On the Same (Web)Page: Using LibGuides to Connect Researchers to Government Information and Data Rescue Projects

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Introduction

Like many library workers, American University (AU) librarians have been concerned about the data loss, website removal, and untracked edits to government information taking place in the current Trump administration. Our researchers use government data, our students prioritize internships with the federal government, and our work as educators of future civil servants relies on access to federal data. Shortly after the news broke that Executive Order No. 14168 had led to the removal of websites and documents from government websites, we set out to find others that were collecting and retaining government data so that we could connect those efforts to our community.[1] Our goals included ensuring that ongoing research projects could remain active and that librarians and faculty at AU who wanted to assist with data preservation efforts knew what steps to take.

In the search for a communication tool to advance our goals, LibGuides, a content management platform published by Springshare that is widely used by academic libraries, emerged as a clear choice.[2] LibGuides are easy to edit, can be managed by multiple users, and are already trusted by our researchers. Our guide "Government Information Data Rescue" (hereafter Data Rescue Guide) was built to connect our campus community to the work of many librarians, archivists, government employees, and citizens.[3] Communications from faculty and students to the library began as soon as news broke of websites and datasets coming down in the wake of E.O. 14168.[4] The Data Rescue Guide allowed us to leverage the strength of the library community to support those requests and plan next steps.

Beyond meeting the immediate need, the Data Rescue Guide became a vector for conversations in the library and with our campus partners about the need for data preservation, the limits of our work, and what it will mean for the relationship between researchers and the federal government moving forward. The redaction of data, text, and pages from the federal government's information space is more than a loss of content; these deliberate actions are a form of censorship led by the executive branch of our government. Furthermore, as content is "restored" by the current administration, (whether because of an action by the courts, due to the outcomes of a lawsuit, or for other reasons) with no clear documentation of redactions and changes, citizens and researchers are left without confidence that prior research is presented in its proper context, or that future outputs can be trusted in the same way as their predecessors.

Government Data and Research Needs at American University

The United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs reported on the Open Government Data Act stating, "Open data, or data that is made available to use without restriction, has led to innovation in both the public and private sectors, supported economic growth, and helped to improve performance and transparency in government programs."[5] AU, a four-year residential, doctoral-granting, urban institution (with newly attained R1 status) in Washington, D.C., is no exception. AU is not a member of the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP), but we support government information access for our users through online research guides, classroom instruction, and subscriptions to third-party databases that index government information alongside other sources. Washington, DC is home to twenty-nine FDLPs.[7] AU

is a member of the Washington Research Library Consortium (WRLC). Meeting our researchers' needs has always been an exercise in collaboration. Data rescue and the loss and movement of government reports from .gov websites is no exception. While we do not maintain an inventory of research projects that rely specifically on federal data, our campus research office operates under the motto "Eagles SOAR: Societal Outcomes, Actionable Research," an ethos that closely aligns with the values and benefits of open data.

Without a preexisting inventory, we needed to determine the scope of concern. To do this, we created an email address, monitored by a team, dedicated to collecting information from faculty. Distributed to an all-faculty email list, the initial communication came from the University Librarian with two asks: 1) that researchers tell us if they have datasets they rely on for their research that need to be preserved and 2) if they have begun storing data locally that needs to be uploaded to centralized storage on our campus or in other venues. We also formed a cross-departmental library working group between the Academic Technology department and Research, Teaching, and Learning unit. This brought a range of capabilities to the table including technological expertise, subject matter knowledge, and deep familiarity with campus research trends and data needs. We sought to determine our available resources, including assessing if our institutional repository could be used, even temporarily, to host data and to establish workflows once unique needs were identified.

A striking characteristic of this project is the speed with which we were able to move forward. This was made possible by an organizational culture that fosters relationship-building and brainstorming across departmental lines, a structure that enables initiatives to be rapidly brought up the chain for decision-making, and a library leadership that is able and willing to be rapidly responsive to user needs and willing to embrace an experimental approach.

The turnaround for the Data Rescue Guide was quick and our team was able to respond to needs in less than a week. The Executive Order was released on Thursday, January 30th. On Friday, January 31st we had our first informal conversations as a group and determined that we needed to act. On Sunday, February 2, the library received its first anxious request from a faculty researcher asking for help. By Monday, February 3rd, we had a plan and launched the Data Rescue Guide. On Tuesday, February 4th, we sent out campus-wide communication announcing our plan and providing a link to the Data Rescue Guide. We received numerous requests from faculty that same day. Most requests came in within the first two weeks, representing 27 datasets across nine federal agencies. A few of the datasets requested are not produced by the U.S. Federal Government, but either rely on federal funding for collection and publishing of the data, thus causing concern about the permanence of online access, or were produced by the District of Columbia, leading to concerns tied to Home Rule.6 As we responded to these emails, we realized that many of the datasets in question were already mirrored by the Internet Archive, IPUMS (part of the Institute for Social Research and Data Innovation at the University of Minnesota), and DataLumos, an archive on the ICPSR platform (the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research hosted at the University of Michigan).8 Our job in those cases was not to duplicate the work of others, but to point our researchers to sources that would keep their research and teaching on track.

Populating the LibGuide: Listservs, Spreadsheets, and the Power of a Creative Commons License

We owe a debt of gratitude to the community of librarians, archivists, and data experts for the content of the Data Rescue Guide. AU Librarians encountered The Data Rescue project on ALA and ACRL listservs including: Politics, Policy and International Relations Section (PPIRS), GODORT (Government Documents Round Table), Education and Behavioral Sciences Section (EBSS), and International Association for Social Science Information Service & Technology (IASSIST). We bookmarked webpages, signed up for alerts, and nominated datasets for backup using the Data Rescue tracking tool. The communication channels allowed us to tap into projects that served our community's needs and addressed their concerns without needless duplication of effort or trying to stretch our personnel and computing resources beyond their bounds. Like any recurring question to a reference and research support desk, we needed to document all of this information in a place for access and review by our public services team and for self-service by our researchers.

Since its launch, the Data Rescue Guide has had more visitors than any other guide on our platform during the same time period, with more than 10,000 views since it was published on February 3, 2025 and between 526 and 5,235 views per month between February and June. Springshare allows guide administrators to track views to guides overall, as well as interaction with specific links/resources, dubbed assets, on each page. Interestingly, the two assets with the most engagement have been the Gov Wayback Machine and The End of Term Archive, both projects of the Internet Archive with a history predating the recent wave of concern.[8] The work of preserving our cultural history and public digital assets is necessary and powerful, even in moments when such work is and can be taken for granted.

The traffic to the website does not come as a surprise, but the outreach from the library community and others from outside of our campus was unexpected. Springshare allows content creators to place their guide in a community where other guide creators can search and reuse pages or boxes from within the guide. Placing a guide within the commons does not change the copyright status of the work, and though there is no technical barrier to reuse, Springshare recommends reaching out to guide authors about one's intent to do so. Inspired by the parameters of Open Educational Research (OER) grants and an attempt to research the copyright practices of library online research guides, AU libraries made a decision in the past year to append a CC BY-NC 4.0 license to all of our LibGuides. This particular Creative Commons license makes the work free to share and allows for adaptations from the original. It also calls for the attribution of the original work.[9] For our purposes, especially with this guide, it is giving others the ability to reuse, remix, and update to meet the needs of research communities beyond AU that matters. We think the attribution piece has increased the outreach from our colleagues, which does have the benefit of helping us build community around the effort, but we don't feel that we own the content in any meaningful way. Every link in the guide represents the work of many, and we are glad to have even a small role in the data preservation efforts that have grown in importance in recent months.

Reflections and Next Steps

The decision to create and publish the Data Rescue Guide was based on a communication need. At first, or at least on the surface, that need was purely logistical in nature; our research community had questions and concerns while our broader professional community was collectively building and executing preservation strategies to meet at least a portion of that need. The communication value turned out to be much broader. The guide has offered us an opportunity to engage within our library, campus, and broader community about the value of public data, the mission and values of libraries, and how to live in those values while they are actively under attack.

Many of the data rescue, preservation, and access challenges are tied up with a common concern of meeting our users with the communication and resources they need at that moment of need. In this case, we needed to educate our users on what did – or did not – happen to data they rely on, while setting expectations for what libraries can – and cannot – do in response. Government websites and other publicly facing information resources often change, especially as administrations turn over, meaning libraries and archives were not inventing preservation strategies on the fly. This data loss, however, is different in kind from

other transitions. As the Executive Order makes clear, this is a policy choice. Data is not simply "missing" or "unavailable." It was removed. Public-facing data files can be saved, but files that would have required FOIA requests to access in the past, or were available to researchers who obtained proper security clearances and permissions cannot easily be proactively pulled down from government servers and stored elsewhere. Some permanent loss of data has taken place and more will be lost. Preserving published data supports research already in progress or near completion and allows for replication studies for projects already completed. Future projects reliant on the ongoing data collection efforts of the federal government cannot be rescued.

Moreover, librarians do not just store information. We describe, contextualize, and keep it findable. That is what makes our role in this work so important. In the case of the ongoing data rescue efforts, we must extend this description and contextualization to what is not there and why it is missing. In the spirt of cross-institutional collaboration, librarians at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and California State University, Sacramento, among others, are doing just that with their *Tracking Government Information* project.[10]

The Data Rescue Guide at AU is one piece in a large and collaboratively constructed puzzle designed to shore up as much data and government information as possible in this time of executive branch led censorship of our public assets. It is our hope that we can continue connecting with our colleagues to serve research needs now and in the future.

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