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Learning to Live Without a *Statistical Abstract*: Thinking about Future Access to Government Information

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Learning to Live Without a *Statistical Abstract*: Thinking about
Future Access to Government Information

What Happened to the Statistical Abstract?

Twenty-four years ago, in 1987, I made a presentation called “Basic Ready Reference: Documents that a Reference Librarian Cannot Live Without” at a meeting of the Iowa Library Association Government Documents Round Table. My top recommendation was the [Statistical Abstract of the United States](#), that annual compendium of data so familiar and indispensable to American librarians everywhere. Twelve years ago, in 1999, I made a similar presentation at the NLA/NEMA Annual Conference, and again the *Statistical Abstract* took its place as the preeminent resource.

The title of my presentation today, “Learning to Live Without a *Statistical Abstract*,” signals that our gathering this morning is something of a memorial. The *Statistical Abstract*, born in 1878 and published annually thereafter, may well be dead, a victim of cuts to the U.S. Census Bureau contained in the House of Representatives’ 2012 Appropriations bill for Commerce, Justice, and Science. The U.S. Census Bureau anticipates that the cuts will likely dismantle the entire Statistical Compendia division, so other stalwarts such as the [State and Metropolitan Area Data Book](#), the [County and City Data Book](#), the [USA Counties web database](#), [Current Industrial Reports](#), and the [Consolidated Federal Funds Report](#) will also be discontinued ([Kelley, 2011](#)).

Two months ago, at the Nebraska State Data Center conference at UNO, I sat for lunch with Jerry O’Donnell, who manages the Partnership and Data Services office at the Denver Regional Census Center, and he confirmed that the demise of the Statistical Compendia branch is almost certainly a done deal.

This is a big deal for libraries and researchers for several reasons:

- because we must look to alternative sources for important information that has been relatively easy and convenient to find;
- because we must look to alternative sources for important information that has been distributed in a free or relatively low-cost manner;
- because it raises important issues concerning to public access to government information, especially in light of how much we depend on that information to inform our understanding of our society, the economy, and public policy.

Let’s take a look at the [blue](#) sheet in the handout packet. I copied several tables from the 2011 *Statistical Abstract* to provide a basic sense of its usefulness:

- [Table 772. Patents and Trademarks: 1990 to 2009](#): table with 6 most recent years and three earlier, 5-year intervals. Source note includes URL plus “and unpublished data.”
- [Table 774. Copyright Registration by Subject Matter: 2000 to 2009](#). Source note to Copyright Office *Annual Report*, but no URL.
- [Table 1239. Adult Participation in Selected Leisure Activities by Frequency: 2009](#). Source note gives URL to Mediarmark Research & Intelligence, a private market research firm. The data lives behind a pay wall.

- [Table 1240. Household Pet Ownership: 2006](#). Source note cites AVMA, privately published with prices ranging from \$174 for a member download to \$279 for a non-member softcover copy.

For librarians and researchers, the *Statistical Abstract* provides not only immediate access to data, it also provides valuable leads via the source notes. The *Statistical Abstract* includes both public and private sources. In the case of private sources, it gives you a glimpse of data that may reside behind a pay wall. The cryptic “unpublished data” gives a clue to when it is time to contact an agency directly.

The 2011 *Statistical Abstract* includes 1,407 tables, which address an impressive range of topics related to government, the economy, business, politics, and social concerns. Robert J. Samuelson wrote an op-ed piece in the *Washington Post* which starts, “If you want to know something about America, there are few better places to start than the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* ([Samuelson, 2011](#)). If it has been awhile since you have browsed through a *Statistical Abstract*, or if it is a resource new to you, then I think it would be well worth your time to become reacquainted or acquainted with it.

Federal Depository Libraries have received paper and CD-ROM copies of the *Statistical Abstract* each year at no charge. The U.S. Government Printing Office [online bookstore](#) sells 2011 paper copies for \$39.00 and CD-ROM copies for \$35.00. The U.S. Census Bureau provides free online access, including PDF and Excel spreadsheet files, and they have an [online archive of PDF copies](#) extending back to 1878. For over a decade, Criss Library at UNO has purchased a [large-print edition from Bernal Press](#), because it is easier to read and photocopies better. It is well worth the \$65.00 investment.

In terms of bang-for-the-buck (or even bang-for-no-buck-at-all) the *Statistical Abstract* has been a bargain for libraries. However, I think the market price understates the value-added component of what it does. For example, the Source notes often send you to a website where data can be found, but once you start looking, you may discover that the data must somehow be mined or distilled. The neat and tidy table in the *Statistical Abstract* stands evidence to staff at the Census Bureau investing effort in evaluating, managing, and presenting the data. When data reside behind a commercial pay wall, then we must thank the Census Bureau for giving us the lead and providing a glimpse to help us decide if it is worth going further.

I hope that by now I have given you cause to regret the passing of the *Statistical Abstract*, but remember it is only one of the publications we may lose with the dismantling of the Census Bureau’s Statistical Compendia Division. I do not have time today to review all the affected programs, but the demise of the [Consolidated Federal Funds Report](#) really hurts. I made copies of the 2009 data for Lancaster County, which you have as one of the handouts. Browse through that for a moment and then ponder these questions: How would you like to try finding this on your own? All the different departments and agencies, all the different programs, neatly summarized at the geographic level of a county? My mind just boggles, and to my knowledge, at this point there is no good alternative source for this data. [USASpending.gov](#) probably comes closest by providing a valuable window into Federal contract awards, but the presentation of data there does not work well for geographic consolidation and summary. In addition, several of the data series feeding into the *Consolidated Federal Funds Report* look to be absent from [USASpending.gov](#).

I will say more about alternative sources in a few minutes, but there is another value-added component to the work of the Statistical Compendia Division which merits attention, and that is the potential loss of expertise and the impact on citizens’ understanding of their government. The staffers who gather,

compile, process, manage, and present the data develop a deep knowledge of the workings of agencies across the government, and they develop a network of colleagues who work with them in sharing and understanding the data. They are professionals at what they do, and I think that our policy-makers benefit from their expertise as they work through the issues of the day.

Jerry O'Donnell, our colleague at the Census Bureau who I mentioned earlier, tells of a workshop for Congressional staff where they examined the *Consolidated Federal Funds Report*. Their response was something on the order of "You're kidding! We had no idea this was available." Consistent and reliable data serve as part of the infrastructure of 21st Century government, and I fear that this component of infrastructure may suffer a spiral into the dilapidation which afflicts highways, bridges, and airports across the country.

As you may imagine, when news broke in March that the *Statistical Abstract* was on the chopping block, professional organizations such as the [ALA Government Documents Round Table](#) encouraged a campaign of contacting Congress to express concern. You can even find Facebook pages (click [here](#) for an example). [GOVDOC-L](#) distributed much information and included examples of letters to send in support of the *Statistical Abstract*. As of today, these efforts appear to have fallen on deaf ears, so I really do need to return to the title of my presentation here: Learning to Live Without a Statistical Abstract.

Alternatives to the Statistical Abstract

Please do not get your hopes up, or at least not very much. There is no truly good alternative to the *Statistical Abstract* in terms of providing both convenience and breadth. There are commercial services such as [ProQuest's Statistical DataSets](#) (purchased from Lexis-Nexis in 2010) which can be quite good, but they may prove too expensive for many libraries. In fact, I find it hard to think of any commercial resource built largely with publicly-funded data to be a reasonable alternative for the *Statistical Abstract*. I do not approve when information paid for by taxpayers ends up exclusively behind pay walls. Also, very practically, when the Census Bureau abandons compiling certain statistics, will private entities pick up the slack? At a cost that libraries or anyone can afford? Who can know at this point?

We can think of the *Statistical Abstract* as a fundamental resource, so perhaps we should think in terms of two questions fundamental to any librarian hunting for information:

- Who would care enough to go to the trouble and expense of compiling the information?
- Who would have reason to be willing to give away the information, or at least charge a manageable cost?

When Dr. Becky Pasco invites me to meet with her Reference classes, I usually pose these questions and demonstrate their utility by examining the website of a shopping mall (for example, [Westroads Mall](#) in Omaha). In the area devoted to leasing information, the management company often provides demographic and market reports, sometimes including useful maps. They have an interest in giving this information away, because they want to sign new leaseholders. Librarians need to cultivate a mindset and skills to ferret out helpful information, sometimes in unusual or unexpected places. I find these kinds of sources too easy to miss if I rely only on general Internet search engines.

Somewhat ironically, [Appendix I of the 2011 Statistical Abstract](#) (pages 879-899) should prove very helpful. We should become familiar with these 21 pages, entitled *Guide to Sources of Statistics, State Statistical Abstracts, and Foreign Statistical Abstracts*, because they provide a sort of Greatest Hits directory of organizations and publications examined during the compilation of the *Statistical Abstract*. The more careful among us will also find [Appendix III, Limitations of Data](#) a helpful guide to understanding the sources. The *Statistical Abstract* will remain a starting place for some time to come, though eventually it will age out. So will I for that matter, but I think I am still good for awhile.

Our time today does not permit an extensive tour through a lot of statistical sources, but I will recommend four Federal sources and six Nebraska sources that I consider indispensable. Taken together, at least in my experience, they evoke the [Pareto Principle](#), in which 80% of the statistical questions I address can be handled by 20% of the sources. The 80-20 Rule obtains even in the Internet age, long tails notwithstanding.

Federal sources

U.S. Census Bureau <http://www.census.gov>
Review the [Subjects A-Z directory](#) and launch from there.

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics <http://www.bls.gov>
Somewhat grim reading during this Great Recession, but also make note of the price and spending data.

Economic Report of the President <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/eop/>
The best annual alternative to the *Statistical Abstract* for basic national-level economic information.

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service <http://www.ers.usda.gov/>
In my view, the USDA ERS is terribly underappreciated. Explore especially the publications and data pertinent to [Diet, Health, and Safety](#) and [Food and Nutrition Assistance](#).

Honorable mentions

Data.gov <http://www.data.gov>
A great source for data sets, but you need to know what to do with them. This is not a typically a place to go for convenient summary data.

FedStats <http://www.fedstats.gov/>
For a decade or so, the most comprehensive directory to Federal statistics on the Internet, but lack of funding and maintenance have considerably eroded it.

Nebraska sources

Nebraska Department of Economic Development, Data and Research

<http://www.neded.org/business/data-a-research>

We used to call this the *Nebraska Data Book*. Despite some format changes it remains a *Statistical Abstract* for Nebraska.

Nebraska Department of Labor, Office of Labor Market Information

<http://networks.nebraska.gov/analyzer/default.asp>

Nebraska's equivalent of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

UNL Bureau of Business Research

<http://www.bbr.unl.edu/>

Publishes research spanning the full range of Nebraska's economy.

UNO Center for Public Affairs Research

<http://www.unomaha.edu/~cpar/>

U.S. Census data, mined and distilled for Nebraska.

UNL Center for Applied Rural Innovation

<http://cari.unl.edu/>

If you are not familiar with reports derived from the Nebraska Rural Poll, you really need to add them to your toolkit.

Nebraska Public Power District, Community Profiles

<http://sites.nppd.com>

The community profiles emphasize concerns related to economic development, but you may be surprised at the breadth of what they encompass.

Be sure to remind the audience that a PDF copy of the presentation is [available on Slide Share](#) along with the other 2011 NLA/NEMA Conference files. The PDF is peppered with links, so that anyone can easily explore these sources and websites.

References

Kelley, Michael. (2011, March 28). *Statistical Abstract* faces an untimely death. Library Journal.com (http://www.libraryjournal.com/lj/home/891422-264/bill_passed_by_house_would.html.csp, retrieved, 2011, September 23).

Samuelson, Robert J. (2011, August 21). Don't kill America's databook. The Washington Post.com (http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/dont-kill-americas-databook/2011/08/21/gIQAGJwBVJ_story.html), retrieved 2011, September 23).