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## Teaching Matters: U.S. Government Information and Information Literacy: A Time-Sensitive Issue for our Profession

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## TEACHING MATTERS: DEVELOPING AS A TEACHER/LIBRARIAN [COLUMN]

U.S. Government Information and Information Literacy:  
A time-sensitive issue for our profession

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*This column will focus on the conceptual and practical aspects of teaching information literacy. Column co-editor Janelle Zauha and I will write about trends and issues that have come to our attention, but we also solicit contributions to this space. Readers with ideas for Teaching Matters may contact me at [ragains@unr.edu](mailto:ragains@unr.edu), or the editors of Communications in Information Literacy at [editors@comminfolit.org](mailto:editors@comminfolit.org).*

James Madison wrote in 1822 that "a people who mean to be their own governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives," illustrating a longstanding, natural alliance between supporters of open government and information literacy. (*Respectfully Quoted*, 1989) Today, most academic and adult services librarians have at least a passing familiarity with U.S. government information, including Web sites like GPO Access, Thomas and USA.gov. These free sites have greatly improved public access to federal government information, and are essential to the service federal depository libraries provide. Even so, trends underway in many libraries may marginalize the role of government information in reference assistance and information literacy instruction.

In 1985-86, Jean Sears and Marilyn K. Moody published *Using Government Publications*,

which was, for its time, the best single tool for learning about U.S. government information. In fact, this book influenced me to begin a career as a librarian. As a new government documents librarian I soon found more continuing education opportunities available from government information providers, including the Bureau of the Census, U.S. Government Printing Office, Bureau of Economic Analysis, and Patent and Trademark Office. At these agency-sponsored workshops I became familiar with a wide range of information, including economic data, law, patents, and international government publications. My experience was not unique - government documents librarians in academic, public and special libraries and many adult services librarians in public libraries comprise a large audience for this type of training. Most importantly, library users have benefited from the knowledge we've gained.

Today there are fewer opportunities for training from government agency staff, experienced librarians and vendor representatives, but other developments more seriously threaten the profession's knowledge base and provision of government information service to the public. First, many government documents/government information departments have been downsized or absorbed by other library units. In four libraries where I've worked, government documents functions are now split between technical services and reference/information services. An increasing number of selective federal depository libraries are dropping out of the system and relying on a regional depository library in their own state (or, in a few instances, a neighboring state) to provide in-depth government information service to their users. Finally, retirements erode specialized expertise available to library users (a trend affecting many educational and social service occupations). In libraries where numbers of depository professional and support staffs are reduced, users are less able to get any sort of government information-related library service on a timely basis. These can include requests to find historical information, such as President Grover Cleveland's 1893 message to Congress on the gold standard, information about RSS services for upcoming regulatory hearings, among countless other possibilities. For the sake of our users, we must call to mind James Madison's warning about the need for an informed citizenry.

The current government information environment is multifaceted, and it would be wrong to claim the sky is falling. Fewer new print-on-paper government publications have been sent to depository libraries over the last fifteen years. By itself this isn't a problem, since the U.S. Government Printing Office includes hyperlinks to online publications in its MARC records. Many library catalogs now include these GPO records. Some of the best online aggregators of government information present mixed blessings to information users, since their services are not open-URL compliant and do not work with link resolvers (Lexis-Nexis Congressional and the Commerce

Department's STAT-USA are two examples).

In order to mitigate the barriers I've mentioned, library public service personnel must gain more expertise in government information. Government information librarians have essential roles here in training their colleagues and promoting improved access. Recent efforts include Web Junction's project, Government Information in the 21st Century ([www.webjunction.org/51](http://www.webjunction.org/51)). Funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, this program is compiling subject-based modules to train reference and public services librarians and library workers to use government information resources. Case studies on teaching government information have appeared in journals like *RSR*, *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, *Research Strategies* and *Journal of Government Information*. There are three chapters on government information in my book, *Information Literacy Instruction that Works* (2006; a general discussion of government information, legal research and patent searching, all contributed by experts in their subjects).

Web-based resources, published case studies and how-to guides are all important resources for continued education and training and should be used to their best advantage. That said, I recommend expert face-to-face training above all. The University of Nevada, Reno partners with the Nevada State Library and Archives and other libraries around the state to present an annual government information training day, targeting library public service providers as its key audience. Workshops can take a lot of time to set up and deliver, and can be more costly than self-paced Web tutorials, but I believe they yield better results. A workshop setting encourages participants to pay full attention to the subject at hand and allows more interaction than asynchronous training. Libraries undertaking this kind of staff training should be prepared for a long-term effort. Six months or one year of reference-related training won't give non-specialists enough exposure, nor will it address needs created by turnover. Department heads and library administrators should look for outcomes such as increased expertise locating

published and online government information (both free and in proprietary databases), pertinent discussion in information literacy instruction, and appropriate referrals to specialists (experienced staff in the local library, regional libraries, and agencies that produce public information).

Librarians should support all such efforts now, before organizational changes (perhaps accelerated significantly by our recent poor economy) seriously reduce the knowledge base among working librarians. Our students, library users and other constituents deserve teaching and research assistance informed by the broadest possible familiarity with government information sources, although the case for learning about it is much the same as for any specialized knowledge. Information is ubiquitous, but we can't expect our users to find everything they need without organized interfaces and personal assistance.

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