web sites house very little, if any, information on their own servers, instead providing a variety of links to other Web sites—usually *GPO Access* and THOMAS—so it is more difficult to assess their value outside of that of the sites to which they link for their content. In addition, Web sites for individual congressional committees were excluded from this study due to two main factors: they are part of either House.gov or Senate.gov, so their individual inclusion would have been redundant, and they, like the educational and library Web sites, tend to provide links to *GPO Access* and THOMAS rather than offering information stored on their own servers.

The three sections that follow present the findings of this comparative analysis, divided into the categories specified above, based on a “snapshot” view of these services during October 1999. It should be noted that these conclusions are necessarily broad, as they represent general trends observed in a comparison of over twenty online legislative resources. More detailed information concerning the resources and scope of a particular service is provided on the attached tables and graphs. It should also be emphasized that dates and statements about the resources available on a particular service within this report and its attachments are based primarily on publicly available information on the selected Web sites. Some of this information is difficult to locate or is restricted to some extent; this is especially the case with the fee-based, non-government Web sites, which severely limit the information they are willing to share with non-subscribers. Focused efforts were made to ensure the accuracy of the data contained herein, but the possibility for omissions or misstatements due to the aforementioned factors should be recognized.

## Available Online Resources

Compared to both the Government and non-government Web sites included in this study, *GPO Access* has the greatest number of online legislative resources.<sup>1</sup> All legislative resources that appear on at least one service are included in the analysis, even if a resource is not provided by *GPO Access*. This study does not differentiate among or tabulate multiple methods or interfaces for accessing the same base of information; therefore, congressional bills are counted as only one resource, even if access to them is provided through both a keyword search and a list of major legislative topics. The tables below present a summary comparison of the number of resources on each service; in total, 22 different resources are compared.

*GPO Access* compared to Government Web sites:

<i>GPO Access</i>	<b>19</b>
THOMAS	5
House.gov	4
Senate.gov	4

*GPO Access* compared to non-government Web sites:

<i>GPO Access</i>	<b>19</b>
Lexis-Nexis	15
Congressional Universe	13
CQ.com	9

*GPO Access* is the only one of the compared Web sites to offer the following resources: General Accounting Office (GAO) Comptroller General decisions, the *House Calendar*, the *House Journal*, and the *Congressional Pictorial Directory*.

Legislative resources that appear on one or more of the compared Web sites but are lacking on *GPO Access* are as follows: committee markups, committee schedules, and *Statutes at Large*.<sup>2</sup>

## Scope of Resources

Scope may be defined in two ways:

- The range of years or sessions of Congress covered by a resource
- The comprehensiveness of coverage within that range

Although the ideal comparative analysis would take both of these factors into consideration, finding the relevant information to answer these two questions on each of the compared Web sites proved to be a challenge. Most of them merely list a range of years or congressional sessions for each resource; some of them make even this basic information difficult to find. If a resource presents a complete set of information for a given period of time, as many of them do, then the comparison is relatively simple. However, when they are designated as “selective” or incomplete, it is nearly impossible to conduct a comparison without going to the document level,

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<sup>1</sup> A resource is defined as a category or type of information, such as congressional bills or public laws. Only resources that reside on a Web site’s own servers in a “considerable” collection are counted for that Web site. This distinction is made in part to exclude from the count Web sites, such as those for congressional committees on House.gov and Senate.gov, that contain only a small number of documents that are specific to one topic and not the more comprehensive collection that other Web sites in the comparison offer.

<sup>2</sup> There are currently plans at GPO to incorporate *Statutes at Large* into *GPO Access* in the future.

which is beyond the scope of this study. In order to facilitate the comparison of these legislative resources in table and chart form, all congressional session citations are translated into years, with the assumption that coverage for a session begins with the first year of the session, unless a note on the Web site indicates the contrary.

In summary, of the 22 legislative resources included in this study, seven have a larger scope on *GPO Access*, one is covered equally on *GPO Access* and at least one other Web site, and 14 have a larger scope on a Web site other than *GPO Access*. It should be reiterated that these numbers are based on the first definition of “scope” presented above and that they provide a general point of comparison for the resources on the selected Web sites.

### Sources of Resources

The final category of this comparative analysis seeks to answer the question of whether the legislative resources on a given Web site are produced and/or housed by the sponsoring organization or provided through links to another Web site, such as *GPO Access*. As explained earlier in this report, educational and library Web sites were excluded from in-depth analysis due to their heavy reliance on other Web sites for their basic content. While all of the Web sites included in this study contain a large base of their own legislative resources, several of them also provide links to other Web sites to augment their content. The following table presents a glimpse of the resources on each Web site that rely on links to *GPO Access*.

Web site	Resources that link to <i>GPO Access</i>
THOMAS	Bills (full text), <i>Congressional Record</i> , <i>Congressional Record Index</i> , congressional reports
House.gov	Congressional hearings and reports on committee Web pages
Senate.gov	Bills (full text), <i>Congressional Record</i> , and <i>Senate Calendar</i> ; committee prints and congressional hearings on committee Web pages
Congressional Universe	Information unavailable <sup>3</sup>
CQ.com	Information unavailable
Lexis-Nexis	Information unavailable

*GPO Access* does not link to any other Web site for its content of the legislative resources compared in this report.

### Conclusion

As the following tables and graphs reveal, a major strength of *GPO Access* is its breadth of online legislative resources, which is one reason that other Web sites—even those that house much of their own content—provide links to *GPO Access*. However, it is weaker than many of the other Web sites in this study in terms of the scope of its resources, when scope is defined loosely by years. *GPO Access* is also different in its lack of value-added features and services, a quality that is not explored in this analysis.

<sup>3</sup> Information about possible links to *GPO Access* from these commercial Web sites is unavailable to non-subscribers.

These differences stem in large part from disparities in the objectives of *GPO Access* and the other Web sites in this study. *GPO Access* has the distinction of being the only service of its kind that is mandated by law (Public Law 103-40). This mandate places the emphasis of *GPO Access* on the provision of free, public access to authoritative electronic Government information, made possible by GPO's creation of its electronic resources from the same source files that are used to produce official print publications. When GPO expands its coverage of current and archival information from any branch of Government, it must devote its efforts and resources to serving the greatest number of people, in line with its mandate, rather than tailoring its services to a specific user base, as many of the other Web sites are able to do, or compromising the official nature of its content by changing information.

The attached tables and graphs present the data that was gathered for this report and used to make the observations and conclusions above. They include a list of the 22 legislative resources that were studied and the scope of those resources on each of the seven compared Web sites.