

Paper delivered at the 10th Biennial Conference of the
Australian Population Association
POPULATION AND GLOBALISATION:
AUSTRALIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY
Melbourne 28th November to 1st December 2000
Melbourne Australia

Dick Crockett, ABS Initiatives in Dissemination

Dick Crockett, ABS Initiatives in Dissemination

INTRODUCTION

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) aims to assist and encourage informed decision making, research and discussion within government and the community, by providing a high quality, objective and responsive national statistical service.

2. Knowledge and information are the cornerstones for good decision making. In this technology age information is more accessible and there is increased flexibility in the way we can access it.
3. A major objective of the current ABS dissemination strategy, (aligned to the ABS mission) is to foster an increase in the use of ABS statistics in order to contribute to more "informed decision making", by:
 - a) improving the awareness of what the ABS can offer, with the community in general and our key clients in particular; and
 - b) improving access to ABS Statistics.
4. The ABS recognises that it needs to do more than simply respond to customer service requests. Research has consistently identified that ABS clients are not aware of the entire range of information, products and services (in other words, ABS Capability) available. They want us to inform them of the potential availability of other information relevant to their needs beyond the statistics they are currently using. The ABS is now focused on being more proactive in communicating this "total ABS capability" for the benefit of our clients.
5. The growth of technology has also led to a change in customer expectations and requirements regarding access to statistics. The customer in the year 2000 wants easier, faster access to data and needs it to be available in a format that allows them to process and integrate it with their own information.
6. The ABS is exploiting new technology to meet changing client needs. Over the past 18 months new dissemination systems and products have been developed in order to provide clients with a better understanding of, and improved access to, our statistics. Clients now have more choice in the way in which they might like to access our information.
7. The ABS' electronic dissemination strategy is presently structured around three main dissemination platforms: the ABS web site, AusStats and ABS@. Email delivery of selected ABS publications is also now available via our Subscription Service. The ABS web site is the main point of contact for many clients and the general community. It provides a "window on total ABS capability" and is fundamental to the notion of empowering our clients via self-help access to information.

8. These vehicles are being supported with the development of internal "next generation" facilities for the authoring and production of standard products. At the heart of our new publishing facilities is the Publication Production Workbench (PPW). The PPW aims to: provide an efficient means of publication production that simultaneously supports both paper and electronic versions; reduce scope for error through automated re-use of content, and automates the layout of content according to corporate standards which represent good product design.

ABS WEB SITE

9. With nearly 15,000,000 hits in 99/00 the ABS web site has become the major way for people to deal with the ABS, in effect it is the ABS for the majority of clients. As a result it is integral to current and future ABS dissemination directions.

10. The ABS joined the information "super highway" with the establishment of the ABS web site in 1995. Initially offering only general information about the bureau and its services, publication release advice and basic statistics, the development of the site like most other organisations that launched web sites at the time, has been an evolutionary process.

11. In 1996, in order to increase the amount of public good information available, the main findings from selected publications began to be added to the site. Today the main findings from virtually all our publications are published via the web.

12. 1997 saw a number of enhancements including a new more graphical interface, the addition of tables and graphs from the pocket yearbook, and most significantly the inclusion of Census data in the form of tables 1 and 32 from the 1996 Basic Community Profile series. In an innovation for the ABS web site, graphical maps were used as a means for clients to access the information they required.

13. It was at this stage, with hits to the site increasing by over 200% in 12 months (from 560,000 hits in 1995-96 to 1.7 million in 1996/97), that the ABS started to recognise the real potential of the world wide web and internet.

14. The ABS web site today is a dynamic, reliable and convenient information source for government, universities, business and the general public. It is focused on content (with over 45,000 pages of information it is one of the larger Australian sites) and provides clients with a comprehensive range of statistical data and organisational information which they can access themselves. It is also becoming one of the main methods for servicing our "public good" or "Community service" obligations.

15. The last 2 years have seen the introduction of a number of innovations aimed at improving the user friendliness of the site and the useability of the content provided,

while keeping in mind the twin goals of increasing the awareness of "ABS capability" and improving access to ABS statistics.

AUSTRALIA NOW

16. Released in 1999, Australia Now is a statistical profile of Australia. It provides a comprehensive overview of the economic and social conditions of contemporary Australia, together with their administrative and legislative background. It also describes Australia's government, international relations, defence, geography and climate. Its pages provide sufficient background information to establish a context for the statistics and to help in understanding and interpreting them.

THEME PAGES

17. There are currently 17 Theme pages on the ABS web site. The "Themes" section groups all information available on the web site about a particular subject together. For example, a client interested in understanding what demographic information is available from the ABS can access the Demography Theme Page. Here they will find links to relevant summary information from publications, Australia Now articles, media releases, information papers, newsletters, links to other sites and much more.

CENSUS HOME PAGE

18. Similar in style to our "Theme" pages the Census Home page groups together all the Census information available via our web site to assist users of Census data. There will also be a site which will supply "provider" information. To assist with the implementation of the 2001 Census, there will be amongst other things, advice on how to fill in a Census form, information on the importance of Census data and a question and answer facility.

. AUSSTATS

19. Perhaps the most significant development to the ABS web site over the last 12 months has been the release of the on line subscription service AusStats.

AUSSTATS

20. AusStats is a web based, subscription service which allows clients to access a range of "charged for" information, not generally available elsewhere on the site, up to a pre set dollar limit. This "charged for" information includes:

All ABS publications from 1998 onwards in Adobe Acrobat format (.pdf); Over 2,000 spreadsheets of economic and social data, including approximately 90,000 time series; Multi-dimensional datasets in SuperTABLE format; and 1996 Census Basic Community Profiles to the Statistical Local Area level in Excel format.

21. The AusStats service also incorporates the free information available on the ABS web site including Main Features, the ABS Catalogue, Media Releases, Release Advices and Australia Now.

22. Two features of AusStats providing "added value" for clients are:

1) information becoming available at the time of release, allowing our clients to have access to our figures at the earliest possible moment without leaving their office; and

2) extensive linking between related material (both free and charged for) making it easy for clients to find information on a particular issue or subject. For example, there are links from publications to main findings, tabulated data in spreadsheet format, datasets and media releases.

23. AusStats also significantly enhances the "useability of information" by providing data in both spreadsheet format and superTABLE format. Clients are now able to manipulate and incorporate data as well as simply viewing it. SuperTABLE is particularly useful as it enables statistics users to build their own tables, including the classifications and time periods they need.

24. An important development, facilitated by AusStats, has been the provision of data to universities. The ABS entered into a three-year agreement with the Australian Vice Chancellors' Committee (AVCC) in April this year. The ABS/AVCC AusStats agreement enables authorised users in 38 Australian universities (about 700,000 students and staff) desktop access to the AusStats service.

25. Feedback has been very positive, and to mid-October, university users have downloaded approximately 65,000 data files.

26. This arrangement builds on an earlier agreement between the ABS and AVCC allowing participating university clients access to Confidentialised Unit Record Files (CURFs) for teaching and academic purposes. The ABS/AVCC CURF deal has also been very successful, resulting in the ABS receiving over 340 applications and despatching 320 CURFs to universities across the country since it came into being in early 1999.

ABS@

27. ABS@ is a variant on the AusStats service and has been developed for ABS key client organisations interested in building their capability to access and store ABS data within their existing or planned organisational wide information management systems. It is an electronic container housing an extensive range of ABS material, published on to a client's intranet, and is updated daily.

28. ABS@ sees ABS data integrated into an organisation's information holdings and computing environment. Slide 20 The aim of the service is to provide easy desktop access to ABS data and data management capabilities to all staff, requiring statistical

information, within a client organisation and to form the basis of improved interaction between the ABS and our key clients. It is hoped that ABS@ will result in both an increased use of ABS outputs and an increased awareness of total ABS capability.

29. ABS@ has essentially the same content as AusStats (including the free output available via the ABS website) the main difference between the two is the delivery mechanism and payment method. The AusStats service 'lives' on the ABS web site and clients are charged on every download. ABS@ is a database or container published into the corporate intranet of key client organisations daily for a flat annual fee.

30. ABS@ represents significant value to the client beyond providing access to ABS data as it also offers filing and retrieval mechanisms, application templates, data management facilities and frameworks. In the future the ABS@ service may also provide improved infrastructure for statistical coordination.

31. ABS@ also allows for special "package deal" arrangements which deliver cost savings to our clients and sales efficiencies to the ABS. ABS@vicgov is one such arrangement, which was recently finalised with the Victorian State Government. ABS@vicgov is an all-of-government service providing over 100,000 members of the Victorian public service, across a number of departments, with access to the latest ABS information via a mix of intranet and internet desktop access.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

32. Recently, ABS reinforced some broad access principles to guide developments for the future:

a consistent with our legal obligation to publish and disseminate, there must be equitable access to all users. This requires that key statistical highlights are made available free of charge or for a small charge;

b ABS should continue to enhance its ability to support the more complex needs of key clients and its value added services should focus on this group; and

c for other clients, there should be more emphasis on encouraging them to use intermediaries (including libraries) or ABS services where clients can help themselves to published statistics.

33. These principles provide a pretty clear indication of where ABS client service and dissemination directions will be focused for the future.

34. One of the major activities planned for the next 2 years, of course, is the dissemination of output from the 2001 Census. The major goals set for the 2001 Census output are:

make greater use of the Internet for dissemination of key census results;
 maintain the timeliness of data release improve the predictability of release of CD-ROM products;
 and improve the relevance of data to users.

35. Key strategies proposed to achieve these goals are:

to develop a range of internet based applications for the dissemination of standard output;
 to repeat the two phased release strategy used for the 1996 Census;
 and to rationalise the range and complexity of CD-ROM products to satisfy a wider range of users.

CONCLUSION

36. Through the application of new technology and innovation, the ABS has positioned itself to meet the following broad dissemination objectives:

a meeting ABS Community Service Obligations through delivery of "public good" information services;

b increasing the use of official statistics by promoting better client understanding of total ABS capability (particularly in key client and subscriber organisations);

c meeting changing customer needs by developing new dissemination methods and products which will exploit technology advances and corporate data management and warehousing facilities;

d improving service delivery efficiency and effectiveness; and

e producing accurate and flexible paper and electronic products which conform to ABS standards.