This paper presents findings from two separate public library Internet connectivity surveys conducted in the United States and Victoria, Australia. The primary survey goals were to assess U.S. and Victoria public library involvement with and use of the Internet. The surveys found considerable progress in U.S. and Victoria public library Internet connectivity. This article argues, however, that connectivity is not the same as the provision of network-based services. Thus, this article identifies issues that public librarians, policy makers, and researchers should consider as public libraries make the transition to the electronic networked environment and increasingly provide electronic services.

Both United States and Victoria public libraries consider the vast resources of the Internet to be vital to public library services of the future. Increasingly, government information, reference material, and other publications are available in electronic format – particularly via the Internet. Moreover, in some instances such as government information, certain information and data are available solely through such vehicles as the World-Wide Web (Web).

Such trends have profound implications for public libraries as libraries search to define their roles in the electronic networked environment. While public libraries continue to connect rapidly to the Internet, librarians are left to wonder what, exactly, does it mean to provide digital services.

This article presents data from two separate public library Internet studies conducted in the United States (Bertot, McClure, and Fletcher, 1997) and Victoria, Australia (Bertot and McClure, 1998a). Both studies examined the current state of public library Internet connectivity and use at the library system level. Based on the findings from the studies, the authors present key issues and strategies for public libraries as they make the transition to the electronic networked environment.

Current Library Networking Context

This section presents a brief and selective description of the current public library-based networking context in Victoria and the United States. It is not intended to be exhaustive. Rather, it identifies key aspects of the current policy and networking environments for discussion purposes.

The Victoria Context

In December 1997, the Premier of Victoria launched the Networking for all Victorians project. The project was a grassroots effort by those in the public library community that saw the importance of creating a statewide effort to connect all public libraries to the Internet. Viclink, a public library system governing body for the state of Victoria, submitted a grant proposal to the Victorian Government’s Community Support Fund for a grant to link all Victorian public libraries to the Internet and provide free public access for all Victorians. The purpose of the grant was to:

- Provide all Victorians with affordable access to information electronically;
- Develop a network infrastructure;
- Provide community benefit;
• Provide equitable access to electronic information and resources; and
• Build on the public library network.

These goals provided the basis for Victoria public library network connectivity activities.

A Working Group comprised of Victoria public librarians and representatives from Arts Victoria, VICNET (an Internet Service Provider — ISP — housed in the State Library that initially saw its role as being the public library ISP), and Viclink undertook to oversee the project. The Working Group identified three levels of access for public libraries, and recommended that libraries should attain levels of connectivity following these stages:

- Level one - ISDN to the headquarters of every Victorian public library service, and public Internet access provided;
- Level two - ISDN to at least the headquarters of every Victorian public library service, and public Internet access at most branches through ISDN and/or dial-up; and
- Level three - Public Internet access via a wide area network (WAN) to all branches in the library system. The library runs its own file server for community information, publishing etc.

Grant applications by library systems were submission based, with significant input from VICNET. The library was required to make a commitment to ongoing costs associated with maintaining connectivity. A component of the grant went straight to VICNET and a further amount was identified for training. Funds were allocated on the number of branches in a system at a fixed rate per branch ($2,500AU per branch). Viclink conducted a one-day seminar designed to provide library directors with the necessary tools and information to enable a strategic implementation plan to be devised and to prepare submissions.

The U.S. Context

Unlike in Victoria, there is no national public library Internet connectivity program in the United States. Rather there exists a multi-level, often competing and contradictory, policy environment that generally leaves public libraries to fend for themselves to get connected. The national government in the U.S. (federal) provides less than one percent of public library funding, thus public library funds are largely from state and local governments. There are, however, recent federal policies and legislation that can have a tremendous impact on U.S. public library Internet connectivity.

The Telecommunications Act of 1996. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-104) (TCA) was the first significant legislative overhaul to the Communications Act of 1934. The TCA essentially updated a variety of key aspects of the telecommunications industry, creating a more market-driven industry that relied on competition to foster lower telecommunications rates throughout the nation (Mueller, 1997).

The universal service provision of the TCA specifically directed the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to create a discount structure for telecommunications services for schools, libraries, and rural health care institutions (P.L. 104-104, Section 254). Based on the broad guidelines established by the TCA, the FCC issued its final universal service rulemaking on May 7, 1997. In this ruling, the FCC created a (Federal Communications Commission, 1997, Section X):

- $2.25 billion annual discount fund for schools and libraries;
- Telecommunications discount structure ranging from 20-90% for telecommunications services (defined as telecommunications conduits — e.g., leased-lines, internal wiring, and Internet connectivity). The discount rate a school or library can receive depends on the percentage of students on school lunch programs and the location (urban/rural) of the school or library.

The universal service provisions of the TCA, and the FCC implementation of those provisions, are aimed specifically at increasing connectivity of schools and libraries to the Internet. Libraries and schools may receive special attention to promote affordable access to the Internet and the availability to Internet services. As Section 254b details, schools and libraries are to receive universal service considerations along the following principles:

- Quality and Rates: Quality services should be available at just, reasonable, and affordable rates.
- Access to Advanced Services: Access to advanced telecommunications and information services should be provided to all regions of the Nation.
- Access in Rural and High Cost Areas: Consumers in all regions of the Nation, including low-income consumers and those in rural, insular, and high cost areas, should have access to telecommunications and information services that are reasonably comparable to those services provided in urban areas and that are available at rates that are reasonable comparable to rates charged for similar services in urban areas.
- Equitable and Nondiscriminatory Contributions: All providers of telecommunications services should make an equitable and non-discriminatory contribution to the preservation and advancement of universal service.
- Access to Advanced Telecommunications Services for Schools, Health Care, and Libraries: Elementary and secondary schools and classrooms, health care providers, and libraries should have access to advanced telecommunications services as described in subsection (h).
- Additional Principles: Such other principles as the Joint Board and the Commission determine are necessary and appropriate for the protection of the public interest, convenience, and necessity and are consistent with this Act.

Later, in section (B) of the universal services provision, the law states “all telecommunications carriers serving a geo-
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