

# Global technology delivers local culture



**Virginia Walsh**

Executive director

The November conference of the Public Libraries and Reference and Information Services Sections of ALIA provided an excellent opportunity to hear about the development of access to online information through libraries here in Australia and in the United States of America and Great Britain. With the theme *Creating tomorrow today: can you imagine...* it is not surprising that many speakers sought to contemplate the important role of the library in providing access points to the burgeoning global information resource — the Internet.

The globalisation of information — our capacity to access a wealth of information resources from a computer terminal — has created great opportunities for our sector. While the emphasis is most frequently on the range of exciting resources we can access from distant sites, there are also great opportunities to create and disseminate local content. The collection and preservation of local heritage is an important function of the library.

There are many examples of how creative public libraries can be in responding to and reflecting local culture and community interests. The libraries of the Northern Territory provide services to diverse peoples in remote locations. The Yulara community library has an emphasis on Aboriginal culture and tourist information needs. The Alice Springs library has a collection of first editions of *A town like Alice* and other novels of author Neville Shute as well as a photographic collection of Aboriginal communities and early settlers which provides important links to the past. The Alexandria community library, east of Tennant Creek, provides services to cattle station workers and their student children and there are libraries serving predominantly aboriginal communities which have established links to educational institutional libraries in Darwin and Batchelor.

The public libraries in the Newcastle area together with the University of Newcastle Library have established a database of material on the Newcastle earthquake. The involvement of local residents and artists in the design of new library buildings and serv-

ices at Liverpool, New South Wales and the Joondalup Public Library in Western Australia — stories in the September issue of *inCite* — are other examples.

In this global village libraries are seeking out imaginative ways of communicating their local heritage through the Internet. The Victorian group of the ALIA Public Libraries Section is evaluating initiatives for creating local Olympic games web sites which it is hoped might be an attractive proposition for all Australian public libraries. There will be opportunities to collect and mount information about former and current Olympic athletes living in the local area. And there are other links in local areas to the Olympics — statues, parks, buildings. The Yarra Plenty library service embraces Melbourne's 1956 Olympic Village, West Heidelberg. Local activities in libraries during the staging of the games are also being explored. It is hoped that these will complement school projects and include links through ALIANet to the national games site already in its infancy and established by the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games.

There is no doubt that one of the key attractions of developing Internet links through local libraries is the capacity to develop and distribute local information. It is also of major importance that greater efforts are made in this direction in order to avoid what some commentators are now referring to as the cultural hegemony of the Internet. This term is used to illustrate the capacity of the large and economically-advanced nations of the world to dominate the Internet. This is not a new concept and it underlies the emphasis of various governments on creating local Australian content for television and early initiatives aimed at securing the same outcomes in the realm of digital information. The digitisation of Australian heritage collections is already underway in all spheres of government but we need more resources directed to this very important area.

At the same time we need to be aware of the barriers of access to information which remain in many parts of our nation. Remote and regional Australians remain disadvantaged by the lack of, unreliability of and cost

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of the telecommunications infrastructure. There is little to be gained by establishing Internet terminals in remote locations if these barriers remain. This is clearly an equity issue when compared with the networks available at relatively low cost in some of our major cities.

In the United States of America the federal government recently legislated to require the provision of discounted telecommunications charges of between twenty and ninety per cent for schools and public libraries based on economic and geographic factors. The Snowe Rockefeller amendment to the *Telecommunications Act* of 1996 requires the United States Federal Communications Commission to im-

plement these discounts up to a maximum annual value of \$2.25 billion.

Our schools, universities, TAFEs and public libraries could all benefit from a commitment by our federal government along the lines of the Stowe Rockefeller initiative. We have sought a commitment to meet similar universal service obligations here with little success. It is time to revisit this matter with our politicians because if we seriously wish to participate in the global information society we must extend the capacity of all our citizens to have access to online facilities, to access distance learning resources and, most importantly, to develop and disseminate information about our local communities. ■

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