



*CRL Global Resources Collections Forum
2014*

Five Threats

Leviathan presenters and attendees identified five factors that loom as particularly serious threats to the long-term integrity and accessibility of e-government information. These challenges echo some of the concerns raised by the panel of historians convened by the American Historical Association Research Division in advance of the Leviathan Forum. (See the report ["Governments and the Digital Record: the Historian's Perspective."](#))

- 1. Scale / "The Leviathan":** In the age of Big Data, the sheer number of records, documents and datasets being produced by governments is immense and is growing exponentially. Moreover, the variety and complexity of the digital information being produced—as the applications and platforms adopted by government agencies continue to multiply and evolve—is increasing as well.
- 2. "Known Unknowns":** The universe of government information is growing and updating so rapidly that the current scope of that universe is essentially immeasurable. The edges of the landscape being indiscernible combined with the tendency of governments to withhold from public view records they consider sensitive, enormously complicates the task of preserving public records and communications.
- 3. Asymmetry:** There is a large and growing disparity between the amount of information produced by government agencies, and the resources allocated by the public sector to preserve that information. Even at the national level in the U.S. and Canada, federal agencies historically tasked with archiving are ill-equipped to meet the new challenges. The problem is not simply one of mismatched resources, but of limits on the authority those agencies exercise over government publishing and records management.

4. **“The Cloud”**: Organizations that bring robust digital technologies and capabilities to the table now play a larger role in the government information ecosystem than in the past. Such organizations include:

- Cloud service providers and other suppliers of technology platforms used by government agencies to create, manage and publish records and information
- “Fourth Estate” organizations that aggregate, analyze and transform government records and data, and make them available to citizens and researchers
- Private-sector, market-oriented aggregators and other third parties that locate, organize, reformat, and distribute public sector data and documents to users in the academic, government and business worlds.

These organizations are the channels through which much government information reaches users today, and that the content they serve is often inseparable from the tools they produce.

5. **“The Fog” (Non-Transparency)**: Ironically, in the era of open government data, too little information is available about how government records and information are created and maintained. In particular, we need more data about:

- *Technology*: the myriad, sophisticated systems and software that have become part of the critical infrastructure of governments. If such systems remain “black boxes,” information vital to scholars about the production, provenance, and alteration of content will be lost.
- *Finance*: the resources invested by the commercial aggregators and distributors of government content, and the returns such entities realize on those investments. Lack of reliable information thwarts library due diligence in evaluating resources for purchase and subscription.
- *Politics*: The actions of governments themselves often have a bearing on the integrity and accessibility of their records. All governments, to a greater or lesser degree, tend to resist public scrutiny of their activities and operations. The mission of the research library and the interests of the researchers they serve may at times be in conflict with the agendas of government agencies.

Five Strategies

Addressing these threats will require new “templates” for research library action. Existing government depository systems, for example, like the U.S. Federal Depository Library Program and the Canadian government’s Depository Services Program, were designed to overcome geographic obstacles to broad public access to documents in tangible form. The realities of today’s “paperless government,” global digital networks, and ubiquitous information pose different challenges and call for new approaches.

The broad strategies described below are essential components for a realistic action agenda for U.S. and Canadian research libraries, and for effective stewardship of government information on behalf of the scholars our libraries serve. As such, they will form the basis for CRL planning and priorities.

- 1. “Triage” (Focus):** Given the scarcity of resources for preservation today, it is imperative that libraries focus their efforts on what is truly at risk and what is not likely to be adequately preserved by other actors, public sector or private. Research library efforts could focus, for example, on digital materials produced by key agencies of distressed U.S. states and by foreign governments in conflict zones, unstable areas, and other regions of U.S. and Canadian strategic interest.
- 2. “Drill Down” (Analysis):** To determine what is at risk, a detailed understanding is necessary of how the digital government information lifecycle and supply chain work, including the cloud services upon which agencies depend and the proprietary systems and platforms they use to distribute information. In the future, “application literacy” will be an essential part of the skill set of both librarians but researchers.
- 3. “Differentiate”:** Researchers in different fields require different things of government information: integrity and authenticity mean something different to an economist than to an historian. To serve constituencies using new analytical tools tailored to their respective disciplines, libraries will have to abandon the “one size fits all” regimes used to accommodate those constituencies in the print era.
- 4. “Collectivize”:** Research libraries must actively engage as a community with key “suppliers” of government information, like NARA, GPO, and Library and Archives Canada; and unite to gain leverage in dealings with key aggregators like ProQuest, Bloomberg, Hein, and others. Libraries should speak with one voice in negotiating not only favorable terms of access to government information databases, but provisions for long-term accessibility and integrity, quality of metadata, interoperability, and tools for analysis and mining of text and data as well.

5. **“Act Up”**: To gain the resources and standing necessary to play a meaningful role in a realm as large as government information research libraries will have to forge new partnerships. Organizations now abound that share with libraries an interest in public access to government information and documentation. The National Security Archive, for example, uses FOIA requests, litigation and other means to compel the U.S. government to declassify and disclose records and information. Though not a library, the NSA has succeeded in making a wealth of critical historical evidence available to scholars and citizens alike. Under a new effort led by UNESCO, the ICA, IFLA, LIBER, and other partners are working to encourage national governments and the technology industry to promote fuller persistence and disclosure of information, particularly government information. Supporting the efforts of these actors and various open government data initiatives could well accelerate declassification and disclosure of government materials important to scholars.