

# LIS: Investigations

Where ALIA's Research Committee brings you news from the world of library and information services research.

## Public libraries, research, and the internet

At the recent ALIA Biennial Conference the ALIA Research Committee ran a panel session titled "Demystifying research". The panel briefly discussed research, its role in the profession, and the importance of evidence-based practice. Brief examples of practice-based research were then provided. A lively discussion followed. One issue (quite rightly) raised by panel attendees was the perceived divorce between public libraries and research: "why are there no public librarians on the research committee?" and "why is no research reported on the panel emanating from public libraries?" It's not because there is no research emanating from or about public libraries (just check in ALIA's subscription to *Library and Information Science Abstracts*). There is a rich lode. The issue of representation cannot be addressed here. Instead a review of a recent paper is called for. In keeping with the theme of this issue, *The Technology of Libraries*, and public libraries I focus on a related article.

### Background: Public libraries and the internet

As public access organisations, public libraries have generally considered providing access to information as a key role. As information has become increasingly digital, libraries have provided access to the internet itself, through public access computers and internet connectivity, which in turn has enabled access to online resources and services within and beyond each library's own walls.

### The research

This article draws on data from national surveys in the USA over 17 years from 1994 conducted with the aim of tracking the growth of public library connectivity and internet use. The survey data serves as a basis for promoting public library internet policies at a federal level, and providing longitudinal data to inform state and system level decision making. While the focus of the surveys has evolved over time and with technology, core questions remained providing continuity.

### The findings

Nearly 100% of public libraries are connected to the internet (from 20.9% in 1994) and provide public access. Number of workstations has increased, and access has moved from dial-up to broadband, to mobile. Public libraries use their internet connectivity to provide the public with access to databases, e-books, digital reference services, and information technology and information literacy training. Public libraries are increasingly providing innovative, value added services such as helping users understand and use government web resources, apply for government services, and complete government forms. User demands on these facilities and resources are rising. Often public libraries, particularly in rural communities, provide the only free public access computing with internet in their communities, and yet they struggle with inadequate funding.

### From our collection

Bertot, J. C., Jaeger, P. T., Wahl, E. E., & Sigler, K. I. (2011). *Chapter 2: Public Libraries and the Internet*. *Library Technology Reports*, 47(6), 7-18.

**You can read the full article via the ALIA online journals at: [www.alia.org.au/onlineLISresources](http://www.alia.org.au/onlineLISresources)**

### The future

As organisations, especially government agencies move their information exclusively online and the economic downturn continues, access to computers and internet, and the assistance in using them provided by public libraries is often the only available access and assistance for some people. Public libraries more than ever need resourcing and this data helps to demonstrate that in the US context. The situation is likely to be similar in Australia

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