November 14, 2017

Laurence Brewer
U.S. Chief Records Officer
National Archives and Records Administration
700 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20408

Re: Improving Management of Federal Web Records

Dear Mr. Brewer,

On behalf of the undersigned organizations concerned with government transparency, we encourage the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) to update its Guidance on Managing Web Records\(^1\) and take other actions in order to better protect the public’s access to government information. In light of recent controversies regarding changes to federal website content, we believe that updated guidance from NARA at this time could promote agency compliance with the Federal Records Act (FRA) and increase public confidence that government records are being properly managed.

Thank you for your leadership in initiating a review of the guidance. We appreciated the opportunity to meet with you and your team recently to discuss our ideas for improving the guidance. To assist in your review, we offer the following recommendations:

1. Issue clear policy guidance on agency responsibilities
2. Manage web records in line with their value
3. Emphasize managing web records for public access
4. Modernize approach to “snapshots” and web archiving
5. Increase transparency of records scheduling

**1. Issue clear policy guidance on agency responsibilities**

NARA’s 2005 guidance is 28 pages long. We believe that more succinct policy guidance on agencies’ responsibilities would better promote agency compliance. We suggest that NARA issue shorter updated guidance focusing on agency responsibilities.\(^2\) Additional technical details and

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\(^2\) One option for the format of guidance would be as a NARA Bulletin; see [https://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/bulletins](https://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/bulletins).
practical suggestions, such as selected examples of approved schedules for web records, could
be included in attachments to the guidance.

In addition to guidance, we encourage NARA to update its records management regulations to
more clearly explain agencies’ essential responsibilities for managing web records. Currently,
NARA’s records management regulations include few references to web records.\(^3\) By comparison,
the regulations contain an entire part dedicated to microform records.\(^4\) Given the ways that web
records are distinct from other types of records, we believe it would be appropriate to discuss
web records more thoroughly in the regulations. Even if NARA updates its guidance, regulations
have greater visibility and may carry greater weight with agencies than guidance. Updated
regulations could reinforce agency compliance and increase public understanding.

2. **Manage web records in line with their value**

We believe that NARA’s approach to web records should recognize the significant administrative,
legal, research, or other value that Federal web content may have.\(^5\) NARA’s updated guidance
should explain to agencies how to consider this value. Additionally, we encourage NARA to review
its appraisal policy to ensure this value is appropriately considered in records scheduling.

In current practice, Federal websites are often the primary access point for information needed
for administrative purposes by agency employees. For documents such as agency guidance, the
record on a Federal website may be considered the authoritative version. If these records are not
properly managed, and any changes to access carefully considered and effectively
communicated, then agency activities are likely to be disrupted.

Furthermore, the contents of Federal websites are considered primary sources for many research
purposes. Federal websites often document historically significant events and activities. In some
cases, even the website itself may be considered historically significant: for instance, imagine
future historians attempting to research the impacts of healthcare reform without being able to
access some record of Healthcare.gov.

Therefore, we believe that NARA’s guidance and appraisal policy should ensure access to web
records for a sufficient length of time, consistent with their value.

3. **Emphasize managing web records for public access**

We recommend that the updated guidance place greater emphasis on the relationship between
records management and public access to Federal web content. As noted above, changes in

\(^3\) See 36 C.F.R. § 1225.22(h)(3), 36 C.F.R. § 1235.48(e), and 36 C.F.R. § 1235.50(e).
\(^4\) Part 1238 of title 36.
\(^5\) See 44 U.S. Code § 3303(1).
access to web records can negatively impact important Federal and non-Federal activities. The
guidance or attachments should suggest practical considerations when an agency is considering
significant changes to web content. For instance, the guidance should advise agencies on how to
communicate about changes\(^6\) in order to minimize public confusion\(^7\) (such as through press
releases, social media, notice on the website itself, or other means). In addition, the guidance
should advise agencies how to indicate alternative methods for accessing the record (such as
links to publicly available web archives or information on how to make a Freedom of Information
Act request).

4. Modernize approach to “snapshots” and web archiving

We recommend that the updated guidance modernize its approach to Federal web archiving and
“snapshots” of web content. Because certain web records are likely to change over time, it is
important that NARA provide agencies with a practical approach to ensure that valuable records
are not lost.

We suggest that the guidance should more clearly explain when agencies should take snapshots
of web content. Snapshots should be taken, at minimum, before any significant changes to
content. The guidance or attachments should advise agencies how to identify significant changes,
such as by classifying the type and magnitude of change\(^8\) and instructing agencies what
subsequent actions should be taken. In addition, the guidance should advise how to anticipate
when significant changes are likely (such as with changes in presidential administration, agency
leadership, law or regulation, program operations, etc.).

In addition, the guidance or attachments should provide technical advice to facilitate effective
snapshots and web archiving. For instance, the guidance should identify technical obstacles (such as
robots.txt files) that could inhibit the agency from taking an authentic snapshot or interfere
with other Federal web archiving activities. The guidance might also address common
technologies, such as version control, and explain whether and how they can be used for records
management.

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\(^6\) Cf. 44 U.S.C. § 3506(d)(3) (directing agencies to “provide adequate notice when initiating, substantially modifying,
or terminating significant information dissemination products”).

\(^7\) For an example of website change generating public confusion, see Toly Rinberg and Andrew Bergman, “Changes
to USGS website highlight the importance of search for public access,” Sunlight Foundation, Sep. 22, 2017,
available at https://sunlightfoundation.com/2017/09/22/changes-to-usgs-website-highlight-the-importance-of-
search-for-public-access/.

\(^8\) See e.g., Toly Rinberg and Andrew Bergman, “How to classify changes to government websites,” Sunlight
When agencies or NARA hold archived web records that may be of interest to the public, we encourage them to make the archives publicly available online.

While primary responsibility to manage web records under the Federal Records Act lies with agencies, we believe that web archiving activities outside the agency also play important roles. Non-agency web archiving, such as by the Federal Web Archiving Working Group or the private Internet Archive, can improve access, particularly since most agency records are not permanent. The guidance should advise agencies how to cooperate with archiving of publicly-accessible web content. Additionally, we encourage NARA to explore whether it could offer technical services to promote consistent and cost-effective management of web records across agencies.

5. Increase transparency of records scheduling

We believe that confusion about changes in access to Federal web content is exacerbated by the public’s lack of familiarity with the Federal Records Act and records schedules in particular. As a key step to increase transparency of records scheduling, we encourage NARA, when publishing notice of proposed records schedules in the Federal Register, to post the proposed schedules and associated appraisal memos online. NARA should post these supporting materials on its website or a Regulations.gov docket and link to the materials from the Federal Register notice. In addition to increasing transparency, this change in practice would reduce the need for NARA to respond to individual requests for these documents.

Thank you for considering our views on this important matter. If we can provide any additional information or assistance, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

Gavin Baker
Assistant Director of Government Relations
American Library Association

Andrew Bergman
Fellow

Alexander B. Howard
Deputy Director
Sunlight Foundation

Lisa Rosenberg
Executive Director
Open The Government

Toly Rinberg
Fellow
Sunlight Foundation