

Evolving Access Points for Government Documents and Information

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Our modern digital age has fundamentally transformed how government information is accessed, distributed, and managed. Due to technological advancements and established informational institutions across the United States, government documents that were once confined to physical archives or limited-access databases are now accessible online to users of all backgrounds and needs. Despite how digital access has revolutionized the availability and accessibility of government information, it has also introduced new challenges for both users and managing information professionals. This paper will examine the advancements in digital access to government information through government agencies and supporting institutions, the ongoing challenges that arise from this shift, and the evolving role of government information professionals. It will also explore the future of digital access points and consider how professionals in this field can enhance public access to government resources, including how I hope to contribute to improving these access points throughout my career.

One of the first notable improvements established by digital access to government information is the overall accessibility and availability of materials through multiple online platforms. Historically, government information, documents, and other materials were often difficult to access due to geographical constraints and complex retrieval processes. As our ability to create these accessible platforms has developed, digital archives and government libraries have allowed users to access information from anywhere, anytime. Christopher Brown and Gwen Sinclair, respective authors of *Mastering United States Government Information: Sources and Service* and *Government Information: A Reference for Librarians in Hawai'i*, cite the incredibly vast avenues of digitized government resources and information that is available to the public. Their efforts to promote digital literacy and accessibility are reflected in their work as both authors take on a strategized approach to identifying and evaluating the different government agencies' online sources, digital libraries, and other supporting institutions. The explosion of online databases, government portals, and e-publications has made it notoriously easy for individuals, researchers, and institutions to obtain various government documents and materials, ranging from legislative histories and policy reports to census data and regulatory filings.

Digital access has greatly sped up the process of obtaining government information. Users can now retrieve information almost instantly as opposed to waiting for physical documents to be mailed or faxed to their local library. Online databases such as GovInfo, Data.gov, National Archives, and agency and Depository libraries have streamlined the process of locating and downloading government publications and information from their websites and databases. Government agencies now routinely mandate the digitization of all public-facing documents, which are then distributed to its various online institutional partners, such as internal databases or libraries or an outside source such as a Federal Depository Library. The standardization of digitizing materials creates a constant flow of current and usable information for patrons who are interacting with these various platforms. By design, Federal Depository Libraries serve as primary access hubs for citizens across the United States for government documents regarding issues at local, state, and federal levels. The program is designed to distribute and house government documents and information through geographical and topical regions and allows for centralized configurations of databases and information across the country. This adaptation of physical libraries into digital realms has been particularly beneficial

for researchers, policy analysts, and information managers who rely on quick access to the most up-to-date information for their lines of work and the communities they serve. Beneficially, these libraries' policies and adaptation of physical and digital materials are updated and monitored regularly for the most streamlined and effective use.

Digitalization has also significantly improved the searchability of government documents. Keywords, metadata, and advanced search filters make it easier for patrons to find relevant information quickly. Online government portals regularly categorize information in intuitive ways, such as by topic, agency, or publication type, allowing for a more organized and user-friendly experience. Additionally, digitized materials are inherently unique in each curation of their digital presence but relatable on a grander scheme; the searchable profiles of these digitized materials create an interconnected system of information and topical relations that further increase the use and traffic of government databases. Some online systems will combine physical and digital profiles of materials to unify their existences as well (if they exist) so that individuals who may have originally used one version or the other can find and reference it in other capacities. This contrasts with the previous reliance on manual cataloging systems, which could be cumbersome and difficult for users to navigate or understand.

Government information and its access points are not just confined to the databases and online platforms that agencies and other government institutions have created. Digital access to government documents has been a key driver in promoting transparency and enhancing citizen engagement as well. Websites like USA.gov and Regulations.gov, along with the home websites of government agencies, provide direct access to patrons to different government activities, from legislative texts to proposed regulations and public comment periods. The ability to engage with government decision-making processes online has empowered citizens, activists, and organizations to hold governments accountable and participate more actively in the democratic process. This engagement, in turn, has resulted in more real-time access and understanding of government information, its process, and the inner structures of our informational systems.

Despite the many advantages of digital access, these advancements also present several challenges, particularly regarding equitable access, data overload, and long-term preservation of digital information. A significant challenge in the digital age is the "digital divide," which is the gap between individuals who have access to digital technologies and the ability to comprehend them versus those who do not have this digital literacy access or skill. This divide can limit access to government information for individuals in rural or underserved areas, as well as those with limited digital literacy. Rural and underserved communities, in particular, may face barriers to accessing government information online or instructional material that would educate patrons on how to best utilize these online services. Additionally, accessibility issues related to visual, auditory, or cognitive disabilities may limit certain users' ability to interact with digital government information resources. While many government websites are improving in terms of accessibility, there is still much work to be done to ensure that all users, regardless of personal or communal circumstances, can access government information.

Another challenge is the sheer volume of information now available. While having vast amounts of government data at one's fingertips is beneficial, it can also be overwhelming. The

exponential growth of digital government resources means that users may struggle to filter through vast amounts of unorganized or poorly indexed data. As previously mentioned, it is standard practice for all currently produced documents to be rendered in a digital format if not originally produced as such, which are then distributed into various online informational portals. This constant flow and creation of information-heavy materials can inundate users and their search process as they try to utilize these digital access points. For example, large datasets or multi-series documents can be difficult to navigate without proper visualization tools or expert guidance. Conversely, datasets or information that were uploaded when digital databases were first created are potentially poorly labeled or executed regarding their organization and understandability.

Digital preservation is another significant challenge for government information professionals that carries roadblocks at various levels. Primarily, the process and costs of mass digitization of physical documents, materials, and database subscriptions are inaccessible to some institutions as they do not have the funds to support the required labor, time, and materials. Many public libraries, agencies, and patrons rely on the digital accessibility of our government's information, whether historical or present, so the ability to ensure its transfer into our digital spheres is critical. As cited in "Digital Transformation: Revitalizing Public Libraries as Inclusive Hubs for National Development," public libraries are fundamental bodies within many communities across the United States, but given major budget constraints and cutbacks, these institutions are unable to subscribe to databases or stock their digital interfaces with physical texts they may have. Secondly, unlike physical documents, digital files are subject to technological obsolescence. The rapid pace of technological development means that file formats and software used to access various documents and datasets could easily become outdated within a few years and require mass reconfiguration. This, again, would require serious financial and labor dedication to appropriately process and readjust our online platforms and the information they hold.

Moreover, the risk of data corruption, hardware failure, and the loss of digital archives due to budget cuts, shifts in government priorities, or outside influences can jeopardize the long-term accessibility of important government information. Resource access points of this nature currently range from free government databases and libraries to more privatized collections such as HeinOnline, ProQuest, and HathiTrust; the loss of public resources funded by government agencies would lead to the increase of monetized and private databases that require institutional subscription or pay-to-access. Bello et al. highlight this issue as a considerable roadblock to mass digitization of older government documents and information, as more digital access points become harder to access and more expensive to subscribe to. Loss can also come in the form of different cyber-attacks. Government portals and archives must be resilient against cyber threats, such as hacking and data breaches, which could compromise the integrity of the information they hold and its users. Information managers and patrons with accounts on these websites could risk personal information leaks and major informational loss. Incidents like these could lead to websites and databases being shut down, requiring higher levels of security and less accessibility to certain information types. In turn, all of these issues combined could lead to the permanent loss of valuable data and an inability to recover it.

Government information professionals, often working as librarians, play a crucial role in helping users navigate these digital access points and their associated challenges while ensuring continued access to government information. In an evolving and complex digital landscape, these professionals must not only provide access to resources but also help users interpret and make sense of the information they are looking for. An imperative way that government information professionals can successfully meet users' needs is through education and training. Librarians and information professionals alike can teach users how to navigate online portals, conduct advanced searches, and critically evaluate government information. Workshops, webinars, LibGuides, and one-on-one consultations can help users understand how to access and interpret digital government documents and ensure that users are empowered to make use of available resources. Additionally, information professionals and librarians can offer patrons other resources that offer non-interactive modes of teaching, such as physical texts or online videos that may help them learn about government information and their resources. Texts, such as those authored by Brown and Sinclair, provide irreplaceable insight and information to the world of digital and physical access points for government information. These, and many other texts, provide informative and direct descriptions of our various government information sources, their importance to their respective areas of interest, and the best way to utilize them. Other free resources, such as the videos accessible on [Congress.gov](https://www.congress.gov), can also help viewers find their informative path through the multitude of government resources made available to them.

Information professionals can also play a vital role in curating and organizing government data. By working within government agencies to improve metadata, enhance search functionality, and ensure that information is up-to-date and relevant, librarians can help users find what they need more efficiently. Again, these professionals can develop guides, video tutorials, and other helpful research tools that assist in filtering through government data and making it more manageable for the average user. Government information professionals can also act as advocates for improved access to government information, both within their organizations and at the policy level. By collaborating with government agencies, libraries, and other stakeholders, information professionals can ensure that free access policies are prioritized, digital resources are regularly updated, and long-term preservation strategies are implemented. Their role as mediators between government institutions and the public is essential for maintaining transparency and supporting democratic engagement. An amazing example of this kind of internal advocacy and activism is the New Mexico State Library, which not only serves as a Federal Depository Library but has created a plethora of accessibility programs for the communities it serves, including tribal, rural, and citizens with visual and/or auditory disabilities. These advantageous programs expand government information access to every citizen of their state who seeks it regardless of educational background, location, or capability and can aid in capturing support and implementing change within other informational institutions across the United States.

What was once a localized and routine career, librarianship, has now developed into a worldly and technology-reliant field. The future of government information librarianship is likely to evolve through continuing technological advancements and shifting public expectations. As artificial intelligence, machine learning, and data analytics become more integrated into government processes, information professionals will increasingly need to be

skilled in managing large datasets and ensuring that they are accessible, accurate, and useful to users. Moreover, as more government services move online, the role of librarians may expand beyond traditional library settings to include working in digital government offices, e-government platforms, and other technology-driven environments. As these non-traditional librarian roles become more frequent, I believe there will be a stronger call for more data and technology focus within librarianship programs and potentially more requirements for digital curation. Informational institutions will have a higher demand for online access, curation, and understanding, necessitating their managing professionals to be adequately trained from the start. Furthermore, as the importance of data privacy and security grows, information professionals will need to stay current with evolving legal and ethical standards, ensuring that government information remains accessible without compromising security or privacy.

As a growing professional within the field of librarianship, inspiration for ensuring the transparency, accessibility, and preservation of information has come in many forms, including from the resources and information gathered from this course. Our repertoire for housing government documents and information has expeditiously increased in recent decades, allowing for information from our governmental foundations to be transfigured into online platforms. With these major increases comes a considerable number of responsibilities, policies, and maintenance of these records and their online databases. I have come to understand that there will be a faster pace of evolution and dissemination of government information as our technological advances continue to develop and that this will be a role that will require a lot of adaptation, forward-thinking, and patience. In my future roles as an informational professional, I hope to be able to work directly with agencies, Depository Libraries, and public-facing information platforms within their means of preservation and creation of online profiles for their documents and information while also working internally with staff to increase the accessibility and comprehension of these various interfaces. By working intimately with other informational professionals and the digital spaces our various agencies and libraries maintain, I will be able to implement new practices, policies, and developments that will push for more accessibility of resources, transparency of the information that is available and where it can be found, and the overall preservation of information and data from our government's past, present, and future actions.

In conclusion, digital access to government information has revolutionized how citizens and organizations engage with government information and documents. While there have been significant improvements in terms of accessibility and searchability, challenges related to the digital divide, information overload, and preservation remain. Government information professionals, particularly librarians, play an essential role in helping users navigate these challenges. They provide education, curate data, and advocate for policies that improve access and long-term preservation of government documents. Looking ahead, the field of government information librarianship will continue to evolve, adapting to innovative technologies, ensuring privacy and security, and meeting the growing needs of users in an increasingly digital world. As I continue my career, I plan to contribute to these efforts by working directly with federal agencies, libraries, and digital platforms to enhance accessibility, improve metadata, and help preserve crucial government information. I hope to ensure that digital resources are not only accessible but also understandable and useful for all citizens.

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