Searching for Online Government Documents: One Graduate Student's Experience

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From summer 2000 through fall 2007, I wore two very distinct hats at IUPUI's University Library. As a member of the reference team, I offered daily assistance to library patrons upon a wide range of subjects. At the same time, as a graduate student completing a doctorate in history at Purdue University, I was also an inveterate library patron, making extensive use of library resources such as interlibrary loan and electronic databases. From the outset, given the subject of my dissertation (twentieth century tobacco culture in the central Ohio River valley) I was keenly aware that government documents were going to be a rich source of information and fully expected that University Library would play a vital role in retrieving them. What I did not anticipate, was just how limited online coverage would be in terms of historic government data, especially on the state and local level. Neither did I realize how valuable having online access to more recent government documents would prove to be, nor was I prepared for the volume of government-generated material that would become available between 1994 and 2007 (Aldrich, Cornwell, & Barkley, 2000). In the end, the final chapter of my dissertation was largely shaped by the rapid and significant deployment of both online government and government-related documents. Because I worked on both sides of the reference desk, my experience with the rapidly expanding universe of online government resources not only enriched my own research, but also enhanced my ability to assist other library patrons with similar needs. This article will focus on my experiences as Reference Assistant and library user with online government information, with reflections on what I learned along the way.

A Historian's Use of Government Information in Research

Surprisingly, several studies conducted over the past twenty years have shown that historians as a group tend to make little use of government documents. This remains true to the present time, although government resources cited are increasingly electronic rather than print (Cheney, 2006). In the initial phase of my dissertation research, however, I expected to use government resources to provide most (if not all) of the detailed raw demographic data that I was going to require. From prior research, I was aware that the U.S. federal manuscript census (*Population schedules of the … census of the United States*, published by the National Archives and Records Administration, ca. 1790–1930), supported by county records, would be essential in reconstructing the multi-generational kin-networks. Finally, I anticipated that I would be relying heavily upon government documents for information on the federal tobacco program, through all of its permutations, since its creation in the 1930s. Having used some of these same resources in the past, I was quite confident in my ability to effectively research government documents in a reasonable timeframe when I outlined my research strategy for my dissertation proposal. At the time, I was convinced that having access to online to government documents would make the research process far simpler and expected that it would cut down on the amount of time I would have to spend on that phase of my dissertation work.

The first thing I discovered was that no government website provides access to the original U.S. federal manuscript census. For a fee, researchers can access all of the open years (1790–1930) through Ancestry.Com, www.ancestry.com/, and on a county-by-county basis, it is possible to access at least some years through the USGenWeb Project, http://usgenweb.org/. But no county is complete, and most counties tend to focus on the 1850 and 1860 censuses. Toward the

end of my dissertation research, however, the entire 1880 manuscript census become available on the FamilySearch.org website, www.familysearch.org/. Both the USGenWeb Project and FamilySearch.org are free to all users.

The next problem I encountered was that very few of the county records that I needed were available online. And once again, no government website provided access to them, and only limited coverage was available through the USGenWeb Project. To adapt my schedule, I was forced to spend much longer than I had anticipated doing extensive archival research across two states, Indiana and Kentucky. It also entailed months spent at the Indiana State Library going through countless reels of microfilm, looking at the U.S. federal manuscript census (1790 through 1930) for Switzerland County, Indiana and Carroll County, Kentucky, as well as the 1850 and 1860 slave schedules for Carroll County. Although it is not a government website, I did discover one online resource for historic census data that proved to be invaluable. The University of Virginia Library's Historical Census Browser provided detailed demographic data at both the national, state, and county level, culled from all the various population census schedules recorded between 1790 and 1960, http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/.[1]

Once I had completed the data collection portion of my dissertation research, I was certain that I would be able to make up for lost time, by turning to online government documents for all the information I needed on the federal tobacco program, and any other agricultural, business, energy, health, and general economic data required. In many respects this did prove to be true, although I was still forced to rely upon print resources for most pre-1990 information. Once I began working with online government information, however, it was difficult not to feel completely overwhelmed by the vastness of this material. Not only does the federal government produce information on an incredibly wide range of subjects, but it does so on a staggering scale. For example, a single government portal, USA.gov, http://usa.gov/, provides links to 5 million websites, each of which has numerous links to online documents. Moreover, there are

an alarming number of ways to access all of these online resources. In addition, all across the United States, cities, counties, and states are also contributing to this flood of online government documents. For me, this meant that I not only had to contend with searching for data, reports, and publications of all kinds in various federal websites, but that I also had to search through state and local websites as well. In many respects, of course, this was exactly what every scholar hopes for, access (potentially at any rate) to an abundance of primary resources. However, even with a generous deadline looming in what seemed like the distant future, the prospect of having to pick through myriad websites in search of pertinent material was daunting.

Lessons Learned

Perhaps the single most important lesson that I took away from my years of using online government documents was simply learning how to determine where to begin searching. In some cases, for certain types of publications, I found that a Google search might be just as effective, and in some respects far easier, than trying to navigate the many subject-based portals that have been created for federal and state government over the past decade. For example, in an effort to determine the impact of the local casino on Switzerland County, Indiana's economy, I found that searching the Web proved far easier than trying to tease out that information from Indiana's central government website, then known as Access Indiana and now called IN.gov. At the same time, when I needed detailed county-level demographic data from both the 1990 and 2000 census the best means of accessing that information turned out to be a subject-based government portal, American Fact Finder. In most cases, however, it was not necessarily clear which approach would work best. A Google search might yield exactly what I was looking for, but it might just as easily produce an overabundance of results that failed to meet either my standards or my needs. Potentially, the biggest drawback to searching for online government documents through one of the state or federal government portals was determining which one would provide the most direct access to the specific information I was seeking. The fact that government portals also seemed to have a propensity for changing their

address (URL), and then failing to update their links accordingly, didn't help matters.

Fortunately, this is where libraries can step up and provide a crucial service for their patrons. In my case, both University Library's online reference shelf and its online government information subject page supplied the kind of guidance I needed in order to narrow the focus of my searches to the proper government agencies and or departments. Just as importantly, the library was fairly successful with keeping its links updated. Additionally, during the years I was researching my dissertation, Indiana University's system-wide online catalog (IUCAT) significantly expanded the number of live links it incorporated into the records of its collection of government documents. In doing so, the IU libraries provided an easy means of searching for online government publications, by keyword or subject, in a setting familiar to all Indiana University library patrons. Indeed, the main reason for not viewing the library catalog as a major tool for accessing online government resources, at this time, is the relative paucity of state and local government documents included in its holdings. The other major benefit of accessing online government documents through the library, of course, is the presence of trained library personnel who can provide assistance. For example, when I needed an authoritative response to my question about the agricultural census, one of our librarians was able to supply me with the name of a contact at the National Archives. A single e-mail exchange settled the matter. Now, I may have eventually been able to find the answer on my own, but just asking for help saved me a great deal of time and unnecessary effort.

In writing my dissertation's final chapter, using online government documents probably had the greatest impact upon my research. I had originally thought that my final chapter might revolve around a panel discussion on tobacco that had taken place in 1998 when (then) President Bill Clinton had visited Carroll County, Kentucky. I had found a transcript of the entire event online at the American Presidency Project, and felt that it provided ample material around which I could construct that final chapter. Between 2000 and 2005, however, the federal tobacco program was

phased out of existence. Thanks to the speed with which the documents documenting this development appeared online, I was able to follow the flow of events almost as they were happening. Eventually, with the official end of the program in 2005, it was possible to incorporate all of the most current information into my final chapter, allowing me to expand its scope to include an analysis of the end of a unique culture that had sustained tobacco farmers in the Ohio River valley for over 70 years.

Conclusion

So in the final analysis, what did I learn about researching online government documents? First I discovered that not all government documents are available online, at least not yet. Certain local, state, and even federal material, especially historic material, is simply not being made available electronically. Some material, such as the U.S. federal manuscript censuses (population schedules), is available for a fee from commercial websites. Some material, thanks to the work of volunteers, is being transcribed and placed on non-commercial websites, but coverage is still incomplete. For certain types of government documents, I found that that searching the Web with a search engine can be just as effective as using the many subject-based local, state, or federal government portals. I determined that a Google search could be quite useful if you knew the kind of information that you were seeking, knew at least some of the concerned parties, but had no idea when, where, by whom, or how it would have been compiled. Finally, I found that library resources could be incredibly useful when trying to track down more recent government documents online (especially from 1990). Library created and maintained subject guides can help steer patrons to the proper agencies and/or departments, within both federal and state government, where the documents are actually posted. The library catalog can provide direct access to a growing number of government documents, in an easy to search and familiar environment. In addition, a library staff readily available to both provide assistance with library resources and knowledgeable about government information is very helpful. Not every government document is available online, and not everything that is online is

available for free or through a government portal. More government documents of every kind imaginable appear online daily, and they are searchable and just waiting for someone to find and use them!

Notes

[1] The University of Virginia Library's Historical Census Browser is an authoritative source. The original source of data is the U.S. Census Bureau's decennial census and the electronic data was compiled by the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) under guidelines developed by the American Historical Association.

References

Aldrich, D. M, Cornwell, G., & Barkley, D. (2000). Changing partnerships? Government documents departments at the turn of the millennium. *Government Information Quarterly*, 17(3), 273-290.

Cheney, D., (2006). Government information collections and services in the social sciences: The subject specialist integration model. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 32, 303-312.

Recommended Online Government Resources

American FactFinder, http://factfinder.census.gov/

American Presidency Project, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/

Ancestry.Com, www.ancestry.com/

FamilySearch.org, www.familysearch.org/

GPO Access, www.gpoaccess.gov/

Historical Census Browser, http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/

IN.gov, www.in.gov/

IUCAT, www.iucat.iu.edu/

University Library (IUPUI) Government Information Guide, www.ulib.iupui.edu/subjectareas/gov

University Library (IUPUI) Reference Shelf, www.ulib.iupui.edu/genref

USA.gov, www.usa.gov/

USGenWeb Project, www.usgenweb.org/

About the Author

Jeffery A. Duvall did his undergraduate work at Earlham College, received his MA in history from Indiana University, and his Ph.D. in history from Purdue University in West Lafayette. He has contributed entries to both *The Encyclopedia of Indianapolis* and *The Governors of Indiana*.