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Webb's web

We've decided to shake things up by altering the format of the column a few times each year. So this month, I'll be looking at a couple of issues in more depth, and returning to the tried-and-true in September.

Is the Web broken?

Just look around the blogs, the online columns, the discussion groups, and you'll see the recurring comment 'The Web is broken' and this is followed by the author's pet solution to mend it — whether it's an open source search engine, better metadata or the Semantic Web. But is it broken? And does it need any mending at all?

To the average user, the Web might be a mess, a huge collection of material that doesn't follow any particular pattern and a place where you can't find what you're looking for. It can be all of that, but I'd argue that in most cases it's nothing of the sort. The average user has a need, has some tools (even if they don't understand how they work or even how to use them properly) and will nearly always find something to answer their query — even if it's on Wikipedia.

I'm not an average user. I usually know where to find things (or at least where they might be found) and I know how to evaluate sources of information. I also know enough to keep looking past the first couple of pages of search results if I really need that nugget. Most information professionals would be in the same position, as would most regular users of the Web.

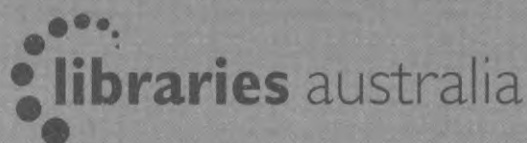
Of course, we can't deny that it could be improved — both in ease of Web publishing (although this will undoubtedly add to the mess) and in searching and locating information. The publishing is being addressed by the various Web 2.0 applications, especially for photos and videos, and by services like Google Page Creator. They're all making it much easier for all sorts of people to get a lot of their stuff online. So much for publishing — it's searching and locating that's the area where most of the interesting improvements can be found.

I see two main aspects — the available tools and the education to be given to the

community on how to use them effectively. To those of us accustomed to online services in the pre-Internet days, even Google will seem primitive. The old systems had so many useful features (stemming, proximity and refining your searches — to name only some) but the problem is that they don't scale, and that's where Google and friends have them all beat. The sheer amount of available information now is quite staggering. But the tools are improving, but subtly.

As for teaching the users, that just isn't going to happen. They're not going to stop people from diving in to the system until they've taken a test (although I was interested to see Second Life doing just that). What keeps happening is that the services adapt to the knowledge level of the users. When people can't spell, the systems will suggest words that they might have meant to type. When they type a URL into the search box instead of keywords or phrases, the system will take that and search for it — usually successfully. So, even when we don't take the time to get to know the systems and when 'advanced

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search' is all but ignored by the user population, the search engines are responsive enough to work around this.

So, would you call it a broken system — or just one that needs continuous improvement? And isn't that what's happening already?

Is there such a thing as privacy?

The old cartoon said it all — 'On the Internet nobody knows you're a dog'. The difference now is when you're on the Web, people can know way too much about you. And it's all happening with the best of intentions.

Consider Google Maps and their inclusion of 'Street View' photographs — as highlighted by *Time* magazine in June — or the aerial photos of the 'Top Secret' propeller of an attack submarine. It's one thing to delight in zooming in on your home address to see a blurry shot of trees and the car parked in your front drive, but what if there's something there that shouldn't have been photographed?

The point is that we want to retain some degree of anonymity about our own property but are still curious about someone else's. Scott McNeally famously said in 1999 that you have no privacy and that you should 'get over it'. He'd be nodding wisely now. The strange thing is that it's taken eight years to get to the point where it's been illustrated so dramatically.

It's one thing though to have your photo taken by a passing stranger and posted on a website; it's entirely another to give your information away willingly.

I have a friend who refuses to reply to messages from Gmail users because Google stores all of the mail on that system 'forever'. Fair enough, but I think it's a bit of an overkill on his part. I wonder what he'd make of a service like Facebook.

This one allows people to register, provide all sorts of information about themselves and invite friends to join them on the service, with those invitees providing (if they choose) quite detailed information about how they met the friend, if they lived together and so on. It's a bit of a concern, but wait — there's more.

When you sign up for the service, you are invited to provide your email account ID and password so that invitations can be sent out to everybody in your address book. Now, giving them private information like this is unwise (and may violate the terms and conditions of your email service), but for Facebook to send out invitations like this is asking for trouble.

It happened to me soon after I signed up (which I'd done purely as a matter of research, of course). An invitation arrived from a young woman (although she didn't display a photo in her profile, there was information about what schools and colleges she'd attended). The name wasn't familiar, so I declined politely. She replied by saying that I must have been in her address book because we were members of a discussion list.

On this occasion it was kosher, but have a look at your email address book. It'll probably contain a whole lot of people with whom you have only the slightest connection. And these are the friends that Facebook wants to invite into your network? It's an interesting comment on the way we communicate these days, isn't it?



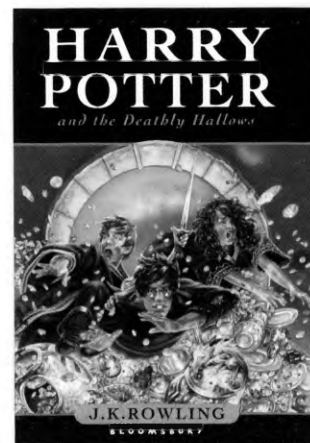
ALIA Research Fund

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Muggles working magic

As *inCite* went to press, many muggles were working magic in public libraries — cataloguing and processing at the speed of a game of Quidditch — to enable anxious junior wizards to borrow copies of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* shortly after its release on Saturday 21 July.

Please share with *inCite* readers the magic your library worked! Send a brief report on any Harry Potter events your library held to <incite@alia.org.au>, for inclusion in the September issue of *inCite*.



@ your library®

The @ your library® campaign is a public education campaign originally developed by the ALA (American Library Association) and IFLA in 2001.

The aim of the campaign is to promote the value of libraries and librarians and to showcase the unique and vital roles played by public, school, academic and special libraries worldwide.

ALIA is part of the worldwide campaign, and most Australian state libraries have also signed up.

Campaign themes for the remainder of the year are:

- August — Escape
- September — Find the past (Treasures/Records)
- October — Holiday Fun/Just ask
- November — Read
- December — Holiday Fun.



For detailed information about the campaign, see <<http://www.alia.org.au/advocacy/atyourlibrary/>>