



Asia-Pacific Internet Update

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Editorial Comment:

Australia is indeed active in exploring and launching new commercial based applications on the Net. The following article was extracted from the NSW Law Society Journal and was published in December 1995. It details one of the latest initiatives by the legal fraternity to distribute public legal information in a more accessible and efficient way. This article has been reproduced with the permission of Mr Patrick McAllister from the NSW Law Society, and the authors are Mr Graham Greenleaf and Mr Andrew Mowbray.

AUSTLII LARGEST LAW SITE ON THE INTERNET

After six months operation, the Australian Legal Information Institute (AustLII) is already the largest source of legal materials on the Internet's World-Wide-Web (the Web). AustLII has more than a gigabyte of text databases, equivalent to hundreds of large legal text books. AustLII's purpose is to provide free access to Australian legal material, to anyone who has access to the Internet. All of AustLII's materials are marked up in rich hypertext and are researchable by both user-controlled and pre-stored free text searches. AustLII's Internet address is (<http://www.austlii.edu.au/>).

AustLII's focus is on making available public legal information: primary legal materials (legislation's and decisions of courts and tribunals); and secondary materials that are (or ought to be) in the public domain or able to be licensed for free. As well as providing the technical capacity to put these materials on the Internet, AustLII's public policy agenda is to convince governments, courts, law reform bodies and other publicly-funded organisations to make legal materials they control available to the public.

AustLII was established jointly by the University of New South Wales (UNSW) and the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) in January 1995. After acquisition of equipment and conversion of initial data, the AustLII system was launched on the Web in April 1995. AustLII's initial 1995 funding (\$110,000) was provided by the Department of Employment, Education and Training and supplemented by a further \$50,000 provided by two host universities.

AustLII's usage has been doubling each month since inception, and by the end of October was averaging almost 7,000 hits (pages accessed) per working day, from at least 600 users. Peak usage so far is over 9,000 hits a day. Approximately 80 per cent of users come from within Australia, 20 per cent from overseas. And this is while there are still relatively few Australian lawyers using the Internet.

Primary legal materials on AustLII

The full text databases of primary materials currently on AustLII include consolidated New South Wales statutes, Commonwealth statutes and statutory rules, and decisions of the High Court of Australia (since 1950), the NSW Land and Environment Court, the Family Court of Australia, the Commonwealth Administrative Appeals Tribunal, the Tasmanian Supreme Court, and the Australian Industrial Court. AustLII is obtaining the data in various ways, direct from courts and legislatures in some cases, and also via the Commonwealth Attorney-General's SCALE system.

In September 1995 the Law Foundation of New South Wales agreed to support AustLII's ongoing provisions of primary legal materials on a national basis, by an initial grant of \$150,000. With the Foundation's assistance, AustLII and Foundation Law have the approval of a number of other State, Territory and Commonwealth courts and tribunals to include their legislation being included on AustLII.

The law Foundation's Foundation Law service now provides an Internet service provider (ISP) focussed on the needs of Australian lawyers, and a convenient home page through which to access the primary materials on AustLII and other legal resources.

AustLII's secondary legal materials

There is a wealth of legal information created by publicly-funded bodies across Australia which can be made available in a free, convenient and more valuable form through the text retrieval and hypertext formats that AustLII provides.

AustLII already includes a considerable amount of such material, such as law reform materials including reports and discussion paper from the New South Wales Reform Commission, the Australian Institute of Judicial Administration, the NSW Privacy Committee, the Information Commissioner of Western Australia, and the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Justice Statement. Also included are law journals such as Murdoch University School of Law's electronic law journal, E-Law, and Privacy Law and Policy Reporter, publications of the Australian Commercial Disputes Centre (ACDC), and law course materials on media law and information technology law from UNSW and UTS.

Major new secondary materials collections are underway, including the National Human Rights Database, funded by the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department through the Human Right's Centre at UNSW. During 1996, extensive hypertext links integrating AustLII's primary and secondary materials will be built, and we expect the collection to be expanded far beyond its current scope and size.

AustLII has also developed a comprehensive index, Australian Law on the Net, with hypertext links over 200 sources of Australian legal information on the Internet (and an index for New Zealand law).

Innovations in navigation and search techniques

AustLII's approach to computerising legal materials has these innovative features:

- Rich and automated hypertext: There are about 5 million automatically inserted hypertext links in AustLII's existing databases, including links to definitions of words in statutes, links to other sections (even in other Acts), links from cases to references to other cases or to legislation, and links from some secondary materials to cases and legislation;
- Development and use of its own search engine, SINO: The whole AustLII database can be searched in a few seconds, and results are presented as a point-and-click list;
- Integration of hypertext and text retrieval: Every section or case in AustLII has a noteup button which causes a search for other references to that cases or section, and will find cases, other legislation, or secondary material;
- A platform for research: the results of AustLII's research will provide future innovations in the delivery of legal materials via the Internet. AustLII researchers have been awarded \$178,000 from Australian Research Council for research into innovative methods of legal text retrieval over the next three years.

Public legal information servers

AustLII is part of a growing international network of public legal information servers, which are concentrating on providing publicly available legal materials free of charge via the Web. Public legal information servers have been established by universities (particularly in the USA), governments (such as in Canada) and courts and legislatures (such as US Congress). AustLII is the world's largest legal information server. Others in Australia include ACT LawNet (ACT law reform materials) and the Victorian system also known as LawNet. Links to other public legal information servers are on AustLII's Other Australian sites and Other International sites pages.

The Internet is fast becoming home to commercial providers of information, and effective means of charging for even occasional uses of resources are being developed. The complementary movement, of which AustLII is a part, aims to ensure that some part of cyberspace remains public space, where no one is denied use of resources because of financial considerations. The aim is similar in some respect to the creation of public libraries in the nineteenth century. Unless this is achieved, the Internet will become "500,000 nodes and a toll booth on every one".

All links point to AustLII

AustLII is a free and open resource to which others can add value by creating on their own home pages subject-specific customised sets of hypertext links into AustLII's generic sets of primary and secondary materials. Stored searches of AustLII databases can also be located on anyone else's hypertext pages as hypertext links - the search is automatically passed to the AustLII server when the user activates the link. Documents on other Web servers which mention legislation or cases can include live links to those cases or sections on the AustLII server.

Extensive linking to AustLII has already been done by centres specialising in Media law and environmental law, by an association of aviation enthusiasts (the Aussie Aviator home page), by the National Information Services Council's legal committee, and by academics building teaching resources. At least one legal publisher is already exploring how to make extensive links to AustLII from the secondary materials that they intend to publish commercially on the Internet.