'Reaching Out' Revisited: A Case Study of the *Australia's Prime Ministers* Website

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In 1994 Helen Nosworthy's chapter in The Records Continuum, *'Reaching Out', argued that the then Australian Archives should move in the new direction of promoting 'wider accessibility and use of the archival resources of Australia'.[1] Nosworthy identified exhibitions and print publications as the two primary vehicles for this work. Internet technology and the World Wide Web were still too new to rate a mention. A decade later, the National Archives websites comprise nearly 15,000 pages and are attracting more than 400,000 visits a month.*

This article revisits 'Reaching Out' and reflects on how the new medium has taken its place alongside exhibitions and print publications as a way to promote the Archives collection. We will first briefly outline Nosworthy's 1994

marketing strategy. Then we present a case study of the development of Australia's Prime Ministers website (primeministers.naa.gov.au), which won the 2003 Mander Jones award for best finding aid. Focusing on its layered approach to website content development and design, we argue that the medium enables the creation of a hybrid – part exhibition and part finding aid – that can effectively address the needs of a wide range of users.

Developing a marketing strategy: Who uses archives? What about the rest?

From the perspective of 2004, the Australian Archives of the early 1990s truly was the product of an earlier century. Located in the Department of Administrative Services, the Archives' primary clients were government agency depositors. The organisation concentrated on appraisal, transfer, arrangement, description, storage and preservation. Although a reading room provided services to 'serious' researchers, the Archives did not encourage or seek to increase the public's use of the collection. However, as government adopted the customer-focused approach to doing business used in the private sector, and as equitable access by citizens to government services overtook the culture of bureaucracies, the Australian Archives began to think about reaching its market.

A 1992 report titled *Marketing Strategies for Australian Archives*, divided non-government users into 'primary users' and 'secondary users'.[2] The report defined the first group as people who 'wish to have direct access to the records for some purpose of their own – for general or specific research, or to examine a particular document for personal reasons'.[3] This group included professional researchers, 'hobby' researchers and genealogists. A much larger group of secondary users comprised people who 'would like to view some of the Archives' holdings for their intrinsic worth but who do not necessarily want to come to a search room and ask to consult specific records'. The report recommended that the Archives begin to promote itself to secondary users and, in response, a new public programs area was created with Helen Nosworthy at the helm.

In 'Reaching Out', Nosworthy articulated a more nuanced analysis of the secondary users that would inform the work of the new area. She

defined them broadly as 'the Australian people', but identified the following subgroups:

- resource allocators

- depositing clients

- educators and students

- interested (aware and unaware)

- indifferent (aware and unaware).

The work of the new public programs area would focus on the 'interested' group of secondary users and aim to move people from 'interested unaware' to 'interested aware'. But Nosworthy also noted the long-term need to try to move people from the 'indifferent' subgroup to the 'interested' subgroup.[4]

Nosworthy envisioned the development of an exhibitions program as a key medium for the work of the new public programs area. Exhibitions would:

- provide the general public (including resource allocators and depositing clients) with opportunities to learn about aspects of Australia's history in an accessible, interesting and engaging manner

- induce an experience in exhibition visitors that would change them in a positive way

- promote the Archives as one of the nation's key national cultural institutions, and

- reach new audiences through publicity and travelling around Australia.[5]

Print publications, Nosworthy argued, would have more complex aims, since they served both primary and secondary users. Finding aids, booklets and leaflets would target primary users and inform them of the Archives' services to researchers. Publications featuring interesting aspects of the collection, or an analysis of a part of the collection by a primary user, would target secondary users. In addition, exhibition

catalogues would be produced to serve as a permanent reminder of the exhibition experience.[6]

The marketing strategy articulated in 'Reaching Out' continues to be relevant in 2004. However, higher levels of education, more wealth and leisure time, the progress of baby-boomers towards retirement, the explosive interest in family history, and the proliferation of the World Wide Web, make it possible to imagine every Australian citizen as a potential primary user of the National Archives collection. Through self-service databases, e-reference inquiries and digitised records we can open at least a small part of our collection to people who might never be able to gain physical access to a record. But the technology alone doesn't achieve this. The online environment creates new communication challenges and demands new approaches.

What a difference a decade makes

In 1995, a year after 'Reaching Out' appeared in *The Records Continuum*, the Australian Archives developed a 'gopher' site as its first appearance on the Internet.[7] Two years later, the Archives appeared on the World Wide Web for the first time, hosting what we would now call a 'portal' to all Australian archives including itself. Some readers may remember the kangaroos on the home page of that site. In a December 1997 speech, *Investing for Growth*, the Prime Minister announced a whole-of-government commitment to make appropriate Australian Government services available on the Internet by 2001 – thus beginning a frenzy of government website activity.[8] In 1998, a new website under the new name of National Archives of Australia was developed. The site had the following major sections:

- about us   . education resources

- the collection   . services to archives

- services to researchers   . exhibitions and events

- services to government   . shop

The Archives website was redeveloped again in 2000. Its greatly expanded section on recordkeeping policy and standards reflected the Archives' decision to communicate with recordkeeping professionals almost exclusively via the website. In addition, the 2000 edition of the

website enabled online access to the Archives collection databases RecordSearch and PhotoSearch. This began the new era of the virtual reading room – researchers and casual visitors could drop in 24/7 to search the databases and submit reference enquiries by email. In 2002, the Archives launched its digitisation-on-demand initiative which enabled researchers to ask for and download digital copies of our records. Although digitised records represent only a small fragment of the collection, by April 2004 some 4,083,895 images were available online.

Since 2000, the National Archives has also developed three specialised subject websites: *Documenting a Democracy* (2001), *Australia's Prime Ministers* (2002) and *Uncommon Lives* (2003).[9] These sites return us to the issues raised in 'Reaching Out'. The 1994 marketing strategy targeted particular products at particular market segments. Finding aids, booklets and leaflets would be developed to meet the specific needs of primary users. More general, engaging and entertaining presentations, either exhibitions or print publications, would promote the collection to secondary users. The new possibilities opened up by medium of the Web, enable one presentation to communicate effectively with both primary and secondary users. Part finding aid and part exhibition, the three subject sites straddle traditional categories. Significantly, the Web medium enables us to offer enticements to secondary users to get a taste of being a primary user with just a click of the mouse.

Australia's Prime Ministers website

The *Australia's Prime Ministers* website (APMW) is one product of the Prime Ministers Papers project. The Prime Ministers Papers project was established to identify and improve public access to the vast body of archival material documenting Australia's 25 Prime Ministers. With the growth of prime ministerial libraries and the dispersal of significant archives among the national collecting institutions, the need for a centralised resource on prime ministerial papers had become apparent.[10] At the same time, the Centenary of Federation ad campaign, 'Do you know who our first Prime Minister was?' had highlighted the gap in the public's knowledge of and interest in its Prime Ministers. Many, if not most, Australians did not know that Edmund Barton was the first Australian Prime Minister. But nearly all could readily name George Washington as the first US President.

The work of the Prime Ministers Papers project was:

1. to identify collections of prime ministerial papers in Australia and overseas

2. to enhance the arrangement, description and accessibility of the National Archives collection of prime ministerial papers, including digitising a significant proportion of these records, and

3. to improve and promote public access to prime ministerial archives through the development of print and online finding aids.

During the scoping phase of the project, the Archives employed a team of researchers to identify relevant archives. Altogether more than 70 collections were located, dispersed among national collecting institutions, state and territory archives, state and territory libraries, university libraries, prime ministerial libraries, other collections, as well as overseas archives, libraries and collections.[11]

From the outset, the Prime Ministers Papers project took a broad approach to the scope of prime ministerial records. The research team looked beyond the Prime Minister as the sole creator of relevant records, beyond Australia as the location of significant collections, and beyond the period of the prime ministerial term. Since about a third of Australia's Prime Ministers held office for less than a year, focusing narrowly on the records documenting the term of office would have provided a misleading view of the political significance of Prime Ministers like John McEwen, Frank Forde or Earle Page who were long-serving deputy prime ministers. We also sought to identify records created by key public servants, prime ministerial wives, Cabinet and other government departments and agencies, as well as influential figures outside government whose papers might shed light on a Prime Minister or his prime ministerial term.

One of the most interesting aspects of the project was identifying records that highlighted the public role of prime ministerial wives. Although prime ministerial wives do not receive the recognition accorded the US 'First Lady', their roles have been crucial to the functioning of Australian Government.[12]

The results of the research enabled the production of finding aids in two media, printed guides and a portal website.[13] The remainder of the article focuses on the development of the website, highlighting how the site exploited the ability of the medium to enable simultaneous engagement of multiple user groups.

The portal

At the outset of the website development, the Archives sought the collaboration and cooperation of other Australian collecting institutions with prime ministerial archives. Ideally the website would have been a portal that enabled a seamless search of all participating collections (on the model of PictureAustralia). In reality, even the institutions with online catalogues did not have descriptive metadata that would support this approach. At least at the beginning, the portal would necessarily take the 'old-fashioned' approach of providing an annotated list of collections with links to their websites or other contact information.

The Australian War Memorial, John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library, National Library of Australia and ScreenSound Australia became portal partners in the project and developed pages on their websites that complemented APMW. These pages enable user access to material deep in their collections and will be updated as new prime ministerial material becomes available. As the project progressed, we also developed links with the Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Library and the Whitlam Institute. We hope that other collecting institutions will join the portal over time.

Meeting the diverse needs of primary and secondary users

APMW aims to be a one-stop-shop for people interested in or doing research on Australia's Prime Ministers. Ideally, the website will become the first resource people visit whenever they seek information about an Australian Prime Minister. To ensure the site is authoritative, we used a model, developed for the *Documenting a Democracy* website, of creating a panel of experts to review and comment on the site's content before publication.

In imagining who users of a portal to archival records on Australia's Prime Ministers might be, we specified the following primary and secondary users.

Primary users

.   professional researchers, primarily in political science or history, located in Australia or overseas

.   tertiary students and teachers

.   journalists, especially when preparing stories on the 30-year release of Cabinet and other records by the National Archives each year.

Secondary users

.   secondary and primary school teachers and students (and their parents) doing assignments

.   people interested in Prime Ministers or their wives, seeking biographical information

Home page of *Australia's Prime Ministers* website

. people interested in Australian government, eg citizens informing themselves about the conditions of their democracy

. people interested in Australian history

. people who stumble into the site by way of a search engine or a link from another website.

To address these user groups, we developed eight distinct types of content.

· **Meet a PM** – short biographical treatments of each Prime Minister. The material is divided into general sections titled 'Before', 'Elections', 'During' and 'After', and there is a section on the wife of the Prime Minister.
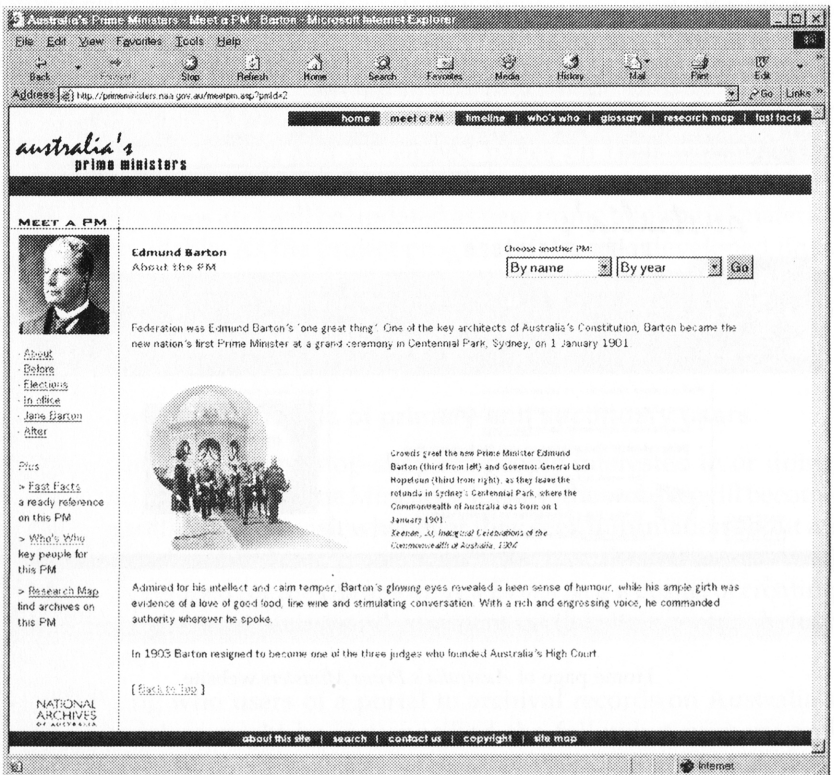
Meet a PM – About Edmund Barton. Notice the section headings on the left side.

The content development of this section also included significant research on images to complement the text. An underlying theme of the website is an invitation to Australian citizens to 'meet' their Prime Ministers. We therefore wanted to find images of the Prime Ministers and their wives that showed them doing the work of meeting and greeting the people. Most of the close-ups of the Prime Ministers and their wives used throughout the site are details from larger meeting-and-greeting photographs.

Meet a PM – Scullin – About the PM, showing James Scullin and Sarah Scullin meeting and greeting at Canberra railway station in 1929.

Meet a PM text is also enhanced with thumbnails of digitised records. Clicking on the thumbnail leads to an enlargement of the image and a link to the RecordSearch database where the entire file can be browsed.
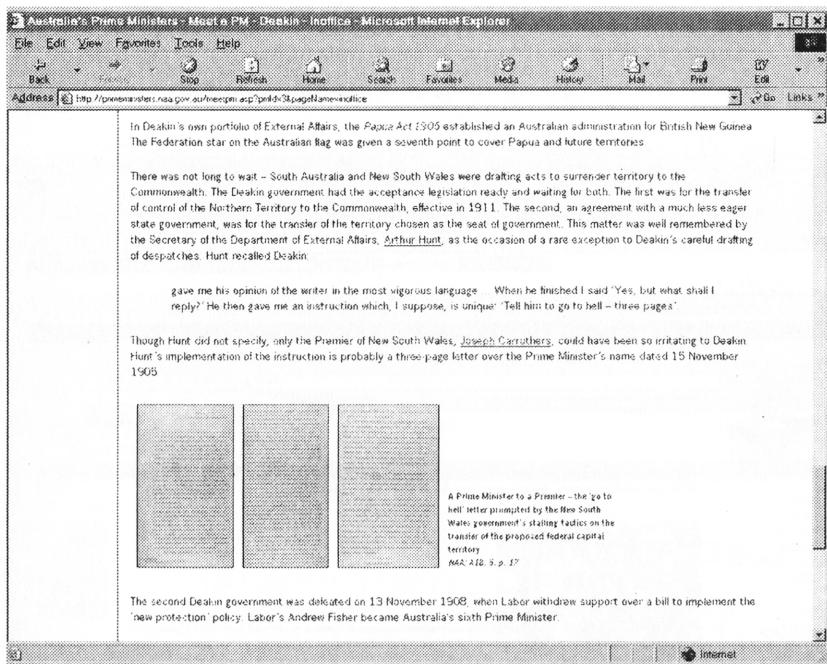
Meet a PM – Alfred Deakin – In office, text with document thumbnails.

. **Fast Facts** – a one-page compendium of key personal and career facts, including quirky and titillating quiz facts.

. **Research Map** – an interface to descriptions of the archival collections on Australian Prime Ministers. The database highlights the National Archives collection and those of our portal partners, the Australian War Memorial, John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library, National Library and ScreenSound Australia, but includes many smaller collections held in other institutions.

Fact Facts – John McEwen

. In addition, the Research Map has a database of secondary sources featuring unpublished theses and journal articles, which are more difficult to find than published monographs.

. **Who's Who** – a database of significant persons mentioned in the Meet a PM text, with short biographical notes. These notes are displayed in a pop-up box the first time they are mentioned in Meet a PM, but site users can also search for particular names or request a list of persons who were significant to a Prime Minister.
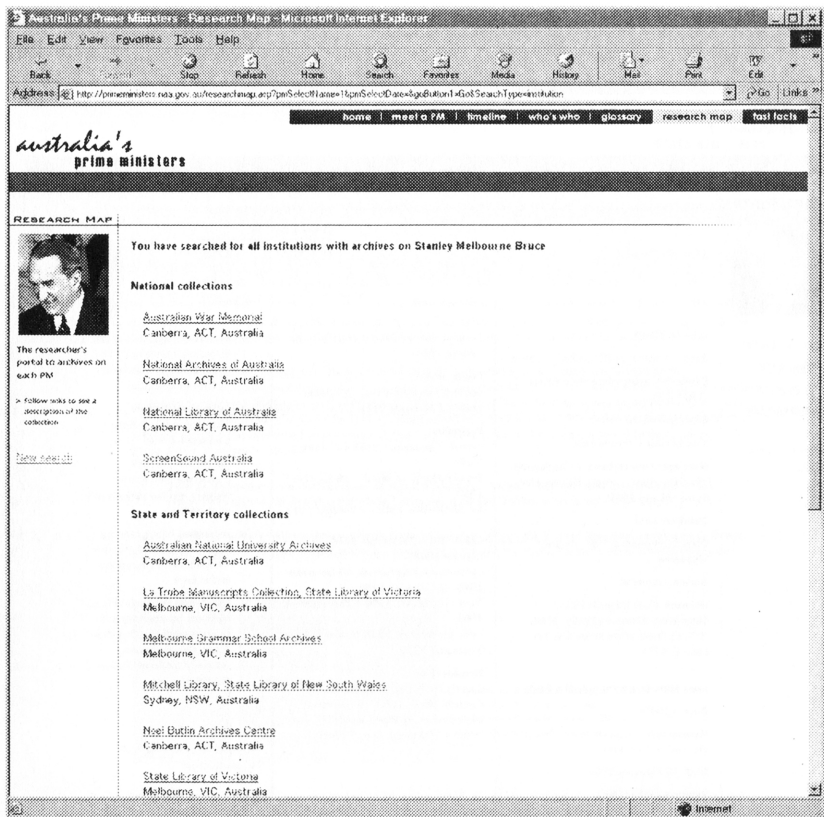
Research Map search results – Stanley Melbourne Bruce

.   **Timeline** – a database of significant events that can be searched or browsed. The timeline is presented in two forms – an animated Flash version and a text-based HTML version. It aims to be both an entertaining presentation of 100 years of Australian history as well as a useful research tool.

In addition to the substantive sections of the website, we developed a number of 'enticers' aimed to be entertaining or intriguing.

·   **Did you know?** – a series of boxes that load randomly into the Fast Facts entry page. For example, Did you know 'The High Court went on strike in 1905?'
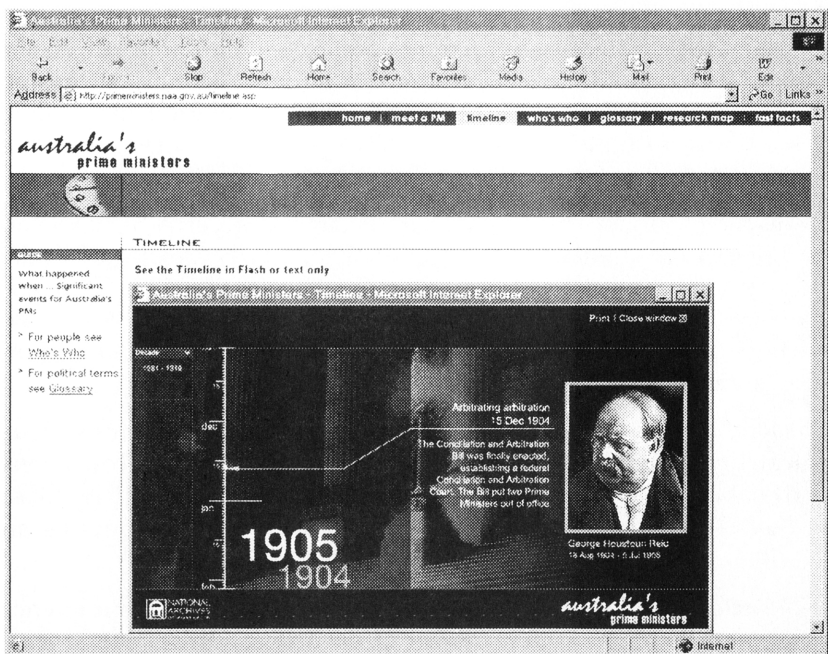
Timeline – Flash version

The Home page has three changing features that aim to pique the curiosity of site visitors, perhaps even visitors who arrive at the site inadvertently. All of these features autoload randomly and create different, but visually predictable, sets of content each time the Home page is accessed or refreshed.

. **Fascinating Facts** – a magazine-format feature that tells a short human-interest story about a Prime Minister or prime ministerial wife. For example, 'Cinderella Mousie' describes a children's book written by Zara Holt.

. **This week last century** – a display of three to five events from the Timeline that happened the same week in the 20th century as the person's visit to the site.

. **Quote of the moment** – a series of 38 quotes by or about Prime Ministers.

Overall, the development of content for *Australia's Prime Ministers* website sought to address the imagined needs of a number of visitor types. Meet a PM aims to meet the needs of primary users by performing the historical contextualising work expected in a finding aid. In addition, it serves as an online reference tool for secondary users who are interested in Prime Ministers, but not in doing research in the records.

By dispersing digital copies of records throughout Meet a PM, however, we hope to excite and then instantly gratify a user's curiosity about the primary sources. By leading them from fragmentary thumbnails to full-sized enlargements of a folio to the archival context of the digitised file we hope to encourage people to explore the primary sources and form their own interpretations.

The Research Map almost exclusively addresses the needs of the serious researcher or primary user. It both identifies the dispersed collections and enables digital access to some of these collections, particularly those of the National Archives and the portal partners. It also provides an excellent starting point to the secondary literature.

Fact Facts, Who's Who and the Timeline offer authoritative reference material that may be useful to either primary or secondary users. They create a reason for ongoing repeat visits to the site. In Fast Facts visitors can find a birth date, a middle name, party affiliation, or a Cabinet position. The Timeline provides an exhaustive listing of the terms of Prime Ministers and Governors-General, while Who's Who offers a fairly extensive listing of prominent figures in 100 years of federal government.

The Flash Timeline, Fascinating Facts, Did you know, This time last century and the Home page quote, aim to entertain and stimulate people's curiosity about the Prime Ministers. These 25 men and their 24 wives were human beings with interesting and mostly unknown lives.

The verdict – some reflections on reaching out with APMW

APMW was launched, with great fanfare, by the Prime Minister the Hon. John Howard in November 2002. The subject of the site makes it a particularly appropriate vehicle for building rapport with resource allocators and potential depositing clients. Since the website is a living publication, it will grow and develop over time to include today's backbenchers who may become Prime Ministers and ministers in the future.

As a medium, websites remain in their infancy. Technology moves rapidly and presentation styles become obsolete soon after publication. Although APMW captures and deploys some of the attributes of both exhibitions and print finding aids, its potential strength is the ability to enable a visitor to make a fluid transition from secondary to primary user, or from indifferent to engaged. Also, its usefulness as a ready reference tool may entice casual researchers to explore the primary sources behind the facts.

The Web is a medium that complements other communication channels the Archives uses to promote the collection. Websites cannot hope to approximate the rich, embodied, aesthetic and social experiences of exhibitions. But a website can complement an exhibition by taking visitors behind the scenes to the 99 per cent of documents that did not make it into the gallery. And it can serve as a lasting resource on a subject, long after the exhibition has been dismantled.

Print catalogues can be beautiful objects that are displayed or given as gifts, as well as serve as a lasting reminder of the exhibition experience. At least for the moment, websites are imprisoned in the somewhat uncomfortable and isolating physical experience of a monitor on a desk. Similarly, at present, you cannot read a website finding aid in your favourite chair or coffee shop, nor can you scribble notes in its margins. Searchability and the capacity to incorporate seamless links to digitised copies, however, make online finding aids more efficient than printed ones. In addition, websites can be easily updated as new records become accessible.

We expect APMW to follow the usage pattern of *Documenting a Democracy* – slowly building a steady community of repeat visitors, who initially come to the site briefly to 'check it out' and set a bookmark, and then return later when they have a research task. Total visits in the 12-month period June 2003 to May 2004 are about 190,000, with an average of 16,000 visits per month. A snapshot of site statistics for May 2004, shows a total 27,124 visitors that month, of which 7,733 (28.5 per cent) were repeat visits. While 51 per cent of visitors entered the site at the Home page, 49 per cent entered at a deeper level (33 per cent at Meet a PM). Not surprisingly, Oceania accounted for 54.8 per cent of visitors, followed by North America (25 per cent) and Asia (15 per cent).

A formative evaluation undertaken during the development of the site helped to refine the structure, design, functionalities and accessibility.[14]

A forthcoming evaluation will indicate whether our layered approach to subject websites works and suggest directions for future development.

Endnotes

1 Helen Nosworthy, 'Reaching Out', in Sue McKemmish and Michael Piggott (eds), *The Records Continuum: Ian Maclean and Australian Archives First Fifty Years*, Ancora Press in association with Australian Archives, Clayton, Vic., 1994, p. 70.

2 Chant Link and Associates, *Marketing Strategies for Australian Archives*, 1992 (unpublished), cited in Nosworthy.

3 Nosworthy, p. 71.

4 In the first instance, however, the indifferent group was not a target market.

5 Nosworthy, p. 74.

6 Nosworthy, p. 75.

7 'Gopher' sites (derived from the vernacular description of someone who fetches things for others as a 'go for') were similar to intranet or local area networks. People from one organisation could see file lists and download files from other organisations via servers connected through the Internet. Although people often use the terms 'Internet' and 'World Wide Web' interchangeably, technically the Web is the collection of interconnected sites delivering information across the Internet through hypertext transfer protocol (HTTP) and displayed in browsers as the familiar web pages. Information continues to be delivered across the Internet through other protocols such as FTP or file transfer protocol.

8 *Investing for Growth*, address by the Prime Minister the Hon. John Howard MP, 8 December 1997, published online at *www.pm.gov.au/news/speeches/1997/industry.htm*.

9 *Documenting a Democracy* (*www.foundingdocs.gov.au*) explores 99 'birth certificates of the nation' and includes significant documents from the states, the Northern Territory and the Commonwealth. ACT documents will be added in 2004–05. *Uncommon Lives* (*uncommonlives.naa.gov.au*) explores the lives of famous and not so famous Australians. The first lives are German scientist and World War II internee, Wolf Klaphake and activist Jessie Street.

10 In 2004 four prime ministerial libraries or institutes are located in Australian universities: the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library at Curtin University (*john.curtin.edu.au/pmportal/index.html*), the Alfred Deakin Prime Ministerial Library at Deakin University (*www.deakin.edu.au/alfred/*), the Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Library at the University of South Australia (*www.unisa.edu.au/hawke/library/*) and the Whitlam Institute at the University of Western Sydney (*www.whitlam.org*).

11 See Australia's Prime Ministers website, Research Map, for listings of archival collections by Prime Minister at *primeministers.naa.gov.au/researchmap.asp.*

12 The wife of an Australian Prime Minister would be the 'Third Lady', coming after the Queen and the wife of the Governor-General.

13 Although people are increasingly using the Internet as a research tool, during this current period of rapid change in the uptake of new technology, the National Archives has continued its printed guides program in order to make finding aids available to people who do not have access to the Internet, have limited access (limited bandwidth in rural and regional Australia) or simply do not like the new technologies. The National Archives has published four print guides: *Our First Six* (2002), *Joseph Lyons* (2002), *Stanley Melbourne Bruce* (2003) and *Harold Holt* (2003).

14 Throughout this article we have used the word 'access' in its more common meaning. Here 'accessibility' refers specifically to the Web Accessibility Initiative published by the World Wide Web Consortium at *w3.org/WAI/.*