

# Name – rank – serial number? What do we know about *you*?



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From time to time I am asked questions about the central repository of all information within ALIA National Office — the ALIA membership database. It is the lifeblood of our administrative efforts: we would be a grossly ineffective organisation without it. But what is it, exactly — and how do we use it?

Developed and evolved over many years, the membership database is now a combination of extensive paper records and a sophisticated electronic computer-based system. We maintain the two sets of records side-by-side for good reason — each member has an individual file which not only holds membership details, but also evidence of qualifications, awards, fellowships, and correspondence. Much of this data is best left un-digitised and in its original form, especially when one considers the cost (and ongoing cost) involved in attempting to implement a purely-digitised database. Our electronic records are a less extensive duplicate of our paper records, but in many ways much more useful for day-to-day tasks.

## Security and confidentiality

We are very particular about how we manage your personal (or your institutional) details. Although it would be useful to know more about your particular demographics for the purpose of lobbying government or for offering a wider range of services, we collect only what we need to be able to process your membership application. For example, some query the need for date-of-birth information — yet without this information we cannot assess your eligibility for a reduced membership fee (category Retired A or B).

If your membership lapses for any reason, your records are initially archived according to our archival policy, and then after two years, eventually destroyed (shredded and disposed). This is why you may be asked to resubmit evidence of your qualifications if you choose to re-apply for membership.

We do not rent the database (or any of your personal details) to outside sources, for any reason. Nor do we assist long-lost relatives in tracking you down by divulging information from the database. You may be surprised to learn that we receive a significant number of requests from individuals wishing to track down someone that they knew was a librarian once and possibly lives in Wollongong (or wherever). In short, the information that you submit to us remains confidential. However, we do contact individual members to let them know that Auntie Sara and Uncle Toby are trying to track them down. That way the ball is left in the recipient's court.

## What about office-bearers?

Divisional representatives (branch presidents, section secretaries *et al*) occasionally request member lists from us to be able to communicate directly with their divisional members. In these circumstances, a special order form may be submitted to ALIA National Office requesting one-off

adhesive mailing labels (or a printed list), and this order will only be accepted if requested and signed by an office-bearer of the division involved. These lists are generated as required from the membership database and posted as soon as a request is received, using the latest information available. In this way, office-bearers can be certain that they have the most up-to-date listing of members.

Do we supply these lists digitally? No. Again, and partly through our concern over confidentiality, it is all too easy for such lists to be reverse-compiled and used in an unauthorised manner. Secondly, corrections, updates and alterations to the membership database are made daily. From the form posted with each *inCite*, to the e-mail notification of an address or details change [address.change@alia.org.au], we receive dozens of alterations per week. If a divisional representative was to use a list compiled more than a few weeks ago, the chances of that data being incorrect is high, much to the annoyance of all concerned.

## Vital link online

Those keeping an eye on ALIANet will be aware that we are about to offer the database of office-bearers, *Vital link*, on ALIANet. It has been a while coming, primarily because of our concern about confidentiality and security. The interface between our membership database and our web server must remain secure and robust, and the data held within *Vital link* on the web must be limited to prevent reverse-compilation, too. We are working towards an interface that presents no more than three to five records given any search criteria, although we may fine-tune this depending upon demand. As it stands, much of what is presently in our *Vital link* component of the membership database already exists on ALIANet dispersed across many divisional web pages. This in itself acts as a deterrent to misuse by marketeers.

## ...on to aliaNEWS

For those that missed reading all about it in last month's issue, aliaNEWS is a new monthly broadcast e-list created to inform members and others about ALIA issues. All members with e-mail addresses are automatically signed up to this informative e-list (unless they indicated otherwise on their membership form), and are free to subscribe or unsubscribe at will. So far, the response from those subscribed has been very positive and enthusiastic (see the 'Your voice', p5). We have automatically subscribed over 3500 members to this list so far, but nearly four hundred have been summarily ejected (unsubscribed) due to faulty or undecipherable e-mail addresses. Please use the opportunity presented on the cover sheet to this magazine (or send an e-mail to address.change@alia.org.au) to let us know of your e-mail address if you have not yet received an issue of aliaNEWS. I would offer to print the entire list of four hundred, but space restrictions prevail. ■

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