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Social Work and Citizenship:

A Day's Work in the Government Information Center

Justine Withers

San Jose State University

Abstract

On Friday, July 6, 2012, I spent three hours shadowing the reference librarians at the Government Information Center (GIC) at San Francisco Public Library Main. The following Tuesday I toured closed stacks and overflow storage. I observed the librarians answer questions mundane, bizarre, and life-altering. After this experience, I fully concur with one librarian's estimate: work on the GIC reference desk is 50% social work and 50% assisting with research.

Social Work and Citizenship: A Day's Work in the Government Information Center

Working in the Government Information Center (GIC) is 50% social work and 50% supporting active citizenship and political research, says Doreen Horstin, California Documents Librarian in the GIC at San Francisco Public Library (SFPL) Main. Architecture, subject matter, and the general responsibilities of today's library contribute to Doreen's experience.

At SFPL Main, GIC inhabits half of the fifth floor. It is the only glassed-in floor in a building that surrounds a noisy atrium, so many people come for quiet study and computer work. The GIC desk is the first desk patrons encounter when they come off the stairs or elevator. Whether someone wants to file a patent, research building codes, read council minutes, get tax assistance, or reserve a computer, they will likely end up at GIC, adding to the wild mix of daily inquiries. I got a taste of life on the reference desk when I spent three hours observing on Friday, July 6, 2012.

The Depository of Hopes, Obligations, and Complaints

As the name implies, the GIC is an official depository for federal, state, and local government documents. In addition, they specialize in patents and trademarks, the law, and census materials (SFPL, n.d.b). Librarians take turns staffing Government Information Online Chat.

Current crime statistics is a typical question at the desk, for example, by ZIP Code in the city of Oakland. Unfortunately, crime statistics are collected city wide and by police beat only. The first duty of the librarian is to explain why the question cannot immediately be answered and what information is available. Oakland publishes the latest citywide crime statistics on its public

website. A patron would have to contact each police station for its individual statistics and then attempt to correlate police beat borders to those of the ZIP codes. I asked Janice Torbet, Federal Government Documents Librarian, if the library should actively gather and collate the statistics for easier reference. She would be inclined to collect statistics for San Francisco only, however, at this time, it is more efficient to send patrons directly to the source.

The mix between social work and librarianship was more obvious as I watched a request for a copy of the 2009 California 540 tax form. Ms. Horstin's reference interview with the couple was delicate. (She later described reference interviews as "tough.") The form and its accompanying instructions are of limited use to a couple with little experience filing taxes. Ms. Horstin encourages them to file every year in case they are due a refund. Further, she tracks down year-round tax assistance on the San Francisco and places a call to the agency.

I observed questions mundane—"What's my PIN?" "How do I reserve a computer?"—and straightforward—"What is the address for the Pentagon?" The librarians share stories of more nebulous requests—"I want to start a bank. Just give me the form."—and startling ones, at least the first time they are heard—"The world is ruled by lizard people. They wear skin suits to hide it."

The few actual reference questions I witnessed followed Cassell and Hiremath's outline, with the aforementioned extra delicacy in handling sensitive topics and the mentally ill attracted to the GIC. "What resources have you tried so far?" seems to work well to ascertain how coherent and realistic the patron is, for instance, when someone wants to file a patent. "How will

you be using this information?” quickly clarifies the purpose of the question: he wants to write a letter to the Pentagon, not visit it.

Ms. Horstin shared another recent question, one that took a few days of poking around several resources to craft a complete answer. A man complained that his water bill was wrong and wanted to know what each of the lines on the meter’s dial represent. Ms. Horstin showed him the San Francisco Water Power Sewer website, which explains only the cubic feet measurement on the meter (one unit equals 100 cubic feet or 748 gallons). It says that the sweep dial is used only for “testing purposes and leak detection” (San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, 2011). That sweep dial is exactly what the patron was asking about. Ms. Horstin promised him a more detailed explanation, if he was willing to wait for an emailed reply, and he was. Perusing several utility sites, Ms. Horstin found a fact sheet from the Office of the Ohio Consumers’ Council that says, “As the pointer hand completes one rotation it records one (1) cubic foot (or 7.48 gallons)” (2011). The dial has 100 demarcations, so with a little math...voilà, each line represents .0748 gallons. That is the opposite of ready reference!

“Where Were You the Day the Internet Went Down?”

As far as ready reference goes, GIC librarians often turn to the *Yellow Books* from Leadership Directories, Inc. Updated quarterly, the *Yellow Books* provide contact and biographical information for all levels of United States government (Leadership Directories, 2012). Cella Mitchell, Wallace Stegner Environmental Librarian, recommends James Publishing’s *California Courts and Judges*, a sort of *Consumer Reports* for state and federal

judges, including attorney reviews (James Publishing, n.d.). *Black's Law Dictionary* is also well used, even if it sometimes confuses a tired librarian with its *green* cover.

The GIC faces the reality of fewer in-person reference questions and more online users. Taking advantage of new technology, the GIC partners with the Internet Archive to build the collection. For instance, the Internet Archive scrapes websites and archives pages relevant to local government, like the Cosco Busan oil spill in the San Francisco Bay (SFPL, 2009). Records like these come in with no metadata, necessitating cataloging by an SFPL librarian.

The Internet Archive also hosts scanned volumes from the SFPL collection (Internet Archive, n.d.). More people can access their digitized form, which are linked from the library online catalog. Ms. Torbet will not rely on scanning alone to preserve these resources. “Where were you when the Internet went down?” she asks, referring to the SOPA protest of January 18, 2012. She will keep the physical copy of local resources to guarantee GIC librarians will always have access.

Digitization also creates challenges in collection maintenance. Mitzi Kanbara, Federal Documents Librarian and floor supervisor, points out that “out of print” is now an ambiguous term. The library has to conduct further research to discover if the resource has only gone online or if it is truly dead.

So what *does* GIC weed from the collection?

Keeping the collection up to date is crucial. Subjects like law and medicine must be current; Ms. Torbet says it would be “criminal” to have outdated materials. Unlike other subjects, they cannot turn old versions into circulating copies.

Ms. Torbet believes public libraries cannot be all things to all people. If other libraries are already doing a better job, SFPL shouldn't try to duplicate their efforts. For instance, Hastings Law School is right up the street from SFPL Main and can obviously provide more in-depth legal reference. Although not in her direct purview, she has the same philosophy for the heavy sciences. During our tour of the overflow closed stacks, she pulled a thick physics book off the shelf. If someone can understand the math in it, she said, they are already using the Berkeley or Stanford libraries.

Conversely, Ms. Torbet will always keep local building codes because demand is high in San Francisco. Archaeology resources also make the cut because they don't go out of date. Ms. Torbet's personal passion, besides the Census, is government pamphlets, such as those explaining policies on recruiting minorities in the military and affirmative action. Although these materials are obsolete, they show the attitudes of the time and are thus important artifacts.

Ms. Torbet emphasizes efficient weeding because the GIC and SFPL as a whole struggle with limited space for the collections. When the new building was planned, several factors contributed to a loss of usable space: construction challenges caused the loss of a planned subfloor; unexpectedly low HVAC and plumbing in the ceiling made tall compact shelving impossible; planners calculated shelf footage using an overoptimistic estimate; and the ever-controversial atrium erased a huge area of floor space.

“The More Access Points the Better.”

As dedicated as the GIC librarians are at the reference desk, they work just as hard behind the scenes to make materials as accessible as possible.

Ms. Torbet says she catalogs 500 to 700 government documents a month. When she left the cataloging department to come back to the reference desk, she maintained some of her cataloging responsibilities because she can do it faster and more thoroughly than a general (and already overworked) cataloger. She adds title access to serials, so that Agriculture Information Bulletin No. 19 becomes *Consumer preferences regarding apples and winter pears* (SFPL, n.d.a). She adds content notes to trial records, municipal reports, and other multi-volume sets, especially referring to local history. The record for a U.S. Department of Transportation report (SFPL, n.d.c) now notes its inclusion of a case study from Santa Clara County (one county away from San Francisco).

Subject headings also came up. SFPL sticks to Library of Congress subject headings as much as possible. One exception Ms. Torbet showed me is the use of Hennepin County Library headings for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual materials. Because the SFPL collection is extensive, the more diverse HCL headings better describe the materials.

In general, Ms. Torbet says, “The more access points the better.” She is willing to “break rules” if needed to provide extra access points.

Looking to the Future

GIC librarians report a decrease in reference questions at the desk. They attribute this to the prevalence of Internet resources. The “middle ground” of reference has disappeared: questions are either very simple or quite complex.

Ms. Kanbara is on the SFPL Reference Question Task Force, which is investigating the future of reference at the library. She thinks there will always be a need for subject specialists,

such as in government documents. She believes technology should also have its own subject specialists. Because it is so hard to keep current with technology, she would like to see it separate from the responsibilities of a traditional reference librarian.

Whatever the changes to librarianship, the GIC will continue to help people and help people help themselves, like all good reference work.

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