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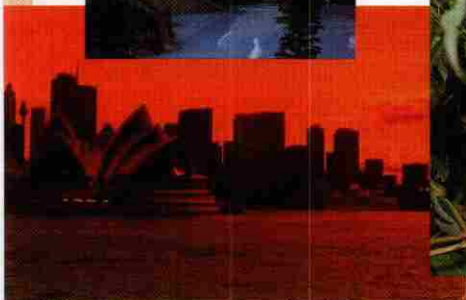
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Australian Virtual Libraries *for* Crocodile Dundee *and the* Sheilas

By JOE FERNANDEZ



AUSTRALIA is a huge country almost the size of the United States of America but with only six people per square mile. Nearly 70 percent of Australians live in 10 cities, mainly along the 22,000-mile coastline. The rest live in small communities, many in the interior, and on isolated farms and mining communities. There is even one town, called Coober Pedy, where people live underground to avoid the desert heat. The poet Henry Lawson referred to the vast isolated interior as the Never-Never Land, where you may never meet anyone for a long time.

For outsiders, this country evokes romanticized notions of an exotic country with kangaroos hopping around the landscape, crocodiles crawling in the outback, and some of the most dangerous snakes in the world slithering through the bush. This image is reinforced by movies like *Crocodile Dundee*, *Thornbirds*, and *A Town Like Alice*.

Despite its exotic image, Australia is very much in the 21st century. It is a vibrant society with all the trappings of a developed society and yet manages to masquerade as a laid-back country epitomized by the sobriquet of "The Sunburnt Country."

VIRTUAL MEDICINE FROM THE ROYAL FLYING DOCTORS

The vastness of this nation and the widely scattered population gave rise to the legendary Royal Flying Doctor Service. These doctors keep in touch with isolated communities by two-way radio to provide vital medical services to the remotest souls. This remarkable medical service was started in 1928 and still plays an essential role in the lives of people in the remotest parts of Australia. With the flying doctors as a model, it's no wonder that other services are delivered virtually. Many outback





AUSTRALIAN VIRTUAL LIBRARIES

children still receive schooling in their homes by two-way radio. A large number of people participate in distance-education programs taking tertiary and vocational courses as diverse as networking, finance, desktop publishing, and public speaking. As information consumers, people all over Australia need the best possible library services.

Australians from all walks of life access information in the course of their daily lives. Farmers need information to keep abreast of market trends of their products. Entrepreneurs need information related to their businesses. Students need help with their homework. Information is a valuable commodity. However, because many Australians are unable to go to a physical library, they prefer to access library services remotely. Increasingly, Australians are turning to the Internet and virtual libraries.

AUSTRALIAN LIBRARIES ONLINE

More and more Australians are becoming computer literate. According to a November 2000 Australian Bureau of Statistics survey, 37 percent of households are connected to the Internet. Online financial transactions like stock trading and bill payments are quite common these days. Australians are quite a tech-savvy bunch of people in spite of the prevalent Crocodile Dundee or Billabong images.

The seeds of the Australian library started with the few books that arrived at Botany Bay in 1788 on board the First Fleet of convict ships. From this colorful beginning, Australian libraries have come a long way. Many Australian libraries offer a variety of services for off-site clients. The Queensland Department of Primary Industries, in association with the Office of Rural Communities, for example, has an online Rural E-Reference Centre [www.dpi.qld.gov.au/lerc/]. This resource is aimed specifically at the rural population with "full-text information on an extensive range of topics from Australian and international newspapers, newswires, magazines, reference books, and Internet reference tools."

It is becoming increasingly obvious that libraries will have to do everything possible to meet the needs of not just on-site clients but also off-site clients. There

is a growing trend among clients to access information online from home or workplace. Libraries will have to respond to this trend and earn their place in the new world of global economy in which competing forces are vying for the information consumer. In this rapidly expanding and changing information environment, virtual libraries play a key role in meeting the information needs of those who are unable or do not have the luxury of time to visit a physical library.

html] that archives online publications. This project enables clients to access online resources that aren't available anymore—like the Web page of the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games AMP Torch Relay. This is in line with the larger digitization project of the National Library.

There is a wealth of digitized resources on the Web sites of the national, state, and territory libraries. In addition to digitized resources, li-

This knowledge database
can be developed from
frequently asked questions
and should include quality full-text
documents and digitized resources.

VIRTUAL LIBRARIANS WANTED FOR TAKE-OFF

The ideal virtual library is defined here as an online resource that meets online clients' information needs as far as possible using databases that include text, image, and audio resources. The ultimate goal of a virtual library is to enable clients to access most of their needed information online.

Libraries have set up shop on the Internet through the Web pages that provide a range of resources and services. Many libraries are digitizing resources and making them available online. One example is the National Library of Australia's PANDORA project [<http://pandora.nla.gov.au/index>].

Libraries are beginning to provide access to databases with full-text documents. The City of Sydney Library [www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/], for example, allows off-site card-carrying members to access some fee-based databases.

To complement on-site resources, many library Web pages have links to useful Internet resources. However, libraries need to go beyond these links. Off-site clients also need to have access to the professional services of librarians. They need a professional virtual library that is almost as good as a physical library. Although a virtual library can never totally replace the physical library, it should be able to meet most of the needs of online clients. This is the



The City of Sydney Library's Web site allows off-site card-carrying members to access some fee-based databases.

challenge for librarians in the new electronic millennium.

THE VIRTUAL LIBRARY'S KNOWLEDGE BASE

A virtual library is user-centered, catering to the needs of independent researchers as much as possible. It enables clients to access full-text documents, images, video, and audio resources. It should be a comprehensive service incorporating a knowledge database, digitized resources, live reference, e-mail, chat room, bulletin board, videoconferencing, and even a telephone reference service. These features may not be as good as having a live librarian at a reference desk. However, a virtual library can strive to meet many of its clients' information needs, and Australian libraries have risen to the challenge.

The crown jewel of a virtual library is the knowledge database that enables clients to access quality resources and to do research independently. This knowledge database can be developed from frequently asked questions and should include quality full-text documents and digitized resources. To this knowledge database, many library Web pages add a collection of Internet links to online resources.

Charles Sturt University [http://hsc.csu.edu.au/] has created a virtual library for pre-university students. It provides access to full-text documents and images and is very popular among its target audience. Clients looking for information about current topics will appreciate the State Library of Victoria [www.slv.vic.gov.au/cgi_bin/hot_topics.cgi] database of Hot Topics that is reg-

ularly updated. The librarians scour the Internet for full-text resources about current events. Recent topics range from Bali Blast to Gene Therapy to Wind Power. This database is useful to a variety of clients for their class assignments or just for personal knowledge. This project is to be lauded, as this is exactly the kind of initiative clients are looking for in a virtual library.

PICTURING AUSTRALIA

The State Library of New South Wales [www.sl.nsw.gov.au] has some excellent resources for clients. Its Picman database contains historical pictures and manuscripts that are invaluable to any historical researcher. It also has an electronic archive of historical documents and images like those of Australian pioneers Sir Joseph Banks and Matthew Flinders.

Another gem of a resource from the National Library of Australia [www.nla.gov.au] is its database, called Picture Australia, with digitized images of Australiana. The State Library of Queensland [www.slq.qld.gov.au/], in line with providing a virtual library, has a unique program to create a Smart Library Network "to support the social, economic and cultural development of Queensland communities in the 21st century." The library is moving in the right direction to bring information resources to the client.

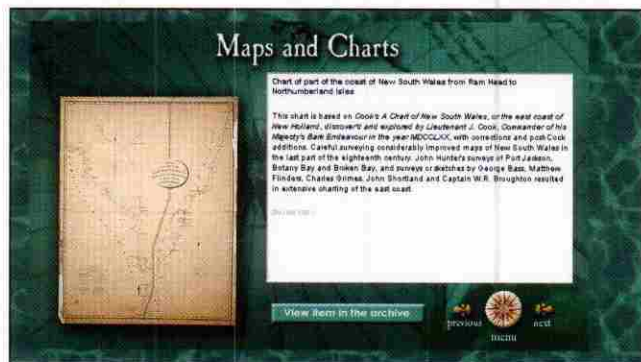
The Northern Territory library [www.ntlib.nt.gov.au/] offers full-text resources and images about the devastating 1974 Cyclone Tracy and about the World War II Japanese attack on Darwin. Tasmanian heritage collections of printed, manuscript, pictorial, and pho-

tographic material are now available online at the State Library of Tasmania [www.statelibrary.tas.gov.au/]. Any cricket enthusiast looking for resources about the legendary cricket icon Don Bradman will find a host of resources at the State Library of South Australia's [www.slsa.sa.gov.au] digital collection. Want to find out about Western Australia's attempts to break away from the Commonwealth? There's a "wealth" of information at the Web site of the State Library of Western Australia [www.lis.wa.gov.au/]. This is just a small sample of Australian libraries providing virtual library services to Australians.

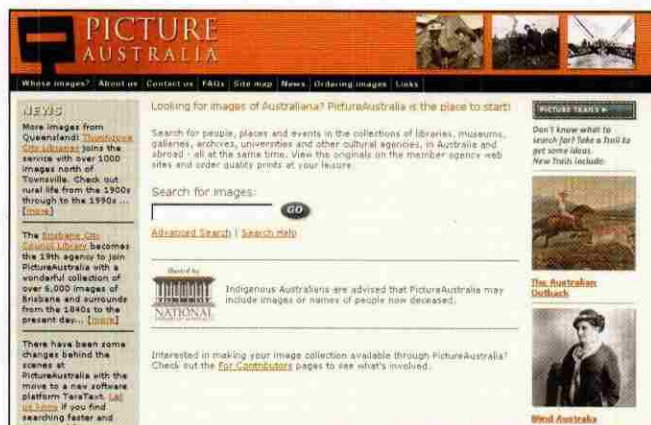
TRAVELING FURTHER

While these efforts are highly commendable, librarians need to do more. The virtual library's knowledge database should ideally also include researched documents prepared by librarians. An example is the *E-Briefs* produced at the Australian Parliamentary Library [www.aph.gov.au/]. Dealing with current topics, these *E-Briefs* are authoritative resources and may be very useful for a variety of researchers, wherever they may be. Librarians have traditionally been information hunters and gatherers, rather than information producers. Perhaps it is time for librarians to start creating researched documents using the vast resources at their disposal. Such a move will definitely go a long way towards improving the public perception of librarians.

The knowledge databases' links to online resources need to be identified, selected, organized, and updated regularly. Millions of documents are creat-



The State Library of New South Wales' Picman database has an electronic archive of historical documents and images like those of Australian pioneers Sir Joseph Banks and Matthew Flinders.



Picture Australia, from the National Library of Australia, has digitized images of Australiana.



ed on the Internet each day. The challenge for librarians is to sift through this vast universe of information and pick out quality material for the needs of their clients. Given the dynamic nature of the Internet, the virtual library should keep pace with it.

LIVE REFERENCE AND CHAT ROOMS

The ultimate boon for remote clients is a live reference service where they can interact with a live librarian for their information needs. A by-product of customer relations management (CRM) from the world of corporate business, live reference is now being used widely in libraries all over the world. The National Library of Australia and the various state and territory libraries offer the live reference service called AskNow [www.asknow.gov.au] with great success. Librarians are able to interact with their online clients in real time and provide professional service whether they are in Oodnadatta or Sydney. Such a service, however, has its limitations. It is available only on the weekdays for a limited number of hours and is unavailable on public holidays. Depending on the number of licenses a library has and the software used, only a limited number of clients at a time get the services of a professional librarian.

Chat rooms and bulletin boards can complement live reference service with after hours availability. Neither needs to compete with the live refer-

ence service but rather can augment it. Chat rooms enable clients to interact with other information seekers about their queries. Librarians could join these chat rooms on a regular basis at designated times and offer their professional expertise to the online community of information seekers. Chat room clients can offer each other their expertise and experiences anytime of the day, any day.

The State Library of Victoria organizes regular online forums in which subject experts "talk" in real time with clients who have subject-related information queries. Such live online chat forums should be organized as regular library features. Similarly, bulletin boards will enable clients to post their queries and let librarians or other online clients respond with possible solutions. The Australasian College of Natural Therapies [www.acnt.edu.au] has bulletin boards and chat rooms for the convenience of students who are taking distance-education courses.

E-MAIL REFERENCE

Another must-have feature of a virtual library that is already commonly available at many Australian libraries is an e-mail reference service. Clients can send e-mail queries that need in-depth research. Australian libraries handle a large number of e-mail inquiries daily, proving its popularity with off-site clients. The other service that is already available in some libraries around the world is videoconferencing. Such a service enables re-

mote clients to interact with a librarian in real time—the next best thing to a face-to-face interaction.

Australian libraries are on track to varying degrees in providing access to information resources for remote clients. At the rate libraries are moving, the comprehensive virtual library will soon be the hottest show in town or in the bush. Virtual libraries will become virtual communities of information seekers and information providers. Such a library with this variety of services will definitely meet many of the needs of the disparate Australian population, many of whom have to contend with the tyranny of distance.

THE VIRTUAL LIBRARY MEETS THE 80-20 RULE


Commercial forces have already realized that information is a marketable commodity. Many "Internet libraries" sprouting on the Web offer library services. Librarians will have to wake up to this challenge and think out of the box about providing information services before they find their services usurped by non-librarians.

The virtual library with comprehensive information services is one solution for off-site clients. The ultimate aim of a virtual library is to make independent research a reality as far as possible and librarians have a crucial role in producing and managing this service. A virtual library should be a dynamic entity that facilitates off-site clients' access to quality information. At the rate online information is developing, one day in the not too distant future, the virtual library may indeed meet the Pareto Principle, whereby clients may be able to find 80 percent of their information using just 20 percent of the resources on the Internet.

Like the Flying Doctors, libraries in Australia aim to provide information to the remotest areas of the country. With a proactively and dynamically organized virtual library, Crocodile Dundee and the sheilas will have access to a wide range of their information needs wherever they may be in this Lucky Country. No worries, mate!

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HISTORICAL PARLIAMENTARY INFORMATION

ELECTIONS AND REFERENDUMS

PUBLICATIONS

RESOURCE GUIDES

ADMINISTRATION

E-Briefs

are electronic documents which provide background and commentary on current topics, as well as web links.

See also: [Online Publications](#) and [Briefing Book](#) (Senators, Members and Parliamentary staff only)

Current E-Briefs - in descending order by date of publication

- [The Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme - an Overview](#) - E-Brief - issued 16 September 2002; updated 13 November 2002
- [Hospitals in Australia](#) - E-Brief - issued 22 October 2002
- [Hospitals in Australia](#) - E-Brief - issued January 2001; updated 21 October 2002
- [Economic Indicators on the Internet](#) - E-Brief - issued September 2001, updated 16 October 2002
- [Disability Support and Services in Australia](#) - E-Brief - issued March 2001, updated 16 October 2002
- [The Ball Bonanza: Looking for Explanations](#) - E-Brief - 14 October 2002
- [Budgetary Implications of Selling Telstra - A Ready Reckoner](#) - E-Brief - 24 September 2002 (Senators, Members and Parliamentary staff only)
- [The Iraqi Precipice](#) - E-Brief - issued 17 September 2002; updated 26 September
- [Paid Maternity Leave](#) - E-Brief - 13 September 2002
- [Who's Looking after the Kids? An Overview of Child Abuse and Child Protection in Australia](#) - E-Brief - issued 13 September 2002; updated 16 October 2002
- [The Kyoto Protocol - Issues and Developments through to Conference of the Parties \(COP7\)](#) - E-Brief - 13 September 2002
- [Parliamentary Remuneration](#) - E-Brief - updated 13 September 2002
- [The Four in Australia: Who Are They and How Many Are There?](#) - E-Brief - 23 August 2002
- [Bargaining Fees and Workplace Agreements](#) - E-Brief - 20 August 2002
- [Organic Agriculture](#) - E-Brief - 25 June 2002
- [India-Pakistan Tensions over Kashmir](#) - E-Brief - 12 June 2002
- [A Matter of Public Importance: Votes for Women](#) - E-Brief - 27 May 2002
- [Mabo: Ten Years On](#) - E-Brief - 14 May 2002
- [The Role of Safety Net Awards](#) - E-Brief - 2 May 2002

The Australian Parliamentary Library produces E-Briefs, researched documents prepared by librarians.

