

YEARBOOKS RIP

by Belinda Weaver

The online availability of Australian Bureau of Statistics data via the AusStats initiative is a wonderful asset for libraries and for members of the public who want to find and use statistical data. If the print publication 'walked' or got reshelved in the wrong box or folder, having as back-up the option of printing out from the Web-based version was of considerable relief to both librarian and customer. But does the benefit of 'always available online' outweigh the disadvantages of the loss of print? I don't think so. ABS's termination of print publications, a seemingly natural consequence of their 'all-electronic from 2002' publishing strategy, is not a good news story – for libraries, for anyone.

From now on, all ABS publications will need to be accessed online (at <http://www.abs.gov.au>). This pushes a lot of extra work – time taken to connect, search time, document download time – on to computer networks, especially for libraries that are heavy users of AusStats. It also increases the range of skills needed to see and use publications. Working from the ABS catalogue, most library staff can locate a print publication by number. Finding the identical publication online is not as straightforward.

You have to know how best to get in, and it can take a few false starts to find the easy pathway – locating the online catalogue of publications, and going through to the numbered series from there.

Once there, it takes more than one or two clicks to get to the desired publication. Another obstacle is their availability only in Portable Document Format (PDF). Most librarians have got to grips with the Adobe Acrobat software by now, having met it all over the place, but not every customer will be as knowledgeable. Sure, they can go to the Adobe web site and pick up a free copy to download, but how easy is that for people who are not very tech savvy?

Some of the time series data is in spreadsheet or table format – again, the onus is on the consumer to have, or be prepared to get, the necessary software on his or her own computer to be able to use the data. This is fine for the free Adobe Acrobat program, not so good with Excel spreadsheets, which are part of Microsoft's suite of expensive Office programs. In addition, these are not the only formats required by ABS.

It is possible to search for data online at ABS, but returns are not always as successful as they might be. When looking for *Labour Force*, a named publication, I found results from the ABS Annual Report and other materials grouped under Themes before finding *Labour Force*, the publication, around the mid-twenties mark in the results. There were more than 100 hits for that phrase. Confusing? Definitely. It really is easier to use the print publication to

find the catalogue number of the desired publication first and then go to that online.

Now many of the state yearbooks have fallen victim to the ABS axe, and this is a much more serious issue for libraries. When *Labour Force* morphed into an electronic publication, it was still the same thing. You had to pay to print it out yourself, but it looked like the print one. It could be used in the same way. The data it contained was the same, so like could be compared to like.

However, that won't happen with the yearbooks. ABS did a lot of work compiling the state yearbooks. Data was gathered from a range of sources and put together in one publication. Now that work has been deemed too costly, and only New South Wales and Victoria will be lucky enough to get state yearbooks in print this year.



Queensland's yearbook was cancelled earlier this year, after a production history dating back to 1937 in its present format, and even earlier as Queensland annual statistics. Poor sales for the 2001 edition were blamed for the cancellation, according to an ABS spokeswoman who also said that "the information contained in the Queensland Year Book was still available, but scattered across about 40 government agencies."

And that's the problem. The yearbooks provided the invaluable service of gathering, sorting and presenting data from a range of sources. Who will be expected to do that work now? The customer? The librarian? It's one thing to pass on the cost of printing to end users – it is something else again to expect them to be analytic statisticians as well.

Queensland Premier Peter Beattie criticised the yearbook's cancellation in February as "absolutely outrageous" and said he would protest to ABS. Peter Spearritt, Director of the Brisbane Institute and author of the 1971 study, *Sydney at the Census: a Social Atlas*, also slammed the move in an opinion piece, *New Year, No Yearbook*, issued by the Institute on 20 February (http://www.brisinst.org.au/resources/spearritt_peter_yearbook.html).

He said: "The primary motive for posting the statistics on the Web is understandable and apparently sensible. It is much cheaper than print and paper, and much easier to change. The drawback is that many sites, from ABS to the Tax Office, are now loaded with statistics, but creating the summary tables, explanatory comments and analytical treatments at the heart of Commonwealth and state yearbooks looks like becoming a relic of the 20th century."

While the ABS does present some data in new ways, for example, city social atlases based on figures from the five-yearly census collections, other statistical analyses must be

paid for, despite the fact that ABS already has the data on file and has the staff with the knowhow to manipulate it. Librarians don't have those skills. However, increasingly we may be expected to help users find statistics that we could once have pointed to in a book across an array of agencies and departments.

It's worthy lobbying about.

Belinda Weaver is a librarian and author, whose book Catch the Wave, on finding good quality information on the Internet, will be published in 2002.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

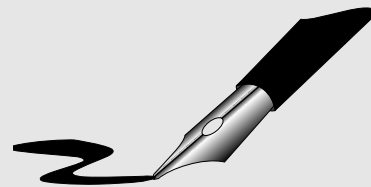
I'm a big fan of Online Currents and often glean great bits of information - especially news on Web sites that I can often incorporate into our Intranet. Today I was reading your (Jonathan Jermeys) Internet Chat article with interest, especially the Hermes Chat as I thought maybe it could have applications within our organisation. I typed in the URL you gave and started reading the Instructions, but when I started reading the "Last 20 lines of current chat" - looks like it was dated 13/5/02 around 5.00pm, I was horrified and embarrassed with what I read (or tried not to read) - I've never been to a sex chat room before!

Disappointment! I thought I can't really risk telling my Intranet users about this site now if that's the type of content they might see - it doesn't look very business like! I guess you can't predict what level of language will be used on these things, and it just takes a few stupid people to spoil it all for the rest of us - as you were saying, it has potential for business use without the need for extra software or joining Yahoo, so I was keen to have a look at it.

Oh well - just thought you might like to know my experience. Depending on when you read this message, and if and when you next logon to Hermes, you may not see the same conversation I saw on Hermes Chat - if so you'll be one of the fortunate ones!

Michele Ritchie
Library & Information Resources Manager
AGAL

Jonathan Jermeys
reply:



I've never encountered sex chat on the Hermes Web site, but I'm not too surprised. Public facilities are inherently uncontrollable. The philosophy behind the Internet was to make a network on which everyone would have equal access and equal rights, whether what they wanted to do was high-minded and altruistic or frivolous and self-serving. There have been several privately operated networks, with stringent rules and restrictions, which set out to compete with the Internet. None of them have succeeded. Open access is a precondition for vigorous growth, strong debate and individual liberty. In other words, Internet porn is cross-subsidising your business e-mail.

I actually find it cheering that a high-tech system built with military funding and designed for scientific purposes should have been subverted to the pursuit of money, laughter and sex. It shows the indomitableness of human nature. But as I mentioned in my article, private chat systems are relatively easy to set up - although not always to control.

Jon Jermeys

NET NOTE

SUPER SEARCHING BUSINESS BOOK

The tenth title in Information Today's Super Searchers series has recently been published. Entitled *Super Searchers Make it on their Own: Top Independent Information Professionals Share Their Secrets for Starting and Running a Research Business*, the book is by Suzanne Sabroski (ISBN: 0-910965-59-5). The author interviewed 11 successful research

entrepreneurs for the book, asking them to share their strategies for getting started in business, developing a niche, finding clients, doing the research, networking with peers, and staying up to date with Web resources and technologies. Readers who are inspired to look at a career in information broking after reading Liz Edol's recent article, *Swimming Not Sinking*, should find this interesting reading.

NET NOTE

BARANI WEB SITE OF SYDNEY'S ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

The City of Sydney has developed the Barani Web site (<http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/barani>) to showcase the Aboriginal history of the city. Barani, meaning "yesterday", is an Aboriginal word of the Eora people, the original inhabitants of the Sydney region. A prototype of the site was created in 2000. It has

now been redeveloped using the colours and textures of the Harbour and local rock carvings as the inspiration for the design. The Web site contains text, images and audio features, a time line, and a glossary with an interactive map of place names in the city. The site also includes a database of source material on the history of Sydney's Aboriginal people, accessible by person, organization or theme.