Extending Your Reach

Creating Topical Guides Featuring Government Information

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Many government information guides are targeted, purposefully or not, at researchers who already know that government resources exist and are useful. They often are divided by governmental departments or branches. While these serve a purpose and are worth maintaining, it is also useful to provide subject or topical guides that coincidently (well, not really coincidently) feature government resources. This article will describe what one librarian created to support the local community and will provide suggestions for how others can create similar resources. Additionally, with permission and credit, duplicating other's materials is one of the great things about the web. Seeking out existing guides and pointing to them is another way to extend your library guide reach. Because newer government information materials are increasingly available on the web and most libraries use the supplied Superintendent of Documents (SuDoc) numbers for their print collections, existing guides will not need modification beyond local locations for print within buildings, something easily summarized at the top of the resource.

After what seemed like years of waiting (albeit, not consciously), the First Year Composition topical theme at Colorado State University lent itself to the promotion of government information materials when the topic of food was selected for fall 2017. Energy and water were added to the mix beginning with fall 2018. As the Government Information Librarian, I seized the chance to create a guide aimed at First Year Composition students that exclusively featured government resources.

Working with the then-liaison to the program in spring 2017, and shortly thereafter with the incumbent liaison, I proposed the creation of a guide that would support students researching the topic of food, but featuring government information. I created a draft of the page and in a meeting arranged by the liaison, I handed out print-outs of what the page looked like and described my vision for it being an additional resource on the First Year Composition guide. The vision included the hope that students, seeing the utility of government information

for their food topic, might afterwards think to seek out governmental items in the future. The meeting went well, and I rounded out the guide in good time so that it was available before the fall semester began and all instructors who used the food topic could be informed of its existence. It is also linked from within the First Year Composition library guide.

Librarians, even if they do not have time to go through the page during their sessions with students, can at least point out where they are located. I did a test run with students in spring 2017 to get their thoughts on the food page, and the feedback was positive, with students looking at it during class, and in at least one case, emailing me later to get the page's URL. It felt good to have appreciation of something that was not even part of those students' course theme!

Part of the selling point is that, as wonderful as proprietary library resources are, they are not going to be available to practitioners in the field after graduation, unless their local public library is particularly well-funded and has a well-rounded, in-depth collection. Given the constraints of library budgets, that is highly unlikely. Encouraging students to use government resources while getting their educations plants the seed of awareness that these materials will be available for them later on. Some assignments must use government resources (water data over decades at precise locations, for example), but many students will never knowingly use a government resource. Sadly, there are even librarians who cringe at the thought of using government documents; they are less likely to recommended resources that may be the very best one for a given topic. Nonetheless, it is easier for those less familiar with government resources to identify them when the local library catalog integrates government materials along with other kinds, so if you do not already have them in your catalog, campaign for them to be included.

One way to head off reluctance to use government sources, is to create topical guides that have government information on them. As a subject liaison I have integrated government

resources when they have been appropriate, but I had a personal awareness and knowledge of them (a course on government documents in library school helped) so adding these items was not a reach for me, even in the years before I was the government information librarian, a relatively recent addition to my responsibilities. On the reference desk I consulted the *Statistical Abstracts of the United States* nearly every shift. I knew it was a government document and while assisting users often scrutinized the footnotes under the tables together with the users so that, if desired, they could find more detailed and contextualized information.

Creating Guides

When creating a guide, it is important to introduce the topic. What is food? Energy? Water? If applicable, what is the range of dates or geographical area covered? Provide definitions, using and linking to local proprietary encyclopedias or reliable and reputable free online ones to support the validity of definitions. Then divide the guide by sub-topics if they get lengthy.

Images for the subject guides aimed at first year students on the government information site were very important to me. My audience is first year students. I made a point of making sure (at least on my computer monitor) that every screen had a row of images that made contextual sense. Thus, under food waste I included the excessively charming trash can from the "Let's Talk Trash" site.[1] See image 1. Images of crops graced the sections discussing agriculture. Government sites are a wonderful resource for locating royalty-free images and often I found a relevant image on the page to which I was linking. When using these images, it is important to be willing to remove accidental non-royalty-free images or provide credit if that is what the copyright holder desires.

The "Food" government information page that I created has these divisions (on the page itself I labeled them all beginning with "Food—"):[2]

- Introduction
- Eating Recommendations
- Health
- Safety
- Allergies
- Eating Disorders
- Waste
- Assistance for the Food Insecure or Hungry
- Workers
- Growing and Harvesting
- National Agriculture Library (focus on harvesting and growing foods, past and present)

- GMOs (Genetically Engineered Organisms) Related to Crops
- Imports and Exports
- Recipes
- Processed
- International Organizations
- Government Information in Print

The section on international organizations was a request from the then-coordinator to first year composition. I added the section on print because my library has some useful materials and I wanted to show that there are print government publications in our library, in addition to links to online materials. I chose images with care. Allergens were easy enough to depict (nuts, dairy, etc.), but the topic of eating disorders does not lend itself to pictures, so I included the copied over image of a banner promoting National Recovery Month. The eating disorders page titles are descriptive enough and I chose not to annotate them individually, but to provide a brief introduction in the section.

I made a conscious point of including local resources in the section on assistance for the food insecure or hungry, with the idea that students in that situation would have a discrete way to identify sources that might be of use to them personally. It does not hurt to provide information of direct assistance to your users and I hope it helped all who needed it.

The "Energy" government information page that I created has these divisions:[3]

- Energy—Information from Various Government Sites
- Solar Energy
- Thermal/Geothermal Energy
- Radiant/Electromagnetic Energy
- Kinetic/Motion/Hydrokinetic Energy
- Electrical Energy
- Wind Energy
- Nuclear Energy
- Chemical Energy
- Energy Consumption, Prices, Various
- Energy Climate
- Agency Web Sites—Energy [mapped from another page]
- Statistical Resources—Energy [mapped from another page]

Because I reused sections from other parts of the government information site and I wanted to keep images part of the page, I added images to the sections on the original (mapped to) boxes on the pages so that they would show on the subject

guide aimed at first year students. Information on energy often includes colorful images and/or inventive online videos that explain how things work. Sites manage to clarify complex information for the layperson without talking down to them (I include myself as someone who is not an expert on this material). My hope is the attractiveness of the sites will encourage students to look for additional topics on government sites.

The "Water" government information page, which frankly had the most depressing to me sections to develop (drowning and non-drinkable water are not cheerful topics), that I created has these divisions:[4]

- How much water . . .
- Table of Contents for Water
- Water—Introduction
- About Water
- Water Resource Archive
- Drinking Water Safety
- Recreational Water Safety
- Water Safety
- Water and Health
- Water Conservation
- Water Rights
- Water Use
- Water and Agriculture
- Water—Power from
- Water—City Utilities, State Plans (examples)
- Colorado Water
- Water Information and Data and Water Quality [mapped from another page]
- Water Resources—Bureau of Reclamation [mapped from another page]
- Water Resources—EPA [mapped from another page]
- Water and Dams—Colorado [mapped from another page]
- Dams, Reservoirs, Projects—Army Corps of Engineers [mapped from another page]

Water lent itself to a different kind of first section or page introduction. There are some compelling numbers available for how much water people use as part of their daily lives in more

Image 1. Food Waste Section of Guide

developed countries and how much is used to create one t-shirt and I felt that it was contextually appropriate (using citations) to bring this information to students' attention. Then came the table of contents. In this case I admit that so far I haven't added images to the sections of other pages that are used here. The more important thing was having the material available.

For your own purposes, look for resources of specific interest to your local population ("local" could mean a large distance population, so if you know where a large number of them are from you could add examples from those geographical locations). My library houses a Water Resource Archive with numerous primary sources, and a sufficient number of them are government resources.[5] Promoting local archives with pertinent materials helps frame them, as well as the government resources, I hope, as standard research items.

I am in Colorado, so I sought out Colorado State and Local governmental resources, while providing suggestions for users who are interested in other locations. These guides are on the web, after all, and I want my Food, Energy, and Water guides to be helpful to anyone, not just those in my university community. I have a primary targeted audience, but I take into account the viewers of the page who might not be part of that constituency. Documents, after all, are for all the people.

Annotations

For every link on a web or print guide it is essential to provide an annotation. This applies to guides without a single government resource on them. A bare list of links is not useful. Should the user click on the first one? The fifth? The tenth? It

will depend upon what is being sought at the time. An annotation informs the researcher of what is on the page—its purpose, primary audience, content, arrangement, whether it has links to or is a PDF, how it can be searched or browsed, other hints on using it, etc. A great place to get ideas for the annotation is text from the site itself; just be sure to use quotation marks so you set a good example for your users. Quotes from sites help with the purpose and intentions of the site and sometimes

Image 2. ChooseMyPlate Section of Spanish Language Guide

explain how to use it. "About" or its equivalent is a good place to find history and purpose.

Subdivide if you have a longer guide. Subdivisions might be geographical or some other contextually appropriate division—age group, free, fee, etc. The subtopics above for food, energy, and water are examples of how one topic can have multiple perspectives. Divide by what you find, not what you hope to find, so create your sections after you identify resources, not before. Provide a table of contents with direct links to sections. That way users only interested in one aspect do not need to scroll through irrelevant—to them—content.

Expanding Your Reach in Your Library

One way to increase visibility for government resources is to volunteer to create guides for topics in your colleagues' areas. Provide a sample to demonstrate your ability; annotations will support the value of the recommendations. Whether it is a full guide or simply a few entries, do all of the typing, coding, and image-creation necessary so that it is as seamless as possible for your colleague to include government content. Integrate any appropriate feedback you receive.

Expanding Reach to Non-English Speakers

While it is only a fraction of the whole, there are a good number of government resources available in languages other than English. As of 2017, my state, Colorado, has around six hundred thousand residents who speak Spanish (there are more than 41 million Spanish speakers in the United States according to the *Statistical Abstract of the U.S. 2020*).[6] It made sense to me to create a section of the government information guide that covers, by subject, materials available in Spanish. It was also important to me to have annotations in Spanish so that use of the page would be straightforward for the targeted population. My colleague Jimena Sagàs, and her mother Gabriela Garcia, graciously translated my English annotations into Spanish

and have continued to be helpful by translating additions and updates to the page.

The page itself is mostly a long list because many categories have one or two sites and it would be excessive (and extra work) to create individual boxes (my library currently uses the Lib-Guide platform). The one exception was Salud (Health) which has multiple resources, so I gave that topic its own box.

Spanish Language Guide (información en español)

The introductory section includes a link to and information about USA.gov en español,[7] the govinfo equivalent for Spanish language materials.

- Agricolas (Agriculture)
- Bancario (Banking)
- Beneficios (Benefits)
- Ciudadania y documentos de viaje (Citizenship and Travel Documents)
- Educación (Education)
- Empleos (Employment)
- Energia (Energy)
- Leyes (Laws)
- Preparación y respuesta ante emergencias (Preparation for and responding to emergencies)
- Salud (Health)
- Seguro Social (Social Security)
- Seguridad (Security)
- Vivienda (Housing)

If your population includes a large number of people who read and speak a specific language, it is worth making an effort to compile and create and guide if there are government materials for them. For example, "ChooseMyPlate" is in multiple languages, as seen in image 2.[8]

Conclusion

It does not matter if a library is public or academic; it is likely that there is going to be some kind of interest in the community that can be used to promote the usefulness of government information sources. By creating an online guide, topics of local interest can be quickly researched on government sites.

Some suggestions for links:

Government (contemporary primary sources)

- Local/regional elected politicians' sites
- US House of Representatives
- US Senate
- White House
- Supreme Court

Government News (search news site:gov)

Find press releases, blogs, speeches, etc.

- News NASA
- News USDA
- News Education
- News Business

Government Recreation Sites and Other Activities

- Local/state parks, nearby national parks
- Hiking and biking trails
- Recreational vehicle trails
- Gardening (your land grant university's extension office should have materials; your own or others—some states specialize—are worth providing links)
- Cooking (ditto extension offices)
- Local arts (theater, museums, community events)

Think about who your primary and secondary audiences are. Consider age groups ("Ben's Guide" is a fun site for the younger set) and what might interest them.[9] Is it help with homework, exploring potential careers, getting a job, hiring new employees, opening a business, personal finances, nutrition, retirement, planning international travel, or something else? A good place to get ideas is from your service desk. If a lot of users are asking questions and checking out books on a given topic, it is worth seeing if there are government resources that could be useful, and if so, putting them on a guide that you share with your colleagues. Making the use of these materials as

seamless as possible encourages their use. Sometimes it is only a government publication that has what a researcher, whether for fun or necessity, needs.

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