ALIAnet's members-only webmail service open for business!

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It has been 10 years since ALIAnet began operations. The domain name, alia.org.au, was registered and propagated amongst the less than one hundred domain name servers around the world in September 1994. Whilst we did not officially launch ALIAnet for a further six months (to allow for testing, implementation of services, and so on), we began serving webpages through a special arrangement with the National Library of Australia, and began accepting and delivering e-mail through the alia.org.au domain. Those were heady days, when Lynx was the most-popular web browser, and when graphical web browsers were only just appearing on the scene, in competition with gopher, telnet, and ftp services. However, this is not the time for reminiscing — the time will come to celebrate ALIAnet's decade of achievements early in 2005.

Propel yourselves forward to September 2004, and the evolution of a new service for ALIA members (and one that has been a long time coming): web-based e-mail. For more than twelve months now, we have been experimenting with a number of strategies to allow members-only access to ALIAnet e-mail accounts. Since ALIAnet's inception, we have offered member access to 'accounts' on the ALIAnet server. More than 200 ALIA members are presently using this service on a regular basis.

An 'account' on ALIAnet consists of an e-mail address, unique and permanent for the individual (such as alexei.sayle@alianet.alia.org.au), web directory space (where account-holders can deposit html-encoded files for public or private access), file transfer rights (to allow files to be manipulated), and a handful of useful tools to make the best available use of the internet. Account-holders have few restrictions imposed on their use of ALIAnet services, and are free to redirect mail to other accounts, to create complex websites, and to otherwise experiment or develop to their heart's content.

Until recently, account-holders were only permitted to access mail via one of two methods.

The first is via the ALIAnet server and an SSH connection (a secure shell session from the account-holder's computer which permits the execution of commands on a remote computer [in this instance, ALIAnet], via an encrypted connection). Once an SSH connection is established, the account-holder can open Pine (a Program for Internet News and Email), ALIAnet's in-built mail application. Pine was originally designed for inexperienced e-mail users, but has evolved into something much more advanced and capable.

The second option for mail access is via a the account-holder's own computer e-mail application, such as Eudora, Microsoft Outlook, or Netscape Mail. This style of connection is via POP, or Post Office Protocol, and works best when the account-holder only uses one computer to access e-mail. POP was not designed with the possibility of a user moving from computer to computer — and although it is quite possible to do so, not many users are familiar with how to keep files synchronised from machine to machine.

The birth of web-based e-mail changed the landscape considerably. 'Web-based e-mail' is another name for access to e-mail via a web-browser, rather than a purpose-built e-mail application or program. The intention was to allow users to travel to any machine, and have a graphical interface that is consistent and usable, in a multitude of environments. The only snag to all of this is that files are left stored on the remote host (such as ALIAnet), rather than on the user's computer. For some, this is a plus, but for system administrators, it presents some headaches in storage, and archiving. However, this aside, the system is now universal, and popular.

ALIAnet now offers web-based e-mail for all account-holders, using a derivative of SquirrelMail ('Webmail for nuts!' is their byline...). We have modified it extensively to better suit ALIAnet's operating environment, and have added a number of useful plug-ins (and will be adding more): message filters, message highlighting, mail forwarding options, an Australian spell-checker, translation options, spam filters, mail notification options, a calendar, to-do items, and an extensive search tool have all been added to the basic software. All in all, a very useful addition to the range of services offered to members of ALIA.

The sixty-four-thousand-dollar question: how does one get an ALIAnet account? Follow the URL at the foot of this article. All that is required to obtain an account is to declare your name and membership number, your contact phone number and location, agree to abide by the rules and conditions of service, and allow a week or so for the documentation to be completed. Account-holders must remain personal financial members of the Association, and are free to conduct their activities in whatever manner they wish, so long as no Australian laws are broken in the process. We also ask that websites are not used for commercial activities. If you would like more information, please contact me directly. I will be very pleased to tell you all about what ALIAnet can offer.

Application form: http://alia.org.au/alianet/accounts/.

Web-based e-mail service: http://webmail.alia.org.au. ∎

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