

## The ACT LawNet



### Peter Quinton

Director, Law Reform Unit  
ACT Attorney-General's Department

Recently the ACT Attorney-General's Department in conjunction with the University of Canberra undertook the ambitious task of publishing a wide range of legal material on the Internet

A comprehensive and inter-related package of ACT legal information has been published by the Law Reform Unit on the Internet under the name 'ACT LawNet' ("<http://actag.canberra.edu.au/actag/ag1.html>") This information includes most of the legal research papers prepared by the Department and the Community Law Reform Committee since self-government. In addition, it includes a number of restatements of ACT law, useful legal forms and information about the ACT legal system

Having entered a publishing venture, the Department now finds itself at a point where it is starting to reconsider the way it has traditionally done business. A range of new legal products and services have suddenly become available

### Background

All people are deemed to know the law in all its terrible complexity and detail. In fact, government legal information products (legislation, information brochures, reform and review papers, and newsletter) are produced in relatively small numbers - a fraction of one percent of our population. However, even this small amount does not find a way into the community. Mirroring international experience, most government legal products are purchased back and consumed within government.

Some claim that this demonstrates a general disinterest in our law and legal institutions. Others insist that legal products are only useful for legal technicians (lawyers, judges and public servants). There may be a grain of truth in both of these views. However to concede that law is the domain of the few is to marginalise the effectivity of our democratic institutions. Research conducted under the ACT *Legislation Review Program* and within the *Law Reform Program* recommendations within recent Commonwealth reports and the ACT draft position paper on *Aboriginal Customary Law* point to serious deficiencies in community legal education in the ACT.

Because of the high influx of new residents into the ACT over the last decade, the level of knowledge about unique ACT laws and legal practices is poor in comparison to other Australian jurisdictions. The development of legal resource material to inform new ACT residents about significant features of the ACT legal system is an important

access to law initiative. Simply put, there is no point making laws in the ACT if people don't know about them. Greater community knowledge of legal rules impacts in a positive fashion on many other programs (particularly in the areas of justice and policing)

Since self-government, the ACT Attorney-General's Department has attempted a number of initiatives to address these issues through the provision of targeted legal information into the ACT community. The quarterly newsletter, *Reform News*, was produced and distributed widely to schools, colleges and universities in the ACT. Law Reform and Law Review reports were produced in large print runs and similarly made available in class sets to schools and colleges. Early attempts to provide school sets of legislation were abandoned when user pay principles were adopted in relation to the production of legislation. While each of these attempts made some inroads into the problem of a dearth of relevant local legal information, these attempts all relied upon multiple publication and expensive distribution and maintenance processes. For example, the last issue of the ACT *Reform News* had a print run of about 1,500 copies. Taking into account preparation, printing, distribution and maintenance costs, each copy of *Reform News* cost about \$1.40. Random sampling of a number of target groups indicated that, while usage was reasonable high (60%), the newsletters themselves had a very short lifetime (effectively only being used once).

More than any other drawback, the lack of persistence of the information caused us greatest concern. While we were able to place legal information into the community domain, it flickered only briefly before being lost. There were other drawbacks. Desirable publishing features: full colour, weight of paper and effective binding were all beyond our capacity to deliver. Similarly, other publishing platforms, particularly through television or video were well outside our budget.

### *The Pilot*

At the beginning of 1995, the Department established a series of connections to the Internet. Following discussions with Professor Eugene Clarke the Department converted the first of a number of reports into world-wide-web format for use by the University. The ease of this process led the Department and the University to enter into a strategic alliance whereby the Department collated and republished its store of legal research documents on a platform provided by the University of Canberra.

Preliminary research into the viability of the Internet as a publishing platform indicated that during 1995 and 1996 the Internet would achieve significant penetration into the ACT government, business, community and private sectors. In particular, during 1995, many ACT schools will acquire Internet access and a number of schools will have a number of resources devoted to this purpose. In addition, the release of Windows 95 and the Gungahlin Broadband project were expected to create a significant increase in the number of Internet users.

Accordingly, following further discussions with the University, in early March 1995, the University agreed to host the Department's information on a secure University computer (called Mozzie). Initial loads of data and testing were carried out in accordance with the following time frame

- 28/3/95 to 4/4/95 **First stage trial process** Allocation of computer resources  
Formatting of Mozzie Initial supply of 1 Mb of data Initial load of data  
Establishment of trial server on the Internet - at this stage only visible to testers
- 4/4/95 **First decision to continue.** Based solely on technical compatibility considerations
- 4/4/95 to 18/5/95 **Mid state trial process** Trial FTP transfers from AG to UC  
Establishment of submit and email links from Internet to Department  
Quality checking of data Image collection Briefing of stakeholders  
Demonstration of system to stakeholders By this stage, the Department had converted more than 60 primary reports and discussion papers into HTML format
- 18/5/95 **Second decision to continue.** Based on mixture of political, administrative and technical considerations
- 18/5/95 to 25/6/95 **Final stage process.** Quality checking by external consultants Establishment of local and international links.
- 25/7/95 **Full visibility of legal information on the Internet** Media announcements involving the ACT Attorney-General and the University of Canberra

### ***Full Visibility***

On 25 July 1995 the ACT LawNet was officially launched at "http://actag.canberra.edu.au/actag/ag1.html". At that stage, the information placed on the ACT LawNet included:

- indexes to ACT Law (both a general index developed by the Law Library and a detailed list of legislation affecting business developed by the Law Reform Unit);
- the complete set of reports and associated issues papers, discussion papers and research documents of the Community Law Reform Committee;
- all published reports under the ACT Law Review Program;
- a number of discussion papers and reports dealing with a number of reform issues published by the Department since Self-Government;

- a guide to the Department and corporate publications;
- a number of restatements of law (including the law of property, municipal and commercial restatements) - these had been produced for research purposes under the Review Program;
- explanatory memoranda; and
- a number of experimental expert systems - these are rules-based systems prepared for research purposes

This information is tied together by a 'Home Page' that also provides pointers to other world legal sites.

### *Future Directions*

At the launch of the ACT LawNet on 25 July 1995 the ACT Attorney-General, Mr Gary Humphries noted that "The Attorney-General's Department is actively seeking to identify additional opportunities for publishing legal information onto the Internet (such as information bulletins, research papers, purpose written material about portfolio agencies, forms and explanatory material)"

The ACT LawNet is being progressively enhanced. For this purpose, a portfolio Internet User's Group has been established to:

- identify new opportunities for publishing portfolio material onto the Internet (such as information bulletins, research papers, purpose written material about portfolio agencies, forms and explanatory material);
- identify new legal research sites on the Internet and make them available to other portfolio users through the AG's homepage; and
- disseminate information about Internet publishing techniques

With only the limited experience of the past few weeks, it is already clear that the publication of material on the Internet is progressively delivering our material to a larger ACT audience. Initial estimates suggest that the ACT LawNet is acquiring about 30 new users per day. Within a month of its release, more people had accessed the Community Law Reform *Report on Residential Tenancies* than we had published hard copy reports. Perhaps surprisingly, members on our existing publications list have generally indicated a strong preference for electronic access to information rather than hard copy reports. Accordingly, we expect a gradual reduction in printing of hard copy reports with an associated reduction in the associated printing and distribution costs.

A person reading ACT legal material on the Internet will have the capacity to annotate or comment on the material they are reading through the Internet. For

example, a person reading the discussion paper (to be released shortly) on sexual assault will be able to comment 'on-line'. These comments will become visible and can themselves be commented on

Utilising the ACT LawNet, the Department is exploring a series of new legal products that seem to offer a number of exciting possibilities in relation to access to law. Applying the methodology developed for rules based systems, the Department has come up with a simple interactive process giving the user access to complex systems of law. A number of earlier experimental systems are available from the ACT LawNet. On the basis of these early systems, the Department is now working with the Office of Financial Management on translating the Financial Directions into a similar format.

The Department is also looking at the provision of on-line access to traditional 'over-the-counter' type services. In the future it will be possible to apply for licences over the Internet.

The development of the ACT LawNet initially focussed on the publication of legal resource material to inform new ACT residents about significant features of the ACT legal system. Of itself this was an important access to law initiative. However, the Internet offers a far greater range of possibilities in terms of access to legal products.

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