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Access for All: A review of "Law Libraries, Government Transparency, and the Internet," a presentation by Daniel Schuman of the Sunlight Foundation at the ALL-SIS Meeting, July 22, 2012

by Susan David deMaine, Ruth Lilly Law Library – Robert H. McKinney School of Law

Attendees at the ALL-SIS Breakfast and Business Meeting at the AALL Annual Meeting had the pleasure of hearing from Daniel Schuman of the Sunlight Foundation speak on “Law Libraries, Government Transparency, and the Internet.” The Sunlight Foundation is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization whose mission is to increase access to federal government information resources through advocacy and the development of information technology tools.

Mr. Schuman began with the point that the internet has changed public expectations regarding access to information. As the availability of private sector information increases, the public expects greater online access to government information as well. Data from the Pew Research Center for 2012 indicate that over 80% of the adult population in the United States uses the internet. In 2011, 67% of internet users visited government websites at some point, an increase from an already impressive 40% in 2009.

As Mr. Schuman went on to say, governmental institutions are struggling to keep up with the demand for information. Much of what our government produces is simply never made accessible. When documents and data are made available, they are often incomplete, presented in difficult-to-use formats, trapped in poorly-designed websites, or require payment/licensing to access. Mr. Schuman offered the example of PDFs, an image-based format often used for government-produced documents. PDFs are easy for people to read but very difficult for computers to read because computers cannot “see” the text of a PDF the way we do. This presents a challenge if information experts want to mine a collection of PDFs for content.

In response to rising public expectations and advocacy from the Sunlight Foundation, new information intermediaries and tools are emerging. Mr. Schuman walked through a number of websites that are opening up access to more government information:

- THOMAS and GovTrack.us can help citizens track current legislation as it moves through Congress.
- OpenCongress.org provides news and information about pending bills and contact links for members of Congress.
- OpenSecrets.org helps users see who is lobbying for any given piece of legislation.
- Scout.SunlightFoundation.com lets you receive alerts and updates about Congress, state legislatures, and other governmental units; search federal bills and regulations; receive notice of scheduled congressional votes; and follow bills in all fifty states.

- CapitolWords.org allows people to conduct deep searches of congressional speeches, making it possible to compare the language used by different members of Congress. The striking example provided by Mr. Schuman was a comparison of the use of “Obamacare” vs. “Affordable Care Act” and how it fluctuated over time (and by party, of course).

Given the Sunlight Foundation’s interest in universal access, it is not surprising that it has also created an Android app for congressional information as well as “Call on Congress,” a service that provides congressional information by phone.

There is current legislation designed to increase access to government information. The CRS Electronic Accessibility Resolution, which would allow free public access to some CRS reports, was sent to committee in July 2012. This House resolution is sponsored by Republican Leonard Lance and has a chance of being passed. The DATA Act (Digital Accountability and Transparency Act), which would increase access to information on federal spending, passed the House in April 2012 but has yet to clear the Senate. The Access to Congressionally Mandated Reports Act, which requires the establishment of a centralized website for all reports mandated by Congress, awaits action by both chambers. In less encouraging news, the Public Online Information Act, which included nonbinding guidelines for electronic access, was introduced in 2011 but, at this point, is presumably dead (or nearly so) in committee. The Lobbying Disclosure Enhancement Act, introduced in 2011, has met a similar fate. Finally, the DISCLOSE Act, a bill introduced in the Senate to increase access to information on election spending, failed to break through a filibuster.

Mr. Schuman concluded his talk by urging law librarians to act boldly in working to increase access to government information. His suggestions included working with the government on best practices in cataloging and access portals, partnering to build websites and services, publishing unique documents from our collections, and using our expertise to point the public to the best sources of information.

This presentation was one of the best I attended at AALL. Mr. Schuman is clearly an effective advocate for his organization and its mission, and I felt inspired by his work. With skills in both technology and law, law librarians are in a unique position to help encourage and facilitate access to government information. I hope that at least some of us will heed Mr. Schuman’s call for our expertise.

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Statewide Consortium of Ohio County Law Library Resource Boards

by Angela Baldree, Lake County Law Library