

# Internet use reaches 100 per cent

It was not likely to happen quite so soon, but recent surveys (ABS, November 1999) suggest that one in every four Australian households is now able to connect to the internet. Whatever that means. Of course, with the advent of WAP (Wireless Application Protocol — the de facto worldwide standard for providing internet communications and advanced telephony services through a range of devices, including mobile phones, pagers, personal digital assistants, fridges and toasters), it is quite likely that 100 per cent of the population of Australia has such a capacity.

An interesting analysis of the figures of home usage of computers show that a significant proportion of those with internet access (seventy-three per cent) use their computer daily — whereas those without internet access are less-frequent computer users (thirty-five per cent). One can easily conclude from these figures that the driving factor behind computer usage in homes is to access the internet. The biggest take-up is in the younger demographic: over seventy per cent of 18–24 year-olds use the internet (or claim to) compared with less than seventeen per cent of people over the age of 55. The figures may not paint a clear picture, however — ‘use of the internet’ is such a difficult term to precisely define for many people. There are so many ways in which we can interact with internet-connected devices, knowingly or otherwise.

With an estimated 3.5 million personal computers in homes, and with more than eight million mobile phones in circulation (ABS, November 1999), we are literally flooded with connectivity options. The digital aficionados will already be well-versed in the use of their cramped mobile phone keyboards to send short messages to each other — but for those with normal-sized fingers, and for those in the upper echelons of the age demographics who are still unable to read the buttons, let alone the numbers on the screen, without resorting to multifocal magnifying glasses, a new and more user-friendly communication device is overdue. And as many older people are discovering, arthritis, failing eyesight and other ailments are making computer use and internet access more difficult than they should be. It is bizarre to note that there are companies that are attempting to satisfy the needs of the older generation by developing software programs that not only allow voice commands, but also allow users to enlarge words on the screen for easier reading. This ‘retro-fit’ approach is, at best, a hotch-potch of technology all steaming in the wrong direction. What is really needed is a complete rethink of the entire interface which takes a broader view of user needs.

There are plenty of reports recently published that show website design to be woeful (with an eye to accessibility), particularly in government departments. A working paper by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission [[http://www.hreoc.gov.au/disability\\_rights/current\\_inquiries/ecom/Webworking\\_paper.htm](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/disability_rights/current_inquiries/ecom/Webworking_paper.htm)] makes for very interesting reading, and supports everything I have been bleating about for years. Jakob Nielsen, who makes a living from such studies, has also presented papers that indicate where things go wrong [<http://www.useit.com/alertbox/990516.html>]. Put simply, many government (let’s extrapolate and include ‘commercial’) sites present barriers to users — though one could argue that the design of the whole computing experience can be at fault too.

It is therefore quite timely that we at ALIANet are currently undergoing a review of our Association’s site design. I would happily give you the URL of the test site for comment, except that Jakob Nielsen has pitched in again [Alertbox March 2000, <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20000319.html>] and suggests that one only needs five users to test the usability of a site. His research, along with earlier research by Tom Landauer, has found that elaborate or extensive usability testing is a waste of resources. So we have found five guinea pigs to take our new site through its paces, and to determine the best way that we can present information on behalf of the Association and its members. Although the overall aim is to reduce download times and to order information into logical groupings for easier navigation, the site is now so large — over 7000 static pages and even more on-the-fly creations — that it is difficult to satisfy all potential users.

Needless to say, we are looking at many other models (and in particular other library sector websites) to see how we can improve. As always, we value your input — if you wish to contribute and help to shape the look and feel of ALIANet simply drop us a note, either by e-mail or phone or fax.

But getting back to the communication device... an ideal device would be either solar-powered or better still, ‘non-powered’, and would come with a flexible membrane screen that can be read in most light conditions. It would be light, robust, and easy to scan, and cheap to produce. It would outlast the user, possibly a few generations of users in some instances. In this way the information would be paramount, and the technology behind it all would be unimportant. It should have a catchy title, too — to captivate the masses (words like ‘book’ or ‘magazine’ come to mind...).



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