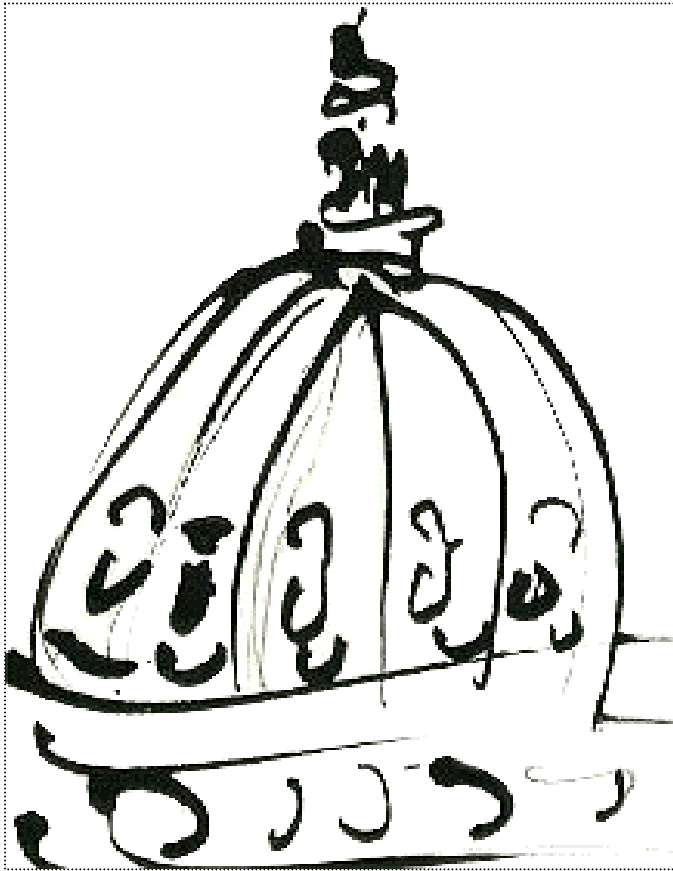




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Public Libraries and the Internet 2006: Study Results and Findings

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III. RELATING SURVEY FINDINGS TO CASE STUDY FINDINGS

The biennial *Public Libraries and the Internet* studies, conducted since 1994, provide a longitudinal portrait of public library involvement with and use of the Internet. Over the years, the studies demonstrated the growth of public access computing and Internet access provided by public libraries to the communities that they serve. Internet connectivity rose from 20.9% to essentially 100% in less than 10 years; the average number of public access computers per library increased from an average of two to nearly 11; and bandwidth rose to the point where 63% of public libraries have connection speeds of greater than 769kbps in 2006. This dramatic growth, replete with related information technology developments, occurred in an environment of budgetary, staffing, and other challenges.

In addition to the national survey, the 2006 *Public Libraries and the Internet* study included site visits at public libraries to identify factors that contribute to being a successfully networked public library (SNPL) and current issues confronting these libraries in maintaining, enhancing, and moving their connectivity and networked services forward. This approach allowed the study team to compare and contrast findings from both data collection efforts to better understand the current context of public libraries and their use of the Internet. This section of the report briefly notes a number of issues and conclusions enabled by linking these two data collection efforts.

Recognizing the Human Factor

Since the original 1994 study, there has been a steady improvement in the percentage of public libraries providing public access computers, the number of workstations per library, increased bandwidth, and the types and number of services and resources offered to library users. The case sites clearly demonstrate that some public library administrators are adept at finding ways to improve their library's information technology infrastructure. Indeed, the human face on the statistics is that significant public library leadership and perseverance is necessary to continue the advances in public access computing.

Data from the site visits provide insights into the various innovative techniques used by library directors to obtain additional support for public access computing. While it is clear that a range of local advocacy efforts are essential, it is equally clear that local situational factors require consideration in any strategic plan to enhance existing or obtain new public access computing services. The advances made by public libraries in public access computing came, in part, because of strong local leadership, tenacity, and advocacy by library administrators to move libraries forward. The human factor—based in the efforts of individual librarians—is a critical component that contributed to increases and advances in public access computing in public libraries.

Increasing Range of Services

The survey data indicate significant improvements in public access computing over the years while the case site visits found that these improvements came with virtually no reduction in the provision of traditional public library services. In short, libraries added a range of additional

public access computing services and networked services to an already heavy load of traditional services. In related work conducted by the study team, federal, state, and local governments have recently added yet another significant level of services to public libraries by “requesting” that they provide numerous e-government services, e.g., social services, prescription drug plans, health care, disaster support, etc.¹⁰

Thus, the maintenance of traditional services, the addition and expansion of public access computing and networked services, and now the addition of a range of e-government services tacitly required by federal, state, and local governments, may stretch public library resources beyond their ability to keep up. Two key questions are: 1) how much longer can public libraries add to and extend their electronic services without a corresponding increase in their resource support? 2) Can libraries continue to add services and resources which require substantial retraining and retooling of librarians and library technology infrastructure?

Gaining Support through Engaging the Political System

Local public policy decision making and the role of the library in that process may vary from community to community due to local and state laws and the local personalities involved in the process. Public policy making is essentially a socially agreeable way to make decisions. Stakeholders, the people affected by a social problem or issue, recognize that policies and decisions may be developed to deal with a particular library issue. Stakeholders often have conflicting value systems and have differing objectives in the resolution of an issue. Politics, and working the local political system, is the process by which public policy decisions and policies are made and those decisions promote the public library.

Engaging in the local political process is essential for advocacy and for becoming a SNPL. Public libraries now exist in a complex and ever-evolving electronic networked environment in which services and resources are often provided via a national, state, regional, or local networked environment. Local governing boards and residents may not understand the extent to which information technology and the networking environment are now the backbone of public library services and the basis for being “successful.” Without a high quality technology information infrastructure and network, public libraries simply cannot compete in the information marketplace.

The SNPLs show that better linking of working within the local political process and advocating for the library – orchestrated by library managers – pays significant benefits for the library, and likely helped to increase public access computing services noted in the survey. Indeed, the site visits suggest that advocacy without working the local political system may have less impact than desired by library managers and local community members. More specifically:

¹⁰ Bertot, J. C., Jaeger, P. T., Langa, L. A., & McClure, C. R. (2006). Drafted: I want you to provide e-government access. *Library Journal*, 133(13), 34-39.

Bertot, J. C., Jaeger, P. T., Langa, L. A., & McClure, C. R. (2006). Public access computing and Internet access in public libraries: The role of public libraries in e-government and emergency situations. *First Monday*, 11(9). Available: <http://www.firstmonday.org>.

- Library directors must be able to work within the local political process to successfully advocate for the public library.
- A picture or vision of what constitutes a successfully networked public library in a particular community is essential for local politicians, governing boards, and residents to then advocate for reaching that vision.
- Local situational factors have to be identified, understood, and considered in the advocacy plan for the library to reach a vision of being successful.

Advocacy and working within the political process has to be done in the context of accomplishing specific goals and working toward a vision of what a successfully networked public library in a particular community would be. Apparently, for many libraries, that vision included public access computing. But if there is no clearly articulated vision of what a successful library should be in a particular community, it will be impossible to reach such a vision.

Sufficient and Quality of Connectivity

In addition to connectivity speed, there are many other important issues related to public access computing and Internet access, such as maintaining adequate budget and sustainability; maintaining sufficient staffing and support; increasing services offered through the technology infrastructure; and evaluating the impacts of connectivity and public access computing on the communities that libraries serve. One pressing question, however, is what is sufficient and quality public access computing and Internet access? And, as a corollary to that question, what are measures and benchmarks of quality access? Survey data alone cannot answer these questions.

It is within this context that issues related to the quality of public access computing and sufficient connectivity speeds to Internet access reside. Research questions to explore include:

- Is it possible to define quality public access computing and Internet access in a public library context?
- If so, what are the attributes included in the definition?
- Can these attributes be operationalized and measured?
- Assuming measurable results, what ways can the library, policy, research, and other interested communities employ to impact public library movement towards quality public access computing and Internet access?
- Should there be “standards” for sufficient connectivity and quality public access computing in public libraries?

These questions are a starting point for a larger dialogue that needs to occur in the research, practitioner, and policy-making communities.

As both the survey and case site visits demonstrated, arbitrary connectivity speed targets, e.g., 769kbps, do not in and of themselves ensure quality public access computing and sufficient connectivity speeds. Public libraries are connected to the Internet and actively provide public access services and resources. It is time to move beyond connectivity type and speed questions

and consider issues of adequacy, quality, and the range of networked services that should be available to the public from public libraries.

Need for Public Policy

Not addressed in the national survey but addressed in many of the site visits was the need for a national and state public policy related to the role and support of public libraries. Generally, 85-90% of public library support comes from the local community. Federal and state aid provides another 5-7%, and other sources of support account for 2-3% of public library funding. Both the survey and the site visits provide findings that many public libraries see themselves as having inadequate resource support for the tasks and roles they perform in today's society.

There are only limited public policy statements that describe the role and responsibilities of public libraries from federal and state governments. The federal and state governments, relatively speaking, provide minimal direct support to assist public libraries perform their tasks and roles. Given the increased set of tasks being expected from public libraries in terms of public access computing and provision of networked services (including e-government responsibilities), there is a need to reevaluate a number of public policy issues related to public libraries. Such issues include:

- What roles and responsibilities should public libraries provide to assist residents to be successful in today's and tomorrow's society?
- To what degree are librarians adequately prepared to offer these roles and activities successfully?
- Are adequate resources being made available to public libraries to accomplish these roles and activities?
- How successful are public libraries in meeting public access computing, networked services, and e-government roles and responsibilities?

It is possible to pose other public policy questions. These questions with supporting data from the survey and site visits, however, can foster national, state, and local discussions intended to reevaluate what public libraries should be doing in terms of public access computing, networked services, and e-government, as well as how they should be resourced to perform these activities successfully. Increasingly, public libraries must address a range of unfunded federal and state mandates.

Evolving Roles for Public Libraries and Librarians

The findings of the *Public Libraries and the Internet* studies, over the years, parallel substantial changes to the public library service environment. As libraries connected to the Internet and became more familiar with Internet-enabled services and resources, libraries offered an increasing array of network-based services. This required changes in library building needs, technology infrastructure, staff skills and expertise, and services that meet both user demands and the possibilities of new and rapidly changing technologies. The combination of an evolving

technology environment and the enabling capabilities of technology creates both new roles and pressures for public libraries.

These new services can bring new users to the library as well as different uses of library resources. They can even foster new societal roles for public libraries, such as community technology access points, e-government providers, technology and information literacy training, and others. However, these increased services also place additional burdens on public library budgets, staff, buildings, and facilities. Beyond traditional librarianship training, public librarians need to be teachers, e-government facilitators, technology literate in an increasingly complex technology environment, politically savvy in an increasingly competitive resource context, and persuasive advocates for the role of public libraries in the community and networked environment. In short, public librarians require a host of skills that promoters of “traditional librarianship” do not sufficiently acknowledge, at the peril of public libraries.

Extending the Research

The usefulness of the *Public Library and the Internet* data over the years has been, and continues to be, significant. Adding the SNPL component to the 2006 study added an additional set of insights that previously had not been tapped. The success of these efforts is largely due to the participation from the public library practitioners who completed the surveys and agreed to the site visits. Unfortunately, the range of research conducted thus far regarding public libraries and the Internet, the deployment of public access computing, provision of networked services, appropriate roles of public libraries in the networked environment, obtaining adequate support for public library public access computing and networked services, and related issues, remains limited.

In developing the national survey, the initial number of questions of interest is roughly triple the number that is ultimately included in the final survey. There is simply not enough room to ask all these questions in a single survey, particularly since excessively long surveys tend to receive a limited number of Responses. Such is also true with the site visits; additional visits would have increased our knowledge of SNPLs. The same number of visits to “unsuccessfully” networked public libraries would also have provided additional insights.

In short, many compelling research questions regarding public libraries and public access computing and networked services remain unaddressed. Ongoing and additional support from a range of funding agencies will be essential if this work is to continue and be expanded. Further, findings from such efforts need to be usable to policy makers and also translated into practical and realistic strategies and recommendations that public librarians can use and implement successfully for improved public access computing.