

Hard-to-Get Policy Briefings For Congress Are Now Online

WASH.
POST
6/28/05

Technology Group Opens Access to Research Reports

By BRIAN FALER
Special to The Washington Post

It's a bit like Napster — but for policy wonks.

A Washington research group has created a Web site where the public can read, submit and download the difficult-to-find public policy briefs members of Congress use to get up to speed on issues.

The Center for Democracy and Technology has created an online database of Congressional Research Service reports that anyone with an Internet connection can now tap free of charge.

The often-coveted but elusive reports are produced by CRS, a public policy research arm of Congress. CRS, which boasts hundreds of analysts and a \$100 million budget, churns out hundreds of briefs each year on a wide range of topics. It recently issued one, for example, called "U.S. Treatment of Prisoners in Iraq: Selected Legal Issues." Another was titled, "Gasoline Prices: Policies and Proposals." A third was "Immigration: Policy Considerations Related to Guest Worker Programs."

The reports have long been praised as nonpartisan, concise and readable. But they are reserved for members of Congress, committees and their staffs. A member of the public can get one generally only if a lawmaker chooses to release it. There is also at least one company, Penny Hill Press of Damascus, Md., that gathers up reports and then sells them for as much as \$20 apiece. LexisNexis announced last week that it will also begin offering the reports through its online service.

The CDT, a technology policy organization, complained that the reports are paid for with taxpayer money and ought to be readily available for free to anyone who wants one.

"Taxpayers pay \$100 million a year for this resource, yet they don't

crs
Congressional Research Reports for the People

Home | About | Collections | Add a Report | Contact

TAKE ACTION!

Help add to the Open CRS collection. Call your member of Congress and request a PDF copy of the following CRS Report. Once you receive it, submit it to Open CRS.

Order Code: RL32026
Title: Market Dynamics and Public Policy Issues in the Video Programming Industry
Request this report from Congress - Add a report

About Open CRS

American taxpayers spend nearly \$100 million a year to fund the Congressional Research Service, a "think tank" that provides reports to members of Congress on a variety of topics relevant to current political events. Yet, these reports are not made available to the public in a way that they can be easily obtained. A project of the Center for Democracy & Technology through the cooperation of several organizations and collectors of CRS Reports, Open CRS provides citizens access to CRS Reports already in the public domain and encourages Congress to provide public access to all CRS Reports. (Moza)

CRS Report Collections

- National Council on Science and the Environment (1980)
- Federation of American Scientists (1964)

Search CRS Reports

Currently searching 8073 reports

Recent Reports

- June 22, 2005 - Robust Nuclear-Birth Proliferator: Budget Request and Plan, FY2006-FY2009
- June 22, 2005 - The Corporation for Public Broadcasting: Federal Funding Facts and Status
- June 20, 2005 - Energy Policy: Legislative Proposals in the 109th Congress
- June 17, 2005 - Renewable Energy: Tax Credit, Budget, and Electricity Production Issues
- June 17, 2005 - Gasoline Prices: Policies and Proposals
- June 15, 2005 - Africa, the G8, and the Blair Initiative
- June 13, 2005 - Homeland Security Department: FY2006 Appropriations
- June 10, 2005 - The Middle East Peace Talks
- June 10, 2005 - The United States and Europe: Current Issues

The Web site asks readers to help acquire more research reports by contacting their representatives in Congress.

have ready access to it," said CDT spokesman David McGuire. "We don't think they should have to pay twice to get their hands on it."

McGuire predicted the Web site, www.opencrs.com, will find an audience among academics, reporters, bloggers, librarians, college students and anyone else looking to bone up on an issue.

A spokeswoman for the Library of Congress — the CRS's parent agency — said it did not have an opinion of the site. "We suggest that people get them through their congressional offices — that's the way it's supposed to be done," Jill Brett said. "If [the CDT] can get the reports and put them up, we can't stop them."

The site includes searchable links to more than 3,300 reports — and thousands of updates of those reports — that were gathered by the center and five other groups: the National Council on Science and the Environment, the Federation of American Scientists, the library at the University of Maryland's law school, a Web site associated with the Franklin Pierce Law Center in New Hampshire and the National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism. The CDT said it is also trying to work out a deal with the University of North Texas, which has built its own online trove

of reports, to make those accessible through the site as well.

The center is also asking the public to help fill out its collection. The group, which said it has a list of briefs produced in recent years, is asking users to request specific reports from their lawmakers and forward copies to the center.

"Take Action!" the Web site says. "Call your members of Congress and request a PDF copy of the following CRS report. Once you receive it, submit it to Open CRS." The group estimated it has collected almost half of the reports the agency has produced in the past five years.

A number of lawmakers have proposed, over the years, opening the CRS's work to the public. A few have also posted the reports on their individual Web sites.

CRS has consistently said it is not designed to serve any sort of public information function. In past years, it has said that could create a number of legal and practical problems, contending, for example, that interest groups and lobbyists would inundate its office with complaints and comments in hopes of influencing what CRS analysts wrote. It has also expressed fears that it could be held liable for what it said in the reports or be sued for copyright infringement.