Chapter Twenty-five

Federal and State Government Web Sites for Children and Adolescents

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Federal and state government Web sites directed at children and adolescents are numerous and vary greatly in content and quality. This chapter focuses on helping education librarians and librarians working with kindergarten through middle school students identify appropriate government sites. Concepts to keep in mind when searching and methods and resources to use for locating sites are presented. Criteria for evaluating sites are provided.

Background
Many Internet sites at both the federal and state levels of government are treasures awaiting discovery. Sites may offer information and activities for children and adolescents such as tours, games, puzzles, jokes, coloring pages, and more. The sites may include graphics and interactive features, photographs, and other digitized primary documents from archives and historical societies. They can be very versatile, serving several age ranges and educational levels, and may include sections directed at parents or teachers to aid in the use of the material.

The most significant document addressing Internet-related government resources for the younger user came at the federal level with President William J. Clinton’s
Memorandum on Expanding Access to Internet-based Educational Resources for Children, Teachers, and Parents, which directed the heads of executive departments and agencies to “determine what resources you can make available that would enrich the Internet as a tool for teaching and learning, and produce and make available a new or expanded version of your service” (National Archives and Records Administration 1998, 460).

In response, departments; independent and quasi-official agencies, boards, commissions, and committees; and other federal government entities with a Web presence began adding information to their sites to make their mission more comprehensible and accessible to children and adolescent viewers. Although state governments were not directly impacted by the president’s memo, each of the fifty states has its own corresponding departments, agencies, and commissions. Many have Internet resources of value and interest to children and adolescents and the librarians working with them.

Instead of an annotated list of government sites, this chapter provides education librarians and librarians working with kindergarten through middle school students with basic concepts to bear in mind when searching for appropriate government sites. The chapter includes seven methods for finding sites and provides examples for each method.

Librarians seeking information on individual sites have numerous excellent lists to choose from. For a comprehensive discussion of individual sites, Andriot’s (1999) Uncle Sam’s K-12 Web: Government Internet Resources for Educators, Students, and Parents is the definitive work in this area. More recent, but less comprehensive, periodical articles such as Elhami’s (2000) “Kids’ Presence on Government Sites” in School Library Media Activities Monthly provide lists and short descriptions of individual sites.

The three branches of the federal government serve as both a good example of the variety of resources available and as a demonstration of how the government’s complexity impacts the identification of resources for the kindergarten through eight-grade Web user. Of the three branches, only the executive branch offers an easily seen link from its main page to information written specifically for elementary and middle school children. In the legislative branch, the House of Representatives has a site directed at younger users, but it is not readily accessible via their main pages. The Senate’s main page includes a section that would be of particular interest to high school students, but it is not specifically written with younger readers in mind. The judicial branch’s (Supreme Court) site’s main page is directed at the adult user. High school students would find information for reports here, but the information is not written specifically at their level.

This small sample of inspected government sites indicates that no standard format is in place at the federal level to guide departments and agencies. Add to this the unique structure of each of the fifty states, and it becomes apparent that the identification of
appropriate and useful federal and state sites for the younger user is not a quick, straightforward process for either the user or the librarian attempting to help. The concepts and methods for seeking federal and state government sites are based on lessons learned over the authors' combined total of forty years of assisting library patrons in finding government information. Sites are of high quality and easy to use, and offer a range of approaches to finding information from state and federal agencies.

**Concepts for Finding Government Information**

Government information is structured according to the organization of government agencies, and some understanding of that organization is essential to finding government-produced information. Agencies publish information about what they do. The reason the agency was created and its current mission determine the content of its publications. Agency leadership, culture, and self-concept determine how the agency views its responsibilities to keep the American public informed. Searching for federal or state government information for children starts not with the usual subject search but, rather, with an analysis of which government agency is most likely to publish information about a topic.

At the federal level, the Clinton-era mandate to provide agency information for children via the Internet has been interpreted and implemented by agencies in various ways and with varying degrees of success because of the above factors. The fifty states have developed their Web presence in fifty individual fashions.

**Methods of Finding Federal and State Government Information for Children**

**Know the Responsible Agency**

This approach is useful for older children and adolescents. Younger children would not have the necessary knowledge but could use one of the "aggregator" sites below. Use a search engine and common sense to find the agency responsible for the topic: agriculture, defense, justice, labor, transportation.

**Use Sites Listing Government Agencies**

**LSU Libraries Federal Agencies Directory**

One of the best and easiest to use for federal-level site searching is Louisiana State University's LSU Libraries Federal Agencies Directory. It is a straightforward list of executive, judicial, legislative, and independent agencies.
URL: http://www.lib.lsu.edu/gov/fedgov.html.

**EROD State Search**

At the state level the Education Resources Organization Directory [EROD] lists many
state educational sites. All state sites can be connected at this central point on the Web.
URL: http://wdcrwrobcolp01.cd.gov/Programs/EROD/.

Use a Site Indexed by Agency Name and Subject
Federal Government Resources on the Web
University of Michigan, Documents Center
This site includes agency Web site directories, lists by branch of government, and sites by broad subjects. A very detailed subject index provides further access. Google’s Uncle Sam is one of the links on the front screen.
URL: http://www.lib.umich.edu/govdocs/federal.html.

Use Gateways to Government Sites for Children
Ben’s Guide
Government Printing Office
This site contains four sections corresponding to grade level: K–2, 3–5, 6–8, and 9–12. The “Parents/Teachers” section has government sites for children by subject and by agency.
URL: http://bensguide.gpo.gov.

First Gov for Kids. Children’s sites are arranged by the Federal Citizen Information Center in clearly labeled lists: government sites, organization sites, commercial sites.
URL: http://www.kids.gov

Afterschool.gov
General Services Administration, The Interagency Executive Oversite Committee
Children selected the sites as the best in the government. At the time of URL checking (April, 2006), the following message was posted on the site: “Afterschool.gov is unavailable while it is being updated. Please check back in the coming months for a site with new information and resources. “
URL: http://www.afterschool.gov/

Kids’ Page-Fedstats
This site lists federal statistical agencies with special Web pages for K–12 students.
Use General Governmentwide Search Engines and Directories

FirstGov
General Services Administration
Users can search millions of Web pages from federal and state government agencies. URL: http://www.firstgov.gov.

FedWorld
National Technical Information Service
Users can search government sites; links to subject-based portals, and gateways. URL: http://www.fedworld.gov.

Meta-indexes for State and Local Government Information

Library of Congress
URL: http://www.loc.gov/rr/news/stategov/stategov.html

State and Local Government on the Net
Piper Resources
State, counties, cities
URL: http://www.statelocalgov.net/index.cfm.

Go to Known Agency Sites

GPO Access: Browse Topics
The University of Central Oklahoma in partnership with the Government Printing Office.
This site offers subject pathfinders to federal Web sites covering education, teaching, audiovisual information, childhood and adolescence. URL: http://www.library.okstate.edu/govdocs/browsetopics/.

The Educator’s Reference Desk
Information Institute of Syracuse University
More than 3,000 resources including government and private Internet sites. Librarians are connecting their expert files to the site for sharing across the nation. URL: http://www.eduref.org/.

An example of a state-specific site is:

Unicam Kids: Nebraska Legislature’s Web Site for Kids
URL: http://www.unicam.state.ne.us/kids/index.htm.
Use Commercial Search Engines and Directories

Google’s Uncle Sam

Users can search sites with “.gov” and “.mil” host name endings.
URL: http://www.google.com/undesam/

Evaluating Sites

As with the rest of the Web, federal and state government Web pages meant for use by children and adolescents are not immune to the problems encountered when viewing other resources. Quality, content, and updating vary greatly from site to site, agency to agency, and state to state. Librarians helping younger users and teachers will want to employ the same selection and evaluation criteria used with other Web resources. The best government sites include a main screen that explains the mission of the agency and the purpose of the site. The information and activities are grouped by identifiable age levels and help the user develop an understanding and appreciation of the agency’s mission. Numerous evaluation resources are available on the Web and in print. The bibliography at the end of this chapter provides a place to start.

Conclusion

State and federal government sites are as varied in content, quality, and value as the rest of the Internet. However, in contrast to much of the rest of the Web, these sites are relatively stable and can be relied on to have the child’s best interests at heart—priceless features as the world of information continues to expand and change.

References


Bibliography


Available online from http://www.ala.org/gwstemplate.cfm?section=greatwebsites&template=/cfapps/gws/default.cfm (Retrieved April 18, 2006.)


*All URLs are current as of April 18, 2006.*