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The Government Domain: A Handful of Classics

By Peggy Garvin, Published on October 31, 2009

Printer-Friendly Version

Every year, I surf as much of the federal web as I can to produce an updated directory of useful government information resources online, the *e-Government and Web Directory: U.S. Federal Government Online*. (The previous five editions of the book were titled the *United States Government Internet Manual*.) Over my six-plus years of tracking the federal web developments for the book -- through the post-9/11 scrubbing of numerous dotmil sites, the continuing conversion of government's printed publications to online-only, the massive Homeland Security reorganization, experiments with social media, and a change in presidential administrations -- I have found that federal web sites do not change as rapidly as people seem to think. The content on federal government websites is dynamic, constantly being refreshed and redesigned. However, the sites themselves, the ones that represent so much of the work of the federal government and are selected for inclusion in the book, are fairly stable. When there are changes, they tend to happen in a slow, piecemeal fashion. New standalone sites such as FinancialStability.gov or Investor.gov typically are linked from the sponsoring agency's website (Treasury and the Securities and Exchange Commission, respectively, for these examples) and so are not difficult to discover. New sites are also created when new agencies or commissions are created, but that process does not happen overnight. There are many challenges in locating U.S. government information, but rapid change is not one of them.

If you follow Internet search news, you know that many federal government sites are not well optimized for indexing and ranking by popular search engines. While some progress is being made in this area, government web databases are still a large part of what is called the Deep Web or "the UnGooglable". Government agencies publicize broadly relevant public sites such as Flu.gov, but they generally lack the funds or means to promote their resources in all of the ways commercial sites can. For these reasons, an understanding of the breadth and depth of the government web as well as the basic structure of the federal government can be much more important to research success than using general search engines or trying to keep up with diverse incremental changes.

How do you gain this understanding? You can start with the staples. In talking to professionals who are not *information* professionals, I have found that some standard government web resources are not as universally known as I had imagined. These are federal government resources that librarians know well and—if they're like me—tend to assume everyone knows. Everyone doesn't. Do the newbies a favor and clue them into a few old favorites:

The **AGRICOLA** database is found under the NAL Catalog section of the USDA National Agricultural Library website. An index to agricultural information, AGRICOLA has been available online via mainframe access since 1970. AGRICOLA is not just for agricultural scientists. The database includes information on popular marketing and policy topics, such as farmers markets and organic certification, along with more technical literature.

The **Catalog of U.S. Government Publications** (CGP) has its roots in the Printing Act of 1895. The Government Printing Office (GPO) describes it as "the finding tool for electronic and print publications from the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of the U.S. government." Like so many things in life, CGP is far from perfect; private companies produce competing products and your library may offer an alternative database. I use CGP to quickly find information on named government documents, to learn whether they are available online, and to link to them. Using CGP's advanced search, you can limit your search results to only publications available online if you like.

The **Energy Information Administration** was established in 1977 as the single federal government authority on energy data. EIA's website covers U.S. production, consumption, pricing, trade, and outlook statistics for a wide range of fuels. EIA also has international and state-level information. The agency has made an effort to make the website easy to navigate, so make it your first stop for energy data. (EIA just launched a consumer-level website called Energy Explained that, among other things, provides help in understanding fuel statistics. It is linked from the EIA home page.)

FedStats.gov has been online since 1997. The home page design has not changed since late 2000. Looks aside, this is an easy-to-navigate portal to the statistics reported by the agencies listed in the Office of Management and Budget's annual Statistical Programs of the United States Government.

Market Research Library, from the Commerce Department's U.S. Commercial Service, offers the popular Country Commercial Guide series. These reports describe the market for U.S. exports by country and by industry sector. In doing so, they provide insight into the economic trends and business regulatory structure in other countries. The Market Research Library links to another foreign market research staple, the **USDA Foreign Agricultural Service**.

National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS)**,** created in 1972, provides centralized access to information related to criminal justice and substance abuse published in government reports, specialized journals, and other sources. The site has a

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