

(The following article by CHASS Executive Director Toss Gascoigne appeared in the Higher Education Supplement of The Australian on 11 May 2005.)

The issue of tracking down government reports is a growing problem for researchers in Australia. Originally published on the web, the reports have become unavailable or difficult to find.

Government departments are increasingly using the web as their primary means of publication. It's quicker and easier and gives much better access in today's wired world. And they save money by printing fewer hard copies.

The problem arises when reports are removed from the web or re-located to a new URL. This may be as time moves on and webmasters, under pressure to run a tidy site, decide to cut some of the older material. Or it may be when departments merge or split, and the material is moved to a new address but without leaving a trace behind so it can be tracked.

There are no national protocols for how web-based material should be selected and preserved and made available in a systematic way in Australia today. This is a cause of concern to researchers.

Just how significant is the issue? I asked the people who subscribe to the newsletter of the Council for Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences:

The ALIA seminar "Digital Amnesia" will address issues relating to the access and management of government publications online. The context is a concern that a number of significant publications have disappeared from a range of government websites.

Have you had experience of this? If so, could you provide details?

One thing became clear, almost instantly - the issue is important. The message was sent at 7 pm on Friday, and within two days I had received over 100 responses.

Respondents gave examples of reports that had disappeared, described their battles to track down material as departments were amalgamated or split, talked about the issues caused as new technologies replaced the old, and proposed possible solutions. Interestingly, a significant number - just over half - said they had not encountered the problem.

Material which had been available on the web but has now disappeared included:

- the AGPS Style Manual, available in full on the web a few years ago
- All ministerial releases prior to 2004 have been recently removed from the Northern Territory Government web site
- The National Plan for Women in Agriculture and Resource Management came out in the mid 1990s. It was endorsed by 130-odd State governments and rural industry organisations, and formed the basis for policy and action for a number of years.
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Typical of the stories was:

"I teach a course on Youth and Society. One of essay topics is Youth Allowance. There was a major evaluation of the program online at the beginning of the semester and I included the website reference for students

Come week 6 when they are doing the essay the link has disappeared. There is simply a generic message saying the page cannot be found."

One librarian had asked her colleagues to nominate reports they could not find. She then set out on a determined hunt to see if they were really missing. She found them, but concluded that:

"All of the publications were still available somewhere, but that was often due to good luck, and not the good management of the government agencies that created them. Five of the seven titles had disappeared from the web site of the creating agency, with no re-directs or other assistance given to the would-be reader about how to find the new location."

The crucial point for her was that, while they remained available somehow, somewhere, their discoverability was almost impossible. All of the titles in this small study were reported missing by librarians, all sophisticated users of the Internet.

"My impression from this small study is that TO THIS POINT, we have not yet suffered a serious loss of government information. I have not yet been able to identify any significant government publication that has disappeared altogether. However, there are certainly significant government publications that have disappeared from the creating agency's web sites.

"Government information is definitely dispersed, some of it is VERY hard to find, and the fact that some of it remains at all is thanks to the whim of the Internet Archive harvesting robot, rather than to any policy, strategy or plan of Commonwealth agencies."

Why was this material moved from the web sites? Sometimes it was because IT managers wanted to keep the web sites manageable and streamlined, and moved old material off as pressures mounted. Old bookmarks become useless when web-sites were re-designed. And significant documents are sometimes not seen significant at the time, and it's only in hindsight that we realise they have important historical value.

"The loss of 'old' material seems to occur most often where a website has gone through an upgrade, change of staff or change of management, or when a major project and its attendant publications have come to an end. Usually older publications are re-located as the structure or focus of the website changes, to make way for new versions or new publications - they are finally removed when they no longer attract much traffic or seem out of place."

One person said that he never expects to find reports more than a couple of years old on a government website. "I presume that a range of issues are involved including changes of government, changes of bureaucrats at the top and a desire to take a different policy direction from the one mentioned in the report."

All these issues were compounded by the march of technology: new software means old reports can become hard to read even if they are available.

Respondents were united that a protocol needed to be developed, funded and implemented across government. Some thought the answer lay in an expansion of the PANDORA archival system run by the National Library of Australia.

One correspondent from New Zealand pointed to new legislation passed earlier this month. Perhaps the answer to the issue in Australia lies in the adoption of a legislation with a similar intent to NZ's Public Records Bill:

"The Bill establishes a framework under which public records can be managed; ensures that the record keeping requirements of the Bill extend to as broad a range of government activities as practicable; and provides for the preservation and accessibility of public archives. In order to achieve these objectives, it provides a legal framework under which public records are created, stored, preserved, disposed of and made accessible.

"The growth in e-mail and the Internet has created a new set of challenges, which the bill addresses by requiring agencies to create and maintain records and to make them available over time. Agencies will also need to seek the approval of the Chief Archivist before they destroy records."

Toss Gascoigne is Executive Director of the Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (CHASS). This is an edited version of his address to the seminar "**Digital amnesia – the challenges of government online**" organised by the Australian Library and Information Services (ALIA) at the National Library of Australia on April 21.