

The ALIANet thickshake

After drinking the ALIANet website thickshake through a needle-thin straw for the past few years, it is indeed a refreshing change to be able to upgrade the straw to a decent diameter, and to bring our services to visitors at much more respectable speeds.



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As of around 2:00pm on 9 October 2001, we unceremoniously switched off our ISDN service, and moved across to a brand-new fibre-optic link that was the culmination of months of planning, organisation, and activity. It was a hard road to get to this point, and we are by no means finished. Indeed, this is only the first step of a major project to upgrade all of ALIANet's services. Without doubt, the most pressing concern was to upgrade our link to bring us back to the forefront of bandwidth and connectivity. Whilst we were at the forefront back when ALIANet began (for a non-commercial organisation or educational institution), we were gradually overtaken by larger corporations, ISPs, and the government sector. For the moment, we are now ranking amongst the big players in terms of connectivity, but there is still a long way to go on both the hardware and software front.

Here is what is planned for the future (these plans are not fixed in concrete, but do indicate the direction in which we are heading):

A new server, a Sun Netra T1, is now undergoing testing at the time of writing, and should be fully operational by the time this issue of *inCite* hits the streets. The new server has much greater processing ability, more RAM and much more hard disk space. It will become the platform from which we anticipate delivering a greater range of services to members, not least of which is to offer a web-based front-end into our membership system. Once it is deployed, we will have the capacity to add modules at will, and to allow our website in particular to bring to members the kinds of activities that are presently only handled by phone calls and letters or e-mails.

ALIANet consists of a range of services, some of which are integrated with each other and some which are not. The most obvious component that most members are aware of is the website, consisting of over 12 000 pages of fixed content, and many more created dynamically through databases and scripts that serve documents on request. With so many pages, it is extremely difficult to make site-wide changes without a good deal of effort, which is one reason why the site has not changed significantly over the past few years. We hope to rewrite how pages appear, so that the content is more easily divorced from the navigational and

'dress-up' elements, and therefore allow us to focus on content more clearly — and to make changes to the look and feel when things need freshening up.

Much more usage will be made of content retained within databases, so that we can provide more customised access to material — such as events in your district, for example — and to allow us to speed up access to data that is presently kept in large and rather unwieldy flat-file databases. The integration of our membership database is a primary goal, but this will require extensive research and will demand that we concern ourselves with the impact of security issues, and the retention of private data. The membership database will have three 'faces': the first will be the front-end for our membership staff, which will offer the full set of functionality that staff here enjoy; the second will be the individual record interface that may be accessed by a member to allow for modifications, such as renewals, registrations for conferences, subscriptions, payments, and membership of groups; whilst the third face is for ALIA office-bearers, which will allow access to statistical data, information on membership details, and whatever else enhances the ability of the group to function. Of course, security and privacy concerns will dominate the construction, and all steps will be taken to ensure that details are not able to be accessed by those without the authority to do so.

One advantage of a site integrated with our membership database is the ability to provide member-only sections of the site, that will require access by a username and password, which can be linked to the membership database (not presently possible, though we can and do offer password-protected access, and have done so since the inception of ALIANet).

This process of improvement will be ongoing, as more services are built into the system. However, our list server will also be upgraded as soon as we can source a better alternative to the indefatigable ListProc the Impaler. Whilst ListProc is providing sterling service, it has its idiosyncrasies, and has one or two omissions that users are demanding in increasing numbers these days. In particular, the ability to use a web-based interface to check and manage subscriptions is high on the list of priorities (although I continue to question the use of web-based activity to manage an e-mail-based activity...) and will be investigated thoroughly. Ultimately, we require 'industrial-strength' services, since the load is significant (we have over sixty e-lists at present, with more than 10 000 subscribers), and our administrative and support resources are minimal. However, I am sure that we will find a solution that is suitable for our needs. ■

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