Public Access Technologies In Public Libraries: Effects And Implications

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Abstract

Public libraries were early adopters of Internet-based technologies and have provided public access to the Internet and computers since the early 1990s. The landscape of public-access Internet and computing was substantially different in the 1990s as the World Wide Web was only in its initial development. At that time, public libraries essentially experimented with public access Internet and computer services, largely absorbing this service into existing service and resource provision without substantial consideration of the management, facilities, staffing, and other implications of public-access technology (PAT) services and resources. This article explores the implications for public libraries of the provision of PAT and seeks to look further to review issues and practices associated with PAT provision resources. While much research focuses on the amount of public access that public libraries provide, little offers a view of the effect of public access on libraries. This article provides insights into some of the costs, issues, and challenges associated with public access and concludes with recommendations that require continued exploration.

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Public libraries have an exciting opportunity to help bring everyone into this global conversation and to bridge what is often called ‘the digital divide’. They can achieve this by providing information technology for public access, by teaching basic computer skills and by participating in programmes to combat illiteracy. However, to fulfil the principle of access for all, they must also continue to maintain services that provide information in different ways, for example, through print or the oral tradition. This article explores the implications for public libraries of the provision of PAT and seeks to look further to review issues and practices associated with PAT provision resources. While much research focuses on the amount of public access that public libraries provide, little offers a view of the effect of public access on libraries. This article provides insights into some of the costs, issues, and challenges associated with public access and concludes with recommendations that require continued exploration. For example, online public access catalogs (OPACs) require users to search for information, and though many are beginning to incorporate Web 2.0 techniques by gathering data regarding a user (checked-out items, preferred searches, search alerts), they do not respond with recommendations, as does Amazon.com, a more dynamic, Web 2.0 service. Another implication of streaming media for libraries is more along the lines of collections instead of services. As media is created, libraries will inevitably be the institutions responsible for archiving and providing access to them. It will not be enough to simply create “hard-copies” of these objects and allow users to access them within the confines of the library’s physical space, however.