

Government Information Speaking Notes

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Documents to the People (DTTP), 43.1 (Spring 2015), p. 11-

12. http://wikis.ala.org/godort/index.php/DttP_Full_Text

For the uninitiated, government information librarians sometimes appear to be speaking an unintelligible dialect of the language of librarianship. For government information librarians, it can sometimes be difficult to explain the issues, challenges, and projects that preoccupy us.

An informal exploration of the fundamentals of government information librarianship has resulted in four ideas framed as speaking notes, intended to facilitate conversations about government information in rapidly changing libraries. While written from a Canadian perspective, the underlying ideas should resonate with library professionals in all democratic countries.

1. Access to government information is the foundation of a functioning democracy and underpins informed citizen engagement.

Government information allows us to assess our governing bodies — access that is required for a democracy to function. Government records accessed through Freedom of Information legislation, Public Accounts, the Debates of the House of Commons and

Senate, and court records, are just a few examples of government information, also called 'government documents.'

Government agencies collect data during the provision of programs and services and produce publications providing citizens with an authoritative source of information about the society they live in. These are often referred to as 'government publications.'

2. Government information has enduring value.

Many government publications cost less than other containers of knowledge. This is, in part, because tax dollars have funded or at least subsidized their production. Don't confuse low present-value price tags with low value overall or the absence of enduring value. This is a commerce-based construct of value that librarians should have learned to identify and interrogate in library school.

Consider the following:

- The work of countless academics and other experts is disseminated via government information.
- Government publications and documents are used by most academics and social commentators in all areas of intellectual output, resulting in the production of books, reports, speeches, etc., which have shaped our society and understanding of the world:

- scientists use government information to make assertions about nearly every subject (environment, energy, meteorology, etc., e.g., *Silent Spring* was full of references to government information)
- social scientists use government information to make informed observations and help shape policy discussions (including statistics compiled using methodology standardized by international governmental organizations like the United Nations)
- legal scholars, lawyers, and judges need access to legislative and court documents to interpret and apply the law
- journalists use government documents to inform the electorate about their governing bodies (insert most political scandals here).
- Government employees need long-term access to government information to develop, implement, and monitor policies, programs, and services. It is not uncommon for these employees to rely on academic libraries for access to material that is no longer available to them via other channels.

3. Government information is precarious and requires stewardship.

Two separate but related issues are at work here.

The first is that governments do not necessarily make collecting and preserving access to their own work a priority. The strongest system of stewardship for government information is one that operates in partnership with, and at arms-length of, author

agencies. This kind of structure is equally important in both print and online environments. For generations, this task was the responsibility of depository libraries.

Secondly, not everything is online and content made available online does not necessarily stay there. Most government publishing moved online earlier than other types of publishing and has thus suffered from not having an a priori comprehensive digital preservation plan. “Born digital” content is also at a high risk for (intentional and unintentional) removal from open access environments. There are groups in both Canada ([CGI DPN](#)¹) and the United States ([GODORT](#)²) that are starting to document these losses.

In addition, not everything born digital is made accessible or indexed by search engines like Google. Policies and procedures developed by the government in power determine what is distributed in an online environment and how it is preserved (or removed) for public access. Political literacy is key to understanding and monitoring changes in information policies that affect access to and stewardship of government information.

4. Government publications and documents are different than most books, journals, and content born on the Internet.

Government publications and documents are more challenging to acquire, organize, and provide access to. Government agencies and their priorities can change with the political winds and it is common for serial titles to start and stop, disappearing only to reappear under ever so slightly different titles or agency names. In addition, government

information doesn't fit into 'traditional' dissemination channels developed and simplified through customer feedback and the pursuit of higher profits. Indeed, the very act of acquisition can feel like activism and inspire pugnacious outbursts from your government information librarians and implicated support staff.

The biggest differences between government information and other types of information products can be explained by why and how they were published. The agencies that produce government information are motivated by different factors than traditional publishers like Elsevier, HarcourtBrace, and the American Chemical Society (to name a few). While many politicians appear to be obsessed with finances, they do not rely on publishing revenue to fund our military, repair our roads, or support re-election campaigns. Sadly, few politicians or bureaucrats make access to government documents and publications a priority. In addition, we often learn about efforts to obfuscate their purpose, delay their release, and even prevent their dissemination.

Summary

Access to and the use of government information continues to be a requirement for participative democracy. Information professionals working with government information have a responsibility to educate others about the origin and nature of these materials. This work requires advocacy; both within and beyond our home institutions.

The ideas presented in this article can serve to begin and inform conversations about the role and value of government information. These conversations can help guide both

government information librarianship and the role of the profession itself within a healthy democracy.

1. http://plnwiki.lockss.org/wiki/index.php/CGI_network
2. <http://www.ala.org/godort/front>