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Minister for Broadband, Communications and the
Digital Economy**

**Deputy Leader of the Government
in the Senate**

**Address to ALIA Information Online
Conference and Exhibition**

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15 mins

Thank you and good morning everyone.

It is a pleasure to be here, for the opening of the ALIA Information Online Conference and Exhibition.

This is my first official speaking engagement for the new year, and I extend to all of you my very best wishes for 2009.

I would like to start this morning by acknowledging the tremendous work undertaken by the Australian Library and Information Association.

This organisation plays an important role, as custodian for quality library and information services in this country.

This is vital work that links directly with national efforts to improve literacy, access to information and digital engagement across the community.

Promoting the free flow of information and ideas is a core aim of ALIA, and this goes to the heart of the education process and democracy we enjoy in Australia.

ALIA also undertakes valuable work improving the services of library and information agencies, ensuring they are meeting the needs of the community and keeping pace with technological change.

Additionally, ALIA plays an important role representing the interests of its members to government, other organisations and the community.

This is vital work that benefits the sector and the community at large, and it should not go unrecognised.

I understand that the ALIA has attracted some 1200 delegates, from around the Asia Pacific region, to this year's conference.

This is clear testament to its standing in the library and information sector, here in Australia and throughout the region.

I would like to extend a warm welcome to all international visitors here today.

The theme of this year's conference also demonstrates, how ALIA is ensuring this sector is helping to set the agenda when it comes to information management and access.

Clearly, we are now living in a highly connected, online world.

Schools, universities, businesses, government agencies and other organisations, are increasingly using the internet to interact both with each other, and more broadly - with the public.

They are placing increasing amounts – at a staggering rate – of information, online.

A recent IDC report noted that, in 2007, for the first time, the amount of digital information created, captured and replicated exceeded the world's available storage space.

It forecast that by 2011, almost half of all digital information will not have a permanent home.

This forecast alone highlights the vital role that the information management sector will play in our connected future.

The theme of today's conference – 'Information Online' – links directly with the ambitions of the Rudd Government.

The Government understands the necessity to develop Australia's digital economy.

This economy, supported by the use of digital technologies and online information across all sectors, will underpin our future national economic and social prosperity.

To some extent the digital economy already exists, however action is required to ensure that all Australians gain maximum benefit.

It is now 71 years since ALIA was established as the Australian Institute of Librarians, in 1937.

In that time, of course, much has changed.

For example, in 1937, most texts were available in book format only, from specialist bookshops and libraries.

Today, this same text is available in a massively increased number of formats via a myriad of channels, including the internet.

The online world also provides a wealth of additional material and interactive features to embellish the reading experience – author biographies, reader forums and historical studies to name just a few.

Additionally in the online world – anyone can be a published author.

This is creating new challenges in ensuring people have the media literacy skills to make judgments about what they are reading.

It is vital that Australians of all ages are media literate and that they have the skills and knowledge to navigate a complex and evolving media landscape.

They need to be able to:

- understand message meaning and context;

- critically analyse;
- use a range of media; and
- create media themselves using emerging platforms.

In today's world, 'media literacy' is to be literate in all facets of modern media, including those in the burgeoning online environment.

Around the world, digital technologies are revolutionising the way people are able to access and utilise information.

This is certainly the case in Australia, where more than 73% of households now have internet access.

Those who don't have access at home often rely on services available in places such as their local library.

And while broadband speeds and pricing may be variable, there are strong signals that Australians see an inherent value in online information.

According to a recent Roy Morgan survey for the Australian Communications and Media Authority, our citizens are becoming increasingly heavy internet users.

They are also using the internet for an increasing range of activities.

Email and banking still dominate, however:

- 72% of internet users access online news;
- 62% use online maps;
- 36% subscribe to email newsletters;
- 30% access medical and health information sites;
- 27% interact with government online; and
- 24% use the internet to seek local community information.

A phenomenon in recent times has been the rise of social networking.

In the ACMA survey, 26% of internet users said they were engaged in online social networking through sites such as MySpace, Facebook and Linked In.

16% said they read blogs, 13% were engaged in online forums and 12% in chat groups.

All this highlights the fact that the internet is now a significant social medium.

It is driving changes in media consumption and social interaction, and it will continue to do so.

Like ALIA, the Rudd Government is keenly tuned to these changes and is now looking at ways to utilise online tools to engage with the community.

Last month, a team at the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy conducted the first ever blog by an Australian Government Department.

This blog was part of an ongoing Government trial of online consultation that aims to improve the processes for e-government in Australia.

This is no small challenge and represents a significant change in thinking from the way Governments have previously engaged with the public.

Given the enthusiastic uptake of online tools like blogging, it makes sense for Government to experiment with these new methods of engagement.

This is particularly the case on a vital topic such as the future of our digital economy, where we are preparing a

roadmap to ensure we make the most of our investments and ensure all Australians can benefit.

In December I released a consultation draft for the *Digital Economy Future Directions Paper*.

The draft follows discussions with industry, business and other stakeholders throughout 2008, including a series of workshops and a forum in September.

It identifies the themes and suggestions to drive Australia's digital economy that were raised through our initial consultations.

This includes key considerations around digital capabilities, confidence and content.

It aims to provide a guide for Government, businesses and innovators, to:

- develop new business models and services;
- address ongoing social and economic challenges;
- build skills and capabilities for effective participation in the digital economy;
- deliver productivity and social benefits; and
- improve living standards.

It also considers emerging issues and trends in the digital economy.

It canvasses our ability to gain the economic and social benefits from the Government's investments, such as the \$4.7 billion National Broadband Network.

One key area of discussion to emerge from our consultations has been open access to public sector information.

This was keenly raised by several members of the online information sector, who see benefits in merging public sector information with emerging digital applications.

A considerable amount of information is already available to the public via current copyright and freedom of information provisions.

However, the internet and interactive online technologies are increasing the potential for economic and socially-valuable adaptation of information created by governments.

This information may include Government produced data - such as Australian Bureau of Statistics and geospatial data - and copyright protected materials - such as reports and other documentation.

It can also include materials that result from publicly-funded cultural, educational and scientific activities.

The Government recognizes, that open access to certain categories of Public Sector Information, can achieve economic benefits and social well-being.

We are therefore working to scope policy development for a national approach to open access.

This is a whole of Government issue and so involves the input of several departments and agencies.

It will also require engagement with states and territories, and will need to include analysis of cost benefits and financial implications, legal frameworks and implementation processes.

These are all questions being asked in our consultation draft and I anticipate thoughtful response from industry and other stakeholders working in the digital content field.

I encourage ALIA put forward its views on this important topic.

The Government has a clear goal to maximise the participation of Australian businesses and individuals in the digital economy.

It is therefore important, that the Government and industry collaborate, to ensure that people are equally confident to interact, and engage via the internet, as they are offline.

Consumers with digital confidence will increasingly find information online, communicate and interact via the internet and shop electronically.

Businesses that have digital confidence will expand their online service offerings.

The question we need to ask is 'how we can all work together to inspire online confidence?'

We know that ALIA shares this concern and we are pleased that ALIA CEO, Sue Hutley, sits on the Government's Consultative Working Group on cyber-safety.

We appreciate the input you provide.

To give Australian households the necessary confidence, the Government is working to promote an online civil society through its \$125.8 million Cyber-Safety Plan.

This contains a comprehensive set of measures to combat online threats and help parents and educators protect children from inappropriate material.

It includes funding for:

- education and information measures;
- law enforcement;
- resources such as helplines and websites;
- ISP-level content filtering;
- consultative arrangements with industry, child protection bodies and children; and

- further research to identify possible areas for further action.

One element of this program is the Government's proposal to introduce ISP-level internet filtering.

This proposal has attracted significant debate, and I can assure everyone who is participating in this debate, that the Government is taking an evidence-based approach to implementing its cyber-safety policy.

The 2007 ALIA survey of 548 public libraries on filtering expressed some concerns about internet content filtering.

These concerns rested on technical aspects, as well as freedom of speech arguments.

The same report also acknowledged that the internet is a vehicle for potential threats to library users - children in particular.

I applaud the work public libraries are doing in the area of cyber-safety through internet-use policies, staff supervision, parental consent to approve internet access

rights and the availability of information and training within libraries.

These are all important measures to ensure the safety and confidence of library users in the online environment.

But as public libraries provide internet access in a public space, funded by public money, the role of Government in ensuring broader public safety is an important one that needs to be considered.

As I mentioned earlier, concerns with ISP level filtering seem to focus on two aspects – technical issues and freedom of speech.

The Government understands that the potential extent of ISP filtering is inherently related to the technical capabilities of filtering solutions.

International experience suggests that index-based filtering of a central blacklist is technically feasible.

Broader, dynamic analysis filtering of internet content, on the other hand, has raised some issues in the past.

The Government is testing the effectiveness of these technical solutions in a live pilot trial.

The results of this trial will inform the Government's approach to this issue.

Several technical claims have been made about ISP filtering – including that it will slow down the internet or result in over-blocking of content.

Let's put those claims to the test.

And while we acknowledge there are technical issues to be tested, the Government does not view this debate as an argument about freedom of speech.

Freedom of speech is fundamentally important in a democratic society and there has never been any suggestion that the Australian Government would seek to block political content.

In this context, claims that the Government's policy is analogous to the approach taken by countries such as Iran, China and Saudi Arabia are not justified.

Australian society has always accepted that there is some material which is not acceptable, particularly for children.

That is why we have the National Classification Scheme.

Like internet content, publications, films and video games are subject to regulation.

Libraries well know that there is regulation under existing Commonwealth, State and Territory legislation which makes it an offence to distribute certain material.

These laws currently exist and, as the Classification Act states, a publication will be considered for classification based on, and I quote: “the standards of morality, decency and propriety generally accepted by reasonable adults.”

Just as libraries operate under policies which ensure certain material is not taken from the library, and that certain material is not accessed by children, the internet also requires regulation.

Australian ISPs are already subject to regulation that prohibits the hosting of certain material based upon the National Classification Scheme.

For many years, ACMA has had the power to issue a 'take-down' notice requiring that prohibited content hosted in Australia be removed from the internet.

But the internet has no borders, and Australians have far greater access to material than that hosted in Australia.

What the Government is examining is how technology can assist in filtering internationally-hosted content that is not subject to this take-down notice.

We want to ensure that the internet complies with the laws as they currently apply to content – whether it be a publication, a film, a video game or online.

This is a matter of genuine importance as we endeavour to foster confidence online and develop our digital economy.

As I have mentioned, the *Digital Economy Future Directions Paper* will provide a roadmap for how government and industry can work together to maximise our participation in the digital economy.

This necessarily includes considerations around online confidence.

It also includes:

- access to public sector information;
- developing our national digital skills base;
- ensuring a flexible regulatory environment;
- using digital technologies to benefit the environment;
- and
- a range of other important topics.

This roadmap will ensure that Australia is ready, to take advantage of the economic and social benefits made possible in the digital economy.

We will also be well-positioned to utilise our investments for productivity and improve our international standing.

The library and information industry has a strong part to play in this future and we welcome your input into the consultation paper.

I again congratulate ALIA for organising the Information Online Conference and Exhibition.

It is my pleasure to officially declare ALIA's 14th Exhibition and Conference open.

Thank you.