Government information and #critlib

I was fortunate to be able to attend the 2015 #CritlibSF Unconference, hosted at the University of San Francisco’s Gleeson Library in conjunction with the American Library Association’s Annual Conference last month. While the discussion predominantly, although by no means exclusively, focused on teaching and learning within the academic library context, the event and broader conversations within the #critlib community have given me a lot of food for thought as a government information librarian.

One of the themes in these discussions is how work within libraries can reinforce or oppose the power structures within society. It is stating the obvious that government is one of the most recognizable, and perhaps most pervasive, signs of power in our daily lives. Even an introductory narrative of government function engages with power as a concept, whether in the language of rights, democracy, or checks and balances. With the supposed consent of the governed, the government has the ability to affect (or, if you prefer, engage with) nearly every aspect of life.

Unimpeded and unmonitored access to government information is a core theme in ALA’s Key Principles of Government Information, and librarians have championed these rights for generations. Still, those of us who work with government information are frequently engaging with the firehose of content as it comes to us, however it comes to us. The publications collected and distributed through videochat18-roulette depository programs are only a small subset of the content published by agencies to websites, databases, and social media, which is itself only a portion of their informational products. If public discourse can only take place in the context of the narratives and threads of information selected by the government and those in a position of authority as being worthy of capture, it could be less representative, less inclusive, and by extension less nuanced.

For those who choose to engage with social justice issues, there is an opportunity to ask important questions about how government information is collected and made accessible by libraries. In the spirit of our Key Principles, I suggest that we ask ourselves how we can better meet our shared mandates with an eye toward a more proactively inclusive definition of ‘citizenry’ and a more nuanced approach to the concept of ‘public.’

Within the academic library community, many (whether from expediency or conviction) use terminology reflecting the need to preserve government information for future researchers. While some use this terminology to apply to anyone accessing government information through the gates of the library, it still connotes those with a delineated role within the academic community. Any historical government information that is only locked away within the confines of the ivory tower is only accessible to those who have passed through the gates of academic privilege. With that in mind, those of us who are specialists working with government information on an ongoing basis can individually and collectively make contributions to more equitable access in countless ways.

Here are a few ideas to get started:

- Scour mainstream and non-mainstream media for mentions of government and NGO resources that engage with or challenge prevailing narratives, and make sure they are hosted in a number of publicly-accessible, sustainable, not-for-profit collections, including full-text trusted digital repositories and the Internet Archive.
- Catalog government documents, particularly authenticated versions, so they can be found more easily. Submit fugitive U.S. documents to GPO for cataloging via Lost Docs. Good metadata leads to better access.
- Participate in collaborative government information projects, particularly ones that build or improve the diversity of collections.
Teach government information as contextual. Often those of us working in academic libraries are pressed to teach students that government information as a class or category is reliable and authoritative. The truth is more complicated — and honestly, more interesting.

Collect resources to meet the needs of all users: if you work at a library providing services to those who may not have consistent or frequent access to the internet, try to lower barriers to tools that help users access and interpret government information.

Learn and teach others how to make FOIA and public records requests. Collect, describe, and build public access to materials made available from FOIA requests.

Speak up about crucial information gaps. Take the example of activists in the #blacklivesmatter movement who brought to widespread attention the lack of data on the number of people killed by police in the U.S. (For efforts to fill this gap, see The Counted, which incorporates data from crowdsourced tools like Fatal Encounters).

Advocate for better access to government information, and advocate for more sensible copyright policies for state and local publications. The more that’s out there, the more that has a chance of being available in the future.

Use your government information skills to help bring about positive change in your community, whether it’s working toward open data from your local government, responding to information needs of community organizations, or suggesting resources in online discussion threads.

If you, like me, benefit from specific forms of privilege, educate yourself about how it may affect your professional biases, particularly as they relate to collecting and providing access to government information, and teaching others about these resources. Listen to and learn from library users, your colleagues, and members of your community, and be an ally.

While this list is to some extent inspired by #critlib discussions on Twitter (see the #critlib Chats Cheat Sheet or check out #critlib on Twitter), my intention here is to indicate a few potential intersections between these discussions and government information, not to explore the context or delve into the long history of activism and government documents librarians.

It’s also focused on academic libraries and government information collections, rather than e-government services, which could be open to similar opportunities. It seems fair to say that these services engage with the digital divide more directly, whereas government information collections do so obliquely (by recognizing, for example, the role of non-digital formats in access as well as preservation); however, libraries that build and maintain collections of government information are serving both immediate and long-term needs of the public, and are responsible for what resources will be available for future conversations that we can only guess about today.

Whether or not this is the start of a discussion about ways that libraries can better serve the government information needs of all, I hope these ideas will provide some inspiration on ways our communities can improve long-term access to government information for everyone.

Selected Resources


