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Getting the Whole Story: Getting the Best Federal, State & Nongovernmental Agencies' Websites to Your Users

Kellian Clink

Minnesota State University Mankato, kellian.clink@mnsu.edu

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Getting the Whole Story: Getting the Best Federal, State & Nongovernmental Agencies' Websites to your Users.

By Kellian Clink

It used to be difficult to access the valuable research performed by governmental and nongovernmental agencies. With the advent of LibGuides and Google custom search, it is easy to make this research available minutes after it has been completed. There are several reasons to bring your users to these resources, including their innate value, their local or topical focus, their timeliness, their authority, and the fact that they are free. Most researchers refer to websites in their scholarly papers.¹ Collection development work on websites allows the librarian to alert their users to the most useful websites that their patrons might otherwise miss in the morass of everything on the web.

Any means you have of directing users to websites can work: handouts, catalog records, a rolodex, depending on your users. Many libraries, however, have adopted LibGuides, which are fundamentally electronic versions of what used to be called handouts, pathfinders or library guides. They often have tabs for books and databases, and it is easy to have a tab for websites.

It's all about your users

I work with social work students, so I will start by describing the page that I built with links to websites gathered with my users' assignments in mind. Students can go to, for a few examples, the Centers for Disease Control (Federal), Minnesota's Department of Human Resources (state) or the Minnesota Center Against Violence and Abuse (Nongovernmental), any of which will get them to different information about family violence than they can find in book chapters or journal articles. These are often more current, more practice-oriented and in many cases more geographically focused. Students can search any of the 60 or more websites individually that I have grouped by topic or they can use the custom Google search box I developed and search all 60 at the same time.

Another quick example and then I'll turn to some mechanisms of finding and getting the websites into the hands of your users. The government LibGuides at my university has ready access to databases and the catalog, and it also has a page with ready access to "think tanks and nonprofits". Students find readily links to websites of the *National Conference of State Legislatures*, the *National Governor's Association* and *Pew Center on the States*, all excellent nonpartisan studies, analyses and statistical comparison of state legislation.

Librarians have historically directed users to sources that are commercially viable—books and journal articles. State and nongovernmental research hasn't as often been edited, reproduced and distributed, so has never had as broad of distribution because of the financial constraints. With the internet, it is possible for their very valuable data and reports to be shared widely.

Librarians understand the value of the federal documents and are accustomed pointing users to libraries with substantial depositories. They may, however, have had less experience seeking out and using with state and nongovernmental agency research, but these resources really valuable.

Finding the good stuff

Choice subscribers already see reviews of websites including federal ones such as the EPA or the Department of Labor. A journal called *Reference Reviews* includes reviews of websites. RUSA² and Ipl2³ offer up reviews and recommendations of good websites. For example, looking in Ipl2 for New Jersey, you find digital archives for historians and history sites for kids and tourism sites for visitors as well as the official *New Jersey Information* website. This one, from the state library, takes the user smoothly from a page of legal sites (constitution, statutes, local ordinances) to a great site for legal blogs, some topical such as bankruptcy, elder law, others more personal, such as *Larry, the New Jersey Lawyer's Cogitations*.⁴

Librarians in Minnesota has the Legislative Reference Library's "Links to the World." This is actually topically arranged websites that the librarians review on about a 2 year cycle. The arrangement is often a handful of Minnesota sites, then Federal sites, then nongovernmental sites. The *Law and Legislation* page takes the user first to Minnesota Statutes, Constitution, and a section on Tribal Law. There is also a section on federal law. The section at the bottom links readily to *WashLaw*, *Zimmerman's Research Guide*, and the *Legal Information Institute's Eye on the Court*, amongst others. Just a few good things.

I study the *Economist*, and jot down the names by nongovernmental agencies referenced. I search on the internet for a hot issue with the word association or organization. I have found valuable websites in this way, such as the International Organization for Migration. I am planning on studying other institution's LibGuides as another means of finding good websites now that more libraries are using them.

Mount them

I used to include websites on the handouts and could describe how to use them in print. With the LibGuides, it is easy include text to describe anything particularly persnickety. In any case, it is easy to either just list these websites and a brief description, or for the bold, the software allows for creating rollovers that can add so when the user hovers over the NGO name, the description or directions can appear. In addition, it is easy to create a custom search box through Google⁵ and simply select the websites, try it out, and put the resulting script in the Libguide, so that users can simultaneously search the websites you have carefully selected based on their needs.

Promote and instruct

An article by Fry and Leshner demonstrated that students will go where the faculty directs them.⁶

Annual meetings with departmental faculty can include conversations about how and why you are choosing to direct them and their students to these websites and what they will find within. With students, it is good to talk about looking carefully at information that comes from an agency that acts in an advocacy role. Introducing the websites can act as a useful springboard into talking about different kinds of information, evaluating all of them based on timeliness, authority, bias, and purpose.

Conclusion

Because websites are authoritative, timely, and sometimes the most significant source of local or topical research on an issue, it is important to intentionally seek out and alert our patrons to the best ones, based on our insights into their research needs. Collection development procedures for these sites should include checking for broken links periodically. Making sure our patrons are aware of them provides another opportunity to be responsive to their research needs.

¹ Primary Research Group. 2009. *The Survey of Higher Education Faculty: Evaluation of Library Efforts to Index, Preserve and Catalog Blogs, Websites, Email Archives, and other Cyber Resources*. New York: Primary Research Group.

² <http://www.ala.org/rusa/development/onlinece>

³ <http://www.ipl2.org/>

⁴ <http://shapiroberzins.com/>

⁵ <http://www.google.com/cse/?hl=en>

⁶Fry, Amy and Marcella Leshner. 2011. "Beyond Lists and Guides: Using Usability to Help Students Get the most Out of E-Resources." *The Serials Librarian* 60 (1-4): 206-212