COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLICATIONS

Reference: Certain issues related to non-print material

THURSDAY, 13 APRIL 2000

CANBERRA

BY AUTHORITY OF THE PARLIAMENT

SITTING DAYS—2000

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JOINT COMMITTEE ON PUBLICATIONS

Thursday, 13 April 2000

Members: Mr Lieberman *(Chair)*, Senators Bishop, Calvert, Chapman, Lightfoot, Ludwig, McKiernan and McLucas and Mr Hardgrave, Mrs Hull, Mr Lloyd, Ms Jann McFarlane, Mr Rudd and Mr Sidebottom

Senators and members in attendance: Senators Lightfoot, Ludwig and McLucas and Mrs Jann McFarlane and Mr Sidebottom

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

Briefing on certain issues related to non-print material.

WITNESSES

Committee met at 8.02 a.m.

MASON, Mr David, **Director, Disability Rights Policy, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission**

CHAIR—I declare open this meeting of the Joint Committee on Publications. I particularly welcome David Mason from the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission to today's meeting. David flew down from Sydney early this morning. I have some formal matters that I need to read into the record. They are done in every case of a committee meeting with witnesses. The committee is undertaking a series of private briefings prior to launching an inquiry into non-print material authored by government and parliamentary sources. We are fortunate today to have a briefing from David Mason. We are seeking information from David on how access to such material is gained by people with disabilities and on limitations caused by residents in remote and regional Australia. I remind you—these warnings are given to all witnesses—that the proceedings here today are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings in the houses themselves. Deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. David, I think you would like to make an opening statement and you are aware of our time constraints.

Mr Mason—I will attempt to be brief because I understand this is a committee with an extremely tight time frame and a busy program. I open by saying that I have been responsible for the administration of a reference from the Attorney-General on access to electronic commerce and other new information and service technologies, with particular reference to people with disabilities and older Australians. I suppose it is in that context that I have the most recent information and experience to share with the committee.

The overwhelming view that has emerged from the conduct of that reference, which has just concluded with a report to the Attorney which will be available to the parliament shortly, is that digital technologies offer vast potential and opportunities for improving access to information and to participation in political, economic and social processes in Australia for people with a disability in particular as well as for older Australians and for people in remote areas. So long as certain avoidable barriers can be addressed, the use of digital technologies ought to be perceived as a great opportunity for expanding equity of access and effectiveness of access to those groups rather than as a threat. I suppose the one message that I most want to emphasise to this committee is that, to the extent possible, any inquiry or reference that it undertakes on access to material in non-print form should be seen not as an examination of specialised and alternative formats with print on paper continuing to be regarded as the principal format, but rather that the inquiry ought to be seen as one into the digital means of provision of whatever information is being made available through and by the parliament.

The uses of digital technologies, whether through the Internet or through other delivery means, for people with a disability may or may not be familiar to the committee, so I will briefly enumerate. The examples are as follows: a well-constructed, correctly constructed, HTML—that is, hypertext markup language—format file can yield with equal facility print on paper or text to synthesised speech output. My colleague Graeme Innes, our Deputy Disability Discrimination Commissioner, has access to, amongst other things, the *Hansards* of this parliament by that means simultaneous with me—I use print on screen and he uses text to speech output. We receive it at the same time and with equal ease. That is a revolution in access and equity of access for someone in his position, as you might imagine.

A good HTML code can also yield braille reasonably automatically. There is a small amount of formatting to be done, but a good deal of work was put in to coordination between the early development of HTML code and the electronic codes that underlie modern braille production such that standards compliant HTML yields very good braille coding, including the structural and logical elements, so that people get not just the raw text but also the heading levels and so on that all of us who can see come to take for granted in accessing documents. And, of course, such things as large print formats become a matter of trivial difficulty if information is available in appropriate digital format.

Both for people with physical disabilities and for people in remote areas, the availability of material on the Internet offers the potential at least for home or at least local access rather than access being restricted to those who have both proximity to and ease of getting into capital city library facilities which maintain the stock of parliamentary and legal materials that, again, those of us who work at least sometimes in capital cities may come to take for granted. Again, if I could briefly reflect on the experience of someone who was educated as long ago as I think all of us were: the normal school would not have, the next day, the *Hansards* of this parliament. Students studying politics at university level or general studies at school level would have to rely on the mass media or their perception of what was going on in this place, and that is no longer the case. A student can read what the Prime Minister or the opposition leader or members or senators actually said—not only what they are reported to have said. That access can be much more timely than was previously the case, even where it was otherwise available.

The overwhelming view from our inquiry has been that there are vast, important and exciting possibilities. Those possibilities extend not only to text materials but also to multimedia elements. The standards for users to have choice of a variety of formats of access to multimedia materials are now emerging and becoming well established, so long as providers both make effective and intelligent use of the technologies available and apply a degree of intelligent choice to the particular technologies that they use. There is a strong preference, particularly in the disability community, for employment of open standards rather than commercial proprietary standards because of the degree of attention that has gone into accessibility issues in the development of standards, such as the HTML standard, under the stewardship of the World Wide Web consortium and also other open standards in terms of Java format and so on. There is a particular issue for government information in that, because it is common for government information to be provided on line only in PDF—portable document format—

Senator LIGHTFOOT—What format, sorry?

Mr Mason—PDF. It has a number of origins but it stands these days for portable document format. It is a proprietary format. I should say that the owners and distributors of that format have made great efforts and strides in improving accessibility to that format such that it is now technically possible for documents in that format to end up in audio or braille and so on. But it is with a number of additional steps and in some cases requiring the user to download additional programs, which may be difficult or burdensome for someone in a regional area who has a slower telecommunications connection. It may be difficult or impossible for a person with a disability who, for reasons of income as much as anything else, has older equipment. The hard disk may simply not have room to download the Acrobat Reader, for example. Again, there are other solutions that the proprietors of that format have developed and, when they work, they work extremely well and work almost instantly. But for their effectiveness they depend on

content providers having configured their documents in the appropriate form in the first place and, at present at least, it does not yield the same degree of access to the logical structure and content of documents as HTML and other open standards do.

The strong recommendation from informed opinion in the disability community at present is that, while PDF provision is a very great deal better than no digital provision at all, it ought to be accompanied with a text or HTM accessible equivalent—and that is not common practice in many areas of Commonwealth administration. If we look at the parliament's own activity, it is the practice with *Hansard*. Thus someone who wants to print out the authentic looking *Hansard* can use the PDF version, but someone who wants ease of access, searchability and so on, such as me, would use the HTML version and so would many of my blind colleagues. That is superb practice to have users having a choice of format.

But in many cases committee reports and other formal reporting processes are issued only in the more specialised priority format. An example of that would be the recent report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs on copyright issues with which it is fair to say the commission has some concerns. We have reported those concerns to the Attorney, and they will be available to the parliament in due course. That one, for example, is available only in PDF. I had the experience yesterday where my own software was not functioning correctly and I could not see it.

We would much prefer that users having a choice of the format in which they access materials was taken as a primary consideration, because one of the great benefits of digital formats is that the user can define how they access materials. As I say, that can apply whether one is talking about documents, which in some cases include graphic elements such as photos or graphs or whatever which need to be made accessible, or about more sophisticated applications with video or audio clips and so on—all of which can be accompanied by equivalents in text or whichever other format is not provided in the first instance so that it can be accessed by a wide range of users. Amongst other things, it can be accessed by people in remote areas who may choose to use text-only access, even though they can see, for the reason that it economises the use of the telecommunications connection. Someone with a slow connection is, to some extent, in the same position as a low vision or no vision user—at least at present. I do not know how much of the committee's time I should take in talking unilaterally.

CHAIR—I think we might go quickly to some questions. We have five minutes at the maximum.

Senator LUDWIG—Parliament produces a lot of reports, and by and large I suspect they go to us and we read them. But if they were provided on a CD in both PDF and HTML formats, would that be of assistance? I do not think they are at this point in time; it is just the reports of the departments that are produced. Whereas if they were produced in that form, then they could easily be converted to HTML and PDF format and put on a CD and made freely available.

Mr Mason—To do justice to the current practice of the parliament's administration, there is increasing availability on the parliament's Internet site of reports. That is becoming standard practice. I think the main limitations we would see are the formatting in which that is done. But if you are asking for a view on whether it ought to be required by the parliament as standard practice, then the answer would be yes.

Senator LUDWIG—I do not want to interrupt but it is not only that it is available on the web but also the fact that, with a standard 286, it is very limited in being able to get a huge report off at that speed and then, where would you save it if you have a 386? But if you could ring up the department on a hotline and say, 'Send me your CD for rural and remote Queensland,' then you would have it.

Mr Mason—That is so. I think the technical issues of how permanence of material and effective distribution are achieved is something that requires detailed attention. We would very much support a move to making digital tabling a standard practice. Indeed, speaking from the perspective of a small agency for a moment rather than for our own particular responsibility, we would very much welcome digital tabling being accepted as satisfying the tabling requirements because it is increasingly the case that the expenditure involved in producing a print version is disproportionate to the benefit gained therefrom. With the recent experience of the commission's pregnancy report, for example, 6,000 copies cost $40,000 to produce, probably another $40,000 to distribute and probably another $40,000 to store over the lifetime, whereas the net equivalent cost of the digital form is approximately zero. So for economical use of public funds, I think there is a real issue there.

Ms JANN McFARLANE—David, we have been pursuing in a number of ways how to improve disability access. What kind of complaints do you get at the commission about government departments in general or the Parliament House web site in particular?

Mr Mason—We have not had any specific complaints about many Commonwealth web sites. There have been a few. There was one involving the Australian Taxation Office, to which they responded extremely positively and their site is now almost a model—indeed, we have said so to them and we will be saying so publicly. We have not had any formal complaints about the Parliament House web site. It has to be said that all Commonwealth agencies and departments have a severe degree of exposure to potential liability under the Commonwealth's own Disability Discrimination Act. In some cases, that is because of accessibility issues of web sites but, behind that, there is a primary issue of lack of routine provision of material in a range of formats at all.

I would not want anyone to think that we are discouraging provision of material in digital formats, because routine practice is not to produce braille copies of everything. There is not a braille copy of most material produced for this parliament, let alone tape which is a more demanding format to produce. Our experience, and we have some particular responsibilities for disability access ourselves, has been that provision of everything that we do in accessible form on the web satisfies the great majority of needs. We are obviously not yet in a position to assume that it satisfies all needs, and I know that it is not current government policy to assume that it does.

But since we moved to doing my own unit's material entirely on the web in accessible format, I have not had one request for direct provision of braille in the last two years. So that I think ought to be the starting point. If people are not going to put everything they do on the web in an accessible form, then they need to be looking to where their braille copies, their large print copies and their audio copies are and be prepared to wear the expense of that or the exposure to liability. I think that will increase, because the disability community is increasingly alive to the

possibilities of what is now potentially available to them and is less and less willing to tolerate the lack of provision of material in formats that it can use.

CHAIR—I do not think there are any other questions. David, it remains for me to thank you very much for the effort you have made to come today and for the briefing. I note that the thrust of the document that will soon be available foreshadows very serious obstacles and difficulties for people with disabilities in gaining access to Commonwealth produced documents. That will be a challenge for our committee. I think we have been given a great insight from your discussion with us. As a committee, I am sure we will be wanting to meet with you again when we get a better grip on what we will be trying to achieve. I thank you for your attendance today.

Committee adjourned at 8.22 a.m.