

Ten internet years



Ivan Trundle

Manager, publishing
and communications
ivan.trundle@alia.org.au

There was considerable debate about the cost of implementing ALIANet ... very much 'blue sky' stuff back then. Not only 'blue sky', but 'green field', too...

The first Australian Association website and internet presence began just over ten years ago. It was an audacious move, and one which combined the talents of a number of people. Back then, the best browser available had a graphical user interface (in contrast to usual practice) and the concept of putting images together with text and viewing them both at the same time was quite an innovation. E-mail, on the other hand, was not so much of a novelty back then, and little has changed in the ensuing period.

With the full support of the ALIA General Council, we forged ahead and developed services that which would evolve to become vital to the functioning of the Association. The website grew from thirty pages to the present-day 40 000+, and our e-lists — which began in September 1996 — have grown from a handful to the more than 100 that we enjoy today. E-mail traffic is still the lifeblood of communication in the digital world, and more than 250 members are currently making use of an ALIANet account and internet-based services to manage their e-mail and personal websites.

Getting to this point was not easy. There was considerable debate about the cost of implementing ALIANet (see Kerry Smith's article), and the need for a sound business plan — very much 'blue sky' stuff back then. Not only 'blue sky', but 'green field', too — much of what we wanted to do and create could only be developed or built by a handful of experts (whereas the IT sector is full of experts now) and with no formula or routine to dictate how things should be done. Fortunately, the team headed in the right direction from the start, and the system that has developed has a very strong foundation, with equipment well-matched for the job. But it wasn't just the hardware and software that made ALIANet what it is, but also the 'wetware'. Without doubt, the contribution of ALIA members has made the ALIANet a bustling hive of activity, and a fantastic success. To all those who have contributed through the years: a very big 'thank you'. From the technical experts to the content contributors, from the tireless listowners to the councillors and directors who gave their full support, the strong sense of community and the realisation that it is indeed a group effort has strengthened all aspects of ALIANet's operation.

However, the speed at which the Association has embraced the electronic world is not without its downside. The exponential growth in digital publishing has been directly attributable to the gradual decline in print publishing. Whilst the sector is well aware of the need to preserve a record of activity and to archive

important documents, there is no doubt that funds that would have otherwise been spent on paper and book production have been diverted to digital reproduction. Nonetheless, the implementation of policies which dictate open standards will ensure that whatever material is kept on ALIANet is preserved for a long time to come — hopefully as long as a print-based publication, or longer.

But what changes we see in websites and publishing pales into insignificance with the changes made in communications between members of the Association and the sector, and the wider world. E-mail has become practically ubiquitous and is often the chosen medium for communication, more so than telephone, mail or even face-to-face contact. The ease at which a member can communicate with like-minded individuals is now taken for granted, yet we all know that it was the library sector which steered much of the infrastructure that we see today. Computer professionals developed the technology, yet information professionals liberated the medium. Thankfully, the library and information sector has maintained a firm grip on the direction of the internet, and has become the 'moral guardian', ensuring that tools and services are not only useful, but that they support existing standards whilst enhancing privacy, ensuring digital rights, and allowing freedom of access.

Consequently, there is much for the sector to think about, to grapple with, and to manage, over the next ten years. At the beginning of the internet, it was 'frontier-land', with few rules and little discipline. Now, in its pubescent state, the ubiquity of it all has realised 'services' such as Google and Yahoo, has created self-publishing opportunities to the point of overkill, and has opened up a Pandora's Box of difficult issues for the general public to face and deal with. Yet, in amongst all of this, the library sector has not lost its way, or its value. It is not difficult to sense an information revolution taking place in the next ten years, whereby the library and information sector regains control over the morass of information, and champions the cause of knowledge-seeking. A simple illustration from the recent ALIA Information Online Conference springs to mind: discussions over content management systems demonstrate very clearly that such things are in their infancy, and that as the library and information sector is drawn into the development of such tools, 'content management' will actually work, and tools will be created which will allow content to be managed. We have come a long way in ten years, but there is still a long way to go! ■