

Public libraries provide vital infrastructure for Australia's digital future

ALIA internet access in public libraries survey 2008

ALIA has a long-standing and active interest in the public debate on the regulation of internet content in Australia. In particular, the Association has an interest in policy and legislative issues relating to the provision of public access internet services in public libraries.

This area is directly related to ALIA's first object: to promote the free flow of information and ideas in the interests of all Australians and a thriving culture, economy, and democracy. ALIA believes that freedom can be protected in a democratic society only if its citizens have unrestricted access to information and ideas.

The survey report demonstrates how public libraries provide vital infrastructure for Australia's digital future, and how they are addressing the need for equitable community access to online information.

About the survey

In June 2008, ALIA invited public library services in Australia to participate in a survey of internet access in public libraries by completing an online survey form. The survey follows up earlier surveys by ALIA in 2002, 2005, and 2007.

The 2008 survey was conducted under the direction of ALIA's Online Content and Regulation Advisory Committee, and with input from the ALIA Public Libraries Advisory Committee. The survey was made possible by the voluntary participation of a significant number of public libraries across Australia.

The 2008 survey report analysed responses from public libraries in all states and territories across Australia. Over 200 public libraries responded to the survey. The library services which participated in the survey represent 6 920 476 registered users and have over 147 000 people accessing internet services in their libraries each week.

Results

Public libraries provide the main means by which people can access the internet outside home, work, and school. They offer access for many people who do not have access online in other ways, and provide an environment that is recognised as trusted, friendly, socially-inclusive, and non-threatening. Public library users are generally happy with the services they receive. Overwhelmingly, their issues relate to shortage, rationing, and resource limitations – public library users have few other complaints.

The key findings include:

Usage (in responding libraries)

- Increasing and improving access to the internet remains a priority for public libraries.
- The number of public access internet terminals has more than doubled since the 2005 survey.
- An estimated 147 474 users access the internet each week – an increase of 91% over the 2005 users.
- Public demand and expectations for increased number of internet terminals in public libraries continues to grow.
- Of the negative feedback received, 77% relates to requests for access to more terminals, faster connection speeds, more downloads, and increased bandwidth.

Internet content complaints

- The percentage of libraries who have received complaints about internet content continues to reduce from 55% in 2002, 50% in 2005, and 43% in 2008.
- Complaints about internet content within public libraries are extremely rare representing 0.2% of users; 99.8% of internet use is complaint-free.
- Most internet content complaints concern sexually explicit material.
- Complaints about adults' access represented 64% of all complaints and 36% concerned children.

Filters

- Public libraries filter not only illegal and offensive material but also social networking sites, games, very large files, and file sharing.
- The trend is towards an increase in the use of filtering software in public libraries: 36% of respondents in 2008 compared with 30% in 2005.
- Using internet filtering does not stop complaints.
- Filtering mechanisms vary significantly from library to library, and no single commercial filtering product is used by more than 10% of responding libraries.
- Examples of other types of filtered sites were:
 - gambling sites
 - secure sites: patrons are unable to conduct secure transactions such as taxation returns with the ATO, banking, airline bookings, etc.

Children

- One third of responding libraries provide separate terminals for access by children.
- More than half of the responding libraries provide specific/targeted internet content or links for children and young adults.
- The requirement for compulsory parental consent for internet use has increased.
- The age limit for parental consent has dropped in some libraries from 18 to 16 years.

Access

- Access disparity between library services is significant and the access varies significantly within states, regions, and also within metropolitan areas. Some library services are only able to offer one terminal to every 7000 registered users while the average is one to 1500.
- The quality of access to the internet also varies significantly within some states, regions and within metropolitan areas; some libraries are able to offer high speed broadband and wireless access while other libraries offer dial up access with limited upload and download.

Internet policy

- Internet use policy in public libraries is developed, implemented, and regulated within a timely manner.
- Public libraries respond closely to their own communities' expectations with internet management decisions and practices.
- Public libraries utilise policy information from ALIA to support their management decisions.
- A range of models of internet policy management exists within the public library sector.

For the 2008 survey report and for more information about ALIA's position on online content regulation, visit <http://www.alia.org.au/advocacy/internet.access/>

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