

Open CRS Web Site Shows Great Demand for Congressional Reports

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On Monday June 26, the Center for Democracy and Technology (CDT) introduced a new Web site called Open CRS at <http://www.opencrs.com> [1] designed to make the much sought after Congressional Research Service Reports easily available online.

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(1) Open CRS Web Site Shows Great Demand for Congressional Reports

On Monday June 26, the Center for Democracy and Technology (CDT) introduced a new Web site called Open CRS at <http://www.opencrs.com> [1] designed to make the much sought after Congressional Research Service Reports easily available online.

For years, open-government advocates have pushed for Congress to make these unclassified, taxpayer-funded reports freely available to the public. CRS already has a searchable Web site, available to every congressional office. Lawmakers have attempted several times to make that site available to the public, but those efforts have repeatedly foundered.

Until Monday, the only way for members of the public to get their hands on CRS reports without paying was to ask their member of Congress and wait, or hope to get lucky on one of the issue-specific Web sites that archive reports on certain topics. And to take either of those steps an individual would first need to be aware that a) the CRS exists at all and b) it drafted a study on an issue they care about. At least two companies sell copies of the reports, but CDT doesn't believe taxpayers should have to fork over more money for a service they already fund.

With no evidence that Congress would act to make the resource available, CDT decided to work with several organizations to create Open CRS. The aim of the site is to make as many of the reports that are already available in the public domain more accessible, by creating search and browsing tools that allow ordinary Internet users to search for the reports from one destination. CDT is also calling on individuals to request more reports from their members of Congress and submit them to Open CRS.

Initial response has been astounding. In its first three days alone, after receiving only a handful of mentions in the press, Open CRS has had over 70,000 visitors download over 30,000 reports and has received over 300 reports that were not otherwise available online. These statistics show the pent up demand for this important resource. CDT hopes to expand the number of reports and functionality on the site as time goes on.

- Open CRS: <http://opencrs.com> [2]
- About the Congressional Research Service: <http://crs.gov> [3]

- More on Open CRS: <http://www.fas.org/sgp/news/secretcy/2005/06/062805.html> [4]

(2) Background on Access to Congressional Research Service Reports

Created in 1914, the Congressional Research Service -- originally called the Legislative Reference Service -- is Congress's private think tank. CRS produces detailed, nonpartisan research reports on issues ranging from climate change to next-generation wireless technology. Lawmakers rely on the reports to provide the factual basis on which they build their cases for new legislation.

The depth and inherent usefulness of the information contained in the reports make them a potentially invaluable resource for journalists, students, activists, companies and indeed anyone with a stake in the policy-making process. In 1998, CDT and OMB Watch placed the reports atop it's list of "10 Most Wanted Government Documents," a list that reflected the comments of dozens of librarians, industry watchdogs, government employees and ordinary citizens.

Operated out of the Library of Congress, CRS has seen its annual budget swell to nearly \$100 million a year. Still, the organization has maintained that is has, and should have, no public facing identity. That said, the reports aren't classified, and neither Congress nor CRS have publicly objected to the reports being made available on Web sites (including www.OpenCRS.com [5]) or being repackaged and sold by groups like Lexis-Nexis and Penny Hill Press.

Through the hard work of collectors like the Federation of American Scientists, the University of Maryland Thurgood Marshall Law Library, the National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism, the National Council on Science and the Environment, and the Franklin Pierce Law Center, specialized batches of CRS reports have been available online for years. Open CRS is now finally making all of those publicly available documents accessible from one centralized location where citizens can easily search, download, and share them.

Newly added and updated reports are syndicated via XML feeds so that reports are distributed far and wide as soon as they are added to the Open CRS database.

- Policy Post 5.16, "CDT and OMB Watch List the 10 Most Wanted Government Documents" August 9, 1999: -- http://www.cdt.org/publications/pp_5.16.html [6]

(3) Legislative Efforts on Access to CRS Reports

Efforts to make CRS reports readily available to the public have not fallen on deaf ears in Congress. In past sessions, Senators John McCain (R-AZ), Patrick Leahy (D-VT) and John Cornyn (R-TX) along with Representatives Christopher Shays (R-CT) and Henry Waxman (D-CA) have proposed measures that would have required CRS reports be made publicly available. Despite strong bipartisan support, those efforts in the past have withered in the Senate Rules and House Administration Committees.

While Open CRS makes it easier than ever before to download and share CRS reports, it isn't a complete solution. Until Congress acts to make the reports readily available, it's unlikely that ordinary citizens will ever have access to the service's entire library.

CDT continues to urge Congress to pass legislation to make all of the CRS reports available to the public. CDT hopes that by operating it's own popular, publicly accessible service on a minimal budget, it can dispel the argument that opening Congress's internal CRS site to the public would be too costly. The speed with which the public is downloading the reports from www.opencrs.com [1] should also put to rest any notion that people aren't interested in using the service.

(4) Legislative Efforts on Access to CRS Reports

CDT is committed to maintaining Open CRS as a freely accessible public resource until Congress



obviates the need for the service by throwing its internal CRS site open for public use. CDT also hopes to add new functions like automatically generated e-mail alerts when new reports become available.

To increase the number of reports available from the site, CDT will continue to seek out large and small archivists who've amassed previously unreleased reports. The ultimate goal of Open CRS is to provide ready access to every single report released to the public, in any form.

For that goal to become a reality, the public needs to get involved. Featured prominently on the Open CRS site is a box encouraging members of the public to ask their members of Congress for reports that haven't yet been made public. Open CRS users who get their hands on an unreleased report are encouraged to send it in so it can be added to the large and growing database. The more users get involved, the more Open CRS will grow to become the robust, extensive database the public deserves.

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