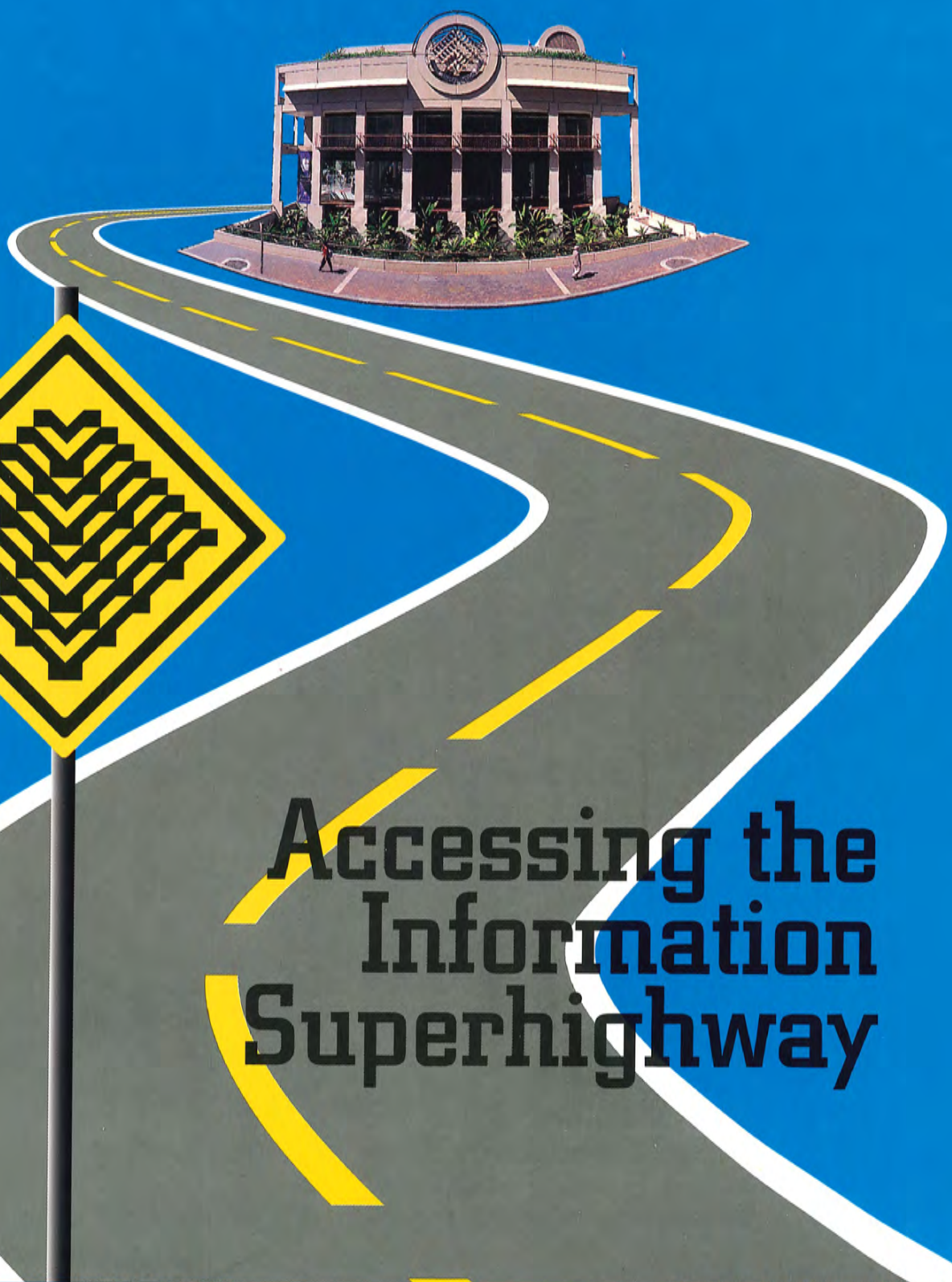


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UPFRONT

Journal of the friends and supporters of the State Library of New South Wales



Accessing the Information Superhighway

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Thanks for the Memory

...the most

BY MICHAEL MANGOLD

AT AN INDIVIDUAL level memory is the basis of accumulated experience and learning. It is the most magical yet practical and durable human faculty. Above all other raw human assets memory is the one capable of resisting the ravages of time and overcoming barriers of distance even in the face of immobility.

When the memory disappears, through accident or disease, the personality it manifests vapourises leaving a shell. Memory provides meaning and in a wider cultural context the collective memory of society is pivotal to humanity. 'Lest we forget'.

Until quite recently the collective memory of society has been housed comfortably in school education systems, religions, galleries, theatres, museums, universities and libraries.

These institutions have also traditionally been the gatekeepers of cultural heritage with responsibility for maintaining the integrity of their collections and the authenticity of the information contained in them.

It is a role that new information technologies and the advent of the information superhighway apparently threaten. But beneath the media hype, State Librarian, Alison Crook, says there are opportunities to apply these same technologies to assert time-honoured cultural values.

Public access to the information superhighway

Far from being isolated by the advent of the information superhighway, the State Library of New South Wales pre-purchased a prime site on it some time ago.

Public access to electronic publishing, CD-ROMs, global databases and other information technologies is already an accepted feature of the Library's services.

Ilanet (Information and Libraries Access Network) is another early initiative placing the Library in a good position in relation to the information superhighway.

PCs in public libraries a decade ago

Ilanet was established a decade ago to link public libraries in New South Wales by computer. Its prime purpose was to facilitate interlibrary loan requests which were previously handled by mail.

John Wright was the Inter-library Loans Librarian at the time. He was instrumental in setting up Minerva, the forerunner to Ilanet. John is now a Coordinator of TAP (Technology Access Program), an enterprise of the State Library providing new information technology training courses that are always heavily booked.

"One of the first things John Wright did in 1985/86 was to actually get PCs (personal

computers) out into the public libraries," Alan Ventress, Manager Australian Research Collections and Mitchell Librarian, recalls. Alan was responsible for the early phase of commercialising Ilanet in his capacity as Collection Development Librarian.

Learning to network

Janette Wright*, Director of Public Library and Network Services at the State Library, says Ilanet now provides libraries and other subscribers across Australia with access to the Internet, a global network of databases with 30 million subscribers worldwide.

the world that such a large block of library users has been connected simultaneously to the Internet."

The ramifications for public library users in New South Wales and elsewhere in Australia are momentous. Less than half of Australian homes currently has a computer and less than a third of these have the necessary modem to join the information superhighway even in a limited way.

In the meantime the collective historical and cultural, including scientific, memory of society internationally, continues to aggregate in computer databases all over the world.



The Ilanet Team. Clockwise from top left: Howard Amos, Ian Mulry, Cail Greenup, Caroline Regan, Jason Cameron and Natalie MacDonald.
PHOTO: SCOTT WAJON

A number of things have happened to transform Ilanet from a useful network into a major statewide and increasingly national asset.

"There have been quite incredible changes in the capacity of computers to store and transmit large files," Janette Wright said. "In January 1994 we brought Ilanet in-house, instead of simply reselling we began adding value using software developed by our own programmers."

Global connections

"In January 1994 we obtained a direct line connecting Ilanet and the Sydney University node of AARNET (Australian Academic Research Network). Around 1000 libraries across Australia subscribing to Ilanet automatically became affiliate members of AARNET with access to the Internet.

"This is probably the first time anywhere in

Universal access to information

Universal access across Australia to the Internet via public libraries connected to Ilanet appears to offer considerable economic and social advantages.

"There is a local library in every community," Janette Wright said. "It is open after hours, it has staff trained to do on line searching, it is supported by the local community and many of them are already linked into the Internet via Ilanet or through some state based network."

"We want to take information from anywhere in the world and make it available through the public library network so that every Australian has access to all of the world's information resources."

The reverse also applies. Plans to digitise the Library's unique Australian Research Collections will eventually make them accessible internation-

magical yet practical human faculty

ally through the Internet. It will also increase access locally as well as generating additional revenue for collecting and preserving original materials. The process of digitisation itself will help protect original materials by reducing the need to access them.

New industries and economic benefits

Another important potential spinoff is the support such a move would provide to local information technology industries. The opportunity to promote local businesses in general is not something lost on the State Library either.

"We are generally expanding the market for all of our value added services, including Ilanet, in Asian countries as part of the State Library's regional strategy," Janette Wright said.

"In order to be able to provide really effective business information services in the region for Information Edge and other State Library businesses we need good communication links with those countries."

The Joint Venture Company established in Beijing between the State Library of New South Wales, Lend Lease and ISTIC (Institute of Science and Technology Information in China) illustrates the economic potential of information technology.

Joint venture with China

The Joint Venture Company will initially provide business information services to foreign companies operating in China as well as business information services in Australia about China. It will also ultimately use Ilanet to disseminate information to Chinese enterprises and resident subscribers in China.

Apart from commercial partnerships the fee structure for Ilanet has been designed to cover its operating costs plus sufficient profit to invest in the development of the network.

Applications and support

"We connect subscribers to the Internet but we also provide applications, support and server facilities that enable people to access the information they need with relative ease," Howard Amos, Ilanet Network Manager, said.

The Internet can be extremely difficult to navigate. *The New Riders' Official Internet Yellow Pages* contains listings for every area of human activity imaginable. Subscribers use the Internet for all types of purposes; business, academic, technical, scientific, education and general interest.

Howard Amos says the dynamic nature and loose structure of the Internet makes printed information relating to it almost immediately out of date. Electronic mail addresses on the Internet

are constantly changing as information providers come and go.

This does not lessen the value of information accessed through the Internet. It just makes it harder to get at. In this regard the State Library of New South Wales has drawn on the heritage and expertise of its librarian and information technology staff to service the spectrum of needs among different Ilanet subscribers.

Ilanet attracts corporate libraries

At least 50% of Ilanet subscribers are corporate libraries attracted by the State Library's policy of managed access to the Internet compared to alternative services offering only a basic connection.

The strength of the Ilanet subscriber base, including many public libraries interstate and shortly in the ACT (Australian Capital Territory), corporate libraries and individual subscribers, has made it possible for the Library to negotiate discounts on telecommunications charges, royalties and commercial database rates.

"There are real cost benefits to being a subscriber to Ilanet," Janette Wright said. "Ilanet offers a column of support services designed to achieve effective information management, including support, training and an 1800 telephone hotline for trouble-shooting."

Government services

Government departments are also beginning to appreciate the potential of Ilanet to distribute legislative and other information through the public library network to local councils for example. There are 95 public library services in New South Wales alone with over 300 service points. They are funded by 177 local councils.

Each local council and the community it represents also have the opportunity to provide all types of information through public libraries via its own public library's connection to Ilanet.



Janette Wright, Director of Public Library and Network Services. PHOTO: ELLEN COMISKEY

Asserting local culture

The potential impact of culturally loaded electronic information from overseas is already on the political agenda in Australia. Local public libraries linked through Ilanet are likely to be important instruments in achieving the type of balance local content policies aim for in broadcast television.

The integrity of an electronic information service such as Ilanet and the need to administer the provision and collection of authentic information is a role the State Library of New South Wales can confidently handle.

Free flowing information

Even as the information superhighway unfolds the State Library is deeply involved in the ongoing debate on policies concerning intellectual property, copyright and fair dealing for research purposes.

"We speak for the public in this regard, for the freedom of information flow within the community," Janette Wright said. "People have to be able to go to their local public library and get access to the information superhighway at a reasonable price."

** no relation to John Wright*



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