

Open Government Data

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From the White House's Open Government Initiative (www.whitehouse.gov/open) to community movements like Code for America (www.codeforamerica.org), there is growing public demand for greater government transparency. Coupled with an overall interest in making government information available to the public, open government data is an emerging issue for many library and information professionals.

Strong Roots

Government librarians have a long history of making government information accessible. The exemplar being the Federal Depository Library Program. For decades, depository libraries across the country have collected, maintained, and continuously made available federal government publications.

To assist with locating these government publications, the Government Printing Office (GPO) began creating catalog records of government publications (<http://catalog.gpo.gov>) that have been published since 1976.

More recently, libraries have started digitizing their government publications collections so as to make accessing -- and not just locating -- government publications easier. Additionally, GPO's FDSys (www.gpo.gov/fdsys/) allows users to search and retrieve full-text digitized government documents and publications. Similarly, the HathiTrust also works on digitizing federal publications and, through their US Federal Government Documents Initiative (www.hathitrust.org/usgovdocs), has the mission of becoming a digital repository of federal government documents.

Other digital libraries such as the TRAIL, the Technical Report Archive & Imagery Library, (www.technicalreports.org/trail/search/), focuses on digitizing pre-1976 technical government reports. There are also many federal agencies that maintain public databases of scientific and technical government reports; including NASA (<http://ntrs.nasa.gov/>), DTIC (www.dtic.mil/dtic/search/tr/tr.html), and NTIS (www.ntis.gov), among others. For additional resources on scientific and technical sources, you may wish to review Matthew von Hendy's recent writings on scientific and technical grey literature sources.

New Branches

From creating catalog records that make locating government information easier to digitizing government publications that make them more readily available to the public, we now see a move towards open government data initiatives.

As “data” continues to be the new frontier in the information environment, so are government data sets the newest frontier for government librarians.

Open government data consists of government data sets that can be accessed, viewed, and used by the public. A helpful resource in locating government data sets is the Open Knowledge Foundation’s list of open data catalogs (<http://opengovernmentdata.org/data/catalogues/>). Here, users can quickly locate a government’s open data website and review and download the available government data sets.

In the U.S. this includes the federal government open data catalog (www.data.gov), which also provides a list of state government open data catalogs. Many U.S. municipal governments have also followed suit by making their data sets available to the general public. At the local level, there are many “Open [City]” movements working on similar initiatives. The Open Austin (www.open-austin.org/) community is one example.

At the international level, the Open Knowledge Foundation’s Open Government Data project (<https://okfn.org/about/our-impact/opengovernment/>) calls on governments around the world to make government data sets publicly accessible. The World Wide Web Foundation has also created initiatives to promote open government data (<http://webfoundation.org/projects/open-government-data/>). The World Bank’s Open Government Data Toolkit assists users in accessing and building on open government data (<http://data.worldbank.org/open-government-data-toolkit>).

Following the tradition of making government information available, librarians and information professionals are well placed to contribute to the open government data movement. This is can be seen in the continued work by government librarians to locate hard to find government publications. It is also seen in public libraries that have partnered with community open government movements to promote open data; and business librarians who are working with large data sets that are regularly used by economists, business analysts, among other users. To be sure, all librarians and information professionals are learning how to code and build databases that support data visualization. Open data is the emerging issue at the center of all these new library and information professional tools. And open government data is sure to be an area that all government information professionals will want to include in their government resources toolkit.

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