Coming just around the corner...

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Members of ALIA will be well aware that we have been in the search for an upgrade to our membership database for some time. I am pleased to announce that the search was worthwhile, and that we have found a vendor with the right credentials as well as the Right Stuff. The Gillard Report of 2001 clearly identified that ALIA members wanted to be able to have stronger communication between members and with those charged with the responsibility of overall steerage of the Association. The report also indicated that members wanted to be able to use a broader range of available internet-based services to satisfy their needs.

ALIAnet already offers a large range of services to members (and non-members) through a web service, an e-mail service, an e-list service, and much more. Many of these services have been enhanced with the bells and whistles that users have come to expect over the years, from e-cards to surveys, from web-based e-list management to online calendars, through to web-based forms, user accounts, direct access to conference websites, virus scanning and the like. The list of 'features' is very extensive, and is supported by a dynamic team of development and support staff at ALIA National Office.

For most people, the website is the most visible and most accessed method of communication — although in sheer data flow, the broad range of ALIAnet e-lists ranks slightly higher: e-mail is becoming the 'killer-app' that everyone talks about in the computer industry. But because the website is so visible, and in most ways less ephemeral than e-mail, a great deal of time and effort is placed in keeping it up-to-date, fresh, and full of useful information. However, at over 15 000 static pages (and a fair number of content-driven 'built-on-the-fly' pages), it is at the point of requiring a different approach to management and content delivery.

But I digress ever so slightly... The new membership database presents an opportunity to review the presentation and content of the website, if only because the chosen database offers a web-based interface that will serve the needs of the membership database staff, the office-bearer, the individual member, and the casual visitor. Each of these have differing needs, both in terms of content and delivery, and this has allowed the website planning team to look at how best we can integrate all of these things. IT is a difficult task, if only because we must attempt to serve all of the identified groups with equal deliberation.

Indeed, the task was made more difficult because our search for a membership database proved that there were two distinct vendor camps. There were those that knew membership database systems and all associated business rules and procedures, and other vendors that knew the internet inside out (but particularly the web). It became immensely frustrating in researching all options to discover how much (or how little) each 'camp' knew of the opposing camp.

For ALIA to progress into the next five years with confidence, we needed to make a choice of vendor that could hopefully marry both the business rules (and Association practice) and the internet interface. At the 11th hour, we found a vendor that we are confident can span both camps. I am not yet able to announce the chosen vendor, since contracts are still being finalised, but what we hope to bring online should delight and inspire members of ALIA (possibly even those without internet access).

Members will be able to access more information online (via a web-based interface). This will include membership details, groups membership, a calendar of events, an online merchandise shop, registration for conferences and seminars, online renewal of membership fees, and newsflashes pertinent to the individual from ALIA. As we develop the interface, even more will be added. Office-bearers will have customised access to group membership details, without having to make a request to ALIA National Office for information. Non-members will be able to join ALIA or buy merchandise from the shop, and to register with conferences and seminars.

Overall, the 'member-only' components of the existing website will be expanded to reflect the desires of membership. However, almost all of what sits on the present-day ALIAnet website will remain free to all. New services will be developed exclusively for members of ALIA, and accessible by a single log-on via the member-only interface. And if the schedule is maintained, all this should be in place for the next renewal period, just before the middle of 2003. Planning, customisation and testing will take place over the next four months or so, and an announcement of a 'launch date' should be made some time in the new year. Look forward to some interesting changes in the next six months! ∎