

Introduction

Judy Hoffman

This issue of *Library Technology Reports*, conceived and coordinated by the American Library Association's (ALA) Office for Research and Statistics, presents a detailed portrait of the evolution and current state of public access technologies in public libraries from the infrastructure, services, and resources perspectives. This edition brings together longitudinal data, key issues, trends, and best practices that will provide library staff with tools for planning, advocacy, and service enhancements.

The first article in this issue, "Public Libraries and the Internet: An Evolutionary Perspective," provides data and analysis from the *Public Library Funding and Technology Access* national surveys, the longest-running and largest study of Internet connectivity in public libraries, begun in 1994 by John Carlo Bertot and Charles R. McClure.¹ The history and methodology of the ground-breaking study is discussed in the opening of the article, which includes data from the first year of the survey through the 2010–2011 survey. The current ALA report, *Libraries Connect Communities: Public Library Funding and Technology Access Study 2010–2011*, was released on June 21, 2011.

The analysis of the data and the impact on library services outlined by John Carlo Bertot, Paul T. Jaeger, Emily E. Wahl, and Kathryn I. Sigler in chapter 2 highlights conflicting results: public libraries continue to offer enhanced public-access technology and resources in spite of continued challenges with insufficiencies across the library landscape, including funding, numbers of computers, connectivity speed, staffing, and space. Many of these same challenges emerged in the 2007–2008 study and were outlined in the January 2009 issue of *Library Technology Reports*. Authors Larra Clark and Denise Davis commented, "As libraries introduce more computers and technology-based

services, keeping up with patron demand is an ongoing challenge."² Yet, as noted then and now, libraries persevere in providing critical services and resources to help individuals, families, and communities through a slow economic recovery.

The other five articles in this issue of *Library Technology Reports* highlight and illuminate selected core services and emerging topics measured over the course of the thirteen surveys conducted since 1994.

Broadband Connectivity

While public library adoption of broadband continues to increase over time, rural libraries lag behind in connectivity capacity and speed. In the 2010–2011 study, 21.8 percent of rural libraries reported having fiber-optic connections, compared to 65.6 percent for urban libraries and 42.8 percent for suburban libraries. And while for the first time more rural libraries reported connectivity speed greater than 1.5 Mbps than less than 1.5 Mbps, nearly 47 percent of rural libraries still reported that their connection speed is insufficient to meet patron needs some or all of the time. As outlined in the article by Nicole D. Alemanne, Lauren H. Mandel, and Charles R. McClure, by taking a leadership role among community broadband anchor institutions, rural libraries have the potential to transform their level of service and the life of the community and its residents.

Wireless Networks

As libraries encounter capacity limits in both broadband and physical space, an effective patron wireless network is an essential consideration for continuity of quality service. In interviews for the 2010–2011

study, library staff consistently noted that with the exponential growth of mobile devices tapping into library wireless networks, expansions and upgrades to the networks were becoming more critical. In this issue, Robert A. Caluori, Jr. reports that the affordable, high-quality wireless equipment libraries need to meet demand is a reality and provides detailed guidance for purchasing decisions and network implementation.

Employment and E-Government Services

Recent news reports on the economy reinforce the role of the public library as a safety net for job seekers, and as government agencies eliminate print forms and close satellite offices, public libraries are increasingly on the front lines, connecting people with essential e-government resources. The increased demand on public libraries in these two areas has brought additional stresses in a number of areas, including staffing levels and computer availability. Author Nancy Fredericks addresses these challenges and presents a wide range of successful practices from her own Pasco County (FL) Library Cooperative and other examples of local, state, and national resources.

Digital Literacy

While almost all (99.3 percent) US public libraries provide free access to computers and the Internet, many citizens are still struggling to gain the skills to adequately access and use online resources. As noted in the article by Larra Clark and Marijke Visser, there is now a “broad recognition that digital literacy is a keystone for civic engagement, educational success, and economic growth and innovation.” In their work at the American Library Association Office of Information Technology

Policy, Clark and Visser are part of the national effort to provide libraries of all types with the competencies and resources to play a lead role in any community efforts that ensure equity of access and advance digital literacy.

Patron Technology Training

In the pursuit of community digital literacy, according to Stephanie Gerding, patron technology training at public libraries is no longer an optional service. While this absolute can be seen as a challenge for many libraries, Gerding provides in her article the building blocks for the “transformation of the library into a digital literacy oasis.” Any size and type of library can adopt and adapt the ideas and resources laid out in four key areas: creation of comprehensive training plans; professional development for library staff; cultivation of partnerships and volunteer relationships; and marketing of training programs.

In an interview for the 2010–2011 study, San Diego County Library Director José Aponte commented that “Technology was formerly a backbone of libraries, and now it’s become the front door of public service.” This sea change has illuminated the need for a greater understanding of the transformation of our public libraries, propelled by community demands and the critical need for sustained funding to provide the technology services required to advance our nation to full digital literacy.

Notes

1. All survey reports are available at www.plinternet-survey.org.
2. Larra Clark and Denise Davis, “The State of Funding for Library Technology in Today’s Economy,” *Library Technology Reports* 45, no. 1 (Jan. 2009): 8.