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Free Government Apps: Fast, Fun and Informative

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Photo by Helga Motley



Dotty Ormes is the Government Information/Instruction, Political Science, English and Shakespeare Studies Librarian at Southern Oregon University. She is also a professional storyteller and has been a featured teller at regional storytelling festivals in California and the Pacific Northwest. Dotty holds a BFA in Theater, an MLS and an MA in Storytelling in Education. In 2009 while serving as Government Documents Librarian at New Mexico State University, Dotty created “Slaves, Sidekicks and Healers: Women’s Stories Collected by the WPA.” The hour long storytelling program based on oral histories from the Library of Congress *American Memory* site fulfilled a community outreach requirement for grant supported “Soul of a People” events. Dotty continues to explore the use of arts related government information in her position at Southern Oregon University.

Federal government apps and mobile sites are readily available and provide great potential for engaging young people at all levels. I teach government information to incoming freshman at Southern Oregon University. When I took a poll in spring of 2012, I discovered that about 50 percent of our students were using a smart technology device of some kind. By fall, 80 percent were using either a smart phone or tablet or, in many cases, both devices to access their research. Unfortunately many were also using Google almost exclusively. In the fall of 2012, I set up an interactive classroom in the government stacks. Using 30 iPads and free government apps, I am able to combine instruction about using both the paper and electronic versions of Congressional hearings and agency reports with the use of government apps for other materials. The transition to smart technology is a game-changer in how students search and, by initiating the classroom in the stacks, my goal is to show students some easy basics of government research while teaching them their role in the democratic process.

Basic Apps/Mobile Sites

For basic research on a variety of topics we start with the www.USA.gov mobile site. This site searches both state and federal information and far surpasses Google in relevancy for my student’s curricular needs. I also show students how to access full-text online Government Accountability Office reports using the GAO app (<http://tinyurl.com/mc96w96>) for information on controversial issues. Many of our students are entering the health professions and discover that the PubMed mobile site (<http://tinyurl.com/6kztyp9>) is excellent for their research. During my introductory classes I also give the students a chance to interact and have some fun using the Smithsonian’s MEanderthal (<http://tinyurl.com/342474o>), an app that allows you to transform your friend to an early hominid, or the Smithsonian Channel app (<http://tinyurl.com/kpo9m2q>) for fascinating videos on science and social research. During the instruction, students new to the iPad learn



how to navigate the technology and students who are already tech savvy eagerly jump in to help their friends. A large percentage of high school and college students have smart technology and this type of instruction gives them the opportunity to learn about government resources that are freely available for research while having fun in the process. The iPad also allows me as the instructor to set up a more interactive class atmosphere in which students use the tablet to take notes, email documents to themselves and pair/share with other students.

Apps for Critical Thinking and Student Engagement

Why use government apps and mobile sites? For one thing, they are free and there is an abundance of them. There is a good chance that students will find some of these apps on their own, so a guided tour is a proactive way to teach them the value of free government information and how it can be utilized for research. They also learn that these tools and government agency sites with many full text articles are available to them after graduation when they no longer have access to fee-based library databases. They become more sophisticated searchers and learn that Google is not their only option.

Government apps provide an opportunity for a student to quickly travel the distance between her own environment and another world that she may not have previously experienced. A good example of this potential is the Vantage Point mobile site (<http://nmai.si.edu/vp/>) from the newest Smithsonian museum, the National Museum of the American Indian which opened in 2004. This app provides a fascination peek into the museum's 2010 exhibition of Native American art. The exhibition is organized around broader themes such as "Personal Memory and Identity." Fabric artist Marie Watt, a graduate of Willamette University and Yale, is one of the featured artists. She discusses her work in a short video in which students can see images of her fabric art piece, *In the Garden*, and watch her leading museum attendees in their own sewing circle where they create an art piece together. Students who see this may be inspired to try setting up a creative sewing circle of their own in which they can learn about co-creation and community.

Another multi-media option available from the Smithsonian is the Infinity of Nations app (<http://tinyurl.com/n792h6w>), also from the National Museum of the American Indian. This app includes images of Native American dress with sound and text descriptions that will inspire students to learn more and try creating replicas of the objects depicted. For students who have not had an opportunity to go to the various Smithsonian museums, the app allows them an interactive peek into the rich cultural identity of our nation. The Smithsonian is only one of many government entities with multimedia educational resources.

The NASA Visualization Explorer app helps students to imagine the views in outer space and gives them text information on space phenomena and the effects of the earth's atmosphere. A video with musical accompaniment is included with each topic. For example, there is a simulation of what Hurricane Katrina looked like from above in a NASA climate model. This is created with both video and stills so that students can get a sense of the whole pattern or look at individual pieces of the puzzle. Each one of these image/video shows can trigger project ideas for students and gives them the potential for creating multimedia depictions of their world. Study of the patterns of Hurricane Katrina can lead to deeper study of climate change.

For students interested in Ecology and the Environment, the EPA mobile site is a good starting place to get ideas for projects addressing environmental needs. The site has



a simple interface. In “Today’s Top Stories,” students will find information on the most current environmental concerns. Right now Climate Change is at the top of the list. When students goes to the Climate Change page, they see a short text about the basics of climate change and at the bottom of the page there are hot links to more detailed information on topics such as greenhouse gas emissions and the science of climate change. Students can also link to an interactive multimedia gallery, where they can try out the Greenhouse Gas Emissions Calculator to predict the effect of their own individual emissions. A student then could create a classroom project, interviewing her peers and having them take the test and then calculating the class emissions as a whole. Student can also get their families involved since they will have to estimate real costs of gas, oil and electricity used in the home. This can lead into discussions of how to make less impact on the environment and debates about what students are willing to give up versus what they want to keep in terms of behaviors that negatively affect the climate. The EPA site has its own list of useful apps such as the “My Right to Know” app. Students can enter the address of their school or home to see a map that pinpoints which facilities in the area report to the Toxic Release Inventory or have special permits for hazardous waste. These types of interactive exercises have great potential for jumpstarting creative critical thinking in a classroom.

Fun and Convenience in the Government Search

The apps I have described are suitable for younger students with teacher or parental guidance. For students

who are not familiar with the technology, the MEandertal app from the Smithsonian is an excellent interactive experience that helps students become comfortable with the iPad. The app is created so that a pair of students working together can take pictures of one another. The photographer then asks the subject to choose one of four early hominids. The subject’s picture transforms before their eyes. At the end the students can read a short description of the early human and then can save the



Students learn functions of the iPad by transforming themselves into early hominids using Smithsonian’s MEandertal app.



picture or post it to Facebook. I have used this app for my freshman university studies group to help them learn the functions of the iPad and have fun while doing it.

When working with undergraduates, I find that students respond well to the convenience of searching the www.USA.gov mobile site to find government information on their topics. They get the typical features of a Google search such as the ability to search with natural language and find instant results plus the added benefit of high relevancy and direct links to both state and federal government agencies and publications. The most important aspect of searching for government information is the understanding of the agency hierarchies. When searching www.USA.gov, students come to that understanding painlessly because their results are what point them to the agency they need. Many students will find full text PDFs during the search that they can immediately download to the iPad. They can then search within the PDF for key words and phrases and annotate the document using a PDF annotation app. Many government agencies make full-text PDFs available on their publications page.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) app is a good example of a government app that makes full text easily available to the student. The most current reports download easily and are full-text searchable on the iPad. Older reports found through the search function are also accessible through an extra step. Students cannot download these directly but must copy/paste the title into the Notepad on the iPad. This action essentially pastes a link that the student can then e-mail to herself. Then the student can access the PDF from email and continue to work with it as necessary. The GAO Reports are succinct, often target controversial topics and sometimes contain relevant statistics that student can use for their research. The titles of these reports are very evocative (e.g. States' Laws and Requirements for Concealed Carry Permits Vary across the Nation <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-12-717>) and each report has a highlights page that gives a brief explanation of why the GAO did the study, what the GAO found and/or recommendations from the GAO.

The PubMed mobile site is an excellent source for students who are going into the health professions. The navigation of the site is simple and it is very clear when full text of these peer-reviewed research articles is available. The user can filter by free full text at the top of the results list. Students will be able to download PDFs and annotate them as explained above. There is also a link to the standard PubMed web page where students can access information about clinical trials or limit their search to a specific topic by choosing Topic Specific Queries link. This is an excellent site for any user interested in medical research.

Most government apps and mobile sites can be accessed at the www.USA.gov Mobile Apps Gallery at <http://apps.usa.gov/>. Some apps can be found only at specific government agency pages. Many are also available through iTunes. Bear in mind that occasionally the apps may crash and need a reload. The most important thing that I emphasize with my students is that these apps and mobile sites are just another tool for them to use alongside the books, paper documents and other computer-based applications with which they are already familiar. 

