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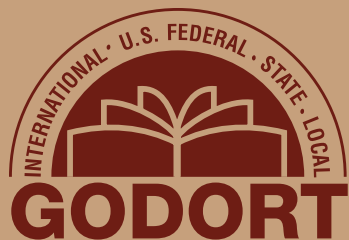
- Stitching Solutions: The Bureau of Home Economics as a Fashion Influencer
- Changing Landscape of Government Information Management and the Role of Government Information Librarians
- Populist Transparency: The JFK Assassination Records Act, Executive Order 14176, and the Normalization of Conspiratorial Thinking in US Politics

DttP

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GODORT

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Editor's Corner: Government Information Librarianship Existentialism

Elizabeth Sanders

While I try to keep my editorials optimistic, I have also made no secret that I, like many others, struggle with the current political environment in which I find myself, both within the United States and globally. Every time I sit down to work on an editorial on an aspect of government information librarianship, it seems more events occur and more information emerges.

To give a sample, I will highlight just three. First, in mid-September, the United Nations Human Rights Council concluded that Israel "bears responsibility for the failure to prevent genocide, the commission of genocide and the failure to punish genocide against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip."[1] Second, President Trump has deployed the National Guard in several states for months using the justification of quelling large increases in crime and domestic terrorism which are not proven to exist.[2] Finally, the US Supreme Court recently heard oral arguments on *Chiles v. Salazar*, the decision on which may deem state laws that ban conversion therapy for minors unconstitutional.[3]

I know it is my professional and civic duty to keep up with these events and the corresponding government information—but on an emotional level, I have found myself questioning government information librarianship. What is our role as government information librarians in times like these? How are we to navigate the current and future landscape, when so much has changed so quickly? So, like any academic librarian with questions, I turned to the published literature to see if I could find answers.

Several insightful articles on the history and transformation of government information librarianship, particularly in academic libraries, exist.[4] In this issue of *DttP*, Sanga Sung's work joins that body of literature; I found her discussions of contemporary challenges and future opportunities especially useful. Equally interesting is how government information librarians describe themselves. On the positive side, government information librarians described their work as "rewarding and challenging," with "specialized knowledge, distinct professional culture, and strong community identity." On the negative side, they felt the value of government information was "not fully understood" and thus "underutilized by the public, underappreciated by library administration, and eschewed by other librarians."[5]

Thinking about the federal government in particular, I found two articles addressing how government information librarians tackled Trump's first presidency.[6] For our current situation, *The Political Librarian* has released a special issue titled "The 2024 Election and the Future of Libraries" with 22 articles that offer different perspectives, subtopics, and practical advice that I am working my way through reading in its entirety.[7] I also found inspiration in long-standing and recent efforts to preserve government information and the Internet Archive's designation as a Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP) library.[8]

Both sets of literature described above encouraged me in recognizing how challenges I face are not new, whether that be in my struggles to embrace change or my frustration at the types of changes occurring, and reminding myself of the larger community of librarians, government information focused or otherwise, who have proceeded me or are beside me. Yet, the most helpful resource I found was one that addressed librarianship more broadly.

In Moore's "Going Around in Circles: Interrogating Librarians' Spheres of Concern, Influence, and Control," she provides an overview of circles of influence, concern, and control and its potential applications to librarianship.[9] While somewhat familiar with the concept, as seen in my general call in past editorials for us to work in the areas which we can influence and control, the connection built between anxiety, job creep, and burnout felt only too familiar to me but articulated in a way I had previously been unable to do myself. She also covers the concept of "slow librarianship," with which I was not familiar, as a potential way to rethink how to divide time and energy.

I didn't find concrete answers to my questions through this dive into the literature; honestly, I didn't expect to find them. What I wanted, what I needed, was reassurance. I did find that. I found reassurance that with change comes adaptation, that there is a community who has seen and adapted with which I can engage. I found reassurance in the reminder that I shouldn't burden myself with expectation and that taking things slowly still has value. So, for those of you who may be in the same mental space I was, please take heart. The way forward may not be clear yet, but that does not mean we should stop trying. The work we do is valuable, even if it is small.

The views expressed in this editorial are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Government Documents Round Table (GODORT), the American Library Association (ALA), Lamar University, or any other entity.

Elizabeth Sanders (esanders5@lamar.edu), Director of Learning & Research, Lamar University

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From the Chair

Julia Ezzo, GODORT Chair

Change is unavoidable and, as information professionals, we're no stranger to it—but that doesn't make change any less scary. According to ALA Treasurer Larry Neal, the July 2025 ALA operating budget showed a 14-million-dollar deficit for 2025 and the 2026 budget was likely to have an approximately seven-million-dollar deficit.[1] Needless to say, this financial situation is unsustainable. The ALA Executive Board has embraced critically reviewing the work of the organization at all levels to help cut costs and better align with ALA's Strategic Plan. In this column, I want to discuss how GODORT has been affected.

In August, ALA Council debated a recommendation from the ALA Executive Board, requiring that Round Table elected positions align with ALA elected offices.[2] The rationale for this change is that each elected office costs ALA staff time to run, and ALA is trying to save money wherever they can due to the above-mentioned financial instability.

For GODORT, this means that for the 2026 election cycle, the only elected positions will be Chair-Elect, Treasurer, and Secretary.[3] The positions of Publications Chair-Elect, Bylaws Coordinator, and Archivist would no longer be elected offices but would become appointed. The election of Councilors will be unaffected by this change and will still be elected by the membership. For 2026, I am happy to announce that GODORT's membership numbers have surpassed the threshold necessary for having a dedicated Councilor for 2026-2027.[4]

Careful, critical review of all offerings is another way ALA is trying to find financial stability. At the end of July, all Round Tables were tasked with pragmatically reviewing all of their Awards, Grants, Scholarships, Committees, and Products and submitting a completed rubric to our ALA Staff Liaison by the end of September. This undertaking was challenging for GODORT Steering. We were working within tight time constraints and it's daunting to objectively evaluate things that we care deeply about. With the results of the rubric, GODORT Steering will spend the next few months discussing ways that we can revitalize, reimagine, and reorganize our work in a manner that makes sense to our round table and helps keep GODORT sustainable and relevant. Already, members of GODORT Steering have kicked off inspiring conversations, sharing fresh ideas for reorganizing our committees that promise to make us even more agile, impactful, and sustainable.

The reorganization of GODORT's committees is nothing new. As time changes, our priorities shift and we must remain adaptable and modify the organization accordingly. It's important that we remain focused on why these changes need to take place. In March 2025, after 116 years, the Special Library Association (SLA) was dissolved, in part due to financial issues.[5] We must remind ourselves that ALA is not making these changes to hurt round tables or hamper their work—they're doing so to ensure the organization's own survival, so that we can continue to benefit from the support of such an incredibly important professional organization, especially in these increasingly difficult times. Together, let's embrace this evolution with the innovative spirit that defines us, turning challenges into opportunities to build a stronger, more vibrant GODORT for generations to come.

Julia Ezzo (julia@msu.edu), Government Information, Packaging, and Political Science Librarian, Michigan State University

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Get to Know …

Arlene Weible

<div align="right">Gwen Sinclair</div>

Arlene Weible may not have realized she was destined to be a government information librarian when she was first hired as a student assistant in the library at Whitman College. Fortunately, the director helped to develop her interest in librarianship, and Arlene subsequently obtained her MLIS degree from the University of Arizona. In Charley Seavey's government documents class, she found the perfect mesh of her interests in cataloging, political science, and history. She had the good luck to land her first professional job as an assistant government documents librarian at Yale, where she worked with Sandy Peterson. After a few years, Arlene returned to Oregon for a documents position at Willamette University. She later held positions at the Washington State Library and the University of North Texas before moving back to Oregon, where she has been working with federal government documents for almost 20 years.

As the Library Consultant and Federal Regional Depository Coordinator at the State Library of Oregon, Arlene spends about a third of her time handling the duties of the regional depository coordinator, maintaining partnerships and conducting outreach to the other depositories in the state. Statewide database licensing and training is another 30 percent of her duties. The remainder of her job deals with special projects such as workforce development and digital equity issues. Both in her outreach work for the state library and as the regional coordinator, she travels to libraries throughout the state. "I really love the fact that I can visit other libraries as part of my job," she said.

Thinking back over her career, Arlene is most proud of her work to establish the shared regional collection in Oregon beginning in 2006. Portland State University (PSU) had been the regional and was eager to divest itself of that responsibility, so Arlene created a plan to have the Oregon State Library take on the role of regional, working collaboratively with PSU, University of Oregon, and Oregon State University to manage a distributed regional collection. She credits the State Librarian and GPO for their support of the idea that local needs should drive how the regional/selective organization is structured.

Arlene has seen many important transitions in her thirty-five-plus years as a librarian. For example, including government documents in the library catalog was just beginning in the 1990s. Soon thereafter, the World Wide Web developed and government information began to appear online. She recalled, "I've spanned the era when print was king to now, when online is king, and all of the pitfalls as well." She has experienced government shutdowns and has seen politicians try to influence what is available online, although she has never witnessed the level of politicization that is occurring today. All of this makes her concerned about preservation and long-term access in the digital age and has given her a renewed appreciation for print collections.

Arlene served as the chair of the Depository Library Council (DLC) in 2013-2014. Her attendance at DLC meetings enhanced her understanding of GPO's regulations, which was invaluable when she was setting up the shared regional in Oregon. She has been very active in GODORT as well and was its chair in 2005-2006. "[GODORT] made such a big difference in my early career. It was the reason I was able to have such a diverse career. … I worked in five different states, and I did that through the networking that I did through the professional organization." She values the productive relationships she has developed as a leader and member of Oregon Library Association, too. Now that so many gov docs librarians wear multiple hats, fewer of them are attending ALA conferences, including Arlene. "That's the thing I miss the most about going to ALA. It was such an energetic group of people who are really passionate about this aspect of librarianship. That's really energizing."

In her free time, Arlene enjoys growing vegetables and canning her home-grown peppers and tomatoes with her sisters. She confessed, "I've got a little bit of a jigsaw puzzle obsession going. … I can put things together, and they fit, and they work, and when I'm done, I've completed something." Arlene is also an avid reader of historical fiction for its mix of history and engaging storytelling.

Aside from her worries about the preservation of government information, Arlene is concerned about the independence of round tables in ALA and hopes that GODORT can survive on its own. "I'm still very dedicated to the group, even if I'm not that active these days," she said. Finally, she has these words of wisdom for new government information librarians: be curious and "don't be afraid of questioning rules."

Gwen Sinclair (gsinclai@hawaii.edu), Chair, Government Documents & Maps Department, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa Library

2025 Award Winners

Emily Rogers

James Bennett Childs Award

The James Bennett Childs Award honors individuals who have made a lifetime and significant contribution to the field of government documents librarianship through stature, service, and publication. The recipients of the 2025 James Bennett Childs Award are Katrina Stierholz and Jim Noël. The Childs Award is a tribute to individuals who have made a lifetime and significant contribution to the field of documents librarianship, based on stature, service, and publication.

Katrina Stierholz

Katrina Stierholz has led preservation and access efforts for critical economic and financial government data through her work at the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. Under her leadership, resources such as FRASER, FRED, and ALFRED have become vital tools for researchers, policymakers, and the public. Her contributions to government data literacy and access will have a lasting impact on the field.
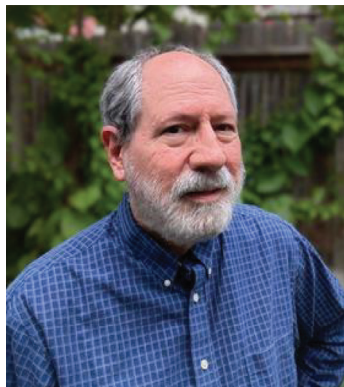
Jim Noël

Jim Noël has dedicated over three decades to enhancing public access to government information through his work at MARCIVE, Inc. His leadership in improving the cataloging and discoverability of federal government documents has made an enduring difference for libraries across the nation. Jim's long-standing support for depository libraries and involvement with GODORT reflect a deep commitment to the mission of government information accessibility.

Bernadine Abbott Hoduski Founders Award

GODORT is awarding federal recipients of the 2025 Bernadine Abbott Hoduski Founders Award, which recognizes documents librarians who might not be known at the national level but have made significant contributions to the field of state, international, local, or federal documents. This year, the Awards Committee selected two federal document recipients: Jenny McBurney and Sara Westdal of the University of Minnesota.

Jenny McBurney and Sara Westdal

Jenny McBurney and Sara Westdal are recognized for their work in preserving access to government information during an administrative transition. Through their efforts to document disappearing data and improve access to archived federal information, they have enhanced the profession's ability to navigate and preserve essential resources. Their work reflects a major contribution to the field that benefits not only their institution but the broader library community.

ProQuest/GODORT/ALA "Documents to the People" Award

The ProQuest/GODORT/ALA "Documents to the People" Award recognizes an individual, library, or institution that has most effectively encouraged the use of government documents in support of library services.

Lauren Hall, Government Information Librarian at California State University, Stanislaus, is the recipient of the 2025 ProQuest/GODORT/ALA "Documents to the People" Award, which honors those who most effectively encourage the use of

Lauren Hall

government documents in library services. Lauren's dynamic outreach through LibGuides, displays, and instruction has significantly expanded engagement with government information among students, faculty, and the broader campus community. Her dedication to promoting access and literacy around government resources exemplifies the spirit of this award.

GODORT Preservation Grant

The GODORT Preservation Grant supports library work associated with preserving government information in all formats and from all levels of government to sustain current and future access. The inaugural 2025 GODORT Preservation Grant is awarded to Middle Tennessee State University for its project: *Distilling, Fermenting, and Brewing Collection Government Document Preservation and Access Project.*

Middle Tennessee State University and Susan Martin
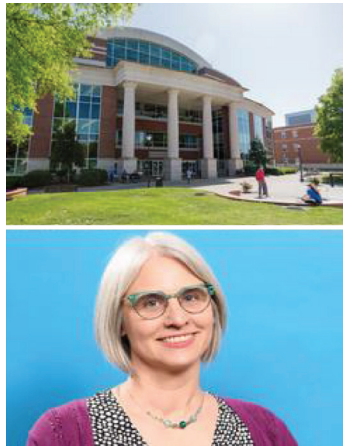
As a GPO Preservation Steward, Middle Tennessee State University has demonstrated a strong commitment to the care and long-term accessibility of federal government documents. Their project involves conservation treatment, reclassification, inventory reconciliation, and the creation of custom enclosures for historically significant materials. It also provides a valuable educational opportunity by involving a graduate intern and plans to share results through publication. This initiative aligns closely with the goals of the GODORT Preservation Grant to preserve and enhance access to government information collections for future generations. Susan Martin, Special Collections Librarian at Middle Tennessee State University Library, submitted the proposal on behalf of the institution.

GODORT Sponsored Emerging Leader

The ALA Emerging Leaders Program is a leadership development initiative for early-career library professionals, designed to provide networking opportunities, hands-on project experience, and pathways into professional leadership.

Aaron M. Wilson, Serials/Government Information Cataloging Librarian at the University of Maryland–College Park, is the 2025 GODORT Sponsored Emerging Leader. In addition to his participation in the Emerging Leaders Program, Aaron has taken an active leadership role within GODORT as Chair of the Education Committee, where he is leading the revision of the Voting and Elections Toolkits—vital resources for civic literacy. As part of his

Aaron M. Wilson

Emerging Leaders project team, Aaron is also contributing to the creation of a toolkit on Black perspectives during the Founding Era for the 250th anniversary of the United States. The project includes educational materials, discussion guides, and interactive resources to expand public understanding of historical narratives.

David W. Rozkuszka Scholarship

The David W. Rozkuszka Scholarship provides financial assistance to an individual who is currently working with government documents in a library and is completing a master's degree in library science. This award, established in 1994, is named after David Rozkuszka, former Documents Librarian at Stanford University.

Sylvia Amber Cotten, an MLIS student at the University of Maryland–College Park, is the recipient of the 2025 W. David Rozkuszka Scholarship. Sylvia's academic and professional experiences reflect a deep dedication to the preservation and accessibility of government information. Her undergraduate thesis explored how archival newspaper sources depicted Indigenous communities in the context of US boarding

Sylvia Amber Cotten

schools, work that underscores the critical importance of access to historical government documents. Sylvia plans to pursue a career focused on government information librarianship, advocating for transparency, preservation, and equitable access to public records and historical materials.
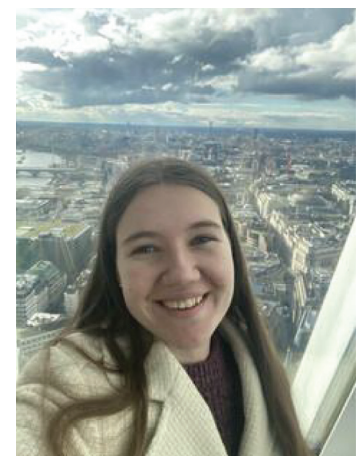
Stitching Solutions: The Bureau of Home Economics as a Fashion Influencer

Julia Ezzo

Introduction

When starting a research project in fashion studies, you might first turn to the library's fine arts section, specifically the Library of Congress call number ranges NK4700–4890 or NK8800–9505.5, or the TT490–695 range covering clothing manufacture, dressmaking, and tailoring. The government documents section is likely the last place you'd consider, as fashion and government rarely intersect. However, for research on fashion and textiles from the 1920s to the early 1960s, the government documents collection is a treasure trove, thanks to publications from the Bureau of Home Economics. While renowned for its work on recipes and nutrition research—particularly during the food shortages of the Great Depression and World War II rationing—the Bureau of Home Economics concerned itself not only with what you put *in* your body but also what you put *on* your body.

A Very Brief History of the Bureau of Home Economics

The Bureau of Home Economics (later renamed the Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics on February 13, 1943),[1] established within the Department of Agriculture on July 1, 1923, aimed to support research at experiment stations nationwide, address practical household challenges, and promote the use of American agricultural products in domestic settings.[2] Although federal support for home economics predated 1923—most notably through the Morrill Act of 1862,[3] which established land-grant colleges, and the Smith-Lever Act of 1914,[4] which funded agricultural extension stations—the Bureau's creation marked a shift toward more intensive, centralized research and broader dissemination of findings.[5] Secretary of Agriculture Henry C. Wallace recognized the significance of household challenges, advocating for federal support to address them. At the Home Economics Association's annual convention in August 1922, the Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, speaking on behalf of Wallace, announced plans to establish "an independent Bureau" led by "a woman of executive ability, scientific training, and broad and sympathetic understanding of what is needed to make such a bureau helpful to the women of this land" to advance home economics research and collaborate with extension stations to share knowledge widely.[6]

Upon its establishment, the Bureau of Home Economics, true to the Secretary of Agriculture's commitment, stood out within the Department of Agriculture as the only division led by a woman—Dr. Louise Stanley, who had a Ph.D. in Chemistry.[7] It also employed numerous women in roles such as chemists, economists, statisticians, and physicists.[8] Reflecting the broad scope of home economics, the Bureau was organized into three research divisions: Food and Nutrition, Economics, and Textiles and Clothing.[9] The Textiles and Clothing Division was further subdivided into two sections: the Textile Maintenance and Utilization Section and the Clothing Design Section. The Textile Maintenance and Utilization Section was comprised of the Chemical Aspects Unit, which studied the effects of chemicals like starch and detergents on textiles, and the Physical Aspects Unit, which tested the properties of domestically produced textiles.[10] The Clothing Design Section designed and tested practical clothing patterns for everyday use.[11] "It's aim is to promote efficiency in 'Women's Biggest Job' by furnishing for homemaking the same kind of help that the various government departments now offer to agriculture, industry, and commerce,"[12] and it accomplished this through its research and publications, while also the influencing American fashion by promoting specific fabrics, standardizing clothing sizes, and innovating clothing construction techniques.

Community Voices, Community Outreach

The Bureau engaged directly with the American public, receiving frequent letters from homemakers regarding their everyday

problems.[13] Bureau staff also conducted targeted surveys to assess their skills and identify their most pressing concerns. These surveys yielded valuable data, including the skill levels of female homemakers, the average number of garments produced (approximately nine),[14] the family members for whom these garments were made,[15] the types of garments crafted (e.g., hats, house dresses, coats),[16] the fabrics selected, the motivations behind home sewing,[17] and what are the greatest difficulties they face when sewing—such as fitting and "choosing becoming and practical designs."[18] Through the letters they received and by analyzing survey results, the Bureau could effectively prioritize resources and tailor its efforts to address the most critical needs reported by the public.

The Bureau of Home Economics disseminated its research and recommendations through diverse channels, including published reports, leaflets, bulletins, newspaper and magazine articles, and radio programs[19] such as *Aunt Sammy's "Housekeepers' Chat."*[20] Their publications were written for different audiences: farmers' bulletins were written for the average homemaker to understand and distributed for free through local congressional offices or by writing to the Department of Agriculture. The technical bulletins were published as Department of Agriculture bulletins and meant for home economics workers, rather than homemakers.[21]

The Bureau also collaborated closely with sewing clubs, extension stations, and home demonstration agents to share practical knowledge. "Home demonstration work, a Nation-wide system of home-making education, is carried on by the United States Department of Agriculture and the State colleges of agriculture. The local representative of this system is the home demonstration agent." These college-educated women with degrees in home economics brought the "latest scientific information" to rural women "in such form that they can readily apply it in practical daily life." Funding for these demonstration agents was provided by the federal government thanks to the Smith-Lever Act, as well as state and county governments.[22] Through its collaborative work and outreach, the Bureau of Home Economics strove to spread its research as broadly as possible.

Innovating Children's Clothing: Practicality, Craftsmanship, Health, and Safety

Before the 20th century, fashion favored style over practicality, often at the expense of comfort and functionality. Petticoats—worn by women and children of both sexes—corsets, hooks, and heavy layers of fabric complicated daily life, particularly for young children. Responding to numerous letters from American women seeking simpler clothing options, the Bureau of Home Economics' Pattern Design Section developed

child-friendly garments that promoted self-dressing. Impractical fasteners like hooks, snaps, and easily tangled bows were replaced with large, easy-to-grip buttons suited for small hands. The designers also introduced innovative styles such as rompers, sundresses, and sunsuits, prioritizing ease of movement. These patterns were developed through evidence-based research, a core mission of the Bureau, and tested in collaboration with Washington, D.C. orphanages to ensure children could independently manage the garments.[23]

These innovative designs not only enabled children to dress themselves independently but also promoted free play through their comfortable, spacious construction, accommodating a wide range of activities.[24] The Bureau's clothing designers urged clothing manufacturers and home sewers alike to prioritize quality craftsmanship in children's clothing. After evaluating various construction techniques, they advised that "stitching needs to be close and well-adjusted and reinforcements...for places likely to be strained" and "seams and finishes should be narrow, flat, smooth, and pliable."[25] This focus on durability ensured garments could withstand frequent washing and the rough wear of active, often messy play, enhancing their practicality for everyday use.

Building on this emphasis on durable, comfortable clothing, the Bureau incorporated scientific research to prioritize children's health. Studies showing that exposure to the sun's ultraviolet rays prevents and treats rickets—a condition most often caused by a vitamin D deficiency—inspired the creation of the sunsuit, designed to expose sufficient skin to sunlight.[26] The Bureau also favored cotton for its softness and breathability, minimizing irritation to children's sensitive skin.[27] These health-conscious designs ensured garments supported both physical well-being and practical use.

To further protect young wearers, the Bureau addressed safety by recommending brightly colored textiles to enhance children's visibility to motorists during outdoor activities.[28] For infants not yet walking and less at risk from traffic, the Bureau recommended softer hues: "Light blue, pink, green and yellow are suitable, depending on the baby's coloring. As a rule, prints are not so attractive as plain tints, but if desired, there are available small allover designs suited to a baby's size."[29] These recommendations guided parents and manufacturers in selecting safe, aesthetically appealing, age-appropriate fabrics, complementing the Bureau's focus on practicality and health.

Focus on Women's Wear: Form and Function

The period spanning the 1920s to the 1950s marked a dynamic evolution in women's fashion, driven by social, economic, and cultural transformations. The 1920s introduced the liberated

WHEN days are hot and children need few clothes, a sun-suit ensemble is ideal. The cool romper with its net top to catch the ultra-violet rays is just right for play in the back yard. With a dress to match, it makes an outfit for practically any occasion.

Figure 1. Illustration of a sunsuit, designed to maximize sunlight exposure for health benefits.

flapper aesthetic, with loose silhouettes, shorter hemlines, and lightweight fabrics that prioritized mobility and reflected post-World War I emancipation, throwing off the Victorian-era shackles of voluminous petticoats, multiple layers of restrictive fabric, and sweeping floor-length skirts, often weighed down by elaborate bustles. The 1930s, shaped by the Great Depression, shifted toward practical yet elegant designs, emphasizing tailored dresses and defined waists for both functionality and femininity. By the 1940s, World War II rationing led to utilitarian styles, with simpler cuts and durable materials, while the post-war 1950s embraced full skirts and cinched waists, celebrating a return to domesticity and prosperity. The Bureau of Home Economics played a pivotal role in this evolution, particularly for homemakers, by developing garment designs that balanced practicality for household tasks with aesthetic appeal.

Through detailed guidelines on fit, materials, and construction, the Bureau empowered women to select or create clothing that was functional, flattering, and aligned with contemporary style trends, thereby supporting their dual roles as efficient homemakers and confident individuals.

"A well-designed, well-made house dress can give a real lift to homemaking jobs. A poorly designed dress or apron, on the other hand—one that restricts when you reach or bend, that twists or gets in your way as you stoop or climb—can be as fatiguing as a poorly planned kitchen," stated a 1952 Farmers' Bulletin. Dresses and aprons were designed by the Bureau with styles and features that were functional for every day household tasks, while also being "attractive, simple to make, and quickly and easily ironed."[30] This dual focus on practicality and style encouraged women to evaluate ready-made garments and sewing patterns based on critical features, including sleeves, blouse backs, skirts, waistbands, pockets, necklines, fastenings, materials, and craftsmanship.[31]

The Bureau emphasized innovative design solutions to popular dress styles to enhance functionality. For example, wrap-around dresses, popular for their stylish silhouette, often posed challenges due to the need for constant readjustment during tasks. To address this, the Bureau encouraged women to select a faux wrap-around style with concealed buttons at the waist, ensuring a secure closure and reducing wardrobe malfunctions.[32] Such adaptations highlight the integration of user-centered design principles to balance fashionable appearance with practical needs. Additionally, the Bureau provided tailored recommendations based on body type to optimize fit and visual appeal.

For example, on a stout figure a set-in sleeve is better than the raglan or the kimono style. With the latter type, ugly wrinkles which can not be fitted out are likely to appear under the arm. On the slender, square-shouldered person, however, these sleeves cause fewer fitting difficulties.[33]

The guidelines also promoted vertical lines in patterns and pleats for their slenderizing effect, as opposed to horizontal lines, which could visually widen the figure.[34] Attention to garment proportions—such as the ratio of waistbands and belts to skirts and tops—was recommended to minimize emphasis on perceived problem areas, such as the stomach or hips. Complementary

Comfort.—Styling is such that garments permit free action and are cool.

Safety.—Pockets, belts, and sleeves won't catch on pan handles or get in the way to cause accidents while the wearer is cooking, cleaning house, or doing the family wash.

Convenience.—Dresses and aprons are easy to put on and take off. They present no laundry problems. And they are equipped with usable pockets placed so that hands can slide in without effort.

Durability.—If materials are chosen carefully and workmanship is good, garments made from these designs will wear well. They have no features that will cause them to tear or wear out in a short time.

Attractiveness.—Styles are planned so that the garments do not muss readily. Materials recommended will not show wrinkles or spots quickly; colors are lasting and fresh looking.

Figure 2. List of five features (comfort, safety, convenience, durability, and attractiveness) that the recommended apron and dress designs have.

shoe styles and heel heights were also suggested to "look smartly dressed."[35]

These recommendations reflect a nuanced understanding of practical and aesthetic considerations in garment design, aligning with broader principles of functional clothing. By addressing both the physical demands of homemaking tasks and the desire for flattering attire, the Bureau's guidelines helped promote the stylistic transformation of these eras.

Evolution of Standardized Sizing: Addressing Fit Challenges through Comprehensive Measurement Studies

A 1927 Bureau of Home Economics sewing survey identified fit as the primary challenge for women.[36] This issue stemmed from manufacturers relying on "ideal" measurements based on the average build from a small sample of individual. These measurements were scaled proportionally to create size ranges, despite human bodies not scaling uniformly. Moreover, the sample size was too limited to represent group averages accurately.[37] Inspired by a World War I survey that measured seventeen body parts of 100,000 male soldiers for clothing sizes,[38] the Bureau conducted measurement studies on women[39] and children.[40] These studies aimed to guide clothing and pattern manufacturers toward standardized sizing, addressing the inconsistency where sizes varied significantly between manufacturers, frustrating consumers.[41]

To address these challenges, the Bureau expanded its efforts to include comprehensive measurement studies for both children and women. From February 1937 to June 1939,[42] the Bureau measured thirty-six attributes of 147,088 children aged four to seventeen across fifteen states and Washington, D.C. Of these, 133,807 measurements (69,661 boys and 64,146 girls) were deemed valid.[43] Based on these findings, the Bureau of Home Economics recommended a sizing system for children based on height and hip measurements, rather than age, proposing twelve regular sizes for girls and twelve for boys.[44] This shift to height- and hip-based sizing aimed to reduce consumer frustration by ensuring better-fitting clothes for children.

Between July 1939 and June 1940, a similar study measured fifty-eight attributes of 14,968 white women spanning seven states and Washington, D.C.[45] Participants, all aged eighteen or older, included both native and non-native white women, primarily from urban areas. Measurements from twenty-four non-white women were collected but excluded[46] due to the study's focus on a narrowly defined "average American woman," reflecting the era's limited approach to racial diversity. Ultimately, data from 10,042 women were analyzed,[47] though the sample was skewed toward younger women, with only sixty participants aged seventy or older.[48] This focus on the "average American woman" omitted measurements from approximately four million non-white women.[49]

In 1958, the National Bureau of Standards (now NIST) utilized data from prior studies to establish Commercial Standard

(CS) 215-58. Adoption of these standards by manufacturers was voluntary, resulting in inconsistent application, though major retailers like Sears and Montgomery Ward initially adopted them. Over time, shifts in body shapes, evolving fashion trends, and the rise of vanity sizing—where manufacturers adjusted sizes to flatter consumers—rendered the standards obsolete, leading to their withdrawal on January 20, 1983.[50]

Stretching the Informed Consumer's Budget

To promote effective household financial management, the Bureau of Home Economics issued comprehensive guidance emphasizing the development of detailed and tailored household budgets. Rather than prescribing fixed expenditure percentages for specific categories such as clothing, the Bureau advocated for a flexible, needs-based approach to budgeting. This approach encouraged homemakers to craft budgets that reflect the unique financial circumstances and requirements of their families.[51] For the clothing category, the Bureau provided specific recommendations to ensure thorough accounting. Homemakers were advised to consider including

> a separate record for each member of the family, covering all materials, trimmings, paid labor, ready-made garments, accessories such as hair nets and pins, dry cleaning, pressing, and repairing. Such items as small findings, thread, and cleaning materials, which can not be divided among individual members of the family, are listed under a general clothing record.[52]

This granular approach aimed to enable precise tracking of all household expenditures.

Beyond the traditional family household, a significant and growing demographic in early twentieth-century America—working women, particularly those earning minimum wages—faced unique challenges in managing limited incomes while maintaining a professional appearance. These unmarried women resided in diverse living arrangements, including rented rooms, shared residences with other working women (commonly termed "housekeeping groups" due to shared domestic responsibilities), or with family members.[53] Their clothing decisions required careful consideration of seasonality, hygiene (maintaining sufficient garments to allow regular laundering), and social appropriateness to align with occupational and societal expectations.[54] To address these needs, the Bureau of Home Economics issued targeted, budget-conscious guidelines tailored to the financial constraints of working women. These guidelines provided detailed

recommendations, including the optimal number of garments across categories such as outerwear, undergarments, footwear, accessories, and maintenance requirements. Additionally, the Bureau outlined the expected lifespan of these items before replacement; recommended fabrics, features, and styles to prioritize for durability and suitability; and provided estimated annual costs for each clothing category.[55] This comprehensive approach aimed to empower working women to make informed, economical choices while upholding professional and social standards.

The Bureau of Home Economics emphasized the value of comparative data in budget development, noting that "it is useful...to know what others are doing and to get information on standards."[56] To provide such benchmarks, the Bureau conducted comprehensive studies on clothing expenditures across American populations, segmented into five geographic regions, and the type of locale: farm, urban, or village setting.[57] These studies analyzed key variables, including household size, average expenditure on specific garment types for each family member, and distinctions between rural and urban households. The surveyed populations were exclusively "native white families," with a notable exception in the Southeast, where data was also collected from African American families.[58]

In 1925, Louise Stanley, the inaugural Chief of the Bureau of Home Economics, underscored the critical need for informed clothing purchases, stating, "more money is spent uselessly on clothing than on foods, hence the importance of the economic aspect of the question. The housewife needs information in regard to fabrics in order to purchase wisely."[59] Recognizing this, the Bureau of Home Economics extended its mission beyond budgeting advice to empower Americans to maximize value while maintaining an aesthetically pleasing and functional wardrobe. To achieve this, the Bureau published comprehensive shopping guides focusing on key clothing categories, including ready-made dresses,[60] cloth coats,[61] hosiery,[62] and men's suits.[63] These guides provided detailed, practical advice to enhance consumer decision-making. They emphasized evaluating fabric quality through characteristics such as weave structure, identifying textiles best suited for specific garments, and scrutinizing construction details, such as seam integrity and the presence of seam allowances for alterations. Additionally, the guides addressed technical aspects of garment production, such as whether the fabric was cut with or against the grain, which impacts durability and fit. Beyond functionality, the Bureau emphasized selecting styles that balanced contemporary fashion with flattery to the wearer's body type, ensuring both aesthetic appeal and practicality. Through these resources, the Bureau equipped consumers with the knowledge to make economical, high-quality clothing choices.

Textile Labeling Standards

The quality of a garment can be assessed through physical examination, but labels provide essential information to guide informed consumer purchasing decisions. The Bureau of Home Economics played a foundational role in shaping textile labeling standards, significantly influencing subsequent regulations by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and other standards organizations.[64] While the Bureau did not directly establish these standards, its researchers developed precise textile definitions and minimum material composition requirements that profoundly shaped industry practices. The Bureau's contributions extended beyond the FTC, informing standards set by organizations such as the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) and influencing clothing manufacturers' practices.[65]

A notable example of the Bureau's impact is its 1939 analysis of fifty-one fabric samples, all labeled as "cotton broadcloth" but exhibiting inconsistent specifications. This study led to a recommendation that cotton broadcloth meet specific criteria: "a minimum weight of three ounces per square yard, a breaking strength of at least fifty-two pounds warp-wise and eighteen pounds filling-wise, and a thread count of at least one hundred warp yarns and approximately fifty filling yarns per inch."[66] These findings were instrumental in the ASTM's adoption of official labeling standards for "bleached cotton broadcloth" in 1941.[67]

Furthermore, the Bureau advocated for clear and informative labeling practices to enhance consumer transparency. It emphasized that labels should specify fiber content in precise percentages, criticizing vague descriptors such as "part wool" or "silk and acetate." Such ambiguous terms, the Bureau argued, were unhelpful, as "part wool" could denote a fabric containing as little as 5 percent wool or nearly entirely wool, without clarifying the composition of the remaining fibers.[68] Through rigorous research and evidence-based recommendations, the Bureau of Home Economics significantly advanced accurate and standardized textile labeling, fostering consumer trust and promoting consistency in manufacturing practices—a legacy that continues to benefit modern consumers.

Textile labels convey critical information beyond mere fiber composition, and the Bureau of Home Economics urged consumers to scrutinize them carefully to make informed purchasing decisions. For example, cotton, prized for its versatility and comfort, is susceptible to shrinkage. The Bureau recommended seeking labels that explicitly indicate preshrunk fabric,[69] with ideally "not only a statement that the fabric has been subjected to a shrinking process, but also the upper limit for residual shrinkage after washing by a specified method."[70] This level of specificity empowered consumers to anticipate a garment's performance post-purchase.

Color fastness, the ability of a fabric to resist fading when exposed to light or washing, was another critical consideration. The Bureau highlighted acorn-shaped labels or labels with the phrase "Nafal tested fast colors" as particularly reliable indicators of quality. As articulated in a 1934 radio broadcast by a Bureau agent, "That's the kind of label that means something, and the pity of it is that more cottons do not carry such labels. The National Association of Finishers of Cotton Fabrics stands behind this label, financing rigorous laboratory tests conducted according to methods established by the National Association of Textile Chemists. This label assures buyers that the fabric is resistant to fading from both light and washing."[71]

Beyond shrinkage and color fastness, the Bureau advised consumers to seek labels indicating additional desirable properties, such as water or moisture repellency, crease and crush resistance, and treatments for fire-proofing, moth protection, and mildew prevention.[72] By promoting awareness of these labeling details, the Bureau equipped consumers with the knowledge to select durable, high-quality textiles suited to their needs.

During economic hardship, however, purchasing new clothing was often impractical. The 1936 Bureau of Home Economics circular, *Clothing Economies*, offered practical strategies for repurposing and revitalizing household fabrics and garments.[73] Simple modifications, such as altering collars, cuffs, hemlines, or necklines, could breathe new life into worn clothing.[74] The Bureau also promoted resourceful Great Depression-era practices, such as crafting "children's clothing made out of salt bags and flour sacks and old partly worn garments."[75] For example, one script notes that "babies' rompers [could be] made from the salvageable parts of a man's shirt and from flour sacks, and a child's play suit from a woman's jersey dress no longer usable as a dress."[76] Even "out-of-style" garments such as coats could be repurposed into practical clothes for children.[77] This ingenuity extended beyond old garments to include unfashionable ones, aligning with the Great Depression motto: "Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without."[78] The Bureau's guidance empowered Americans to creatively adapt to scarcity.

While the emphasis was on stretching what you had, it was not meant to be at the expense of fashion. Suggested modifications took into account the latest fashion trends, such as adding "taffetas, satins, and ribbed and quilted fabrics in plain, plaid, dots, or stripes are fashionable materials [to add as] collars, jabots, and vests," to freshen up "a plain dresses of tailored silk or wool."[79] "If you have any pieces of flat fur bring them out. Collars, cuffs, bows, and belts of fur are being used on some of the smartest

dresses this year"[80] another piece of advice stated. Opening seams on dresses and skirts and fitting them more closely to the body or adding pleats helped update outdated silhouettes.[81]

Conclusion

The Bureau of Home Economics, active from 1923 to its dissolution on November 2, 1953, played a transformative role in American fashion by bridging scientific research, consumer needs, and practical design. As women's roles evolved in the 1950s, with greater workforce participation and a shift away from traditional homemaking, the US Department of Agriculture redirected its focus toward broader agricultural priorities, leading to the Bureau's integration into the Agricultural Research Service (ARS).[82] While its functions, such as nutrition and food safety research, continued under ARS, the Bureau's fashion legacy endures through its pioneering contributions to clothing design, standardized sizing, and consumer education. Its innovative patterns for children's and women's garments prioritized practicality, health, and style, empowering homemakers and working women alike to navigate economic challenges with resourcefulness and confidence. The Bureau's rigorous measurement studies laid the groundwork for modern sizing standards, while its advocacy for clear textile labeling shaped industry practices that continue to inform consumer choices today. By equipping Americans with the tools to make informed, economical, and aesthetically pleasing clothing decisions, the Bureau of Home Economics left an indelible mark on fashion history, demonstrating that government research could resonate far beyond the kitchen and into the fabric of everyday life.

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Changing Landscape of Government Information Management and the Role of Government Information Librarians

Sanga Sung

This paper examines the evolving role of government information services at the University of Illinois Urbana–Champaign Library in response to national shifts in government publishing, discovery infrastructure, and user needs. As the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP) transitions to a digital-first model, traditional responsibilities like print selection and cataloging have given way to new priorities, including instruction, outreach, and digital stewardship. Through a case study of organizational restructuring, service redesign, and cross-unit collaboration, the paper highlights how academic libraries can adapt to ensure continued access, discoverability, and engagement with government information. The findings offer broader insights into the future of government information librarianship and the critical role libraries play in supporting civic literacy and public access in a dynamic information environment.

Introduction

Government information includes a wide range of formats, including reports, legislative records, maps, datasets, statistics, social media content, and health alerts. These materials serve as essential primary sources and official records, documenting the workings of government, its decisions, and their impact on society. Users of government information are equally diverse: students cite it in papers, scholars analyze it for trends, journalists investigate issues and provide public context, advocates draw on these sources to demand change, and members of the public consult them for practical information about rights, services, and communities. Libraries that collect, preserve, and promote access to government information provide crucial support not only for academic inquiry but also for public knowledge and civic engagement.

The Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP), established in 1813, has long served as the cornerstone of public access to US government information.[1] The program serves not only as a distribution channel but also as a national infrastructure for the preservation, discovery, and access of government information. Historically, the US Government Publishing Office (GPO) supplied physical publications and catalog records to participating depository libraries at no cost. In turn, FDLP libraries are responsible for "providing local, free access to information from the Federal government in an impartial environment."[2] While the FDLP remains foundational, the value and scope of government information extend far beyond federal output. At the local, state, national, and international levels, governments generate and disseminate information that informs public policy, civic participation, legal rights, economic development, and more.

The roles of the FDLP and government information librarianship have evolved significantly in response to changes in publication formats, user expectations and behaviors, and digital access models. Librarians are no longer focused solely on managing physical collections. Instead they guide discovery, teach critical source evaluation, support digital access, and address the challenges of fragmented and dynamic government information ecosystems. These evolving responsibilities have reshaped staffing models, service strategies, and professional identities.

This paper is a case study of the University of Illinois Urbana–Champaign Library, hereafter referred to as the Illinois Library, to explore how one academic library has navigated these changes. It examines how local developments in organizational structure, cataloging workflows, instruction, and outreach reflect broader national shifts. By tracing this library's adaptation to the changing government information landscape, the paper offers insights into how institutions can continue to lead efforts to preserve, promote, and ensure equitable access to government information in a digital-first era.

Historic Context and Collection Scope

The Illinois Library serves as a selective depository in FDLP. Selective depositories choose a subset of the documents distributed through the program based on local needs while regional depositories receive and retain all materials distributed through the FDLP and oversee the activities of the selectives in their state or region.[3] Although the Illinois Library was once considered for regional status, the Illinois State Library was ultimately designated as the Regional Depository for Illinois. Nevertheless, the Illinois Library historically selected 90 to 95 percent of titles available from the GPO, building an extensive and comprehensive federal depository collection of government information. In 2024, for example, the Illinois Library selected 94.8 percent of what was offered, continuing its long-standing role as a high-percentage federal depository library.

While official GPO records long listed the Illinois Library's depository designation as beginning in 1907, a letter dated August 8, 1912, from Head Librarian Phineas L. Windsor to Superintendent of Documents August Donath, suggests the designation actually occurred in 1884.[4] To date, no official documentation has been located to confirm the 1884 designation, but the letter indicates the Illinois Library's early and sustained commitment to government information access.

In addition to its participation in the FDLP, the Illinois Library has contributed to other major government information programs. It has served as a depository for Illinois state government information since the late 1960s, with holdings that include legislative documents dating back to statehood in 1818. The Illinois Library has also been a United Nations (UN) Depository since 1946, collecting key agency reports, country profiles, and statistical series, though the UN Depository Programme is set to be phased out recently. The Illinois Library served as a Canadian Depository since 1927 until the program ended in December 2013, focusing on agriculture, education, health, the environment, and transportation, and a collector of British government publications, including parliamentary papers, bills, committee and commission reports, and command papers.[5]

As many of these programs have transitioned to open-access and digital-only models, the nature of depository programs has evolved as well as the Illinois Library's role. While physical shipments have largely ceased, the Illinois Library continues to provide reference support, access assistance, and collection integration for government information across jurisdictions. This long-standing participation in multiple depository programs laid the foundation for the Illinois Library's continued leadership in the management of government information, even as formats and access models have shifted over time.

Changing Environment
Organization Changes

As depository programs and access models evolved, organizational restructuring at the Illinois Library also transformed the management of government information, with evolving government information workflows simultaneously shaping institutional change. In 2007, the Illinois Library launched its New Service Model (NSM) initiative, which aimed to reconfigure "collection models, patron services, and library operations" in response to shifting user needs and technological changes.[6] As part of the effort, the number of departmental libraries was changed from fifty to fewer than thirty and emphasis was placed on improving cross-unit coordination and operational flexibility.

Prior to this reorganization, the Government Documents unit operated independently within the Public Services Division. The team oversaw all US federal and Illinois State government documents acquired by the Illinois Library. All three librarians in the unit were engaged in cataloging, with one librarian focusing primarily on US federal documents.

A key milestone in this transformation occurred in June 2009, when the Government Documents Library was permanently closed. Its reference services were merged into Reference, Research and Government Information Services, creating a unified public service point, while cataloging and receiving functions were transferred to the Content and Access Services unit, which assumed the responsibility for all acquired materials, including government information.[7] The closure of a dedicated physical space for government documents marked a shift away from a standalone unit to a more integrated model of access and support. The updated terminology reflected a broader understanding within the field that government information encompassed more than print, embracing digital content, datasets, legal information, and multimedia formats under the umbrella of government information.

In the same year, two of the three librarians with primary responsibilities for government information departed, and the

librarian who remained served as the sole librarian overseeing the government information collection and services. This remaining librarian focused on government information reference, instruction, and collection development within the newly integrated central reference services unit. Meanwhile, the cataloging and receiving staff were fully reassigned to the Content and Access Services unit, aligning government information cataloging with the Illinois Library's central technical services.

The staffing structure remained in place until the retirement of the government information librarian in June 2019. Following this transition, the Illinois Library undertook an assessment of the physical government titles it received and handled, along with associated services. Based on the assessment, a new position was created and filled in July 2020. This role combined government information services with broader reference and instruction duties. Notably, this role also brought together responsibilities previously divided across multiple positions, combining oversight of federal, state, international, and intergovernmental government information services.

Despite these structural and staffing shifts, the Illinois Library continues to serve as a selective depository and remains committed to providing access to government information for both the campus and the broader public. The government information program has adapted to changes in institutional priorities, staffing models, and user needs while continuing to support discovery, access, and long-term stewardship of government-produced content.

Cataloging and Access Services

While staffing and service structures were redefined, cataloging and access workflows for government information at the Illinois Library have evolved alongside national infrastructure and technology change. Since 1976, the GPO has cataloged US government publications, distributing records through platforms such as the Catalog of US Government Publications (CGP), the Library Services and Content Management (LSCM) GitHub repository, the FDLP Data Manager, and OCLC.[8] While non-depository libraries can acquire records through OCLC's WorldCat and Connexion services by subscription, depository libraries such as Illinois have historically received records at no cost. Over time, methods of delivery, acquisition, and local integration have shifted, reflecting broader changes in metadata standards and discovery systems.

Beginning in 2009, the Illinois Library received catalog records through the Cataloging Record Distribution Program (CRDP), administered by LSCM and supported by vendor MARCIVE. This automated record distribution simplified cataloging workflows and improved metadata consistency across depository

libraries. The 2019 migration of the Illinois Library's integrated library system to Alma further streamlined this process, enabling automated batch imports that created or updated holdings and portfolios with minimal manual intervention.

In August 2024, the GPO announced the end of the CRDP following MARIVE's decision to cease its service in March 2025.[9] This decision coincided with GPO's transition to an electronic-only publication model and marked a turning point for metadata workflows in depository libraries. Since January 2025, the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois (CARLI) has assumed responsibility for providing cataloging records and managing access to government information for member libraries. As a result, cataloging work at the Illinois Library has become more centralized and less labor-intensive, reflecting a shift from local processing to collaborative metadata management. These evolving workflows mirror broader national trends toward digital access and shared infrastructure, setting the stage for the FDLP's transition to a fully digital program.

National Shift to a Digital FDLP

These institutional and workflow transformations reflect a larger national movement toward digital dissemination of government information, culminating in GPO's formal transition to a Digital FDLP. While many depository programs had already moved toward digital-first publication models, GPO formally launched its transition to a Digital FDLP in February 2024.[10] This shift marked a significant milestone in how federal government information is collected, preserved, and accessed, prioritizing permanent public access to born-digital content while acknowledging the enduring importance of tangible collections.

The digital transition reflects over three decades of incremental change and positions the FDLP to use new tools, partnerships, and technologies to expand access and improve services.[11] In 2024, GPO implemented limited print distribution for a small number of titles, providing select depositories with continued access to tangible resources no longer widely distributed. The Illinois Library was selected as one of the depository libraries to receive eighteen titles, which span multiple formats and subject areas, including *Economic Indicators*, the *Congressional Directory*, the *FCC Records*, the *Forest Atlas of the United States*, and several US Geological Survey and Bureau of Land Management map series. These titles represent enduring statistical and reference tools that continue to support research and public access.

This transition also coincided with GPO's announcement that it would sunset the CRDP by March 2025, as noted earlier. The program's conclusion was driven by shifting discovery needs, the growing availability of high-quality records from other vendors,

and evolving digital workflows. It reflects broader shifts in federal metadata services and the need for libraries to adopt new cataloging workflows to support discovery of digital content.

Following the launch of the Digital FDLP, National Collection Service Area (NCSA) Steering Committees were established to support coordination and communication among depository libraries within each geographic region. These committees are charged with promoting collaboration around shared collection development and retention strategies, as well as helping to shape evolving policies and practices for managing a digital-first FDLP.[12]

Though delivery methods and infrastructure are evolving, the mission of the FDLP—to provide free, ready, and permanent public access to federal government information for current and future generations—remains unchanged.[13] For libraries, the digital transition introduces expanded responsibilities in metadata management, digital preservation, and user support. It demands strategic planning and proactive approaches to ensure discoverability, usability, and long-term access to an increasingly digital National Collection.

Evolving Government Information Services

Shifting Professional Responsibilities

The role of government information librarians at the Illinois Library has evolved in direct response to national trends, shifting access models, and internal organizational restructuring. Previously, these roles were centered on managing tangible materials: selecting, receiving, processing, cataloging, and managing physical collections, as well as providing reference services rooted in print-based tools. Increasingly, as discovery and access are handled through centralized systems, collaborative cataloging services, and online access points managed externally along with a broader shift toward electronic formats, the emphasis at the Illinois Library has moved from technical processing to user engagement, instruction, and public service.

Librarians are now expected to help users navigate complex discovery platforms and fragmented digital content across federal, state, and international levels as the growing volume of born-digital information and inconsistent metadata practices make discovery and evaluation more challenging.[14]

As the Government Documents Library was dissolved in 2009 and services were integrated into broader reference and technical services units, these responsibilities became more distributed across the organization. Cataloging duties, once handled by subject librarians, were reassigned to a centralized technical services unit, while reference, instruction, and outreach were consolidated under a single librarian. The transformation of

national metadata infrastructure further contributed to the shift in librarian responsibilities. The implementation of batch loading services reduced local technical workflows while increasing reliance on external cataloging support.

As a result, the emphasis of government information librarianship has shifted toward instruction, outreach, and user focused services. Reflecting these changing needs, a study found that over 80 percent of government information job postings from 2010 to 2016 emphasized reference and instructional responsibilities, with fewer including traditional cataloging tasks.[15]

At the Illinois Library, this shift also aligns with institutional changes under the NSM initiative, which dispersed government information responsibilities across several departments. With no single librarian managing the full lifecycle of government information, new demands have emerged for cross-unit collaboration. Librarians must now coordinate metadata practices and cataloging workflows with colleagues in technical services while ensuring those efforts align with reference, instruction, and outreach goals. The diminished role of physical collection management has amplified the need for communication and collaboration across functional areas.

Even as centralized cataloging and digital access services reduce the technical workload of government information librarians, challenges related to discovery and access remain a significant part of their responsibilities. The sheer volume of born-digital content, variations in agency practices, inconsistent links and metadata can create barriers for users attempting to locate authoritative government sources. Additionally, the practice of selecting and deselecting print materials, once a routine and essential task for government information professionals, has largely disappeared with the transition of the FDLP to a digital model, apart from the small number of limited print titles still distributed. In place of this, librarians are now tasked with curating and promoting relevant digital content for specific user groups.

At the Illinois Library, these shifts are reflected in the current role of the government information librarian, which emphasizes instruction, reference, and public services over traditional technical processing tasks. While direct cataloging responsibilities have diminished, collaboration with technical services colleagues remains essential for resolving discovery issues, coordinating cataloging workflows, and maintaining metadata integrity. Curating digital collections through research guides, online exhibits, and dedicated platforms has become a key strategy for improving access. In addition, targeted instructional support is provided to help users develop search strategies and navigate access challenges unique to government information. These efforts ensure that both campus and public users can engage with a diverse and evolving body of government content.

Changing Formats and Audiences

As the responsibilities of government information librarians have shifted toward instruction, discovery, and user engagement, so too has the definition of government information—expanding beyond traditional print collections to include a wide array of digital and born-digital materials. Government information is no longer limited to printed reports and legislative documents but encompasses a broad range of formats, including datasets, websites, social media posts, audiovisual materials, and other born-digital content. These digital and non-traditional formats present new challenges that extend beyond traditional collection management, requiring librarians to develop new expertise in navigating and interpreting complex and fragmented platforms.

The shift to digital access has also broadened the reach of government information services. Open availability of federal, state, and international resources online means that users increasingly encounter government content outside formal academic settings. A 2011 study of FDLP users found that people sought government information for a wide range of purposes beyond academic research, including education, personal use, health and safety, legal needs, civic participation, and business-related activities.[16] These trends are mirrored at the Illinois Library, where email reference inquiries to the government information librarian from 2020 to 2025 included at least twenty-two users clearly unaffiliated with the university, along with thirty-five additional users who used non-institutional email addresses suggesting many of them were likely unaffiliated as well. Affiliated users also spanned across roles, including sixty-three graduate students, fifty-two faculty, and thirty-eight undergraduates, illustrating the interdisciplinary and cross-generational nature of demand for government information.

Chat interactions from the Illinois Library's Ask a Librarian chat service further illustrates the range of users engaging with government information. From July 2023 through August 2025, forty-six chats tagged with government information-related subjects. These chats reflected engagement from twelve graduate students, seven faculty and staff, eight local community members, and ten unaffiliated individuals outside of the institution. While these datasets offer valuable insights, they have limitations as subject tagging is not required by chat responders and in-person and phone-based reference interactions handled directly by the government information librarian are not systematically recorded. In practice, several community members regularly contact the government information librarian by phone or visit in person, suggesting that public-facing and informal channels continue to play an important role.

In response to these changing formats and expanding audiences, the Illinois Library has developed a multifaceted approach to government information services. Instructional support now includes a range of materials tailored to diverse information needs and learning preferences, including tutorial videos, interactive learning modules, and research guides. Outreach programs are designed to engage specific user groups, including campus affiliates and public patrons, through workshops, events, and digital engagement. Additionally, the government information librarian works closely with units across the Illinois Library and with state and national partners to improve discovery, preservation, and access strategies for the increasingly complex ecosystem of government information formats. These efforts aim to ensure that all years can connect with reliable and relevant government content in meaningful ways.

Growing Needs for Instruction and Outreach

Shifts in content and audience engagement have also reshaped Illinois Library's instructional and outreach priorities, emphasizing new strategies for teaching discovery and evaluation skills. As outlined in the previous sections, the transition to digital formats and expanded user audiences has made instructional support and public engagement increasingly essential.

Course-integrated instruction from 2004 to 2019 was primarily concentrated in Journalism, Afro-American Studies, Political Science, and Library and Information Science. In more recent years, instructional engagement has expanded in both volume and disciplinary range, with more frequent sessions held in areas such as History, Education Policy, Communication, Journalism, and Social Work. Instructional efforts also extend beyond the classroom, with the government information librarian supporting numerous outreach efforts through workshops and events, including contributions to library-wide initiatives like the Savvy Researcher series. Past sessions have covered topics such as policy and legislative research, locating and using government data and statistics, and strategies for locating government information using open web sources. Targeted programming has also been developed for visiting scholars and summer enrichment programs. While earlier outreach focused more on standalone workshops, recent efforts have emphasized embedded instruction and deeper curricular integration.

Alongside disciplinary expansion, instructional content has increasingly focused on helping students navigate the digital government information landscape. As government content is dispersed across agency websites, databases, and digital archives, instruction centers on strategies for locating, evaluating, and interpreting diverse and often fragmented sources. Instruction often emphasizes how purpose, audience, and political context

shape the content and tone of government publications, helping students develop the critical evaluation skills needed to identify bias or selective framing in official documents.[17] A 2025 citation analysis of first-year undergraduates at the Illinois Library found that many students cited newspaper articles or non-governmental webpages when referencing government policies or statistics.[18] While not inherently problematic, these findings highlight the importance of instilling critical source evaluation skills, particularly in distinguishing between government-produced content and third-party interpretations.

Recent instruction requests have also focused on teaching students how to navigate barriers to access, particularly in response to the removal or modification of online government information following political transitions. These requests reflect growing awareness among instructors and students of the fragility of digital government content and the need for critical skills related to preservation, transparency, and long-term access.

Civic literacy has also emerged as a core theme in government information outreach, particularly as users are confronted with issues like misinformation, transparency, and access to public information.[19] Recognizing the role of government information in supporting democratic participation, the Illinois Library has led initiatives to promote civic awareness and engagement. These include campus-wide voter registration drives, Constitution Day programming with exhibits and interactive events, a panel discussion on local government and advocacy, and a tabling event focusing on Artificial Intelligence (AI) literacy in the context of elections and political messaging.

To meet the evolving needs of diverse user groups, government information instruction and outreach at the Illinois Library are designed to be flexible and inclusive. Instructional resources range from brief tutorial videos to in-depth Canvas modules, library guides, and online exhibits, offering support for different learning preferences and levels of familiarity. Outreach programming is similarly tailored to specific audiences, including academic departments, student organizations, and community members. These efforts are supported through partnerships across library departments and collaboration with state and national government information professionals, ensuring that discovery, preservation, and access strategies reflect the complexity and diversity of government information formats.

Opportunities and Emerging Directions
Infrastructure and Digital Stewardship

At the systems level, new approaches to cataloging and metadata sharing have helped simplify how collections are managed. For example, the Illinois Library benefits from the cataloging and metadata services coordinated by CARLI, which helps reduce duplication of effort while improving record quality and accessibility. Nationally, the GPO supports discovery through services such as FDLP, and new platforms like DiscoverGov, a new unified search platform that integrates the Catalog of US Government Publications (CGP) and GovInfo.

As more materials are released in digital formats and hosted on agency websites, library systems must remain flexible to ensure that users can discover and retrieve authoritative materials in diverse and changing environments. More broadly, the changing information landscape, including government agencies' use of social media, multimedia publications, and ephemeral digital content, demands ongoing adaptation across multiple areas of librarianship. These nontraditional formats require thoughtful approaches to collection management, new strategies to ensure discoverability and long-term access, and updated instruction to help users locate, interpret, and ethically use these sources. Government information professionals must navigate these changes while continuing to uphold the core values of transparency, public access, and accountability. At the same time, tangible formats should not be overlooked, as they remain a valuable part of government information access, especially for users with limited internet or device access or for those with specific accessibility preferences and needs. Libraries that take on these evolving responsibilities will be better prepared to serve users in today's complex and evolving information landscape.

Collaborations and Collective Stewardship

The transition to a digital-first FDLP has created new opportunities for collaborative stewardship and underscores the importance of partnerships across libraries, government agencies, and cultural organizations to ensure long-term access to public information.[20] The establishment of NCSAs has grouped depository libraries into four regions to coordinate access, retention, and planning efforts. Through the NCSA Steering Committee, the Illinois Library participates in shaping the collective future of federal information services in its region.

Professional organizations also play a vital role in supporting the evolving needs of government information librarians. The Government Documents Round Table (GODORT) of the American Library Association (ALA) provides forums for collaboration, professional development, and advocacy. Local and regional networks also support these efforts. For example, the Illinois Library is an active member of the Northeastern Illinois Documents Librarians (NIDL), a group dedicated to resource sharing, communication, and professional development for those working with government information.[21]

Partnerships with GPO offers additional avenues for engagement. Initiatives such as the Preservation Steward program and

opportunities to serve as Digital Content Contributors or Digital Access partners enable libraries to support preservation and digital access infrastructure. As a recipient of several limited-distribution print titles, the Illinois Library is uniquely positioned to support preservation of materials that are no longer widely distributed. Although the Illinois Library is not currently designated as a Preservation Steward, participating in these programs remains a valuable opportunity that aligns with its existing strengths.

Collaborative efforts outside of library organizations also demonstrate the increasing importance of civic engagement and preservation of public knowledge. Major initiatives such as the End of Term (EOT) Web Archive and the Data Rescue Project represent large-scale responses to at-risk government information.[22] More recently, projects such as Tracking Government Information (TGI), which documents the scope of modified or removed federal information, have added to this preservation landscape.[23] The Illinois Library's government information librarian's participation in TGI reflects the important contributions that individual librarians can make to national transparency and accountability efforts.

Emerging Technologies

Alongside these collaborative efforts, rapid technological advancements are transforming how government information is created, discovered, and preserved. Rapid developments in technology are reshaping how government information is created, shared, discovered, and preserved. These transformations present new opportunities for enhancing access and analysis, but they also introduce challenges around transparency, accessibility, and credibility.

Some government agencies are actively using AI tools to improve public services and internal processes. Examples include automated mail sorting in the US Postal Services, AI-powered customer service systems in New York City, and a state government initiative using AI to help citizens search over a million pages of documents.[24] These implementations illustrate how AI is reshaping the management and delivery of government information. At the same time, commercial platforms are increasingly integrating AI to personalize searches, raising new challenges for identifying and accessing authoritative public content.

These developments are reshaping how users interact with government content, often making it harder to identify credible sources or causing authoritative materials to be overlooked. Limited transparency, biased data, and uneven implementation can result in misinformation or exclusion.[25] Together, these challenges underscore the growing need for government information professionals to teach critical evaluation skills and guide users in navigating an increasingly complex information landscape.

Beyond AI, government agencies are collecting and working with increasingly large and complex datasets across areas such as public health, economics, education, and the environment. These datasets are often made available through public-facing portals, dashboards, or APIs, offering new opportunities for users to interact with information. However, the formats, platforms, and technical requirements for accessing this information can vary widely. As a result, users may need guidance not only in finding these sources but also in understanding how to interpret and apply them.

In addition, many agencies are implementing dynamic and visual tools such as interactive maps, data visualizations, and custom dashboards to make government information more accessible and engaging. While these tools can enhance understanding by highlighting spatial relationships, they may also obscure context or simplify complex issues, highlighting the need for continued instruction in data literacy and critical analysis.

Conclusion

The role of the FDLP and government information librarianship has undergone significant transformation in response to ongoing shifts in the publishing landscape, institutional infrastructure, and user expectations. The move from print to digital formats has not only altered how government information is produced and distributed but also how it is accessed, preserved, and supported. As more content becomes born-digital and is hosted across a range of decentralized platforms, the responsibilities of government information professionals have shifted accordingly, placing greater emphasis on instruction, outreach, discovery, and digital stewardship.

The case of the Illinois Library illustrates how one academic institution has navigated these changes by adapting its staffing, services, and organizational structures to better serve evolving user needs. The decline in print distribution and cataloging responsibilities has led to new collaborative models, with librarians closely working across departments to address access and metadata challenges. Instruction has expanded to encompass a broader disciplinary range and a more complex information environment, while outreach efforts reflect growing awareness of civic literacy, public engagement, and the value of government information in everyday life.

At the same time, the digital shift introduces challenges that cannot be overlooked. Issues of discoverability, preservation, and equitable access persist, particularly for non-traditional formats and at-risk content. These concerns underscore the continued importance of professional collaboration, both locally and

nationally, and the need for libraries to play and take an active role in shaping the infrastructure and policies that support long-term public access.

As the information landscape continues to evolve, government information professionals must not only adapt to change but also guide it through collaboration and innovation. Their expertise positions them to strengthen discovery systems, advocate for equitable digital access, and advance preservation policies that protect the public record. By continuing to champion transparency, civic engagement, and cooperation, librarians can ensure that government information remains accessible, meaningful, and central to an informed democracy.

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Populist Transparency: The JFK Assassination Records Act, Executive Order 14176, and the Normalization of Conspiratorial Thinking in US Politics

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Introduction

In the days before his second inauguration, President-elect Trump teased that "as a first step toward restoring transparency and accountability to government" he would declassify records related to the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy (JFK), Robert F. Kennedy (RFK), and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK).[1] On January 23, 2025, President Trump signed Executive Order (EO) 14176,[2] which triggered the declassification of "all records related to the assassination of President Kennedy" pursuant to the President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992 (hereafter, JFK Records Act).[3] He had balked at the opportunity to fully declassify these records in 2017 during his first term, inviting scrutiny regarding the motive for his recent eagerness to do so. Moreover, EO 14176's inclusion of orders to declassify records related to the assassinations of RFK and MLK, releases of which have not been directed by any Act of Congress, suggests broader motivations than merely carrying out the JFK Records Act. Conspiracy theories surrounding each of these assassinations have circulated since they occurred, and (as we will see) Donald Trump is no stranger to using conspiracist rhetoric to mobilize his constituents.

In this paper I contextualize EO 14176 and its legislative impetus by (1) examining the historical events that precipitated them and (2) comparing them to earlier declassification initiatives under Presidents Obama and Clinton. Considering both this analysis and scholarship on the resurgence of mainstream conspiratorial thinking in US political discourse, I argue that Trump's order reflects a broader transformation in American politics, specifically that, with President Trump's reelection, conspiracism has become a dominant mode of political engagement in the United States. EO 14176, then, serves as an example of how

mechanisms of government information dissemination—in this case, the transparency-building process of declassification—may be leveraged to appeal to a conspiracy-minded public.

The JFK Records Act in Context

On November 22, 1963, Lee Harvey Oswald assassinated JFK during a presidential motorcade in Dallas, Texas. Two days later, Oswald himself was fatally shot by nightclub operator Jack Ruby while Oswald was being transported through Dallas Police Headquarters. On November 27, 1963, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed EO 11130, which established a commission to investigate the assassination, known unofficially as the Warren Commission.[4] Ten months later, the Warren Commission released its final report, concluding that Oswald and Ruby acted alone in carrying out their respective murders.[5]

Elites and non-elites alike met the Warren Report with skepticism. Journalists, historians, and legal experts published works critiquing, and ultimately opposing, the conclusions put forth in the report. Likewise, according to a 1966 survey, 50% of respondents—normal, everyday Americans—indicated that they held conspiracist beliefs about the circumstances of JFK's assassination and its governmental investigation.[6] A federal response to public resistance to the Warren Report finally came in the wake of the release of Oliver Stone's 1991 film, *JFK*, whose screenplay drew heavily conspiracy theories surrounding JFK's assassination and reignited public skepticism. The bill proposing the JFK Records Act was introduced in the Senate in July 1992, seven months after the film's release; it was signed into law that October.[7]

The law stipulated the creation of a collection of records related to JFK's assassination at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and the establishment of the

Assassination Records Review Board (ARRB), an independent agency tasked with overseeing the identification and review of assassination-related records.[8] The JFK Records Act emphasized that these records "should carry a presumption of immediate disclosure" and that all should be made available twenty-five years after enactment unless the President discerns "an identifiable harm to the military defense, intelligence operations, law enforcement, or conduct of foreign relations" that "outweighs the public interest in disclosure."[9]

The twenty-fifth anniversary of the JFK Records Act's enactment came in 2017 during President Trump's first term, but a blanket declassification did not come immediately. Instead, he invited agencies to recommend records for continued postponement of declassification, ultimately agreeing to keep some records classified and ordering their continued review over the next three years.[10] The COVID-19 pandemic, however, heavily impacted NARA's ability to coordinate with federal agencies to review the remaining classified records, prompting President Biden to further postpone a comprehensive release in October 2021.[11] Reviews continued and more documents continued to be released, but some records remained restricted.[12] By June 2023 99 percent of the JFK assassination records were made available to the public, with "4,684 documents remain[ing] withheld in whole or in part."[13]

Donald Trump was re-elected in 2024. Soon after his inauguration he issued EO 14176, which triggered the declassification of all remaining JFK assassination records and ordered the immediate declassification of all records pertaining to RFK and MLK Jr. As of March 18, 2025, "all records previously withheld for classification that are part of the President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection are released."[14]

To better understand the unique context and impact of the JFK Records Act, we may compare it to other recent federal declassification and transparency-building initiatives. Below, I contrast the JFK Records Act with President Bill Clinton's (hereafter Clinton) Executive Order 12958 and President Barak Obama's (hereafter Obama) Argentina Declassification Project.

EO 12958, signed by Clinton April 17, 1995, aimed to overhaul the systemic management of all classified information across federal agencies. It mandated the automatic declassification of records twenty-five years or older unless they qualified for exemption under national security criteria. It also emphasized agency accountability and public access, establishing the Information Security Oversight Office (ISOO) and the Interagency Security Classification Appeals Panel (ISCAP) to oversee implementation.[15] Whereas the JFK Records Act sought to restore public trust in response to popular skepticism and conspiracy theories surrounding a single event, EO 12958 represented an attempt to institutionalize informational transparency across the federal government. Although it was amended and eventually fully replaced by subsequent administrations, this EO laid a foundation for large-scale archival releases and further developments in classification policy.[16]

The Argentina Declassification Project was an executive declassification initiative grounded in foreign policy and human rights objectives. Announced by Obama during a 2016 visit to Buenos Aires, the project sought to assist Argentina's reckoning with its 1976–1983 military dictatorship, during which thousands of citizens were "disappeared" or killed. Unlike the JFK Records Act, this effort was prompted not by domestic political pressure but by international diplomacy and moral responsibility; it is among the first uses of the foreign policy tool known popularly as "declassification diplomacy."[17] Managed by the National Security Council (NSC) and Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), the project coordinated the release of almost 50,000 pages across roughly sixteen federal agencies, including the CIA, State Department, and Department of Defense. These documents have played a crucial role in "hold[ing] accountable those responsible for human rights abuses" in Argentina.[18]

Each of these efforts illustrates different motivations for and implementations of declassification policy (see Table 1 for a comparative summary of these policies). The JFK Records Act sought to address a domestic lack of public trust surrounding a singular event. It was not motivated by external relations and had minimal institutional impact. Conversely, Clinton's EO 12958 sought to broadly impose a more comprehensive administrative vision of transparency, aiming to embed openness within the bureaucratic mechanisms of classification itself. The Argentina Declassification Project demonstrates the strategic use of declassification as an instrument of diplomacy and historical justice, achieving tangible, wide-reaching impacts abroad. Collectively, these cases underscore that declassification as policy is a deeply political act, one that can be leveraged to serve various purposes and can have varying degrees of impact. With this in mind, we can now better understand the motivations and significance of Trump's EO 14176.

Understanding EO 14176 and the (Re-) Growth of a Conspiracy-Minded American Public

According to Michael Butter, Donald Trump has reshaped the role and status of conspiracy theories in American political culture. Conspiracy theories, which had once been widely accepted in US public and political discourse, became stigmatized in the public sphere after the 1950s due to social-scientific development and media critique.[19] While conspiracism never truly left fringe subcultures, the rise of the internet enabled these theories to

Category	JFK Records Act (1992)	E.O. 12958 (1995)	Argentina Declassification Project (2016–2019)
Type	Congressional legislation	Executive Order	Executive-led initiative
Initiating President	George H. W. Bush (signed)	Bill Clinton	Barack Obama (initiated), concluded under Donald Trump
Motivation	Public pressure and distrust after *JFK* film	Reform of classification/declassification bureaucracy	Human rights and diplomacy with Argentina
Primary Focus	JFK assassination records	System-wide declassification of 25+ year-old records	U.S. policy during Argentina's military dictatorship
Oversight Mechanism	ARRB	ISOO; ISCAP	NSC, ODNI (no independent body)
Legal Mandate	Yes – Congressional statute; executive order 14176 concluded	Yes – executive order	No – voluntary executive action
Audience/Stakeholders	U.S. public, media, conspiracy theorists	Federal agencies, archivists, transparency advocates	Argentine government, human rights groups, historians
Impact	Mixed – reinforced some public distrust due to ongoing delays	Institutional – reformed declassification norms	Positive – aided investigations, praised internationally
Legacy	Symbol of transparency struggles in U.S. democracy	Foundation for future executive transparency policies	Model of declassification as diplomatic/humanitarian tool

Table 1. Comparative Summary Table of Recent US Declassification Initiatives: JFK Records Act, Argentina Declassification Project, and EO 12958.

re-emerge visibly and widely in online spaces. Trump's embrace of conspiratorial rhetoric in 2011 regarding Obama's citizenship and eligibility for the presidency contributed to bringing conspiracist ideas back into the political mainstream, especially within the Republican Party and its media ecosystem.[20]

During his 2016 campaign, Trump used conspiracy theories strategically. He often merely suggested, but did not fully endorse, conspiracy theories—e.g., prefacing his statements with "a lot of people are saying…"—to appeal both to conspiracy-believing and more moderate voters.[21] His shift to more explicit conspiracist messaging, such as accusing Hillary Clinton of collusion with global elites, intensified as the campaign progressed. While Trump returned to deploying conspiracism more cautiously once in office, he had nevertheless positioned himself as unafraid to engage with conspiracist discourse. After his 2020 defeat, Trump's rhetoric escalated. Failing to prove electoral fraud in practically every legitimate arena, Trump leaned into promoting his conspiracy theories, convincing more than 40% of the American public that Biden was an illegitimate president.[22] This strategy culminated in the Capitol riots on January 6, 2021, at

which point, Butter argues, conspiracy theory moved from the fringe to the center of Trump's political movement.[23]

Butter concludes that conspiracy theories have become foundational to the modern Republican party, shifting from marginal discourse to a central political tool. The party's increasing embrace of this conspiracist thinking illustrates a fragmentation of American political discourse, a bifurcation of "publics" in which one side has normalized conspiracism and the other continues to stigmatize it. Butter suggests that this fragmentation poses a growing threat to democratic institutions, as it "makes meaningful public debate… impossible." Moreover, conspiracist rhetoric regarding election interference has motivated policies that are "allegedly meant to make voting securer but are in effect making it more difficult for groups that tend to support the Democrats, most notably people of color."[24]

Seen in this light, Executive Order 14176 marks a significant departure from earlier declassification efforts, not only in scope but also in rhetorical strategy and political function. While the JFK Records Act was a response to public pressure and the Clinton and Obama-era initiatives pursued institutional reform and

diplomatic goodwill, EO 14176 operates within a conspiracist political logic that transforms the transparency-building mechanism of declassification into a symbolic gesture. It demonstrates how informational processes are currently being deployed to appeal to a conspiracy-minded constituency.

Beyond merely carrying out the JFK Records Act, which was legislatively mandated and focused narrowly on a single historical event, EO 14176 unilaterally expands its scope to include the assassinations of RFK and MLK, events not previously subject to comprehensive federal declassification frameworks. This expansion is politically significant. All three assassinations are touchstones in American conspiracist discourse. By grouping them together, the order signals solidarity with the conspiracy-believing public, offering what appears to be long-denied validation of their suspicions that multiple parties were involved in these figures' assassinations and/or in deliberate "cover-ups" by government agencies. The timing of the order—signed just days after Trump's second inauguration—further supports this interpretation. Whereas Trump deferred full declassification of JFK files during his first term, his renewed urgency to do so in 2025 suggests that transparency is no longer a technocratic concern but rather a campaign promise fulfilled, a move to re-engage a base energized by distrust of a "deep state."

In this way, EO 14176 mirrors the symbolic function of the JFK Records Act while recontextualizing it within the post-2020 conspiracist mainstream Butter described. If the JFK Records Act tried to restore public trust, Trump's order instead exploits distrust. This instrumentalization is especially clear in the language of the order itself, which frames declassification both as a bureaucratic duty and as a reckoning with hidden truths. I argue that this points to a critical shift; whereas earlier declassification efforts were aimed at producing accountability (whether public, institutional, or international), Trump's order aims chiefly to affirm conspiracist belief, whether accurate or not. Thus, the information contained within the declassified documents matters little. Rather, the very act of disclosure is the proof, a signal that there was always something hidden, even if the documents released ultimately reveal little that is new.[25] In this sense, EO 14176 represents what we might call a "populist declassification," one in which pre-existing belief or suspicion motivates and is reinforced by the disclosure.

Ultimately, Trump's EO 14176 transforms the bureaucratic logic of declassification into a populist tool of ideological alignment. It validates conspiracism not by proving it, but by mimicking its worldview—that the truth is always just out of reach and only accessible through the intervention of a maverick leader. In doing so, it marks a profound shift in the function of US transparency policy from a mode of governance to a mode of political storytelling and manipulation.

Conclusion: Broader Implications of and Resistance to Institutionalized Conspiracism

To be sure, it is a good thing that the American public has access to the JFK assassination records; generally, the more information that is available to everyday Americans about the history and activities of their governing bodies, the better. However, in this paper I have argued that President Trump's declassification of the JFK records supports Butter's hypothesis of a fragmented American public sphere, in which one side embraces conspiracist logic and the other continues to stigmatize it. Butter recognizes that politicians who, and policies which, embrace the logic of conspiracy have succeeded in the political arena and gained decision-making power but asserts that, as of 2022, it is "impossible to say which of these publics is in the hegemonic position."[26] At a minimum, with the 2024 reelection of Trump, who won both the electoral and the popular vote, EO 14176 demonstrates that conspiratorial thinking has thoroughly taken root in American governmental institutions.

Just six months into his second term, this conspiracism has been a blessing and a curse for the Trump administration. It has served both as a tool for developing and promoting policies as well as a catalyst for controversy. For instance, Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who has spread long-debunked claims that vaccines cause autism, recently proposed a plan to implement a registry of Americans with autism, vowing to find a "cause" of autism by September 2025.[27] Conversely, President Trump has recently faced backlash from his own base of support due to newly uncovered information regarding his relationship with the financier and child sex offender Jeffery Epstein, whose activity and death have been the subject of numerous conspiracy theories. Although Trump had signaled support for declassifying Epstein-related information, more commonly known as the Epstein Files, before taking office, he has since expressed frustration over continued media attention to the case, and to his alleged involvement, despite a July 2025 Department of Justice memo stating that no incriminating "client list" exists and that no further disclosure was warranted.[28] This controversy is ongoing, but the sharp response it has engendered from Trump's supporters certainly demonstrates the volatility of conspiracism as a political tool, if not its ineffectiveness (which remains to be seen).

With an eye toward combatting the spread of public conspiracism and preserving institutional trust, Murty and Green suggest utilizing AI, machine learning, and other technological innovations in combination with human fact-checkers to detect, analyze, and warn against disinformation on the internet. They also encourage social media platforms to implement

disinformation policies and recommend governmental regulations to keep these platforms accountable.[29] However, I speculate that it may be too late for these large-scale strategies to be implemented and/or to be effective. As conspiratorial thinking continues to embed itself in media and governmental policy, we must contend with the fact that conspiracism is now a mainstream form of discourse.

More research must be done on how to contend with conspiratorial thinking in this rapidly evolving political climate, but I will conclude with some potential strategies. First, as traditional knowledge-building methods are de-emphasized in promoting federal policy, lawmakers and media outlets should consider focusing less on the rhetoric or even the facts with which conspiracist-motivated policies are presented and should instead emphasize to their audiences the concrete consequences such policies would bring about. Second, building off Murty and Green, community engagement through media literacy and critical thinking programs at local institutions such as public libraries could offer opportunities both to educate and to foster connection among diverse constituents in an increasingly fragmented political landscape.[30] Finally, and perhaps most simply, we as individuals should continue to engage in healthy discussion and to foster relationships with our immediate connections, such as family, friends, and communities—and especially those who think differently than we do.[31] Achieving mutual understanding and addressing conspiracism from the bottom up may be a strong first step toward healing a fragmented public.

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Review

Preserving Government Information: Past, Present, and Future. Jacobs, J.A. and Jacobs J.R. San Diego: FreeGovInfo Press, 2025. 420 pgs. https://freegovinfo.info/PGI/

In *Preserving Government Information*, Jim Jacobs and James Jacobs (both veteran GODORT supporters and established librarians) pour literally decades of work, experience, knowledge, and collaboration into 400 pages. The book is open access, licensed under CC BY-NC-SA. That means anyone can download and use this book for free—though those in the trenches of digital government information should consider purchasing the paperback version.

Preserving Government Information (hereafter *Preserving*) is a full-scale rundown of the preservation of digital materials from the federal government. This book is salient and scary in our contemporary environment where digital government information is being consciously deleted at worst and aggressively deprioritized at best, whether that happens quickly and quietly or loudly and proudly. While many librarians and archivists touch pieces of government information regularly, this book proceeds to classify all of that used information into categories which we can, if not neatly, locate within other categories, providing a web of materials that intersect and overlap while explaining their relevance in the same swoop. This book reads like a white paper on the ever-encompassing topic of government information; one could read it from beginning to end as a student or new to the topic entirely or piecemeal the portions for the repository librarian or the GPO enthusiast.

Split into four major parts, *Preserving* lays out the context of government information and how it can be parsed into workable categories, necessarily so, for the librarian to understand where their specific work fits in the framework. Part 1 attempts to define the landscape of government information. Part 2 places a premium on existing laws and policies that govern the current preservation of federal government information while also looking at the government's publishing wing, much altered in the digital format world. Parts 3 and 4 lay out the current preservation infrastructures and make a case for a new one altogether with an open framework. Parts 1 and 2 are interesting for everybody, a contextual rundown of the government information field. These parts run together at times and have no real clear starting point. Parts 3 and 4 are for those more deeply interested or invested in government information, though even here language and technical jargon are digestible.

Preserving roots the need for digital preservation in the print era when there were three major justifications for preservation: the importance of an informed citizenry, the value of government information and preservation as a "principle." With this framework as a foreground, its easy to trace longstanding problems in digital preservation to the fact that attempts have largely been trying to place a square peg in a round hole—aka, use paper standards for a digitally dominated field. Building off what was once considered preservation, *Preserving* analyzes the way we've left some efficiencies behind, created new ones, and had to adapt to the digital landscape with federal entities that have historically tolerated the function and form of information preservation. An updated version that reflects the landscape after Trump's second presidency would be a valuable follow-up to this excellent book.

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