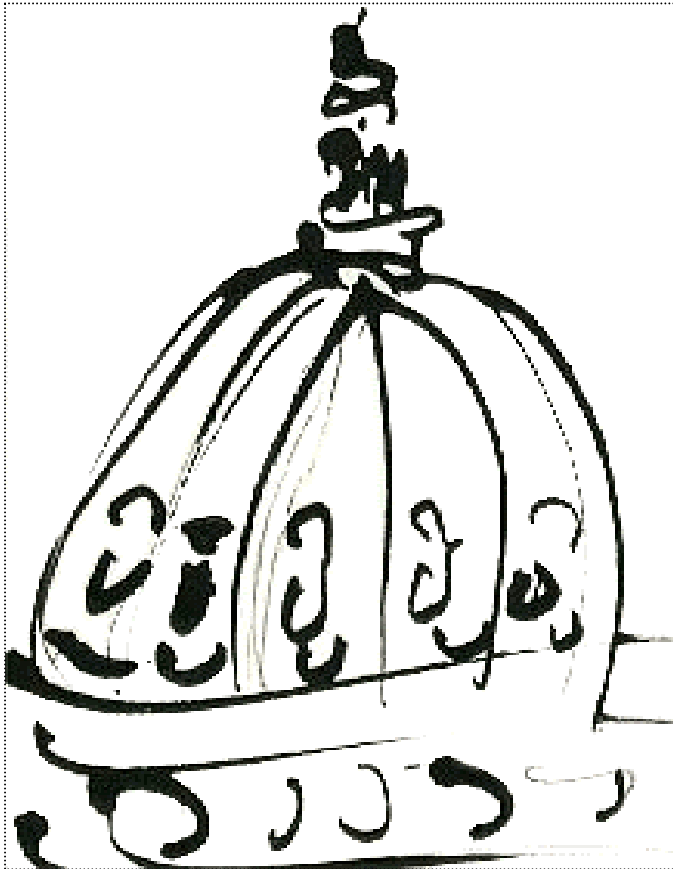Information Use Management and Policy Institute

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Public Libraries and the Internet 2006: Study Results and Findings

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents national and state data from the *2006 Public Libraries and the Internet* survey and site visits funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the American Library Association. The primary goal of the study is to provide current information that describes public library activities in the networked environment. This information has importance not only to the public library community, but also to policymakers at local, state, and federal levels; manufacturers of information and communication technologies; library funding agencies; and the communities served by public libraries. This report summarizes findings at both the library outlet level and the system level for all questions on the survey.[1]

The 2006 *Public Libraries and the Internet* study collected data through two integrated approaches: 1) a national survey of public library Internet connectivity, use, services, involvement, and sustainability issues; and 2) a case site component which sought to identify successfully networked public libraries and how these libraries meet and resolve the challenges with maintaining, enhancing, and continually moving forward their networked services and resources. The survey received 4,818 responses for a 69.0% response rate. The cases involved site-visits, focus groups, and interviews at more than 30 libraries in five states. The study continues national surveys of public libraries and the Internet conducted by the authors since 1994.[2]

Key Findings

Libraries as Community Public Access Computing and Internet Access Points

Public libraries continue to provide important public access computing and Internet access in their communities:

- 98.9% of public library branches are connected to the Internet.
- 98.4% of connected public library branches offer public Internet access.
- 36.7% of public library branches offer wireless Internet access, up from 17.9% in 2004.
- 100% of high poverty branches—those with greater than 40% poverty in the service area—are connected to the Internet and offer public Internet access.
- Public library branches have an average of 10.7 public access computers, with rural libraries having an average of 7.1 workstations and urban libraries having an average of 17.9 workstations.

Continued Improvements

Public libraries continue to enhance their public access computing and Internet access services:

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[1] The term "outlet" refers to a public library facility (e.g., main branch or branch). The term may also refer to bookmobiles, but this study excluded bookmobiles. A library "system" comprises all facilities (i.e., main branch and all branches).

[2] Information and reports regarding the various studies is available at: http://www.ii.fsu.edu/plinternet.

- In 2006, 34.4% of connected public library branches have connection speeds of 769kbps-1.5mbps compared to 27.4% in 2004.
- In 2006, 28.9% have connection speeds of greater than 1.5mbps compared to 20.3% in 2004.
- Bandwidth continues to increase, with 63.3% of public library branches having connection speeds of greater than 769kbps in 2006 compared to 47.4% in 2004.

Future Developments

In the future, public libraries plan to add and/or replace workstations and make other enhancements to their public access computing and Internet access services:

- 16.6% of public library branches plan to add more workstations within two years, while 28.6% of branches are considering doing so.
- 72.8% of public library branches plan to replace some workstations within two years. Of the 72.8% of libraries, 35.3% have plans to replace a definite number of workstations, with an average replacement of 7.2 workstations.
- 23.1% plan to add wireless access within two years, which means that over 60.0% of public libraries would then offer wireless access.

Challenges Remain

Challenges remain as public libraries continue to improve their public access computing and Internet access services:

- Roughly 45.0% of public libraries reported a decrease (6.8%) or flat funding (36.6%) in their overall budget as compared to the previous fiscal year. Given inflation and increased personnel and benefits costs, flat funding equates to a cut in funding. Thus, nearly half of public libraries essentially experienced reductions in funding.
- Public libraries face increased demands to supply public access computing in times of natural disasters such as the 2005 hurricanes and to support federal, state, and local e-government services, e.g., applications for the federal prescription drug plan.
- 45.5% of public library branches indicate that their connection speeds are inadequate to meet user demands some or all of the time.
- One-quarter of public library branches have 3 or fewer workstations, two-quarters of public library branches have 6 or fewer workstations, and three-quarters of public library branches have 12 or fewer workstations.
- Only 20.7% of public library branches indicate that the number of workstations they currently have is adequate to meet patron demand.
- 45.4% of public library branches have no plans to add workstations in the next two years.
- Space (79.9%), cost factors (72.6%), and maintenance (38.8%) most commonly influence decisions to add or upgrade public access Internet workstations.
- Rural public libraries tend to have fewer public access workstations, lower bandwidth, and are less likely to offer wireless access.

- Public access computing and bandwidth are important parts of public access, but there is a need to continually upgrade technology and provide sufficient bandwidth to meet increasingly demanding applications, digital content, and services.
- Public libraries in some states collectively lag behind the public libraries nationally in terms of number of computers, connectivity speeds, and other important factors.

Successfully Networked Public Libraries

A successfully networked public library (SNPL) provides high quality traditional library services as well as networked services. Networked services include electronic information resources and/or services, such as Internet access, email, chat, online reference, subscription databases, and other web-based services. In the context of this study, network services comprise three primary areas: 1) networked services offered within the library; 2) the library's virtual branch, meaning web-based external services; and 3) the infrastructure needed to support both. SNPLs have exceptionally high quality leaders who successfully and actively engage the political process. Factors describing SNPLs in 2006 also include:

1. *Networked services within the library*
    - SNPLs offer public access copiers, fax, printers, scanners, and computing workstations, and may also lend a variety of equipment including digital cameras, GPS equipment, ipods, MP3 players, and even telescopes. Often, SNPLs provide the first introduction to a new type of information technology (IT) and serve as the access point of first and last resort for their communities and visitors to various types of IT.
    - SNPLs offer an integrated library system (ILS) including an online public access catalog (OPAC) of library materials.

2. *Library's virtual branch*
    - SNPLs view their website as an additional branch or as a virtual branch.
    - They seek to offer the same or equivalent services, such as answering reference questions, as those offered within the library in addition to those only available virtually.
    - Though the services are available, the provision of virtual branch management, staff, resources, and budget equivalent to a traditional branch may not yet be established.
    - Virtual branch evaluation is performed, but the evaluation data are not integrated with results of physical branch evaluations.

3. *Network infrastructure*
    - SNPLs have sufficient IT staff to make certain types of networked library services possible. Having such staff can save the library money. For some libraries, however, the difference between not having and having dedicated IT staff must be experienced before being believed.
    - They conduct extensive, continuous, formal and informal network service planning.

- SNPLs have sufficient bandwidth to meet the needs of patrons and staff and to offer or plan to offer wireless connectivity. However, they also anticipate an impending future need for additional bandwidth as video, music, and large file transfers become more common.
- They generally have enough public workstations but cannot meet peak demand.
- They provide necessary IT (including software) and training so that all staff members are proficient in the IT-related aspects of their jobs.
- SNPLs have built or are considering building facilities better tailored to the networked environment.
- SNPLs recognize and capitalize on the potential of the Internet as a shared information infrastructure where hardware, software, resources, services and staff expertise may be shared between branches.

4. *SNPL Advocacy Strategies*
- SNPLs engage in a wide range of advocacy strategies for continued public library and networked services support. The following is a summary of SNPL qualities that influence theses advocacy activities:
  - *Proactive:* A distinguishing characteristic of all of the SNPLs, when compared to other public libraries, is their proactive approach. SNPLs proactively partner with local and state governments and non-profits for mutual benefit. SNPLs actively look for opportunities to show what the library was already doing to address local, state, and regional issues, and actively seek partners and funding to address these issues. SNPLs do not wait to be invited to participate in local issues.
  - *Opportunistic:* The SNPL managers are masters at perceiving an opportunity to make the library's worth visible to others and to obtain funding or support, particularly when the source does not specifically mention libraries. SNPL managers recognize that financial support was only one of many types of support that successful libraries need.
  - *Prepared:* SNPLs are often, but not always, better prepared than peer government agencies to make known their contributions to the community and to explain their funding needs. Part of this preparation includes assembling relevant evidence and arguments based on the evidence.
  - *Relationships:* SNPL managers have a year-round positive relationship with elected and appointed officials, community opinion makers, and government agency and nonprofit leaders. SNPL managers are not meeting with strangers when they go to the annual library budget hearing.

5. *SNPLs Need Sustainable Support*
- Stable and sustainable funding is key to SNPLs, as such funding enables realistic multi-year planning:
  - SNPLs conduct continuous, systematic environmental scans seeking to match community needs, related IT, and funding opportunities.
  - Most SNPLs are transitioning from national grant-based funds to increased local support for networked services.

▪ Support for networked services is not limited to money, as shared hardware, resources, staff time, and staff training, among other benefits, are equally important.

Importance of Public Access Computing

Programs and local advocacy efforts that demonstrate the role of public libraries in providing public access computing can contribute to the long-term viability of public libraries. Findings from both the national survey and the case site visits document the importance of public access computing and Internet access provided by public libraries. Public libraries are often the first choice for many people to access the Internet and engage in networked services such as applying for a job, applying for and engaging in government services, obtaining health information, and much more. But the need to continually enhance information technology, telecommunications, and networked services often puts considerable strain on already stressed library budgets.

Challenges in Moving Forward

The networked environment continues to increase in scope, service, resource possibilities and capabilities, and complexity. There are now multiple uses of bandwidths, different levels and types of access provided by public access computers, licensed resources from numerous sources, the increasing demands for wireless access, content that needs increasing bandwidth, the introduction of new technologies, and advent of popular interactive websites, among others. It is in this context that public libraries offer their public access computing services and resources.

The impacts on libraries of this new and substantially more complex environment are potentially significant, and effect library service and resource provision, staff skills, training requirements, and public access computing and Internet access requirements. As user expectations rise, combined with the provision of high quality services by other providers, libraries are in a competitive and service/resource rich information environment. Providing "bare minimum" public access computing and Internet access can have two detrimental effects: 1) relegate libraries to places of last resort, and 2) further digitally divide those who only have PAC and Internet access through their public libraries.

As the complexity of the networked environment impacts public library services, roles, and demands on librarians, any assessment of public library public access computing and Internet access must also account for the increased complexity of the actual environment. Thus, another major impact of the complexity of the networked environment is the ability of studies such as these to measure adequately library connectivity, public access computing, the range and type of networked services provided, and the depth and extent of the library's information technology infrastructure. The increased complexity is replete with measurement challenges.