

Access to Australian government publications

In the 2003/2004 Budget the federal government announced a new business model for the access and distribution of government publications. Since the budget announcement we have seen the development of a *Publications Register*, a *Publication Services Directory*, the closure the Australian Government Bookshop Network, and a review of the Library Deposit Scheme. These actions have been co-ordinated by the National Office for the Information Economy (NOIE) [<http://www.noie.gov.au/>].

These changes are further steps in the decentralisation of government publishing after the movement of responsibility for publishing from a central organisation, the Australian Government Publishing Service (AGPS) later AusInfo, to the agencies themselves.

Publications Register (<http://www.publications.gov.au>)

ALIA's Expert Group on Government Publications has reviewed the *Publications Register*, developed by NOIE in association with the National Library of Australia, and finds that it is an innovative and useful concept, and a great first step.

The *Register* enables users to identify government publications, and it provides contact details for each agency. Government Agencies are found in an alphabetical listing on the home page, with links to the agencies' websites. There is also a list of agencies by subject category. Agencies which distributed publications through the former government bookshop network contribute to the Bookshop Listings found on the home page and the agency websites can provide information on the new distribution arrangements. You can search the *Register* using a word or phrase from any title in the database.

However, librarians will need to continue to monitor the development, resourcing and management of the *Register*. NOIE representatives have stated publicly that while NOIE supports the development of initiatives, it is not responsible for the long-term management of programs.

The *Publications Register* is still in development and has some limitations.

- **Databases:** The *Publications Register* as it currently operates is not an integrated database, but three separate databases — Government agency listings, Bookshop listings and Quick links — each of which must be searched separately.
- **Formats available:** It is sometimes not clear what is available in electronic format and what is available in print.
- **Government agencies included:** There are gaps in the agency listings when compared with what is included with the list of agencies at <http://www.fed.gov.au>. It is understood that the listing will be expanded in the future.
- **Usability, navigation:** The website is confusing to use. For example, there is no consistency with the information that can be obtained from the websites linked from the *Register* because the design of agency websites is not standardised to display publications in the same way.

Usability analysis and testing of the website would allow NOIE to obtain structured feedback from users about the performance of the site.

- **Searching:** Other access points in addition to keyword or phrase from the title are required for publication specific searching, for example: ISBN, ISSN, exact title, series, date of publication. Desirable developments would be fuller citations, publication level searching, and consistent filing order.
- **Standards, guidelines, best practice:** Standards and guidelines for the publishing and distribution of agency publications,

improved compliance by agencies to contribute to the *Register*, and guidelines for the standard display of content on websites are needed.

- **Archiving of publications:** The *Register* provides access to agency publications that are currently available. However, it is not known how long the publication will remain accessible on the agency website and, if the publication is born digital, whether it will be archived or preserved for future research access.
- **National Bibliographic Database:** It is important that agency publication records are added to the National Bibliographic Database. It is recommended that either NOIE co-ordinate this activity to be done by each agency; or that the National Library of Australia be contracted to organise that publication records are sent automatically via a link to the National Bibliographic Database from the agency website.

Publication Services Directory (<http://psd.gov.au>)

Each government agency distributes its own publications. The *Directory* has been produced to support the agency publishing obligations and will provide links to suppliers of publication distribution services. It will assist agencies to identify the range of distribution mechanisms and services that are available including online distribution through the internet and e-mail, and more traditional methods. It will also cover new publishing business models.

Closure of the Government Bookshop Network

The Australian Government Bookshop Network closed on 17 October 2003. New arrangements for checking the availability and for the distribution of government publications include the use of the *Publications Register* to find out about the continued availability of publications that were stocked by the Bookshop Network. Many government agencies provide online ordering facilities or consumer contact details through their own websites or agents. Also, many publications can be downloaded free of charge from these websites.

Some publications in print format have very limited print runs and libraries now find that obtaining print copies of some government publications is more difficult. To address this problem we recommend that the development of the *Publications Register* include a listing, for example, weekly or monthly, of new items added to the database. In addition, the facilitation of access to online publications if the print is no longer available should be part of each agency's publishing contract.

Library Deposit Scheme

It has been confirmed that new print publications from Australian government agencies will continue to be distributed to libraries through the Library Deposit Scheme co-ordinated by NOIE. It is recognised that it has been complex and difficult to extend the principle of the deposit of material to online government publications and this format is not included in the Library Deposit Scheme.

NOIE has undertaken to review the Library Deposit Scheme during the first half of 2004. Deposit libraries and other relevant bodies such as CASL and ALIA will be consulted as part of this review. NOIE is also involved in continuing consultations with the National Library, National Archives and other stakeholders on a range of issues relating to Government publishing, such as use of metadata, and e-permanence.

This is an edited version of the ALIA Expert Group on Government Publication's review of the new business model for access to and distribution of Australian government publications. For the full report see <http://alia.org.au/governance/committees/expert/publications.review.html>