

.Gov in the Classroom: Using Government Websites in Library Instruction

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In the world of library instruction, the role of government websites (URLs ending in .gov) is often overlooked. Due to limited time, a plethora of library databases, and the desire to steer away from internet resources in favor of library selected databases, government websites are often given little thought and even less use. However, not only are many government websites of prime importance to students; they are also critical for public use. Once introduced, they also tend to be very popular among high school and college students for a variety of personal needs as well as class assignments. Government websites in general are reliable, current, authoritative, and user-friendly! So if a librarian is seeking to include some 'life-long learning' aspects to library instruction sessions, government websites are hard to beat. As an added benefit, students enjoy the fact that online government information is publically accessible to them after they leave school. This article will describe implementing government websites into particular courses at Indiana University Southeast. It is intended to be introductory and readers are encouraged to seek out the many rich resources of online government information for library user needs. College and high school librarians, public librarians, and school media specialists will also find the government websites described useful for library websites as well as reference.

Teaching online government sources can be implemented at many different levels of library instruction. It is important that the resource is introduced at the point where students understand the benefits of its application. In some introductory classes, government information may not be appropriate, but for most students, their papers and research projects are strengthened by the use of government information and statistics. Here are some specific resources on careers, education, criminal justice, and population and

demographic statistics that library instructors may incorporate into student courses and projects.

Career Services

There is a government website related to almost any research need. For career exploration projects, students have access to excellent information from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics website at www.bls.gov. Important resources for career exploration are the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (OOH) and the *Career Guide to Industries*; they give pertinent information about job requirements, opportunities and outlook as well as links to professional organizations. They are easily found on the home page under featured publications. The searchable online periodical, *Occupational Outlook Quarterly*, updates some of the outlook information in the annual OOH. As many people want wage information more specific to their location than the national averages available in the OOH, they may also consult the *Wages by Area and Occupation* page located in the drop-down menu under *Occupations* on the left bar of the home page.

Education

The value of detailed statistical information available to education majors and professionals in the state of Indiana has been demonstrated in our library instruction sessions. Students may access Indiana data down to the school level on state education websites. Many states do not provide the type and amount of detail that Indiana does through the official website of the state of Indiana, IN.gov. In particular, the Indiana K-12 Education Data (www.doe.in.gov/data/) offers a wealth of information for students such as enrollment data, ISTEP averages, SAT information, annual school performance report cards, the employment record and licensing information of both the

teacher and administrative rosters, and a searchable database of Indiana schools by name and geographic area. The database allows users to compare schools on a number of criteria. In fact, it is a good idea for library instructors to plan plenty of exploration time into library sessions to allow students to explore everything available.

Criminal Justice

The U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics website www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/ is another example of a rich online resource that meets a variety of student needs. Criminal justice students at all levels of degree work will need to use this website. It covers introductory material such as the sequence of events in the justice system (under workings of the criminal justice system) to detailed statistics on varieties of violent crimes. It also includes online versions of standard print resources such as *The Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics*. However, criminal justice students are not the only ones that will benefit from being introduced to this site. The special topics covered will have value for any student in a writing or speech class who needs statistical information on a variety of subjects like hate crimes, intimate partner violence, drugs and crime, HIV in prisons, recidivism, and expenditures.

Health

Students doing research on any health topic will both want and need statistics. The best .gov website for that information is www.cdc.gov, the site for the Centers for Disease Control. Students can access reliable statistics for any condition by topic from Aging — Workplace. Nursing students in particular will find the online access to issues of *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Reports* (MMWR) and *Emerging Infectious Diseases* (EID) of particular use in their research. Nurses can also use the Chronic Disease Indicators (CDI) database to compare their state to others for such health factors as cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, or others. The site also provides links to other important health related sites such as Fedstats, Health, United States and Health-E stats.

Government

The main government websites that are useful for student research are whitehouse.gov, senate.gov, and house.gov. Links to all three of these sites are provided on the IUS website, but students have very little trouble remembering such easy URLs as these. The White house website is an excellent resource for primary material relating both to the president and the executive branch of government. There is a complete listing of documents and speeches under the Briefing Room and extended biographical information about all members of the current administration including staff and cabinet. Links to former presidents' websites are available through the White House, subcategory White House 101 along with historical information about the building itself. Senate.gov allows students to find their senators and check on their activity. Information on what committees a senator serves and what votes they cast on current legislation is easily accessible from the Senate's home page. The Senate is also steeped in history and the website provides ample information on its formation and history as a body and its individual members over time. For the librarian, there is also easy access on the home page for familiar print titles such as the *Daily Digest* for recent floor activity and the *Senate Calendar*.

In contrast, there is much more emphasis on how government works on house.gov. The center of the page is dominated by legislative information that will allow a student to search for current legislation, committee hearings, roll call votes (with links to previous years displayed), as well as the legislative process for making laws for those students new to the study of the legislative branch of government, what it does, and how it works. Access to information on individual members of the House is listed on the left sidebar of the page, with links to historical information on the Capitol Building history on the right.

Population and Demographics

Now we come to the mother-lode of all government websites — census.gov, www.census.gov/, of course! If only one government website could be taught (whether federal,

state or local), it would be census.gov because of its layout, usability and links to other governmental agencies. The search engine on this site is also particularly good in returning relevant and understandable results for students, but it is important for library instructors to teach some aspects of the structure of the website so that students get an overview of types of information the government collects.

While there are several easy searches that students can do on the home page, some of the results have to be explained to students who may not grasp the concepts without explanation, the decennial census, for example. One popular database is 'Find an Area Profile with QuickFacts.' However, many of the results under the Area Profiles data date back to 2000, and the more attentive and demanding student will pick up on this fact and want more recent data (and no explanation about 'official' population statistics will make any impression on them). The Population Finder database featured above the Area Profiles search box remedies some of these problems with population estimates from more recent years.

For classes with more specific needs, it is worth teaching and encouraging the use of the Subjects A-Z listing featured on the top of the home page. This list gives students a good understanding of the depth of data and information collected by the federal government, specifically the U.S. Census Bureau, and the cross-references are very good.

Also on the home page under Special Topics is a link to the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (also accessible through the A-Z list and under Publications). This title is also useful in reassuring the professors that bring their students in for a library instruction class. If there is one government title that professors know, it is the *Statistical Abstract*, and therefore they accept the citation to this online resource, no matter how abhorrent they find the use of online information in academic research.

Finally, census.gov also features Economic Indicators, useful for both business and sociology instruction sessions. Not only is the online resource handy for quick reference, the

historical data and supplementary material (including program overviews, press releases and definitions) give a student a fuller understanding of the information.

The link to the American Fact Finder on census.gov takes library instruction in a new direction. This page is appropriate for retrieving quick facts or in-depth research, so library instruction sessions may be geared toward the general introductory class or the upper level advanced class. This website supports the instructor in explaining the purpose and intent of the decennial census, as well as the purpose behind such programs as the American Community Survey. An entire instruction session could easily be designed around this website. American Fact Finder meets student needs in sessions, whether the project is to find information about their specific locality, or whether the project is to start a new business or assess what medical or social support systems were in place in a geographic area.

However, the information resource that is greatly anticipated after the 2010 census is the address search. If the Census Bureau only knew how incredibly popular this particular search is with college students they would place it in a much more prominent position on the American Fact Finder website. At IU Southeast, library instructors noticed students perk up and actually get involved in searching once this part of the site was demonstrated. Several other academic librarians have confirmed similar experiences demonstrating this search. Nothing captures student interest more than relating the instruction directly to *them*.

Conclusion

.Gov sites may easily be incorporated into library instruction sessions, no matter what the subject or level of the class. The basic websites described in this article are appropriate for school and public libraries as well as college libraries, for use in instruction, reference, and on library websites. And most of all, online government information resources will be used by students the rest of their lives. By incorporating government websites into regular library activities, librarians also serve their users' future needs!

About the Author

Jacqueline F. Johnson has been a librarian at Indiana University Southeast for nineteen years, and has been Coordinator for Collection Development and Special Collections (including Government information) for most of those nineteen years. She teaches 'Information Resources for Journalism Majors' in which government websites form the feature of two lecture sessions for that course.