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Advocating for Transparency and Access to Information

THE CHALLENGE AND REWARD of government information librarianship stems from the diversity of activities and intellectual work demanded by the intersection of subject and functional expertise with institutional and professional responsibilities. Many who work with government information are motivated by the "thrill of the chase" that comes with digging out and tracing content through complex government organizations, forward and backward in time, and across disciplinary boundaries; many are also motivated by belief in the right of the public to freely access and use government information. Government information in the library setting creates an opportunity to position advocacy as a core component of library work.

Advocacy is the intentional practice of identifying, articulating, and amplifying reasons and motivations for a desirable course of action that serves a given vision. In libraries, advocacy is both iterative and creative: it is often independent work undertaken as situations arise and adapted as

situations change. It can also be collective work for change at a higher level, whether within public policy or professional practice.

Working with government information in a library setting asks for the development of one's capacity for advocacy. If we agree that access to government information is a public good, there is reason enough to consider adopting advocacy as part of our professional identity. But the history of government document collections and services in libraries has led to a present in which this content area is misunderstood, neglected, or besieged, often in service of narrow, short-term goals. Libraries are frequently organized based on services to particular user communities, such as academic disciplinary areas or groups defined by age. Government information often lacks a core and vocal constituency, so it is necessary to identify and then listen to a diffuse and heterogeneous group of users in order to understand current requirements and predict future needs. For an institution to fulfill its obligations to its user communities, librarians must translate and articulate these needs as actionable steps to improve and maintain services.

As advocates, government information librarians speak up for collections and services within an institution, to peers and to administrators. We collaborate on projects that improve access and preservation for these resources. We pursue public policy advocacy that improves access to government information, which can include requests for changes in policy and practice that promote transparency, as well as funding requests that support information dissemination and preservation. We also advocate within professional communities for resources to support our work.

LOCAL COLLECTIONS AND SERVICES

In common with all librarians, we often find ourselves in the position of advocating for our users; however, government information calls for additional attention to this type of inward-facing advocacy. We provide services and care for collections that are less well understood and often less well resourced. In many situations, being an advocate means recognizing an opportunity to explain a policy or practice in order to support an informed decision within the organization. We can also be strong voices for our users over a longer period of time, working to ensure the alignment of policies and practices with our institutions' missions and values as they pertain to government information access and use. Most of the time these are not actually in conflict with each other, but in an environment of limited and increasingly diminishing resources, careful navigation and an eye to short- and long-term priorities are essential in order to serve both.

Cultural heritage institutions are rarely overburdened with resources. Within libraries, those in administrative positions set priorities and make

decisions that balance competing needs and interests in order to make effective use of available resources—people, funding, space—in service of institutional goals. Reaching for this balance is in practice an iterative and messy challenge: as plans are developed and implemented, others already in motion are affected by shifting resources, while external influences continue to sway and change perceptions of priorities and the tools available to address them. As we work within the scope of our organizational roles, we affect the balance of resources available to address goals and the practical scope of possible outcomes for decision-making processes. Whether or not there are available and effective channels for any one person to participate in deliberate decision-making activities, our presence and our work are implicit inputs.

Conceiving of our work in this way affords insight into the many ways in which advocacy takes place within libraries. We have some measure of autonomy in determining how to conduct our day-to-day work, and we have input into our annual professional goals. We may also participate on teams and committees responsible for developing, implementing, and assessing projects. As experts in our own domains, we provide information and advice through formal and informal channels that can include reporting lines, departments, and cross-functional units. As our understanding of user needs is refined and improved through everyday experience, we translate and communicate this information throughout the organization.

As an example, a government information librarian might choose to volunteer for a nationally coordinated project that is developing metadata for government information, focusing on locally pertinent regional offices for her specific efforts. As part of a team implementing a new interface for the library's catalog, the librarian could propose the inclusion of sources that include the national project to which she is contributing and then use this content when demonstrating the functionality of the new tool. Following the catalog launch, use data may provide an opening to approach library administration to request additional personnel for developing metadata for this project, in light of the concrete demonstration of how the work benefits local users.

Government information presents additional challenges in libraries. Core users of these collections are dispersed among many communities: within academia, dozens of disciplinary areas rely on government information, but there is rarely a central department or program with exclusive demands and needs. Academic libraries are commonly oriented toward a subject liaison model of librarianship that disadvantages support for resources that do not fit a disciplinary categorization but are otherwise of use to all. In many cases, we rely on our colleagues to alert us to opportunities for outreach and collaboration, but it is also true that our colleagues may be hesitant to support this work without a clear understanding of how it benefits their targeted user communities.

According to library lore, government documents collections are notoriously difficult, impenetrable, and intimidating to the uninitiated. Anecdotally,

within academic libraries these seem to be the collections that everyone (except perhaps government information librarians) loves to hate! The variety of formats, oddities of description and classification, and even the subject matter present challenges to identifying, locating, and using these materials. In many libraries, government publications collections were not incorporated into the electronic catalog until many years after the library loaded its first records. Librarians with knowledge of the access mechanisms for government documents collections were positioned and perceived as gatekeepers and as intermediaries to those seeking access to the collections. In practical terms, this attitude often discouraged librarians other than government information specialists from learning how to search these collections or access this content.

Too often these historical practices resulted in government documents collections being deemed peripheral to the library's core collecting areas, making them targets for reallocation of space. Withdrawing materials or moving them off-site does not lessen the need for government information librarians: users of libraries that have substantially reduced on-site government documents collections must navigate challenging description practices to identify and request materials through borrowing arrangements. Although referrals to government information librarians are a tool to bridge growing gaps between collections and users, good referrals depend on, first, the presence of a government information specialist and second, a clear understanding of the scope of questions that are potentially answerable with government information.

The gatekeeper and the peripheral collections models are questionable in terms of their service to the public good. Even if such models were appropriate in modern libraries, limitations to available resources increasingly narrow available traction for extensive, hands-on mediation. Better access models would empower librarians and users by providing seamless tools that contextualize content and discovery, with focused expert support for research and information-seeking that pushes the boundaries of current systems. The development of systems for the management and preservation of electronic government information collections is a promising opportunity to reduce barriers to access, but this work is contingent on revolutionizing approaches to acquiring and describing government information, along with a renewed commitment to long-term preservation. Most important, the creation of systems that leverage the affordances of digital content is fundamentally dependent on active and engaged government information librarians who are willing and prepared to take on exploratory projects in collaboration with colleagues within and outside their current institutions.

An example of advocacy in this environment might be the development of a training tool kit for reference services providers to explore the disparate scope of questions that can be addressed with government information resources. A librarian who has developed a tool kit and then conducted

hands-on training might follow up with individual meetings with subject liaison colleagues to prompt discussion intended to surface opportunities to connect with an academic department. Conducting outreach leads to a better understanding of how the library can meet user needs. By including the subject liaisons in the process, the government information librarian also has allies in communicating user needs to the library administration. Subject liaisons also develop their own aptitude in working with the collections that strengthens the support they are able to provide to others.

Even with sophisticated searching tools and techniques, knowledge of government provenance is crucial for deciding where to look and identifying steps to take when information is lacking. Government information librarians develop expertise in navigating these collections, and we have a responsibility to apply this expertise in service of reducing barriers for our users. These barriers may include policies or practices that make it difficult for user communities to access collections or request assistance, such as insufficient description for locally housed collections or a lack of workstations available for public users; collection development and management practices that fail to prioritize the needs of government information users at a level equal to all other users of library resources, often under the mistaken assumption that it's all freely available online; and personnel assignments that discourage or disincentivize the development of expertise in locating and using these materials. For those whose assigned responsibilities include coordinating the library's participation in the Federal Depository Library Program or other depository systems, advocacy is an important component in ensuring that the library meets the program's requirements and expectations.

Lack of online resource persistence, often referred to as "link rot," presents a different kind of challenge: few libraries are hosting digital content from government entities, which leads to implicit reliance on a scant handful of large-scale projects focused on collecting this content. Information products are created and disseminated in order to meet immediate, usually narrow goals of agencies and other governmental entities. Few government agencies demonstrate cognizance of the needs pertaining to long-term access to these same products, let alone are equipped to meet these needs. Content is continually lost as agencies reorganize and refresh their websites, and when an agency's mission changes, whole subsets of content can disappear.

Advocacy in this space, both within libraries and more broadly across the profession, is a pressing need and concern. The development of easy-to-use, affordable platforms for collecting and managing born-digital government information, let alone making it easily discoverable and reusable, is still in its early days. Committed government information librarians can seek a variety of opportunities to contribute to initiatives and projects that seek to address these gaps. As librarians and information professionals, we are building on decades of experience in managing, preserving, and providing access to

information. By educating ourselves on issues and best practices, we have the opportunity to build capacity to conduct work for long-term access to government information. For example, one significant initiative in this area, the End of Term Web Archive, conducts a comprehensive capture of the federal web domain at the end of each presidential term. This work is completed as a collaboration between academic libraries and government agencies.

Of course, advocacy possibilities stretch beyond the basics of collections and services; we can also explore and expand practices in emerging and creative contexts that improve institutional capacity for supporting a wide variety of user needs. Developing new approaches to library instruction and outreach that engage with government sources, and fostering programs that increase opportunities for civic engagement within the community, serve user needs in ways that enhance the value of the library along unexplored dimensions. Teaching government information promotes civic engagement and participation by empowering individuals to access government information. An improved understanding of the complexity of systems of governance also informs and contextualizes skepticism about systems of power. The *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* from the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) offers the opportunity to creatively explore ways in which government information can be used to teach information literacy concepts. For example, the frame "Authority Is Constructed and Contextual" explores the systems of power that endorse the authoritativeness of sources of information and affect perceptions and accusations of perspective, privilege, and bias.

Government information resources are also a natural fit for exploring new directions for digital collections and data-oriented research. Within the United States, works created by federal government employees as part of their official duties are not entitled to domestic copyright protection. This exclusion makes U.S. government information an attractive corpus for projects repurposing digital content at scale for discovery, exploration, analysis, and sharing. For example, historians and linguists, among others, use computational research methods to study the *Congressional Record, Foreign Relations of the United States,* and other large-scale, semi-structured documents. Transforming this content into usable text for analysis requires conducting optical character recognition (OCR) and marking up the results to match the structure of the original text in order to prepare it for algorithmic processing that can provide answers to research questions about the content and discourse these publications represent.

Not every initiative will succeed: even the most carefully planned project can fall prey to unforeseen circumstances. Still, exploring these opportunities raises the profile of our collections and expertise and opens pathways to the development of new skills in areas of existing and future practice. These projects also offer possible ways in which our institutions can improve support for their user communities. Access to government information is foundational to

an open society, so the provision and enhancement of this access is in alignment with the work of publicly funded institutions.

PUBLIC POLICY

Government information librarians, as professionals and as private individuals, are in an unparalleled position to advocate for policy pertaining to the public good of government information access and preservation. We encounter barriers to government information access and use that may be political, technological, or institutional. Governmental entities resist external accountability, and mechanisms intended to provide access to information needed for accountability are inherently conservative, favoring minimized access in order to protect the status quo. By drawing on our understanding of the systems that present barriers, we are positioned to be aware of and quickly respond to these obstacles through direct advocacy and by supporting the work of other advocates for transparency and open government.

In some ways, government information is like air: it is everywhere around us, but we only attend to it when a drastic change attracts our awareness. We may take note of a pleasant light breeze, but more likely it is only an unpleasant odor or visible pollutants that intrude into our attention. Just as there are professional arenas for which air quality is of ongoing interest, the availability of and long-term access to government information are of perpetual concern to our profession. Those who work with government information are afforded the opportunity to develop insight into the mechanisms in place to disseminate this information, as well as sensitivity to shifts and changes that affect public access.

It is in the best interests of our user communities to have more access to more government information. Although unfettered access to information is a core principle of a political society with aspirations to freedom and fairness, it is also a truism that those in power benefit from secrecy. Even with excellent intentions toward service of the public good, disclosure of information beyond what is required to accomplish mandated responsibilities and strategic goals demands attention and resources that could be applied to internal projects. Government entities tend to be slow to adapt, so political pressure from external voices is essential in initiating and directing changes in information dissemination practices. We can stay informed on issues pertaining to open and transparent governance, including open data, Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) compliance, records management policies, national security information, censorship, and the freedom to read. Issues pertaining to copyright and open access, privacy, and information security also bear on the interests of our users.

Government information librarians have a direct interest in policies and funding pertaining to information dissemination and preservation activities

conducted by government entities. At the national level in the United States, these activities include much of the work of the U.S. Government Publishing Office (GPO), which includes GPO's oversight of the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP), the development and maintenance of GPO's bibliographic database of national government publications, and GPO's provision of access to authenticated government information through its content management system and preservation repository, govinfo. Other agencies of programmatic concern include the National Archives and Records Administration, the Library of Congress, and the Office of Management and Budget. Similar agencies are of interest at the state and local levels, where advocacy needs are perhaps even greater. Identifying and pursuing opportunities to request improved practices and funding for information dissemination are a core part of our own professional work; the work of transparency advocacy groups such as the Sunlight Foundation affords additional avenues and approaches to advocating for access to government information.

Avenues of direct advocacy include writing letters and making phone calls to legislators; commenting on proposed rules; contacting officials directly with questions, suggestions, and concerns; attending public hearings and meetings; and encouraging colleagues to speak up about issues of concern. Many professional organizations, including the American Library Association and the American Association of Law Libraries, lobby on behalf of their members, so we can use the internal mechanisms available within these associations to strengthen their orientation toward improving and protecting access to government information. Sharing information with social media networks also adds to public and professional awareness of these crucial issues.

Public opinion informs policy, so seeking opportunities to highlight government information collections and services in media venues and through local partnerships increases exposure to these resources and, by extension, some of the issues we face in enabling and improving public access to them. News stories and other forms of publicity also connect the value of our institutions' investments in public service to those who make decisions about allocating resources that affect our ability to do our jobs, thus connecting public advocacy to institutional and professional advocacy.

WITHIN THE PROFESSION

Government information librarians must be advocates for ourselves, as individuals and as a community. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the number of full-time government information librarians is dwindling. The complex, diversifying portfolios of work for academic librarians lead library administrations to prioritize hiring professionals with expertise that may not neatly intersect with content and subject matter specialization. Some academic and public libraries are stepping away from formal recognition of their roles in providing

access to government information, most starkly when they relinquish their status in programs such as the FDLP. Other libraries recruit and retain government information librarians but do so in a manner that divides those librarians' responsibilities with other areas. This particular trend is beneficial in some respects because it increases the scope of awareness and reciprocal information sharing between government information librarians and those in other functional and subject-oriented areas of expertise. However, this practice also results in fewer opportunities for librarians to develop the government information expertise needed by the library's community of users.

Although cross-functional expertise can and should be encouraged and rewarded, the potential loss of content-oriented expertise that results from de-specialization is a serious long-term barrier to meeting access needs and, by extension, the strategic goals of libraries and other organizations serving their users. In addition, the long-term preservation of government information resources demands sustained collaboration within the library community. The enormity of this project cannot be undertaken by a single institution, but dispersed, coordinated work can accomplish seemingly insurmountable tasks. The coordination of this work requires specialists with government information expertise and a passion for improving access.

Our work enriches our own institutions and contributes to the public good. These contributions include the facilitation of broad access to government information; thoughtful development, maintenance, and preservation of government information collections; and advocacy pertaining to public policy. In the absence of formally designated government information librarian positions, fewer librarians are situated to make these contributions as part of the course of their work.

There are opportunities at differing scales to advocate for government information librarianship. Ongoing demonstration of the value and relevance of one's work is a natural fit with any professional role. By thinking creatively about how to contribute to the work of others, we build connections to government information in new and unexpected ways. For example, identifying users who are interested in text analysis can lead to opportunities to develop new data collections, or seeking out opportunities to use government information to teach information literacy concepts can create an avenue of engagement with library instruction programs, or hosting civic engagement events can lead to outreach with users who may not typically visit the library. Articulating and emphasizing the relationships between our work and the organization's strategic goals help justify ongoing institutional investment in the roles that support these needs. We can also make the case for government information librarianship at peer institutions through activity in professional associations, regional consortia, and other affiliations. Sharing accomplishments and best practices provides concrete and relatable evidence that government information librarians are just as necessary now as decades ago when libraries were exclusive gatekeepers for these collections.

Supporting government information librarians also takes the form of individual acts of collegiality, mentorship, and compassion. Such support can mean seeking out those who are new to government information to orient them to the community and then act as informal cheerleaders for their professional development. It can also mean seeking out those who are long-time government documents librarians to learn from their work and connect them with new perspectives from related professional areas. The community of government information librarians is changing as librarians shift focus from one professional identity to another, new community members take on or expand roles and then move on to new opportunities, and long-time librarians retire and others take their place.

SUMMARY

Advocacy is professional, but it is also personal. Working to improve access to government information is something that anyone can do, and something that perhaps many more should do. Government information librarians are fortunate in that our specialization allows us to contribute to a project that goes beyond our individual libraries and our own careers. What is asked of us in return is to develop a keen and creative vision for where and when our insight and voices can make a meaningful difference.

Within our organizational roles, we have the responsibility to connect the dots between the mission of the library and the access needs of our users. We also have the opportunity to seek out new ways to manage and provide access to historical and newly emergent content. As a professional community, we can combine our efforts to develop new systems and models for preserving this content. We can also offer our expertise to the efforts of others who are seeking more access to more government information. Finally, we must not lose sight of the ways in which we are ultimately advocates for our own future: without government information librarians, who will undertake this work with a clear vision and willing spirit?

RESOURCES

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