

# The 'Jones Report' unveiled

## Australia as an Information Society: grasping new paradigms

Our readers will recall (*inCite* Vol 11, No 17, 29 October 1991) that a House of Representatives Standing Committee for Long Term Strategies has been examining the issue of Australia as an information society. Its first report, dated May 1991, was discussed at the General Council meeting in June. ALIA will respond to it, and is organising a national forum to examine it more closely. A second report, *The Role of Libraries/Information Networks*, has now been published.

Meanwhile it may interest those who have not yet seen this report to have a little more background on its findings. The Standing Committee's terms of reference were to inquire into and report on:

- the desirability of adopting a National Information Policy;
- equity in information access and transfer;
- the dimension of the 'information explosion';
- questions of personal privacy and national sovereignty;
- 'information' as a factor in employment, production and export;
- libraries as an area of national need and responsibility; and
- the access of Members of Parliament to adequate information.

In the Report's Summary, it is explained that the 'information society' is a term that has been applied to western, developed nations where communications and computer technology have brought about a concentration of the workforce in the collection, processing and manipulation of data and the organisation and transformation of this into information and/or knowledge.

Information is central to production, affecting all areas of economic, social or cultural life, with serious implications for the state and the relationship of the individual to the state. There is the danger of the widening gap between the 'information rich' and the 'information poor'; there is the conflict between the citizen's right to know and questions of privacy; there are the difficulties of selecting useful information from the mass available, of managing the vast amount of existing paper-based material and, at the same time, developing new skills and systems for data management and retrieval.

The committee developed some guiding principles and beliefs as a framework for developing its conclusions and recommendations. These included:

1. Increases in the volume of available information and the extent of information flow, much of it based on computerised technology, have accompanied substantial changes in the structure of the Australian economy and society.

2. Governments must now grasp the significance of this increase.

3. Australia is behind other advanced nations in using its intelligence/knowledge to produce brain-based, high value-added goods and services.

4. Australia has to recognise that information is a central organising principle, a tool for understanding, and a vital element in trade expansion.

5. There is a pressing need to increase the community's use of information, involving:

- household use of information technology;
- transforming information into knowledge;
- libraries and database providers storing and preserving information; and
- adequate access to information for the benefit of society.

6. Risks include threats to personal privacy, illegal access to information, more 'information poor', and threats to national sovereignty.

7. Within government, information issues and policy are fragmented. A rational approach should focus on:

- an adequate base for the maintenance and development of the Australian economy and society; and
- the potential for Australia to develop its trade in brain-based, high-value-added goods and services.

The challenge for Australia is to encourage the debate to put information issues firmly on the national agenda in the same way that environmental issues are. There is a need to overcome the fragmentation and the lack of coordination and comprehension that characterise the current approach.

The committee has produced a set of principles, propositions, recommendations and conclusions. These form a National Information Policy in its broadest sense, under the following headings:

- the right to know;
- industry;
- scientific and technological information;
- intellectual property law;
- transborder data flows;
- sovereignty;
- defence;
- telecommunications/media;
- media ownership and control;
- libraries;
- archives;
- public accounting information;
- social justice;
- privacy;
- education;
- information research;
- information statistics;
- promoting efficient/effective

information use;

- promoting critical evaluation of information;
- consumer information; and
- copyright.

Many of the sections include phrases such as 'the Commonwealth of Australia should take the leading role in...', 'should collaborate with the States in...', 'should define and codify...', 'should encourage...', etc. The report calls for a national advisory body in information policy, serviced by a permanent interdepartmental committee, reporting to the Parliament through a Minister designated by the Prime Minister. Nothing is formally labelled a 'recommendation'. However, the next volume has no fewer than 14 multi-part recommendations on a national **library policy**.

The report is highly condensed and almost defies further compression. These brief excerpts are exasperatingly superficial, but should give an indication of the report's coverage and perhaps prompt interested readers to get hold of the book (AGPS, 1991) and pursue some of these issues more closely.

Peter Judge □

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