Ensuring Access to Government Information

By: Shari Laster and Lynda Kellam

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Abstract:

In the United States, the dominant paradigm of research libraries as content managers for print government documents and access portals for digital government information and data took a substantial turn in late 2016. With the change in Presidential administration, academics, journalists, and other constituencies whose work relies on uninterrupted access to federal information expressed concern about the specter of political threats to data and information produced and disseminated with public funding. In particular, public access to climate and environmental data was suddenly seen as fragile and vulnerable.

The response over the past year has been, frankly, remarkable. Longstanding library work to collect, describe, and preserve federal government information in print and digital formats, much of it in partnership with the U.S. Government Publishing Office (GPO) and other government agencies, received renewed attention, even as new energy poured into experimental and transformative models for capturing digital content at risk for loss from trusted public sources. News outlets featured and valorized the work of library and information professionals in safeguarding the public's right to know, even as libraries and public advocacy groups scrambled to organize hundreds of enthusiastic volunteers eager to save government information.

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Article:

 ***Note: Full text of article below

Ensuring Access to Government Information

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In the United States, the dominant paradigm of research libraries as *content managers* for print government documents and *access portals* for digital government information and data took a substantial turn in late 2016. With the change in Presidential administration, academics, journalists, and other constituencies whose work relies on uninterrupted access to federal information expressed concern about the specter of political threats to data and information produced and disseminated with public funding. In particular, public access to climate and environmental data was suddenly seen as fragile and vulnerable.

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This issue of *Against the Grain* is an attempt to capture the network of projects and relationships that connect a specialized group of publishers — government agencies — with libraries as content stewards. Libraries are collaborating with partners to explore new methods and approaches to solving a persistent problem: how can we ensure that government information will be freely available to the public for the foreseeable future?

The **Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP)** continues important work that is now over two centuries old. Implemented by the **GPO**, the **FDLP** serves as a model of distributed access to print federal documents, one that has resulted in *de facto* preservation. Participating libraries agree to accept copies of information dissemination products, and in exchange make them freely available to the public for as long as the materials are in their collections. Some libraries with notably rich historical collections have kept this promise for well over a century. Of course, libraries can only preserve what they have been able to collect, and as **James R. Jacobs** writes, vast numbers of fugitive documents have resulted from both accidental and deliberate gaps in the mechanisms used to identify and disseminate official content. For content managed in a smaller network, as with state government information, these gaps can be exacerbated by funding issues and other challenges inherent to scale. **Susanne Caro** identifies many of the ways in which print and digital state information can become at risk of loss.

Partnerships among federal depository libraries are making important strides in access and preservation for federal information. The **Association of Southeastern Research Libraries (ASERL)** has developed its own network of libraries that are building focused, comprehensive depository collections. According to the Coordinator of **ASERL's Collaborative Federal Depository Program**, **Cheryle Cole-Bennett**, the benefits of this project are accruing throughout the region. The **HathiTrust Digital Library** has launched a focused program for building its collections of digitized federal documents, work described by the Program Officer for Federal Documents and Collections, **Heather Christenson**. By leveraging **HathiTrust** and relying on long-standing close consortial ties among **University of California** libraries, the **UC** system is adopting a new approach to managing its government documents collections. **Jesse Silva** describes the **Federal Document Archive** or **FedDocArc**, which encompasses both print and digitized volumes and aspires to be a comprehensive collection for all **UC** campuses.

Other partnerships do not rely on consortial ties, but instead bring together those able to do important work with those willing to help. The **End of Term Project**, discussed by **Mark Phillips** and **Kristy Phillips**, is a collaborative effort with university, government, and not-for-profits partnering to capture a comprehensive snapshot of the federal web presence at the end of every Presidential administration. **Data Rescue** became an enormous success in late 2016 and early 2017 as it brought the work of collecting federal data products to researchers, students, and members of the public who wanted to help save government information. **Margaret Janz** describes the development of **DataRefuge** and highlights the accomplishments of this movement.

Among Canadian data librarians, a focused project succeeded in reuniting data with the information needed to interpret and use it. The model outlined by **Kristi Thompson** demonstrates the benefits of cooperating with data producers. Similarly, the **University of California Curation Center (UC3)** is piloting a mirror of the U.S. government portal for datasets. **UC3** Director **John Chodacki** describes the rationale for **Data Mirror**, which also backs up the datasets cataloged in *data.gov*. Finally, many government information professionals and others have recognized the need to continue conversations about issues with electronic government information, especially with stakeholders outside of libraries. **Roberta Sittel** in her article on the **Preserving Electronic Government Information (PEGI) Project** discusses an **Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)**-funded program to coordinate and conduct national discussion forums bringing together librarians and stakeholders, such as historians and scientists, to discuss possibilities and challenges.

Throughout these articles a common theme is the need for both targeted and widespread partnerships to tackle barriers to long-term public access to government information. The dissemination and preservation of government information is not only a concern for government agencies or documents librarians. Research libraries should be concerned as well: after all, if public information is no longer available to the public, the research that depends on it will no longer be possible. As stewards of our informational heritage, libraries need to develop and implement proactive and collaborative measures to ensure that government information will continue to be available for all.