CHAPTER 3

DISCUSSION OF *SA GOVERNMENT ONLINE*

1. INTRODUCTION

To get an understanding of the first product that was being evaluated, i.e. the *SA Government Online* website, and of the findings for the evaluation and recommendations made to improve the website (see chapters six to eight), this chapter provides an overview of the site as it was at the time of the research (14 August 2000 – 16 September 2000).

Brief information on the development of the site and on its aims and objectives is provided and its main features are discussed. To enable readers to visualise the site and the features that are discussed, screen prints of the home page and main pages are also provided.

2. BACKGROUND

SA Government Online was developed in accordance with the recommendations of the Comtask Report (1996), which was accepted by Cabinet on 8 October 1996. One of the recommendations reads: "South Africa needs to develop a comprehensive government website on the Internet, and all departments, provinces and other government bodies should be able to integrate national databases into such as system." In this process, existing efforts and initiatives – both government and parastatal – needed to be linked via the network to provide ease of access, and all government structures were to supply key information into the system. As this had to be the common vehicle for all government bodies, the Government Communication and Information System (GCIS) had to facilitate the development of such a network (Comtask, 1996:75).

One of the initiatives in this regard included the setting up of an interdepartmental steering committee representing GCIS, the Department of Communications, the Department of Public Service and Administration, the Central Computer Services and Project Management Services. The implementation process was planned and co-ordinated by this committee.

3. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF *SA GOVERNMENT ONLINE*

At the launch of *SA Government Online* on 28 January 1999, Thabo Mbeki (then Deputy President of South Africa) remarked that the website would ensure that government would be accessible to the people and that it would form part of the democratic open-door policy of government (Mbeki, 1999). The introduction to the website stated: "By developing a comprehensive government Home Page, government has created a mechanism by which the information from government departments, provinces and other government bodies is accessible through a one-stop gateway. This will enable users to get a comprehensive overview of information available on government websites and to quickly navigate the vast information resources available in government."

The main objectives of SA *Government Online*, according to the introduction, were to:
- facilitate easy access to government information on the Internet
- avoid duplication regarding the availability of government information on the Internet
- ensure a co-ordinated approach to government Internet publishing
- meet transparency goals
- keep the electorate informed
- place information on the global network.

4. MAIN FEATURES OF *SA GOVERNMENT ONLINE*

This section provides an overview of the main features of the website and covers the home page, content, information architecture and organisation, navigation, search and design issues.

4.1 Approach with regard to carrying information content versus linking to other websites

SA Government Online contained and provided links to a range of government information. The general approach followed with regard to linking versus carrying information content was that the website contained links to web pages of government departments, provinces and other government information where websites existed, information content where it was not the direct line-functional responsibility of any government department, when it would have enhanced accessibility or when government bodies did not have their own websites, and value-added features such as a search engine, maximum access points to

government information, feedback opportunity and access to additional government information (*SA Government Online* website, 2000*)*.

4.2 The home page

The design of the top border of the home page made use of the South African flag and featured the title of the website, *South Africa Government Online*. The home page was divided into three columns, namely *Content*, *Events*, and *What's New* (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Home page
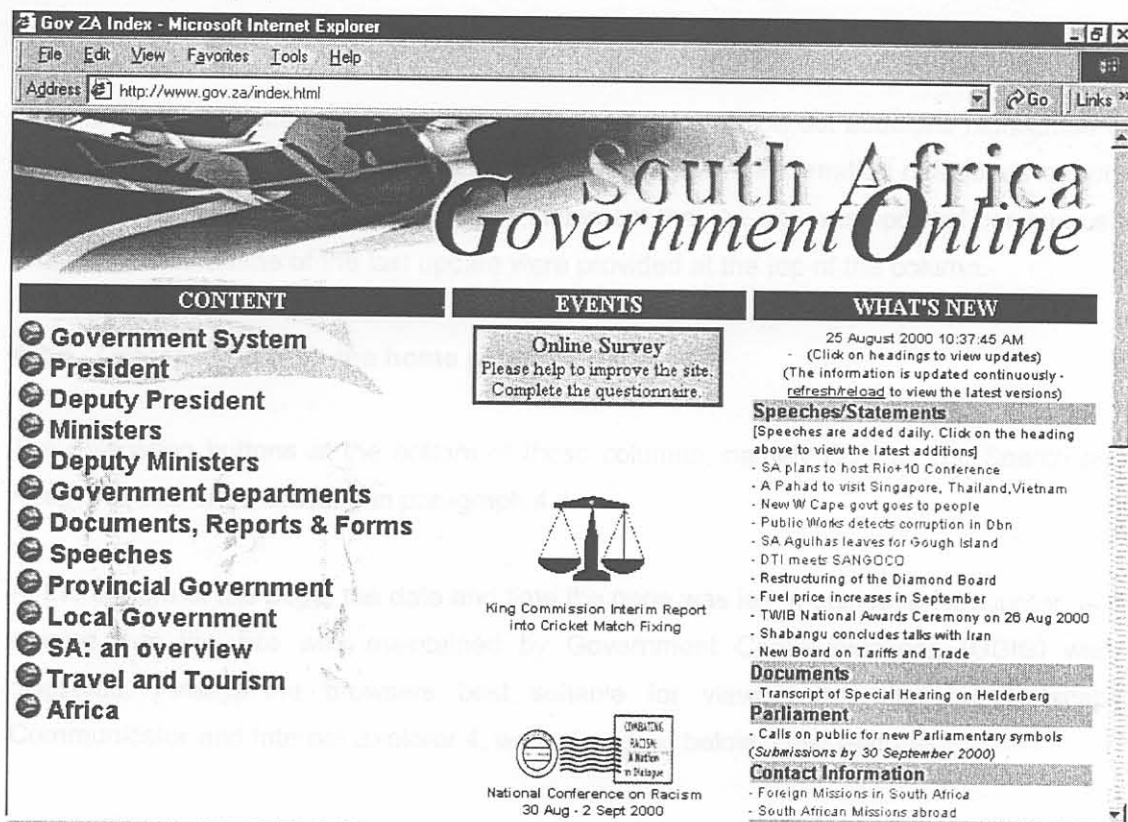
4.2.1 Content

A listing of the main information categories of the site was provided in the left hand column. These categories were: *Government System; President; Deputy President; Ministers; Deputy Ministers; Government Departments*; *Documents, Reports & Forms; Speeches; Provincial Government; Local Government, SA: an overview; Travel and Tourism; Africa.*

4.2.2 *Events*

Government and national events were announced in a visual way by using images accompanying the announcement thereof. Links were provided to additional information about these events, for example media advisories, media statements before or after an event, background documents and/or relevant websites. On 21 August 2000, the website carried a call to the public for submissions on new parliamentary symbols, a link to a media statement on municipal elections registrations, and an announcement about the National Conference on Racism.

4.2.3 *What's New*

New information posted on the site was announced and the latest additions highlighted in red. Announcements were presented according to relevant information categories or sub-categories as the situation determined. A statement that the site was updated continuously and the date and time of the last update were provided at the top of the column.

4.2.4 Other features on the home page

The navigation buttons at the bottom of these columns, namely *Contact Us, Search* and *About the Site* are discussed in paragraph 4.4.

At the bottom of the page, the date and time the page was last modified, a hit counter, and a note that the site was maintained by Government Communications (GCIS) were displayed. Finally, the browsers best suitable for viewing the site, i.e. Netscape Communicator and Internet Explorer 4, were displayed below these features.

4.3 Content, layout and navigation of the main pages of the website

The website is discussed according to the main information categories presented on the home page.

4.3.1 *Government System*

This category provided information about the national government system and structure and how it operated. The home page entry linked to the index page as presented in figure 2.

Figure 2: Index page for *Government System*
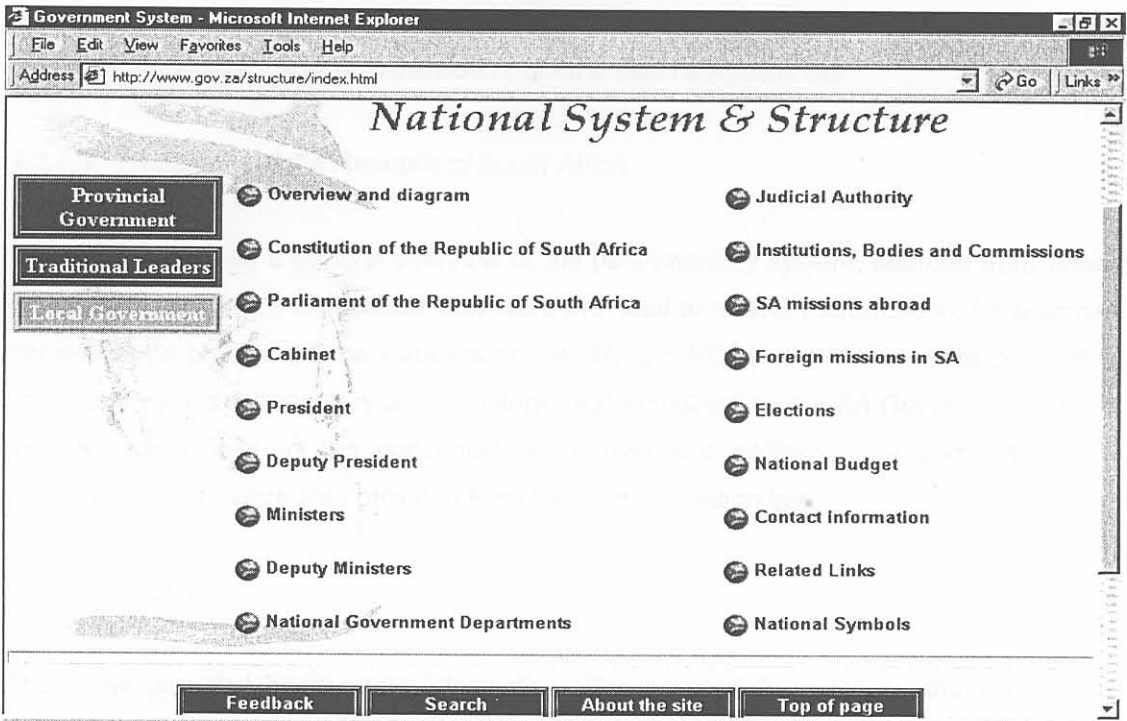
The page contained the following sub-categories:

4.3.1.1   Overview and diagram

This page contained a general overview of the government system and how it operated, sourced from *South Africa Yearbook 1999*. Topics included, for example, the Constitution, parliament, the cabinet, provincial and local government, elections, etc. Embedded links were provided to relevant information, for example the Constitution, National Assembly (NA), National Council of Provinces (NCOP), and the Constitutional Assembly's website. An index to the main sections of the document was provided at the top of the page, while 'top of the page' options were provided between sections. Additional cross-navigation was provided to a government diagramme and to an alphabetical index of other government bodies and institutions. The latter linked to the respective websites of the bodies.

4.3.1.2   Constitution of the Republic of South Africa

This page contained background information about the Constitution, sourced from *South Africa Yearbook 1999*. Embedded links were provided to relevant information, for example the individual chapters of the Constitution and the website of the Constitutional Assembly.

34

Additional cross-navigation was provided to background information on the writing of the Constitution, amendments to the Constitution and a new page containing information on previous constitutions. A link to an index to websites that contained information on constitutional matters was also provided from the side navigation bar.

4.3.1.3 Parliament of the Republic of South Africa

This page contained a general overview of the parliamentary system, sourced from *South Africa Yearbook 1999*. Embedded links were provided to relevant information, for example the speaker's profile and the websites of the NA and NCOP. Additional cross-navigation was provided to parliamentary contact information contained on the *SA Government Online* website, while links to the parliamentary website and parliamentary committees (on parliament's site), were also provided from the side navigation bar.

4.3.1.4 Cabinet

This page provided background information, also sourced from *South Africa Yearbook 1999*. Embedded links were provided to relevant information, for example the *Ministries* and *Deputy Ministries* pages, NA, *The Presidency* page and the profile of Thabo Mbeki. Additional cross-navigation was provided to the relevant section in the Constitution, a government diagramme, a list of cabinet ministers and their portfolios) and a combined list of contact information for all the ministries.

4.3.1.5 President and Deputy President

Information for these two categories was presented together on *The Presidency* page, and provided contact information for the offices of the president and deputy president, their photographs, as well as links to their speeches and media statements, profiles, *Director-General in the Presidency* page, organisational information on The Presidency (Powerpoint presentation) and other relevant information. An 'index' at the top of the page linked to the two respective categories.

From the page containing profile, additional cross-navigation was provided to the contact information for the relevant official's office, his/her speeches, and the *Profiles* page (a listing of cabinet members and deputy ministers, linking to their profiles).

4.3.1.6 Ministers

This entry linked to a page with a list of the ministries, the name of each minister (this linked to his/her profile and photograph), as well as links to each official's speeches and contact information (see figure 3). Additional cross-navigation was provided to the relevant section in the Constitution, a portfolio list (an alphabetical listing of ministers and their portfolios), a combined list of contact information for all the members of cabinet, a list of cabinet members with a link to each one's profile, and to a list of deputy ministers.

Figure 3: Index page for *Ministries*

From each page containing profiles, additional cross-navigation was provided to the contact information for the relevant official's office, his/her speeches and the *Profiles* page (listing of cabinet and deputy ministers, linking to their profiles). Pages containing ministers' contact information also included a photograph of each.

4.3.1.7 Deputy Ministers

This entry linked to a page with a list of the deputy ministries, the name of each deputy minister (which linked to his\her profile and photograph), as well as links to the speeches

and contact information of each. Additional cross-navigation was provided to the relevant section in the Constitution, a portfolio list (an alphabetical listing of deputy ministers and their portfolios), a combined list of contact information for all deputy ministers, and to a list of cabinet members.

From the pages containing profiles, additional cross-navigation was provided to the contact information for the relevant official's office, his/her speeches, and the *Profiles* page (a listing of cabinet and deputy ministers linking to their profiles). Pages containing ministers' contact information also included a photograph of each.

4.3.1.8 National Departments

This page contained an alphabetical listing of all national government departments, with links to each department's website, a short overview of each department (vision, mission, organisational structure), its contact information and relevant ministry (see figure 4). Additional cross-navigation was provided to legislation and documents about the public service, an index of other government bodies and institutions (linking to their websites), and a combined list of contact information for all government departments.

Figure 4: Index page for *National Departments*

Pages containing the contact information of each department and an overview thereof also provided links to the department's website and the profile of the responsible minister and deputy minister.

4.3.1.9 Judicial Authority

This page provided background information on the administration of justice, sourced from *South Africa Yearbook 1999*. Embedded links were provided to other relevant information, for example the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development. Additional cross-navigation was provided to the relevant section in the Constitution, the government diagramme and the pages for the *Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Development* and the *Department of Justice and Constitutional Development.*

4.3.1.10 Institutions, Bodies and Commissions

This page contained an alphabetical index of government bodies and institutions (other than those already mentioned), linking to their respective websites. Additional cross-navigation was provided to the relevant section in the Constitution, government diagramme and a combined list of contact information for these institutions (as carried on the *SA Government Online* website).

4.3.1.11 SA Missions Abroad

This page contained an index to information on South African representatives abroad, South African representatives at international organisations abroad, and other offices. An additional cross-navigation link to *Foreign Missions in South Africa* was provided.

4.3.1.12 Foreign Missions in SA

This page contained an index to information on foreign representatives in South Africa, international organisations represented in South Africa, and other offices. An additional cross-navigation link to *South African Missions Abroad* was provided.

4.3.1.13 Elections

This page contained an index linking mainly to information about the 1999 national elections. The listing contained entries to speeches and media statements on the elections, registered political parties, results of the 1999 and 1994 elections, an index of regulations and legislation pertaining to the elections, an explanation of South Africa's electoral system, the Electoral Act and media reports. Links to the Independent Electoral Commission's (IEC) website and other electoral resources were also provided.

4.3.1.14 National Budget

This entry linked to a *Budget 2000* page which contained various budget-related links to the website of the Department of Finance (for example the budget speech, *Budget Review, People's Guide to the Budget*) and budget-related media statements contained in the searchable database. An additional cross-navigation link, *Search on other Speeches,* was provided.

4.3.1.15 Contact information

This entry linked to an index of different government structures (cabinet, deputy ministers, national government departments, provinces, bodies and institutions, parliament), linking to combined lists of contact information for each grouping.

4.3.1.16 Related Links

This entry linked to the *Government and Politics* section on the *SA Webs* page and which provided an index linking to the websites of foreign offices, political parties and organisations, international bodies and other governments.

4.3.1.17 National Symbols

This page provided an index to information about the national symbols of South Africa (anthem; flag; Coat of Arms; animal; bird; fish; flower and tree). Background information on each of these symbols and images thereof were provided. These pages provided additional navigation to the pages of the other *National Symbols* sub-categories.

4.3.1.18 Additional cross-navigation

Additional cross-navigation was provided to the *Provincial Government* and *Local Government pages* and to a page about traditional leaders. The latter provided background information sourced from *South Africa Yearbook 1999.* Embedded links were provided to relevant information, for example the relevant chapter in the Constitution.

4.3.2 President, Deputy President, Ministers, Deputy Ministers and Government Departments

These categories linked directly from the home page to the same information as described under similar headings at *Government System.*

4.3.3 Documents, Reports & Forms

This page contained an index to the sub-categories described in the following paragraphs. See figure 5 for an example of the screen display.

Figure 5: Index page for *Government Documents, Reports & Forms*
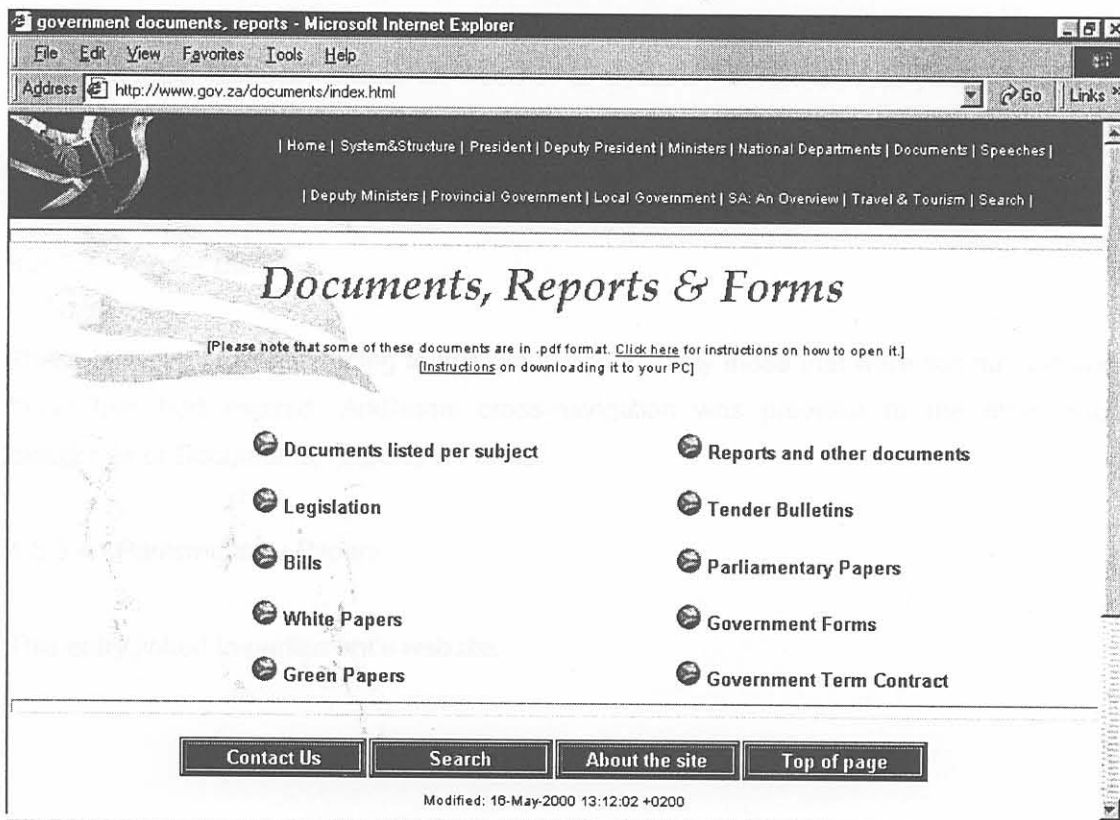
4.3.3.1 Legislation, Bills, white papers, green papers, reports and other documents

For the first three sub-categories documents were categorised per annum, for example *2000 Legislation, 1999 Bills*, and so on. The initial entries linked to the *2000* pages. For the other three sub-categories documents were listed on one page each and grouped per annum. In all cases documents were listed in descending order (from new to old).

Additional cross-navigation was provided to the other sub-categories of *Documents, Reports & Forms*, and in the case of separate pages for the same sub-category, also to these.

4.3.3.2 Documents listed per subject

This entry linked to the *2000 Documents per subject* page, consisting of an index of documents from all above-mentioned sub-categories published in 2000. Documents were listed according to topics and sorted alphabetically. An alphabetical index at the top of the page linked to the relevant topics.

Additional cross-navigation was provided to the other sub-categories of *Documents, Reports & Forms*, to the other documents from the same sub-category (for example *1999 Documents per subject)*, and to an index of all documents from all four years. The latter listed all topics alphabetically, and contained an index (letters of the alphabet) at the top of the page.

4.3.3.3 Tender Bulletins

These were provided according to two groupings, namely those that were still running and those that had expired. Additional cross-navigation was provided to the other sub-categories of *Documents, Reports & Forms*.

4.3.3.4 *Parliamentary Papers*

This entry linked to parliament's website.

4.3.3.5 Government Forms

This page contained an index to five government forms. Additional cross-navigation was provided to the other sub-categories of *Documents, Reports & Forms.*

4.3.3.6 Government Term Contract

This entry linked to the website of the State Tender Board.

4.3.3.7 Document formats

Although most of the documents were carried on the *SA Government Online* web server in either PDF or HTML format, there were some links to documents contained on other government sites.

4.3.4 Speeches

On 31 August 2000, the site contained 2013 speeches and media statements made or issued by current and former government officials during the period 1994 – 2000, as well as six made by foreign delegates.

Speeches and media statements were indexed in the full-text retrieval system or *Searchable Database* (see paragraph 4.4.2). The search interface allowed the user to choose the relevant year he/she wished to search on, to search on date, title or text fields, as well as to sort the results. After a search had been performed, the results list contained dates, titles and the occasions on which speeches or media statements were delivered. A short summary of the content of each speech/media statement was also provided. To use the search facility, the user had to go to the *Searchable Database* page from *Search on Speeches* button in the side navigation bar or the *Search* button.

On the *Speeches and Press Releases* page (see figure 6), speeches and media statements were listed per annum (in descending order, i.e. from new to old), as well as per official (minister; deputy minister). Selecting the relevant menu item (year or name of official) took the user to the information indexed in the *Searchable Database.* Additional cross-navigation was provided from the *Speeches per Annum* section to the listings of cabinet members and deputy ministers (with links to their speeches), S*earch on Speeches*

and speeches by the former president, Nelson Mandela. From the *Speeches as delivered per Cabinet Member* and *Speeches as delivered per Deputy Minister* sections, additional cross-navigation was provided to the deputy ministers'/ministers' speeches, *Search on Speeches* and top of page.
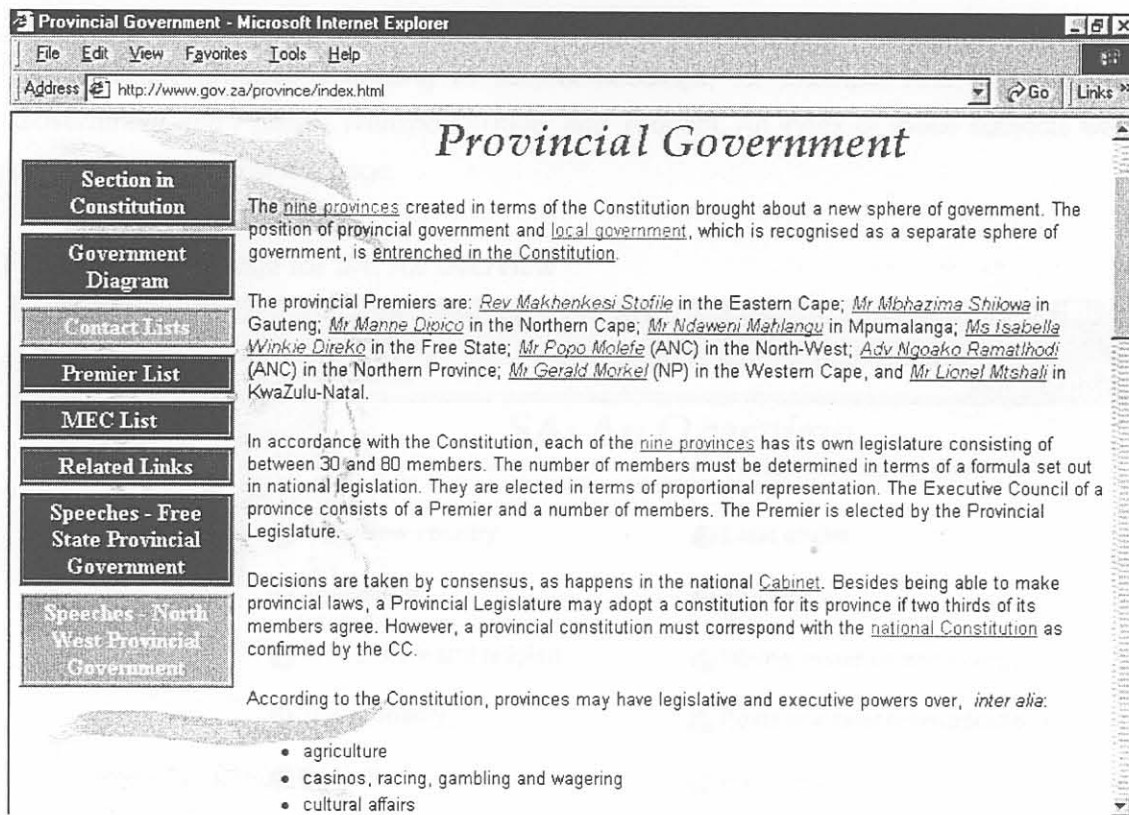
Figure 6: Index page for *Speeches and Press Releases*
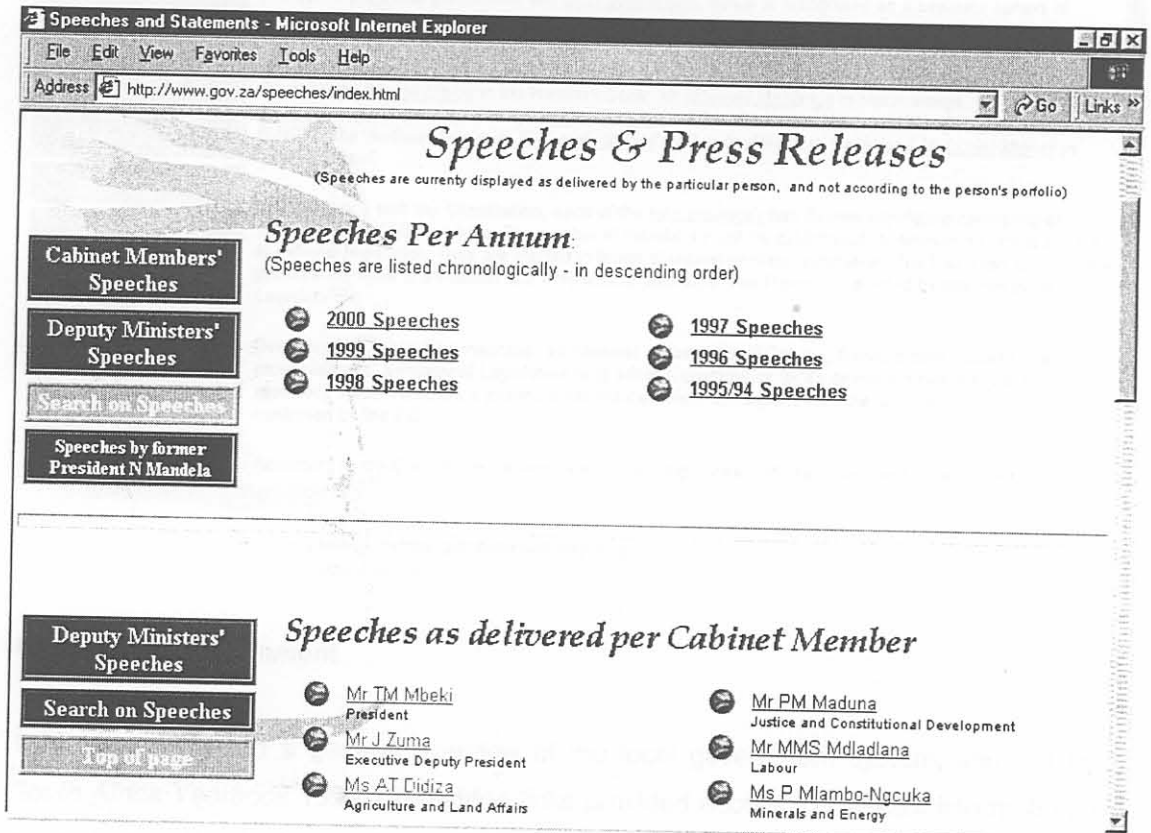
4.3.5 *Provincial Government*

This page contained a general overview of the provincial government system, sourced from the *South Africa Yearbook 1999* (see figure 7). Embedded links provided access to a page with more detailed information about the provinces (*nine provinces*), profiles of the provincial premiers, and other relevant information. At the bottom of the page, a list of the provinces, which linked to their websites, was provided. Additional cross-navigation was provided to the relevant section in the Constitution, government diagramme, combined list of contact information for all provinces, a list of provinces with and their respective premiers, a list of MECs (Members of the Provincial Executive Councils) of the respective provinces, and speeches of two of the provincial governments, while a link (*Related Links*) to the above-mentioned listing of provincial websites was also provided.

Figure 7: *Provincial Government* page

4.3.6 *Local Government*

This page contained a general overview of the local government system, sourced from *South Africa Yearbook 1999*. Embedded links provided access to relevant information, for example the South African Local Government Association (Salga), relevant Acts, the relevant ministry and department. Additional cross-navigation was provided to the relevant section in the Constitution, government diagramme, relevant ministry and relevant department, while a link (*Related Links)* to a listing of some local government websites was also provided.

4.3.7 *SA: An Overview*

This page contained a topical index linking to information sourced from *South Africa Yearbook 1999* as well as to information on public holidays and work permits and to the school calendar (see figure 8). Entries were for example *Agriculture, Health, Tourism, Transport, Government system*. Each of these pages provided additional cross-navigation to *SA Webs* and back to the previous page (*SA: an Overview* index page*). From the *SA: An Overview* page, additional cross-navigation was provided to *South Africa Yearbook 1998*,

and to an index of South African websites, *SA Websites*. The *SA Websites* page contained links to a variety of South African and some international websites. These links were alphabetically grouped according to subject headings, for example *Arts and Culture, Government and Politics, Transport, Travel and Tourism.* An index of these subjects was provided at the top of the page.

Figure 8: Index page for *SA: An Overview*
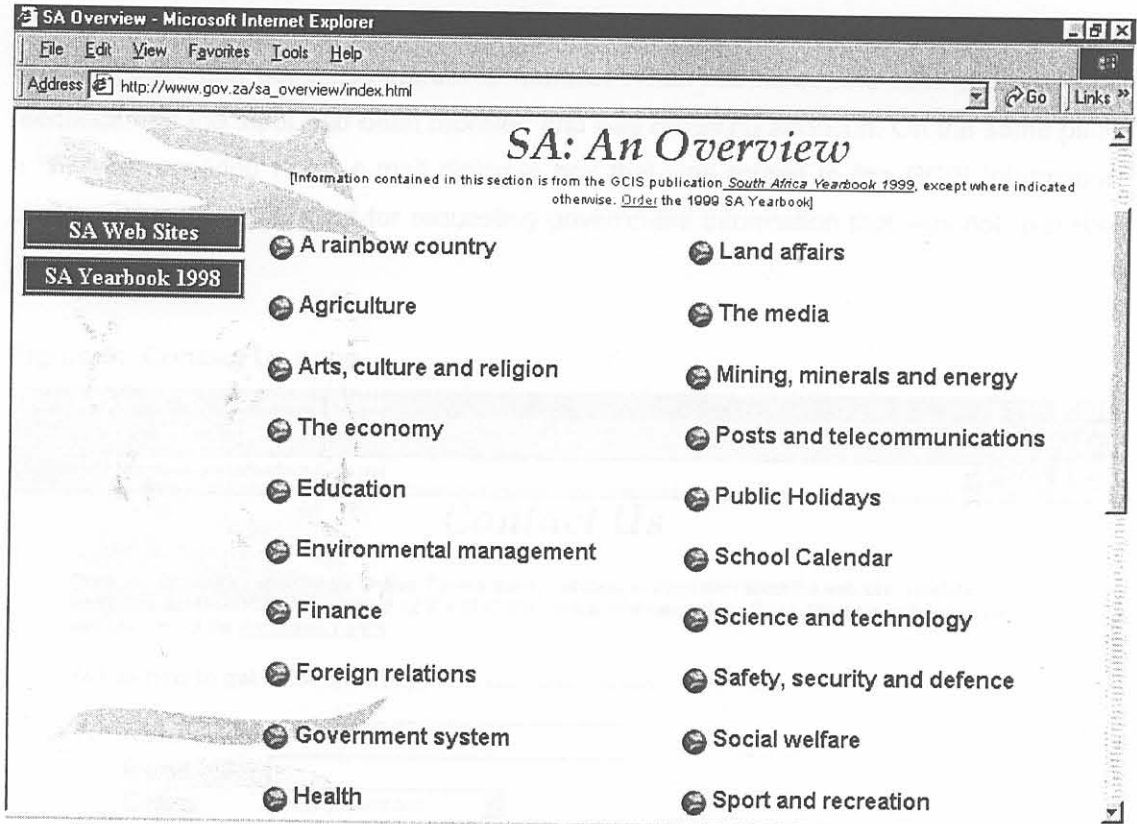
4.3.8 *Travel and Tourism*

This entry linked to the *Travel and Tourism* section on the *SA Webs* page which contained an index of websites providing information relevant to tourists to South Africa.

4.3.9 *Africa*

This page contained an index of links to the websites of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries as well as other African countries. Additional cross-navigation was provided to the *SA Webs* page and a page that contained information of the flood relief effort in Southern Africa.

4.4 Other organisational, navigation and design elements

Certain navigation options were provided at the bottom of all pages, namely *Contact Us, Search, About the site* and *Top of Page*.

4.4.1 *Contact Us*

This link provided access to an interactive feedback form (see figure 9) that provided for user feedback and questions about the website. When submitted, the user got automatic feedback that the input had been received and was receiving attention. On the same page a link was provided to an e-mail dialogue box that was routed to the GCIS information centre. This was to be used for requesting government information that was not available on the website.

**Figure 9:** *Contact Us* page

4.4.2 *Search*

This linked to the website's search page. The search facility allowed for searching in two ways.

The first, *Search the Government Online World Wide Website* (figure 10), was for searching information contained on the web (HTML) pages. The search interface allowed the user to

- enter words or phrases in a dialogue box.
- make a selection *from different result types.* Options provided were *default, standard and* power.
- manipulate the result count from 25 up to 100.
- refine a search from the results pages when the *standard* or *power* result type is selected.

Figure 10: *Search the Government Online World Wide Web site* page
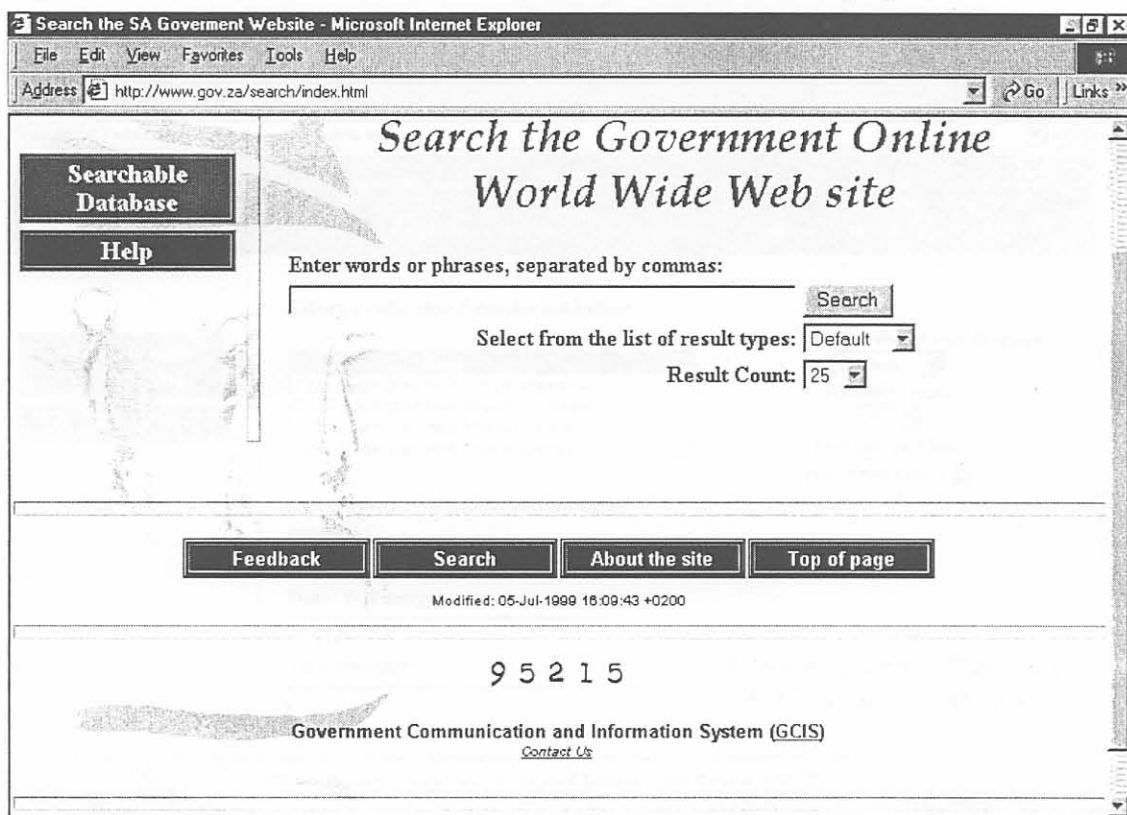
The second, *Searchable Database* (figure 11), was for searching information contained in a text retrieval system and was available from the side navigation bar on the previously mentioned search page. Main features of the search interface were that it allowed the user to

- choose the relevant data collections he/she wished to search on (for example *2000 Speeches and Press releases*; *1999 BuaNews*).
- search on date, title and text fields or a combination thereof.

- sort search results. Sorting options provided were to sort according to score or date, both either descending or ascending.
- select different result types. Options provided were *default*, *simple*, *standard*, and *power*.
- manipulate the result count from 25 up to 100.
- select options to view documents, namely *formatted view* and *simple view*.
- refine a search from the results page when the *standard* or *power* result type is selected.

Information contained in the text retrieval system was also accessible from relevant web pages, and thus by browsing the website.

Figure 11: Search interface for the S*earchable Database*
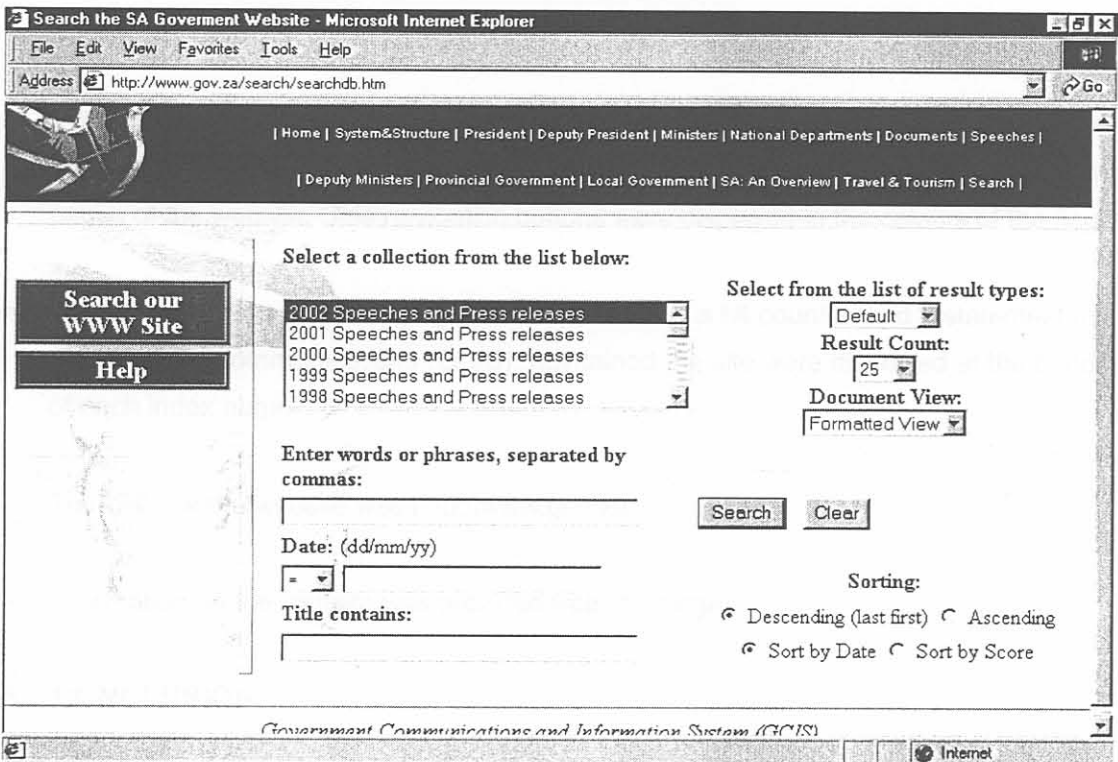
A *Help* page was accessible from both search pages and provided information on how to search with both the search mechanisms and provided quick tips on how to search.

4.4.3 *About the Site*

This linked to background information on the development of the website, its main objectives and content, as well as on document formats used on the site.

4.4.4 Other features

Other features of the website were:

- In general the site made use of menus (indexes) linking to sub-menu and sub-sub-menu structures and then to the information itself. Depth of menu structures varied from one to three levels, thus requiring the user to click a maximum of three times to reach the information he/she required. In contrast, text overviews with embedded links to further information were provided in the case of *Government Structure*.

- All pages, except for the home page, contained a navigation bar at the top that provided links back to the home page and to the index pages of the main categories presented on the home page.

- The design made use of the South African flag at the top of pages and Khoisan figures as background. These elements were used on the home page as well as all the main pages of the website. Side navigation buttons were displayed in the colours of the flag.

- The date and time when the page was last modified, a hit counter, and a statement that Government Communications (GCIS) maintained the site were displayed at the bottom of each index page.

- The URL for the website was http://www.gov.za.

- Information on the website was provided free of charge.

5. CONCLUSION

The overview of the *SA Government Online* website as presented in this chapter will enable readers to visualise the website as it was at the time it was evaluated. When considering the findings of the evaluation process and recommendations made to improve the website (chapters six to eight), readers may refer back to this chapter.

The detailed discussion of the content features of the website made it clear that the website linked to other government websites, but also contained content itself. Furthermore, the discussion provided an indication of the navigation scheme and organisational structure of

the site, and discussed the main features of the search mechanism and the visual appearance of the website. From this discussion it became clear that the *SA Government Online* website was developed with the purpose of providing a one-stop service with easy access to national, provincial and other government websites, to avoid duplication, and to keep the public informed of government policies and activities.

The next two chapters will provide comprehensive criteria for effective websites in general (chapter four) and for government websites and South African websites in particular (chapter five).