



Australian
Library and
Information
Association

Internet access in public libraries survey 2005 report

30 March 2006

Contents

Summary

- Key findings
- Conclusions

Report

- Introduction
- About the survey
- Results
 - Policy
 - Community education and training
 - Complaints
 - Filters
 - Children
 - Monitoring
 - Feedback from library users about internet access services
 - Comments about internet access in libraries

Conclusions

Acknowledgements

References and further information

Appendix:

- Survey of internet access in public libraries, 2005 — survey form

Summary

This survey of internet access in public libraries covers 41 per cent of public libraries across Australia. Library services which participated in the survey represent almost 6 million registered users and over 77 000 people access internet services in these libraries each week.

This report is a follow-up to a similar survey in 2002 and provides up-to-date information on how public library internet services are being managed, delivered and used.

Australia's public libraries are key players in addressing the need for equitable community access to online information and services. Public access internet services in libraries are expanding. Public libraries are important sources for internet training, access to online services and providers of valuable online content, including content available only by subscription.

Key findings

Internet access services in public libraries are highly valued, popular and heavily used. Services have grown and improved over the past three years. Users particularly appreciate the improvements in access, bandwidth and speed that many libraries have made. Internet access services are used for study and learning; accessing government and other services, such as banking; recreation and e-mail and many other purposes.

In providing internet access services public libraries:

- Have regularly reviewed and endorsed use policies which are widely publicised.
- Provide extensive user education, guides to searching and trained staff to assist users.
- Are an important source for community information and education on effective and safe internet use.
- Monitor and supervise internet use in a variety of ways.
- Attend to the needs and interest of special groups in the community, such as children and seniors.

Despite the high level of use of internet access service, libraries report receiving few complaints about online content. Fifty per cent of libraries surveyed reported that they had received no complaints. Most of the 50 per cent who had received complaints said that they had received five or fewer complaints in the past 12 months. Most complaints concerned sexually explicit content, compared to violent, racist or other offensive content.

Around 30 per cent of libraries surveyed reported using filtering software (up from 18 per cent in 2002). However, there has been a corresponding increase in complaints, mainly about filters blocking legitimate sites.

Libraries are attending to the special needs and interests of children by providing separate internet terminals and/or websites for children and young adults that link to resources tailored especially for them.

Seventy-one per cent of libraries require parental consent for children to use the internet. Some libraries also require a parent or carer to be present with a child using the internet.

Conclusions

Providing access to online information and services is a core service for public libraries and must be based on the principle of the right of all users to unhindered access to information of their choice regardless of format, in the context of the current regulatory measures for online content and libraries' duty of care.

The experiences of libraries and their users supports a view that the current legislation relating to online content is appropriate, workable and reflects wide held community views and standards.

Delivering an effective, rewarding and safe internet service requires in-depth understanding of user needs, online content and technical requirements. Filtering of public library internet services is not the way to deliver a high quality and safe service. Filtering software has been shown to block legitimate content while not guaranteeing that illegal or inappropriate sites will be blocked.

The work of organisations such as NetAlert and ALIA in developing educational and information materials for libraries and internet users is well-known, appreciated and used by public libraries.

Report

Introduction

Australian libraries and information services provide extensive internet access services and Australia's public libraries are key players in addressing the need for equitable community access to online information and services. The provision of internet access in public libraries has grown strongly over the past few years. The Australian Bureau of Statistics reports that in 2003–04 there were on average three internet workstations in each local government library location in Australia^[1]. Public libraries are important sources for internet training, access to online services and providers of valuable online content, including content available only by subscription.

The first object of the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) is to promote the free flow of information and ideas in the interests of all Australians and a thriving culture, economy and democracy. ALIA has a long-standing interest and is active in the public debate on the regulation of internet content in Australia. The Association has a particular interest in policy and legislative issues relating to the provision of public access internet services in public libraries.

This report of a recent survey of internet services in public libraries in Australia provides up-to-date information on how these services are being managed, delivered and used. The survey and report are timely in the light of recent media and political debate on these services and on the potential risk of children being exposed to inappropriate online content and where some interests have called for the use of filtering software as an appropriate solution to manage access to online content in public libraries.

About the survey

In November 2005, the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) invited public library services in Australia to take part in a survey of internet access in public libraries by completing an online survey form. Public library services who were institutional members of ALIA received an individually addressed invitation to take part. The survey was also publicised through a number of e-lists and the State and Territory libraries assisted by circulating information about the survey to their public library networks.

The survey asked participating library services about internet use policies, community education and training, complaints from users about internet content, use of internet filtering software and children's use of the internet in libraries. The survey follows up an earlier survey by ALIA in 2002^[2]. For comparative purposes, the 2005 survey asked the same questions as the earlier survey. A few new questions were added in the light of developments in internet services in libraries and policy relating to online content regulation since 2002.

The survey was conducted by ALIA's Online Content and Regulation Reference Group, an advisory group to ALIA's Board of Directors^[3].

Results

This survey covers 186 public library organisations with 718 access points, representing 34 per cent of library organisations and 41 per cent of library access points, such as branch libraries and mobile libraries Australia-wide^[4]. The survey respondents are broadly representative of the range of public library services throughout Australia. Respondents included library services located in metropolitan, greater metropolitan, regional and rural areas and one state-wide library service. Respondents range from state and national libraries to large metropolitan library services with multiple branches and over 100 000 registered users to remote rural libraries with fewer than 1000 registered users.

The 186 library services covered by the survey have a total of 5 954 668 registered users. They have 3646 public access internet terminals. An estimated 77 168 users access the internet each week in these library services.

Sixty-seven per cent of respondents were ALIA institutional members and 33 per cent were non-members.

1 Australian Bureau of Statistics. *Public libraries 2003–04*. 2005, p9.

2 The report of the 2002 survey is at <http://alia.org.au/advocacy/internet.access/>

3 The terms of reference and further information about the Online Content and Regulation Reference Group are at <http://alia.org.au/governance/committees/content.regulations/>.

4 According to ABS. *Public libraries 2003–04* (2005), at the end of June 2004 Australia had 532 local government library organisations operating from 1716 library locations and eight national, state and territory libraries with 17 locations.

Policy

Ninety-five per cent of respondents have an internet policy. Their internet policies are reviewed regularly and kept up-to-date. Ninety per cent of library services had reviewed their internet policies in the past three years, including 66 per cent who had reviewed their policies in 2005. Ninety-eight per cent of policies include user behaviour policies.

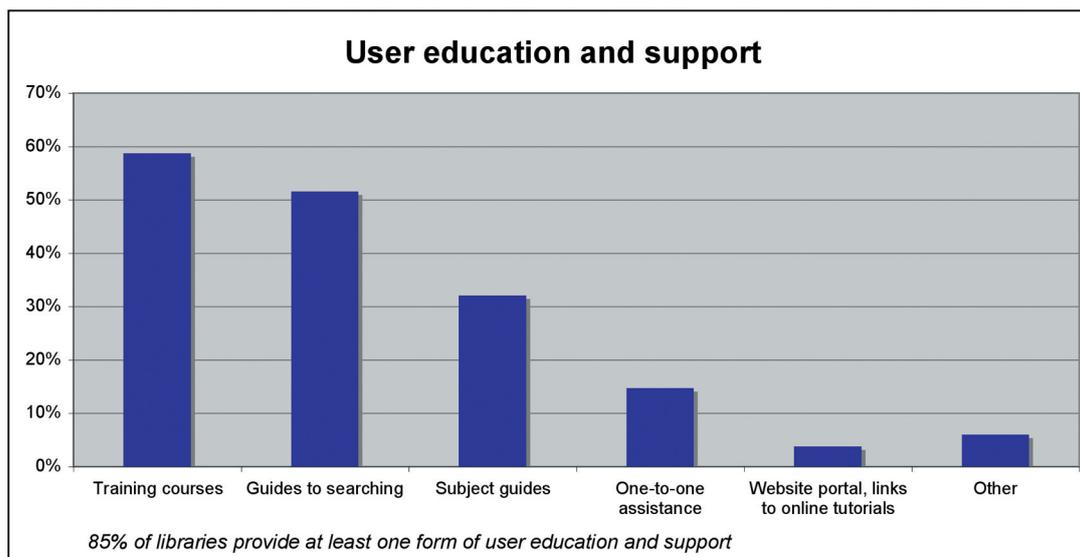
Eighty per cent of respondents imposed time restrictions on internet use, compared to 95 per cent in the 2002 survey, and 89 per cent operated booking systems for internet use, compared to 93 per cent in the 2002 survey.

Library services use a range of approaches to publicise their internet policies to their users, including signs, brochures, library web sites, the screen saver or default screen on public use internet work stations and verbally by library staff.

In 43 per cent of cases, the library service's internet policy has been endorsed by library management. Internet policies may also be endorsed by Council management (24 per cent) or Council (23 per cent). In some cases the policy is endorsed at a state level, for example through a state libraries board or state government minister, or in the case of regional library services through a regional library committee or corporation board. In addition some library services consulted their communities when developing or reviewing their internet policy using methods such as suggestion boxes and library advisory committees with community representation. This is a similar result to the 2002 survey.

Community education and training

Public library services provide extensive user education and support for their internet services. Almost 85 per cent of respondents indicated that they provide at least one form of training or support. There appears to have been a decline in the number of libraries providing internet training courses, 58 per cent in this survey compared to 82 per cent in 2002, but a corresponding increase in libraries providing guides to searching the internet (52 per cent compared to 38 per cent in 2002).



Twenty-eight per cent of respondents have internet training programs specifically for children and/or parents and 60 per cent have internet education programs for seniors. Seventy-four per cent of library services provide free internet education programs.

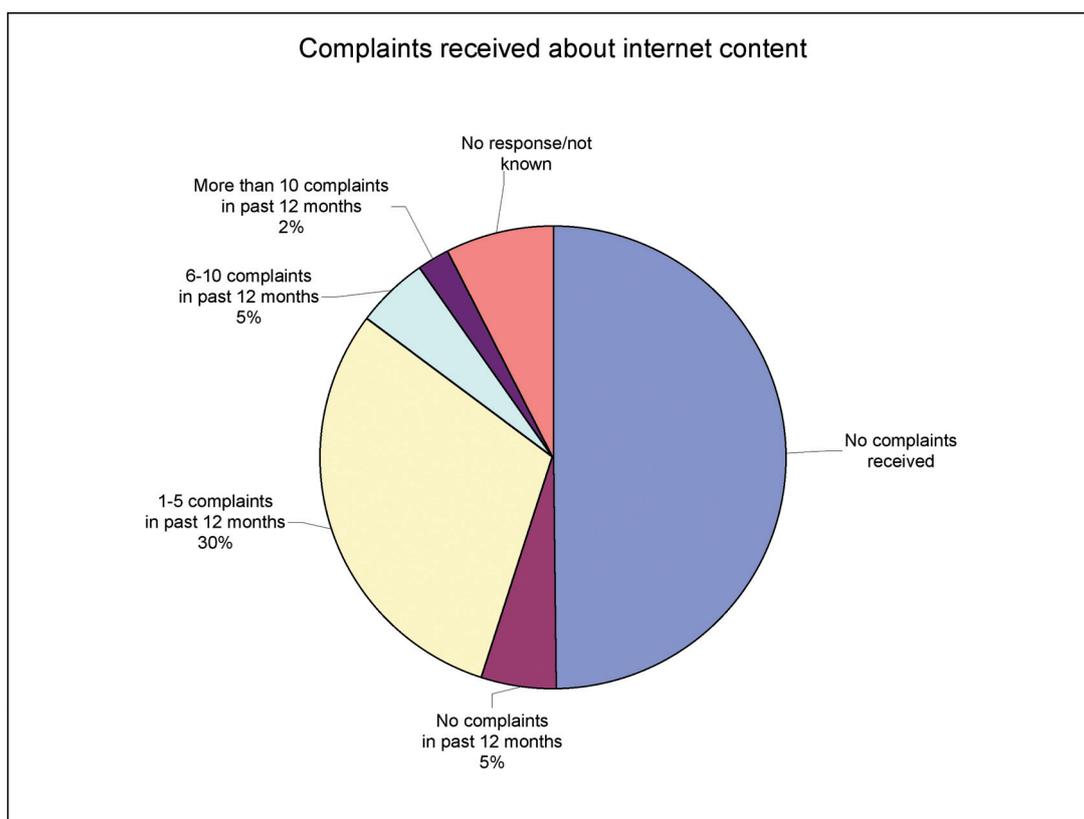
Since 2002, NetAlert, the federal government's community internet education initiative, has developed internet safety programs and information resources specifically targeting libraries. Over the past three years there has been a corresponding increase in public libraries' awareness and use of NetAlert materials. Whereas in the 2002 survey 30 per cent of participants said that they were aware of NetAlert and only eight per cent reported actively using NetAlert materials, in 2005 53 per cent of respondents have received NetAlert materials and 41 per cent provided information to the survey on how the material is being used. It is being displayed and copies made available for library users, it is used in staff training and has been referred to in review of library internet use policies.

Seventy-two per cent of respondents were aware of ALIA's policy and other information relating to online content regulation and internet services in libraries. Many library services have made use of ALIA policy and other information, especially in developing and reviewing their internet use policies. There is a distinctive difference between ALIA institutional members

and non-members in their awareness and use of ALIA's policy and other information relating to online content regulation. While 83 per cent of respondents who were ALIA institutional members were aware of ALIA's policy and other information, only 50 per cent of non-members were aware the Association's policy and information resources.

Complaints

Given the high level of use of internet services in libraries described above, the level of complaints about internet content is very low. The number of libraries reporting receiving complaints about internet content is lower in 2005 than in 2002. Fifty per cent of respondents reported that they had received complaints about internet content, compared to 55 per cent in 2002. Of the 93 library service who reported that they had received complaints, 71 per cent had received five or fewer complaints in the past 12 months. Most complaints were about sexually explicit content, compared to violent, racist or other offensive content.



Selected responses to survey question:

'Please add an other comments about complaints received about internet content'

Complaints about content received prior to one year ago; NetNanny installed now and no problems with content over last 12 months but during last 12 months NetNanny itself has become the source of complaints as it blocks legitimate sites.

Generally complaints are from adjacent users of the Internet and relate to noise and or content and, once the complaint is dealt with by staff, goes no further. We have received no formal general complaints about Internet content available in the library.

The concern was more about what children may be accessing rather than examples of children who actually were accessing.

There is a level of general concern about the internet, particularly relating to pornography and children, but no specific complaints re library.

Filtering is used but some people still manage to access sexually explicit material which infringes our internet policy, upsets clientele.

We have had people questioning how we monitor usage, but not really complaints about content

Filters

Over the past three years, there appears to have been an increase in the use of filtering software by public library services. Thirty-one per cent of respondents to the 2005 survey reported using filters, compared to 18 per cent of respondents in 2002. There has been a corresponding increase in complaints about the use of filters.

Selected responses to survey question:

'If complaints have been received (about the use of filters), please comment on the nature of the complaints'.

...we do have filter software but do not filter whole categories of sites; we block a small number of individual sites that appear to contravene the legislation eg live sex, illegal activity.

Access to certain java enabled pages are periodically prevented. (NB — WebMarshall is used primarily to block applets and active code - no content restrictions are applied)

It can sometimes be too restrictive and staff use their discretion to turn the filters off.

Restrictions can occur on valid sites because of the way the filter operates.

WebMarshall has at times filtered some hotmail correspondence which patrons were not happy about.

Children

Since 2002, libraries have continued to develop their internet services for children. Twenty per cent of respondents have separate internet terminals for children (compared to 16 per cent in 2002) and 52 per cent have websites for children and young adults that link to material especially recommended for them (compared to 47 per cent in 2002).

Seventy-one per cent of respondents required parental consent for children to use the internet. For 60 per cent of those library services which require parental consent the age up to which consent is required is 18 years. For a further 21 per cent the age up to which consent is required is 16 years. Twenty-two per cent of library services required parents to be present with children using the internet. The age up to which a parent or carer is required to be present with a child using the internet varies widely, from four years of age in one case to eighteen years of age in six cases. The most common age limit is 12 years, in 13 cases.

Monitoring

Eighty per cent of respondents reported that they monitor internet use. In most cases this is visual monitoring by library staff. Some libraries collect system data.

Information from monitoring of internet use is used for a variety of purposes: for statistical reporting on levels of use and sites visited; to assist in planning for services and selection and purchase of online resources; for tracking and following up breaches of internet use policy; for reviewing and blocking sites or modifying filtering; and to assist in managing download limits.

Feedback from library users about internet access services

From the comments on the positive feedback received from users, it is evident that libraries' internet services are popular, heavily used and highly valued by library users. It is also evident that the expansion of internet services and improvements in bandwidth and speed that some libraries have been able to achieve in the past few years is well appreciated by library users. Compared to the 2002 survey, there has been a significant increase in positive comments about the quality of equipment, speed and bandwidth (from 4 per cent in 2002 to 20 per cent in 2005) and the ease of access and accessibility of services (from 4 per cent in 2002 to 13 per cent in 2005). Library users also appreciate the free access to the internet provided by public library services.

Correspondingly, while in 2002 50 per cent of negative feedback concerned slow connection and download times, this represented 32 per cent of negative feedback in 2005. Other areas of negative feedback from users relate to the popularity of services which requires many library services to manage demand through booking systems, time restrictions and limiting access to services such as downloading, e-mail, continuous streaming or use of external devices.

Selected responses to the survey question:

'Please comment on the nature and type of feedback (both positive and negative) received from users about internet access in the library service'.

Positive feedback

Feedback is most appreciative, self serve bookings a positive; comment re good management of internet access and behaviours by staff.

Generally positive. Very few issues with inappropriate behaviour and material being downloaded. Internet access is a very large part of our service and growing all staff have skills to support users. Users generally respect the rules and policies in place.

One of the most popular services we provide. Has brought new clients to the library and has improved reader/reference services.

Users are very supportive of the public access internet and particularly comment on the currency of the computers and associated equipment eg printers.

We only have positive feedback regarding the internet.

Negative feedback

Comments related to insufficient terminals to meet demand — we have had to break up some fights when users overstay their booking. Complaints about content and lack of filters are extremely rare.

Would like more intensive assistance with using the internet

Want more PCs. — Want faster access.

Patrons are unhappy about the filtering restrictions, restrictions on downloads and restricted use of e-mail services.

Our library service charges for e-mail and chat. Almost all negative feedback relates to these charges.

As in the earlier survey, respondents reported a low level of concern from users about unfiltered access and the risks of children accessing inappropriate sites.

Comments about internet access in libraries

Thirty-four per cent of respondents provided comments about internet access in libraries.

Comments cover issues such as the importance of internet services to library users and the community. In some communities the library service is a 'safety net' for those who do not have access to a computer or to the internet at home. Some respondents commented that there has been increasing use of the public library's internet services over the past few years for access to government information and services. Internet services have attracted new library users and have changed the way that libraries do their core business.

Some commented on the challenges of managing and monitoring internet services and internet use by children. While one respondent reported being 'pleased to see that Content Keeper [internet filtering software] is installed as a duty of care to young children' another stated 'I don't believe that filtering is a good solution for public libraries. It gives a false sense of security' and another that 'We have found that if the parents are made fully aware of their responsibilities regarding their child accessing the internet then there are no problems.'

Conclusions

As found by the earlier 2002 survey, this recent survey of internet access in public libraries demonstrates that libraries have well-developed policies and service practices to ensure that using the internet is a positive and rewarding experience for the great majority of users, including children. Libraries' internet services are well-managed, with regularly updated and endorsed use policies and strong community education programs. In many libraries, special attention is paid to the needs of children.

Libraries receive very few complaints about internet content. Such complaints and instances of inappropriate use are generally dealt with satisfactorily through the library service's policies and complaints procedures.

Although there appears to be an increase in the number of libraries using filtering software, this has brought its own policy and management issues, for example where access to legitimate sites is blocked.

As in ALIA's earlier survey, the findings of this 2005 survey support a conclusion that the current online content regulatory scheme and the federal government's policy position supporting community education relating to online content are effective

and are broadly in step with community perceptions and values⁵. From the experience of public libraries there is not a high level of concern or complaint from users of public library internet services about offensive or illegal internet content.

There is scope for debate and development of best practice approaches in the public library sector relating to internet access services for children and the monitoring of internet use.

The level of awareness and use of NetAlert and ALIA information resources is commendable and is contributing to libraries providing effective and responsible services. There is scope for further promotion of these resources.

ALIA will incorporate the findings of the survey into its lobbying and advocacy for public library services and in support of freedom of access to information and will publicise the finding to its members, the library sector and more broadly to the community.

Acknowledgements

The Online Content and Regulation Reference Group thanks the state and territory libraries for their assistance in publicising the survey. The Reference Group also thanks all those public library services who participated in the survey.

References and further information

Australia. Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts. *Review of the operation of schedule 5 to the Broadcasting Services Act 1992. Report.* 2004. (http://www.dcita.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/10920/Online_Content_Review_Report.pdf)

Australian Library and Information Association. *Statement on online content regulation and related information resources* (<http://alia.org.au/advocacy/internet.access>)

Australian Bureau of Statistics. *Public libraries 2003–04* (8561.0, 2005)

Environmetrics. *NSW public libraries and e-government: research report.* Library Council of New South Wales, 2005 (<http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/pln/projects.cfm>)

Libraries building communities: the vital contribution of Victoria's public libraries — a research report. Library Board of Victoria, 2005 (http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/about/information/publications/policies_reports/plu_lbc.html)

NetAlert *Librarian's guide to the internet* (<http://netalert.net.au>)

5 The government's position is set out in the 2004 report of the Review of the operation of schedule 5 to the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* (http://www.dcita.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/10920/Online_Content_Review_Report.pdf).

Appendix

Public access internet services

Survey of internet access in public libraries

November 2005

In 2002, ALIA conducted a survey of internet access in public libraries. We are now seeking to update the survey to ensure that we have accurate and up-to-date information in this vital area of library services and freedom of access to information. Would you please complete and submit the survey form by 16 December 2005. You may also return the completed survey form by mail or fax if you prefer. Figures need only be approximate if exact figures are not available.

1 Internet policy	
1.1 Does your library service have an internet use policy? (If no please continue to question 2)	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
1.2 When was the policy last reviewed?	Year <input type="text"/>
1.3 Does the policy include user behaviour policies?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
1.4 Does the policy impose time restrictions on internet use?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
1.5 If restricted, what are the time limits?	<input type="text"/>
1.6 Does the library service operate a booking system for internet use?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
1.7 Does the library service publicise the internet use policy?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
1.8 If publicised, how do you do so? (Please tick all that apply)	<input type="checkbox"/> Signs near terminals <input type="checkbox"/> Website <input type="checkbox"/> Verbally <input type="checkbox"/> Other <input type="checkbox"/> Brochures
1.9 If other selected, what method(s) do you use?	<input type="text"/>
1.10 Was the community consulted when developing the use policy?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
1.11 If consulted, how was this done?(Please tick all that apply)	<input type="checkbox"/> Public meetings <input type="checkbox"/> Mail outs <input type="checkbox"/> Suggestion box in library <input type="checkbox"/> Other
1.12 If other selected, what method(s) do you use?	<input type="text"/>
1.13 At what level was the policy endorsed?	<input type="checkbox"/> Library management <input type="checkbox"/> Council management <input type="checkbox"/> Council <input type="checkbox"/> Other
1.14 If other selected, at what level was the endorsement?	<input type="text"/>
2 Community education and training	
2.1 Training courses	<input type="checkbox"/> Subject guides <input type="checkbox"/> Guides to searching <input type="checkbox"/> Other
2.2 If other selected, what are the programs and services?	<input type="text"/>
2.3 Do you have internet training programs specifically for children and/or parents?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
2.4 Do you have internet training programs for seniors?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
2.5 Is the internet training free?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
2.6 Do your library staff receive internet training?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
2.7 Have you received educational material from NetAlert, the Commonwealth government education initiative, such as <i>The librarian's guide to internet safety</i> ?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No

2.8 If you have received NetAlert material, how has it been used in your library?		
2.9 Are you aware of ALIA's policy and other information relating to online content regulation and internet services in libraries?		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
2.10 If yes, how have you used ALIA's policy and other information?		
3 Complaints		
3.1 Has the library received any complaints about internet content?		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
3.2 If yes, how many such complaints were received in the past twelve months?		
3.3 Were the complaints about content that was: (Please tick all that apply)		<input type="checkbox"/> Sexually explicit <input type="checkbox"/> Violent Racist <input type="checkbox"/> Other
3.4 If other selected, what was the nature of the content?		
3.5 Did any such complaints concern access by children?		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
3.6 Please add any other comments about complaints received about internet content.		
3.7 To your knowledge, have any complaints about internet content been referred by your library users to the Australian Communications and Media Authority (formerly the Australian Broadcasting Authority)?		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
4 Filters		
4.1 Does your library service use filters?		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
4.2 If filtering is used, what is the filtering software used by your library service?		
4.3 Are there unfiltered terminals for adults?		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
4.4 Has the library received any complaints about the use of filters?		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
4.5 If complaints have been received, please comment on the nature of the complaints.		
5 Children		
5.1 Does your library have separate terminals for children?		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
5.2 Does your library have websites for children and young adults that link to material		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
5.3 Is parental consent required for children to use the internet?		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
5.4 If consent is required, for up to what age?		
5.5 Is there an age requirement for parents to be present with children using the internet?		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
5.6 If required, for up to what age?		
6 Monitoring		
6.1 Does your library monitor internet use?		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
6.2 If monitored, how do you monitor internet use? (Please tick all that apply)		<input type="checkbox"/> Collection of system data <input type="checkbox"/> Visual monitoring by library staff <input type="checkbox"/> Other
6.3 If other selected, which methods do you use?		

6.4 Do you collect data on: (Please tick all that apply)	<input type="checkbox"/> Sites accessed by all users? <input type="checkbox"/> Sites accessed by children? <input type="checkbox"/> Other
6.5 If other selected, please add details.	<input type="text"/>
6.6 What use is made of this information?	<input type="text"/>
7 About your library	
7.1 Your location	<input type="checkbox"/> Metropolitan <input type="checkbox"/> Greater metropolitan <input type="checkbox"/> Regional Rural (located in towns of less than 200 people)
7.2 Your state/territory	<input type="text"/>
7.3 How many branches and access points (eg. mobile libraries) does your library service have?	<input type="text"/>
7.4 How many registered users does your library service have?	<input type="text"/>
7.5 How many public internet access terminals does your library service have?	<input type="text"/>
7.6 On average, how many users access the internet each week in your library service?	<input type="text"/>
7.7 Does your library service have staffing specifically dedicated to supporting internet services?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
7.8 If yes, how many hours per week?	<input type="text"/>
7.9 Please comment on the nature and type of feedback (both positive and negative) received from users about internet access in the library service?	<input type="text"/>
7.10 Is your library service an institutional member of ALIA?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
8 Comments	
8.1 What other comments do you have about internet access in libraries?	<input type="text"/>
8.2 Contact details (optional)	<input type="text"/>

Please submit your completed survey form online or send it by mail or fax by 16 December 2005 to:

Online Content and Regulation Reference Group, Australian Library and Information Association, PO Box 6335, Kingston ACT 2604, Fx 02 6282 2249

If you have any questions about the survey please contact: Susan Magnay, manager, planning policy, ph 02 6215 8225, susan.magnay@alia.org.au

ALIA Online Content and Regulation Reference Group, November 2005



For further information:

Australian Library and Information Association
 PO Box 6335 Kingston ACT 2604

ph: 02 6215 8222 • fax: 02 6282 2249 • website: <http://alia.org.au> • enquiry@alia.org.au