



Language, Professional Culture, and Self-Depiction in Government Documents Librarianship

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abstract: This article studies how government documents librarians describe their field within scholarly publications. Treating published works as primary source texts, it examines language, themes, and self-depiction within academic publications authored by documents librarians, arguing that a qualitative analysis provides insights into the professional culture of the field. The article further posits that the language used and ideas expressed by documents librarians in their writings reflect, reinforce, and shape attitudes and practices within the field. The study concludes that the rhetoric, language, and themes in the writings of documents librarians shape perceptions of the discipline, both positive and negative, among other librarians and the public. Examining how documents librarians define themselves and their field may produce a nuanced understanding of the professional culture in this area of librarianship.

Introduction

Within librarianship, the government documents field has a reputation for being arcane, difficult to master, and intimidating to outsiders. In testimony to a United States Senate committee, expert witness and former Virginia Library Association president Christie Vernon admitted, “I am not a wizard; I am not a Government documents librarian. I think it is an arcane subject for which I have enormous respect.”¹ Vernon further stressed the unique and seemingly mystical skills of documents librarians in a written statement declaring, “I am not a certified Wizard (as I think of the Government Documents Librarians), just a Wizard’s Apprentice.”² Vernon is not alone in this characterization of the documents field as arcane. In *More Book Lust*, librarian Nancy Pearl warns readers that government documents “have their own arcane classification



system.”³ Nancy Herron’s *The Social Sciences*, which was written for a broad academic audience, warns that government documents “can be complicated and intimidating to the novice.”⁴ In Anne Carson’s verse novel *Autobiography of Red*, the protagonist finds “a job in the local library shelving government documents” working “in a basement humming with fluorescent tubes” while tending to volumes characterized by “forlorn austerity.”⁵ These examples, while not exhaustive, provide insights into how many authors outside the documents community depict the field: austere, intimidating, and arcane.

This article studies how government documents librarians describe their own profession within scholarly publications. Recurring themes, phrasing, and self-depiction within published works yield insights into the professional culture of the documents field. The language and themes invoked by documents librarians when describing their specialty reflect their professional cultural identity, which subsequently shapes the attitudes and practices of the discipline. Documents librarians’ wording and ideas are also important because they contribute to perceptions of the field, both positive and negative, among other librarians and the public.

Several consistent themes emerge from the sample of 61 examined texts (29 monographs and 32 articles) written by documents librarians about their field. Foremost, depictions of the government documents profession and community are overwhelmingly positive. Even authors who acknowledge the complex and intimidating aspects of the discipline invariably reassure readers that practice and community support will lead to eventual expertise. Second, when describing their field, documents librarians

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frequently use the terms *intimidating* and *arcane*. This rhetorical choice serves several functions. On the surface, it acknowledges the difficulty researchers, students, and fellow librarians experience when using unfamiliar government materials. At a deeper level, *arcane* implies a mysterious and challenging field that only a select few have mastered. Third, authors frequently emphasize the unique aspects of the government documents community, describing it as a distinct professional culture within librarianship that has its own myths, humor, ethos, and history. This shared cultural link among documents librarians is typically presented as a strength of the field, but some authors suggest it may also be a weakness, as it may lead to isolation from the wider library community.

Finally, authors lament that government documents are underutilized by the public, underappreciated by library administration, and eschewed by other librarians. They declare that the value of government information is not fully understood, resulting in low usage of documents, materials, and services. The need to promote the field is subsequently another common theme. A discussion about non-documents librarians, particularly their perceived avoidance of the documents field, is a common theme to emerge from the examined texts. Most authors assure readers that any librarian can eventually master the specialty with practice, while others suggest that the rhetoric of unique subject mastery and community may dissuade colleagues from exploring the field.

Each of these themes appears consistently across decades and is not unique to a specific period, despite significant changes within librarianship, particularly relating to access and technology. The 14 examined texts (23 percent) that include language of the arcane and intimidation were published between 1984 and 2020. The six texts (10 percent) emphasizing strong bonds within the documents community appeared between 1998 and 2018. The seven texts (11.5 percent) discussing the unique professional culture among documents librarians were published between 1992 and 2020. Thirteen texts (21 percent) dated between 1983 and 2020 express anxiety about how administrators and members of the public view the specialty. Nine texts (15 percent) discussing other librarians' perceptions of the documents field were published between 1977 and 2017. Four texts (7 percent) appearing between 1977 and 2018 declare that documents are underappreciated and need promotion.⁶ Unsurprisingly, all the texts examined include positive language about the field, regardless of publication date. This continuity demonstrates a consistency within the professional culture of documents librarians across more than five decades.

Overall, when writing about their profession, documents librarians depict their field as rewarding and challenging, but distinct from the rest of librarianship due to its specialized knowledge, distinct professional culture, and strong community identity. Despite describing the field with potentially off-putting adjectives, such as *intimidating*, *complicated*, and *arcane*, the same authors emphasize the welcoming and fulfilling aspects of the specialty.

Literature Review

This study is not the first to analyze language and rhetoric within librarianship, though it is unique in its focus on documents librarians. Ronald Day's "Tropes, History, and Ethics in Professional Discourse and Information Science," which examines how language influences professional culture, is particularly important in framing this article. Day finds that language directly shapes the values, beliefs, attitudes, customs, and behaviors of a profession. "Professional discourses," he argues, "tend to align themselves with dominant ideological and social forces by means of language."⁷

Richard Stoddart and Adrienne Lee also provide a "fantasy-theme rhetorical analysis of library science literature and the impact this literature has in constructing the role of librarian" through their study of "language, phrasing, and rhetorical construction of images."⁸ Michael Kicey, focusing on the interactions of academic subject librarians, similarly argues that the practices of librarianship are "acts of communication" shaped by the rhetoric and language used by librarians and their academic colleagues.⁹

Kim Leeder and Maoria Kirker have both examined rhetorical use of the term *traditional library* within the profession,¹⁰ while Hanna Carlsson has studied rhetoric

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surrounding the concept of “Library 2.0” as characterized by increased user participation and usage of social media.¹¹ Shannon Crawford Barniskis has investigated the use of language in public library mission statements,¹² and Elliot Kuecker has studied “the rhetoric in the LIS field surrounding student workers” to identify “the common traits of the dominant rhetoric on student labor in LIS literature.”¹³ Margot Hanson, Cody Hennesy, and Annis Lee Adams have applied textual analysis to examine librarians’ language and professional discourse on Twitter, specifically regarding discussions of “race, diversity, gender, and critical librarianship” at recent Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) conferences.¹⁴ Jacalyn Eddy’s historical study of librarianship from 1880 to 1920 explores the “language of gender” in public librarianship at the turn of the century.¹⁵ Each of these studies, which focus on the influence of language in shaping and defining librarianship, considers the entire library profession from a macro-level perspective. This article, which concentrates exclusively on documents librarians, allows for a detailed and nuanced examination of the professional culture within this specific area of librarianship.

The conceptual framework of this study, which employs a cultural analysis of how its practitioners describe the field, builds upon a large body of literature that examines professional culture and communities. Using Burton Bledstein’s definition of professional culture as a “set of learned values and habitual responses,” this study treats cultural trends expressed by government documents librarians as a shared set of values that both reflect and shape self-identity within the profession.¹⁶ Works examining academic professional culture, such as Cynthia Franklin’s *Academic Lives: Memoir, Cultural Theory, and the University Today*, provide important templates for this study.¹⁷ Franklin offers a close-read analysis of scholars’ memoirs, which she uses as primary source texts, to study how their authors depict and describe the academic profession. This examination, Franklin argues, provides unique insights into how members of the scholarly community view and perceive issues within their field. Other important works that explore professional identity as a cultural construction include Tony Becher and Paul Trowler’s *Academic Tribes and Territories*, Pierre Bourdieu’s *Homo Academicus*, Burton Clark’s “Faculty Culture,” Paul Goodman’s *The Community of Scholars*, Deborah Rhode’s *In Pursuit of Knowledge*, Logan Wilson’s *The Academic Man*, and the 1997 *Daedalus* special issue “The American Academic Profession,” edited by Stephen Graubard.¹⁸ Utilizing this conceptual framework, this article uniquely applies the same analysis of professional culture to government documents librarianship.

Finally, the qualitative aspect of this study differs from other examinations of the government documents profession, which are typically quantitative, statistical, and demographic. In the 2020 article “Who Are ‘We the People’? Pilot Survey Investigating Government Information Professionals,” Kenya Flash and Dominique Hallett survey 284 respondents to provide a demographic snapshot of the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP), the group of libraries that provide free public access to government publications.¹⁹ Lauren Sapp Williams, who administered a questionnaire to 298 staff at 151 academic federal depositories in the Southeast, found “a positive perception of service on the part of government documents librarians.”²⁰ Kathryn Yelinek and Marilou Hinchcliff, while examining the training regimens for interim documents librarians, admit that “beginning government documents librarians are frequently unprepared for



their positions.”²¹ Claudene Sproles and Angel Clemons analyze 75 job postings in the government documents field between 2010 and 2016 on the American Library Association (ALA) JobLIST and on GOVDOC-L, a discussion forum about government information and the FDLP. They find that the focus of these positions has shifted to include other duties, mostly in reference and public services. Their data show that 85 percent of these postings include reference or information literacy duties, with 29 percent involving cataloging responsibilities. Despite this shift, Sproles and Clemons conclude that the “need for subject specialists and professionals to oversee and coordinate depository operations remains steady.”²² To this body of literature, which primarily provides statistical and demographic information about the field, the present article adds a qualitative analysis of how documents librarians view and describe their profession.

Methods

To examine how government documents librarians depict their specialty, this study examines a sample of 29 monographs and 32 journal articles about the profession (see Appendix A and Appendix B). These works, written by documents librarians about government information librarianship, are examined closely as primary source cultural texts. The monographs utilized for this study were identified through WorldCat using the subject headings “Documents Librarians,” “Government Information,” “Government Publications,” and “Federal Depository Library Program.” An exhaustive examination of all relevant monographs was prevented by COVID-19, which limited interlibrary loan access to materials held by partner institutions within the 37-member library consortium Orbis Cascade Alliance.²³ For this reason, a representative sample of monographs was examined. To supplement the monographs chosen for the study, which provide broad overviews of the field, the author also analyzed journal articles by documents librarians that convey perceptions of the specialty. When examining these works as primary sources, one can observe the authors’ own professional self-perceptions. These articles echo many of the themes and phrases used in the monographs.

The initial scope of this study was confined to publications written by documents librarians within the last five years. The resulting sample of 17 texts proved too small for meaningful cultural analysis, however, nor was it large enough to identify significant themes. This limited scope also excluded influential older publications that remain in print, continue to be assigned in graduate courses, and appear in the citations of recent studies. To address these issues, the examination was expanded to include all discovered publications that met the previously defined criteria, regardless of publication date. This approach resulted in a sample set of sufficient size (61) for analysis, of which 40 texts (66 percent) were published in the last 20 years. Of the 29 examined monographs, 5 (17.2 percent) appeared between 1984 and 1989, 3 each (10.3 percent) from 1991 to 1994 and from 1997 to 1999, 5 each (17.2 percent) between 2001 and 2006 and between 2007 and 2013, and 8 (27.6 percent) from 2016 to 2020. Of the 32 examined articles, 5 (15.6 percent) were published between 1974 and 1992, 5 (15.6 percent) between 1996 and 1999, 5 (15.6 percent) between 2000 and 2007, 7 (21.9 percent) between 2008 and 2013, 5 (15.6 percent) between 2015 and 2019, and 5 (15.6 percent) in 2020. Of the total 61 texts examined, 2 (3.3 percent) were published between 1974 and 1977, 7 (11.5 percent) between 1983 and



1989, 12 (19.7 percent) between 1991 and 1999, 16 (26.2 percent) between 2000 and 2009, 7 (11.5 percent) between 2011 and 2015, and 17 (27.9 percent) between 2016 and 2020.

Having selected a sample of monographs and articles to examine, the author noted, compiled, and categorized the trends, themes, and language within the materials with the use of Zotero management software. Drawing upon the conceptual frameworks detailed within the literature review, most notably Stoddart and Lee's study of rhetoric within library science literature, the author analyzed the collected data and identified important themes.²⁴ This focus on published works as primary source documents allows for a deep reading and qualitative examination of cultural trends within the field, particularly relating to how documents librarians view and depict their profession.

Themes

Optimism and Encouragement

Documents librarians are overwhelmingly positive when describing their profession, and favorable descriptions of the field appear in every work reviewed for this study. In "The Poetry of Government Information," Amy Brunvand declares, "Government

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information is not without its poetic side" and "Poetry shows us how government information is expressive of human relationships with the land, oppression and justice, and activism to make the world a better place."²⁵ In the *DttP* column series "Tales from the Trenches," edited by Kenya Flash and Dominique Hallett, a contributor shares that two LIS students were inspired to get tattoos of the FDLP logo after taking Cassandra Hartnett's

government information course at the University of Washington Information School in Seattle.²⁶ In *Government Documents Librarianship*, Lisa Ennis warmly describes the welcoming nature of the community, writing, "Your fellow depository librarians are your greatest asset and resource."²⁷ Even when authors remark upon challenging aspects of the profession, they quickly reassure readers that these obstacles are surmountable. In *Fundamentals of Government Information*, Cassandra Hartnett, Andrea Sevetson, and Eric Forte promise, "You will be pleasantly surprised at how quickly your skill level grows at this game. Do not worry about mastering this art, which takes a lifetime of applied work; in truth, mastery never occurs in the government information world, because governments are ever changing."²⁸ In their revised edition, they further pledge that anyone can "become comfortable with the everydayness of government information."²⁹

Eleven of the monographs examined for this project include no discussion, even in passing, about the potentially negative, intimidating, or arcane nature of documents librarianship.³⁰ Overall, it is not surprising that the surveyed works offer positive depictions of the profession, particularly as the authors are documents librarians. It is nevertheless important to note this universal affinity for the field within the examined texts.



The Arcane

Government documents librarians frequently describe their field as *arcane*. In the preface to Christopher Brown's *Mastering United States Government Information*, Gwen Sinclair writes, "Chris's long experience as a government documents librarian shows through his intricate explication of the arcane world of the federal government, from regulations and laws to patents and data."³¹ Hartnett, Sevetson, and Forte similarly note that documents librarians are "experts in locating sometimes obscure, and frequently specialized and arcane, government information."³² Kate Nevins, in "Order from Chaos: Libraries and Electronic Government Information," writes that FDLP libraries can only be maintained through "a talented pool of specialists, versed in the arcane secrets" of government documents.³³ Writing in 1999, J. Timothy Sprehe speaks of "the arcane world of government information."³⁴

This element of the arcane is not always depicted positively. Joe Morehead, in *Essays on Public Documents and Government Policies*, recalls an instance in which a "sociologist shunned the segregated documents collection in his library because he could not understand the arcane mysteries of the Superintendent of Documents classification scheme and was too embarrassed to ask."³⁵ Describing *Selected U.S. Government Publications*, a biweekly list of new materials issued by the Superintendent of Documents until 1982, Moorhead says that the "bemused reader" often "comes upon arcane entries" there. He writes, "Every issue that I have perused over the last decade has included any number of federal government publications that by no stretch of the most antic and febrile imagination can be considered popular reading."³⁶ Nancy Melin Nelson and Steven Zink, in their *Government Documents and Microforms*, argue there is a need to "remove some of the stigmata [*sic*] of the arcane from the world of federal government publications."³⁷ Patrick Ragains, in *Information Literacy Instruction That Works*, warns, "Government documents collections are multidisciplinary, yet their organization is often arcane, making special efforts necessary to identify information not covered in other databases, indexes and bibliographies."³⁸

Rhetoric of the arcane is used to emphasize the complexity of the field, another common theme addressed by documents librarians. In *Introduction to United States Government Information Sources*, Morehead writes, "The bibliographic apparatus for U.S. government information is complex and unwieldy, a reflection of the materials it attempts to encompass . . . one is reminded of the eponymous protagonist of Tennyson's *Ulysses* who, in the famous poem, viewed experience's vistas with some despair."³⁹ Judith Schiek Robinson issues a similar warning in *Tapping the Government Grapevine*, writing, "The endless tide of change is both dazzling and intimidating."⁴⁰ Jerrold Zwirn states in *Access to U.S. Government Information* that government information is "available at little or no cost to those aware of its existence." He adds that the complexities of the field are such, however, that "the cost in time and effort can act as a deterrent."⁴¹ Bethany Latham's *Finding and Using U.S. Government Information*, which is written for "inadvertent" depository coordinators, describes government documents as "more difficult to locate and effectively use than traditional information sources." She admits, "The amount of government information is vast, and it can be intimidating to the uniniti-



ated."⁴² Writing from a Canadian perspective in their *Government Information in Canada*, Amanda Wakaruk and Sam-chin Li similarly describe government documents as "often complex, rarely obvious, and sometimes elusive."⁴³

This language is also useful in highlighting the unique skills of documents librarians, which can be used to justify the existence of distinct documents units or positions. In "Training for Documents Reference in a Merged Reference Center," Maggie Farrell expresses concern that merging documents departments with reference units will cause "some libraries [to] lose the unique insights and expertise of a documents librarian."⁴⁴ Vickie Lynn Mix declares similar worries in "Fear and Loathing in Library Land," writing, "Research had indicated merging government information reference services with general reference resulted in decline of government publication circulation; decline in perceived need for government information resources [and] decreased satisfaction in government reference."⁴⁵ Descriptions of the field as *arcane* and *intimidating* concisely convey the argument, outlined by Farrell and Mix, that only documents librarians can effectively provide this service.

The rhetorical uses of *arcane* and *intimidating* are not, in these examples, meant to dissuade users from attempting to access government information. Instead, they serve as a concise way to denote the complexities of the field. The rhetoric of the *arcane* also suggests that mastery of the subject is limited to a group of specialists, all members of a distinct community.

Community

Accompanying the rhetoric of the *arcane* is the oft-stated conviction that documents librarians make up a unique and distinct community of master practitioners. Hartnett, Sevetson, and Forte write, "Information professionals who work with government publications appreciate, as perhaps no other group of librarians can, the tidbits of *arcane* knowledge that can assist in helping patrons and colleagues alike."⁴⁶ Kathryn Yelinek and Marilou Hinchcliff make a similar point in "Accidental Government Documents Librarian," declaring, "Government documents librarians occupy a niche within librarianship, one that requires specialized knowledge about a wide range of materials and media."⁴⁷ Lynn Walshak, in "The GPO and the Depository Library Program as Structured Are Needed," argues, "One of the most important reasons for maintaining the FDLP is so that there will be a cadre of people knowledgeable about conditions relative to access to government information for the public and who are sufficiently motivated to see that government upholds this right of the people."⁴⁸

There is also a reoccurring theme that only members of this specialized community fully understand and appreciate the skills and duties of documents librarianship. In encouraging documents librarians to seek assistance from other members of their community, Lisa Ennis writes in *Government Documents Librarianship*, "No one knows what it means to be a depository librarian like other depository librarians . . . All documents librarians are in this together, and we should all be prepared to support each other no matter what our local situation is."⁴⁹



While lauding the strong community identity of documents librarians, some authors note the potentially isolating effects. Barbara Miller warns in “The Truth as We Know It” that the powerful sense of community within documents librarianship can make it difficult to work with other groups within ALA. Miller writes:

We, as documents librarians, spend a lot of time talking about bias being a good thing; and I often use various government agency views on certain topics to explain how different groups will all see a certain event differently, with different issues at stake. Yet, when push comes to shove, we are in there fighting like lions to get our [Government Documents Round Table or GODORT] resolution or our document passed, regardless of other opinions. Why not try to work out a plan that everyone can live with, that doesn’t punish any part of ALA, or one type of library group as the “bad guys.”³⁰

In a 2018 “From the Chair” piece in *DttP*, Shari Laster warns against “self-imposed boundaries” created by documents librarians, explaining:

As library folks who care about government information, we would do very well to look beyond our self-imposed boundaries. Too many draw a hard-and-fast line between publications and records, or insist that government data is too different from government documents to be within the scope of our work, or arbitrarily decide that we can only provide shared, persistent access to publications if GPO [Government Publishing Office, formerly the Government Printing Office] first catalogs them. I am concerned that these barriers cause us to miss the larger picture, which is that work happens in libraries every day that blithely disregards every one of these distinctions, and many more I have not identified here.⁵¹

Overall, the strong sense of community expressed in the examined works might have been anticipated, as the FDLP creates a structured national network through which documents librarians are connected. Other works to investigate professional culture, such as those discussed in the literature review, similarly conclude that many skilled professions develop a distinct community identity. A unique finding within the examined works, however, is the concern that a strong community identity can be potentially isolating.

Government Documents Culture

In their writings, documents librarians depict a rich professional culture, which has its own humor, myths, and norms. In the *DttP* “Tales from the Trenches” series, for example, an anonymous contributor jokes that FDLP eXchange, the system through which libraries trade and discard materials, “should have been called Yenta.gov (someone else came up with Match.gov).”⁵² Robert Lopresti’s “Lost in the Stacks for Forty-One Years” recounts his career as a librarian “in Gov Docs Land.”⁵³ Humor helps in creating a shared professional culture. In “Fear and Loathing in Library Land,” Vickie Lynn Mix argues for the importance of sharing “the lighter side of government information” and “documents

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hilarity," while still recognizing "how utterly serious government documents librarianship can be when it isn't so completely hilarious."⁵⁴

The profession also has notable cultural figures and shared myths. Adelaide Hasse (1868–1953), a librarian at the GPO, has become a shared historic figure. Hasse created the classification method that evolved into the SuDoc (Superintendent of Documents) system, in which materials are arranged by the issuing agency, not by subject. Clare Beck credits Hasse for "rejecting the conventional roles of Madonna of the children's room or small-town Marian the Librarian, [and] she invented a career of professional expertise that gave her a half century of intellectually challenging work."⁵⁵ Bernadette Lear, a librarian and historian of librarianship, describes Hasse as "a minor deity among government documents librarians."⁵⁶ In "U.S. Depository Librarians in Reality and Myth," Jack Sulzer identifies and challenges the six "most cherished concepts" of a "Depository Program Mythology." These concepts, in brief, are:

1. "A popular government without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy; or, perhaps both."
2. "Documents to the People. We are the gateway to government information for government by the people."
3. "Not all depository libraries are created equal, but should be."
4. "The FDLP is not an entitlement program for libraries."
5. "Preserving print preserves access for a large segment of our population."
6. "The FDLP is the 'safety net' for information have-nots' in the electronic age."⁵⁷

In keeping with Sulzer's language of mythology, J. Timothy Sprehe uses religious terminology in his article "The New Heresy," which predicts that some government

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materials will eventually be sold by private publishers. Sprehe warns that subscription-based access to government information, which documents librarians would currently view as "heretical" and contrary to their commitment to make materials freely available to the public, may eventually become the norm. He argues that the profession "will have to face the question whether yesterday's heresy regarding public access is to become today's orthodoxy."⁵⁸ As with the use of the term *arcane*, this language of heresy, orthodoxy, and mythology contributes to

a sense that the documents community is a mysterious, almost religious order as much as a profession. At a basic level, the communal touchstones of myth, humor, and history contribute to a shared professional culture.

Public and Administrative Perceptions

Documents librarians frequently discuss what they perceive as the public's perceptions of their field. Popular views and misunderstanding surrounding government informa-

tion and documents is one recurring theme. In "A Turbulent Time: Government Sources Post-2016 Presidential Election," Alicia Kubas argues that "hyper-partisanship" has damaged the public image of documents and caused "wider distrust of government information."⁵⁹ Edward Herman's *Locating United States Government Information* states, "Most people have misconceptions about the kinds of materials published by the United States government."⁶⁰ In an analysis of Anne Carson's novel in verse *Autobiography of Red*, Amy Brunvand notes that the protagonist's "job shelving government documents in a joyless library basement" is "a poet's fanciful invention of an impossibly drab occupation."⁶¹ In "Toward a New Image," Yuri Nakata writes of attending a nonlibrary conference in which "a prominent speaker" declared that "depository libraries which he had visited were not well organized, that boxes of material were stored in attics or in basements; he implied that, in general, government publications were inaccessible in these libraries—a sad commentary for those depository libraries functioning at a higher level of service."⁶²

The examined texts also give significant attention to library administrators' perceived views of government documents librarianship, particularly regarding the importance of FDLP membership. Peter Hernon and Laura Saunders, in their survey of 30 Association of Research Libraries (ARL) library directors titled "The Federal Depository Library Program in 2023," argue that it is important for directors to understand and appreciate the government information field. This is because library directors are "the individuals who shape a library's strategic direction and have formed an overarching picture of the organization and how the various parts of the library fit together."⁶³ In their article "The Future of the FDLP in Public Libraries," Cynthia Chadwick, Renee Di Pilato, Monique le Conge, Rachel Rubin, and Gary Shaffer also examine library directors' attitudes toward the FDLP. They argue that administrative views of the program are important because "public library directors set the strategic directions for their institutions," and "their opinions about the participation of their libraries in the program are particularly relevant."⁶⁴ In "Democracy in an Electronic Depository World," Elizabeth Hamilton writes that depositories are in danger because "library directors are not immune from the mentality of the 'it's on the web' solution to access," which makes them less likely to support retention of physical materials.⁶⁵ David Heisser makes a similar argument in "Federal Depository Program at the Crossroads." He warns that online access raises "serious doubts" about the "[FDLP] program's future as universal internet access diminishes the special advantages of depository status," which means administrative buy-in is vital.⁶⁶

Documents librarians also voice concerns that library administration may fail to appreciate their professional services. Nelson and Zink warn that the documents field has a "reputation for holding arcane materials that were impossible to identify, uncataloged, underutilized, and overprotected by a group of zealots." As a result, there is "sometimes an inclination on the part of the library administration to skimp on staffing, space allotment and funding to a department that no one understood and that few used."⁶⁷ Lynn Walshak, in "The GPO and the Depository Library Program as Structured Are Needed," similarly writes,

Unfavorable images [of the field] have resulted and been used by various advocacy groups in their arguments intended to bring the GPO, the FDLP and program libraries



into a disadvantaged position. Such issues may have a bearing on whether the institution at which this writer is employed will continue to have the opportunity to participate as a depository library.

Walshak concludes, "Library administrators and depository librarians must not allow unfavorable images such as claimed ineptness and poor service to be touted as proof of a weak [FDLP] program."⁶⁸

Documents librarians also write about students' perceived opinions of the materials. In the *DttP* "Tales from the Trenches" column series, librarians discuss student interactions with government documents. An anonymous contributor writes, "I've told a student what government documents actually are, and that they aren't necessarily just 'stuffy' reports full of data that is difficult to understand, etc." Another shared that "we had a student worker who had to quit being a shelver because she dreamed she was being chased by SuDoc numbers."⁶⁹ Students' views of documents are frequently attributed to lack of proper exposure or instruction. In the article "Government Information," Patricia Reeling and Edward Herman warn that it is vital to avoid "overwhelming or frightening students" during instruction.⁷⁰ Judith Downie states in "The Current Information Literacy Instruction Environment for Government Documents (Pt. 1)" that "documents are not well-represented in general IL instruction." This lack of instruction, Downie contends, means "the researcher frequently misses government documents as a viable resource" due to "unfamiliarity with primary source materials or government agency structures."⁷¹

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The preceding examples suggest that documents librarians worry about the way administrators and the public perceive their field. Their misgivings are not surprising, as library funding and service levels are directly impacted by these considerations. The frequency with which the topic is raised in the writings is notable, however, as it suggests an anxiety within the profession. Documents librarians express concern that unfamiliarity with, and misunderstandings of,

their field create negative perceptions, which in turn impact funding, materials usage, and the general reputation of their specialty.

Perceptions within Librarianship

Another prominent recurring theme is a belief that the documents field intimidates other librarians. In a favorable review of Joe Morehead's seminal *Introduction to United States Public Documents*, for example, Sally Davis writes that "many librarians find documents awkward and intimidating." Davis concludes, however, that Morehead's book will make the subject "approachable and comprehensible to countless librarians."⁷² In the ALA GODORT publication *Managing Electronic Government Information in Libraries*, edited by Andrea Morrison, readers are warned, "For librarians who have not been exposed to them, the very thought of government documents can often be a bit intimidating."⁷³ While

a library science student at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, Robert Lopresti recalls, "[Professor] Walt Fraser gave me the best advice I received there: 'Take a course in government documents, if you can stand it. Most people can't, so there are always jobs.'"⁷⁴ Marilyn Moody, in "Documents Search Strategies and General Reference Search Strategies," writes that "general reference librarians often show both dislike and puzzlement for the seemingly arcane and elaborate process involved in documents reference work."⁷⁵ In "Ten Years of TRAIL [Technical Report and Archive Image Library]," Daureen Nesdill, Laura Sare, Alice Trussell, and Marilyn Von Seggern state, "Historically, many library patrons and librarians have viewed government documents as a collection of unknown and difficult-to-find materials. Their indexing and call numbers often vary from that of other library resources, and finding the key to unlocking those mysteries fell to a select few librarians."⁷⁶ This sentiment is also expressed by Peggy Garvin in *Government Information Management in the 21st Century*, who writes that documents collections are "organized according to their own unique scheme, intimidating even to other librarians, and, therefore, horribly underutilized."⁷⁷ Joseph Hurley, contributing to the same publication, comments, "Government documents have long been viewed by non-documents librarians as hopelessly complex and categorically intimidating. When dealing with a reference question that hints of government documents, non-documents librarians can be quick to hand it over to a government documents librarian."⁷⁸

Documents librarians, while acknowledging that their colleagues may be intimidated by the field, also stress the need to encourage peers to embrace it. In "Training for Documents Reference in a Merged Reference Center," Maggie Farrell tells readers to "demonstrate patience" because "just as our library patrons require patience, so too do other librarians. Documents reference is an intimidating field. A positive and patient attitude will assist other librarians in conquering their fear of government information."⁷⁹ Vickie Lynn Mix, in "Fear and Loathing in Library Land," outlines efforts to make documents less mysterious to colleagues, writing, "Because many of our staff seemed intimidated even by the mention of government documents, our objective [during training] was to introduce objects of an unexpected and unusual nature to demonstrate the vast array of information products distributed through the FDLP." Mix found it "clear that many in the library were indeed mystified by government information and the documents collection." She added, however, "By the end of the session, staff admitted these library resources were not as intimidating as once thought."⁸⁰

George Whitbeck and Peter Hernon, in their survey of public services librarians titled "The Attitudes of Librarians toward the Servicing and Use of Government Publications," write, "The survey found an overwhelmingly positive attitude toward government publications among its respondents. However, this positive finding was accompanied by one to the effect that many public service librarians felt the need of further education in the field of government publications." They also remark upon the practical importance of training non-documents librarians because "librarians unfamiliar with government publications may well shy away from referring users to these sources and from helping users to exploit them." They also suggest that "the much decried lack of use of government publications could be due, in part, to the attitude of public service librarians in depository libraries toward this information resource and their lack of knowledge of the means of exploiting it."⁸¹



Whitbeck and Hernon posit that encouraging colleagues to become engaged in documents librarianship will improve their perception of and appreciation for the field and its practitioners.⁸² Unless more librarians are exposed to the documents field, negative perceptions of the specialty will persist within librarianship.

Underappreciation and Promotion

The reoccurring concern that the documents field is underappreciated has been noted in other sections of this article, particularly regarding perceptions of students,

82 Unless more librarians are exposed to the documents field, negative perceptions of the specialty will persist within librarianship.

administration, the public, and library colleagues. Several authors throughout the examined texts explicitly express concerns about underappreciation. In "Undergraduate Use of Government Information," Amy Brunvand and Tatiana Pashkova-Balkenhol write, "Government documents librarians have long lamented

that their collections are underused and underappreciated."⁸² Connie Hamner Williams's *Understanding Government Information* similarly states, "Government information is vast, complicated, and far too often overlooked as the valuable educational resource that it is."⁸³ Citing studies published as early as 1938,⁸⁴ Whitbeck and Hernon note,

The literature of librarianship is filled with statements bemoaning the lack of use of government publications. All concede that publications from all levels of government offer invaluable information to patrons of libraries and information centers. However, most also point to a pronounced underutilization of these valuable resources.⁸⁵

In "Teaching about Government Information," Dena Hutto argues that underutilization should be combated through publicizing what government documents offer. She writes, "Remember the days when we used to say that government documents were one of the best-kept secrets in the library? It's time to put those days behind us, because government documents librarians can't afford to be content with best-kept-secret status." Hutto continues, "Our administrators, our colleagues in librarianship and other information professions, our faculty and students (if we work at academic institutions), the public, and, of course, students in MLS programs need to learn what we know: that government information is useful and important, not to mention an essential ingredient in our democracy."⁸⁶ This underlying concern that the documents field is misunderstood, underappreciated, and in need of active promotion is one of the most consistent themes within the examined works.

Future Research

The approach used in this article leaves additional avenues for future study. This article focuses solely upon published works, quoting only documents librarians who have expressed their views in a public academic forum. It does not examine how documents librarians describe their profession in unofficial forums, such as conference papers, websites, blogs, and messaging sites. An examination of how librarians talk about their

specialty on discussion forums such as GOVDOC-L and GODORT on ALA Connect, both of which have searchable archives, is a potential area of future exploration.⁸⁷ The theoretical framework utilized in this study, which employs a close reading of texts to examine professional culture, is qualitative by nature. Quantitative studies, possibly through surveys or interviews, might also be conducted to assess perceptions of the documents profession, both among documents librarians and other librarians. Such a study would provide useful statistical data to accompany this article.

Conclusion

Much can be learned by examining how documents librarians describe themselves, their profession, and their relationship with others. Their expressions of optimism and their affection for their field reflects a vibrant professional community. The frequent use of the term *arcane* demonstrates an appreciation and pride in their unique subject mastery, while also hinting at a sense of custodianship and a singular understanding of the materials in their charge. This pride is mirrored in the repeated and consistent assertion that the documents community is distinct within the library profession. Descriptions suggest that the community, while part of librarianship, also stands apart as a unique, distinct, and possibly misunderstood group of experts.

The frequent use of the term *arcane* demonstrates an appreciation and pride in their unique subject mastery, while also hinting at a sense of custodianship and a singular understanding of the materials in their charge.

The ways documents librarians describe their community also reflect a strong sense of belonging, exemplified by Lisa Ennis's statement "We are documents librarians first."⁸⁸ The distinct government documents culture, with its own humor and inside jokes, further shows the richness of the field and the extent to which a well-defined and self-identifying community has developed. There are also hints of professional anxieties. Authors express concerns that their materials go unused, that administrators and library users undervalue their services, and that their library colleagues neither fully understand nor appreciate their field. Finally, they feel pride that their library colleagues, despite their own areas of expertise, cannot fully crack the arcane secrets of documents librarianship—at least, until they take the time and effort to learn the craft.

The ways in which documents librarians describe and perceive their field directly shape their professional practice and inform how others view them. The overwhelming enthusiasm expressed by documents librarians for their work, combined with the frequent assurances that the community welcomes new members, undoubtedly contribute to the community-oriented ethos of the field. While Carson's language of "forlorn austerity" suggests that the discipline lacks conviviality, the enthusiasm of documents librarians for their subject brings the field a well-earned reputation for warm congeniality.

Other aspects of the professional culture of government documents have both positive and potentially negative impacts. A shared belief in a distinct community creates strong professional bonds between documents librarians, though it may also cause feel-



ings of isolation from the rest of librarianship. An emphasis on arcane and unique subject mastery creates professional pride, yet it may also cause documents librarians to view themselves as gatekeepers who limit access rather than as stewards who manage and preserve their collections. Describing documents collections as extremely complex may in some cases be accurate, while also causing administrators to view FDLP membership as burdensome. The well-defined professional culture of documents librarianship is a strength of the field, though it may have unintended consequences. "For the uninitiated," Amanda Wakaruk writes, "government information librarians sometimes appear to be speaking an unintelligible dialect of the language of librarianship. For government information librarians, it can sometimes be difficult to explain the issues, challenges, and projects that preoccupy us."⁸⁹

Finally, the way documents librarians describe their specialty, both among themselves and to those outside the field, will shape future membership of the community. Forming public perceptions of the profession is especially important when attracting new members to the field, particularly among those who have only just entered librarianship. As Laura Sare, Stephen Bales, and Bruce Neville have demonstrated, perceptions of the specialty are important in shaping the careers of early academic librarians.⁹⁰

Contrary to fears that the profession is shrinking, new documents librarians are needed. Between 2007 and 2018, according to ALA JobLIST data, 299 job postings listed "Government Documents" as a "job function." Of these, 121 (40.4 percent) were posted between 2014 and 2018.⁹¹ Documents librarianship, despite abundant employment opportunities, suffers from the same lack of diversity found throughout the wider library profession. In a demographic survey of the documents profession, Kenya Flash and Dominique Hallett determined that of 284 respondents, 208 identified as female, 63 as male, 3 as nonbinary, 7 "prefer not to say," and 3 left the question blank. In the same study, "247 identified as white, 13 Black or African American, 5 Asian, and 13 other."⁹² These figures mirror larger demographic studies of librarianship. The 2017 ALA member survey found that 81 percent of the membership identified as female in both 2014 and 2017. In the 2014 survey, 87.1 percent described themselves as white; the figure was 86.7 percent in 2017.⁹³ Similar demographic data are reflected by Data USA, which pulls figures from the United States Census. Data USA presents the library profession as 82.1 percent women and 81.3 percent white in 2017.⁹⁴ The language of the arcane may earn documents librarians the status of wizards among their peers, but the tendency to focus on the difficult and potentially isolating aspects of the field may also dissuade early career librarians from entering the documents profession.

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Appendix A

Journal Articles Examined for This Study

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Appendix B

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Notes

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