

Examining the Conceptualization of Government Publications on the World Wide Web: A Genre Theory Inspired Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

■ Background Information & Research Questions

This study proposes a conceptual framework inspired by *genre theory* and the methods of *phenomenology* and *grounded theory* to examine the conceptualizations of government publications on the World Wide Web. “Government publications,” traditionally perceived as physical and tangible items, have become mainly a *conceptual unit* for librarians and government agency staff to select Web contents to populate the digital depositories of state publications. The conceptualization of Web-based government publications is an excellent case to examine how the social and the technological aspects of government information interact on the Web, and how the involved parties use the existing conceptions of government publications to reinstate orders in the uncertain and amorphous Web environment.

In the United States, several policy initiatives in the 1990s have greatly reduced the numbers of

print government publications. Government agencies at the federal and state levels have now turned to Web publishing as a major means of information dissemination. Web-based government information greatly challenges the depository library practices established on print and tangible publications. One of the major challenges is to determine what to preserve – and who gets to decide and how. Existing preservation initiatives vary greatly in this respect. Most of the state-level programs do not attempt to capture everything on the agency sites, but preserve only those qualified as “government publications”; the goals are to continue the traditional missions of depository library systems. Questions arise, however, because what count as “publications” (and why) are not always clearly indicated in the selection policies, and it is often left to selectors’ discretion.

Two selection models exist in the current selection practices. In the *active selection* model, the states (including Connecticut, New Mexico, and Wisconsin) use an externally-developed digital repository service such as the *OCLC Digital Archive* to capture and store the digital publications. The digital depository librarians actively discover, identify, and select “publications” from agency Web sites to populate their state depositories. Texas, on the other hand, is representative of a *passive selection* model. Its home-grown system automatically harvests Web contents from agency sites based on the metadata assigned by agency staff at the “publication” level. The digital depository librarians rarely review and select the captured contents.

In both cases, the concept of “government publications” is the key to the inclusion/exclusion of

certain Web contents in the state digital depositories. It suggests the need to examine how the concept of government publications mediates and influences the identification and selection for digital depositories. Further, the previous study also suggested the differences in who select (librarian select vs. agency staff select) may have significant social consequences in the permanent access to government information. The goals of the current study are thus twofold. First, it seeks to systematically compare government information librarians' and agency staff's perceptions of "government publications"; and second, it seeks to demonstrate how the concept of government publications affects the discovery and identification of Web publications in the *librarian-initiated publications discovery (LIPD)* activities. The research questions include:

- RQ1: What are the commonly held perceptions of government publications among government information librarians and agency staffers?
 - RQ1a: What do librarians mean by government publications?
 - RQ1b: What do agency staffers mean by government publications?
 - RQ1c: What are the similarities/differences in the conceptualizations?
- RQ2: How do the perceptions of government publications influence the LIPD activities, and vice versa?
 - RQ2a: How do the perceptions of *government publications as a genre* influence the identification and selection of a "publication" from an agency Web site?

- RQ2b: How do the perceptions of the *genres of government publications* (as manifested in the typologies of “publication types”) affect the identification and selection of Web publications?

■ The Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that will guide the empirical investigation is inspired by genre theory, phenomenology, and grounded theory. The modern genre theory emphasizes the social context of a text, theorizing *genres* as “institutionalized templates for social actions.” Genres are best viewed as a form of *social institutions* for recurrent socio-rhetorical situations. Genre perceptions are the social cognition shared by the members of a discourse community. Genres enable and constrain discourse practices and convey a certain ideology or worldview. Similar to other social institutions, genres are characterized by the *duality of structure* as Giddens’s *structuration theory* suggests. Although genres are relatively stable constructs, they are also dynamic and adaptive to user needs and will evolve over time as a result of environmental changes.

Genre theory fits this study well in that government publications are conventionally recognized as a unique resource with special features in the *form, substance, and communicative purpose*. The view of *genres as structuration device* allows for the observations on how the concept of government publications changes or reproduces itself from the print to the Web environment.

Findings from the previous study suggest that the working of genres on the conceptualization of government publications should be examined at two levels. First, existing state-level programs emphasize the selection of “government publications” for inclusion in the digital depositories; this suggests *government publications as a genre* – distinguishing “publications” from “non-publications” (Web contents that selectors do not see qualified as government publications). Second, existing selection practices rely heavily on using *publication types* (e.g., annual reports, statistics, directories, etc.) to identify eligible Web contents. Because each publication type can be viewed as a sub-genre of government publications, it suggests the need to examine how the *genres of government publications* mediate and affect the conceptualization of government publications in the dynamic Web context.

The methodologies of phenomenology and grounded theory further inform a two-tier framework that explores two different aspects of conceptualization. First, *phenomenology*, an interpretive methodology for studying the “meanings” of a phenomenon, inspires the view of *conceptualization as interpretations* (“conceptualization” as noun). RQ1 aims at revealing the librarians and agency staffers’ perceived meanings of “government publications.” Second, grounded theory, which emphasizes social interactions, suggests *conceptualization as processes* (“conceptualization as verb”). RQ2 examines how digital depository librarians of the active selection model conceptualize government publications in LIPD activities. The mapping of the conceptual & methodology framework is summarized in the table below.

The Mapping of the Conceptual Framework & Methodologies

	Tier 1	Tier 2
Phenomenon of Interest	<p>Conceptualization as interpretations (RQ1)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meanings of government publications for librarians and agency staff • Similarities and differences between the two groups 	<p>Conceptualization as processes (RQ2)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying and distinguishing “publications” from non-publications • Identifying “publications” via “publication types”
Methodology	Phenomenological inquiry	Grounded Theory
Study Participants	<p>Two communities of practices (in Wisconsin)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government info. librarians <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Web publication seekers • Librarians in depository libraries • Government agency staff <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Web content creators • Content approvers / publishers • Print publications managers • Public information officers 	<p>Digital depository librarians in the states that use OCLC Digital Archive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Web publication seekers • Other supporting librarians
Research focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reveal the “essential structure” of government publications • Compare and contrast the meanings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe LIPD processes in study sites, including the methods, procedures, patterns, and the

	perceived by the two communities	<p>general context of such practices.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe how publications are distinguished from non-publications. • Describe how the concept of “publication types” mediates LIPD. • Describe how LIPD activities reinforce or reshape the concept of government publications.
Data collection method	Phenomenological interviewing	In-depth interviewing
Unit of Analysis	Group level	Site level (a site being a state)
Sampling	Purposeful / Snowballing sampling	Purposeful / Theoretical sampling