

# Libraries: building an equitable information society

A report released by the Centre for Community Networking Research (CCNR) at Monash University examines the provision of internet access in libraries. *Characteristics and choices of public access internet users in Victorian public libraries* details the results of a survey of the users of free public access internet terminals in Victorian public libraries. The survey is part of a wider research undertaking designed to gain a better understanding of the users of Victorian public library public internet access services. The survey was conducted with the assistance of VICLINK Reference Co-op and with support from VICLINK and Monash University Small Grants Fund.

CCNR received 2465 responses to the survey from users in twenty-five public library services, representing more than eighty branches, and from the State Library of Victoria.

Survey responses appear to support the anecdotal evidence that public libraries are important first steps in

introducing new users to the services available on the internet. It also seems to suggest two groupings of users can be identified: those who are making use of the service on a short-term basis, and those who intend to continue to use the service over a long period. The second group is made up of those whose needs seem to be adequately met by the service provided, and those who cannot access the internet from other locations (the costs involved with online access at home is seen as a major factor).

The survey does not support the proposition that the demand for public access internet terminals in libraries is declining: in fact, quite the opposite. Indications are that the demand will rise exponentially. The chief reasons for using the public access terminals were that the public library was the only source of access to the internet (almost sixty per cent of respondents); and price considerations (just over fifty-two per cent of respondents).

Unsurprisingly, survey responses indicate that e-mail is the single most common activity undertaken. However, users also reported engaging in a diverse range of online activities — online banking, job related research, and academic research, to name a few.

If repeat usage is a sign of how valued a service is, then public access to the internet is highly valued. More than thirty per cent of respondents reported using the service a few times a week, and just over twenty-five per cent use it at least once a week. Almost ten per cent of those surveyed had not previously used the service.

Survey participants were also asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with the service. While overall the respondents found the service satisfactory, there were significant areas of dissatisfaction: for example slow

connection speeds; too few terminals; and problems with the booking service. While respondents were generally happy with the assistance provided by library staff, focus groups and general comments on the survey indicate that there is still a demand for more general training.

It appears from the results of the survey that internet access in public libraries in Victoria is a very popular service, with a high satisfaction rate. The service seems to be providing a service to those who need it most: fifty-four per cent of respondents are low-income earners. The underlying 'safety net' rationale for the provision of public access to the internet in libraries seems to be working in practice. The Victorian public library sector should be congratulated as respondents generally had very positive comments about the services offered by the sector.

The survey report is available from the CCNR at <http://www.ccnr.net/PAT/results/char.pdf>.

## About CCNR

The Centre for Community Networking Research, School of Information Management and Systems, Monash University, is a co-operatively funded centre whose mission is to develop and implement evaluation frameworks within the environment of emerging community uses of ICTs.

CCNR's work provides tools to document and measure the impact of community networking projects and activities to the community, government, academia, and others.

## About the report authors

**Graeme Johanson**, CCNR director, is a senior lecturer in the School of Information Management and Systems, Faculty of Information Technology, Monash University. He has undertaken research into Australian publishing and the book trade, evaluating the usefulness of library portals and virtual libraries by scholarly communities, managing knowledge, disciplinary information-seeking behaviours, electronic publishing, and social issues related to information management.

**Gary Hardy** was one of the founders of VICNET: Victoria's Network, a trail-blazing venture which has been instrumental in the provision of public access, skills training and content development for the Victorian community. ■

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