

Tales from the Trenches—Part 1

Kenya Flash and Dominique Hallett

Many and wondrous are the tales told by government information professionals of their interactions with these boundless sources of information. This discovery was made as Kenya and Dominique were compiling information from the recent for “Who are we the people” survey. In the survey conducted in late 2018-early 2019 we included the following question:

Tell us your favorite government documents/government information story. If you would like your name to be included with your story, please include it here, otherwise your story might be published as an anonymous story from the survey.

This is the first of a four part column sharing the collected stories from government information professionals with you. We hope you enjoy reading them as much as we have! Here are their stories:

This collection was not managed well in the past. I believe that I am modernizing our outlook on it and our access—with this comes hopefully a revitalization. In a community with no big university or similar institution people get the “truth” from a wide range of sources that are often rife with bias and unfounded claims. Stay tuned: We may not be big and we may not be powerful but the collection under my watch will become a familiar tool for the whole county—patrons and staff alike.

I attended a talk with Nancy Pearl when she had just published “Book Lust” and I asked why she did not include any government publications in her selections. Her response was that she did not believe these were the kinds of books people wanted to read at home; they were more for reference. I responded that I felt she was mistaken as there were many government publications which would fit most of her chapters. She said she was going to do a second book and asked me to send her some recommendations which I did. In “More Book Lust,” she kept her promise and there is a chapter devoted to some of the best government publications. Of course it is the last chapter but I got her to read some good ones.

In general, it has been the few times I’ve told a student what government documents actually are, and that they aren’t necessarily just “stuffy” reports full of data that is difficult to understand, etc. They are often really great resources on historical events, or military publications about various wars, or really cool exhibits from the Smithsonian Institution. Also, the committee hearings can be interesting too, depending on the topic or subject matter the student might be researching.

We have been doing different displays showcasing a variety of topics. It’s fun to go back in time and do research on different topics and incorporate them into our lives. So many don’t know what the world of government information can offer them. I recently did topics of Women’s Month in March. Autism, Jazz and Poetry in April. And October was a display of against violence, high-school dropout, substance abuse and many other topics.

I don’t have one story. I enjoy interfacing with the patrons who come down to our department to have custom USGS maps made or who need help with research. I enjoy exploring the subjects they are studying usually. I’ve enjoyed helping most all of them.

I was able to locate information in the National Park Service’s Soldiers and Sailors Database regarding the unit and regiment of two of my ancestors who served in the Civil War.

I had a theology student who wanted to know more about the religious views regarding John B. Anderson (independent candidate for president in 1980), specifically in the 1960s when he was first starting in Congress. There either aren’t biographies or the ones out there didn’t cover this period well, I can’t remember which. This student contacted me given my proximity to gov docs. I probably spent the better part of a day reading through search results from the CR [Congressional Record] and newspapers, and ultimately, we were able to piece together enough primary source information to be helpful for his thesis.

In 2017 I began a project at Brown to organize Brown’s paper government documents. After a year’s hard work the shelving

staff at Brown along with work-study students weeded our SuDoc hearings and offered them to our regional.

I work extensively with graduate and undergraduate history students and, overwhelmingly, they tend to gravitate toward diplomatic and military topics when working on theses and seminar projects. Introducing them to GWU's National Security Archives, State's FRUS [Foreign Relations of the United States], and teaching them how to use NARA finding aids is the best part of my position.

In 2007, (or thereabout), the Petroleum Safety technology professor wanted his classes to learn the Code of Federal Regulations, the United States Code and the Federal Register, and their role in the laws of our country as well as how they were to be used to keep people safe in the oilfield. He brought his night class, which consisted of approximately 50 men and women working in the oilfield, into the Government documents department for 3 nights. I was able to help them learn to navigate these documents on paper and then electronically. This provided much satisfaction to me, as I was a retired school teacher. It was very rewarding, as each of these people were highly motivated to learn and very grateful when they left. As the professors became more familiar with online sources, the classes moved to online, however, the professors still defer to our department when their students need help navigating these documents. I am Lynette Tamplain. I am a government information library specialist at Nicholls State University, Ellender Library in Thibodaux, Louisiana.

My most inspiring story is that of a citizen who arrived at the library knowing only that she needed information to get the municipal government to recognize an area of then illegal housing where many people needed government services. She only had heard that the census had a population count. We sent her home with the number of the census block that covered that area, and other information such as the number of housing units, age levels of the population, educational level, and

income information. She was grateful and amazed at the quantity of information.—Jane Canfield

We had a student worker who had to quit being a shelver because she dreamed she was being chased by SuDoc numbers.

The first one that comes to mind is the story of the local woman who used state health statistics to demonstrate there might be a link between higher cancer incidence in our community and the presence of certain elements in the water supply. Through her persistence she changed the way the city government managed water, invested in the water infrastructure and communicated water quality information to the entire community.

Showing students and faculty that they can find information on foreign policy and national security issues from sites like the Defense Department, State Department, and various intelligence agencies. In addition, I have just finished a book on the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (published by Palgrave Macmillan) which makes heavy use of U.S. Government information resources and government information resources from other democratic national governments.

A patron wanted particular parts of the testimony from Robert Kennedy during the McCarthy hearings. I did all the research I could, found the dates and times, but didn't have the transcripts. I put the question out on the GovDoc-L listserv and the next day, the Librarian of the U.S. Senate said she had it and would I like it faxed or scanned/emailed. I was awestruck that my patron was receiving this kind of assistance.

Kenya Flash (kenya.flash@yale.edu), Political Science, Global Affairs & Government Information Librarian, Yale University, and **Dominique Hallett** (dhallett@astate.edu), Government Information and STEM Librarian, Arkansas State University.