Indiana's Government Information Day Focuses on Change, Access & Continuity

Jennifer Morgan
Indiana University Maurer School of Law, jlbryan@indiana.edu

Sally Holterhoff
Valparaiso University School of Law

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For many people, particularly car racing enthusiasts, thoughts of May in Indianapolis focus on the Motor Speedway and a certain 500-mile race. But for those of us who are interested in government information, Indianapolis in May this year brought another exciting (though less noisy) event: Government Information Day 2015, http://www.in.gov/library/GID.htm, held on May 7 at the impressive and historic Indiana State Library building. The theme of the conference was E-Access: The Changing Face of Government Information. For the 130 attendees (librarians and other government information professionals), the GID was a great opportunity to learn, to network, and to discuss various aspects of government information access. The stately setting of walnut-paneled, bookcase-lined rooms was a reminder to all of us that government information has an impressive past as well as an exciting future.

Transformation of GPO as a 21st Century Publisher

Setting the tone for the day was the keynote speaker, Davita Vance-Cooks, who is the Director of the G.P.O. As most of us are well aware, this federal agency has been undergoing many changes, starting with its name. With Congressional approval (Pub. L. No. 113-235, § 1301), the G.P.O. became the Government Publishing Office and Vance-Cooks’ former title of Public Printer was replaced with her current one. She began her presentation by recognizing and thanking the 30 selective federal depository libraries in Indiana, many of which were represented by members of the audience. Other strong points of our state she mentioned include the valuable historical collection of the Indiana State Library (which serves as our FDLP regional depository) and the activities of INDIGO (an independent organization of government information librarians).

The main focus of Vance-Cooks’ remarks was G.P.O.’s ongoing transformation from printing on paper to publishing online. She emphasized the public’s right of access and the government’s obligation to disseminate, authenticate, and preserve information, as well as to keep it in the public domain. She shared interesting details about G.P.O.’s 154-year history and its current operations. While great reductions have occurred in recent years in the number of print copies produced at G.P.O. and in the number of employees, the “reach” of G.P.O. activities has increased dramatically in the digital era, with the start of GPO Access in 1993, leading to the launch of FDsys in 2009. She pointed out that content from FDsys “fuels” other popular government websites such as Congress.gov, Federalregister.gov, and Regulations.gov. She announced that in late 2015 a new version of FDsys will be released, with an improved search engine, better user interface, and publication-linking capability. Vance-Cooks concluded her remarks with comments on the priorities of the new National Plan for Access to U.S. Government Information (http://www.fdlp.gov/project-list/national-plan) and what G.P.O. has undertaken so far to address them, particularly the Federal Information Preservation Network (FIPNet) (http://www.fdlp.gov/project-list/federal-information-preservation-network).
Finding Judicial Branch Documents

In addition to Davita Vance-Cooks, the day’s presenters included attorneys, professionals from Indiana state agencies, a media ethics professor, and librarians from the Indiana State Library, academic libraries, the Law Library of Congress, and an academic law library.

Jennifer Morgan and Michelle Trumbo (colleagues at the Jerome Hall Law Library, Indiana University Maurer School of Law) gave a presentation entitled, “Gov Docs 101: The Judicial Branch (an introduction to finding case opinions, dockets, court records, and briefs).”

Acknowledging the problem that many Judicial branch publications can be difficult to find, because of their limited distribution through the Federal Depository Library Program, Jennifer (Documents Librarian) and Michelle (Electronic Services Librarian) focused their talk on free and low-cost online resources that can be utilized by a wide variety of researchers (such as academic librarians, public librarians, state and government employees, private citizens, and attorneys) to find case opinions and court records.

During their 30-minute presentation, Jennifer and Michelle highlighted the functionality and features of a select number of online resources, including the following: the official U.S. Supreme Court website; official state Judicial branch websites; Google Scholar (for Federal and state case law); Ravel Law (a legal search, analytics, and visualization platform); Casemaker (a low-cost online legal research system); PACER.gov; and MyCase.in.gov (Indiana’s public database for court records and dockets). They also pointed out several research guides that are useful for locating both state and federal judicial branch documents. A hand-out was given to attendees, which along with Jennifer and Michelle’s PowerPoint slides, is available from the Indiana State Library’s website.

The Digital Paradox

Featured speaker Jane Kirtley, Director of the Silha Center for the Study of Media Ethics and Law, School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Minnesota Law School, discussed “The Digital Paradox: Practical Obscurity, the Right to Be Forgotten, and Other Threats to Access to Government Information.”

Positing the paradox of digitization of government information, Professor Kirtley stated, “In theory, information is more readily available/accessible than ever, but in practice, its very availability is causing state and federal government to rethink the meaning of access policies, particularly where privacy is implicated.”

Professor Kirtley, the author of The Media Law Handbook, published by the U.S. Department of Justice, in 2010, was the Executive Director of The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press for 14 years before she went to Minnesota in 1999. While she was Executive Director of the RCFP, the FOIA case – DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE v. REPORTERS COMMITTEE – was argued in the U.S. Supreme Court.

Kirtley’s talk at Government Information Day drew from her recently published essay for Communications Law & Policy, about the 25th anniversary of DOJ v. RCFP, in which she argued that both practical obscurity and the right to be forgotten pose enormous threats to the public’s right to know. During her presentation, Professor Kirtley discussed several cases which illustrated her
argument, including DOJ v. RCFP, National Archives & Records Administration v. Favish, Los Angeles Police Department v. United Reporting Publishing Corp., and the “Google Spain” case.


Exploring Congress.gov

Keeping the attention of an audience following a mid-afternoon break can be a challenge. Andrew Weber, Legislative Information Systems Manager for the Law Library of Congress, succeeded in creating a lively session. He invited attendees to compete for some small prizes as they tested their search skills on Congress.gov, using their devices of choice—tablet, laptop, or smart phone. With PowerPoint slides, he presented three “challenges,” each consisting of several related questions about Congressional actions that could be answered by searching the website. Along with that activity, Andrew talked about new features on Congress.gov, an improved platform which was launched in 2012 to replace the 20-year-old Thomas system. It has now been moved out of “beta” mode. Improvements include the addition of Advanced Search and Browse and “nominations by the President” information back to 1981. Both Treaty Documents and the Appropriations Tables have now been transferred over from the former Thomas site. Member remarks in the Congressional Record are now more easily accessible and email alerts (a frequently-requested enhancement) are possible. Another addition is an alphabetical directory of resources found on the site.

Learn More about Indiana’s Government Information Day

Other informative sessions at Indiana’s Government Information Day included “Indiana Memory: Your Gateway to the History and Culture of Indiana,” “E-Access for the Unrepresented Civil Litigant,” “Indiana’s 2016 Bicentennial: How you and your Library can be Part of the Excitement,” and “A Working Update on Indiana Data.” There were also several lunch-time roundtable sessions for conference attendees who wanted an informal setting to discuss topics such as cataloging, weeding of government documents, and GIS Resources with the experts.

Video and materials from some of the sessions are available at the GID15 website at http://www.in.gov/library/GID.htm. You can also review lively tweeting and photos from the event by searching #GID15 on Twitter.