

2016

# Of the People, by the People, for the People: Critical Pedagogy and Government Information

Melanie Maksin

*Yale University*, [melanie.maksin@yale.edu](mailto:melanie.maksin@yale.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/yul\\_staff](https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/yul_staff)



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Maksin, Melanie. "Of the People, by the People, for the People: Critical Pedagogy and Government Information." In Nicole Pagowsky and Kelly McElroy, eds., *Critical Library Pedagogy Handbook*, volume 1. Chicago: ALA, 2016.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Yale University Library at EliScholar – A Digital Platform for Scholarly Publishing at Yale. It has been accepted for inclusion in Library Staff Publications by an authorized administrator of EliScholar – A Digital Platform for Scholarly Publishing at Yale. For more information, please contact [elischolar@yale.edu](mailto:elischolar@yale.edu).



## CHAPTER 13\*

# Of the People, by the People, for the People

## Critical Pedagogy and Government Information

*Melanie Maksin*

### Introduction

Government documents articulate policies, assert priorities, and reveal—or endeavor to conceal—the movement of capital, ideology, and power. From declassified memos that lay bare the tension between security and transparency to demographic statistics that reflect changing conceptions of race, ethnicity, and language ability, government information is notable for its scope, variety, and sociopolitical intrigue.

Despite the richness and diversity of this fascinating, sometimes infuriating source material, library instruction in finding and interpreting government information can easily fall into a rut of processes and products. Librarians might rely on specialist resources and strategies that emphasize search and discovery or present the information produced by governments and intergovernmental organizations as ideologically neutral, decontextualized bits of bureaucracy. In their handbook *Fundamentals of Government Information: Mining, Finding, Evaluating, and Using Government Resources*, Eric J. Forte, Cassandra J. Hartnett, and Andrea Severson state, “Unlike other kinds of li-

---

\* This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (CC-BY 4.0).

brarians, documents librarians are all about where the information comes from.”<sup>1</sup> The tools we use to find government information, like the SuDocs classification system and specialized indexes and databases, organize government documents by issuing agency, and this system of organization tends to structure our search strategies. Forte, Hartnett, and Severson refer to this as “the Civics and Search approach,” in which a working knowledge of government branches, agencies, and departments and their respective responsibilities and publication processes is essential to productive searching.<sup>2</sup>

This model of government information, in which every action generates an information product, is expedient for search and retrieval, but as Sara Franks asserts regarding library instruction on the information cycle, it “reflects our own preconceptions of the process as something so established and so ingrained...that it takes on an apolitical, manifest and predetermined quality.”<sup>3</sup> To foster student engagement and critical reflection, we must break apart the government information cycle and illuminate the political and social realities that underpin the federal government’s actions and its documentation.

This chapter focuses on pedagogical frames and techniques that encourage student engagement and problematize the process-and-product model of government information. These strategies reflect four interconnected ideas, namely

- that government information is political,
- that access to government information is political,
- that government information has value both in scholarly contexts and in individuals’ daily lives, and
- that we can intervene in the production and dissemination of government information.

Government information instruction is rife with possibilities for critical thinking, constructivist learning, and even political and social transformation. Because the approaches that follow prioritize reflection and discussion over specialized resources and search strategies, even generalists and subject librarians who do not habitually teach government information might consider integrating these approaches into the classroom or one-on-one instruction. With the tools of critical pedagogy, we can recontextualize and repoliticize government information and empower students as scholars, as citizens, and as members of their communities.\*

---

\* While the examples that follow are related to United States federal government information, these concepts can apply, with some retooling, to other governments or intergovernmental organizations.

## Government Information Is Political

Every year since 1976, the U.S. Department of State has issued Country Reports on Human Rights Practices. These reports “cover internationally recognized individual, civil, political, and worker rights, as set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international agreements”<sup>4</sup> and help guide U.S. foreign policy and the allocation of foreign aid. If a researcher is interested in perspectives on human rights in China, the “Civics and Search” model of government information would probably lead them to the State Department’s report, which recounts official repression, coercion, corruption, and myriad human rights violations.<sup>5</sup> What this report does not reveal, however, is that since 1998, the Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China has issued an annual rebuttal to the State Department’s report on China that considers human rights conditions in the United States.<sup>6</sup> In a library workshop on human rights as seen through government and intergovernmental organization (IGO) information sources, the juxtaposition of the reports offers a striking encapsulation of the inherently political nature of government information.

An emphasis on finding government information can sometimes obscure questions of what to make of government information once we’ve found it. The questions of authority, point of view, and veracity that we encourage students to ask of other types of sources like websites or scholarly articles don’t always make their way into government information instruction. However, government information instruction provides an appropriate venue for nuanced conversations about these issues. As Karen Hogenboom notes, “Given the partisan nature of government and politics, these sources often contain clear examples that can give students a solid understanding of the concept of point of view, an understanding they can then apply in less obvious situations.”<sup>7</sup> Shari Laster also proposes a critical-pedagogy-inflected approach to presenting “government information as contextual,” instead of giving students the idea “that government information as a class or category is reliable and authoritative.”<sup>8</sup> Laster maintains that “the truth is more complicated—and honestly, more interesting.”<sup>9</sup>

A discussion of the authority and purpose or purposes of government information can become a classroom activity. In the aforementioned workshop on human rights and government information, students were given a selection of documents and asked to make notes on when a document was produced and by whom, the document’s intended audience, what purposes the document might serve, and what it tells us about ideas of human rights at that time and place. As they shared their findings, students heard their peers talk about feel-good brochures that resembled propaganda, detailed manuals for avoiding human rights violations in prisons, Congressional hearings on potential roles for the United States in the defense of human rights around

the world, and more. Ideas about authority, veracity, and purpose were hardly clear-cut; the same government produced self-congratulatory information about its human rights record while internally debating its own authority as a global human rights enforcer. Through close readings and discussion, students could recognize the points of view and politics at play in government information, without coming away from the session with the belief that all government information is biased and ideologically suspect or that all government information is innately reliable. Rather, they saw that savvy scholars and citizens can approach government information as they would any other source and work to unpack the assumptions and values that are part of the information's broader context.

## Access to Government Information Is Political

In library instruction, we might discuss information access in terms of economics. The ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* expresses the notion of information as a commodity and the recognition that “value may be wielded by powerful interests in ways that marginalize certain voices.”<sup>10</sup> Students have likely encountered publishers' websites that ask them to pay to download a journal article or news sites that are partially obscured by a pay wall. When a price tag is visible, the idea that economic privilege begets information privilege is readily graspable. While access to government information is not without an economic dimension, it is the political aspect of government information access that tells a more compelling story in the instruction classroom.

The federal government shutdown in October 2013 was a topsy-turvy moment for government information librarians. Many of the resources and strategies that had served us so well either failed us or vanished completely, as some federal agencies posted apologetic notices on their websites while other agencies' websites went dark.<sup>\*</sup> In a library session for a course on the Farm Bill and U.S. politics, the sudden disappearance of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's website hindered students' ability to locate the latest information on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), documentation that would easily have been at their fingertips before the shutdown. Workarounds like the Wayback Machine from the Internet Archive assisted with some research

---

\* For an overview of the impact of a government shutdown on agency websites, see Tom Lee, “What Happens to .gov in a Shutdown?” Sunlight Foundation Blog, September 30, 2013, <http://sunlightfoundation.com/blog/2013/09/30/what-happens-to-gov-in-a-shutdown>.

needs, but the loss was still acute. For contemporary government information, much of which is either born digital or electronic-only, a shuttered website is more than just an inconvenience; it impedes the ability of scholars and citizens to access needed resources and services. The government shutdown provided a reminder of the value of all those tangible documents shelved in depository libraries, as well as a high-profile example of the effects of politics (and political quagmire) on information access.

In government information instruction informed by critical pedagogy, we can challenge the idea that access to government information in the United States is an uncomplicated model for other countries and governments. Although it is true that citizens and scholars have greater access to *some* U.S. government information, there are limits, as well as constant challenges from those who would impose further restrictions in the name of security, efficiency, or cost savings. Major incidents like the release of State Department diplomatic cables by Wikileaks in 2010 or Edward Snowden's leak of National Security Administration (NSA) documents in 2013 highlight that even in an age of open government, total transparency is still a long way off. There are less glamorous cases as well, like repeated proposals to abolish the National Technical Information Service.<sup>†</sup>

Sharing these and other examples of government information access as an ideological battleground can encourage students to remain aware of the shifting contexts in which government information is produced, disseminated, and sometimes embargoed. This discussion has implications for search and discovery: if the information does exist, who may access it? These examples also help students connect their research with government information to contemporary political debates over the rights of individuals to know about their government's activities domestically and around the world.

## Government Information also has Relevance to our Daily Lives and Communities

In academic libraries, government information instruction often focuses on scholarly uses of government information. For example, documents like the Kerner Commission's *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* can serve as primary sources for a research paper on the urban riots of the 1960s and the "separate and unequal" societies fueled by racism, pover-

---

<sup>†</sup> Recent attacks on the NTIS include the Let Me Google That For You Act of 2014 (S. 2206, 113th Congress, 2014) and the Just Google It Act of 2015 (S. 1636, 114th Congress, 2015).

ty, and inadequate social services.<sup>11</sup> Contemporary government information, like unemployment statistics from the Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics or bills related to immigration making their way through the House or Senate, might be viewed through the lens of sociology, political science, or public policy research. The value of government information to scholars in a variety of fields is well worth emphasizing in library instruction—but so, too, is the relevance of government information to students’ lives. By sharing timely examples of government information and emphasizing resources and search strategies that have authentic applications for both academic and personal research, we can propose new relationships between students and government information that are not dependent upon coursework or research assignments.

Forte, Hartnett, and Severson suggest that “direct, rather than secondary, access to government information is the whole reason government information exists” and that “[one] of the most empowering aspects of understanding government information is the ability to conduct one’s own fact checking.”<sup>12</sup> In an instruction session, a librarian can encourage students to find a recent newspaper article or blog post that cites a government report or study, and then find the actual government document in order to evaluate claims and tease out journalists’ viewpoints. Or students involved in an event or social movement can compare official government accounts to their own experiences. How does the Department of Homeland Security’s dossier on Occupy Wall Street demonstrations around the country square with participants’ on-the-ground involvement?<sup>13</sup> These activities can make government information personal, relevant, and immediate.

The types of resources and search strategies we use can also help students see government information in a new light. For example, a tool like Capitol Words from the Sunlight Foundation, which presents visualizations of frequently used words in the *Congressional Record*, employs open data to show political rhetoric.\* Even promoting Google as a tool for finding contemporary government information can remove government documents from the realm of specialists and academics and couch government information instruction in a familiar resource. In the “Civics and Search” model of government information, librarians might focus on specialized resources like the *Catalog of Government Publications*; however, Google strategies like *site:* and *filetype:* searches are sometimes just as essential for locating government information, as well as being useful beyond the government information context.

---

\* A search for “Obamacare” versus a search for “Affordable Care Act” is one attention-grabbing example of differences in political language. Capitol Words website, Sunlight Foundation, accessed September 11, 2015, <http://capitolwords.org>.

## We Can Intervene in Government Information and Government Processes

To demonstrate the many uses of government information, librarians might emphasize points of intervention in government information and processes—that is, we can frame government information instruction in the context of participating in the production and dissemination of government information. Incorporating open government sites, social media, and Freedom of Information Act requests into instruction brings students into the flow of government information in potentially transformative ways. If critical pedagogy, as Lauren Smith asserts, helps individuals “develop the knowledge, skills, and sense of responsibility necessary to engage in a culture of questioning,”<sup>14</sup> these resources and strategies are valuable tools for political and social engagement.

Open government initiatives provide many opportunities for students to participate not just as consumers of government information, but as citizens and agents in government processes. For example, while average citizens have always been able to respond to proposed notices and rules published in the print and electronic *Federal Register*, submitting a comment was cumbersome, with requirements that varied from agency to agency. Now, Regulations.gov allows interested individuals to comment on proposed regulations with minimal hassle; users can post comments on a web form and even upload and attach supporting documentation. As Cass Hartnett maintains, “Regulations affect nearly every sector of our lives,” but the public can influence rulemaking, and “librarians should be evangelical on this point.”<sup>15</sup> Other tools for tracking government activity, like Scout from the Sunlight Foundation (for bills and regulations) and OpenSecrets from the Center for Responsive Politics (for campaign finance and analysis of lobbying and political influence), can also encourage students to keep up with government and politics.

Social media plays an increasingly prominent role in government and political discourse. By opening up the government information instruction classroom to these less formal channels of communication, we enable students to interact, in real time, with government agencies and representatives. The subscription database ProQuest Congressional now features a “Political News & Social Media” search that includes press releases, blogs, videos, Twitter, and Facebook; but students can also connect with politicians without a commercial vendor as an intermediary. Incorporating social media into instruction expands the scope of government information and sheds light on the personalities and perspectives that are rarely captured within official documents and publications.

Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and Mandatory Declassification Review (MDR) requests offer additional prospects for student engagement



with government information. By giving students the instruction and resources they need to make these requests, we help them understand yet another channel of government information that exists outside of depository libraries. Whether they seek the FBI's records on an activist group or the State Department's memos on its activities around the world, FOIA and declassification requests potentially allow students to access previously untapped sources while giving them firsthand experience in exercising their rights to information. The National Security Archive has produced a guide, *Effective FOIA Requesting for Everyone*, that elucidates the request process and is an invaluable reference for librarians who want to provide support for this aspect of government information research.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

Government information instruction, although it is often framed in terms of search and discovery, provides a fitting setting for approaches grounded in critical pedagogy. Both the instruction classroom and individual consultations offer opportunities for librarians—government information specialists, subject liaisons, and generalists alike—to engage students in dialogue, reflection, and inquiry related to the production and dissemination of government information. These discussions can restore government information to its political and social contexts while also encouraging students to participate in, or present informed opposition to, government activities and processes.

## Notes

1. Eric J. Forte, Cassandra J. Hartnett, and Andrea Sevetson, *Fundamentals of Government Information* (Chicago: Neal-Schuman, 2011), 25.
2. *Ibid.*, 27.
3. Sara Franks, "Grand Narratives and the Information Cycle in the Library Instruction Classroom," in *Critical Library Instruction*, ed. Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier (Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2010), 47.
4. "Human Rights Reports," U.S. Department of State, accessed September 11, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt>.
5. "China (Includes Tibet, Hong Kong, and Macau)," 2014 Human Rights Report, U.S. Department of State, accessed September 11, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/236644.pdf>.
6. "China Issues Report Attacking U.S. Human Rights Record," Reuters, *The Guardian*, June 25, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/26/china-report-attacks-us-human-rights-record>.
7. Karen Hogenboom, "Going Beyond .gov: Using Government Information to Teach Evaluation of Sources," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 5, no. 4 (October 2005): 458, doi:10.1353/pla.2005.0052.

8. Shari Laster, "Government Information and #critlib," *Free Government Information* (blog), July 21, 2015, <http://freegovinfo.info/node/10186>.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015, last updated February 9, 2015), <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework#value>.
11. U.S. National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, March 1, 1968* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968), 1.
12. Forte et al., *Fundamentals of Government Information*, 6.
13. "Occupy Wall Street," U.S. Department of Homeland Security, accessed September 11, 2015, <http://www.dhs.gov/publication/occupy-wall-street>.
14. Lauren Smith, "Towards a Model of Critical Information Literacy Instruction for the Development of Political Agency," *Journal of Information Literacy* 7, no. 2 (2013): 15, doi:10.11645/7.2.1809.
15. Cass Hartnett, "Government Regulations: Protective, Restrictive, and Influenced by the Public," *DttP: A Quarterly Journal of Government Information Practice and Perspective* 34 (2006): 29.
16. Kristin Adair and Catherine Nielsen, *Effective FOIA Requesting for Everyone: A National Security Archive Guide*, ed. Meredith Fuchs, Yvette M. Chin, Malcolm Byrne, and Tom Blanton (Washington, D.C.: National Security Archive, 2008), [http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/nsa/foia/foia\\_guide.html](http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/nsa/foia/foia_guide.html).

## Bibliography

- Adair, Kristin, and Catherine Nielsen. *Effective FOIA Requesting for Everyone: A National Security Archive Guide*. Edited by Meredith Fuchs, Yvette M. Chin, Malcolm Byrne, and Tom Blanton. Washington, D.C.: National Security Archive, 2008. [http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/nsa/foia/foia\\_guide.html](http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/nsa/foia/foia_guide.html).
- Association of College and Research Libraries. *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015, last updated February 9, 2015. <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>.
- Forte, Eric J., Cassandra J. Hartnett, and Andrea Severson. *Fundamentals of Government Information: Mining, Finding, Evaluating, and Using Government Resources*. Chicago: Neal-Schuman, 2011.
- Franks, Sara. "Grand Narratives and the Information Cycle in the Library Instruction Classroom." In *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods*. Edited by Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier, 43–54. Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2010.
- Hartnett, Cass. "Government Regulations: Protective, Restrictive, and Influenced by the Public." *DttP: A Quarterly Journal of Government Information Practice and Perspective* 34, no. 2 (2006): 29–33.
- Hogenboom, Karen. "Going Beyond .gov: Using Government Information to Teach Evaluation of Sources." *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 5, no. 4 (October 2005): 455–66. doi:10.1353/pla.2005.0052.

- Laster, Shari. "Government Information and #critlib." *Free Government Information* (blog), July 21, 2015. <http://freegovinfo.info/node/10186>.
- Lee, Tom. "What Happens to .gov in a Shutdown?" *Sunlight Foundation Blog*, September 30, 2013. <http://sunlightfoundation.com/blog/2013/09/30/what-happens-to-gov-in-a-shutdown>.
- Reuters. "China Issues Report Attacking U.S. Human Rights Record." *The Guardian*, June 25, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/26/china-report-attacks-us-human-rights-record>.
- Smith, Lauren. "Towards a Model of Critical Information Literacy Instruction for the Development of Political Agency." *Journal of Information Literacy* 7, no. 2 (2013): 15–32. doi:10.11645/7.2.1809.
- U.S. Department of Homeland Security. "Occupy Wall Street." Accessed September 11, 2015. <http://www.dhs.gov/publication/occupy-wall-street>.
- U.S. Department of State. "China (Includes Tibet, Hong Kong, and Macau)." 2014 Human Rights Report. Accessed September 11, 2015. <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/236644.pdf>.
- . "Human Rights Reports." Accessed September 11, 2015. <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt>.
- U.S. National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, March 1, 1968*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968.