Chapter 5  The Library and the Internet Circa 1997-9

The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite, perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries. In the center of each gallery is a ventilation shaft, bounded by a low railing. From any hexagon one can see the floors above and below—one after another, endlessly. The arrangement of the galleries is always the same: Twenty bookshelves, five to each side, line four of the hexagon’s six sides ... Through this space, too, there passes a spiral staircase, which winds upward and downward into the remotest distance. ... Light is provided by certain spherical fruits that bear the name “bulbs”. There are two of these bulbs in each hexagon, set crosswise. The light they give is insufficient, and unceasing.

Jorge Luis Borges, ‘The Library of Babel’ in Collected Fictions

From the global environment to the local, information and communications technologies are changing our lives and changing the way libraries do business. No longer are libraries an arcane world of their own. Every major trend impacting on today’s society is also impacting on libraries.

Novak, J., Virtual Libraries: Service Realities

5.1 The State Library and the Internet

In the previous chapter the emphasis was mainly on VICNET and how it was perceived by many as an important actor to form an alliance with; the rhetoric used was that VICNET is the “driving force in Victoria” especially in enabling public libraries and librarians to join the Information Age (Mackenzie and Siegersma 1996, p. 37). It is now time to turn to the State Library proper and examine the evidence that enables us to see how the SLV and the Internet co-constitute one another.

This chapter is a series of exhibits, a bricolage (see Section 3.3), the aim of which is to present the reader with a rich picture, a thick description (Geertz 1975), of the interactions
between ICTs as adopted by the libraries, the library staff and users as well as the physical space that constitutes the ‘bricks and mortar’ presence that these actors inhabit. I, as the author of the assemblage, will guide you through the exhibition. In order not to disorient you, the reader, too much and to enhance your understanding and experience of the exhibition, it will be worthwhile foreshadowing some of the things you will see as you peruse the following pages.

Borges (1998 (originally published 1941)) likened the universe to a labyrinthine library with an infinite number of rooms of exactly the same design. One never entered or exited his library; one was already there amongst the collected knowledge of the universe. In contrast to his mind-numbing image of repetitive uniformity, my visits to the library reveal a startlingly different picture maybe emphasising the fact pace the claims of the librarian depicted in Figure 5.19 (Page 230) that they contain less than the complete universe of knowledge. Consequently, my visits to the ‘physical’ or ‘bricks and mortar’ library\(^7\) start from the outside and work their way into the building. The purpose of Section 5.2 is to situate the SLV building within the context of the City of Melbourne. You will discover some of the SLV’s adjacent buildings and have a view of the old building and the new world wide web addresses working together to construct a particular view of the library’s contents. In Section 5.3 we enter the library passing through the foyer and into the newly renovated reference and public reading rooms. There you will be astounded by a very long queue and a rather busy area of the library where the Public Access Internet facilities are. So new, so upsetting, to some, is this change from that of pre-Internet days, that in Section 5.4 we spend sometime observing the actors and the

\(^7\) As we have discovered, especially in the previous chapter, there is a virtual State Library that could have been visited, however the purpose of this study is to establish how this arose and the role the physical building, staff and users had in its co-construction.
activities there. The data presented (in the grey text box) here is essentially the edited version of my observations over a period of several hours. (I have also used this convention to signify other, much shorter observations reported in this chapter and the next.) So for example an observation would appear thus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>12 September 1999</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One becomes quite absorbed in the process of typing and it is rather a jolt to be brought back to reality by a voice over your right hand shoulder. I hastily finish of the note I am typing (an email to myself containing brief notes of what is going on).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

And my interpretation of this like so (in 11pt Helvetica Neue):

The time limit of 30 minutes once a day at the SLV terminals and the large number of other users waiting for their turn mean that concentration on the task at hand becomes tantamount.

In the following section I perform a preliminary analysis of what was observed and augment the list of actors begun in Chapter 4. Now, we been inside the library and observed the Internet in use, we really should return to the booking desk to observe the procedure used to gain access to the Internet—this is described in Section 5.6. However, the situation described there is only one of the ways that the library has tried to cope with its popular new facility. This and many more details are revealed in the more microscopic examination depicted here.

The limited concept semantic networks (LCSNs) are heavily exploited in Section 5.6 so that the interactions and associations of the human and nonhuman actors can be viewed in a complementary manner. They are also employed in the following two sections: in Section 5.7 where we examine the librarians themselves as Internet users instead of simply organisers of Internet access for the library users. In conjunction with this
interpretation, in Section 5.8 I also employ the same data together with more exhibits to illustrate how ‘information’ is defined by practice (Section 2.12).

The purpose of Section 5.9 is to draw all of these exhibits together and develop a comprehensive summary of all that we have seen.

Now that you know what to expect in this rather detailed and lengthy chapter, it is time to move on and set the scene.

5.2 Setting the Scene

Situated on the highest point of Swanston St in all its 19th Century Neo-Classical glory is the stately, imposing State Library of Victoria (Figure 5.1). It has, over the last few years, undergone quite extensive renovations but there are still large sections of the sandstone facade yet to be cleaned. Superimposed over the roar of the traffic on Latrobe Street is a steady rattle, clatter and ringing of bells from the trams that travel along both along Swanston Walk and Latrobe Street, the thoroughfares that delineate the block on which this storehouse of knowledge stands. Looking down from the library steps and towards the intersection, but not crossing the road, the visitor might be surprised to see another statue. This time not of a famous personage but a representation of the library building itself – a corner of the library (Figure 1.3). Standing as high as the average person, it depicts, depending on who one talks to, either the death and destruction of the traditional library—the whole building except for the corner is buried under the pavement, or the rebirth of the library with the corner of the facade being the first sign of an emerging fledgling. Directly across from the front lawns is Melbourne Central, an underground railway station and vast shopping complex which, as we have already seen, is where the VICNET launch (Chapter 4) occurred. Looking North, we have RMIT University (another player in the VICNET story)
which is an assemblage of buildings representing modern, post-modern and classical Victorian schools of architecture—nothing is impossible here (Figure 5.3). If anything, it mediates between classical Greek architecture of the State Library and the pure post-modernity of Melbourne Central. As an indication of the negotiating power of the allies of VICNET within the SLV, it is worth noting that by this time (1997), the VICNET office had its own entrance on Latrobe St, just around the corner from the main SLV entrance (Figure 5.2). When I visited the VICNET office in 1995, I had to enter through the main doors and proceed upstairs, following some temporary signage, to a small cramped office space.

![Map showing the location of the State Library of Victoria, RMIT University and Melbourne Central. The circled intersection is the corner of Swanston Walk and Latrobe Street.](image)

Figure 5.1: Map showing the location of the State Library of Victoria, RMIT University and Melbourne Central. The circled intersection is the corner of Swanston Walk and Latrobe Street.
Figure 5.2: The entrance to VICNET on Latrobe St. (Photo: November 1999)

Figure 5.3: The RMIT University. (Photo: May 1995)
The Library and the Internet Circa 1997-9

The once tree-shaded lawns are one of Melbourne’s meeting places (Figure 1.2). Three immense statues, in the grand romantic tradition, look down upon the area where people come and sit to eat lunch, chat, and feed the forever-hungry seagulls who almost seem to goad the school children in to trying to catch them. People sit on the steps, grass or seats eating and drinking. There is even the occasional smoker or those who are content just to sit waiting for the portals to the world of knowledge to open. A few lean against the pillars with seemingly the same purpose. Many are young, dressed as students or tourists; a few don the uniform of the business person. Very few are above middle-age.

Four banners strung between the pillars display/advertise in solid colour with white text the context wrought brief of the building (Figure 5.4):

- The State Library of Victoria.
- A World of Knowledge
- VICNET – Victoria’s network.
- What’s on—a comic postcard display.

The Internet address emblazoned on two of the banners provide a clue to what many are waiting for—www.slv.vic.gov.au, www.vicnet.net.au. A signifier of the role computers play in the library. The WWW addresses signify the library is open to the world to access databases or send messages as packets of electrons over a path of indeterminate media over a vaguely indeterminate route.

Here, I too, await opening time; but I shall act as an observer. I am going inside to observe the users in their various acts at the terminals, at the desk, or just sitting around waiting. As I eat my lunch my gaze periodically turns about the forecourt to observe my potential subjects. On this day, the first day of my recorded observations, the never too brilliant sunlight disappears, the grey clouds loom making the inside of the library more attractive.
Figure 5.4: The banners strung between the columns at the entrance of the SLV serve to advertise the means of accessing the world of knowledge, either via VICNET or the SLV’s own website. The statue in the foreground is of Sir Redmond Barry, one of the main driving forces behind the library’s formation. (Photo: April 1998)

5.3 Upon Entering the Library

The main entrance of the library is reached after passing through the lofty columns and across the checkerboard of worn black and white marble tiles that line the portico (Figure 5.5).
As one enters, one can almost sense the reverence with which this institution is held and the clock seems to be turning back to a bygone era. I walk across yet more marble, past the security personnel and the chrome-plated hoops of the electronic sensors—almost the first signs of late twentieth century technology—past the well-worn marble staircases off to the left and right and head into the Trescowthick Information Centre (TIC) (Figure 5.6 area 1 & 2). Here in this newly renovated space, we can almost sense the trappings of the
Victorian Era disappearing. On the left, on numerous spacious desks, are the symbols of a more recent technological information age—tens of PCs that are used to access the catalogue of the vast store of knowledge contained within the SLV’s purview.

But, wait, directly ahead of us is an enormous queue that winds back past the pillar to the main entrance (Figure 5.7). Surely, they are not just library users making reference enquiries? Well, no they are not. As we shall see, it is a line of hopefuls who want to make a booking to use the Internet.

Many PCs are in use but none are busier than the ones immediately off to the right. There, the density of people is far higher and the activity at the keyboard is more intense. For here is the latest addition to the plethora of resources available to the patron of the library—the Public Access Internet area. It is the people who inhabit and the activities that happen in this section of the library that will form a significant component of the observations reported in this chapter.

5.4 A Few Hours in the SLV’s Public Access Internet Area in April 1998

In order, for you, the reader, to gain some idea of my fascination for this project, it would be useful for you to spend some time near the Public Access Internet (PAI) (Figure 5.8) area with me so that you can begin to acquire a feel for the types of activities that occur. To assist here, I have chosen to combine the observations from two days in April 1998. There are some points to note here: firstly at this time there were eight PAI terminals; secondly, bookings could only be made in half hour blocks and lastly, only one booking could be made per day. My observations started one hour after opening time. They are related in following text box with a light grey background.
Figure 5.6: Plan of the ground floor of the SLV showing the entrance foyer and relocated booking desk (3), the corrals housing the eight Internet PC’s (2) and the Reference Enquiry desk (1).
Figure 5.7: A queue of prospective Internet users, waiting to secure a booking. When this was taken, (February 1997 whilst I was negotiating access; before recorded observations commenced) bookings were still made at the reference desk. On some days, at opening time, there were around 40-60 people in line.

Figure 5.8: The Public Access Internet facility in the State Library. The terminal in the far left of the picture has a larger screen and is available for the sight impaired. There are four more terminals on the other side of the desk. (Photo: April 1998)
11:00
My observation diary records that 1 hour after opening time there are 5 email users, 2 patrons using search engines and one terminal vacant. This vacancy is quite unusual at this time of the morning.

It is changeover time. People stand over the current users. One person comes in the doors of the TIC, looks at her watch and waits; as soon as the previous user gets up to go she sits down and goes straight away to Hotmail—giving the impression that she is an experienced user.

Two young lads sit side-by-side, one typing a mail message, the other just looking on.

11:07
A young woman rushes in, obviously late but a person is sitting in the seat at the terminal she has been booked to use (Terminal 2). A short exchange ensues. This results in the person on Terminal 3 getting up (as he was obviously using it past his allotted time) and offering the terminal to her. No, she wants to use the one she is booked to use. The current user of Terminal 2 gets up and moves to Terminal 3 and restarts his session while the woman sits down and rapidly begins to type almost as if she is making up for lost time.

Simon, one of the patrons I have interviewed\footnote{These observations were conducted concurrently with the interviews of both staff and users.} comes in with a friend. They are just walking casually and talking quietly. He asks John who was using the service when I first came in but who is now just sitting in a chair near me “What time are you booked on for?” John replies, “None, I have already used it. Are you booked?”

But Simon has already moved off.
In contrast to most other users, John is dressed in neat slacks, long sleeve shirt and tie.

It is amazing the number of people who come in and do a circuit of the corral hoping to see a vacant terminal or just quickly checking up on what others are doing. It is easy to tell how close to the hour or half hour we are because the would-be-next-users start moving towards the terminals. This whole section of the TIC has become like a doctor’s waiting room.

This time the change over is perhaps the most obvious I have seen so far.

11:30
At exactly 11:30, Julie, who has been sitting thumbing through the New York Times gets up and goes over to the terminal, deposits her belongings on the desk and says something to the current user then looms over his shoulder quite blatantly reading the screen. His typing speed increases until at 11:32 he clicks the submit button to send off his email. As he gets off the chair, Julie almost follows him onto it. She is anxious to get down to work. She has come prepared to do some serious searching—with a list of prepared topics to look for. Quite obviously she wishes to make the best use of her time.

Simon walks out of the TIC but a short time later comes back in and sits somewhere else.

Meanwhile Julie has located some information and has begun printing it out. There is a problem though so she has to go to the Reference Desk, which is located some distance away, to get help. In the meantime Fred moves over hoping to see if the terminal is vacant—at closely gazing at the screen he decides he cannot use this one and goes and sits down.

A staff member has by this time come over and is unable to fix the problem. Whilst the staff member is trying to fix the problem, Fred chats to some of the other patrons.
11:45

A notice is placed on the computer stating that the printer is jammed and that the fault has been reported.

Another user, who seemingly wasn’t booked in at that time is asked to move and Julie takes over that terminal and continues to with her searching.

Fred then persuades the Staff member to let him use the terminal as it is only the printer that is faulty. She does—he sits down to use Hotmail. But, it is causing problems, coming up with errors such as “illegal operation”. He sees me looking and asks for help.\textsuperscript{73}

The computer has “hung” meaning that it doesn’t respond to any input either from the keyboard or the mouse. Meanwhile the Librarian has returned to help another user (twice in 5 minutes). She suggests to both users that they turn off the computer wait 30 seconds and start it up again. They do this. Whilst they wait for the computers to go through the lengthy start up procedures they sit and wait watching the screen.

Finally they have a working computer and the welcome screen is displayed. Both users continue doing what they had started. Fred is fairly new to this game as he keeps using the right-hand mouse button which causes problems in the Windows 95 based environment that these computers use. He again asks me what is going wrong and I explain to him that the left-hand button is the one to use for the things he is doing. The \textit{Hotmail} Welcome page finally appears and he types in his email address and manages to log in and read his mail.

\textsuperscript{73} This was just one of the many times that I was perceived to be a “computer savvy” person. See page 146.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2:01</td>
<td>All eight machines are occupied by people using email, although I notice that one person does some surfing in between. It is pretty much business as usual for this half hour and the next.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:32</td>
<td>A number of people enter the library as a group. They obviously know one another quite well as they come in chatting and laughing. Two of them also talk to one another whilst using the Internet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:00</td>
<td>This is the busiest I have seen it! People are standing over people waiting to use the computers (four on one side of the desk, one on the other). The seats don’t even get a chance to lose the indentation caused by the previous user’s backside! There are seven people using email and the other terminal is being used by Jean who is searching VICNET. The group of four who came into the library together, having used up their allotted time, stand around chatting for a while then move off together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:07</td>
<td>One person finishes using email, gets up and walks out. Her spot is quickly taken by someone else who has been “lurking” around with an eye out for a vacant terminal. Jean has now found Yahoo mail and is trying to register.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:15</td>
<td>Sam has now returned to Hotmail but this is only temporary to see if anyone has responded. By 3:16 he is back to searching. Meanwhile Jean and her friend are still trying to register with...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Yahoo mail. The system response is very slow today but this seems to be accepted by everyone and most people wait calmly for something to happen such as the next screen to be displayed.

Sam is now reading about software libraries (on the screen).

3:20
Jean’s friend leaves, sits down at a table and picks up a magazine that is lying there. Jean has managed to get into her email account and is reading her mail.

Sam, who has been flitting around the websites like a bee is now reading about Kumon and the Queensland Gifted and Talented Children.

3:29
Just to get a feel of what it is like using a terminal when it is busy, I tried taking over a terminal myself—it is very slow for all things, not just a particular service.

3:31
Just as I begin to get some response the next person booked to use this terminal comes along and looks over my shoulder to indicate that I should move along. It’s rather like being gently nudged forward in a queue and a little frustrating when the screen is just starting to display something.

3:35
At Terminal 1, the new user is an old hand at this email game. She just clicks on the Netscape history list; this brings up a menu of the most recently visited sites. Of course, Hotmail happens to be listed there so she clicks on that, logs in, prints out several messages and is now reading through them.

Ellen is using Terminal 4 and has actually come in with a handwritten letter which she is typing in to the computer. In conversation with her later on she explains why “English is
not my native language. Because I am sending it out in English, it is easier to write it out, check it, then type it in”.

4:12
One of the new users here is using the First Families Database.74 I approach him hoping to snare him as an interviewee as he is one of the first people today who has not been an email user. He agrees and I breathe a sigh of relief as this will add some difference to the data I am collecting. When I approached him I said I knew how precious his time on the Internet was. His reply, as well as agreeing to do the interview was, “Yes, yes, it’s terrible.”

Simon, one of the frequent users of the Internet here is back again. He says hello and tells me he has just come into use chat. He sits down and starts to use Yahoo chat on the singles channel.

In order to reinforce the validity of the observations included above, I also recorded over many days the type of activity each of the eight terminals in the PAI area was being used for. Table 5.1 summarizes the results obtained for three days in February 1998. A user was classified as using a terminal for research if they were taking notes from a page, printing a page or reading a screenful of information for a significant period of time. A user was web-surfing if they were observed to be frequently clicking on hyperlinks and not taking notes or reading a page for more than a few seconds. Other activities might include the use of a chat program or viewing a movie file. The email classification is self-
explanatory in that it involved the use of one of the free email services such as Hotmail or Yahoo mail—the two most frequently used in the SLV environment. No attempt was made to determine if a user was emailing individuals or posting to a discussion list or bulletin board as it was decided that this would amount to an invasion of privacy and could be more easily ascertained during subsequent interviews.

The remarkable thing about these results is the very high occurrence of email use—79%. Certainly the library staff found this astonishing and even overwhelming, as we will see later on in this chapter. Because I had been alerted to this in early discussions with my Gatekeeper (Chapter 3) and from my experiences as a lecturer in an environment where Internet access was fairly freely available even if the use of free email services was not encouraged, I was expecting usage to be about this high. In their popularist social history of the Internet, Hafner and Lyon (1998) recount how by 1973 75% of ARPANET (the precursor of the Internet) traffic was email. Bennahum (1998) states in his article ‘The Hot New Medium Is ... Email’ that mailing list use grew at a rate of between 5-10% a month over the period August 1997 to January 1998 compared with WWW usage of 3-4% a month over the same period. Of course, a mailing list employs the same protocol as email (SMTP) so is essentially an email message that is distributed to a group of people who are on the subscription list. Thus I can be fairly justified in concluding that email is was as popular in 1998 as it was in 1974 (See also Misa 2004)\(^75\). The irony of all this is

\(^75\) As I write this (in March 2005) one of the major free email providers Yahoo has announced it will make 1Gbyte of disk space available for each user of its email service. By way of comparison, at my place of work (Victoria University) staff are allocated 75Mbytes. Yahoo’s vice-president of communications products is quoted as saying, “[t]oday email is a much richer and essential part of people’s lives than it was five-plus years ago, and the more essential Yahoo Mail is to someone’s life the more engaged they will be with the overall Yahoo network”. [Macworld staff 2005, Macworld UK - Yahoo Mail Hits 1gb, IDG, [Online. internet], Available: http://www.macworld.co.uk/news/index.cfm?NewsID=11146, Accessed 24 March 2005.] So not
that in the early days of ARPANET “[a]n ARPA blueprint explicitly dismissed email: sending messages between users was ‘not an important motivation for a network of scientific computers’” (Abate (1999, p. 108) as cited by Misa 2004, p. 252). As we will see the SLV was similarly to dismiss the importance of email as it sought to enrol the Internet to assist them in the move towards modernisation and enhance the access to information and knowledge.

only is email still as popular as it was years ago the size of email messages has increased because users are now using it to send richer multi-media content.
## Table 5.1: Internet applications used as a function of time recorded on three different days in February 1998. Research is taken to mean that user is reading the page for a significant length of time and not just clicking on new links.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Email</th>
<th>Research</th>
<th>Web-surfing</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Unoccupied</th>
<th>Out of order</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday 16/2/1998</td>
<td>1:20</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1:35</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monday 23/2/1998</td>
<td>1:35</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2:15</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday 24/2/1998</td>
<td>10:55</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11:05</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1*</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11:37</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12:07</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12:55</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1:13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1:38</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2:03</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2:35</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total sessions</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of total</td>
<td>78.85</td>
<td>13.46</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes**

* Repaired by 11:15 but vacant until 11:30.

Sessions commence on the hour and half hour and are 30 minutes duration.

The totals include all types of activity including vacant or out-of-order. If a user commenced in one half hour and continued into the next then they were counted as a new user.

The % of total is the total sessions for a particular activity divided by the total sessions (104).
5.5 Some of the Actors Involved in the Public Access Internet Area.

Recall that in Section 2.6 an actor was defined as something that can be acted on or moves an action on to some other entity. There are relationships between objects that allow us to classify them as actors in the story being told. In the brief story of VICNET recounted in Chapter 4, this idea was employed in Section 4.6 to identify many of the actors and the relationships existing between them. I also introduced the idea of an inscription, that is a text (in the very broadest sense of the term) that is used to denote or signify something. Thus a notice placed on a computer, stating that it is out of order is a signifier. It is a visible sign to all those who see it that something is not performing in its usual manner. In the same way an error message that a computer’s operating system displays on the screen is also an inscription that acts to signify something is wrong with the technology.

With these ideas in mind we can now analyze the events depicted in the previous sections and identify some of the actors and the relationships between them (Table 5.2). This table should not be taken to be a comprehensive list but rather seen as providing some examples of the types of actors and their practices. Many of these will reappear in the following sections along with numerous others. The other thing to remember is that the same actor may perform different actions depending on the alliances they form at any particular time. Just as a hammer may be used by a human actor to drive a nail into a wall or as a murder weapon, a librarian may book a user in so they can use the Internet, or they may perform a trouble-shooting operation on a computer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actors</th>
<th>Actions/Practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chat</td>
<td>As in the synchronous communication program. For example IRC. Users like this as it allows them to have a conversation in real-time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email</td>
<td>A very important actor in this network as it recruits users for the library.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Actors</strong></td>
<td><strong>Actions/Practices</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email addresses</td>
<td>Are exchanged, written down. A sign pointing to a particular space where messages are stored.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error message</td>
<td>These can be considered as inscriptions ‘built-in’ to a program. They are displayed when some action or event has occurred that disrupts or threatens to disrupt the alliances between technology and user.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Furniture</td>
<td>Although seemingly passive, furniture such as armchairs, corrals, desks are involved in the Actor-Network as they provide some way for the library to encourage users to sit in certain areas. Can also be used to designate areas where certain types of activities take place. For a user for instance, the corral or desk is a useful ally because it can designate a private space.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History list</td>
<td>Provides a link between a user and the web-browsing software. Can be called into action if a user wants to revisit a previously visited website.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>Provides a multitude of access points (global?). Needed to obtain access to email. Brings bodies into the SLV.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library staff</td>
<td>Perform actions such as booking people into use the Internet. Called upon if an error occurs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library user</td>
<td>Books into use the Internet, uses email system, seeks help.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mouse</td>
<td>Provides a means of interacting with the program interface. The observation at 11:45 (April 1998) illustrates how even a small actor can play a part in disassociating the network.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notice</td>
<td>An inscription that stands in for (a delegate for) a member of staff, for example. Placed on a terminal signifying that it is out of order rather than a staff member having to be there all the time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operating system</td>
<td>As software (set of inscriptions) it is a script that instructs various parts of the computer hardware on the actions to be performed when a user interacts with it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printer</td>
<td>PAI users enrol a printer to provide a more permanent copy (immutable mobile) of some text that they wish to take away from the SLV.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The researcher (myself)</td>
<td>Not only was the researcher (myself) observing how these other actors associated and interacted, but, I was also approached by another user for help.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading materials</td>
<td>An essential part of any library. In this case, are employed by many of those waiting to use the Internet as a means of keeping occupied.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search engines</td>
<td>Are called in to action when a user wishes to locate an information resource on the Internet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Library</td>
<td>Offers Internet service. Adopts Internet to change image and new services. Does not assist people to use email. Needs bodies through the door so that it can convince the funding bodies that it is a worthwhile service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VICNET</td>
<td>In this case enrolled into a specific configuration enabling a user to search for information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watch (timepiece)</td>
<td>Part of the regulatory system for users, library Internet usage policy and staff. Remember PAI sessions are 30 minutes duration. The SLV encourages users to be self-regulating.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 5.2: Some of the actors that appear in the previous section, the actions they are involved in, and the alliances they may form.*
5.6 The Microscopic View—a closer examination of the actors and their interactions

The Amorphous Itinerant Community

Who are these people who have come flooding into the library? Most of them are in the 20-30 age group and are itinerant tourists who have come to explore Australia and work if and when the money is needed. They are backpackers and the numbers visiting Australia and subsequently Victoria are increasing. Johnston views them as being an important part of the Victorian economy:

The newest figures have counted 150,000 backpackers in Melbourne or Victorian country towns since November [1998] – 20,000 more than the summer before, when they poured $170 million into the state’s economy (Johnston 1999, p. 8).

Statistics quoted in a recent article about backpackers state that “[t]he average backpacker is English and aged 24” (Johnston 1999, p. 8). Table 5.3 below, shows the country of origin for 46 of the Internet users I surveyed in April 1998 at the SLV. Notice that there is only one Victorian amongst them and only 9% are Australian. However, it transpires that that all these users constitute an important actor in our story.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>% of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>4***</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>2*</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>9**</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>1***</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>46</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**
* Same user for two sessions (1 hour)
** Same user for three sessions (m)
*** Most insistent that I record Wales not U.K. or England
**** Qld 1, Tas 1, Vic 1, NSW 1.

Table 5.3: Typical breakdown of country of origin for Internet users at the SLV. Data collected over a period of several hours 23 April 1998.
The interesting thing about backpackers as an actor is that it is as a collective that they exert an influence on the sociotechnical network that I am studying. Now, although I agree with the philosopher Gordon Graham that community has become a “vogue word ... a word now used, or abused, to the point of meaningless” (1999, p. 131) I am disinclined to use it in the way he would like us to—”a community is a group of people who are subject to a Rule, and this Rule determines both what their objective interests are and what their subjective interests ought to be” (1999, p. 133). The Concise Oxford Dictionary (Allen 1990) defines community as being amongst other things “all the people living in a specific locality”, or “a body of people having a religion, a profession, etc., in common”. Now obviously living in a specific locality doesn’t apply to backpackers as the one thing they seek to do is move from locality to locality and it is apparent from Table 5.3 that our backpackers do not even hail from the same country, so the first definition can be applied. On the other hand, whilst they may not have a profession or religion in

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common, something they do have in common is that they are visitors to Australia who aim to see as much of the country as possible as cheaply as possible. These people who have only this characteristic in common when they arrive in Australia and more specifically at the SLV they, through their actions, and engagement with the technology form themselves into a community but that it is one to which we should apply special descriptors—amorphous and itinerant.

The characteristic of backpackers as a community is that it is one where the members are constantly on the move as they seek work, chase the sun, move from town to town—they are itinerant. Unlike a religious community that is, for instance, housed in a monastery and may be easily enumerated we cannot point to a building that houses our community of Internet using backpackers. We may point to a hostel where backpackers may be staying, but over any given period, the number of members in the hostel and their identities will change as individuals or smaller groups come and go on their adventures. Similarly, whilst over a given period, I may observe individual backpackers returning to use the Internet facilities at the SLV. If we consider the group as a whole, then it mutates both in size and constitution it is in effect amorphous. However as we will see, the Internet and especially email emerges as an important technology that gives a shape to our amorphous itinerant community.

In the following sections, I will examine the various activities and motivations of the backpacker community re technology and libraries. We will see how they use email and why they use it and on the way we will also see some of the other ways they use the
Internet but, firstly, we need to see how they gain access to the Internet and its associated services through negotiations with a three headed dog.\footnote{Be patient dear reader, all will come clear shortly.}

\textit{Guardian of the Internet?}

As we saw in the previous section most of the activity occurring in the public access Internet area is email use. Indeed, it is this use of email that is central to many of the tensions that arise between library staff and users. It is the one thing the backpackers like to use and yet the one thing that many library staff view with disdain. That being so, it is maybe a good place to start in this more detailed view of the co-construction of Internet use.

As two patrons, let’s call them \textbf{User A} and \textbf{User B}, are about to leave, they are grabbed by a new user (\textbf{User C}) who asks them how to get on to email. \textit{“Hotmail”}, asks one. “Yes”, he says. \textbf{User B} then points at the history list arrow and then says, “Click on that, then click on \textit{Hotmail}. Then click on the various boxes to create a new account”. As \textbf{User C} clicks on the places indicated, \textbf{User A} and \textbf{User B} stay and watch to see that he follows the instructions. Finally an email account is created.

Others don’t have an email address before they arrive.

\textbf{Luigi [user]:} I didn’t have an email address before I got here. I have been here 2 weeks and I now have one.

\textbf{Andrew:} \textit{So did you get an email address before you left?}

\textbf{James[user]:} No. I got one when I came out here. But the funny thing is that my family uses that address at home. So I am always writing to myself.
One\textsuperscript{78} time at North Melbourne Library (June 1998) I observed a user having trouble gaining access to Hotmail. He hadn’t realized that you must enter both login (user) name and password before clicking the <Enter> button. The script that the program follows is very strict and there is little room for error. Eventually, he managed to perform the steps in the correct order and was allowed access.

Some Internet users who come into the library do not have an email address; others will. Irrespective of whether they do or don’t, all will have to negotiate with the email system, be it Hotmail, Yahoo mail or one of the many free mail providers, before they can gain access to the part of the system where messages are read, written and dispatched.

The task of creating a new email address (as the users frequently refer to it, someone with an IS background would call it an account) commences by negotiating access with a guardian or watchdog at the email system gateway. This modern day version of Cerebus, the mythical three-headed dog who guards the entrance to Hades has the power to ask users to provide details about themselves and where they come from (Figure 5.9). This is done so that any advertising displayed along with the mail program interface has been customised to the user’s tastes. Some of the backpackers told of how they registered as undertakers, doctors or other careers they regarded as rather comically opposed to their current and future possible employment situations. Many also said they disregarded the advertising anyway—all they wanted was access to email.

If any of the details are missing from the form it will be redisplayed and the user asked to supply the missing information. The user is able to nominate a preferred login name but if this has already been allocated to another, then the system will inform the user of this and provide some suggestions as to acceptable alternatives. This can be the start to a dance of negotiation whereby the user can either accept one of these or supply an alternative that they would prefer. Cerebus, does apply some restrictions to what is acceptable to the system, these have been inscribed as rules into its negotiation script or program. Remember, that this was 1998 and many people were new to the idea of usernames/passwords and being able to create their own email accounts. In the case of Hotmail the rules state that only the letters a-z, the numbers 0-9 and the underscore ‘ _ ’

\textsuperscript{78} Remember my interpretations are in \texttt{11pt HelveticaNeue} (refer Page 184).
maybe used. All names must begin with a letter. Passwords must be at least four characters long. If any of these rules are broken then Cerebus will continue rejecting the application until he is satisfied. As I have explained, in far greater detail, elsewhere (Wenn 2002) there are an enormous number of possibilities for email addresses and these are co-constructed between the user, the system administrator and technology.

Once the user and Cerebus have reached an agreement as to an acceptable login name, this is then prefixed to the domain name. In the case of Hotmail it becomes username@hotmail.com. This user name also points to a mailbox which is an allocated space somewhere on the provider’s
disk storage system (Wenn 2002). From this point on, the user just has to provide the correct responses to Cerebus’ demand for login name and password to gain access to the system. Cerebus’ role has altered from that of interrogator and having a far more wide ranging effect on system structure to the equally but less intrusive one of allowing or denying access to the email system. This is a simple, but effective illustration of the fluid nature of sociotechnical systems, where the role of certain actors may change depending on the prior arrangements and associations that have been negotiated by the actors (Wenn 2000).

79 In this Provider or Service Provider should be taken to mean a provider of a free email service and the attached storage space not the more frequently encountered Internet Service Provider (ISP).
Please fill out the form completely and accurately. Thank you.

We use this information for our own general demographic information and so we can tailor sponsor's advertisement banners presented to you. We hold all the personal information private and do not disclose it to anyone without your explicit permission.

Choose a Login Name: @hotmail.com

Only letters, numbers, (0-9) and underscores (_). Login Name must start with a letter.

Choose a Password
Re-type that Password: For secure access to Hotmail, your password must be at least 8 characters long.

Password Reminder: Something we can tell you that will help you remember your password

Your First Name
Your Last Name

U.S. Residents Only
State
Zip Code

Non-U.S. Residents Only
State/Province
Country
Postal Code

Gender
Male
Female

Year of Birth

Highest Education
Level Completed

Marital Status
No. of children under 18 in your household
(Optional)

Employment Status
Job Function
Company size

Household Income
Do you use your computer primarily:

Figure 5.9: A section of the interface to the free email system 
Hotmail that a user who wishes to create an account would see.
It would be hard to choose a better example to illustrate the “open system” nature of this assemblage than this. You may recall from Section 2.3 that an open system is one whose configuration varies with time and cannot be strictly determined. So it is with these free email systems, because they provide this facility that allows people to register themselves and create a new email address and be allocated some storage space on the system. The actual number of users is difficult to determine. The other aspect that is hard to pin down is where a user such as the ones we find using email from the SLV will be using it next time they log in. For, by then, they might have moved on in their journey, gone fruit picking in Northern Victoria or chased the sun up to Queensland. One of the attractions of the Internet for such users is that it provides this type of flexibility. No matter where they are, if there is Internet access and they can provide the correct answers to Cerebus then they will be allowed to enter the system and access their mailbox. If they have forgotten their password then they will have to enter into more detailed negotiations with the guardian either asking for a new password to be sent to them or creating a whole new address and pointer to some storage space.

The email system, in this case Hotmail, is a black box that the user interacts with, negotiates with, providing certain details required by the registration form. This is a process of translation and results in the user being enrolled in the network. Notice that Cerebus, the interface, is an inscription. It has the viewpoints of the system developers (for one) embedded in it. The user must provide certain information in exchange for an email address and access. If it is not provided then the interface has the power to reject, lock out, the user. Figure 5.10 is an LCSN that attempts to capture these relationships between the actors, rendered visible in this view of the system. Although, there exist relationships between the Service Providers and the Internet and the Cerebus and the Internet, I have chosen to highlight those that exist between the backpacker/email user Cerebus, the email system and Service Provider.
The Gatekeeper has a very close relationship with the email service as it co-constructs the user account and storage area.

Service providers who offer free email access also provide disk space and an account creation and maintenance facility.

Backpackers who don’t have an email account need internet access to create one by negotiating with a Gatekeeper.

Figure 5.10: An LCSN that illustrates the relationships between the backpacker, the gatekeeper Cerebus, the email system and the service provider.
Accessing the Public Access Internet

There is also another guardian of Internet access in the State Library and indeed in the other two libraries that were part of this study. However, only at the SLV was the role and physical placement of the ‘sentry box’ contested. The following exhibits will enable us to see why this was so.

In Section 5.3, we went for a walk through the library foyer and into the library proper and I described what we would encounter in early 1997. We saw that at that time the queue of people who wanted to make a booking for the Internet had to wait at the Reference Desk (Figure 5.6 area 1).

There is a queue of ten people waiting to make a booking to use the Internet. One or two others wait on the other side of the doughnut well on the other side of the computer screen with obviously different enquiries (Figure 5.11).

Figure 5.11: The Doughnut desk where Internet bookings were made or where general enquiries can be answered (Photo: April 1998). The sign reads, “Please queue here for Internet bookings”. The man seated at the desk in the background is a security guard.
Two people are inside the doughnut today, Julia the usual receptionist and another person who has been enlisted to help with the rush. Julia uses the WWW interface to find out some information for a patron. A sign alongside the doughnut reads, “Please queue here for Internet bookings”. On previous visits, I have seen other signs displayed such as “The Internet is fully booked today”. However, today there are places still available for access to the Internet so there is no need to display the sign.

Part of the policy document Sixth Draft Computers and the Internet in the State Library of Victoria Conditions of Use reads:

“Use of computer terminals providing access to the Internet must generally be booked in advance”

Further on under the section ‘Booking Procedures’ we find:

“2.1 Identification must be presented at the time of booking”

Suitable forms of identification are listed as “3.1 ... passports, credit cards, Victorian Driver’s License, International Student cards, Concession Cards, Medicare Cards, Health Care Cards. ... 3.3 Users must present their own identification”.^80

Figure 5.12 depicts the relationships established when a user (here I mean any user not just an email user) wishes to make an Internet booking. In ANT parlance, the user must pass through the obligatory passage point of the booking desk (Figure 5.11) and have their name recorded in the book (for example in Figure 5.13). The SLV policy document dictates that only on the production of suitable proof of identification can the user be enrolled into the network of Internet users. Again, this emphasises the fluid nature of the network relationships that are formed. The reader must remember that the LCSN depicts

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these as frozen in time, whereas in reality there is a more or less constant flow of negotiation and mutual interaction.

Figure 5.12: The relationships that exist when a user requires access to the Internet at the SLV

Figure 5.13: At North Melbourne Public Library, bookings for Internet use are taken and recorded in a diary. Note the folder containing instructions on Internet use which is available for staff in the case of a problem or an inquiry from a user. (Photo: June 1998)
Creating a sense of community

Years ago, when one walked into the State Library, there was a sense of quiet and subdued speech if there was any at all. But, at least round the Internet terminals, this has changed. One only has to sit near to the terminals to realise that things are different here. There is a sense of community. Often you will see people greet each other with a few words, a happy smile, even a hug and it is odds on, that you would see at least one of the terminals two people cooperatively writing an email. At others there maybe a couple with one typing and the other just observing, but after a time, they may even swap over. The traditional library taboo on silence no longer exists here although most of the users talk with subdued voices. Much of this could be accounted for by the fact that library staff, while not condoning the use of email, advise anyone wishing to use it and unfamiliar with its use within the library to ask another user; as illustrated in the following excerpt.

**User:** Can I make a booking to use a computer for email?

**Librarian 1 [slv]:** Officially I have to say that you are not allowed to send email, but we do have other users who use email.

**User:** I don’t know how to use email ...

**Librarian 1:** Well we can’t show you but I will ask W [meaning Librarian 2]. Moves right to consult other librarian. And returns with her.

**Librarian 2 [slv]:** We can’t show you but there are plenty of “players” using the terminals how can show you how.

**User:** I know how to use email but I don’t now how to use it from here.

**Librarian 2:** Well there are plenty of “players” who can help you.

I observed at various times at both the SLV and North Melbourne, users come in with a friend who helps them use email. Sometimes this may even entail sitting down with them, creating an account (often a **Hotmail** one) and then taking them through the process of writing and then sending an email.
Margaret manages the day-to-day operations of the TIC and the reference staff at the SLV, I asked her what the policy was regarding email use in the PAI area.

**Margaret [slv]:** There is no policy against clients using email or chat.

**Andrew:** Am I correct in saying that there is a policy of not giving assistance to patrons who wish to use or are having problems using email?

**Margaret:** Clients working with email and chat sites are more proficient with these tools than the desk staff as we have had little direct use with these public email facilities and as the number of email suppliers is increasing, desk staff will always be behind the users in this field.

There appears to be an ambivalence regarding email use in the State Library. We have a staff member on the Reference Desk saying, “Officially we don’t want you to use email” [Librarian 1 above] on the other hand there is the statement saying there is no official policy against the use of email. Staff do, however, turn a blind eye to its use at the public access terminals and they recognise the fact that the majority of the Internet users do use email, just as there is a recognition of the fact that some users will be more knowledgeable about using email.

In reaction to this the backpackers help each other. They build up a little community. It becomes not only a community of self-help people but also in some respects a community that forms queues to book the Internet forcing the library to reconfigure itself.

Can you see how others are enrolled into the network of email use? Other nonhuman actors such as letters, parents and relatives are coerced, have their interests translated, so that they also become part of the network. They are also enrolled in the actor-network (see Figure 5.14).
As we saw previously (Section 5.4), even the researcher can, for a time, be enrolled into the community (Figure 5.15). More than once I was given the email address of one of the people I had interviewed. Recall also that during the observations reported in Section 5.4, that I was asked several times for help not only explaining why the mouse didn’t work but also when an error message appeared on the screen. On another occasion, Bill had just arrived from Tasmania where a friend had made an email account for him with the freemail service provider start.com.au. At the SLV, Bill had started off using Hotmail but was unable to access his mail account as he wasn’t registered with it (he was in effect talking to the wrong Cerebus). As he had seen me helping a couple of others he asked if I knew what was going on. I explained that first of all he had to type in the address (the URL) of his mail provider into Netscape so that he could access their service and then use his account name and password to read and compose his mail.
Another user (Hans) asked for advice on how to create a Hotmail account. He already had one but wanted to show his girlfriend how to make one. His account had been created by a friend so although he knew how to use Hotmail, he didn’t know how to register. I showed him how to do this, and he is now going to pass the information on to his girlfriend.

I was, on at least one occasion, enrolled into the network of email users.

Jim: Better give you my email address.
Andrew: Thanks very much.

Jim pulls out a scrap of paper with some email addresses on and allows me to copy it down.

![Diagram](image)

*Figure 5.15: Enrolling the researcher into the sociotechnical network. Once the researcher has provided advice the relationships will again change as will the backpacker’s role in the network.*

**Reasons for using email**

Ask any of the backpacking community why they use email and they will almost certainly reply, “It’s fast, it’s cheap, convenient and easy to use.” They also like the idea
that delivery is instant rather than there being a five to ten day delay before the addressee receives their mail.

Andrew: I suppose you write to people back home telling them your email address.

James [user]: Yes.

Kurt [user]: I’m an Internet convert. It’s just so cool—easy to send email when you are on the road and it’s so easy to keep in touch.

Mark [user]: I meet people in real life and swap email addresses. We go our own way but can still keep in touch. Sometimes we may even meet up again. Just a while ago at the Internet Cafe, I got an email from a very good friend to say she was in Melbourne.

Andrew: Creating a network of email using travellers?

Mark: Yes.

We met Hans before, when he asked how to go about creating a Hotmail account. He is from the Netherlands and came out to Australia as a tourist/itinerant worker.

Hans [user]: I am going to leave for Mildura soon, to go fruit picking. I hadn’t used the Internet before coming to Australia. I use Hotmail because it is free as is Internet access from here. A letter takes six days while Hotmail takes one second. I use it to keep in contact with friends and parents—it’s convenient.

Ellen is using terminal 4 and reveals later on during an informal conversation that she is very enthusiastic about email.

Ellen [user]: I like using email. It’s great—you get a buzz out of it. It’s fun. It is a good way of keeping in contact with people you meet whilst travelling. I collect email addresses.

One of the obvious things that emerge from these examples is that email has a convenience factor. This convenience comes in many forms: it offers speed of delivery (“a letter takes six days”, email “takes one second”), it enables one to keep in contact with friends no matter where they are, these friends may be ones from home or ones that have been made during the journey (“we go on our way but still keep in touch”), for most people it is convenient because it is easy to use (but see later). Whether or not the speed factor has been exaggerated, it is the appearance of instantaneous action that appeals to these users. This many faceted nature of convenience is something that persuades users to enrol in the sociotechnical network of email users.
Even more reasons were cited by others to whom I talked. They were really anxious about things that were going on at home. They wanted to keep track of things that were happening both with their families or others. There were things happening at home or in England or over the other side of the world and email offered the sort of immediacy that the postal service does not have.

John is an American male in his mid-twenties from Colorado. His local library introduced a similar service 12 months ago. He had not used the Internet until December 1997. Now he cannot get enough of it. In his own words, “I am hooked. It’s a great service that offers speedy convenient way of contacting friends and relatives back home.”

To make more efficient use of time he will print off his and his girlfriend’s email messages to read at home. “The printing service offered by this service is great.” That way they can browse their messages in their own time and think of replies.

Gudrun from Denmark has just come across the road from the Internet Café (Figure 5.16) in Melbourne Central to the SLV, “I’m a backpacker so I can’t afford to go there [the Internet Café] very often!” She travels equipped with a book containing names and addresses including email address. We chat for a while about her journey and then she gets up and goes over to the users of Terminal 4 and taps them on the shoulder to let them know the time is nearly up. She then comes back and says to me, “I hope they get off in time that is a really long letter they are writing.” “You keep yours really short then?” I ask. “I have to today as I’ve got a really long list of people to write to.” Indicating a half page of names. “So they’ll have to be short.”

Gudrun says Internet Cafés especially are too expensive and she cannot afford to use them often and John confirms this saying: “Internet Cafes are too expensive especially when you compare it with this service.”
An email address is a medium of exchange. It allows people who have access to email, that is their own email address, and an email service provider to send email to friends all over the world. From anywhere. They can come from France to Australia as NMP12 (an Internet user from North Melbourne) did who said to me “I send email to friends all over, Paris, London, everywhere”.

During my observations I saw many people with diaries or scraps of paper, which had, email addresses written on them. It seems that the email address is, at least for one group of people usurping the role of the postal or street address. It is just one of the many new types of signifiers that come as part and parcel of Internet use, not just in the library, but anywhere that the Internet is used.

Figure 5.16: The Internet Cafe that is hidden away in Melbourne Central. (Photo: April 2000)
They meet people along the way and they exchange email addresses. They might keep these addresses in a diary or something similar or it may be just a scrap of paper. Otherwise they may send letters via the post to their parents and relatives at home informing them of their email addresses in the hope that people from home will email them. Some travellers don’t even have an email address when they start out. They are shown how to register by friends they meet along the way or they may just do it themselves and then send letters via the post to their parents and relatives at home, informing them of their email addresses in the hope that people from home will email them. Again, Figure 5.17 pictures these relationships between the users and the various artefacts used for storing email addresses.

Backpackers meet others during their travels and exchange email addresses. The email address is an immutable mobile. For the person in possession of the email address it is in fact important that doesn’t change as it (the email address) moves through space and
time. Otherwise, the backpackers will not be able to communicate with whom they intended. Notice that it is also a delegate in several ways (Latour 1996b). Firstly it stands in for the person in real-life. If another backpacker wishes to send a message to a friend they met on their travels or maybe even home, then they do not speak the message to the person in the flesh but they rely on the email address to carry the text to the addressee. On the other hand, and somewhat more abstractly, the email address speaks for a space where the message is to be stored (Wenn 2002).

Part of the power of the email network is that it is accessible everywhere. When a user comes into the library they access the system through an interface, for instance the “Hotmail” front-end that is essentially uniform wherever it is used—again it is an immutable mobile. However, it is also, as we saw earlier, an obligatory passage point, it inscribes a place and a set of procedures that an email user must pass through to gain access to the functions of the email system. For as we have seen, the initial login screen acts as a gatekeeper (Figure 5.10).

Backpackers use the Internet (Figure 5.8) to keep in contact with parents, relatives and others in their home country, specifically they will use email for this. They also use it to keep in contact with others they meet whilst travelling, to keep up to date with their acquaintances’ whereabouts, make appointments to see them either in this town or the next. Ask any of the backpacking community why they use email and they will almost certainly reply, “It’s fast, it’s cheap, convenient and easy to use.” They also like the idea that delivery is instant rather than there being a five to ten day delay before the addressee receives their mail. The other convenience is that they do not have to organise a Poste Restante address prior to their travels (Figure 5.18).
One time whilst I was observing in the State Library a user was talking to me. He had his own email address that was not one based on a freemail service. However, because the Library has stopped all access to telnet\(^1\) services (used for remote logins) and the use of a mail protocol such as POP3 that allows a user to download mail from another mail server to the user's local machine it was useless. “It’s a real pity because now I cannot email anyone. I’d have to open an Hotmail account but everyone knows my other email address”. He then asks me if I know where there is a cybercafe. So being a traveller and coming equipped with an email address doesn’t always work, especially if it is one that is not based on a freemail service.

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\(^1\) See Glossary
This user is implying he would resist changing his email address if possible. He wanted to keep the same email address, the same identity, because that was how he was known. Unfortunately the place where he wanted to email from would not let him do that. He would have to open another account, create a new identity and send email from another domain. He was hoping that a Cyber Cafe would offer the facilities that the SLV didn’t so that this change would not be necessary.

The Role of the SLV and Staff

In the public psyche, a librarian is a woman of indeterminate age, who wears spectacles; a person with either a timorous disposition or an austere disposition, wearing a long sleeved blouse buttoned to the neck; someone who loves silence, likes books, and suffers people. Librarians don’t laugh. They are covered with a thin film of dust. They have pale skins, which, when touched (as if one ever could) might flake and prove to be reptilian scales.

Alison Hall, Batgirl was a Librarian

The SLV’s Strategic Plan for 1997-2002 declares “[t]he State Library is Victoria’s major research and reference library” (State Library of Victoria 1997, p. 10). It will provide services through “electronic systems designed for self-directed access to local and remote services and resources” (State Library of Victoria 1997, p. 10).

It would seem that librarians are rather conscious of the image they present to the public (Cram 1991; Dougherty 2001) and there is no doubt the average librarian is seen as a bespectacled, older female wearing a cardigan and either as timid as a mouse or rather authoritarian. As Roszak says: “It [the library] is distinctly a female work place, one of the traditional women’s professions. Stereotypically, the library is associated with a certain prim and mannerly feminine subservience that is bound up with the age-old culture of books (1986, p. 173). Even, given that this image of librarians is somewhat over-blown, it still comes as rather a surprise when one encounters the image Figure 5.19. When I first
encountered this image on the ALIA (Australian Library and Information Association) Library Week poster, I couldn’t help but label this well-built, muscular, female librarian ‘Super Librarian’.

This representation suggests to me that here is someone who is not frightened of and has tamed technology, but who also has the world of books well in hand. She is always on hand to answer your questions and guide you to whatever knowledge you may need. This person is young, alert, alive with anticipation and trendy and it is people like her who help to make libraries incredible gateways and hence on to the pathways in universe of knowledge. In case the promises delivered by the words are not enough, the bright colours, the ultramodern text layout and fonts used should help to convince you that all is possible. The lines radiating from ‘Super Librarian’ can be interpreted as lighting the pathways along which someone seeking enlightenment may wish to travel.

Just in case one is unsure that this is the type of image ALIA wishes to present, then a visit to the ALIA website (ALIA 2005) in subsequent years reveals a similarly attired and built librarians (making allowances for changes of fashion) in 1999, 2000 and 2001 (Figure 5.20).
There are a whole host of promises in this image and there is no doubt that the modern librarian is familiar with and a regular user of technology for information retrieval (Gordon 2003; Roszak 1986). It therefore comes as something of a surprise that our amorphous, itinerant community of backpackers could threaten to undermine our
intrepid guide to knowledge, but as we shall see, this constantly changing actor\textsuperscript{82} when allied with technology was able to do just this and in the process force the SLV to alter certain modes of its operation.

Finally, Georgina, a reference librarian from the SLV sums up what it is the staff on the reference desk should be doing and in doing so reveals a resistance to the type of work that they have been asked to do. As you will see in the next two sections, this resistance to undertake new tasks, such as booking people into use email causes a renegotiation of, and a reconfiguration of the sociotechnical network.

\textbf{Georgina [slv]}: Whereas we would really rather be dealing with proper research enquiries ... and what we see as valid reference work rather than booking people in to send emails. Which is basically what is happening.

\textsuperscript{82} Later in this chapter and in Chapter 7 we see that backpackers can seen as a community, but one very obvious characteristic of this community is that its physical makeup is subject to frequent change as people come and go on their peregrinations around Australia. The group as a whole is capable of exerting an influence, however. This implies that there are several ways of thinking of backpackers as actors.
Andrew: So, you sort of don’t think using email and chat and that sort of thing are, are good uses of the Internet for a library to be ...

Georgina: Well, I don’t care that they’re sending emails. It’s when we have people who want to do genuine research over the Internet. Which is a minority. But we have people that come in and we can’t offer them anything.

Andrew: And you see the Internet’s purpose as in the library as ... how do you see that, it’s not a post office so?

Francis [slv]: I see it as another reference tool. The Internet is another reference tool. It’s not something that should be taken as totally separate from everything else. It’s a reference tool.

The SLV’s View of the Role of the Internet

In its five year Strategic Plan 1997-2002 the SLV included networked services, ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) and remote and local access to information as important areas for its strategy (State Library of Victoria 1997). Specifically it identified in the section Key Strategy Areas “Networks and ‘the information age’” and stated it wished “[t]o develop a successful integrated library network to deliver enhanced information services to all Victorians beyond constraints of time and place” (p. 3). It also saw ICTs as being important of the Library’s values, believing “that libraries must be active partners in the development and implementation of technology to ensure that access to knowledge and information will be available to all” (p. 8). Enabling the sharing of resources was also critical (p. 8). Many of these issues we encountered in the discussion of VICNET in Chapter 4.

In March 1998, I interviewed Josephine whose role was Electronic Resources Officer and she also had a role in development of the SLV’s Internet usage policy. We were discussing the move towards the Internet.

Andrew: Why do you think there is this move towards using the Internet?

Josephine [slv]: Well, there’s a couple of things, I mean A) it is an information tool; but it’s not just that. It’s also a communication medium. Uhm, ...
Andrew: As in using email and ...
Josephine: Discussion lists
Andrew: ... discussion lists, chat ...
Josephine: the whole gamut.

Lillian [sly]: If you look at the library’s policy the Victoria Library’s policy, um, that, um, acknowledges very much the direction in which these sorts of technologies are taking us. And acknowledges that the role of, um, the library in terms of providing access to email and the potential for the integration in a way of email and information; that blurring of what you can actually do. Get the information but then you can also, email a site to, um, you know, to, er, further that information. To get more information from [it]. You know. So I think that we’re seeing a merging of the those, um, two activities.

Andrew: Possibly, it is true to say it’s a spectrum from just the information gathering to using communications to get information and then just using pure communication to talk with people?

Lillian: That’s right, I mean I think ...

Andrew: ... people you have met overseas?

Lillian: ... that suddenly libraries. Ah, it’s the pure communication issue, the use of email that’s the concern for the staff.

Thus, although the library staff initially thought of the Internet as offering increased access to information, the backpackers through the use of the Internet and translation through the email system have also persuaded, translated the library’s interests. The library was hoping that the Internet as an information tool was irreversible. For them it was a black box. They didn’t expect it to be opened, reconfigured, have its interests moved and manipulated, for it to be translated to become a communication tool. One thing to learn from this is that there are varying degrees of reversibility, of stabilisation, of resistance to change.

Losing Control?

Francis and Georgina are both Reference Librarians, part of the public face of the SLV. At the time of the interviews one of the responsibilities of staff on the Reference Desk in the TIC was to handle the Internet bookings. I asked them both if they thought the Internet had affected their work.
Georgina: Yes. Because at times, certain times of the day, when it is busy the bulk of the business, so to speak, is Internet bookings. When people see a huge line at a desk they’re, um, scared away because they think well my enquiry is going to take up more time and they’re really busy. Whereas we would really rather be dealing with proper research enquiries.

Georgina: It’s, it’s a bit of a source of angst, just generally working out policies and the best ways to deal with the increase because it has brought a lot more people into the library as well. It’s made Mondays when we open a lot scarier because we get like 50 or 60 people coming in but we are dealing with that because we have moved it away from the reference desk.

Andrew: Yeah, that’s now going out to the foyer.

Georgina: We get a lot more phone calls on the weekend so you spend half your time, when you’re busy, and the phone starts ringing and you can’t get to it most of the time it’s just email enquiries. You get a bit, well I get a bit resentful of that because you’re trying, your priority are the people at the desk.

Francis: You were there a couple of Monday’s ago when we had that really long queue wrapped round the pole nearly out the door. Um, the trouble is you can only have one person. Can I preface it this by saying up until now the language we have used as a department have been very poor or very ineffective when we talk to management or anyone about this. We are not having trouble with the Internet per se, what we’re having trouble with is the booking system.

Andrew: Right.

Francis: We’ve got to have a booking system because at the beginning when we didn’t have one there were fights. Quite physical fights.

Andrew: As in actual fisticuffs?

Francis: Yeah. Yeah. And throwing glasses of water over people and it was horrible. It really was horrible.

Now, the picture I had of the new super-librarian is part of the rhetoric of this new technology in libraries. But, what was happening with the Internet was that it was increasing the anxiety levels amongst librarians because they were increasingly being called upon to perform a variety of new tasks. They had to book people in to use the Internet; they had to control the queues. And we saw the queues involved earlier, and in the early days of the Internet they didn’t have a booking system and there are tales of fights and high anxiety. Not surprisingly, there were high levels of anxiety amongst many librarians. They wanted to continue to help people with reference enquiries, not have to
book people into to use the email or to cope with squabbles amongst the users. However, not all the staff were of the same mind:

Andrew: Right communication, so you have no um, problem with people coming in and using the Internet as an email resource?

Josephine [slv]: No, absolutely not. I think the library ... sees itself as a research library and um I actually a think that’s a bit of a snobby sort of way to look at things.

Andrew: Uh, huh.

Josephine: Um, and I think we should be more like a public library is. It is much more ground up ... the user level really. What the users want. And being much more flexible.

Andrew: Uhm, right. Turning now to the introduction of the public access Internet facilities. Has that sort of added or subtracted, changed what you do as a reference librarian?

Tom [slv]: Very few people actually ask to use the Internet as a research tool. I find this very, very disappointing. Um, the majority of use as you have probably already heard, is email. I would say probably 19 times out of 20 it would be email.

Notice here, the emotions that the provision of Internet access brings both to the library staff and those user’s who wish to use the Internet for reference or genealogical work. Remember the First Family Database user mentioned on page 199? He was resentful about how difficult it was to get access and the small amount of time he had available. The Internet is also a source of angst. It is scary. It creates resentment, frustration disappointment and violence. Many of the staff also felt that the Internet was disenfranchising the SLV’s traditional users who wanted to use the library as a reference library. There were problems for both the access providers, the more traditional user base and those who wanted to use the Internet for tasks they perceived as more meaningful than email. Hence, in that respect, there was a danger of the sociotechnical network becoming undone; alliances between actors being undermined mostly because of the long queues of people who wanted to use email. One staff member (Francis) conceded that it wasn’t the use of email so much that was the problem but the fact that time was being taken away from their real work and considered that the staff hadn’t been able to communicate this to management. She recognised the failure of their arguments, the presentation of their case to management. At the meeting between reference staff and management that I attended in February 1998 there was some recognition of the problems with an announcement being made that a Library Technician (as distinct from a
Reference Librarian) would be rostered on to help the staff cope with bookings. It was noted by the manager that the “queue was tremendous”.

In the next section, we will see other actions that were taken in order to help stabilise the sociotechnical network. Once again we will see that this whole system was very much an evolving and open one.

This dislike of email use, by the public, in a library was not confined only to the SLV. During an interview in June 1998 with Peter a librarian from the Sam Merrifield Library he had this to say:

**Peter [sm]:** I really don’t think the use of email or chat facilities is appropriate in a library environment.

**Attempting to Regain Control**

Now, having seen that the network is far from being stable, how could the management and staff regain some semblance of control, their self-respect and perform the duties that they had been trained for?

**Francis [slv]:** We also want to have another two Internet terminals, for purely research purposes. Now we, we don’t sit and judge what people access it [the Internet] for but those machines are just used for email and chat lines. So when someone comes in and they have a legitimate enquiry whether it be to find an address of an institution or whatever. We can’t offer them the Internet at the moment because there are no free terminals. Unless we do it at the desk and we just don’t have time. To sit them up at the desk and to help them go through it which is what we used to be able to do [before when there were only 2 terminals].

I mean we never could spend a lot of time with people because it is so busy in the TIC. But now I mean 3 minutes is a luxury to spend with someone [on a reference enquiry]. So you are taking them over to a terminal, people are using EBSCO® hosts, so we’ve got all these wonderful new tools that we’re just not able to offer to people. They mightn’t have a printer attached because all the printers are with the Internet terminals.

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83 An online reference tool. See glossary.
Andrew: So you feel pressured by this queue of Internet people who just want it purely for communication purposes.

Francis: Yeah. Exactly. Yes. We are not a post office. We are a library. ... we are not doing our job properly though by not offering the Internet as a reference tool more than we do because we don’t have the time. So hopefully by moving the booking sheets we can then take it back as a reference tool.

Thus, relocating the place where Internet booking occur, reconfiguring the physical space, is hopefully one way the reference staff can reclaim their rightful duties.

Consider this conversation with Lillian the librarian in charge of the day-to-day operations of the reference section.

Lillian [slv]: Well, I suppose originally when Internet, PCs were put into libraries there was a perception of, that they would be used for information. The initial goal that libraries had providing, equitable access to information for all.

Andrew: Uh, huh.

Lillian: ... of course, the consumers84 started telling us quite rapidly that they were going to use it for something else. It wasn’t being used for access to information; it was being used as a communication tool. So I think that, um, I think it actually, initially many staff I know would have felt that we weren’t meeting the goals of access to information because people would come in wanting to use it for research or information services and they wouldn’t be able to get on to that with the PCs because there were people who were, had booked onto them already ...

Lillian: Yes. I’d say to some degree they’re [the users] challenging us to, um, develop our services in different ways.

Andrew: In ways that traditional libraries were not ...

Lillian: That’s right they are very much challenging the traditional, um, role of the library as a static, um ... you know body of books.

Lillian’s role covers the public service areas of the library particular as it relates to customer service and she sees that the demand for Internet services and the adequate

84 Lillian was very mindful of the SLV acting as and being seen to act as a business inline with its recent corporatisation. I mentioned in Chapter 3 that the SLV preferred the use of the word patron rather than user, well consumer was used more often in the later stages of the first phase of data collection.
resourcing of that demand is a major issue. Tied up with this issue is the fact that the impact of public access Internet on staff and services needs to be monitored.

Lillian [slv]: ... looking at how the Internet impacts on the other, um, services that the staff are able to offer. You will be aware that we’ve made certain decisions, um, about the Internet in the time that you have been observing it. That we’ve made the decision to have two terminals, two PC’s entirely given over to the Internet for information. Simply because the high core usage being for email.

Andrew: And you have also moved the bookings from one place to another?

Lillian: That’s right, again with that, we moved from one place to another because the staff felt that was affecting peoples, other customers approaching the desk.

Andrew: Have you had any feedback on how effective that change has been?

Lillian: Oh, its been extremely effective from the staff point of view. They feel as though they are much better able to manage the information enquiries that they get and they don’t have to manage just the queue for the bookings. We’ve also, we’ve developed a couple of things that assist the booking process. To speed the process up. I don’t know whether you have seen these, or are aware of these having been introduced in the last couple of weeks.

At this point she tears off and gives me a slip of paper where the user can write down the details of their booking.

Lillian: There you can have one of those, that’s just a little Internet booking form. We have had a second person on the desk, um, at the foyer to cope with the demand but this is part, giving the staffing situation, that person is only employed for a contract period, to the end of June. And, er, what I am proposing with this is that the user will fill this out while the staff member on the foyer desk fills out the other form.

This slip of paper, this simple form passes some of the responsibility back to the patron (Figure 5.21). They now have to remember when their booking is and for which terminal rather than queuing up at the desk again to be reminded when it was.
Tom [slv]: We are trying to encourage, we have tried various options, uhm, we’ve got a system now that is certainly a great improvement on what we had before. Hopefully we will be able to encourage more people to, to use the Internet [for information retrieval purposes].

In another email exchange with Lillian she stated:

Lillian [slv]: What really needs to be noted is that our “policy” is under constant review and adjustment - the nature of things I think in providing a service where one can never really meet the demand and where the customers themselves push libraries into new territory.

Notice once again, how the system as such is so open to change as the actors involved negotiate and persuade each other that there has to be a better way of reaching a more stable, more satisfying, more usable configuration. This does not happen overnight. The changes took place over an extended period as the next section illustrates.
A History of Changes

In an attempt to try and obtain a better picture of the changes to public’s ability to access the Internet I was advised to email Margaret who was in charge of the Reference Librarians and the day-to-day operations of the TIC. What follows is a reformatted and edited version of her reply.

Andrew: I wonder if you can provide more information regarding the history of the development of the SLV’s policy on Internet use—more specifically the use of email and the assistance that staff can/will give to patrons using the Internet. Having interviewed a number of library staff, I have formed the conclusion that use of the email facilities at the State Library is not openly encouraged.

Margaret [slv]: Information desk staff are focussed on the information needs of users and are actively using Internet as a research resource, frustrations arise in not being able to access PCs for specific research needs immediately a question is asked due to the heavy demand on Internet PCs from email and chat usage. To cope with this we have added another 4 [sic] PCs specifically for research Internet use, a 10-minute [period] for any Internet [SLV] catalogue/cd-rom resource and our mainstream PCs for catalogue and information databases have incorporated high profile Internet sites on these PCs for research use.

Internet bookings are now taken in the foyer and the guidelines aim for equity of access to as many people as possible.

Andrew: Am I correct in saying that there is a policy of not giving assistance to patrons who wish to use or are having problems using email?

Margaret: ... Staff show people how to get to the most common address ‘Hotmail’ and do machine maintenance like rebooting machines or trying to establish whether link problems relate to our equipment or the host site and fixing printing problems, if the problem is bigger that the limited range of troubleshooting options available to desk staff, they will call the technology help desk for assistance. All troubleshooting tasks are done equally for all users on all of our PCs.

Margaret: There is no policy against clients using email or chat, all our changes in procedures and bookings have been geared to ensuring equity of access for as many people as possible and given the demand on our PCs this appears to be working. The only other issue is to ensure the availability of PCs for information access and many of our procedure changes have been targeted at this purpose, State Library is striving for a ‘digital reference’ goal and to do this we need PCs readily available on instant notice for reference purposes.
Andrew: Can you provide some history to the development of Internet services for library users?

Margaret: Development of Internet services has been an evolutionary process halting along as a reaction to public demand and trying to maintain a [sic] equitable balance between all users for a scarce resource. Our solutions to some of our Internet issues has followed similar lines to other State Library crisis situations of heavy demand, for example the VCE CATs created similar rationing of limited resources to ensure equity of access and alternative strategies to ensure reference service was available to all.

The approximate timeframe for introducing Internet and working it into the reference service was as follows.

- June 1995 one public Internet terminal in the Reference Centre courtyard. This was operated as a self booking sheet with the rules “One 30 minute session per person per day. Sessions could be booked up to 2 weeks [sic] in advance and no phone bookings”.

- By January 1996 there were 2 [sic] terminals, with the same booking arrangements except phone bookings were taken to assist equity for country users. At this stage there were few or no public email sites and while there were multiple bookings the system was not overstressed and staff could gain access for reference queries.

- By September 1996 (2 [sic] terminals), email was starting to feature. Multiple bookings were getting out of hand [sic] and demand was starting to stress the self booking system. To ease demand staff were giving the address of close Internet cafes. It was getting difficult to find space and time for staff to access terminals for reference queries.

- Planning for TIC resulted in the initial layout having 20 [sic] PCs being set for Dynix only, 12 for CD-roms and Dynix access and 8 [sic] for Internet, CD-rom and Dynix access, with the possibility that PCs could be changed as the need arose. TIC opened in April 1997 with 8 [sic] Internet plus PCs and a self booking sheet on each PC stating “One 30 minute session per person per day” and phone bookings taken. Multiple bookings, clients arguing, high demand and complaints resulted in a succession of changes occurring to try and keep up with demand and ensure equity for all and access for reference purposes. There were also public Internet PCs placed in Arts, La Trobe and Newspapers.

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85 Library automation software, in this case providing access to the catalogue. See Glossary.
July/August 1997 modified the booking sheet by requesting identification, so staff could handle disputes over the use of false names to have longer sessions and multiple sessions.

Of the 8 [sic] PCs one pc was channelled for people with disabilities to book 60 minute sessions and a second PC to give priority to reference service (15 minute priority), so information desk staff could gain access to a PC. Phone advance bookings only were taken at this time. Demand accelerated to such an extent, all machines were booked out by lunch time and there were arguments between users and complaints. This resulted in the booking sheets being taken back to the information desk and identification being requested.

January 1998 staff forums were held over the demand for Internet PCs and the amount of staff time being channelled into bookings and therefore time not available to handle reference queries. Issues raised at this time included a management initiative to have commercial Internet kiosks in the foyer, consideration of different ways of handling demand and ways of regaining staff time.

By March 1998 the changes from this included moving same day bookings to the Foyer desk (State Library only began staffing the foyer desk in August 1997) and minimizing advance bookings, in person down to one day ahead on 2 [sic] PCs and by phone up to a week ahead on 2 [sic] PCs and streamlining the number of servicepoints with public Internet pc concentrating demand in TIC.

August 1998[,] demand is still outstripping supply and desk staff have more resources on [the] Internet which they need to use for reference queries. We introduced 2 [sic] more PCs for research purposes to isolate this need, this has since been increased to 4 [sic] research PCs and a 10 minute PC.

As this quick history should show we have no policy against email usage, we are merely trying to keep up with demand while trying to operate as a reference library and a reference library which incorporates Internet resources in its standard tools.

Andrew: Once again I thank you for your time.

Now, whilst it is still 1998, it is quite obvious that there have been many changes in the booking procedures since the Public Access Internet facilities first became available in 1995. Since that Monday in February 1997 when the photograph (Figure 5.7) was taken there have been even more changes in an attempt by the librarians to reclaim some sense of control. Table 5.4 summarises these changes since the introduction of the Internet in 1994.
Notice how Margaret talks about consideration being given to “different ways of handling demand and ways of **regaining staff time**”. That is, staff time to do reference work and operate as a reference library—the proper purpose (as seen by the staff) of the SLV. By reshaping the physical layout of the library—that is moving the booking desk and changing the booking procedures and adding more access points with different operating rules—the library hopes to achieve this as well as maintain the interest of the users who want access email.

We should also note how the backpackers have forced the procedures to be changed through the attempts of a few to undermine the existing procedures by using false names...
to obtain more than the permitted half hour booking per day. In response to this some proof of identification was required when making a booking. Again we see the process of co-construction at work (Figure 5.22).

Figure 5.22: The LCSN showing how the booking procedures are co-constructed

5.7 Librarians and the Internet

... I believe the Internet is simply a vital tool through which libraries can make information accessible. Other outreach services such as bookmobiles, inter-library loans and library delivery services to the elderly and disabled have clearly increased our client base” (Kurzeme 1997, p. 147).

Just Another Tool?

I mentioned the interview I had with Josephine (page 232) where she saw the move to the Internet occurring because it was an information tool as well as a one for communication. She went on to say that library staff will have...

Josephine [slv]: ... more facility to pass the user on to use the Internet - an Internet tool to answer their problem. I mean they can quickly do it on the desk. If its something a little bit more involved, like a ... I mean if they could do it within one minute they’ll probably just do it. If it takes like five minutes then that’s sort of getting into an area where they will have to take them somewhere else and do it. If you know what I mean?

Andrew: Yep.
Josephine: Especially if they can think that they might just get a book off the shelf that’ll answer the same thing. Then you’ve got currency issues and things like that.

Francis [slv]: I see it as another reference tool. The Internet is another reference tool. It’s not something that should be taken as totally separate from everything else. It’s a reference tool.

Another one of the librarians I talked to is a bit more willing to accept the fact that the Internet is a communication tool as well as being an information tool. Most of the librarians want the Internet purely as an information tool. They say, “we don’t have word processors in the library so why should we allow people to have access to email?” “It’s an information tool we would like to see it used as.” In this section I wish to unpack this notion of the Internet as a tool.

“... librarians and users should not be threatened by the Internet, but rather view it as a powerful extension to the traditional sources of information” (Kurzeme 1997, p. 151).

Throughout the interviews I have seen the Internet referred to as a tool, “I see it as a tool”, “It’s another reference tool”. The Internet is another reference tool it is not something to be taken as totally new, or separate from everything else. So the librarians just integrate it into their current practices when they are using it for information retrieval. Notice also that Kurzeme, a librarian and the author of the article (originally published in The Australian Library Journal) which is the source of the quotes above is acting as an evangelist for the Internet. That article itself becomes a ‘spokesperson’ for Kurzeme and the value of the Internet for other librarians.

The SLV staff have access to the Internet and it is used to increase professionalism. One or two of the librarians I interviewed said “when someone writes me a letter from somewhere round the globe asking for information, I often use the Internet to provide extra information”. So there is, to use that terribly overworked phrase, a sense of value-adding. They, the SLV librarians, are saying we can use it to provide information that is outside our collections.
As Ian [slv] says:

I do a little bit of searching for myself and then I will provide them with some facts. I say, “go to this address and you will get some more information. I’d rather supply the URL, than use a whole block of text [copied into] the letter and say this is where you go.” It sort of broadens their horizons but it makes us look professional.

We can see the librarian as being an organiser, giving a pointer to additional information. But, on the other hand, he doesn’t just précis the information, he uses a signifier—a URL. He just puts in the web address telling the person with the enquiry where to find the information. If we compare this with Figure 2.12, The 7Rs of Information, we see that public knowledge has been retrieved, validated and restructured in the form of a signifier pointing to the source. That is the activities taking place are mainly, but not exclusively, on the right hand side of the diagram.

However, as we have seen, the Internet becomes something else if they have to do things such as booking people in to use it. It becomes a source of frustration. In some cases, the Internet as a tool is also a source of frustration. The librarians at the two metropolitan public libraries say:

Look in theory this would be really good but we just don’t have access to it. The public has access to the Internet, at the public access terminals but we don’t have a terminal on our desk so we can get the access, so we can get the information. We need to get the practice at using it (the Internet) for finding the information that people want. It will be better when we have access.87

When talking to staff from these libraries, there is a feeling that this facility has been made available to the public without regard for the fact that it is the staff members who will actually have to act as advisers on using the Internet. They want to be up to date themselves, be seen to be up to date with the technology and to proficient at using it—they have their pride too. The staff at the SLV are much luckier, they have Internet access at their desks and have had it for quite some time (since 1994).

86 In this case the signifier is a semiotic sign expressed as a URL or web address that points to a site where the actual information is stored.
87 This is my synthesis of the opinions gleaned from several interviews.
So for the Internet to be better employed as a tool requires that the staff (those in the metropolitan libraries) have the opportunity to practice using it. Not having access from their desk, or even in the office, away from the hustle and bustle of the public areas is a disadvantage a backward step.

**Tom [slv]:** If I’m taking a research enquiry up here [meaning the third floor at his desk] then yes, then I might push it a little bit harder, you know, practise a few of my skills, search here, there and everywhere and have a bit of a play with it. If you don’t play you don’t learn.

When Tom says, “If you don’t play you don’t learn” it is not play in the recreational sense but more in the sense of the constructivist approach to learning (Wenger 1998). It is a honing of skills, pushing and prodding at the tool to discover what it can do. Let’s delve a little deeper into what Tom says about the Internet as a tool that one should practice using.

**Tom [slv]:** I find very little time to play these days. My skills are suffering because of it.

**Andrew:** Can I ask why you are finding very little time?

**Tom:** Well, when it first started, um. When did we get it? We got it about six or seven years ago. It was great because, you know, you had to basically spend time because it was before World Wide Web [at that time it was a Gopher based service]. And we spent time, you had to basically try and find the addresses, you had to sort of check out the different sites, you had to sort of...there wasn’t that much information on it. And it was great because, you know, you had to play with it to learn it.

**Andrew:** Uh, huh.

**Tom:** Um, and now that you’ve reached a certain level of skill you don’t feel it is justified to spend as much time playing with it because there are literally, there are other sources of information.

**Andrew:** Yep.

**Tom:** ... it is only one of a number of available information sources for us. So there are new things, new books that come in. You have to go and check those out. There are new microfiche collections that come in. There are on-line services [databases that are not Internet based] that we have to sort of get to know. You know, obscure this that or the other. Um, each one actually requires us as professional staff to get to know the stuff.

**Andrew:** You have to be familiar with it otherwise you can’t use it?

**Tom:** Yep. So, having reached that level of equilibrium where I feel that, “Yes, I do know something about the Internet”. It just slots in with all the others and it gets exactly the same amount of time.
Earlier on in this section Ian mentioned being seen as being professional by providing extra information. Throughout this passage from my interview with Tom, we can see that he took pride in his work and that he also desired to be seen as a professional who knew how to use the Internet to get the best out of it. However, it was not to be something that became the dominant thing in his work, there were other information tools that it was just as important to know how to use, to become familiar with and know what questions they could answer, what information they could provide. For others it was something to be used as a last resort:

**Rosemary [sm]:** if we can’t find anything in a book, just in a lending book, then we go to our reference books, if we can’t find anything on our shelves here uhm, then we try other branches to see if they’ve got anything available and then it’s usually, is pretty much a last resort really (laughs). Yeah, well uhm, that is our last resort.

**Francis [slv]:** But it [the Internet] is not taking, it shouldn’t take over from everything else that we do. And it doesn’t. VCE [Year 11 & 12 secondary education] kids come in, their teachers “say access the Internet for your CAT [an assessment task]” I said, I said to one particular person, “Have you looked at any books so far?” No, our teacher said just on the Internet. We found the information in books. So because I’m not going to there [the Internet] first— I’ll go to it but I’ll do other things first. I’m probably doing other things first because I don’t have access to the Internet myself [from the Reference desk] because there are just so many people.

For Rosemary from the public library the Internet as a tool is very much a last port of call as even other library branches will be tried first, but for Francis at the State Library I get the feeling that it was a last resort more because of the queues of users and lack of Internet access at the Reference Desk.

I also detect in Tom’s answer a sense of guilt about how time-wasting the Internet as a tool can be now that for SLV staff it is no longer new. Time has to be divided between the plethora of information tools, of which the Internet is just one, that are available. Later in this chapter, when I look at how information appears in practice in a library context, time as an artefact that influences that shapes the interactions between information, practitioner and user will also reappear. However, it is worthwhile examining some background issues first.
5.8 Practice and the Shaping of Information

In the discussion of ANT (Section 2.8) I mentioned how it was trying to move from nouns to verbs and from notions to practices. In the same way I want to draw attention away from talk of defining information to looking for a more performative one. I want, if I can be so bold to paraphrase Latour’s words (1986, pp. 272–273), to move away from an ostensive definition of information whereby we try to discover properties typical of information—a task which will always be incomplete, to a performative definition whereby the actors through their practices and their interactions with others define what information is. Hence, before I do move on, I would like to draw your attention to some of the words and phrases that have been used by the interviewees in conjunction with the practice of information, when they talk of their work with information (Table 5.5). Emerging from this and the following discussion I hope to establish a clearer picture of how information is co-constructed in the world.

You may recall, that one of my research questions was ‘What is information?’. I struggled with the task of arriving at a ‘definition’ of information for a long time, and perhaps this is mirrored in the length of the discussion in Section 2.12, which by the way only partly reflects the volume of literature that attempts to define ‘information’. In that section I showed some of the myriad of ways researchers far more knowledgeable than myself have sought to define information and I concluded that:

... the particular meaning employed depends very much on the context in which it is used. Information may mean data, information may mean knowledge, and we find that knowledge may not have a secure meaning either. The one thing that emerges is that information obtains its meaning through a process of social construction. (p. 95)
Even as I was working on this section I kept trying to come up with a hard and fast, a
conclusive, definition for ‘information’. I found it very hard to talk about information as
something actors perform actions on or with and not really being able to grasp what it is.
I found myself continually thinking back to an article by Agre (1995) and published in
Information Technology and Libraries. In that he demonstrates how information is
something that circulates around an organization or a community and is far from the
easily definable thing that we might like it to be since it is shaped by a succession of
actors on its journey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phrase used by actors to talk about information</th>
<th>Page where mentioned</th>
<th>Performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I believe the Internet is simply a vital tool through which libraries can make information accessible.</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>Access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Internet is a reference tool.</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>Use a tool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We don’t have a terminal on our desk so we can get the access, so we can get the information.</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>Access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supply a URL.</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>Signal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>URL’s point to information that can broaden horizons.</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>Broaden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I practice harder to find information on the Internet.</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>Practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You had to find addresses.</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>Search</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Check out different sites.</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>Evaluate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Check out new information sources that come into the library.</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>Evaluate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play around with the Internet and these other sources.</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>Play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a professional, get to know stuff.</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>Learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We found information in books</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>Discovery</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 5.5: Some of the ways the respondents talked about performing information.*
Some of these practices we will encounter in the following pages. We have however encountered access before. In the previous chapter I discussed the way ‘access’ could be used as an organising principle allowing us to contemplate, through the plurality of meanings that access could adopt, the role of VICNET. I now wish to consider ‘access’ in relation to libraries and librarians and the roles they co-construct in the world. That is, what does ‘access’ mean in this context? Doing this will also reveal something about information practices.

One of core values contained in the Australian Libraries and Information Association (ALIA) Draft statement on core values is:

**Assurance of free and open access to recorded knowledge, information, and creative works.** We recognise unfettered access to ideas across time and across cultures is fundamental to society and civilisation (ALIA 2000, p. 25 emphasis in original).

VICNET is core business for the State Library of Victoria. ... Our core mission is to provide advanced information services to the people of Victoria (D. W. 1994). 88

VICNET does this by providing a “threelfold approach”, access, publishing and communication. Access is seen as adding value through providing the members of VICNET a way of connecting to the Internet, through a user friendly interface which caters for a wide range of users either text based or graphical, “providing menus and tools which point the user to the most useful resources around the world” and by providing
other Victorian public libraries with access to the catalogue and other facilities of the SLV (D. W. 1994).

Back in 1995, in answer to a question about VICNET’s policy on the type of material that it will publish, Gary Hardy replied:

**Gary [slv]**: VICNET is an adhocracy. Our broad policy is to reflect a wide range of community viewpoints. It is fundamentally the same as library collection policies. We would make a decision on the basis of the material submitted. We publish Mountain Cattlemen and the ACF, the Liberal party and the trade unions. 

**Francis [slv]**: I’m there to provide access to information. Whatever information that be, and whether it be pornography, how to make bombs, whatever.

Information is about access. Freedom of access to whatever library users require. Information is something you need access to, without access there is no information. Whatever the text is, it will just metaphorically sit on the shelf, gather dust or be eaten by silverfish. How do we know we have access? When we can retrieve the text as information. But we also see that information is providing menus, interfaces and pointers to resources as well as enabling the sharing of the SLV’s resources.

How does this relate to the other things that were mentioned such as publishing and communication? I would like to suggest that one of the aspects of access is that information must be published. It is also freedom for a VICNET user to publish their own views. So information is both publishing and access.

**Rosemary [sm]**: If it is quiet and at night usually it is quiet, or first thing in the morning. I mean we can go over and offer a bit more help. It depends on the time of the day. ... If they [the users] come in wanting to do their research and of course the time of the day [−] the machine is faster as well. That can really impact on [how much time we spend helping the users, how quickly the Internet responds].

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88 This document, a copy of which was obtained from the SLV, has the initials D.W. and the date 15.9.94 at the end of it. Presumably D.W. stands for Derek Whitehead who was at that time one of the major speakers for VICNET.

But, access is also about being able to provide help. Help can best be provided when the staff are not busy and as we can see that depends on the time of day. And the time of day also determines when the technology is most responsive (faster). When the machines are faster the staff are more able to help. So we are starting to see that in practice information is about access, time, assistance, other people, other technologies. All of these things construct a web of interactions—a sociotechnical web. I would also like you to recall that time of day can also affect the length of queues (page 234) and hence access.

**Time and Information**

So there is a temporal nature to information, time is a factor in the access to information. There can be another way in which time shapes this ‘stuff’ that is information.

**Francis[slv]:** And we don’t not use the Internet. I’ve found it very good for lots of reference enquiries. Especially things that change a lot like phone numbers and faxes and things that have currently been in the news that mightn’t of had time to be indexed. Is often a good thing like um a man was enquiring about the tyres on the car that broke the speed record a couple of months ago. Well we couldn’t find anything in any articles. I did a search found a home page for this car and it had all the details about the tyres. Now it would have been very difficult to find that information anywhere else but I found it on the Internet.

**Rosemary [sm]:** Like yesterday, uhm, the World Cup [soccer competition which was underway at the time of this interview], they were wanting the team and everything in the World Cup and there are no books you know just for the [completed] cup [competitions].

... and so one of our staff used the Internet and our workroom to locate some sites and printed that all off. It was actually for Flemington Branch.

... [T]hey asked, they had the enquiry, and so we researched the Internet and sent, oh, faxed off the information to them.

So, technology in its Internet guise, is very good for things that change rapidly or often (such as phone numbers) or where events that are currently occurring or have happened in recent time(s).

The example provided by Rosemary is also useful for illustrating the co-construction of information by both human and nonhuman actors. The information required was the names of the teams playing in the World Cup Soccer competition that was happening
around the time of our meeting. Another library had contacted the Sam Merrifield Library because they could not find this information. The staff-member at Sam Merrifield duly searched the Internet and found the required information. Notice how the technology is co-opted to help move the enquiry from one branch to another, but along the way the initial request is answered or reshaped by the actors at Sam Merrifield from an electronic document into a printed list that is sent by fax machine to the originating branch (See the LCSN depicted in Figure 5.23).

An additional thing to note is Rosemary’s comment about the way the Sam Merrifield library is often asked to help with reference enquiries.

**Rosemary[sm]:** ... I don’t know whether it’s because this branch is so reference focussed ... more technology focussed or something but we have a lot of other branches ... ring us up for the information.

*Figure 5.23: The sociotechnical construction of information*
Thus it seems that to provide or even find information in some forms requires that you have a focus. It could be that you are better at performing reference enquiries or happier with the technology. Enquiries are referred to others who are seen as being better able to find it. To be enrolled in this particular network might be about being seen by others to have more power over, more control of, more practice with the technology.

It is perhaps an unfortunate fact of the researcher’s life that there are things that remain to be followed through on. The statement above is pure conjecture, an extrapolation based on my interpretation of Rosemary’s words. To have followed up on that would have meant realising, at the time, its significance then obtaining ethics approval to include another site, arranging more interviews and interpreting the results. Thus extending outwards the network of researcher-library-staff-user-technology relationships.

I argued in Section 2.5 that sociotechnical networks not only have depth, that is the further we peer into them the more social and technical artefacts we encounter but that they also extend outwards, they have width as well. Think of the difference of the image in a camera’s viewfinder when you press the button marked ‘W’ which takes a wide-angle view as compared to the one marked ‘T’ which offers the telescopic view with a narrower field but with more detail.

Research is like that; judgements must be made, compromises arrived at as to the best snapshot to take at the time. And this was one of those moments.

Fred is a library user from North Melbourne with whom I had a long and wide-ranging interview. His comments will appear in subsequent sections.

**Fred [user]:** ... I did history when I was at uni and er, er, particularly interested in ancient history and there are a number of online information services that, that, er, are available so I will go in and have a look and see what’s there. ... To keep up with, yeah, what’s up to date in terms of latest information.

Information/time. This time there are several different ways they are intertwined. Firstly, information might need to be very up to date. Maybe it is requiring the latest possible phone numbers. Or it could be that accessing information published in certain forms; for example, as an online telephone book, saves the library staff time when they have to answer a reference enquiry about a telephone number. Or, as in Fred’s case, it is staying
current with discoveries and interpretations of events extending back into the mists of time.

The Semiotics of Information

Joan is a library assistant, who is largely responsible for the local history collection at a municipal library. When I interviewed her she was telling me about her latest project to try and find and expand the list of genealogical resources available to the library users.

Joan[sm]: ... So I have been using it [the Internet] for that. And making up a list so that then, well it’s promoting what’s available on the Internet for genealogy.

Information is gathered, organised and published. An Information Professional such as Joan, a librarian, may do this. Library users may do so as well.

It should also be mentioned that just through the process of selecting resources, the librarian confers authority on those sources and others may be disregarded as being uninteresting, not important or inaccurate. Information can be edited to suit a particular purpose—it is shaped by social and technical processes.

Fred regularly uses the public access Internet service there to check his email and web pages that are of interest to him. The URLs of these he has bookmarked for ease of recall.

Andrew: You’ve got a bookmark file that you bring with you?

Fred [user]: Yeah, yeah. I keep it written down, I’ve also got a disk I usually bring with me and I’ll just put the bookmark in and I’ll access the bookmark and ...

Andrew: Oh, right, yeah, so. A convenient way of carrying it? I mean it’s ...

Fred: Oh, absolutely. And if I happen to be a different computer I can just sit down, um, now I’ve got a friend whose got, um, Internet access so sometimes I go to his place sit down ... [and use the bookmark list stored on the disk].

Another thing that should be said is that information is also about standardisation (Bowker and Star 1998). Even signs erected in shopping centres (remember back to Section 4.3 where VICNET was likened to a shopping mall) use standard symbols to direct shoppers around the labyrinth that such places have become (Figure 5.24). URLs are addresses, signs, which point to information sources. They have a standard format. Bookmark files
saved from a web browser are saved in a standard format as well (Figure 5.25). Could it be said that without standards we have no information?

Figure 5.24: Signs inside Melbourne Central use a series of standardised symbols; for example telephone and lift. Their function is to provide the shopper with information about where they may locate sources of the goods they wish to buy. (Photo: July 1998)
Figure 5.25: A typical bookmark file; this one generated by the Firefox Web-browser (www.mozilla.org accessed 31 May 2005). It uses standard HTML and can be either imported into a similar browser’s bookmark folder or opened in a browser window to be displayed as a web page with active links to each site. Each URL web address points to an information source rather than saving the all the information in the file.

Portability, different storage media, computer files or digital bits that record pointers to other interesting sites; these too show how people enact information. Fred doesn’t need to print out everything he wants to read from the websites that interest him, he can just store the URL as a bookmark on a disk and transport it with him to other computers or use it on his return to the library. The backpackers encountered earlier in this chapter (page 222) do similar things with email addresses, but they tended to use diaries or scraps of paper. Again, the LCSN in Figure 5.26 shows the various connections between the actors that enable this to happen. For simplicity, I have not included such standards bodies as the W3C who publish recommendations on the correct syntax and usage for hypertext markup language (HTML) that the bookmark files use (Figure 5.25).
Figure 5.26: Bookmarks and information

**Information Contextualities**

Information creation and use would appear to be very driven by context. Consider these examples.

**Joan [sm]:** Well, um, we’ve got in the Local History room, we’ve really only got the records for Victoria, we don’t have anything that’s an international basis. So, I suppose I was looking at getting the international sites. And interstate, Australia wide and overseas.

**Joan:** I found this “Cindy’s” um site it looks, it’s quite good because um well I was using the Port Philip Libraries [another group of libraries in a different area of Melbourne], sort of what they had for their world wide base for genealogy resources as a guide. Well like they had the Jewish, well that would be no use here, we’ve got a big Italian population so I found quite a lot of sites there.

**Andrew:** Yes, right.
Joan: But then, I thought, Greek as well because of the big Greek population here but I haven’t been able to find a Greek site yet but then I’ll work on that.

Andrew: So you used another Library’s guide as a starting point?

Joan: Just as a starting point.

This illustrates how important context is in the way information is constructed in everyday life. It again revolves around genealogy, the Internet, organising and the semiotic nature this “stuff” we call information.

Information appears in its semiotic guise here. It also revealed its portable nature. Joan used a list compiled by another library organization as a starting point for her list of family history sites. She reveals to us that some of her initial pointers (which contained details of Jewish family history sites) would be of little use to the predominately Greek and Italian population that comes into the library where she works. Figure 5.27 shows how the actors work together to create a brochure containing information for those residents of the Moonee Ponds area of Melbourne who are interested in tracing their family history.

Information exists in a context. It is brought into being and understood within that context.

Figure 5.27: One way of creating new information.

Josephine [slv]: ... Once I was looking for an aboriginal word. I went to all our aboriginal word sources which you can imagine, I mean there are some good ones here. Couldn’t find
it and typed it in and found on it an Internet site. You know so if you are looking for something really specific you can often find it [on the Internet].

But information about older cultures than that of the white European settlers of Australia finds its way onto that latest means of information presentation—the Internet. So what is information here but the obscure, the difficult to find, the thing that is not published in books available in the library—something that can be found on the Internet. The context here can be thought of as those first Australians and their language that is not easy to find published in books. However more recent technologies were able to assist in the search for meaning. Information may be obscure or very current, the Internet as a tool can be enrolled to assist in locating the answer to problems and we have seen that librarians on the reference desk are keen to be seen as professionals and employ the best tool for the job.

5.9 Summary and Conclusion

In my efforts to paint a picture of the co-construction of the Internet in libraries I have covered much ground and uncovered many actors both human and nonhuman. Our journey of deconstruction began outside the State Library, at the magnificent, and stately portico that dominates the corner of Latrobe and Swanston streets. The very epitome of classical architecture that houses some very recent technology indeed and a rather different type of library user from the days of yore. Further on in the trip through the physical space of the bricks and mortar library and over two years in time—from late 1997 to the end of 1999—we encountered numerous events.

We have seen struggles to form alliances; reference staff feeling frustrated, angry and as though things were becoming unstuck—traditional alliances broken—as far as the type of work they were trained for, like to do, enjoy doing, is concerned. We have encountered long queues, new types of users (ones who wished to reshape the traditional role of the State Library of Victoria into something more immediately relevant to their own needs), changes in the methods used to gain access to the facilities offered by the library, new ways of publishing and accessing information, new practices that help to shape
information and an additional tool appended to the reference librarian’s already burgeoning information retrieval toolkit.

It would be far too easy to attribute these changes (physical, temporal, emotional) to the introduction of new technology. To say, ‘Yes, the Internet was placed in the SLV and all of these things happened’. Blame the fights, the frustration, the new ways of working on the technology alone. Remove these fancy ICTs and the staff can get back to carrying out their work the way they used to. Good idea? Probably not, as we have already seen these same ICTs can be enrolled to enhance the pride and professional image of the very staff who have experienced other less positive feelings about the technology.

Throughout this thesis and, especially in this chapter I have argued that a more holistic approach needs to be taken if we are to understand the myriad of ways social and technical artefacts construct their various roles. I have advocated that this is best done by viewing the various artefacts as co-constructing the multitude of configurations encountered. It is this process of mutual shaping, the coalescence of artefacts that enables the system to perform in various ways. But, it should not be viewed as something that is all ‘sunshine and roses’ where the artefacts joyfully shake hands and agree to cooperate rather, it is a process of overcoming resistance, persuading others that it is in their best interest to join the network, it is accepting that there will be ambiguity such as when the reference desk staff say “officially we can’t let you use email” but there is no official text that states this extant in 1997, 1998 or 1999. In years to come this official statement may exist.

The existence of these ambiguities brings me to yet another aspect of illustrated in the data here. That is, the very openness of the sociotechnical system being explored. The discussion in Section 2.3 was included because I perceived early on (in 1995, pre this research) that the difficulty of this undertaking would be finding a way to build in the
The Library and the Internet Circa 1997-9

Notion that the very system being studied was volatile, changeable and uncertain. This is amply demonstrated in Section 5.6 where we saw that numerous changes were made to the booking procedures for the PAI; the physical space where bookings occurred moved several times; new staff were employed to make the bookings thus relieving the staff on the reference desk; even small booking slips to be completed with details of the booking time and terminal number as well as reminders of the conditions of use were introduced. By the end of 1999 it was possible to say that some stability had been reached in this system, but even more changes were afoot.

The LCSN depicted in Figure 5.28 is a combination of Figure 5.12 and Figure 5.22. It shows just how complex the process of reaching a concord, a system of controls that allow staff a greater degree of work satisfaction and less anxiety, yet allowing the Internet users which, you will recall, comprised mainly backpackers access to the PAI facilities can be. And of course it will also enable users with “genuine research enquiries” in the librarians’ eyes to return to the queues at the reference desk.

Figure 5.28: Combined booking procedure

Chapter 5
Why did the library managers wish to do this? Because, as we have seen above, they believed that, amongst other things, the library needed to change its image, to appear ready for the 21st century. Internet access had to be made available in the library for the very same reasons that VICNET was constructed (See Chapter 4).

If Figure 5.28 represented the complex alliances formed just to create a booking procedure, then you might be forgiven for regarding Figure 5.29 as representing total chaos. Yet, this messy network is one way of representing the relationships between the various artefacts involved in the use of email by backpackers who visit the SLV.

Figure 5.29: Messiness prevails! The LCSN depicts some of the myriad of relationships between human and nonhuman actors when they co combine provide an email service that backpackers use at the SLV and elsewhere.
And, it is not even a complete representation! It is a combination of part of Figure 5.10, Figure 5.14, Figure 5.15 and Figure 5.17 with some additional relationships thrown in for good measure—namely those about the advertisements that email service providers append to an email message so that they can persuade (in the ANT sense) other companies to help pay for the service.

There are many other actors that could have been included, such as the different protocols (for instance POP3, IMAP, HTML, TCP/IP and http) that actually allow computers, digital networks and email texts to flow from sender to receiver (Krol 1994; Wenn 2002). I mention this just to remind the reader that the stories told here cannot and should not be taken as being complete in themselves. Even a holistic approach to interpretation and representation must have its compromises.

Finally, Figure 5.30 which combines Figure 5.23 and Figure 5.28 presents some of the ways that librarians, ICTs, local communities and their cultural characteristics shape the practices involved in dealing with information. Some of the practices illustrated in that figure are filtering, compiling, understanding the requirements of the local users, constructing lists that contain pointers such as URLs that the genealogical researcher uses in combination with a web-browser, internet access and all that entails to retrieve information. Libraries can use their existing alliances with each other to seek help to answer requests for information from each other’s users.

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Again, as I stated in Section 4.6, these networks are not fixed or stable. For example, the relationships formed between the Sam Merrifield and Port Philip libraries (page 259) in the particular configuration illustrated did not exist after the exchange of information. Whilst this may seem rather obvious if not trivial then I remind you of the important role the Mornington Peninsula Library Service played in the spread and popularisation of VICNET (Section 4.4) and yet the website had vanished by 2004.

In the next chapter, you will have a chance to read about how some of the networks delineated in this chapter have altered. A comparison of the situation as it existed in the years 1997-9 with that found in 2005 will allow us to see how open, and indeterminate the system is.
Chapter 6  The Current Situation (2004-2005)

We write a very urgent letter,
‘Dear Miss Theroux, we hope your better.
Mr Boycott is a dunce,
Please come back to school at once.’

The very next day at half-past two,
Miss Prue turns up in her blue Subaru.
‘What a to-do,’ says Prue Theroux.
She goes inside to Mr Boycott,
Whose head looks like a bloodshot teapot,
Removes his hair with great aplomb,
And puts in another CD ROM.

Gillian Rubinstein & David Mackintosh, Prue Theroux: the cool librarian

After a hiatus of over five years, during which I had struggled with this thesis
and made infrequent visits to the State Library, none I might add for the
purposes of data collection, I somewhat hesitantly returned to gain a picture
of the current situation of the Internet at the State Library of Victoria. Thus adding a
longitudinal component to this study.

The purpose of this chapter, which could almost be seen as an epilogue, is to describe
what I found on that return visit. The format taken is very similar to the last chapter, in
that I retrace the steps of my 1998 walk from the forecourt of the SLV into the
Trescowthick Information Centre (TIC) where the Public Access Internet (PAI) was
situated sharing with you what I found and comparing the current situation with my
record of things (as described in Chapter 5) all those years ago. Again, I recorded the use
to which people were putting the PAI area as I reported in Section 5.3 and employ some
descriptive statistics to compare the past and recent findings. (The dates of these

Page 267.