



31 March 2006

This media release: <http://alia.org.au/media.room/2006.03.31.html>

Library internet access is for everyone

"Australia's public libraries are key players in addressing the need for equitable community access to online information and services," says executive director of the Australian Library and Information Association, Sue Hutley.

Ms Hutley, responding to a media statement made by Senator Guy Barnett, said "The Australian Family Association's survey is totally misleading."

The Australian Library and Information Association together with public libraries have been keeping a close watch on internet use and content since libraries first began offering access to the world wide web.

The Association has recently completed its second comprehensive survey of internet delivery, use and management across over 700 Australian public libraries.

"In our most recent national survey completed in December 2005 we found 30 per cent of the libraries surveyed use filtering software" said Ms Hutley. "We also found that the increase in the use of filtering services (up 12 per cent since the first survey in 2002), has brought with it a corresponding increase in complaints, mainly about filters blocking legitimate sites," Ms Hutley said.

The majority of libraries do have policies and guidelines for the use of the internet and these policies are often available on the library's website.

"Libraries have a duty of care, and we take this very seriously. The facts are that there are 1500 public library locations in Australia, and a significant proportion of them require parental consent or adult supervision for children to use the internet," she said.

Because libraries provide information access and expertise to all members of the community, not just children, access is a very real concern.

"Imagine if you had just been diagnosed with breast cancer, and wanted to find out more about your options for treatment using the internet," said Ms Hutley. "Internet filtering could stop you, and this is not acceptable in terms of what public libraries are there for," she said.

"The role of these libraries is, first and foremost, to promote the free flow of information. That is a core value of libraries and librarians everywhere," said Ms Hutley.

"Findings from our 2005 survey showed over 77 000 people access internet services through public libraries each week," she said. "The survey revealed 2.2 per cent of complaints received by librarians were about internet content, and that covered all content issues, not just inappropriate material." (Survey results available at <http://alia.org.au/advocacy/internet.access/>)

The Association's survey also revealed many libraries deal with the special needs and interests of children by providing separate internet terminals and websites for children and young adults that link to resources especially tailored for them. "Qualified professionals provide training and advice on internet use in libraries as an integral part of the service." Ms Hutley added.

"Filtering is not the answer," said Ms Hutley. "The Australian library and information profession believes the current legislation relating to online content is appropriate and workable." she said.

Survey results can be viewed at <http://alia.org.au/advocacy/internet.access/> from 31 March 2006

For further information:

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Statement on Public Library Services: <http://www.alia.org.au/policies/public.library.services.html>

Statement on Online Content Regulation: <http://www.alia.org.au/policies/content.regulation.html>