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Topic (iii) How to present metadata

PRESENTATION OF DESCRIPTIVE METADATA ON THE ABS WEB SITE

Supporting Paper

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I.   INTRODUCTION

1.   Publishing statistical information on the ABS web site allows our clients to design their own reading experience. This, in turn, allows them to meet their information needs efficiently and effectively through viewing only those components of our larger information suite which interests them.

2.   However, in being selective, clients may misunderstand our information through missing or ignoring important parts of it. It is also possible that they will simply fail to find what they are looking for.

3.   This sets us a problem. How do we make sure that clients find the information they need, recognise its value and understand its messages? The answer is, we cannot. We can never be entirely sure that our clients' needs are fully met. However, there are a number of ways in which we can help them find and understand what they seek.

4.   The ABS contends that clients are best helped to use and understand statistical information by having relevant descriptive metadata readily at hand as they search for, evaluate and apply that information. As well, we contend that such descriptive metadata best serves its purpose when presented at levels of detail tailored for the clients' uses.

II. PRINCIPLES

5.   The ABS has adopted a number of principles to guide evolution of our web site to better service our on-line clients' needs. These principles are:

*   layering – presenting information in layers, with the simplest presented first, and the most complex last, hyperlinked to allow easy navigation between layers

*   contextual linking – hyperlinking to explanatory materials from the information to which they relate, and layering them at equivalent levels of detail, and

*   writing for on-screen reading – presenting information in readily digestible chunks, not requiring extensive scrolling of or jumping between screens, and written in everyday language.

6.   Further detail about these principles can be found in *Data Communication - Emerging International Trends and Practices of the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006* <http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/1211.0>.

II.   CLIENTS

7.   The ABS believes that these principles will best enable us to address the needs of our broad range of clients, who we have categorised as:

*   tourists – infrequent users of the information they are viewing, and perhaps of the ABS web site; seeking small amounts of summary information on a topic; 'statistically naive' in the topic at hand, even if expert in other information

*   harvesters – generally interested in the same type of information at regular intervals and generally have a good understanding of their data needs

*   miners – very experienced users interested in acquiring a large volumes of detailed information and explanatory materials.

II.   ADOPTING A LAYERED APPROACH ON SCREEN

8.   Research suggests that presenting information in layers improves client understanding. It facilitates communication with a diverse range of on-line users with different levels of statistical sophistication.

9.   In line with this approach, the ABS web site currently displays information in the following layers:

*   Headlines – concise, factual statements drawing attention to, and capturing interest in newly released statistics or other newly published information

*   Simple story of the data (main features) – summarising the principal statistical results of a publication or other product

*   Detailed story (detailed publication) and detailed statistics (spreadsheets, data cubes and time series).

III. CONTEXTUAL LINKING TO METADATA

10.   Use of layering and linking approaches described above also applies to the presentation of metadata. This allows users to view supporting information appropriate to their needs.

11.   For example, a simple story of the data (main features) may include links to brief summary explanatory notes. Typically these take the form of mouse-over annotations or notes on an associated web page. These summary explanations, however, may themselves include hyperlinks to more detailed information.

12.   Detailed stories and detailed statistics (publications, spreadsheets, etc.), on the other hand, will not necessarily be confined to linking explanations in this way. Rather, they may include direct links to the most detailed sources of explanation such as: data dictionaries; concepts, sources and methods publications.

IV. WRITING FOR, AND PRESENTING INFORMATION ON SCREEN

13.   In a web site, explanatory materials may be published in one location and linked to from numerous places. However, to do this effectively we need to create small 'grabs' of information of broad relevance. This information needs to be concise and expressed in commonly understood language. Otherwise, we will distract our clients from their main task, which is to understand our statistics. Complex and wordy explanations defeat their own purpose.

14.   Too much explanatory material also becomes a distraction and obscures the meaning of the information it seeks to explain. Now that we are no longer constrained by the number of pages that can be reasonably bound in a paper book, we could potentially swamp our core messages with explanations of them. It is important, therefore, for us to be selective in what we explain, and how.

15.   Not only must explanations be concise, they must also be displayed on-screen in ways facilitating quick comprehension. This is important for all statistical and related information, as in the web environment one layer may well serve as an explanation for another. All information, therefore, must be presented for on-screen viewing:

- lines of text should be short

- pages should make judicious use of space and should be easily scanned

- pages should not include non-essential distractions

- every object upon a page must have an identifiable purpose

- information on web pages should be broken into single topic paragraphs wherever possible, and

- sentences too should cover only a single proposition.

V. IMPLEMENTATION

16. The ABS is currently enhancing its publishing systems to support the full adoption of these principles. We are also developing and delivering training for:

- ABS authors – to help them to organise their information in this new manner, and

- web site users – to help them read and understand information structured according to these principles.

17. The need to undertake these developments means that we will be implementing our new publishing vision in a staged fashion. This staged approach, however, has the added benefit of demanding only incremental cultural change for both writers and readers of our statistical and related information.

VI. CONCLUSION

18. Many of the approaches outlined in this paper have been well tested in other contexts. For example, educators have long introduced new fields of learning to their students, beginning with simple concepts and moving to the more complex. Contents pages, footnotes and indexes in scholarly texts illustrate the value of providing help at the point of need.

19. The web allows us to offer greater flexibility to our clients than has been the case in the past. In a web environment we can easily allow expert users (miners), and those familiar with the topic at hand (harvesters), to skip highly summarised information and move directly to the most detailed and complex data. As well as narrowing their searches - to help them find what they are seeking, we can introduce them to wider contexts for the information they are viewing - to enhance their understanding. And we can do all of these things simultaneously using the same strategies. In short, we can 'communicate' our information to them, not merely 'disseminate' it for their unguided consumption.