

## 8. Let Me Google That for You: National Technical Information Service – (Department of Commerce) \$50 million

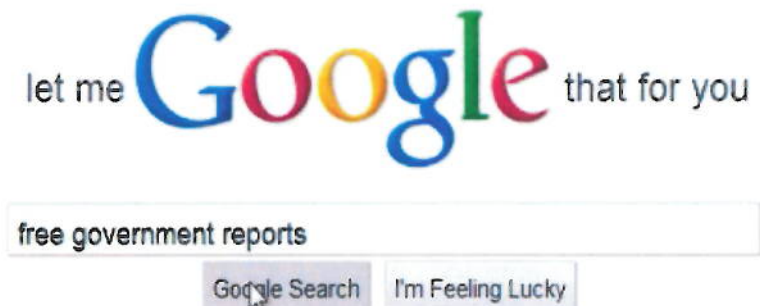
One federal agency is charging other offices and taxpayers to provide government reports that are largely available free of charge on the Internet. It is essentially the “let me Google that for you” office of the federal government.

Home to more than three million records,<sup>117</sup> the Department of Commerce’s National Technical Information Service (NTIS) collects “government-funded scientific, technical, engineering, and business-related information” and reports and sells them to other federal agencies.<sup>118</sup> Only it turns out most of what it sells can also be found for free on the Internet with little effort.

Established more than 60 years ago, NTIS is a vestige of the pre-Internet era when a lot of the reports the agency collects were not widely available; however, as times have changed agency has not.

Required by law to be largely self-sustaining,<sup>119</sup> NTIS charges other federal agencies to access its collection of reports. However, a November 2012 review of the office by GAO uncovered that about three-quarters of the reports in the NTIS archives were available from other public sources. Specifically, “GAO estimated that approximately 621,917, or about 74 percent, of the 841,502 reports were readily available from one of the other four publicly available sources GAO searched.”

GAO explains, “The source that most often had the reports GAO was searching for was another website located at <http://www.Google.com>.”<sup>120</sup> In addition, reports could be found on the website of the issuing federal department, the Government Printing Office’s website, or USA.gov.<sup>121</sup>



Yet, federal departments continue to send taxpayer dollars to NTIS for reports they could get for free with a simple web search. NTIS notes that one of its best-sellers<sup>122</sup> is the Armed Forces Recipe Service, available on CD-ROM for \$79.<sup>123</sup> However, the Armed Forces Recipe Service recipe index is also available online and can be downloaded for free directly from the Quartermaster Corps Website.<sup>124</sup> Further, a recipe index that offers “1,700 convenient recipes for groups of 100 that can be easily adjusted up or down,”<sup>125</sup> likely falls outside the scope of technical, scientific, and engineering reports the office should be collecting.

Another report sold by NTIS is the 2009 Public Health Service Food Code produced by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which is available for \$69.<sup>126</sup> Alternatively, the report is available for free on the Food and Drug Administration’s website.<sup>127</sup>

Moreover, GAO found much of the work outdated because NTIS has focused largely on growing its repertoire of older reports. “Specifically, NTIS added approximately 841,500 reports to its repository during fiscal years 1990 through 2011, and approximately 62 percent of these had publication dates of

2000 or earlier.” While the office worked to accumulate reports older than those dated 2000, GAO reports that only 21 percent of the reports distributed from 2001 to 2011 were dated older than 1989.<sup>128</sup> Meanwhile, nearly 100 percent of the reports from 2009-2011 were distributed. However, these are also the most likely to be available online elsewhere.<sup>129</sup>

More than 12 years ago, GAO issued two different reports explaining NTIS would need to soon reconsider its function and fee-based model, as the Internet made of the reports it sold available for free.<sup>130, 131</sup> Shuttering the NTIS entirely was first suggested in 1999, by the Clinton administration’s Secretary of Commerce William Daley, who contended “declining sales revenues soon would not be sufficient to recover all of NTIS’ operating costs.”<sup>132</sup> The Secretary “attributed this decline to other agencies’ practice of making their research results available to the public for free through the Web.”<sup>133</sup>

According to GAO, “the decline in revenue for its products continues to call into question whether NTIS’s basic statutory function of acting as a self-financing repository and disseminator of scientific and technical information is still viable.”

As the actual “let me Google that for you” website (<http://lmgty.com/>) explains, “this is for all of those people who find it more convenient to bother you with their question than google it for themselves.” But when NTIS is doing the Googling, the search response comes with a price tag for taxpayers.

Federal agencies pay NTIS millions of dollars each year to provide government reports can be available for free online and can be found with a simple Google search.