

# Australian public sector information and information practices

**Maureen Henninger**

University of Technology Sydney, Sydney Australia, [Maureen.henninger@uts.edu.au](mailto:Maureen.henninger@uts.edu.au)

In recent years, governments of liberal democracies have espoused openness in government, a rhetoric that is driven by new networked information communication technologies. It variously promises the promotion of good governance through enhanced transparency and accountability, enables participatory democracy, and drives innovation, entrepreneurship and scientific discovery (Gruen 2009). In 2009 Australia adopted the OECD's definition of public sector information as "*information, including information products and services, generated, created, collected, processed, preserved, maintained, disseminated* [my italics] or funded by or for the Government or public institution (2008, p. 4, n.1) and in 2013 endorsed the principle that open access to government information is the default position unless there are "[relevant] legal requirement and restrictions" (McMillan 2011).

A decade ago Cunningham and Phillips (2005) outlined the challenges to the securing of access to government information. Since then a 2009 study reported thirty-two per cent of the Australians surveyed had used the Internet to access government information (Gauld *et al.* 2010). The questions therefore must be asked, are government documents easily and permanently accessible to the public, and what policies, responsibilities, decisions and institutional mechanisms are in place to achieve this default position of open government.

This paper reports on the findings of a case study which follows the trajectory of the creation, publication and dissemination of a set of high profile government documents through to an apparent disappearance from public accessibility resulting in the frustration of users' expectations of technology enabled open government. The study employs a field analysis methodology to identify the actors in the field and the decisions-making processes embedded in their information practices throughout the lifecycle of these documents. Specifically the research focusses on the institutional mechanisms at all levels, including libraries, which engender public accessibility to government documents in order to discover the points at which they support or hinder this access.

**Keywords** *government information, public sector information, open government, field analysis, information practices*

## References

- Cunningham, A. & Phillips, M. 2005, 'Accountability and accessibility: ensuring the evidence of e-governance in Australia', *Aslib Proceedings*, vol. 57, no. 4, pp. 301-17.
- Gauld, R., Goldfinch, S. & Horsburgh, S. 2010, 'Do they want it? Do they use it? The 'Demand-Side' of e-Government in Australia and New Zealand', *Government Information Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 177-86.
- Gruen, N. 2009, *Engage: Getting on with Government 2.0: Report of the Government 2.0 Taskforce*, [Australian Government Information Management Office], Department of Finance and Deregulation, Canberra, viewed 12 November 2012, <http://www.finance.gov.au/publications/gov20taskforcereport/>.
- McMillan, J. 2011, *Principles on open public sector information*, Office of the Australian Information Commissioner, Canberra, viewed 10 October 2013, [http://www.oaic.gov.au/images/documents/information-policy/information-policy-reports/Principles\\_open\\_public\\_sector\\_info\\_report\\_may2011.pdf](http://www.oaic.gov.au/images/documents/information-policy/information-policy-reports/Principles_open_public_sector_info_report_may2011.pdf).
- OECD 2008, *OECD Recommendation of the Council for Enhanced Access and More Effective Use of Public Sector Information*, [C(2008)36], viewed 30 October 2014, <http://www.oecd.org/sti/44384673.pdf>.