

## News You Can Use:

### Contemporary SDI and Anticipatory Reference for Government Information

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**Summary:** Government information is becoming available to citizens more quickly than ever before due to electronic dissemination via the internet. Two projects that rapidly capture, organize, and publicize regionally relevant government information are examined: Government News for Montana and New Mexico News Plus. These news-based sites serve as tools for collection development and digital archiving, pro-active reference, content alerting services, information literacy, promotion, and outreach. Issues to consider and suggestions for the application of these services at other libraries are discussed.

Keywords: government documents, reference, digital preservation, SDI, blogs, RSS

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Depository librarians are accustomed to adapting to changes in the government. Agencies shift from department to department, series change in name and frequency, and policies on the type and format of government publications transform over time. With government agencies increasingly producing “born digital” information and using the internet as the first (if not only) means of disseminating those publications, government materials are available to the public more rapidly than ever before. Titles are uploaded for nearly instantaneous access instead of waiting weeks or months for a publication to be printed, cataloged, shipped, processed, and placed on a shelf.

As a result of this “speeding” of dissemination, librarians must find, and are finding, new ways to capture, organize, and highlight these intangible materials. The methods of showcasing new materials are digital updates of classic ideas. The “what’s new” feature on a depository website is a digital version of the “new books” shelf at many libraries. Further, a growing number of depositories are featuring current, regionally relevant publications via dedicated websites and weblogs. These websites are effectively the next generation of selective dissemination of information (SDI) and seek to inform readers of brand-new content of interest. The sites anticipate and answer reference queries, capture new content for local archiving, and serve as an educational tool for content providers, fellow librarians, students, and the public at large.

A profile of two websites, *Government News for Montana* and *New Mexico News Plus*, demonstrates the potential uses for and issues involved in such projects.<sup>1</sup>

## **Overview of the Projects**

### *Government News for Montana*

*Government News for Montana* is a weblog that features recently published government information with particular relevance to Montana. The site is designed to provide easy access to new reports , proactively answer potential reference questions, inform Montana readers of recent government news, and link to deeper information.

Documents featured on the blog predominantly come from federal and state government sources. Topics for posts are derived from reports in Montana and national newspapers, state news releases, and alerts from email subscriptions and RSS feeds. A typical post on the blog features a key paragraph of the referring article or press release, links to the cited report or bill, links to supporting materials, and a citation for (and often link to) the referring article. The site also has a weekly feature called “Resource Round-up” which offers links to a wider array of government reports that were published during the preceding week but not featured in news reports.

The site was launched in October 2004 using Blogger software and is hosted on Blogspot.com (the free web hosting service provided by Blogger). The software was selected because it allowed for frequent, simple updating, multiple contributors, automatic archiving, search capability, and an automatically generated RSS feed. Since Blogger is a free, web-based tool, it provided a low-risk means of trying a new content alerting service. Several government information librarians in Montana contribute to the *Government News for Montana* site in an effort to cover news of high interest in various parts of the state, and their contact information is readily visible on the blog. Including contact information for local experts raises awareness of available assistance offered by government information professionals.

### *New Mexico News Plus*

In New Mexico a different approach produces results similar to those of the Montana blog. Rather than highlighting a specific report or news article, *New Mexico News Plus* provides a snapshot of all local newspaper articles mentioning federal and state reports, legislation, statistics, or other items of government information. Begun in March 2004 at the New Mexico State Library, each weekday morning the Regional Depository Librarian scans the local newspapers of Santa Fe (*The Santa Fe New Mexican* and *Journal Santa Fe*) and Albuquerque (*Albuquerque Journal*) for government-related articles. These articles are then listed on the *New Mexico News Plus* website along with links to online government information sources corresponding to the article. If the mentioned document cannot be found, the librarian contacts the agency to determine if the referenced item is temporarily unavailable online or will not be posted electronically, and a note provides users with this additional information.

Beginning in September 2004, the Government Documents Librarian at New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, began adding news stories covering the southern part of the state using two local papers, the *Las Cruces Sun-News* and *El Paso Times*. While the *El Paso Times* is technically a Texas newspaper, many federal agencies headquartered in El Paso include New Mexico in their jurisdictions. Contributions are then emailed to the New Mexico State Library for inclusion on the website. While some overlap between papers exists, especially on items of national interest, the addition of local items mentioned in only one newspaper provides broader coverage and a more comprehensive view of governmental issues.

In addition to the website, the New Mexico State Library goes one step further through its Digital Archive Project. Using OCLC's Digital Archive web harvesting product, online resources identified through *New Mexico News Plus* are captured and ingested from the agency's

website. A copy is stored on the OCLC server and cataloged with a permanent PURL link.

These records are included in the State Library's online catalog as well as in OCLC.

## **Project Applications**

### **Proactive Reference Tool**

News-influenced sites serve as pro-active reference tools. Instead of waiting for information seekers to approach a librarian for assistance, the library can reach out to users and provide needed resources where information seekers routinely go. Similar examples of pro-active reference are evident in outpost reference services, website creation, content alerting tools, and virtual reference services.

Two questions need to be answered in order to provide effective proactive reference: what information are people looking for and where are they looking? The 2005 OCLC report on user perceptions of libraries provides some clues about the ways people hear about and pursue information resources. According to the report, people primarily learn about new, electronic information sources through peers, websites, news media, and advertising.<sup>2</sup> Librarians can monitor website updates (through email newsletters and RSS feeds), news media sources (newspapers and television reports), and government agency press releases for new information sources that their local patrons will find particularly interesting.

Once librarians anticipate potential queries, the next step is to put the information in a place that is highly discoverable by local users. The OCLC report indicates that the vast majority (84%) of library users begin their search for information with search engines.<sup>3</sup> Search engines like Google, Yahoo!, and MSN routinely capture both website and weblog content, so the librarian-created information will be found by the intended audience.

Given that the intent of this type of proactive reference service is to answer a question before it is directly asked of a librarian, how can one gauge the success of the service?

*Government News for Montana* uses the web-based StatCounter software to assess use of the resource. StatCounter tracks the referral information of visitors, i.e., what webpage the user came from most recently. Based on a two-week slice of activity on the *Government News for Montana* site, it is apparent how most users are discovering the content. Of 169 unique visits from March 1 to 14, 2006, 65% came from a search engine result page. Just over 17% came from other websites or blogs, and nearly 18% had no referring link (possibly the result of web spider and bot visits). Of the website referrals, 57% came from Montana sites through links on the *Billings Gazette* website and Montana blogs, 17% came from a news aggregator, and 10% came from a link on the Mansfield Library website, the host library and primary content provider for the blog. This referral data indicates that while some visitors are finding the site through bookmarks, aggregators, and links on other sites, most use the site as a result of a specific question. These requests for information are formed through search engine queries, and the library has effectively and proactively responded to information seeking by providing information where users are searching.

### **Current Awareness Tool**

Libraries use many approaches to alert their users to new content, new services, and new research tools. As indicated by the OCLC report, library users are increasingly turning to electronic sources for information, and libraries have responded by using websites, email newsletters, RSS feeds, and other tools to keep their users informed.

Multiple methods have been used to alert library users of new government reports. Moody and Sears describe a subject-organized government publications SDI service

implemented at Miami University of Ohio consisting of customized bibliographies issued three to four times per year.<sup>4</sup> *New Mexico News Plus* includes a feature that serves as an update of traditional, subject-oriented SDI. Its main page provides news items daily, which works well when a specific date is needed or for looking at the current day's events. For additional subject access, *New Mexico News Plus* provides an A to Z resource list based on the daily links. For example, the Carson National Forest Agua/Caballo projects were covered over several months on *New Mexico News Plus*, with different links provided for each step of the proposed projects, from draft environmental impact statements, through the decision appeal, to the final Record of Decision. In the subject list, Aqua/Caballo links are grouped together, saving the time of the user. Subject grouping allows for more simplified searching of a large database of materials and provides the opportunity to link sites that, on the surface, might not have much in common. A broad subject such as the U.S.-Mexico Border crosses several governmental agencies and organizations, yet all related documents are linked through the subject list.

Looking at another current awareness trend, several libraries are turning to blogs as a tool for rapid notification of new content and services. Vogel and Goans reference the blog created at the Georgia State University Library for government information and map news and note that using blogging software shifts “the focus from time-consuming layout and production issues to rapid dissemination of relevant, quality news and information.”<sup>5</sup> For the *Government News for Montana* project, using blog software allows for fast and frequent updates, which fits the speed with which new information is produced and released by the government. The blog software provides an additional feature for simple alerting—an RSS feed.

RSS is effectively the new SDI.<sup>6</sup> RSS, or “Really Simple Syndication,” has become an easy, flexible way to put users in control of the news they receive. An RSS feed for a blog or

other website allows information seekers to learn about newly available content almost as soon as the news is posted. By subscribing to a site's feed through a news aggregator, the user lets the software do the work of frequently "visiting" sites to check for new content and "pulling" new content to one location to read at his or her convenience. In the context of the *Government News for Montana* blog, the RSS feed allows users with news aggregators to receive alerts of new reports of regional interest as often as they like. Subscribing to the feed is very simple, and users have the advantage of skimming through a page of recent posts rather than sorting through a flood of email messages created by electronic newsletters or listserv subscriptions. Because the RSS feed is automatically generated by the Blogger software, this additional feature requires no additional work from contributors.

While RSS shows tremendous potential, it should be noted that present knowledge and use of feeds is relatively small, but steadily growing. The January 2005 Pew Internet & American Life Project "state of blogging" report indicated that 5% of internet users used RSS aggregators or similar products.<sup>7</sup> Six months later, Pew data indicated that 9% of internet users had "a good idea" of what RSS feeds were, and only 26% had never heard of RSS.<sup>8</sup> The questions in the two surveys were not the same, and knowledge of a tool does not automatically indicate its adoption; however, growing numbers of internet users who are actively learning about a new technology or who are at least aware of the term point toward an increasing use of RSS in the future. Even more promising, the Yahoo! paper on RSS usage indicates that adoption of RSS may be more significant than previously calculated.<sup>9</sup> Though only 4% of internet users are aware of their use of RSS, an additional 27% of internet users are already using RSS, although they are *unaware* that RSS is at the root of the tools they are using. Both aware and unaware RSS users can access feeds for sites like *Government News for Montana*. Though

library users may not know the nuts and bolts of RSS feeds, they can, and most likely do, make use of the growing number of tools that are RSS-driven.

### **Education Tool**

The *Government News for Montana* and *New Mexico News Plus* sites provide a broad range of educational opportunities for both readers and contributors. By highlighting new reports and other government resources, the sites serve to alert and teach librarians, both within the contributors' home institutions and throughout the state, about relevant resources they can use in reference interactions. As a continuing education tool, librarians (and library users) who follow the sites over time can become familiar with various agencies, key agency publication pages, and core tools (such as *THOMAS* and *GPO Access*). The sites can help to make library users and non-documents librarians aware of the breadth of government information and how much of that information is available for free online.

While many may not think of a blog or news site as a source for bibliographic instruction, there are several possibilities for its use in library instruction of students. The first step of the research project, choosing a topic, can sometimes be the hardest. To help with this step, libraries, as well as commercial vendors, develop hot topics pages to provide guidance and resources related to current issues. *Government News for Montana* and *New Mexico News Plus* provide the same service but with a local twist. The news stories and related links are to issues that directly affect the students themselves. A news story detailing changes to immigration laws can directly impact a student's family and friends. Another article looking at proposed changes in off-road vehicle use in a local national forest can influence another student's recreational time. These current topics translate to research paper topics when, by using *Government News for*

*Montana* or *New Mexico News Plus*, the student gains two credible sources: a newspaper article, and, more importantly, a government information resource.

In addition to the usefulness to library peers and library users, maintaining these resources provides daily practice for the contributors in rapidly locating and organizing new information. The process of seeking specific reports and statistics offers opportunities to explore a wide range of government resources and expand knowledge of agency and subagency publication processes. By actively seeking out newly published reports, contributors are well informed about new materials of interest to their users and well prepared to answer questions about “hot topics.”

## **Issues to Consider**

### **Selection of Content and Librarian Ethics**

In creating content for a government news site and working with information that is often politically charged, it becomes important for contributors to revisit the ALA Library Code of Ethics.<sup>10</sup> Creating content that is balanced and neutral (particularly politically neutral) is important in a professional blog or site. Librarians must be aware of the types of stories covered, the choice of featured documents (i.e., are both sides of an issue represented?), and the rhetoric of explanatory content. Does background information from the librarian editorialize or provide impartial context? Blogs are often noted for the way that they give a voice to multiple points of view and for opinionated content, but a professional blog (one that is conveying librarian expertise on a topic) needs to be as free of political viewpoint as possible.

Even on a site such as *New Mexico News Plus* where a comprehensive look at the day’s news is provided and, therefore, limited bias in article selection occurs, a potential ethical issue involves providing both sides to an issue. When a news article reports statistics on illegal

immigrants using both government and non-government sources, does the librarian include links to both? The non-government source goes beyond the scope of the website, yet not providing the link limits the context for the user. There is also the issue of when to stop providing coverage. For instance, during an election year, should links be provided to only one candidate's remarks, as mentioned in the referral article, or are opposing candidates' remarks also included to balance coverage?

### **Assessment**

Is the time and effort involved in creating and maintaining a government information blog or news site worth it? Given the shortcuts of blogging software and web design programs, the set up time is minimal. The real commitment comes in maintaining and regularly updating the site. For *Government News for Montana*, locating content and creating posts takes approximately an hour per day. Generating the weekly "round-up" post takes two or more hours. For *New Mexico News Plus*, the daily time commitment is much longer due to the more comprehensive nature of the source. It takes approximately two to three hours for two people to search through five newspapers, find the corresponding online sources, and create the web links.

According to StatCounter figures, in 2005 *Government News for Montana* had 3,576 unique visitors, 523 of whom were counted as returning visitors. The majority of visitors had an IP address associated with Montana; however, a surprising number of visitors came from other states and other countries. Tracking readers who use the available RSS feeds is more difficult. The Feedburner version of the feed ranges from 10–25 subscribers in a given week. However, Blogger creates automatic feeds as well, and subscribers to those feeds cannot be reliably counted using Feedburner. Combining average site visits and estimated RSS subscribers, over

90 people visit the site weekly. Considering the fact that web audiences take time to build and the many benefits of posting, it seems worthwhile to continue the project for another year.

The mechanisms currently available to the New Mexico State Library for tracking web site use are limited, but it is possible to count the number of site visits. The most recent statistics come from the second quarter of 2005 during which time over 3,000 visits to *New Mexico News Plus* and the related A to Z site were counted. The State Library will be transferring to a new open source content management system, Joomla, in January of 2007. Joomla provides flexibility in site management and more sophistication in the gathering of user statistics and will allow significant enhancements to graphic representation on the *New Mexico News Plus* site.

## **Next Steps**

Once a current awareness site has been created, the next vital step is to publicize its availability. *Government News for Montana* has been promoted on the University of Montana campus through flier and postcard distribution and through digital advertisement in the library. The Mansfield Library and University Relations websites include links to the blog. Focusing on the Montana library community, the site has been demonstrated and discussed at three state conferences, and announcements have been posted on the state association listserv. Notifying the Montana blogging community has been a fruitful way to promote the service. Links to the site are currently included in the Big Sky Blogroll, on several Montana blogs, and on the *Billings Gazette* list of Montana blogs.<sup>11</sup>

New Mexico State Library's promotion of *New Mexico News Plus* occurs in a variety of venues. The daily listing is posted at the reference desk where many state legislators and agency employees see it during their daily business in the library. Several New Mexico U.S.

Congressional delegations have been contacted, with one Senatorial Office receiving research staff training in using the site. This office indicated that *New Mexico News Plus* is a valuable current awareness tool that saves them time in keeping up with the local concerns of New Mexico constituents. A live demonstration was also done in the rotunda of the State Capitol Building for the New Mexico State Government Information Technology Fair. Frequent articles highlighting the site are included in the State Library's newsletter, *The Hitchhiker*, which is distributed widely to libraries in the state, and the *Web Junction New Mexico* website features *New Mexico News Plus* in its "Top Picks."<sup>12</sup> New Mexico State University Library provides additional promotion through links on the library's web site, articles in the library newsletter, discussions with faculty, and library instruction sessions. Promotion of the service to other librarians occurs through presentations at local, state, and national meetings and conferences. Future promotion in New Mexico includes participation from other federal depository librarians in the state to broaden coverage through the inclusion of small town newspapers. Other ideas for the future include contacting newspapers to see if links to *New Mexico News Plus* can be made from their sites.

Next, librarians will use these projects to track how many linked and archived reports have not been "captured" by the Federal Depository Library Program and incorporated into the Catalog of Government Publications. It will prove useful to determine how many links to reports are now defunct, emphasizing the importance of local archiving and PURLs.

### **Broader Implications**

With web-based documents becoming the standard publication venue for government information, all libraries and library users have access to "depository" materials at virtually any location. By making use of new technologies and updated models, libraries can help to organize

this flood of information almost as quickly as it is produced and make it accessible where their user populations begin their searches—through search engines. Raising the profile of locally pertinent information offers the additional benefit of promoting library expertise in aiding discovery of information.

Each region and locality has its unique set of interests, and each library has unique content to showcase. Though the two projects discussed in this article focus on federal and state government publications, local government information is an ideal content area to include in a library blog or news site. Links to local government information can be underreported and very difficult for citizens to uncover. However, a post on a local library blog or news site that points the way to a high-interest report can dramatically improve immediate access. Just as each geographic area has unique government information to feature, library news sites need not be limited purely to online government materials. Such sites are ideal places to highlight relevant print sources, collection gems, new services, upcoming programs, and any other special news libraries want to share with their users.

These projects serve to demonstrate variations and evolutions of classic library services: collection development, reference, instruction, SDI, and outreach. By focusing on content of regional interest, they endeavor to facilitate and anticipate the needs of local users. By linking to, archiving, and organizing new content and providing related information, the sites offer an added-value, instructive tool for readers. By embracing current information-seeking behaviors, these tools reach out to users at home, at school, and at the office, in addition to providing assistance within libraries. Library users want to know what's new in their libraries, their communities, and their country. Libraries have the expertise and resources to fulfill that request.

### **Notes**

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