



## “Once and Forever” Documents Librarians

Cass Hartnett

The past few months have seen major news developments: a new presidential administration, an economy in crisis, library budgets slashed, and change in the air. In our professional world, a new sense of openness, transparency, and progress balances out some of the challenges. GPO’s FDsys debuted to positive reviews. GODORT’s meetings at ALA Midwinter 2009 ventured into new territory with a program on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Excellent talks by three different speakers convinced us that libraries, and specifically government information specialists, have a role in collecting NGO literature.<sup>1</sup> GODORT helped promote the Federal Armed Services Libraries Round Table’s “Libraries in Tough Economic Times” summit in March. The Free Government Information (FGI) blog, unaffiliated with GODORT but stocked heavily with our members and friends, has been buzzing with content and talented guest bloggers: the former editor of *DttP*, John Shuler (University of Illinois at Chicago), published an engaging series of “Won’t Get Fooled Again” essays about the future of government information.<sup>2</sup> Literally, there has not been a dull day in the world of government information (blogs, classrooms, public libraries, discussion groups are all teeming with talk of government) in 2009. Lorna Aites, a University of Washington Libraries technician who typically has had little interest in government documents outside of work and “hadn’t read a newspaper for years, it was too depressing,” now watches presidential speeches online on the weekends and sends herself e-mail messages from home about government links to revisit at work.

Writing my final Chair’s Column is difficult. How can I summarize GODORT’s 2008–09 activities, or encapsulate how this experience has broadened my thinking profoundly? A quiet hallway at a professional conference might seem like a good setting for reflection, but I barely had time to think at the March 2009 ACRL national conference in Seattle. I kept running into academic library colleagues, most of who had past connections to government documents: there was Bob Schroeder (Portland State University, now an information literacy coordinator; he and I “did docs” in Detroit in the 1990s), Ann Miller (University of Oregon, now a metadata and digital projects librarian, GODORT Chair 2000–2001), Lindsay Johnston (University of Alberta, now a biological sciences librarian, previously government publications librarian and Chair of the Canadian Library Association’s Access to

Government Information Interest Group), and M. Elizabeth Cowell (once a gov docs and LOCKSS maven at Stanford and University of California, San Diego, now associate university librarian for public services at University of California, Santa Cruz). I saw Lori Ricigliano (University of Puget Sound), who balances depository coordination duties with her associate director role.

I ran into no fewer than ten librarians who were either former government publications graduate assistants at my department or who had taken the government documents class at our iSchool, all doing “non-documents” work, all vigorously nodding their heads when I asked them if their documents work was a helpful foundation in their current job. One of them, who graduated in 1999, even told me “. . . and I still find *DttP* so helpful.” Feedback I received from several of these folks was that the statistical, legislative, and historical nature of documents work helped build their skill set, as did the need to think jurisdictionally (in state, local, federal, international, and now nongovernmental terms).

The day before the conference, I spoke with Wendy Mann, education librarian at George Mason University, who still contributes to GODORT via the Notable Documents project. For the first fifteen years of Wendy’s career, she was a documents librarian at the University of Pittsburgh, where she worked with the esteemed Amy Knapp. In turn, Amy (assistant university librarian, University of Pittsburgh University Library System until 2008), had ties to the documents community, having taught Pitt’s Government Information Resources class as an adjunct professor and having written her dissertation on faculty use of online government resources.<sup>3</sup> (Sadly, Knapp succumbed to cancer last year at age 46.<sup>4</sup>) GODORT should nurture our connections to as many of these “once and forever” government documents colleagues as possible, especially now with the reality, and perhaps necessity, of virtual ALA participation. Clearly, these colleagues see the value of our specialization, and we can’t overstate the importance of keeping them aware of government information developments. So my charge to committees, task forces, and other GODORT groups is to reenvision the work of our organization into meaningful yet manageable participation—that will keep these people involved.

Those of us who attend conferences year after year develop a delusion that we “know everyone” in the field: it is an interesting, mildly intoxicating belief. It is also dead wrong. We get this heady feeling that if we could map out our connections

visually, we would form some kind of star cluster. Before we get enamored with ourselves, let's remember the dozens of ALA units with whom we will collaborate via the ALA Forum on the Future of Government Information. They are part of the cluster, too. Let's remember the libraries represented by those units, and all of those libraries' users. Add to that the millions of individual government information users worldwide, with or without online connections; they are our real universe. We've got to form a mental picture of this mega-set of all government information seekers, and keep it in our minds, especially if we want to stay relevant and work side by side with activists and pioneers reshaping access to government information all around us.

As the editorial team of this journal changes with the next issue (we owe a debt of gratitude to the outgoing team), I began looking back on the past six years of *DttP* and easily chose my favorite issue: Fall 2006 (vol. 34, no. 3). Five GODORT award winners (Reynolds, Linden, Sanders, York, and Mosley) smile out at us from the cover photo. Inside is a fantastic range of essays, including one of *DttP*'s catchiest projects so far: "Things I Wish I Knew about Documents, and Things I'm Glad I Know." Seven brief articles cover disciplines ranging from medicine, agriculture, education, data services, humanities, law, business, economics, and public safety. Librarians specializing in these areas tell how government resources impact their content areas, and what they still want to know.

The larger world has changed, in many ways and across many sectors. We are far from alone in feeling both invigorated and overwhelmed by the rapid changes confronting our profession. People who visit antique stores are now a fraction of those buying and selling antiques; professional critics see their book and movies reviews placed side by side with thousands of amateur reviews online; and my goodness, the millions of people who routinely seek government information are rarely

consulting librarians or libraries! And yet we still have a role. All those people are charged up by the same thing that we are: government information. Whenever they need serious and comprehensive searching, when they require general assistance, when they want to find collections of actual artifacts, or when they want to put data in a context, GODORT librarians need to be there online, via phone, and of course in person. I looked around on the bus this morning to see a lady poring over statistical printouts from King County Public Health, while the man sitting next to me read a book about the 1964 *Civil Rights Act* with the page open to a table tallying the number of yeas and nays votes in Congress (we know how to find those). The next seat over? A student reading a *Time* magazine article on taxes and a woman asleep with her State of Washington identification tag hanging outside of her bag. Government content is everywhere. So . . . how can we position GODORT's expertise, and GODORT members' willingness to learn and share, in as many places as possible?

## References

1. GODORT Update Midwinter 2009, [wikis.ala.org/godort/index.php/GODORT\\_Update\\_Midwinter\\_2009](http://wikis.ala.org/godort/index.php/GODORT_Update_Midwinter_2009).
2. Free Government Information (FGI), Shuler's blog, [freegovinfo.info/blog/160](http://freegovinfo.info/blog/160).
3. Amy Elizabeth Knapp, "An Examination of the Use of United States Government Documents on the World Wide Web by Social Sciences Faculty at Selected ARL Institutions," Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1999, in *Dissertations & Theses: Full Text* [database on-line], available from [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com) (publication number AAT 9957749).
4. Peter Hart, "Obituary: Amy E. Knapp," *University Times* (Pittsburgh, PA), 40, no. 20, June 12, 2008, [tinyurl.com/caldaj](http://tinyurl.com/caldaj).

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