

Fifteen years on

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Webb's web



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One morning in February 1992, I sat down at my PC at the National Library, logged on to the internet for the first time – and I was hooked. The tools that we had then were quite primitive: Pine was our character-based e-mail client, telnet was the way of logging on to remote sites and there was a collection of other tools with quaint names like Archie, Veronica (and Jughead too), Gopher, WAIS and pretty soon the WWW.

I'm generally a late adopter of technology, but on that February day I knew that this was going to be great! It was hard to find stuff in those days, though. The Wide Area Information Service (WAIS) differed from the Archie and Gopher systems in providing a way of searching for content rather than file names, and eventually it indexed more than 600 databases of information. Wow! Searchers and lovers of trivia were delighted and we eagerly looked for electronic texts and song lyrics and all manner of arcana.

Looking back, it's hard to imagine how happy we were with text-based data (until you recall that most books are text-based) but there was so much we could do with it. One of my discoveries in that year was Usenet newsgroups, but the problem was that the NLA did not subscribe to a news feed. This was solved when I heard about the Launchpad service at the University of North

Carolina, where I was able to telnet and search their WAIS and read newsgroup postings (all work-related of course).

Even the necessity of sending a letter to UNC to register as a user of the service was no real problem, and in those days dealing with users from another country would have been a novelty for them.

Although the tools were limited, the information retrieval possibilities were remarkable. Rick Gates started his Internet Hunt, in which you had to answer the questions from the net and record how you discovered them. The PACS-I list – which is still going strong – was where the questions and answers were posted, and this was the main place where we kept up with

net developments in those days. Rick became a minor celebrity as a result of the Hunt, and was a very popular man at ALA in 1993 where he organised one of the first internet rooms ever at a library conference. Of course, we immediately started having our own at the VALA and Online conferences that followed, but by then the world had changed.

First there was the development of the World Wide Web, coming out of the CERN complex in Switzerland, courtesy of Tim Berners-Lee. Marvellous as this was, the real take-off happened when the NCSA at the University of Illinois gave us Mosaic, the first graphical browser. Overnight, text-based browsers just weren't good enough, and by mid-1995 'the web' was a household concept.

Libraries were even then significant users of the technology – not just for information access but also as creators of web-based resources. The NLA was one of the first national libraries with a web presence, and we also provided websites for others, like the Australian Electoral Commission and ALIA. Other people with a close association with libraries also tried quite a few things – some worked, some didn't.

One development that seemed like a very good idea at the time was a Virtual Library, initiated by Tim Berners-Lee (similar projects happened elsewhere, like David Green's Life service at the ANU). The principle was that a central site would collect links to other sites and that these would be catalogued by a team of volunteers. Back in the early 90s, it might have made sense. As the web grew in size, it became too hard to manage, and the development of search engines didn't quite make these projects redundant – they were just easier for the average user.

Directories still exist, of course. Yahoo! maintains an effective one (but it's no longer the central feature of their home page) and the Open Directory project continues its good work, but it's fair to say that we're much more search-oriented that we used to be.

February 1992 and my first internet logon:
I knew this was going to be great

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Beginning around 1994, the first search engines that we'd recognise came on the scene, with names like WebCrawler and Lycos, and later Excite, Northern Light and AltaVista. Some of these still survive (some under other names) but most have moved into net limbo, with their bright young things moving on to other parts of the industry.

Amazon came along in 1995, and you'd have to say that it was not an overnight success. Six years later it first reported a quarterly profit, and that came only after a lot of trial and error, restructuring and job losses. But it was clear that the third major component of the internet business was here to stay. First we'd had communication – through e-mail, newsgroups and distribution lists. Then there was the provision of information through databases, library catalogues and search engines. Now, the people who'd been asking 'but what can we do with it?' had a concrete answer – online services. Now, they could buy books and lots of other things, and they could transact some types of business.

It's no accident that 1995–96 saw the first real take-up of the internet by the everyday users. It made its move out of the academic and government and big business worlds and became something worthwhile for ordinary people. But many organisations were still hesitant.

I was talking to an old friend last week; he'd left the National Library in the mid-80s and we've kept in touch every few years since. He reminded me that I'd proudly shown him what the NLA was doing with the net around 1995, and he went back to the large insurance company he worked for and tried to get them interested. No success. They kept on wanting to see some return on investment, some real benefits, some indications that other insurance companies were getting involved. It took three more years before they took the plunge, and by then he'd moved on. It seems a little strange now – how could anyone not be online? – but that's how it was then.

Over the next few years, the juggernaut moved on and on. Growth rates (measured in dial-up subscriptions and new websites published) were staggering. It was no surprise that many people with not the slightest chance of success had money thrust at them and we saw the dot.com bubble that eventually burst in 2000–01. There were some weird ideas, for sure, but a lot of sensible possibilities were caught up in the chaos.

During that period, I was working for a Cooperative Research Centre at CSIRO, which even then was under pressure to commercialise its research to get more revenue to make up for reduced government funding. Some of their ventures were successful – a small start-up concentrating on digital video processing has since become a successful (slightly larger) company with offices in Canberra and Washington DC, and a search engine developed by ANU staff is now used by dozens of sites here and overseas – but for many of the researchers, the dreams of IPOs remained just that.

And so it was in many countries. In the USA there were seventeen dotcoms advertising on TV during the Super Bowl in 2000; a year later only three decided it was worth the \$2 million dollars for that sort of exposure.

Of course, the market corrected itself in time, and although some great ideas were probably lost in the scramble, there have been plenty of further developments in the past six years. Perhaps the most significant have been those involving contributions by the user community, and this is probably the fourth main category of net development, usually gathered together under the Web 2.0 umbrella.

It's easy to dismiss such an obvious buzzword, but the way that ordinary people have been enabled to contribute to the wealth of the net over the past few years has been interesting. Think of the different forms of media: blogs, YouTube, Picasa. Consider the Earth (Google's real one and Microsoft's Virtual version). Move into the imaginative world of Second Life and see that it's not free from the niggles of the first one. Then look at folksonomies and build-your-own-website tools like Google Page Creator. And mash-ups, and customised search engines. And who knows what we'll be playing with next year?

It's a long way from February 1992, and much has changed – and not just what content we had on the Net. The technology has marched in step with these developments, and in most cases has made them possible. Broadband speeds, for instance, mean that downloading pictures and videos is no longer an excuse to go and make a cup of tea, and large colour displays mean that the pictures and videos can be worth looking at. Faster computers help, too. And then the telcos want us to enjoy it all on our mobile phones. Maybe. I think though that new applications for all types of users are more likely to be the crowd pleasers.

I used to think that we have trouble seeing when we're living through a Golden Age, but now I know better. Long may it shine.

Communication, provision of information, on-line services and now Web 2.0 – the four stages of the internet

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