

Digital amnesia: challenges of government online

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Over 150 participants from Australian states and territories and New Zealand attended the Digital Amnesia seminar, hosted by ALIA and sponsored by the National Library of Australia and the National Archives of Australia, on Thursday 21 April 2005.

The event was organised to discuss and identify issues relating to digital government publications and was requested by the Peak Bodies Forum — a meeting of representatives of peak library organisations which identifies significant issues facing the Australian library sector and has developed a national plan of action.

Key issues that emerged during the day were:

- The Australian Government is now primarily online as part of the Government Online strategy — publishing is predominantly online, services have moved more slowly to online delivery, and the strategic issues now emerging for consideration reflect a maturing in assessing online delivery.
- A new set of questions needs to be asked about online services and publications, including whether appropriate technology and delivery strategies are being used.
- The aspiration of placing all services and publications online is near; however, whether the delivery method is appropriate has yet to be measured.
- Complex issues exist in relation to audience needs — some, such as health care consumers, have a wide range of information needs for accurate, detailed information.
- Analyses of types of users, such as that done by ABS, provide more insights, including that new or novice users require greater assistance.
- Service models for resources and e-government services are still in development and need to evolve to meet changing understanding of consumer need and profile.
- Legal issues, including the use of creative commons concepts, should be explored to ensure access to government resources.
- Libraries, particularly public libraries, can enhance access and utilisation of e-government. However, adequate access through public terminals and support through library staff assistance require greater funding.
- Future resource discovery tools are likely to be influenced through the semantic web — these tools will rely on metadata which need to be intelligently and accurately applied.
- Guidelines are required to ensure that government publications are reported to the Australian Government Information Management Office (AGIMO) and the National Library of Australia to enable information about these publications to be made available to the public in an acceptable and useful format.
- The publishing process needs to incorporate the supply of information for resource discovery to support access and to utilise cross-linkages.
- Permanent access needs to be addressed urgently, before more information and publications are lost — AGIMO, the National Archives and the National Library all have a contribution to make in resolving this problem.
- Ongoing management of resources is required to prevent 'link rot', and to ensure that, as organisations change, their resources/publications remain accessible.
- The National Library of Australia needs to have the right to collect, ensure access to and preserve electronic publications of all Australian government agencies.

Patrick Callioni, division manager, AGIMO, Department of Finance and Administration, gave the keynote speech. He described the prolific nature of current Australian government publishing and the federated approach where all agencies have responsibility for their own publishing. The overall policy is to make all government publications and services available online. The closure of government bookshops, due to lack of use, has led to a rethink in the roles and issues of providing access to government publications. Critical issues include understanding what a publication is — including new forms — and taking actions to overcome any possibility of loss of electronic publications.

Patrick Callioni attributed the cause of digital amnesia to the decrease in hard copy, increased electronic communication, such as e-mail, and inadequate preservation of it, with poor recordkeeping and data management practices. He identified two problems — discovery and retention. While metadata provide the basis for the underlying structure for discovery, he proposed that a semantic web would emerge in the longer term based on alternative forms of data.

Key papers from the seminar will soon be available at <http://conferences.alia.org.au/seminars/>.

Many useful suggestions were made in the seminar evaluation forms and ALIA will be working with different organisations to take up some of the issues raised. ■



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