Who's using what on the web

How do libraries compare with the rest of the world?

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The browser war is over, and the current 530 million internet users [http://www2.cio.com/metrics/2002/metric319.html] are predominantly and overwhelmingly using Microsoft Internet Explorer (MSIE) — or so we are led to believe. Many of the reports indicate figures as high as eighty per cent of users that surf the net with Microsoft's browser.

And with due diligence and concern for their client base, website designers go to great lengths to ensure that their sites are *'best viewed with Internet Explorer version X and at a minimum of 800 x 600 pixels'*. But to ensure that their hearts are in the right place, concessions are made to the lower classes who choose to use some other obscure software to view the web world.

There are plenty of sites that collect data on browser statistics, operating systems and much more — even Google's Zeitgeist [http://www.google.com/press/zeitgeist.html] declares that the percentage usage of MSIE is many times that of its nearest rival. Google also declares that half of the 'googlers' use Windows 98, and that Linux (as an operating system) accounts for only one per cent.

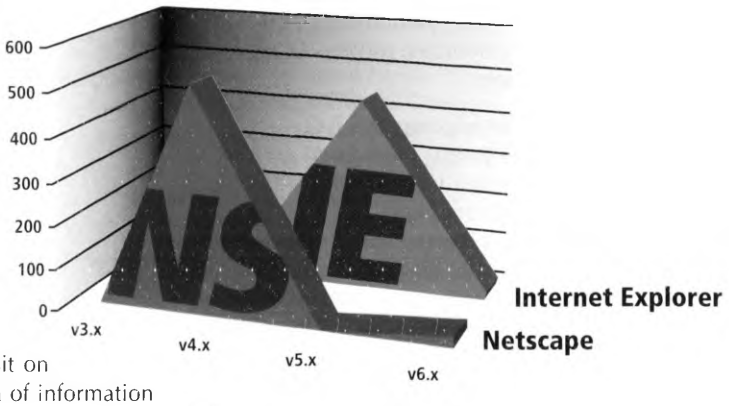
So where does all of this information come from? Virtually all websites sit on servers that collect a plethora of information from people who use the site — and in that regard, ALIAnet's website is no different. We can, for example, determine (in most cases) the path that individual users take through ALIAnet, we can determine what site and page you were on before you arrived, we can determine what operating system you use, and we can easily determine what browser you are (allegedly) using. There are other metrics that are possible, too — but the information listed above is collected by almost all websites that keep log files.

How does this affect website designers? In an ideal world, it should not. Indeed, here at ALIA National Office we design the Association's website on the principle that it is best viewed by anything at all — eyeballs, text-readers, or whatever. In other words, the site is — as all sites should be — 'browser-agnostic' so that everyone has an equal view (or read). But we collect statistics all the same, and compare our log files with those of others to see what our user base is up to and how we can best serve those users.

Some interesting divergences appear in the figures when comparing with more general 'world views'. Users of ALIAnet's website plainly do not fit the standard profile of the other 529.994 million web users around the world.

In a representative sample taken from the last month, almost fifty-two per cent of our website visitors used a version of Netscape Communicator, whilst MSIE was in the minority at slightly more than forty-eight per cent. What's more, Netscape Communicator v4.0 accounts for nearly fifty per cent of the unique visitors, which implies that the library sector has not rushed at the opportunity to load the latest and greatest browsers (Netscape 6.x is used by just over two per cent of visitors, and MSIE 6.x accounts for just under two per cent).

Nor has the library sector rushed to embrace more modern operating systems on their desktops. Microsoft is nonetheless dominant with ninety-four per cent market share (the other six per cent being brave Macintosh users



Linux does not even rate a mention), yet forty-eight per cent have Windows 95 as their operation system of choice. This is simply stunning, given that Microsoft neither sell or support 'Win95' any more.

It also indicates that the ALIAnet 'customer base' (that is, members and other visitors to the site) are slow to take the upgrade path, and that the hardware may well be as old as the software. By implication, a visitor's screen resolution may well be minimal too, significantly less than the more commonplace (and larger) 800 by 600 pixel minimum. Given the figures from our web logs it is unlikely that we will optimise our site for this larger screen dimension in the near future.

But again, sites need not be designed for optimal viewing under certain conditions — a good designer will test all of the possibilities that are likely with his or her user base. The difficulty arises when compromises have to be made to accommodate the tiny minorities that are using technology outside the normal parameters. If a site is designed from the ground up to take in everyone, then the issue does not arise. On ALIAnet, we made the decision from the outset to accommodate a minimum com-

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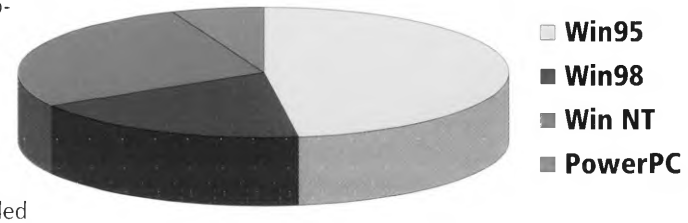
fortable viewing screen of 640 by 480 pixels [http://www.alia.org.au/alianet/technical.notes.html], recognising that those with smaller screens should not be impaired by this judgement.

Overall, sites must be designed for all anticipated users, as the Sydney Olympics website development team discovered — not only is legislation in place to ensure that public sites offer this level of accessibility, but if the site is to perform its function and reach the intended audience, then it is good commercial sense to test the site through all likely means of access. 'Likely means' is defined according to the user base, and it is clear from the statistics that we collect, ALIA website visitors come from an uncharted demographic — or at least, not one that matches commonly-accepted 'standard metrics'.

The importance of these statistics should not be underestimated — compared with statistics drawn from the wider web population, libraries (and personal ALIA members) may well be at the forefront of the information revolution, but the technology that they are using is decidedly in the back rows. If you are reading this and have ever felt frustrated by the age of the technology that you are using, then perhaps it is because a large proportion of the world is using better/newer/faster technology to access the web.



Make's you wonder how they still seek us out for answers, eh? ■

ALIAnet agent log file
January 2002: unique visitors
The raw data from which the charts are drawn...

Netscape 4.0	290
Netscape 4.04	5
Netscape 4.08	15
Netscape 4.5	126
Netscape 4.6	11
Netscape 4.61	1
Netscape 4.7	8
Netscape 4.72	3
Netscape 4.73	10
Netscape 4.75	24
Netscape 4.76	12
Netscape 4.78	14
Netscape 4.79	5
Netscape 6.1	13
Netscape 6.2	10
Internet Explorer 3.0	1
Internet Explorer 4.01	41
Internet Explorer 5.0	250
Internet Explorer 5.01	94
Internet Explorer 5.5	101
Internet Explorer 6.0	19
Win95	502
Win98	198
Win NT	289
PowerPC (Macintosh)	64

But wait, there's more...

Some more information on web browsing habits can always be found from companies like Nielsen//NetRatings — who offer Australian data to supplement their normal worldwide figures [http://epm.netratings.com/au/web/NRpublicreports.usagemonthly]. Try adding these numbers to the matrix: in Australia, the average web user accesses the web 17 times a month, visits 39 unique sites, spends just over 38(!) minutes on each site, but views pages for only 59 seconds each. For those site designers that like to pack information into a page, how much can be read and digested in under a minute?