IT Officer’s Report

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I’ve taken a slightly different approach to my report. It will provide a detailed explanation of the email issues experienced this year, along with some recommendations as to how ALSA can safeguard itself against any further issues. I will implement these recommendations (and any other’s that come out of Council) over the remainder of my term.

**Background and detailed summary of events**

The issue with the ALSA emails was caused by a number of factors, each of which compounded the problem.

ALSA has two ‘domains’, essentially internet addresses – alsa.net.au and alsa.asn.au. We use the first for our website and the second for our emails. These domain names have to be ‘registered’ by a company.

For these domains to actually ‘hold’ anything they must be ‘hosted’ – a company provides space on a server for files to be uploaded, etc.

Currently, alsa.net.au is hosted through squarespace, the content manager I use to administer the website. This was setup by Connor last year, moving it from another company called Netregistry. Our email system however was set up through another company called mycloudhost, unbeknown to myself and I believe Connor.

The renewal for mycloudhost came up in February this year. It was my understanding after handover discussions with Connor, that this be left to lapse, as we had no services provided by them. However, once the account became overdue it did however have an effect on our email system (through alsa.asn.au) which stopped working. This result came about because the alsa.asn.au domain name, utilised the name servers of mycloudhost. Name servers are computers that translates domain names to IP addresses (a unique number given to a device in a network – in this case our hosting company’s server).

I was also in the US, after completing an internship, and had very little internet during this time. Upon calling mycloudhost, I was assured that paying the account fees plus an additional recovery fee, would rectify the situation. After a few days monitoring the system without success, I contacted Insane Technologies. It then became apparent that there was nothing they had to ‘recover’. The alsa.asn.au domain used the mycloudhost name servers but any files that were hosted, were with its separate hosting company ConnectWest (a subsidiary of iiNet). This was most likely a result of a previous IT Officer splitting the hosting of emails from the main registration of the website.

I was advised my Insane Technologies to establish emails under the alsa.net.au domain and make alsa.asn.au an alias of these new emails. I was told this would also forward any messages in the server, but not actually ‘received’ to their respective inboxes. To do this I had to contact Connect West and have them change nameservers and MX (Mail Exchanger) records. Through completing a WHOIS search (basically a search that reveals the company who registered it and the owner of the domain, along with the current hosting company), I also discovered that the email to reset our passwords had been changed without our permission. In any case, as the system was not working, we wouldn’t have been able to reset passwords the regular way (like any other ‘forgotten password’), as my account would not have received any emails.

The process therefore required that ALSA prove its ownership of the domain and that the current Committee had the authority to act for ALSA. This required a search for emailed invoices (which were sent via iiNet and not ConnectWest) and other information buried in emails sent years ago (complicated by the fact that passwords had been changed numerous times and the website had been migrated from a number of hosts). It also required that Council minutes be sent, Paul sign a number of documents and provide his driver’s license. This all took some time to complete.

While this was occurring, I decided to set up emails under the alsa.net.au domain and link it to the alsa.asn.au gmail system. This allowed access to the drive and contacts. This also took some time as I had to call all Committee members and walk them through the process of linking these to their existing gmail inboxes. Setting up email lists proved to be difficult however, and there still continues to be issues with these lists, the main being ‘moderation’ (sometimes the list asks for approval to send, sometimes it does not) I have spent a lot of time looking at how to fix this, with limited success.

Unfortunately, once the nameserver and MX information was changed, it became clear that the emails sent to the asn.au servers while the issue was ongoing, would not be forwarded to their respective accounts. While this is certainly disappointing after being told by Insane Technologies that this would not be the case, the issue could simply not drag on any further, as it had caused serious damage to the ALSA Committee and the wider Association.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

This was an incredibly complex issue that took an unacceptable amount of time to fix. I am happy to take some of the blame for the delay, but I had university commitments to attend to, as we all do. I had missed the first week of semester due to my internship in the US, and could not devote hours to the issue.

Some of the delay was caused by the assurance that emails left on the server would be forwarded. This is why I undertook the process of establishing new email addresses and setting up the alias system. I could have severed the connection and gone ‘reset’ the hosting, however this would have left no chance to recover emails. In the end, it did not matter anyway.

Otherwise, the nature of the Committee has also led to this occurring. Having IT Officers serve one year terms has contributed to the absolute mess of hosting companies, with different services being run between different companies with illogical splits between them. It is what it is however, and the nature of the ALSA Committee cannot be changed. A strong recommendation from me however, would be that the IT Officer keeps a register of all companies that we deal with, detailing their service, renewal dates, usernames and passwords. This can then be passed on during handover. This would go a long way to making sure an issue of this kind will not occur again.

Broadly, ALSA should also establish another site where files and backed up (a DropBox or other cloud based solution) to protect the Google Drive, if another issue does occur. The IT Officer would be charged with backing up the Google drive to this location at regular intervals (determined by the Committee or perhaps Council) or at any other time the Committee thinks fit. I would even go as far to suggest that an external hard drive be purchased, with the IT Officer having the responsibility of backing up this drive from the cloud. Yes, this adds some redundancy, but with the fall in price of external hard drives this would make it highly unlikely that ALSA would ever lose access to its files.