Fundamentals of Government Information:
Mining, Finding, Evaluating, and Using Government Resources

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For decades, librarians in all settings have known that government information is an integral part of their work. Examples include public librarians who assist users with consumer questions, job seeking, special queries at tax and election time, or applying for government benefits; community college librarians who discover that the Congressional Research Service offers the best concise overviews of controversial topics; academic librarians who are often amazed that a high percentage of their grand collections are in fact government holdings; law librarians who help users find government cases, legislation, and regulations; and medical librarians who have built an entire intellectual framework around the government-produced PubMed database.

Our ardent belief is that greater knowledge of government resources can strengthen the skills of any librarian. Fundamentals of Government Information: Mining, Finding, Evaluating, and Using Government Resources introduces librarians, library and information science students, educators, and information seekers of all kinds to the world of government material. Far from dry, dusty “documents,” today’s government offerings are deep, far-reaching, and ultimately essential to an informed citizenry, a true democracy, and outstanding library collections and services. For most of the examples in the book, we assume a context of online government communication, but we frequently refer back to resources in print as well. It will be not the container, but rather the content, that will guide our journey through government resources.

Earlier government documents overviews and texts have not adequately addressed the fundamental changes in the means of producing, distributing, and accessing government information that have occurred over the past ten years. Since we believe it is time for some new basics, we have designed Fundamentals of Government Information: Mining, Finding, Evaluating, and Using Government Resources as the first government information text to be conceived, written, and published in the twenty-first century. The book provides the reader with the following:

- Models and techniques for discovery of government information
- Insight into the popular and research value of government publications
- Experience acquiring new skills in a simple, sequential manner, reinforced by exercises

Above all else, we aim to help you, the reader, become comfortable with the “everydayness” of government information. Rather than worrying about not being conversant in all things governmental, we will encourage you to look for basic evidence of government in your daily life. Breathing clean air? Think of...
the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Watching a television set that does not explode? Give a nod to the Consumer Product Safety Commission. Looking forward to a nip of alcohol after work on Friday night? Your state’s liquor authority will greatly influence your ability to do so. Throughout the book, we encourage you to observe the world around you with an eye to government agencies and policies. You will be pleasantly surprised at how quickly your skill level grows at this game. Do not worry about mastering this art, which takes a lifetime of applied work; in truth, mastery never occurs in the government information world, because governments are ever changing. Still, our goal is to define the new fundamentals of government publications for any non-government documents librarian or student.

Government information should be considered a genre of public literature. Whether one is perusing a congressional hearing, a NASA technical document, an FDA advisory, or a historic War Department pamphlet, this literature stands apart because of its provenance and official nature, concepts that become complicated in the era of easily modified online publications, as we will explore in Chapter 1. Although government information exists at the state and local levels (city, county, and in some cases neighborhood), this book focuses primarily on the U.S. federal government. We intersperse examples from state and local governments, but we generally do not explore international or foreign government literature in depth, except for a few instances in which this content is essential to the information at hand. The U.S. federal government is vast enough on its own and provides a good working model for other levels of government. One could argue that state and local governments do most of the actual governing, but the federal government certainly is the most prolific publisher. If one can appreciate the basic structure and function of the mammoth United States federal government, other government models may be relatively easy to understand.

How the Book Is Structured

Fundamentals of Government Information is divided into two main parts. Part I, “Overview of Key Government Information Resources,” provides an overarching view of government resources that sets the context for the more specific information to come. Chapter 1 looks at the nature of government information. Why do governments publish, after all? What types of literature do they distribute, and how is this accomplished? It reviews the history of government publishing, the concept of designated “depository” libraries, and the rapid evolution to nearly exclusive digital publishing—and the issues that followed that change. Chapter 2 delves into general tools and strategies for describing and identifying government information, including reference books and textbooks about government information, comprehensive catalogs and indexes, databases, and online search tools. It is natural to follow with a chapter on Congress and laws, as most librarians appreciate an overview of
the legislative process and the information created along the way. Chapter 3 aims to stoke readers’ enthusiasm for some of the most valued public affairs literature in the world: congressional publications (such as hearings, reports, and research studies). We explore the array of documents that contribute to the making and codifying of our laws, focusing on freely available sources but including some discussion of private sources and their value. In government documents, the difference between what is free and what is fee can be an important distinction: some government output, like the bills from a single session of Congress, is so voluminous that the materials may be overwhelming to use without the extra value added by commercial publishers.

Chapter 4 explores government rules, also known as regulations. Most Americans know little about the process of creating administrative law (regulatory materials). Readers learn the difference between regulations and laws passed by Congress; the draft and comment process; final regulations; codification; and the Reginfo.gov, Regulations.gov, and FederalRegister.gov projects. Strategies are offered for tracking the same processes at the state level. The next logical step is an introduction to the legal system and both statutory and judicial law, found in Chapter 5. Readers discover what legislatures and courts publish and how decisions and other court materials are accessed. Much legal material is privately published, due to the rather unusual evolution of legal publishing in this country, but it is important to highlight some of the growing free, government-produced court publications at both the federal and the state level. Chapter 6 addresses some of the most classic reading in government publications: the information output of the U.S. president. The chapter examines the way presidential papers have been compiled over the years, as well as executive orders, proclamations, decisions, press conferences, WhiteHouse.gov, and bill signing statements.

Part II, “Government Information in Focus,” begins with a 360-degree sweep through the rest of the executive branch (Chapter 7), exploring the incredible array of agencies and their publications found online and in libraries nationwide. The following chapters in Part 2 are arranged by broad topic area, starting with Statistical Information (Chapter 8), and the simple becomes multifaceted as we show the many ways in which government documents librarians utilize their most essential reference work, the Statistical Abstract of the United States. Readers are coached to think like the government officials responsible for collecting and distributing statistics. Chapter 9 (Health Information) examines PubMed and its prominent role in the movement toward open access to scholarly, medical, and scientific literature, along with a review of consumer and statistical health information and the vital role played by local health departments across the country. In Chapter 10, the focus shifts to resources from the U.S. Department of Education, such as enrollment and performance data, directories, school information, curricular materials, and laws like No Child Left Behind.

Chapter 11’s treatment of Scientific and Technical Information adds coverage of cross-disciplinary government tools (the National Technical Information Service, Science.gov) and other major government scientific publishing agencies,
such as the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the United States Geologic Survey (USGS). Chapter 12 focuses on environmental and energy resources from agencies like the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Energy, but also covers other related material, such as weather data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Next, in Chapter 13, readers learn that government sources have everything to do with the financial machinery that keeps our nation’s economy running. Included is a close look at information from agencies as wide-ranging as the Federal Reserve Board, the Treasury, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics as we consider business, economic, and financial sources.

Chapter 14 brings readers to a full exploration of census data, truly the mother lode of federal statistics, with not only the decennial census but the myriad other surveys conducted by the Census Bureau on topics ranging from childcare to marriage to immigration. The book concludes with Chapter 15, a journey through historical and archival information, which is the type of government record most familiar to many people. The convergence of libraries, archives, and museums is a central focus. After considering the expanding field of genealogy and its intersection with government information, the chapter concludes with a review of the Freedom of Information Act and the public’s right to request release of unpublished government materials.

We have included over 50 exercises, allowing readers to assess their understanding of government information and have a little fun playing with a wide variety of real government documents. These exercises are designed to (1) be useful in a library science classroom, (2) clarify some of the more challenging concepts in government information, and (3) give readers a chance to use a particular information resource to answer a question and evaluate its effectiveness step by step. For example, in Chapter 6, readers are asked to think about where a president’s letters would be found and weigh the importance of different signing statements cited in an article.

We hope all our readers find this journey through Congress, the courts, the president, federal agencies, statistics, regulations and more…to be a rewarding and memorable adventure.