

Policy statements for Information Rights Day from federal, state and territory political leaders

Federal Government

Senator Richard Alston, Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts

Libraries play a central role in the delivery of information to the Australian public. One of the key challenges facing libraries today is to ensure that the concept of equity of access to information in the digital age can be achieved. The internet has opened up new opportunities for the discovery and delivery of information. Libraries, as trusted providers of information, are in an excellent position to take advantage of this new technology to ensure that all Australians, regardless of their location or affiliations, have access to their nation's cultural heritage and to the vast amount of information now available globally in digital form.

National Library of Australia

The National Library performs a leadership role in the development of an infrastructure to support the delivery of information to the Australian public. Its strategic goal is that 'all Australians at their place of choice, have direct seamless access to print and electronic sources of information'. The National Library is giving priority to digital content with activities including the archiving, preservation and provision of access to selected Australian internet publications, and the digitisation of original materials in all formats held in its collections. Nationwide access to this digital content is provided gratis through the National Library's website, providing remote users with collection access as never before. The National Library's online exhibitions program is also designed to facilitate remote access. The travelling *Bunyips* exhibition with its corresponding website is a recent example.

In addition to preserving and providing access to the digital content in its own collections and exhibitions, the National Library facilitates the PictureAustralia service. This collaborative service provides Australians with a single entry point for discovering the digital images held by key cultural institutions.

For Australians to take advantage of these innovations, equity of access must be addressed in relation to technology, content and information literacy. A national framework for co-ordination of initiatives and for interconnectivity is important. The

National Library is working towards the development of a national infrastructure to assist the provision of access to information by all Australians. The Kinetica system is one plank in this infrastructure. Broad collaboration is under way with the state, university and public library sectors to develop other elements of the infrastructure. The National Library is, for example, leading a consortium with the state libraries to purchase specific licensed digital products, thereby ensuring their availability through the depository libraries. It is the intention to extend the consortium to public libraries.

The National Library considers collaboration beyond the library sector important and it is supporting a range of initiatives, such as the Australian Subject Gateways Forum and the cross-sectoral MusicAustralia.

Digital access to library materials

The Federal Government's policy to ensure that libraries play a key role in delivery of information in the digital environment is re-

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flected in the amendments brought into operation by the *Copyright Amendment (Digital Agenda) Act 2000* on 4 March 2001.

Exceptions to copyright which allow libraries to supply documents to individuals for research and study purposes have been extended to allow digital uses such as scanning and e-mailing. These exceptions are vital if libraries are to maintain their important information dissemination role in the online environment. The exceptions will promote online access to libraries by disadvantaged users and users in remote and regional areas. The amendments also facilitate electronic document delivery between libraries.

In addition, the reforms promote access to electronic material within libraries on terminals that allow only viewing and printing. The amendments also protect libraries from liability for any infringements on other terminals connected to the internet where copyright notices are properly displayed.

The Digital Agenda Act will be closely monitored and its operation reviewed in three years time. The ability of libraries to provide reasonable access will be a key aspect of this review.

Community Heritage Grants

Since 1994, the Federal Government, through the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts with the National Library of Australia, has offered these Grants to assist community organisations such as libraries, historical societies, museums, multicultural and indigenous groups to preserve documentary heritage collections of significance.

Products of the Heritage Collections Council

The Heritage Collections Council (HCC) was established in 1996 to co-ordinate national strategies and initiatives for improving the accessibility and preservation of Australia's cultural heritage collections including those in libraries. The Federal Government has provided support for the HCC

through its Distributed National Collection program. Products of the Council are useful resources for collection management and preservation. HCC publications include: *The National conservation and preservation policy and strategy for Australia's heritage collections*; *reCollections: caring for collections across Australia*; *Be prepared!: guidelines for small museums for writing a disaster preparedness plan*; *Significance — a guide to assessing the significance of cultural heritage objects and collections*.

Book Industry Assistance Plan

In July 2000 the Federal Government implemented the Book Industry Assistance Plan, which will provide \$240 million to the book industry over four years. The main objectives of the plan are to provide assistance to Australian creators of books and to school libraries, to subsidise the cost to students of textbooks, and to provide financial assistance to book printers and publishers to help revitalise the industry.

The Communications, Information Technology and the Arts portfolio is responsible for implementing three key elements of the Plan, with funding of \$47.2 million.

- Educational Lending Right (ELR) will provide payments to eligible Australian creators (authors, editors, illustrators, compilers and translators) and publishers. ELR thereby acknowledges that income is lost from the free multiple use of books in educational libraries.
- *Books Alive* promotes the value of books, reading and literacy, especially for children, and the books of Australian authors. It is managed by the Australia Council.
- Statistics relating to book publishing and book sales will be collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics over the four-year period of the Plan.

The Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs is managing the Grants to Primary School Libraries Program, another

element of the Book Industry Assistance Plan. The objective of this program is to provide financial assistance to libraries of Australian primary schools in connection with the acquisition of books of Australian authors or books produced in Australia. The first payments will be made in 2001, when all Australian primary schools will be provided with funding based on the number of primary school students enrolled in 2000.

The Federal Government also funds the Public Lending Right scheme, which compensates authors and other creators of books for the use of their books in public libraries. ELR and PLR indirectly promote the value of libraries by acknowledging the importance of free access to books in libraries.

Community access to the information economy

In the last few years, the Federal Government has devoted considerable resources to the goal of ensuring that all Australians can participate equitably in the information economy.

The Federal Government's multi-faceted approach to this issue comprises: regulatory initiatives to encourage greater competition in the telecommunications market; grants programs to fund the development of telecommunications infrastructure, community access facilities and training; a range of educational and skills development initiatives; and providing government services electronically in ways that enable access for all sectors of the community, including people with disabilities.

These initiatives are consistent with the Federal Government's (January 1999) *Strategic framework for the information economy* which conveyed its vision for Australia and set a national framework to achieve it.

The Federal Government has made a commitment, as part of the *Backing Australia's Ability* action plan, to encourage more consumers and businesses to take up online technologies through the introduction of measures to provide more equitable and affordable online access.

These measures will build upon the considerable work already undertaken in the areas of: infrastructure provision; skills development; government services online; and raising awareness of the benefits of the information economy.

The National Office for the Information Economy will continue working to identify barriers preventing equitable access to the internet and, in concert with other levels of government and industry, develop policies and initiatives to address these barriers. NOIE is also developing an 'enabling' program of work with government, private and non-profit organisations to explain, encourage and facilitate access to the information economy.

This is an edited version of Senator Alston's statement. The full statement is available at <http://www.alia.org.au/advocacy/>. ■

Australian Greens

Senator Bob Brown, Senator for Tasmania

We think your Information Rights Day on 14 May 2001 is a fantastic idea. It will encourage all Australians to recognise their rights to access information vital to their development and increased understanding of our complex society.

Our national policies provide that access to information is a basic right and this principle flows into all our policies on society, environment, democracy, Indigenous rights and global issues. Our information technology policy specifically states that sufficient government funding be

available to enable no (or low) cost access to e-mail, the internet and other electronic information resources for schools, libraries and public sector organisations, in a context where the provision of such services is important to full participation in society.

Our goal to instil greater democracy includes the need to engage community participation in government at all levels. This requires the public be kept well informed. A copy of The Greens national policy is available at <http://www.greens.org.au>. ■