

Implications for Dissemination Strategies of the Internet as a New Channel

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1. Introduction

The potential of the Internet has matured over the past few years to the point that it now commonly features prominently in the strategy of national statistical offices such as Statistics New Zealand (SNZ) for the dissemination of official statistics. However for some time to come it will remain only one, albeit one of growing significance, of a number of alternative channels for dissemination. This has raised a number of policy issues for SNZ which, together with some of our practical experiences as we have moved to integrate Web based dissemination facilities into our more traditional dissemination program, are discussed in this paper. This discussion is framed within the overall context of the objectives of SNZ's dissemination programme which are to meet the needs of users for data from the statistical databases that SNZ holds and to encourage increased use of this data generally within New Zealand society.

The programme drives SNZ actions to improve user access to SNZ information resources and provides leadership for data dissemination in the official statistical system. The programme adheres to the following five basic principles which underpin the department's dissemination strategy.

Principle 1 - Maximise the availability and usefulness of data.

Principle 2 - Ensure that the main results from surveys are made widely, reliably and freely available to all levels of the community concurrently.

Principle 3 - Provide dissemination products and services which allow timely and equitable access to the latest information.

Principle 4 - Work cooperatively with other organisations to enhance the distribution and use of official statistics

Principle 5 - Operate in a business like manner so that prices charged for specialised services can continue to be reduced.

In the SNZ context, to apply these principles into the future in the most cost effective manner, we have defined a hierarchy of access channels that will shape our future investment and business planning to meet current and future user needs. These channels, in descending order of general strategic importance from an SNZ perspective, have been defined as:

information intermediaries,
self-help access facilities,
subscription services,
consultancy services,
micro data access services.

2. Some Policy Implications of Increasing Use of the Internet

SNZ has a statutory responsibility to ensure that the general community is well informed on a broad range of economic and social conditions within New Zealand society. It has sought to achieve this over the years through a range of public good/community services, primarily via the media, the public library system, and the maintenance of a telephone information enquiry service for simple requests. These have been supplemented more recently through the provision of a range of free data services on the SNZ website.

These will continue but as SNZ moves towards greater reliance on the Internet as a delivery channel for official statistics, a major challenge will be to continue to ensure equity of access for all New Zealanders both in perception and reality. Equity in this context may relate to availability, cost, timeliness or what I will term the utility of access. In the New Zealand context, the potential impact of the so called 'digital divide' in the context of availability of access to on-line government services is an issue that is being pursued at a broad governmental level and SNZ will be developing strategies consistent with these broader whole of government directions.

Cost of access may also present barriers in terms of the so called 'digital divide'. It may also have some wider implications. One simple illustration is the dissatisfaction an increasing number of end users are expressing about our policy of retaining the same charge for an SNZ publication sourced as a PDF file from the SNZ website as for the hardcopy version either purchased personally from an SNZ bookshop or distributed through the mail. This reflects the fact that as the penetration in New Zealand over recent years of PC's connected to the Internet in both businesses and in households has grown, peoples' ability to access information online has brought with it a growing expectation amongst many in the community of cheaper (often free) information flows.

There is also the issue of what I have described as the 'utility of access'. The capability of internet based access and delivery services to effectively support users representing a wide spectrum of levels of both topic and technical skills will be essential if the utility of the access is to be reasonably similar for all users. I say reasonably similar because the access functionality required to support a sophisticated user will generally be far less complex and therefore less costly than for others. This is likely to be particularly the case where large volumes of statistical information covering a very wide variety of topics are available at no or very minimal cost to all. The extent of investment by a statistical agency in providing effective support for the less sophisticated users is an important policy issue that at least in the New Zealand context remains to be resolved.

A further likely complication involves initiatives at all levels of government in New Zealand to move many services online over the next few years. While a natural evolution, this may well result in a period of confusion and client antagonism as different charging policies and practices emerge both within and across governments. More generally, the continuing growth of the information market is another key factor for SNZ to consider. Implications include the expectation of much greater competition in some of our traditional markets, more market innovation in information products and services generally, a continual and relentless drive to be cost competitive from a producer's perspective and heightened expectations of all levels of consumers regarding ease and costs of access and the ability of service providers to tailor their service(s) to the specific needs of the individual consumer. Our strategy to use information intermediaries as a key channel for the delivery of our data is, in part, a response to these pressures.

3. Some Practical Lessons to Date

The ability to cost effectively support most of the channels discussed above will depend increasingly on the ability of SNZ to assemble and then disseminate information in digital form using the internet. Over the last few years SNZ has moved from what was fundamentally a hard copy based publishing and dissemination system (where success was measured by the revenue achieved) to one with a primary focus now shifting to electronic distribution (in particular the Internet) and the recovery of costs for specialised services. This has now been more formally articulated by the principles of access and hierarchy of access channels referred to earlier in this paper. The journey to where we are today has not been without its challenges and many remain to be tackled before our dissemination strategy can be fully realised.

The initial phase in our shift to greater use of the Internet involved just 'get things up' so that much of what was on the web site was simply PDF's etc of books or other publications. The underlying aim of this somewhat chaotic approach was to have everything that was being available electronically in one place (ie the SNZ web site) and to try to break down information silos that had built up within SNZ. Looking back it is clear that it was driven by the enthusiasm of the individuals, rather than any coherent plan.

As we have moved on to seek to integrate Internet dissemination into our existing dissemination processes, we have confronted the reality of the diversity of output systems in use within SNZ, the significant degree of variability in data and metadata management practices across the different information silos and the risks of manual processes in multiple media releases. This is constraining our ability to seamlessly author and then distribute information products and services to the range of output media in a consistent and coherent manner.

The key weaknesses identified in our current output systems which increase the risks to accuracy of the products and services we disseminate and which are often sources of inefficiency in our production processes are as follows:

1) Data Management

Multiple data formats and software are in use across the department. Managing data to ensure that the appropriate version of a dataset is used for each time period is also difficult in our current environment.

2) Calculating Aggregate Values

Output divisions are usually supplied with a unit record dataset. As data is received in a variety of formats, it has not been possible to develop standard processes for aggregating data and producing analysis tables and graphs. The result is a plethora of ad hoc processes, which are mostly created and maintained by individual business areas.

3) Production of Tables and Graphs for Publication

The standard process for producing tables for publication generally requires some manual formatting to meet SNZ standards. The process for creating graphs for publication also require some manual extraction of data. This is both inefficient and increases the risks of errors at each stage of production.

This, combined with our recognition that using the existing processes, procedures and technologies that have evolved to support primarily paper based products to also publish to the web is proving problematical, is leading us to redesign our output production functions from the bottom up. We still have a way to go in this work but perhaps the most important conclusion we have reached to date is that the major challenges are cultural and functional rather than technological.

RESUME

Le potentiel de l'Internet s'est affirmé au cours des quelques dernières années au point qu'il figure maintenant communément de façon marquée dans la stratégie des bureaux nationaux des Statistiques tels que « Statistics New Zealand » (SNZ) pour la diffusion des statistiques officielles. Cependant pendant un certain temps encore, bien que d'une importance croissante, celui-ci ne restera qu'une avenue parmi les autres moyens de diffusion. Ceci a soulevé un nombre de questions sur la conduite à suivre de SNZ qui, avec certains des nos expériences pratiques comme l'intergration des moyens d'information sur la Toile dans notre programme de diffusion plus traditionnel, sont abordées dans ce document. Ces délibérations sont adaptées au contexte global des objectifs du programme de diffusion de SNZ et doivent remplir les besoins en information des utilisateurs sur les bases de données statistiques appartenant à SNZ et encourager l'utilisation accrue de ces données dans la société néo-zélandaise en général.