

Archiving the UK Government: a perspective from a new official publications librarian

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Over the past few months I've been attempting to familiarise myself with the extensive collection of UK government material we hold here at LSE Library. One of the founding principles of the school was to train social scientists for the betterment of society and official publications remain a primary source of information to support that aim.

I've drawn two conclusions from my explorations thus far:

a) Students enjoy sleeping on beanbags and eating Pringles in dark corners wedged between the rolling stacks of the official publications collection.

b) The Internet has happened.

What's been changing over the past decade or so is the UK government's use of the web to distribute its information. Whilst some information continues to be produced in print, a lot of it is now exclusively online, with some publications existing both in print and online. The format of the information that is found online is also wide - from PDFs, Word documents, multiple Excel spreadsheets, to (increasingly) standalone HTML publications; some but not all of which are available deep within the government's moderately un-wonderful [publications portal](#).

You sometimes hear rumours that there's a straightforward vector working its way from the print world to the online world, where in the near future all will be available in a digitally pure environment powered by the heat of a billion printed books burning behind us. The truth is that online and print are going to be existing alongside each other for quite some time yet – and indeed, should be, until and if some problems are solved.

Irrespective of whatever future awaits us in the publishing world, what we have right now is a complex hybrid of information: both in the way it exists (print, HTML, PDF, etc.) and the way it is discovered and accessed (library discovery systems/catalogues, Google etc.). The print formats are susceptible to libraries' increasing need for space, with many looking to get rid of parts of their collections (and if you're thinking about doing this, head to SCOOP's [Print Still Matters](#)).

The online formats, on the other hand, suffer from the web's greatest double-edged sword: its largely unmediated transience. An online government document can be here one second and gone the next. How do we, as librarians, ensure the official documentation produced on the web is available and accessible for as long as it needs to be, when the medium it is conveyed in so easily allows for the opposite?

From my perspective at LSE Library, I think this raises three key questions for our official publications collection:

*1. How do we maintain the **integrity** of our existing print collection?*

At the moment, an information-seeker wondering around our printed collection (side stepping Pringle debris and the unconscious) or perusing the library catalogue will find a series of reports randomly stop at some point in the 2000's. The integrity is lost. What do they assume at this point –

that the collection is missing after that date? That we simply don't hold them? Is it enough to say "now go off to the web"?

*2. How do we ensure the **discoverability** of official publications produced exclusively on the web?*

If an integral part of our collection-interests now exist somewhere on the web, how should our information-seekers discover it? Should we catalogue bits of the web? Should we harvest the documents and make them available in some way on our own systems? Or should we send the enquirer off to the Internet armed with a bit of advice? ("Try gov.uk and good luck").

*3. How do we **preserve** our collection in perpetuity?*

Can we rely on pointing out towards documentation held on external websites when we know this information is difficult to find, can disappear, can reappear with changes, move to a different URL? As a library that collects strongly in the area of government publications, is it our role to preserve this information, or let the National Archives and the legal deposit libraries worry about this on our behalf?

What are the answers to all these questions?

One possible option for us is to produce a repository of our own, along the lines of the excellent and well-used [Digital Education Resource Archive](#) (DERA), which collects government documents published online in the areas of education. Our aim, similar to DERA's, would be to permanently preserve government documents produced within the remit of our existing collections and to make these available open access in a way that integrates with our own collections and discovery system. I'm very interested to hear from anyone that has thoughts on this, and particularly alternative answers to the questions raised.

