



Challenges and Opportunities

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As I begin my term as chair of GODORT, I'd like to take this opportunity to introduce myself to the GODORT members who may not know me. To those of you who have been my friends for many years and know all this—please bear with me! I am currently head of the Social Sciences and Maps Libraries at Pennsylvania State University. I have worked with government information at Penn State for more than forty years, initially as a staff member responsible for documents processing and later as the international documents librarian.

Though my primary responsibility is for international documents, I have worked extensively with both federal and state government information, as well I am currently teaching an online three-credit undergraduate course on federal and legal information, have taught an international documents undergraduate research course, and taught the government documents course for the Clarion University MLS program. I have been a member of the IFLA Government Information and Official Publications Section and have spoken about documents in national and international forums. All this to say, I have been immersed in documents for many years and have watched the profession evolve and change enormously—in both positive and negative ways.

Today, as government information librarians, we are being asked by our users to provide access to more and more government information, while at the same time our ranks are shrinking and the necessity of government information specialists is questioned.

So, where is our profession headed? Two conferences I recently attended may provide some insight. I walked away from the conferences both excited about new possibilities and dispirited by the lack of acknowledgment of the role that FDLP and government information librarians could play in filling our users' needs. I walked away both excited and discouraged by the conversations.

The Center for Research Libraries' April 2014 "Leviathan" conference ("Leviathan: Libraries and Government Information in the Age of Big Data," www.crl.edu/leviathan) looked at how imperiled the government-born digital record is and the challenges this presents for preservation and access to government information. It also highlighted the innovative ways researchers are using government records to better understand how our government works. On the one hand, it was exciting to hear researchers such as Michael Connelly, a Columbia University

historian, talk about the use of computational methods to gain insights into the historical record; the possibilities in using techniques such as text analysis to deeply examine what our government is doing are endless, but it assumes we are preserving these records in bulk. On the other hand, the challenges of managing such retention—collection, preservation, storage, and privacy issues—are enormous, but not insoluble. My favorite suggestion came from Tom Blanton, director of the National Security Archive, who suggested the National Security Agency (NSA) could do it. After all, NSA clearly has the computing power to scoop up massive amounts of data and with restrictions being put on their collection of phone data, maybe they will have time to take on a new project.

Dr. Blanton's suggestion, given somewhat tongue in cheek, nevertheless points out the availability of the necessary technology to collect and categorize massive amounts of data. Yet, archivists from the National Archives and Records Administration and Libraries and Archives Canada both talked about selective retention of records, rather than the type of bulk data collection that Dr. Connelly needs for his research. The conference ended with the very last speakers stating outright that the FDLP system can't be "fixed" and that research libraries must move beyond it to other modes of collecting government information/records.

The spring 2014 conference at the GPO the following week was all about "fixing" the FDLP (www.fdlp.gov/dlc-meeting-and-conference-summaries/1851-2014-dlc-meeting-and-fdl-conference). Among the many conversations about using government information were sessions on capturing and preserving web content, managing regional depositories in an era of declining resources, the FDLP forecast study results, and HathiTrust and government documents. Most importantly, GPO unveiled its National Plan for the Future of the FDLP (www.fdlp.gov/file-repository/outreach/events/depository-library-council-dlc-meetings/2014-meeting-proceedings/2462-national-plan-for-the-future-of-the-fdlp). The plan is designed to transform the FDLP into a Federal Information Access Library Program while avoiding the risks to the program a rewrite of Title 44 would present. There is a lot to digest in reviewing the plan. It includes tiered levels of service ranging from Federal Information Access Assurance Partners with responsibility for preservation and permanent public access; through Regional Federal Access Libraries with responsibility for state and regional cooperation; and much smaller Federal Access Libraries with collections and services

tailored to local needs. I encourage all GODORT members to read the plan. GPO is working hard to engage the depository community in discussion of the plan and we must take the opportunity to respond.

The issues facing the FDLP are similar to those facing inter-governmental organizations such as the UN, other national depository programs such as the Canadian Depository Program, and state and local depository programs. Decisions we endorse for the FDLP can inform our responses to issues facing these other organizations as well.

I once had a supervisor who insisted there were no “problems,” only challenges and opportunities, and largely I agree. Today, librarianship in general and documents librarianship in particular seems under fire. We must reinvent ourselves and our service models to accommodate new users and new research

methods. We need to acquire new skill sets in data analysis and the preservation of born digital government information. And, most importantly, we need to develop new networks and partnerships both within the FDLP community and beyond. By doing these things, we can, I believe, reinvigorate our profession and convince our administrations of the important expertise we bring to the table.

I challenge each GODORT task force and committee to review the issues discussed at both these conferences. Much of the material is freely available on the websites. Then, let's come together to discuss what this means for the future of documents librarianship. We can sit either sit back and let others decide our future or we can accept the challenges and opportunities before us and help chart our own future.

Errata

An error occurred in the Spring 2014 issue. The review for Ringsmuth was written by Kristine Stilwell, not Andrea Wright. The editors apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused.