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Feedback to your Board of Directors

Board members welcome your comments and feedback. Please feel free to contact a Board member at any time.

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A sea of pictures – but waving, not drowning

Frontline this month is about pictures. It is no coincidence that I recently spent the day at the annual Picture Australia Participants' Meeting. Picture Australia is one of Australian libraries' great achievements. It has been widely flattered by imitation, and illustrates the strength of systematically aggregated online resources. As you know, you can find it at <http://www.pictureaustralia.org>

Picture Australia brings together the online image collections of 47 Australian cultural agencies, such as state libraries, cultural institutions, and universities. It allows you to search material in all of these collections at the same time. When you find images of interest, you can retrieve a digital copy online from the institution which holds it.

In the old days, pictures in libraries played a marginal role. The library was about books. Pictures were, metaphorically, a small room off to the side, subordinate to the great issue of books.

Not any more. Now that both pictures and books have moved online, pictures have become common currency. The recent saying "one picture is worth a thousand words", can no longer be true – there are pictures everywhere. Are we drowning in a sea of pictures?

Our ability to create, reproduce and distribute images now equals or exceeds our ability to do the same with words. We can use our mobile telephone (the number of mobile phones in the world just recently passed the 50% mark – half of all the people in the world now have one) to take a picture, and then send it, all within a minute or two. We can have a picture accessible online almost instantaneously.

The web is a sea of pictures – there are now over 2 billion on Flickr – check it out at <http://www.flickr.com> – and many more on the social networking sites, and for that matter on any site. Within the whole web, with its billions of images, the challenge for Picture Australia (with well over a million images) is to provide a service which is valued and adds value in the sea of many billions of digital images. The Picture Australia marketing Plan (on the site) shows how PA staff see their strategic strengths. These are things like Australian focus, organisation, quality control, subject concentration, educational value, ease of use, research relevance, and, increasingly, access to images in the public domain or with open licences.

Needless to say, Picture Australia has allied with Flickr, most recently to create Re-Picture Australia, which uses public domain images.

The same challenge, but much larger, exists for libraries in their wider information role. Within the vast sea of online information, we need to clearly inhabit a space where the value which libraries add is significant, and clear to users. This library space within the world wide web may have characteristics like organisation, findability, quality control, audience definition, the use of clear language, or other things. We are still working out how libraries can best add value in the online world.

But it is very important that we are waving, not drowning, as we think about those oceans of pictures, or information.

This Frontline column concludes with an unashamed call for advice.

One of the things Roxanne gave me when she handed over the ALIA presidency in May this year was the ALIA Facebook Group. Go to <http://www.facebook.com> and then to the group ALIA (Australian Library and Information Association). We have 264 members and nine photographs. This is about 5% of our membership (assuming they are all members) – a start, but a long way to go.

I was hugely impressed to hear of the success of Michael Geist's Facebook group, Fair Copyright for Canada, which has grown to 88,000 members in a short time. The group has been so successful that members have actually met in, well, groups of people, physically. The Facebook group now has chapters. Have a look.

I asked Kathryn Greenhill, Murdoch University's online guru, and she suggested that photographs might work. So how about it? One of the features of the more lively Facebook groups I belong to – Swinburne Chapter of the Golden Key Society – is the proliferation of photographs, which bring people together.

Send me your suggestions about to how we can make the ALIA Facebook group lively and relevant.