

“The Truth is Out There”

UFO’s and Government Disclosure—A Brief Look into Exploring Recently Declassified Government Documents

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The extraordinary growth of information and information technologies in modern times have irrevocably changed the way participants of a democracy access, navigate, share, and normalize information retrieval practices. The unprecedented access afforded by these technologies, the fluency with which people use to navigate it and a government seemingly moving toward more transparency have further democratized information access for all citizens. The commitment of government to ensure the sustainable relationship between citizen and information has been helped by the synergy of government publications and the internet. Barnes et al. state,

The promise of eGovernment then and continuing now offers governments the opportunity to open their doors to citizens, helping expose the secrecy of government, opening doors to the inner workings while aiding understanding and explanation, informing and making available large quantities and types of information for use, interest, and comprehension, delivering services where and when and at times citizens and constituents need them, and creating internal and external operating efficiencies that improve the operations and interchanges within and between governments.¹

The secrecy of government is perhaps what has intrigued most citizens particularly in the decades of the Cold War and in a time of uncertainty since September 11. This paper explores one facet of government secrecy; disclosure and access of government publications recently declassified. It is intended to provide insight into the history of the documents, the nature of those documents, strategies on how to navigate them and the politics of disclosure.

One of the most important bureaucratic and cultural artifacts to emerge in the last century was Project Blue Book, a

United States Air Force initiative to evaluate and ascertain information about Unidentified Flying Objects between 1947 and 1969. The disclosure during the Cold War and our government’s recent disclosure from the Central Intelligence Agency this year reify the intrigue by both our intelligence institutions and the public. The government’s investigative involvement in phenomenon that could reveal not only one of the most significant discoveries for humankind but our nation’s participation in it is inspiration enough to examine government publication policy. But moreover, understanding the strategies of publication research of declassified material particularly of such a sensitive nature. As more and more historical information is being analyzed by information professionals (e.g., digital humanists), it is incumbent upon them to familiarize themselves with government sources in particular and the strategies used to navigate and access this information.

It is important to note that this paper does not intend to promote, prove or otherwise provide subjective analysis of the existence of extraterrestrials in our solar system or anywhere else. It is not intended to advance conspiracy theories or indict government agencies with disinformation practices. It does, however, provide insight into navigating recent government declassified information.

The 2009 Executive Order signed by President Barack Obama was our government’s recent initiative to expand declassification of information both current and historical. The Order stated,

Our democratic principles require that the American people be informed of the activities of their government. Also, our Nation’s progress depends on the free flow of information both within the Government and to the American people. Nevertheless, throughout our history, the national defense has required that certain information be maintained in confidence in order to

protect our citizens, our democratic institutions, our homeland security, and our interactions with foreign nations.²

This initiative is a continuation of historical executive orders that cover national classified information. These orders began with President Truman's Executive Order 10290 to up to the 2009 order from President Obama.³

The Department of Justice has spearheaded the effort as well as overseen those under The Automatic Declassification Program. The department describes automatic declassification as “the declassification of information based upon the occurrence of a specific date or event as determined by the original classification authority; or the expiration of a maximum time frame for the duration of classification established under the Order (25 years).”⁴ Along with concerted efforts to promote transparency within the government through its practice of declassification, preservation of national security remains at the center of the controlled and calculated release of federal documents. The process, “increases the potential release of formerly classified national security information to the general public and researchers, enhancing their knowledge of the United States’ democratic institutions and history, while at the same time ensuring that information which can still cause damage to national security continues to be protected.”⁵ This process attempts to explain the legal context of the declassification of government publications while also providing insight into why architects of these policies (to include the president) work to ensure that citizens have access to previously secured information. The result of these policies—particularly The Automatic Declassification Program—further enables both checks and balances as well as a potential for stakeholders of a participative democracy to hold more accountable those charged with their governance. This is achieved through citizens’ access to government publications allowing them to enhance their visibility on the workings of their government.

Roswell Crash Declassified Conclusions

In July 1947, a crash of an unidentified flying object was reported near the town of Roswell, New Mexico. Reports of a “flying disc” initially made by the Roswell Army Air Field (RAAF) public information officer sparked nationwide attention as proof of extraterrestrial aircraft having been identified. However, the following day, “the press reported that the Commanding General of the U.S. Eighth Air Force announced that RAAF personnel had recovered a crashed radar-tracking (weather) balloon, not a ‘flying disc.’”⁶

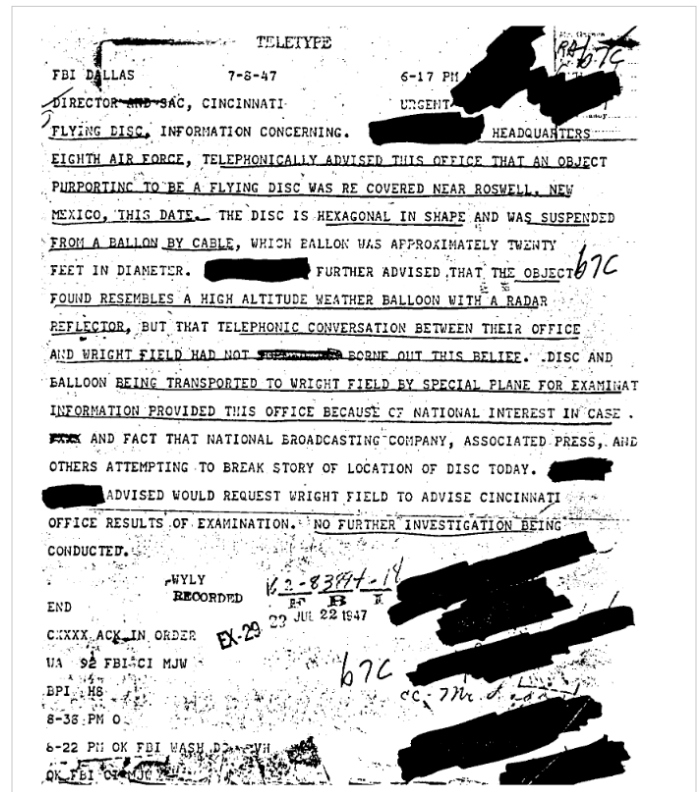


Figure 1. Teletype report of UFO in Roswell, New Mexico.

The event and its subsequent speculation that continues today has left an indelible impression on the culture of America. Most notably, this influence has been popularized by *The X-Files* and other cinematic examples of citizens searching “the truth” while navigating the various stations of the government. Investigative television shows and journalists frequently use terms such, “recently declassified” or “government disclosure” against scenes of staged filing cabinets in dark cellars. The frequency of these tropes in popular media emerging alongside individuals navigating government resources reflects a genuine interest in not only the UFO phenomenon but also an interest in government document access by the public.

This interest was felt and shared by government representatives as early as 1994 when general inquiries were made at the federal level into reports of information previously deemed classified by the US Department of Defense. A published digital record within the National Archives explains that

at the request of Congressman Steven H. Schiff (R-NM), the General Accounting Office (GAO) initiated an audit in February of 1994, to locate records relating to the “Roswell Incident” and to determine if such records were properly handled. The GAO audit was completed and the results published by the Headquarters, U.S. Air Force in 1995. The publication is

TOTAL UFO SIGHTINGS, 1947 - 1969		
YEAR	TOTAL SIGHTINGS	UNIDENTIFIED
1947	122	12
1948	156	7
1949	186	22
1950	210	27
1951	169	22
1952	1,501	303
1953	509	42
1954	487	46
1955	545	24
1956	670	14
1957	1,006	14
1958	627	10
1959	390	12
1960	557	14
1961	591	13
1962	474	15
1963	399	14
1964	562	19
1965	887	16
1966	1,112	32
1967	937	19
1968	375	3
1969	146	1
TOTAL	12,618	701

Figure 2. Total UFO Sightings, 1947-1969 from Project Bluebook

entitled, "The Roswell Report: Fact vs. Fiction in the New Mexico Desert."⁷

A response to this request was submitted the following year by Director of National Security Analysis Richard Davis. Contained within the report are descriptions of multiple information requests from governmental agencies that include, but were not limited to, the National Security Council, Department of Energy, and the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. Further requests were made by initiating Freedom of Information Act requests with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. These examples of internal information retrieval highlight the government publication search efforts of our own state entities in attaining previously classified information. An artifact of this correspondence is represented in figure 1 where an "Eighth Air Force headquarters official had telephonically informed the FBI's Dallas office of the recovery near Roswell of a hexagonal-shaped disc suspended from a large balloon by cable."⁸ In locating this primary source, it was anticipated significant restrictions that would prohibit locating any and all documents related to this topic. For example, is this a topic that the government takes seriously enough to publish? Or will national security restrictions prevent any document related to the Roswell crash from being available?

The initial search began with archived documents within the US Government Accountability Office (GAO). The source document was easily navigable by executing a simple search within the Government Accountability Office website. By searching for "Roswell crash," the aforementioned document was easily locate containing concluding reports about the

military's crashed weather balloon on outskirts of the small desert community in 1947. The metadata provided by the GAO enhanced the transparency of this report. For example, the document number "GAO-NSIAD-95-187" allows for easy retrieval both in physical and digital forms. Since the document was not "born digital," it is correct to assume that a physical copy exists in Gaithersberg, Maryland as illustrated on the final page of the primary source document. Additionally, the published and released dates are exactly the same: July 28, 1995. Examining this communicated that GAO wasted no time in ensuring the publication of this material to the requester.

Project Blue Book

For over two decades beginning in the late 1940's the US Air Force investigated UFO phenomenon under the title Project Blue Book. Thousands of reported unidentified flying objects were investigated, approximately 12,618 in total. Of that many, 701 were determined unidentified according to recently released government publications from that project. Declassified reports from Project Blue Book revealed that the, "decision to discontinue UFO investigations was based on an evaluation of a report prepared by the University of Colorado entitled, 'Scientific Study of Unidentified Flying Objects:' a review of the University of Colorado's report by the National Academy of Sciences."⁹

Primary source material for this document was easily obtained by navigating two separate but equally beneficial government digital catalogs. The first was MetaLib, a federated search engine provided by the Catalog of US Government Publications that searches multiple US government databases and providing direct links to selected resources available online.¹⁰

The second was the actual Catalog of US Government Publication's search page. The former provided substantial results linking information users to a myriad of sources including but not limited to the US National Archives' Special Media Division blogs discussing the formerly clandestine project.¹¹ The latter provided a singular results after inputting "project bluebook." It linked to a secondary site to a document authored by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1997 and accessible through the Government Publications Office. Figure 2 illustrates a listing from that formerly classified document of total UFO reports from 1947 to 1969.

Additional information was available through a cursory search executed through science.gov, a government catalog of more than 60 databases and 2,200 scientific websites providing access to more than 200 million pages of federal science information.¹² By searching for "project blue book," the page yielded numerous results with options to refine sources by type, author,

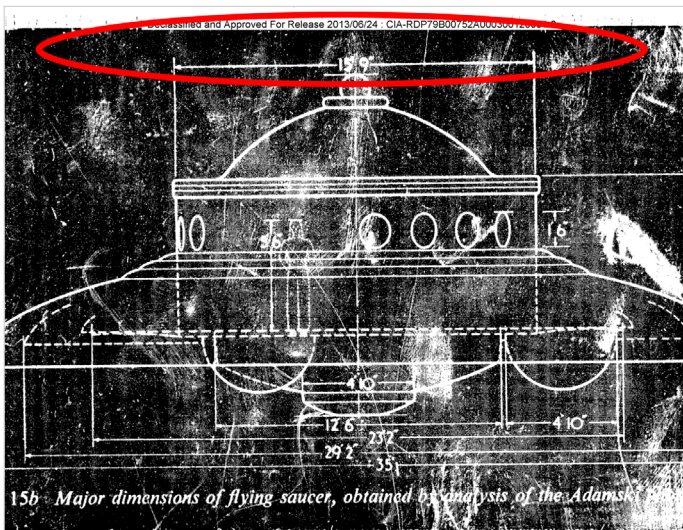


Figure 3. Declassified CIA document detailing the dimensions of a flying saucer.

dates and topics allowing for maximum potential for information retrieval on the topic. Included in these results were links to several other government sources, each providing their respective insight on the declassified publications from intelligence and military sources. Examples include the National Technical Information Service, which has available in its physical archive (unavailable digitally) monthly status reports from the clandestine project during in early inception in 1952. Additionally, the science.gov results provide links to the Defense Technical Information Center. This site provides an abstract for an *internal* publication from the Central Intelligence Agency's library titled "CIA's Role in the Study of UFO's, 1947–90." Contained within the report is possible reasoning for the information cover-up regarding UFO phenomenon and its subsequent classification for decades. As described in the agency document, "Because of the tense Cold War situation and increased Soviet capabilities, the CIA Study Group saw serious national security concerns in the flying saucer situation. The group believed that the Soviets could use UFO reports to touch off mass hysteria and panic in the United States."¹³

This revelation by the CIA's account supports clandestine information collection and subsequent classification. Historical consideration provides insight in the reasoning of this classification due to national security. Information seekers would be unable during that time to participate in information gathering of this phenomenon. The justification of national interest or security prohibits any information deemed sensitive or classified from being shared with the public. This obvious point leads to the conclusion that examples of this exists contemporarily as our nation faces threats from both within and outside the United States.

Central Intelligence Agency Release—2017

The recent declassification of documents, more than 800,000, earlier this year mark a significant event in the efforts of citizens to engage with their government's information systems and agencies. The strategies employed include legal initiatives as well as Freedom of Information Act led by nonprofit groups such as MuckRock—a citizen campaign dedicated to freedom of information. Figure 3 illustrates one of the 800,000 documents retrieved from the trove of information. The means with which were used to acquire these documents are perhaps the most important as it did not require a breach of national security or any other unauthorized leaking of material. Journalist Mike Best visited the CIA archives and personally printed out the records individually at cost to the agency. In a statement given to the BBC members of this group explained, "By printing out and scanning the documents at CIA expense, I was able to begin making them freely available to the public and to give the agency a financial incentive to simply put the database online."¹⁴ This strategy has arguably led to the CIA and other agencies of the government to disclose previously identified information deemed sensitive at a significant rate. The result of citizen initiatives operating within the rule of law in their efforts to influence government disclosure has irrevocably changed grassroots information retrieval.

Conclusion

This research was an opportunity to investigate a facet of government publications work that at one time or another was highly sensitive, clandestine and explicitly not for public review. What is interesting about this work is that since its declassification citizens are able to gain insight into the world of clandestine operations and information. It also provides an opportunity to investigate further phenomenon that is not yet explained through the unique exercise of government datamining.

The government sources used throughout this assignment and the platforms that hosted them were surprisingly transparent and intuitive. There were no significant obstacles to information retrieval. Popularized search terms were familiar across multiple platform. These terms included but were not limited to, "Roswell," "UFO," and "Project Blue Book."

There was information and resource overlap between agencies and other partners. For example, science.gov yielded results that the Government Publications Office had as well. This exchange of information demonstrated that the formerly classified information is now widely available for open access

and that the government platforms used to search and retrieve information is functional and reliable.

In addition, to the navigability of these platforms it is noteworthy that this type of research into formerly classified information satisfies a research need now more than ever. This is due as a response to the growing amount of information that exceeded their twenty-five-year limitation as noted earlier by the Department of Justice. The opportunity for researchers to explore documents released shortly after the end of the Cold War is advantageous. Research into formerly classified information may be attractive to government observers (“watchdogs”) who wish to hold to further accountability agencies and entities charged with control and safety of the citizenry.

Whatever one’s intent with regard to government information retrieval, it is my hope that information retrieved is information that enhances both government transparency and serves democracy. While I concede that there is information that serves the national interest through its classification, I also view government disclosure of all nonsensitive information both a moral and public duty. This originates from the conception of information as a human right. This exercise in navigating government publications further informs my effort to better grow as a citizen-scholar and participant of a democracy.

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