

Becoming interactive

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Back in the October issue of *inCite* a story highlighted the activity taking place on ALIANet, ALIA's Internet server. Even for those with Internet access, the entity 'ALIANet' is a difficult object to perceive and quantify. What indeed is ALIANet? Regular surfers of the Internet may proclaim that ALIANet is the Association's web site, resplendent with information about the workings of the organisation, snippets of newsletters from the various Association divisions active on the web, or merely a place to find the latest policy statements or prospect for a new job. To be sure, this is a significant part of ALIANet. But wait — there's more...

Many e-mail-unchallenged members will be aware that ALIANet provides e-mail access to and from all staff of the ALIA National Office. This service has been in operation since the inception of ALIANet, and provides a valuable link between staff, members and other internet users alike. A large part of official business and much communication is now carried out using e-mail, allowing members to keep in close touch with developments in the sector. Whilst e-mail will never fully-replace more conventional methods of communication such as the telephone or fax, it has proved to be an extremely useful and cost-effective tool, and is increasing in popularity as the preferred method of contact over longer distances.

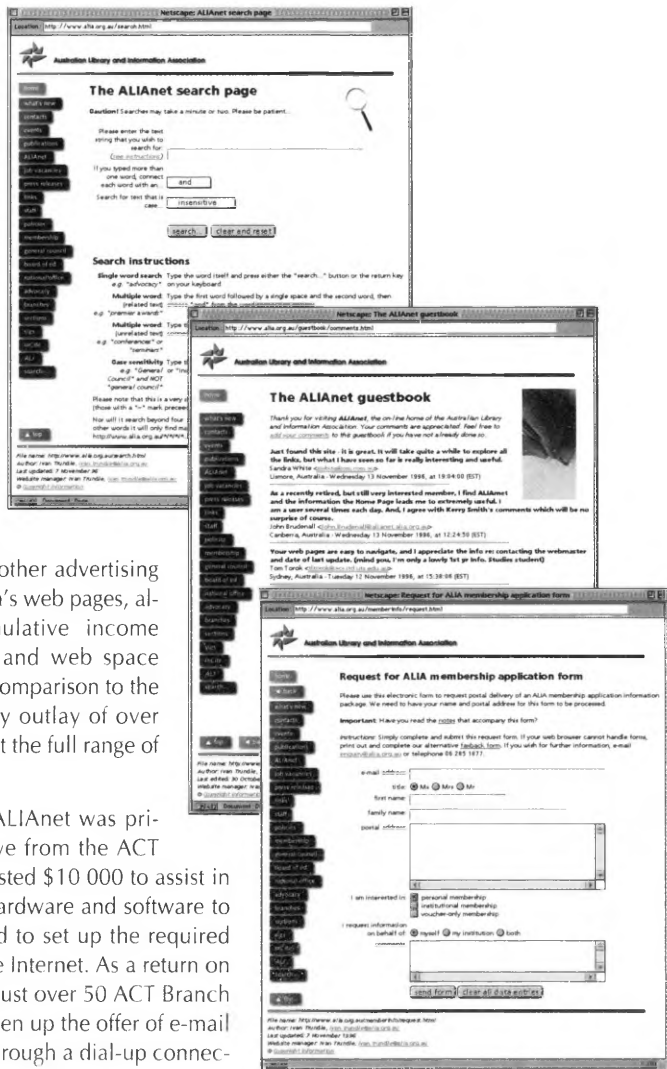
In recent months, since the installation of electronic mailing list software, listservs have been hosted from ALIANet, offering excellent on-line fora for discussion of library sector issues. Anyone with a valid e-mail address can join the listservs in operation, although some listservs are 'private' or closed to the public. General Council, for example, have a listserv of their own to discuss important issues as and when they arise. Plans are in place to bring many of the active library and information sector listservs currently hosted or maintained by volunteers in educational institutions to ALIANet, or at least those that are likely to be discontinued in this current climate of cutbacks in the education arena. Further electronic mailing lists may be generated given sufficient interest (suggestions are always welcome — from ALIA members and non-members alike).

Unknown to most, ALIANet also hosts other non-profit organisations web sites. This provides a small but steady income to

the Association, and helps to defray the costs of maintaining ALIANet. Further income generation comes from the posting of job advertisements and other advertising on our Association's web pages, although the cumulative income from advertising and web space rental is small in comparison to the average net yearly outlay of over \$75 000 to support the full range of ALIANet services.

The birth of ALIANet was primarily an initiative from the ACT Branch, who invested \$10 000 to assist in the purchase of hardware and software to build ALIANet and to set up the required connections to the Internet. As a return on their investment, just over 50 ACT Branch members have taken up the offer of e-mail and web access through a dial-up connection to ALIANet. This dial-up connection allows free Internet access for one hour per day for each subscriber. To these people, ALIANet offers more than just a web presence for the Association — for many it is their sole lifeline to the Internet.

What else does ALIANet offer to ALIA members? Recently we have implemented a number of interactive functions on our website. Searches of our site are possible using the search page at www.alia.org.au/search.html (our navigator panel has a button leading to this page), providing a listing of pages with keywords chosen by the browser concerned. Electronic forms are now in full operation, and you will find a number of examples of these throughout our site — expect these to expand and multiply over the next few months. For those who wish to leave their mark on our site, a guestbook can be found at <http://www.alia.org.au/guestbook/comments.html> ready and waiting for your input. In future months we may offer 'guestbook'-style pages specifically for discussions on topics of relevance to the library sector. These can be viewed in the manner of an archived and public listserv, through which discussions can be broadcast. They can be made private also, since password access is required for certain directories.



As for the future? To make ALIANet truly relevant and useful to the Association's members (and to make it an attractive hook to non-members), as well as offering a voice that represents our interests, is no easy task. Developments occur almost daily in this field, and to implement all of them would stretch ALIA's resources unimaginably. Nonetheless, there are practical and worthwhile steps that can be taken to secure the long-term usefulness of ALIANet and particularly our web site. We have many contributors who post material onto the site from many sources, and although our 'What's new' page (www.alia.org.au/whats.new.html) records many of the achievements to date, it would be impossible to list them all as and when they happen. ALIANet (the web site) will continue to grow with the continued and praiseworthy efforts of the members of ALIA divisions who volunteer their time to produce relevant, interesting, and useful information. If you want to become involved in putting your division's activities and ideas onto ALIANet, please telephone me at the ALIA National Office on 06 285 1877, or send an e-mail message to ivan.trundle@alia.org.au asking for information on how it can be done. No previous experience required! ■