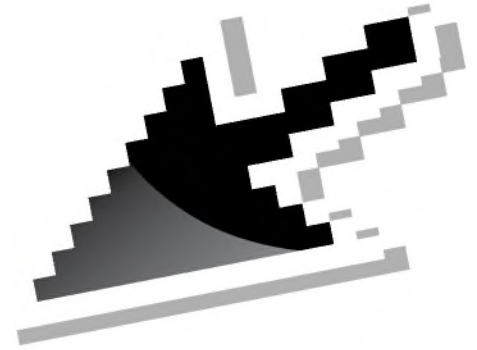


# Webb's Web



More on my blog [www.alia.org.au/webbsblog](http://www.alia.org.au/webbsblog)

WEBB'S WEB

## Hacking for the public good

I've written a bit recently about Open Government – specifically Open Data – and the philosophies behind it. The reason is fairly simple: my day job (the one that keeps me from blogging more) has been involved over the past few months with preparing for our government data portal – in particular scouting around to collect a few data sets to publish on it. One of the most interesting things about this quest has been that no one I've spoken to in our various agencies has been unwilling to participate. Their only reaction has been to ask (quite reasonably), "where's the money coming from?" They've been preparing data for years and publishing it in tables in their annual reports, but now we're asking for it in an ever-so-slightly different format. Oh, and while they're at it could they change their business practices so that the data is extracted in this new format on a regular basis? Not a major problem, oh no.

Anyway, one way or another it's going to happen, and like so many other initiatives over the past decades, the 'bureaucrats' will find the time to do this and we'll get some interesting data on our portals. Which is all to the good, because we're seeing a growing interest in developers wanting to do things with data. This was brought home to me at a couple of events around the beginning of June: GovHack and GovCamp ([www.govcamp.au.org/report](http://www.govcamp.au.org/report)). GovHack had around forty teams of developers looking at various published data sets and in a 48-hour period creating applications or websites that could make something new from them. The new creation might develop a completely new service, or perhaps just a

new way of looking at the data to make it more interesting or understandable. A good example of the latter is the Open Budget Project at [www.theopenbudget.org](http://www.theopenbudget.org) (best viewed in Chrome or Firefox) which relies on two factors: a very attractive user interface and the fact that all of the data is gathered together in one place, rather than distributed over a large set of Budget papers. Other developments included an app that charted a path through terrain based on the level of mobility needed to get from point to point: most useful for a person in a wheel chair or someone pushing a pram.

Many of the apps in the GovHack were not well developed (remember that they only had 48 hours to do it) and may at first seem a little trivial. But these are very early days and the people who come along next will have their imagination sparked to branch off to all sorts of directions and many good things will result.

And you might wonder if this has much to do with our profession. Quite a lot, I believe. As I've wandered through all sorts of available data in the collections phase and looked at specifying various metadata elements for the portal, I've been relying on my long-ago cataloguing training and have been very mindful of keeping the user's needs at the forefront of our work.

## Meaningful names

Connecting to Country: Australian Place Names at [www.aiatsis.gov.au/collections/connectingtocountry.html](http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/collections/connectingtocountry.html) is a well-produced tutorial from AIATSIS that examines their place thesaurus, one of three that makes up the Pathways product. It's not only useful for people

working on systems requiring a knowledge of the background to indigenous place names, but it's a bit of an eye-opener for those of us with just a general interest in the subject.

## Technology trends

There's a new Pew Report on Public Library Funding and Technology Access that reveals some of the real challenges facing US public libraries in how they're coping with the demand of new technologies. One of the notable ones is in the lending of e-books. The barriers thrown up by the publishers make it all too difficult or too expensive or both. We shouldn't be too surprised, of course – they're clearly still trying to find the right business model, and while they have the product that we need for our patrons, they will be working to exploit this scarcity for all they're worth. But it's still galling.

The other aspect of technology use is the growing role for library staff in technical support. Even with the massive growth in home computers, it seems that there's plenty of un-met demand for the use of library computers and where there are users there's always a need for technical support. (Don't just believe me: look at the experience of Dewey in Unshelved) Do you have a go-to person in your library who knows all about downloading, who can find the appropriate software to open that obscure file type, who knows the ins and outs of the ever-changing copyright laws? If not, you'd better start looking.