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Designing Your Government Documents Web Page for Your Community's Needs

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Since the U.S. Government began extensive electronic publishing a few years ago, Government documents librarians in many Federal depository libraries have begun creating Government document home pages on the World Wide Web to help their users access the wealth of electronic Government information. These Government document home pages serve two differing purposes: to introduce researchers to the breadth and variety of information available; and to focus the information so that users can locate it.

Because the Bowdoin College Library has made a substantial commitment to using the Web as an information organizing and delivery tool, I developed one Government documents Web page two years ago, and last summer made major revisions to make it a more effective tool for research and to make it visually consistent with a new design for the Library's gateway page. Through reflecting on this process, I have developed some specific recommendations for the intellectual and physical design of Government document home pages.

The first step is to have a clear reason for creating a Government documents home page and a distinct goal for the page. For most depositories I think the most important objective needs to be to connect library users, whether present in the library or at a remote desktop, most directly with the Government information they seek. For Government information the Web offers some unique access opportunities from a user's perspective. In addition to ready availability on any computer anywhere, for many of our users the Web arguably offers easier access to Government information because Web search methods are more similar from site to site than the organization and indexing of paper and fiche materials are from series to series. For example, searching congressional debate in Thomas is far more similar to searching data in the Census Bureau's Web site than searching the paper Congressional Record is to searching the print Statistical Abstract. This is not an argument, by the way, for a wholly electronic depository; in a world where not all people have computers and networks crash regularly, print still has an important place. But I think depository librarians should capitalize on the Web's ease of access to help create more direct connections to Government information for a variety of our users.

While I have just said that the Web offers some unique ease of access, I also want to point out that it also presents us with unique confusion and chaos as well, because it is so easy to access and there is such broad dissemination of so much material. Therefore, another reason for a depository Web page is that it can act as a focus, providing researchers a manageable window into the larger landscape of Government information. Not only can it be a focus by providing a limited number of selected Web sites selected to be most important for your patrons, but it can also function as an index to the many Government Web sites available. This index feature can be useful both for library users and also for library reference staff.

In our medium sized library, as in many libraries of liberal arts colleges or medium sized public libraries, all reference staff assist with Government document questions, but many do not have enough time to gain adequate expertise in the collection. We are finding that the Web page is very helpful, not only for individuals seeking information, but for librarians assisting them. Another advantage of a Government documents home page as a finding aid is its flexibility. Updating information and making additions or deletions are easily done.

In creating a Web page, one of the first steps is to decide what sites needs to be included. The first consideration is what information your community needs most. At my library, a college library, the curriculum is a major determining factor of the sites that I select. Not only do I select congressional and presidential sites for the political science classes, I also include EPA and USGS sites for geologists and environmental studies majors, Medline online for the sociology and pre-med students, etc.

Many of these sites prove useful to students in public schools as well. The social and demographic composition of our congressional district is an equally important consideration in selection. Mid-coast Maine has a large number of active retirees for whom travel information is important, so embassy information and travel advisories are included. Our district is characterized by small businesses, so there is a substantial section of links to Government business sources. An interesting feature of the business section is that our page incorporates the work of a Government documents colleague, Paul D'Alessandro, from Portland Public Library, who wanted to create a business Web page, but whose library had no Web presence at the time. The cooperation benefits both libraries and all patrons of the congressional district.

In thinking about information needs, I also considered the kinds of questions that come up frequently at the Reference Desk from the general public as well as Bowdoin students and faculty. Everyone needs tax forms, social security forms, the addresses of their congressional representatives, foreign embassy information, the CPI, and so forth. Our Government documents home page, therefore, includes a selection of sites which answer these kinds of questions.

After defining the information needs of the depository's user population, it is then necessary to locate the sites which provide the kinds of information identified for inclusion on the Web page. For some information, it is easy to discover a site or there are many sites that we work with every day. For other needs, it is necessary to search for a site providing the appropriate information. To search for an agency, the Federal Web Locator works well; GPO Access provides a good range of frequently needed document texts; and the

Government Information Exchange site [www.info.gov] offers a subject-organized approach to locating material. Two good sources for new material are GOVDOC-L and the Scout Report [<http://scout.cs.wisc.edu/scout/report/>]. The Scout Report is an Internet service which provides timely reviews of new Web sites, many of Federal Government origin. Also new Government Web sites are often discovered simply in doing day to day reference work.

In reviewing Web sites to include on the Government documents home page, it is useful to apply some evaluative criteria for selection. Such criteria as currency, authority, effectiveness of display, speed of loading and others should be applied in determining whether a site is appropriate for your needs. A number of Web sites provide good lists of evaluative criteria. Two that I like are: Hope Tillman's at www.bowdoin.edu/dept/library/internet/eval/index.html#web , and one from the library instruction program at UCLA [www.library.ucla.edu/libraries/college/instruct/critical.htm]. Some Government information is available in more than one Web site; my recommendation is that the site closest to the issuing agency is likely to be most authoritative. Also in comparing two sites offering the same publication, it is useful to do some sample questions to ascertain which has the easier search engine and which produces the best results.

Once a body of material has been selected for inclusion on the Web site, it is time to think about the intellectual design of the home page. There are, of course, many ways to organize Government information and many different structures can be effective. The material itself suggests certain forms of organization, but I think it is equally important to observe the ways in which people look for information and try to design the page to reflect those approaches.

For Government documents there is always a strong tendency to organize the material by originating agency, as with the SuDocs classification in our depository collections; but many times people do not know what agency produces the CPI or the Federal Register. In thinking about this I noticed that users usually knew what level of Government—state, Federal, international—they wanted, so that seemed a logical organizing concept. Another factor that seemed important was categories of information—reference for quick factual look-ups, locators for broad searches, and guides for assistance with special categories. The hope is to locate information where people will think to look to find it; sometimes this requires reworking after the page is used for a while.

Simplicity is a key concept in the intellectual organization of the Government documents home page. It needs to be clear to be easily accessed. Also, the actual facts or documents sought should not be "buried" too deeply. Having to click on too many links to find material is frustrating to the searcher, and sometimes leads them to stop short of locating the actual information. Simplicity can extend to size, as well as organization. Pages do not have to be huge or comprehensive to be effective; they need to offer manageable amounts of useful material in an understandable format. A home page can be begun with just a few sections, and more can be added later. Flexibility is a major advantage of HTML and the Web; pages can be added and expanded as time and additional information permit.

Simplicity is also a major factor in visual and technical design considerations. Simplicity in visual design is appealing, especially in a publication designed to inform rather than persuade or entertain. The visual simplicity underscores the philosophic clarity. Technical simplicity is also critical. Moving objects, banners and other Web accessories are best used only very sparingly and for well-defined and appropriate purposes. In recent usability tests conducted by Jakob Nielsen of Alertbox, users clearly wanted recognizable simple interactions in viewing and searching information

[<http://www.useit.com/alertbox/980322.html>]. Simplicity also adds to manageability in creation and maintenance for the documents staff. For our page we have created templates for formatting the individual pages, so that individual coding was not required for each; we simply put the content into the coded template. The consistency is both a staff time-saver and makes the page easier for users to grasp when certain forms of material are in predictable places.

Another consideration is that simpler pages load more quickly. Graphics make Web pages more interesting and appealing, but they need to be applied judiciously, and they need to be images which load reasonably quickly. On our page the bars with the titles in them are graphics, but they are simple graphics which load quickly, which do not interfere with the researcher's finding the information efficiently. Also please be sure that the fonts and colors that are chosen will display well on computers of different make and age. On Bowdoin's Government documents Web page for example, I used italics fairly liberally in one section, and then happened to look at the page on a Macintosh computer where the italics did not display readably at all. This is a particularly important consideration for a depository library, since the public is certainly accessing the Web on a wide variety of computers, and the information should be equally available to all.

There are many ways to add explanatory information to a Government documents home page to enhance the use of Government information. One is to annotate the sites on the home page so that searchers know what to expect from each site and can judge whether a given site is the one they are seeking. Annotations need to be crisp and informative. In general searchers do not want to read whole paragraphs, but often find it helpful to have some idea of the scope and content of the linked site. In other places it can be useful to add other short relevant items of information, such as the local address to send social security forms, which does not appear on the social security forms page.

Another useful addition to a Government documents home page are guides for the use of Government publications, whether those publications are Web sites or traditional paper and microfiche documents in the depository's collection. One example of this from Bowdoin's Government documents Web page is the guide to locating congressional documents at www.bowdoin.edu/dept/library/govdocs/guides/congdocs.html. In that guide the location and classification of congressional documents, such as bills, hearings, reports, etc., in the depository collection is provided along with the URLs for such sources as GPO Access and Thomas where the texts of those documents can be obtained online.

At Bowdoin the librarians create course research guides on the Web, and the Government documents home page includes all the guides relating to Government documents. In this way the Government documents home page becomes a tool for accessing both paper and electronic sources and can serve as an advertisement and reminder of the presence of the

depository and the materials there. One other important access addition is reaching the depository librarian. The home page needs to include the depository's phone number and the librarian's e-mail address. I receive e-mail questions from both the college community and the general public through our Web page.

When a Government documents Web page has been created, its existence should be publicized. I suggest posting to your state library listserv or newsletter and to GOVDOC-L. Local school and public libraries also are likely to be interested in linking to the depository's home page because it can help them better direct their patrons to Government information, often not found in print form in their libraries. Notifying the library's primary users, through e-mail or a print newsletter, is also a good idea. A nice bonus is that many people find it on their own, and it seems to be a good way to advertise the presence of the depository library. Bowdoin's Government documents home page has been discovered by a variety of people from Cub Scouts to retired citizens.

In closing, I'd like to say that a well-designed Government documents Web page can substantially enhance access to Government information for many patrons. I think it is well worth our time to experiment with the information access opportunities this new medium affords to do our work more effectively in Federal document depository libraries.