

Upgrading the Network's Web Hosting Service

Like you I was alarmed when our web-hosting network failed on around 18 May this year.

Problems had occurred in the past and the U3A Network NSW Committee recognised that a long term solution had to be researched and, if feasible, implemented. Your Management Committee resolved on 5 June 2020 to meet the cost of the scoped upgrade. The decision to proceed was made on 6 July and a contractor was engaged soon afterwards. I commend the report below to you, the members of U3As in NSW, and to other interested parties. It covers some of the history, the reasons and it highlights the Committee's desire to provide an improved and more secure service to our member web-hosting users.

At this time I am pleased to inform you that the project is meeting our objectives and is heading into its final phase, that is, all 50 or so websites will be hosted in a much improved server environment.

*Laurene Mulcahy,
President*

Why do this?

The network of websites was established in 2007, with the state website being established nsw.u3anet.org.au, and it grew progressively in numbers until it reached around 50 member U3A sites in 2012 and it has been pretty steady at that number for the last 8 or so years.

Hindsight can be wonderful, however, it is not available when plans are being made. Retirees running a group of websites is risky as the requisite technical knowledge and certainty of fallback is a key attribute of making such a system reliable. Ern Hollebhone served in the role for around 8 years until 2016 and then Bert de Hosson took on the role for a couple of years. A younger volunteer, Elena Scifleet, took on the role for the period late 2017 to early 2019. The services of Ern, Bert and Elena are acknowledged and valued.

The hindsight aspect relates to the supervision of a largish group of websites that requires a person or an organisation with current industry knowledge and experience. Our U3A cohort will rarely have one person with such skills and better still having a second person as a contingency replacement, should the need arise.

The revamp of the web-hosting is binary, it involves the restructuring of about 75% of the sites into what is called a WordPress **Multisite**

arrangement - a setup that has a higher level of ongoing professional supervision, than the original configuration, and allows the editing and presentation of content in much the same way as previously. smoother succession Further, all of these websites will effectively deliver their content to screen sizes ranging from a smartphone through to a personal computer.

Around 25% of our member U3A website users have elected to stay with what we are calling **Independent** sites. With this arrangement the website holder has a higher responsibility for website maintenance as well as the usual content creation and editing.

We believe our process has been very member U3A friendly with each site transitioned to Multisite being put into a 'test' mode to allow the U3A to log-in with a view to ensuring that their needs were being addressed by the change and to experiment with some of the site set up options. Only one of the 36 that went into test mode decided not to proceed while another two had complex individual site options that could not be satisfied. The option for an Independent site to transition to Multisite will remain available.

In June 2020, based upon a recommendation from Sydney U3A the Network engaged a Consultant to advise on our web-hosting set up and then after assessment and negotiation the Network resolved to proceed with the process of an upgrade. This action is both costly and necessary and it will be born by drawing from the Network's reserves.

Aside from the need for professional supervision of the system, over the years, a number of network 'loss of service events occurred. In February 2018 and in May 2020 major failures of our service occurred, with the recent incident making action by the Committee mandatory.

The word 'upgrade' is broad brush, while the project that was scoped was to increase the security and reliability of our hosted group of member U3A websites together with the embedding of an additional long-term supervisory oversight of our system.

The tally, as the transition is nearing completion, is 27 'moved' and 8 pending (total 35) for Multisite and 11 remaining as Independent.

Most if not all website visitors will see no obvious difference in the delivery of information between the old configuration and the new Multisites and the continuing Independent sites.

Service Hosting Costs

Commercial hosting from reliable suppliers starts at around \$15 per month and there are extras that may be necessary. The Network's commitment to supply an appropriate service to member U3As for \$50 per annum for many years has been, in comparison to the market, exceeding good value.

The Network has budgeted a charge of \$70 for 2021 for the provision of hosting of a member U3A's site in both types of site configuration.

The Network has clearly identified that, in the future, ongoing professional support must underpin the delivery of website-hosting to its members. Further this supervision will oversight the official sites used by U3A Network NSW Inc. as well. We will have professional server level supervision that will include liaison with our web-hosting provider with ongoing site level management for the group member U3As under the Multisite arrangement. Independent site users will be obligated to maintain their site in what is the conventional WordPress manner. This is much the same as what the Network has expected from site holders since its inception. Independent site holders will be given the option to contract with our website consultant for a contingency service should the need arise. Due to the nature of server level problems, assistance will only be provided by [Webhive](#), the Network's consultant as a necessary means of ensuring integrity of our server.

Some Network History

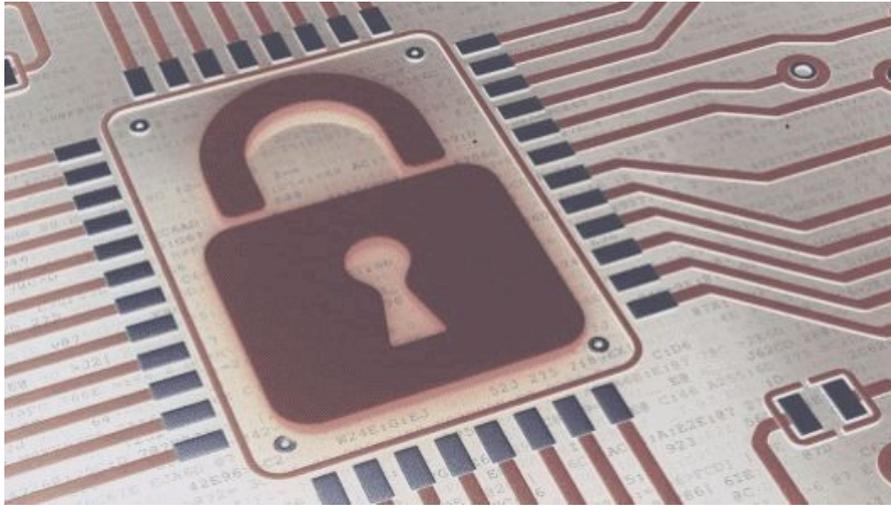
The whole web-hosting group of sites was looked after for around 8 years by the above-mentioned Ern Hollebhone of Manning River U3A.

In February 2016, Ern documented his thoughts for the U3A Network NSW Committee:

“My current concern is the cavalier attitude of some webmasters to their responsibility to upgrade their websites when called upon. WordPress occasionally calls upon webmasters to perform an upgrade to their installations. This can concern the WordPress installation itself, themes and/or plugins. The process is very simple and very safe. The upgrades contain security fixes for known weaknesses and are essential for the running of the domain. It is possible that outsiders can hack into these weaknesses and play havoc with the local website and, alarmingly, the entire domain – as was the case in one instance in 2015. The entire domain can crash, leaving the Network Administrator with the task of picking up the pieces and setting things up again – no mean task.

When WordPress calls upon local administrators to upgrade their sites, I reinforce that call and issue another to the entire domain, asking that I be informed when it is done. This normally results in about 50% immediate response, following which I call for cooperation from the remainder. Another 50% response. After that I approach individual webmasters, hopefully nagging them into cooperation. All this takes time; time enough for a hacker to attack the domain.”

Ern further explored methods of 'calling out' those member U3As who were recalcitrant in performing maintenance on their website. His reported thoughts are worrying. Systems have improved in recent years, however, the risks have become more complex and more persistent as some are hellbent on pursuing their mischievous goals.



Website Security

A key to our Network's approach to security has been the ongoing adoption of a WordPress plugin, that is named **Wordfence**. Wordfence is a highly acclaimed means of monitoring all sorts of mischief that can cause technical and privacy problems on one targeted website or, in an extreme situation, to all of our hosted websites. Wordfence is somewhat akin to a comprehensive insurance policy on your motor vehicle. See the Network's website for more advice on [Cyber Security](#).

An example, in May 2020 Wordfence alerted the Network of a series of hacking attacks (around 2500 occurred and were unsuccessful) against nsw.u3anet.org.au. The received warning message led to our action in blocking the source IP addresses (either by site or by country) and adjusting our alert settings. The attack was apparently random and was an evidence of our need to be diligent and responsive to the warnings from Wordfence.

Non-website U3As

The Network recognises that websites are the best medium available to both promote and to be seen. A few of our member U3As aren't using the web and the Network has devised a 'small' U3A site option. Essentially it will be a "*here we are*" presence that will allow the U3A to tell their community and the wider world a little about their group and how to get in contact with the U3A. The site will be somewhat like a brochure placed on-line. Support with content placement on the website is planned on an occasional service basis. The website will be supplied at a discounted cost to U3As that can make use of this service. Leeton U3A is the first to take-on this option.

For further enquiries about the above please Email Phil Warren at u3answ.website@gmail.com or, to learn more, visit this website: <https://tutorial.u3anet.org.au/>