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In my Front Line for the March 1994 issue of *inCite* I indicated my view that there is a pressing need for a two-pronged approach to electronic networking by librarians in Australia. There is the need for professional development for those librarians who have limited awareness of the value and advantages of the networked data to their professional roles; and there is the more political issue, that of public access to networks.

The public access issue has, until very recently, received little attention in Australia, but there is now a rapidly growing level of increased interest and a variety of inputs that may significantly contribute to determining future network access policy in Australia.

It may be useful at this point for me to provide a brief and necessarily limited overview of what I mean by 'networking' in its national and international context. Networking means accessing and working with the Internet and the thousands of subnets that constitute the Internet. The national subnets like the NSFNET in the US, JANET in the UK, AARNET in Australia, CANARIE in Canada and the very recent THAINET in Thailand, give some indication of the scope. It is very hard to obtain any precise data on the size and extent of the Internet but Paul Evan Peters at the 1993 VALA Conference has provided us with some statistics that are indicative. He stated that at the start of August, 1993, the Internet contained 15 000 subnets in 60 countries, it embraced 1.75 million computers and included e-mail and other gateways to 175 countries. There are at least 3 million regular users of the Internet worldwide.

In the US there has been a great deal of activity, particularly in the last eighteen months, in establishing and further developing community access to networks, and policy is being developed on access, particularly in e public library and the school (K-12) area.

We should not, however, assume that this access is uniform or widespread—there is a great variation in the manner in which public and school li-

braries have grasped technology. Craig Anderson, again at the 1993 VALA Conference, gave an excellent paper on public library network access in the US, and detailed some quality case studies that could well serve as models for our planning.

In Australia, although the University sector has been very involved in networking since 1989/90 and many University libraries are highly competent at exploiting the networks, there has been little activity in other sectors until very recently. However, particularly in the last year, there has been a significant increase in interest in the area and many useful public statements of the need for this access and involvement.

Some of the statements and activities that can be seen as most important to this promotion and development of public network access are:

- the recommendation from the report 'Developing Australia: a Regional Perspective' by the Taskforce on Regional Development which urged the government to explore ways in which public libraries can have cheaper access to on-line information;
- the ALIA/CAUL/ACLIS submission and evidence to the Senate Inquiry on the Organisation and Funding of Research in Higher Education.

The most recent expression of this need has come from a new umbrella group, the National Scholarly Communications Forum, which has been formed from a number of Australia's peak academic and library information bodies. Representatives of the four Australian Academies (Science, Humanities, Technological Sciences and Social Sciences) have been joined in the new forum by representatives of ALIA, ACLIS, Australian Society of Authors, Australian Book Publishers' Association, Council of Australian University Librarians, Committee of Australian University Directors of Information Technology, Copyright Agency Ltd, National Library of Australia and Council of Australian State Libraries.

The need for such a group arose out of the extremely successful confer-

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ence held in Canberra in April 1993, *Changes in Scholarly Communication Patterns in: Australia and the Electronic Library*, which saw a continuing need to bring together interested parties in the network revolution which is dramatically affecting Australian and global communication access and information.

The Nation Scholarly Communication Forum will organise three round table meetings in 1994. The first will be on public networking, the second on scholarly publishing and the third on intellectual property.

The first round table meeting, on public networking, is planned to be at the Academy of Science, Canberra, on the 21-22 June, 1994 with approximately 100 invited participants. The National Library of Australia will, most appropriately, take prime responsibility for organising this forum.

This activity will be followed up at the joint NZLIA/ALIA Conference in Wellington, NZ, in September, where a panel session will explore the options in initiatives that are happening and are possible in Australia and New Zealand.

Continuing expert and professional advice to ALIA in this area will be provided by a new body of General Council, an Information Technology Committee. This new body is currently being established on the shell of the new disbanded Audiovisual Services Committee, and it is expected that it will be a major contributor to the development of ALIA public access network policy.

It would be remiss of me, before closing this Front Line, not to mention that there are at least two embryonic public access services under development in Australia at this time (I would be very pleased to hear of any others). One, a pilot project in Newcastle, NSW is briefly described in this issue of *inCite*. The other is an ACT initiative, which revolves around the tertiary institutions in the area, TAFE, Schools, the ACT Government and Telecom. I hope we can hear some news from them in a future *inCite*.