

Chapter 56

Academic Library Collaborations to Strengthen Open Government Data and Expand Librarianship

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ABSTRACT

In academic libraries, the area of data librarianship has introduced several new functions and skills into the librarian toolbox. These include statistical and software support, research data management, data curation, and data and statistical literacy. Fostering data-related collaborations enables librarians to enhance library services, collections, and outreach. In this chapter, we will focus on academic library collaborations with government agencies as case in point. Under the umbrella of open access, local and national governments have started making available the raw data that they collect, in the course of providing public services, for users to conduct their own analysis. This chapter will 1) describe data librarianship in academic libraries; 2) review open government data repositories; 3) outline concerns with open government data, such as metadata and data literacy; and 4) describe collaborative efforts between an academic library and New York City government agencies to address concerns with open government data.

INTRODUCTION

In academic libraries, the area of data librarianship has expanded the librarian's role into statistical and software support, research data management, data curation, and data and statistical literacy. As part of data librarianship, librarians provide services related to data analysis and management. Fostering data-related collaborations enables librarians to create an authoritative place for themselves, one that is apart from faculty and other resources. These collaborations are essential for successful library services, collections, and outreach. In this chapter, we will focus on academic library collaborations with government agencies as an illustration.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-9860-2.ch056

The trend in data librarianship has dovetailed with a trend in open government data. Under the umbrella of open access, local and national governments have started making available the raw data that they collect, in the course of providing public services, for users to conduct their own analysis. With the majority of government information now in electronic format, including open government data, several concerns arise. Most notably, library government information collections have moved towards pointing to web links and away from collecting publications. Yet, governments, their websites, and individual webpages can shut down, which makes this move to “pointing” for government collections fraught with risk for libraries, on whom people rely for information. Despite the electronic nature of government information,

Libraries should still be selecting, acquiring, organizing, and preserving information for their user-communities, and providing access to and services for those collections. Libraries do no one a long-term service by simply pointing to resources over which they have no control and which someone else can simply make unavailable literally at the flick of a switch. (Free Government Information, 2013)

In this chapter, these issues in government information will be melded with data librarianship in considering how librarians can improve open government data via collaboration.

In situating library-government collaboration on data within a broader context, this chapter will

1. Describe data librarianship in academic libraries;
2. Review open government data repositories;
3. Outline concerns with open government data, such as metadata and data literacy; and
4. Describe collaborative efforts between an academic library and New York City government agencies to address concerns with open government data, and support data curation and archiving that benefit users.

The central portal for open government data in New York City is NYC Open Data, which was required by Local Law 11 of 2012, “Publishing Open Data” (New York City, 2012). It makes available a wide range of government datasets that are submitted from city government agencies, based on their routine data collection activities. Given access and preservation concerns with electronic government information, librarians in the Digital Social Science Center at the Columbia University Libraries were planning workflows for preserving this open data in our data catalog. During this planning, we became aware that definitions for dataset column headings and values, and documentation for how the data were collected were absent for most datasets. Hence any research and interpretation using the data was hindered.

While providing alternate library access to NYC Open Data is valuable in the event that any dataset (or the portal itself) became unavailable, the data itself need to also be useful for research and analysis. For instance, a research best practice is to identify any data limitations that can restrict application of one’s analysis. This cannot be done if a researcher does not have information on how open data is defined and derived – i.e. metadata – which really diminishes the value and use of this data for research purposes. It was this awareness that motivated the author to initiate communication and collaboration with the NYC government agencies whose data is made available on NYC Open Data. The intent was to create data dictionaries and metadata for the datasets on NYC Open Data.

In New York City, the Mayor’s Office of Data Analytics oversees the portal and implementation of the open data law. New York City Council, which passed the law, provides oversight. Each government

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