

Public Libraries, the Internet, and Economic Uncertainty

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For more than 15 years, the *Public Library Funding and Technology Access*¹ studies have documented the rapid changes in Internet access and services in public libraries and the accompanying successes and challenges that the Internet has raised for libraries. Over these years, the presence of the Internet in public libraries has significantly shaped the social roles of public libraries and the expectations for public libraries by patrons, communities, and governments (Bertot, Jaeger & McClure, in press).

As a result of the early embrace of providing free public Internet access, public libraries have become centers of Internet access in society, with patrons, communities, employers, and governments relying on the availability of free public Internet access through public libraries (Bertot, 2009; Bertot, McClure, & Jaeger, 2008; McClure, Jaeger, & Bertot, 2007). While there are some critics of the Internet in public libraries, there is little dispute that the public library has become the primary community-based public access point for Internet services for people with no other means of access, for people with limited access, and for people who need help in accessing the Internet. The studies show that the Internet both serves to augment existing library services and to establish new social roles, with e-government and emergency response being two of the most prominent new roles (Jaeger, 2008; Jaeger & Bertot, 2009).

More commonplace crises have also led to new ways that patrons rely on the public library. In the current economic downturn, use of public libraries and library computers for job seeking activities, social services, email access, entertainment, and other purposes has increased substantially (Carlton, 2009; CNN, 2009; Van Sant, 2009). Further, as some people consider home Internet access to be a luxury that can be cut to save money in harsh economic times, this usage of libraries for information access and exchange is likely to continue to increase (Horrigan, 2008).

For all of the new responsibilities that libraries have taken on as a result of their role as guarantor of Internet access and training, the significantly increased reliance on Internet access and training by patrons applying for jobs, seeking social support, and looking for free entertainment options in challenging economic times presents especially significant challenges for libraries. The same economic challenges that are increasing library and Internet need and usage are simultaneously draining library budgets, as state and local governments have been increasingly disinclined to invest in public libraries given badly declining tax revenues and the financial uncertainties of the future.

¹ Previously known as the *Public Libraries and the Internet* national survey. Previous study reports are available at <http://www.plinternetsurvey.org>.

The 2009-2010 *Public Library Funding and Technology Access* national survey (Bertot, Langa, Grimes, Simmons, & Sigler, 2010), funded by the American Library Association and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, employed a web-based survey approach to gather data which were collected between September 2009 and November 2009. The survey obtained both national and state level data about many facets of public library public access technology infrastructure, Internet-enabled services and resources, training, and funding at both public library system and outlet (branch) levels. The data from this study offer critical insights into the ability of public libraries to maintain, enhance, and/or innovate with their Internet technologies. In addition, the ability of the public library to support its Internet access and training impacts the extent to which those dependent on public library access are able to engage in educational, employment, e-government, entertainment, and other Internet-dependent services that are of importance to increasing numbers of people in the current economic climate.

This paper will provide insights into the ways in which public libraries are using the Internet to meet patron, community, and government needs in this time of economic crisis. Drawing from the data and findings from the 2009-2010 *Public Library Funding and Technology Access* national survey, this paper will examine key issues at the intersection of public libraries, the Internet, and economic uncertainty, including issues related to library budgets, job seeking, social service applications and other e-government usage, educational activities, and entertainment sources. In these difficult economic circumstances, public libraries are able to use the Internet to meet many significant patron and community needs, but face numerous economic difficulties in meeting these needs.

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