

AUSTRALIANS AND INFORMATION ACCESS: A FRAMEWORK FOR A NATIONAL AGENDA FOR PUBLIC LIBRARIES

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ABSTRACT

Australians have been able to access extensive information and knowledge services through public libraries. The role of these libraries has expanded in the past decade through digital services and literacy projects. Public library funding and support has been fragmented and Australians access to service has very much depended on where they happen to live.

This paper reviews the information needs of Australians, the value of public libraries to their communities and the state of public libraries in 2008. It outlines critical issues including access to information through the Internet and the lack of a policy context for national development. Strategies taken by national, state and public libraries such as Electronic Resources Australia, Ask now the collaborative digital reference service and collection access services such as Libraries Australia are presented in terms of their impact on making library collections and expertise available to Australians.

Discussion then occurs on key issues for the nation in access to information and services through public libraries within the COAG framework.

Introduction

Australians are living in a rich information age both in terms of the information that is produced and the arenas where we need to use information. Around us there is a digital “explosion” of information – one that not just Generation X and Y are experiencing.

For all of us, the need for information is also increasing. The move to distance/flexible delivery of learning and teaching means that many are studying throughout Australia with a commensurate need for access to quality information resources beyond the physical walls of their education institution.

For many communities the new online environment means that information about their region and special aspects of their communities need to be recorded and made accessible online. The wonderful collections of photographs now available through PictureAustralia are a marvelous example of how information about communities can be collected from across the world, from organizations and individuals, and made available to communities wherever they are.

Australians have a growing interest in their history – family and community history. As the average age of the population increases, the number of people with time to research their personal history and genealogy is increasing dramatically. This research is leading to new publications in print and online, from which further investigation can occur.

We are a nation of extraordinary ethnic and cultural diversity. Of the 21 million in this country, one in four were born overseas. Supporting information access for this diverse population and indeed providing literacy skills to enable participation in day to day activities, is vital for an effective nation.

In attending the first meeting of the Australian Social Inclusion Board, the Hon Julia Gillard MP, Minister for Education, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, Minister for Social Inclusion, and Deputy Prime Minister (Gillard, 2008) noted that:

Every Australian should have an opportunity to be a full participant in the life of the nation. Unfortunately, too many Australians remain locked out of the benefits of work, education, community engagement and access to basic services. This social exclusion is a significant barrier to sustained prosperity and restricts Australia's future economic growth. Promoting social inclusion requires a new way of governing. Australia must rethink how policy and programs across portfolios and levels of government can work together to combat economic and social disadvantage.

Participation in our community is significantly enhanced by access to information skills and support – and public libraries (national, state and local) are a major part of this support system).

In 2003, the Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts References Committee inquiry into *Libraries in the online environment* (Australia. Senate, 2003) noted that:

More and more information is being made available for online access, and an increasing number of Australians are accessing it online. For the foreseeable future, however, there will be a continuing need for quality public access to the Internet to bridge the 'digital divide' and to ensure that as many citizens as possible are included in the online world...Libraries have traditionally performed a valuable role in the provision of all manner of information, in an accessible, safe, non-judgmental and supportive environment.

The importance of public libraries for access to information and social cohesion was demonstrated by two submissions to the Inquiry:

As a regular and frequent user of public libraries we are very concerned at the disparity in public libraries' provision of free access to the on-line environment.

We have used public libraries in Melbourne and Sydney, and generally speaking there is reasonable, if limited, access to computers and the internet free of charge, and libraries are open in the evenings and weekends. Moreover, you are never more than a few kilometres from a range of public library branches.

However, it is a totally different story when we moved to rural New South Wales. Here in the Regional Centre of Lismore we find that libraries have very limited opening hours, inadequate staff, no technical staff for computers etc. and inadequate numbers of computers. Here in the country residents just don't have adequate free access to the on-line environment.

What exacerbates this already inequitable situation is the fact that line costs are higher in the country in many cases, and also there is limited access to broadband. Furthermore, country libraries don't seem to provide training in internet use: they don't have enough staff. Thus many country people remain ignorant of the help and information they could derive from the on-line environment.

Australia currently has developed a two-tier system – the information-rich in the metropolitan areas, and the information-poor in rural and regional Australia. This is a national shame and disgrace. Your Committee must highlight this disparity of provision.

*I urge the Committee to ensure steps are taken by both Federal and State Governments to provide specific funding for the public libraries in rural and regional Australia **so that country folk have fair and equitable access to the on-line environment.** (Field, 2003)*

Many Australian towns are still like Mallacoota where I live. Here we have extremely limited access to public TV channels (only the ABC, and not SBS), or radio stations or metropolitan or world newspapers, and only some aging computers at a telecentre which is trying to find its role in the community (and about to close at the end of this month).

At a time when the electronic media makes it possible for anyone using an online computer to speak to climbers as they ascend Mount Everest, Mallacoota residents are being starved of even the most basic information available online. For the first time in history it is now possible to stay abreast of events and knowledge anywhere in the world and from wherever you live and it is not happening for very many in our small town...

Online libraries are a goal to aim for. (Brandl, 2003)

To understand the opportunities that public libraries provide to support communities, it is first useful to look at the value of libraries.

Public libraries: their value

Over the past years there have been many developments in evaluation theory which has led to the development of methodologies to measure the value of programs and organisations operating in the knowledge economy and contributing to social capital. These methodologies are beginning to be applied to libraries and a body of literature has developed.

In the 1990s a new wave of studies emerged – taking a broader view of the value of libraries and seeking to establish their value to managers, stakeholders and clients. Establishing the perspectives of these core groups and then assessing the relevance of the library service emerged in studies of special libraries first, particularly corporate libraries. The high point of this wave can be seen in the new studies of value using return on investment and contingent valuation. These studies are generally undertaken to determine the economic benefit to citizens of public libraries and the economic benefit of particular services, such as national union catalogues and bibliographic services.

The concept of return on investment has been in existence for a number of decades. The NOAA Panel on Contingent Valuation noted in 1993 that “The contingent valuation technique has been used for twenty years or so to estimate passive use values.”(p 4603). At its heart is the principle of costing activities and the benefits from these activities to individuals. It is a methodology related to consumer surplus which has also been used to calculate return on investment.

Contingent valuation is an economic methodology used to estimate the value that a person places on a good or service. Applied through the 1990s in studies of environmental goods and services, it is based on surveying individuals to establish value. It seeks to determine how much individuals would be prepared to pay, willingness-to-pay (WTP) in order to secure the provision of a public good. For example they may be asked a question such as “What are you

prepared to pay for 5 days per year of clean air?”. In addition, they are asked how much money they would be willing to accept for loss of quality of life - willingness-to-accept (WTA). For example they may be asked a question such as “What is the minimum amount you would be prepared to accept in compensation for a reduction of 5 days per year of clean air?”

Recent studies of libraries have occurred in public and national library sectors and are summarised below.

British Library study (2004): The British Library commissioned Spectrum Strategy Consultants and Idepen to undertake a report to assess the contribution of the Library to the economy. The study was based on contingent valuation and assessed the value enjoyed indirectly and directly by UK citizens.

The study showed that the British Library generates value around 4.4 times the level of its public funding:

- The total value each year of the British Library is £363m - £59m comes directly from users of the services and £304m comes from wider society
- For every £1 of public funding the British Library receives each year, £4.40 is generated for the economy
- If public funding of the Library were to end, the UK would lose £280m per annum.

The economic impact of public libraries on **South Carolina (2005):** The University of South Carolina's School of Library and Information Science, in partnership with the South Carolina State Library and the SC Association of Public Library Administrators conducted a Public Library Economic Impact Survey based on surveys in 2004.

The study was in two parts, with the first based on a survey to determine the perceived value of the libraries for general use, business use, personal investment use and job seeking use. The findings from this part of the study were that the public library:

The second component of the study analysed the financial value of service provided by the library network as follows:

- Direct economic impact of all public library expenditures = \$80 million
- Public libraries bring almost \$5 million (from federal and private sources) that the state would not otherwise have (excludes funds received directly by the S.C. State Library)
- Value of the loan and use of books, videos, cassettes, CDs, newspapers, magazines and other materials to users is approximately \$102 million (based on comparable retail costs).
- Value of reference services to users is approximately \$26 million. (Estimate based on time saved.)
- The bottom line -- Total direct and indirect return on investment is \$347 million. This means that for every \$1 spent on public libraries by state and local governments, the state receives \$4.48, a nearly 350 percent ROI. ~ The breakdown -- Total direct economic impact of public libraries is estimated at \$222 million, while the actual cost of these services to the state and local governments is only \$77.5 million. (p. 4)

Florida public libraries ROI study (2004): Drs Jose-Marie Griffiths, Donald King and Thomas Lynch prepared perhaps the most detailed public library study in 2003. They found, from surveys and statistical analysis:

Libraries play an important role in economic development across the state, from providing informational resources for small businesses to helping Floridians develop marketable

skills. The total direct economic impact of Florida's public libraries on the state economy is \$6 billion a year.

- Libraries bring a substantial return on investment for Florida's taxpayers. Overall, Florida's public libraries return \$6.54 to the economy for every \$1 invested from all sources.
- The economic impact of libraries directly affects Florida's citizens. Every dollar invested in Florida's public libraries results in an additional \$12.66 in wages in Florida's economy.
- Libraries are efficient economic engines. A \$1 public investment in libraries results in a \$9.08 increase in the gross state product.
- Strong neighborhood libraries are community anchors that improve the quality of life, helping cities and counties across Florida grow and thrive. Local communities are building more public libraries today than ever before. Floridians visited public libraries over 66 million times in 2002. (Griffiths, King and Lynch, 2004 p. 4)

St. Louis Public Library study (1999): Funded by Institute of Museum & Library Services a cost-benefit project was undertaken based on analysis of expenditure by the library and users. User surveys were a key to determine the value of the libraries in the five public libraries included in the study – St. Louis Public Library, King County Library System, Seattle; Baltimore County Public Library; Birmingham Public Library, Alabama; and Phoenix Public Library. In St. Louis 320 library members were surveyed to identify consumer surplus (library users were asked to place a dollar value on specific services); contingent valuation (questions focused on willingness to accept to go without library services); and opportunity cost (questions focused on the expenditure in using the library including time and travel).

The contingent valuation methodology found different results in each library system. Baltimore County Public Library returned \$3-\$6 in benefit per tax dollar. Birmingham Public Library returned \$1.30-\$2.70, King County Library System returned \$5-\$10 and Phoenix Public Library returned over \$10. St. Louis Public Library returned \$2.50-\$5 in benefits per tax dollar. Libraries also were considered to yield a good return on invested capital. The return was calculated to be 72% for Baltimore County Public Library, 5% for Birmingham Public Library, 94% for King County Library System, 150% for Phoenix Public Library and 22% for St. Louis Public Library.

Victoria public libraries: In 2005 a project undertaken for the State Library of Victoria found:

The LBC study shows that libraries and librarians make a fundamental contribution to our communities in four key areas: they provide free public access to computer and information technology resources; by helping people locate information they create better-informed communities; they run programs that promote lifelong learning and literacy in the community; and they build connections between individuals, groups and government.

Just how important public libraries are to community life can be seen in the following statistics. On average, every day every Victorian public library will lend about 500 items; each will receive nearly 270 visits from a total of 2.5 million registered users (over half the Victorian population) and respond to nearly 30 reference enquiries. Libraries will provide these services from a resource base that amounts to about 9 million books, magazines, audio books and videos through a network of 238 branches and 30 mobile libraries open a total of 10,500 hours every week. Imagine our communities without them.

People place a high monetary value on these services. Survey respondents valued a small library with 20,000 registered users at about \$20 million a year; this figure ranged upwards to \$730 million a year for a larger library with about 150,000 registered users. (State Library of Victoria, 2005 p 5-6)

The studies listed above demonstrate that there is a direct benefit to users is perceived to be many times that of the actual investment in the service.

Working together for Australians

Libraries have demonstrated that by working together Australians can have access to quality information resources and services.

Electronic Resources Australia (ERA) was created in response to the needs of individuals across the nation identified by the Senate inquiry. It was the outcome of considerable discussion by all library sectors. At the 4th and final National Licensing Proposal forum in 2007, all sectors agreed to develop a truly national purchasing consortia to purchase resources for Australians. ERA unashamedly sets out to:

Deliver access for Australians to quality to resources through their libraries.

It provides a national approach, managed by and for all Australian libraries for their users.

Electronic Resources Australia offers significant potential benefits for Australians and their libraries. These are:

- Australians across all rural, regional and urban areas, all social groups and diverse community organisations could have access to quality electronic resources through all types of libraries.
- Australians would benefit through access to information that supports business, vocational, government, educational and community activities.
- A national licence would be a very tangible step towards overcoming the isolation experienced daily by those living in rural and remote regions of Australia by facilitating their access to reliable and readily available information sources.
- Significant business opportunities and economies of scale would be offered to publishers and suppliers of Australian online resources through access to national markets.
- The bargaining position of libraries would be strengthened by negotiating as a consortium, offering vendors economies of scale and single-point purchasing. Subscriptions to their electronic resources would become more affordable for libraries, and this benefit would flow on to their users in improved services.
- The broader Australian community would become more aware of the benefits of electronic resources and so make more effective and profitable use of them.
- Libraries would acquire a higher profile at all levels of government.

The ERA initiative opens the way to producing a framework for the creation of licences across different library sectors that satisfy the needs of libraries, consumers and vendors.

It will facilitate the creation of mutually effective agreements between all interested parties with regard to costs, access principles, authentication and performance measurements. However it is only with the cooperation of us all that the full benefits of ERA will be fully realised.

By working together Australian libraries can achieve greater outcomes for our customers; you too can be a part of history when you put your support behind this project.

ERA celebrates its first anniversary in 2008, having focused on delivering content to libraries through selecting, through a tender process, products which are of interest to many libraries. Products in three categories were selected:

- *Australian News & Business Information*
 - [ABI/INFORM@ Global](#) / ProQuest
 - [Asian Business and Reference™](#) / ProQuest
 - [Australia & New Zealand Newsstand](#) / ProQuest
- *General Reference*
 - [Australia/New Zealand Reference Centre™](#) / EBSCO Publishing
 - [Oxford Reference Online: Premium Collection](#) / Oxford University Press
 - [World Book Online Reference Center](#) / Forward Learning Pty Ltd
- *Health Information*
 - [Consumer Health Complete™](#) / EBSCO Publishing
 - [Health & Wellness Resource Center](#) / Gale Cengage Learning
 - [Health Reference Center Academic](#) / Gale Cengage Learning

Approximately **6,750,000** Australians are served by libraries that subscribe to resources through ERA.

In total there are 485 libraries and consortia from all sectors subscribing to products through ERA:

Summary of libraries/ consortia subscribing through ERA

	ACT	NSW	SA	WA	VIC	TAS	NT	QLD	Total
Public	0	24	18	2	11	0	0	6	61
Academic	0	1	0	1	2	0	0	1	5
School	5	131	59	37	113	2	2	21	370
TAFE	1	1	1	1	5	0	0	0	9
Special	14	5	1	1	5	1	2	3	32
NSLA	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	8
Totals	22	163	80	43	137	4	5	31	485

Tab. 1: ERA: Summary of libraries subscribing 2007/08

These figures demonstrate an enormous benefit to the nation, based on a strong commitment by many libraries. While we had anticipated a slow start because of the complexities of change, the small product range and the complexities of our acquisition program, this is a very significant achievement.

All Australians could access the high quality resources if there was a nationally funded model. The current basis for the consortium results in access dependent on local funding models,

which, given these are a key set of community resources, is less than adequate for an informed nation.

Answering enquiries online: AskNow is a virtual reference service staffed by librarians in Australia and New Zealand. It uses software that allows individuals through the internet to ask questions and be provided with resources and skills. It aims to provide high quality information to users, with the convenience of immediate, online communication. Using purpose-built software, it allows librarians and users to interact in real time. It is a collaborative service offered by [National & State Libraries Australasia](#) (NSLA). More than 160 librarians, from 22 libraries, rostered three at a time, provide information and research help in real time. 87% of clients in the 2006 / 2007 financial year rated the service as good, very good or excellent

Over 108,000 sessions have been conducted since 2004; an average of 31,127 per year.

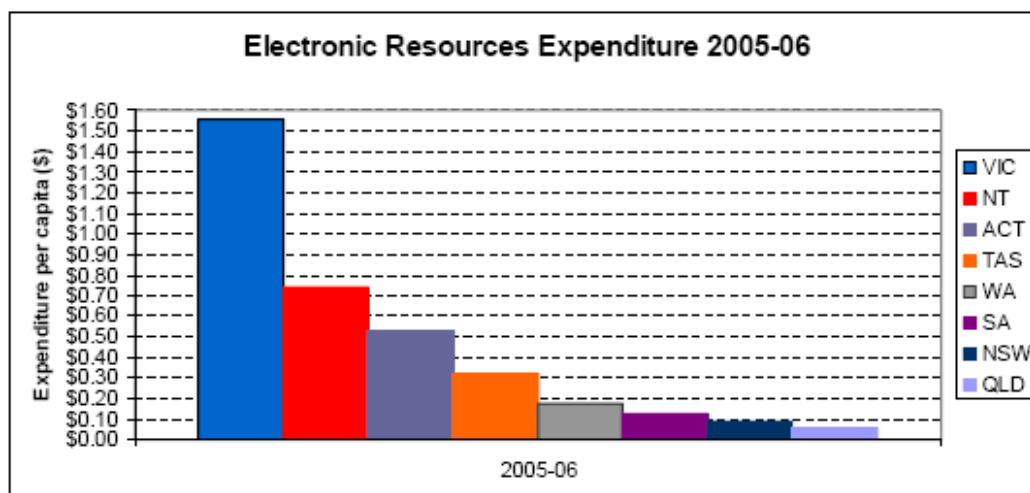
Questions in 2006-07 ranged as follows:

- 61% of enquiries were for research or study;
- 23% of enquiries were for personal interest or family history;
- 11% of enquiries were for work or business; and
- 5% of enquiries were for other reasons

Key issues for Australians

Creating a national approach to enable Australians to be able to access and have the support and skills to use a rich array of quality information sources is a major policy arena. There are many challenges that are described below.

1. **Variability in resources based on location:** The present funding framework for national, state, territory and local government means that Australians have access to information and library services inconsistently across the nation. For example access to electronic resources varies significantly:



Tab. 2: Expenditure on Electronic resources per capital (National & State Libraries Australasia, 2007 p 17)

The range of collections, public access terminals and other services vary significantly across all states.

- 2. Government services are increasingly accessed through public libraries:** Libraries have historically provided extensive access to government publications. Formal arrangement for supplying resources to libraries have included the parliamentary paper distribution scheme, the Australian Bureau of Statistics Library Extension Program and the Free Library Distribution Scheme of the Australian Government Information Management Office (previously the by the Australian Government Publishing Service). These programs ensured that national, state, selected public and university libraries were supplied with copies of government publications. The program has enabled citizens to have access to government information through a range of geographically dispersed libraries.

In the predominantly online environment, it could have been expected that libraries would not need to be involved in providing access to government publications and e-government services. Research has shown, however, that this is not the case, and that the role of public libraries is even more important, particularly for those without Internet access at home.

Public libraries have had to pick up the burden of supporting public use of government services. A study of New South Wales public libraries (Environmetrics 2004, State Library of New South Wales 2004) found:

Increasing demand. Most librarians report increasing client use of individual Government websites, for both content information and process or transaction based purposes.

An invisible draw on resources. While libraries were aware of some high-demand government online services, librarians rarely had an overview of all government services accessed by their clients... (State Library of New South Wales 2004, p. 1)

The communities increased reliance of public libraries for support for use of government services has been unanticipated by those producing these services. Only a small number of agencies provide training and information support to public libraries in this role. The Australian Bureau of Statistics Library Extension Program is a good model of extending information to Australians through public libraries through activities based in all states and territories.

Research into public libraries in the United States echoes this finding:

Public access to the Internet and computers is transforming public libraries into de facto e-government access points... This new role for public libraries is not just user-initiated. Government agencies now refer people to public libraries to receive both access to and assistance with online services. (Bertot, 2006).

Public libraries have been funded in other countries to support access through public libraries. In the United Kingdom funding for the Peoples network (<http://www.peoplesnetwork.gov.uk/>) has enabled public libraries to develop both improved skills in library staff and improved services for resource discovery of e-government, including government publications and services. By delivering on a policy to develop online services with libraries as a key delivery component the community, particularly those in lower socio-economic groups, access to e-government has been successfully supported.

- 3. Internet access:** For those affected by the “digital divide” who are unable to afford or have the skills to access the Internet, public libraries have a vital role. The number of public access terminals has increased and demand continues to grow:

	ACT	NSW	NT	QLD	SA	TAS	VIC	WA	Australia
2001-02	56	1,452	68	718	503	92	1,065	425	4,379
2002-03	65	1,630	68	900	518	94	1,170	570	5,015
2003-04	72	1,773	70	976	586	100	1,154	570	5,301
2004-05	77	1,963	122	1,194	628	100	1,251	630	5,965
2005-06	72	2,082	133	1,388	636	115	1,354	676	6,456
Change over 5 year period	29%	43%	96%	93%	26%	25%	27%	59%	47%
Change to previous year	-6%	6%	9%	16%	1%	15%	8%	7%	8%

Tab. 3: Public Access Internet Terminals in public libraries (Nationals State Libraries Australasia, 2007 p 18)

Major programs increasing the range of quality resources available to Australians through their public libraries include ERA and legal and health information programs in a number of states.

4. **Access and support for people with a disability:** For those with a disability access to information is a very significant challenge a recent study in Victoria found:

The provision of fast, reliable, cheap (or preferably free) internet access at public libraries was found to be very important. The vast majority of respondents with disabilities use the internet and they use it at public libraries at a significantly higher rate than do people in the general population.

Importantly, over half the respondents with disabilities also said they would like to use the internet more. Given the fact that so many services are now provided online and the internet is such an entrenched part of modern life, equal access to it for everyone is vital. Public libraries in Victoria play an important role in mitigating the effects of the “digital divide” on people with a disability.

The most common complaints about internet access at the library included:

- not enough computers available
- long waiting times to get access to a computer
- session times on the computer too short
- lack of adaptive and assistive equipment and software.

(Equity Research Centre, 2007, p. 34)

For this community public library services are vital and require improvement.

5. **Broadband:** Australians have limited access to the Internet because of the physical networks connecting the country. The Government announced the National Broadband Network in early 2008:

to provide up to \$4.7 billion and to consider necessary regulatory changes to facilitate the roll-out of a new open access, high-speed, fibre-based broadband network, providing downlink speeds of at least 12 megabits per second to 98 per cent of Australian homes and businesses. (Australia. Department of Broadcasting, Communications and the Digital Economy, 2008)

Improved access is vital to ensure that Australians can take advantage of the electronic environment. Libraries play a key role in enabling users to both access quality information and providing skills to support use of online information resources.

6. **Connected government:** Currently library services for the public are provided by national, state and public libraries with separate policies and funding frameworks. For Australians the services need to be integrated and duplication reduced. “Connected Government” is a concept that is increasing being adopted through the public sector and particularly through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). The Management Advisory Committee (MAC) report notes that:

There are many imperatives which make being successful at whole of government work increasingly important. These include pressures on the APS to offer sophisticated whole of government policy advice which comprehends a range of stakeholders' views, and to respond to complex policy challenges such as environmental or rural issues. There are pressures to join up program management, including security threats and intractable social issues such as drug dependence. There are rising community expectations for easier access to government by integrating service delivery. Agencies should review the impact of these imperatives on their work, including taking a long-term view of possible scenarios.

Whole of government approaches to Australian government work are a relative strength for Australia and are not new. The increasing pressures on the APS demands that its history in whole of government work is understood to ensure it is not necessary to 'reinvent the wheel', yet work practices are continually improved. (Management Advisory Committee, 2004)

Public libraries are an example where users needs exist across the nation and services are fragments with some coordination at a high level, but funding and management is fundamentally local and state based. National and State Libraries Australasia is seeking to develop greater coordination through their planning (National and State Libraries Australasia, 2008).

Why a framework?

This paper has outlined the need for access to information and support for Australians for education, communities, personal development, government services and business. While there have been major achievements through collaborative projects and by many public libraries individually the end result is fragmented service which varies significantly simply on the basis of an individuals location.

In January 2008, two major reports were issued that cast a less than rosy light on Australians' preparedness to participate in the digital economy and modern society. These reports did not focus on the much-lauded strategies to increase access to the digital environment through national broadband roll-out, promised by the major parties contesting the last federal election. They also did not focus on the creation of digital businesses and government, despite research demonstrating that the shift to online services is well established in Australia. Rather, these reports identified gaps in the basic skills of Australians—literacy—which limit the ability of national achievement from the digital economy and, indeed, our print world.

Overall literacy in Australia does not achieve the standards of many other developed countries. In January, the Australian Bureau of Statistics released its report, *Adult literacy and life skills survey*. The publication contains the results of the 2006 survey of prose literacy, document literacy, numeracy and problem solving of 15- to 74-year-olds using a five level rating system. Prose and document literacy, which are essential skills in order to use the Internet and day-to-day materials such as newspapers and forms, had small but statistically significant decreases in the proportion of people at the lowest level since 1996. The results for the “minimum required for individuals to meet the complex demands of everyday life and work in the emerging knowledge-based economy” were 35 per cent for document literacy the same as in 1996 and 37 per cent for prose literacy, an increase. Overall, slightly less than half of the Australian population, approximately 7 million, failed to achieve the minimum required level or higher in prose and document literacy. Australian literacy ranks poorly compared to Canada and Norway, although it is higher than Italy or the United States.

The results for school students were somewhat better than the general population. The Productivity Commission’s *Report on Government Services 2008* reported on assessment of Year 3, 5 and 7 students compared to benchmarks of nationally agreed minimum acceptable standards for reading. The report found that the proportion of assessed Year 3 students who achieved the reading benchmark in 2005 was 91.1–94.3 per cent. Indigenous students had a significantly lower outcome — 73.7–82.3 per cent. For Year 5 students, 85.7–89.3 per cent achieved the benchmark, but only 58.7–66.9 per cent for Indigenous students did so. For Year 7 students, the result was 89.0–90.6 per cent nationally, but only 60.9–66.7 per cent for Indigenous students.

While these findings indicate a higher level of literacy than that for all of Australia, they are based on a survey of students attending school and do not measure the literacy of those who were absent from the education system. The total literacy of school-age children will therefore be lower than the reported figures. For Indigenous students, the study finds a very significantly lower literacy level, which can only be worrying for the future of the nation.

Finally Leigh and Ryan’s study of education productivity, published in February, found that the literacy and numeracy skills of young Australian teenagers (aged 13-14) have fallen over the past few decades. Numeracy skills fell in the period 1964-2003, and both literacy and numeracy skills fell in the period 1975-1998. Worryingly, Leigh and Ryan note that, while literacy and numeracy skills fell, real expenditure per child increased by 10 per cent in the period 1975-1998 and by 258 per cent from 1964-2003. The authors found a decline in school productivity which suggests that investment in the form of increased expenditure has not been made in the areas where it could make the most difference. In fact, it has not just failed to increase literacy, it has actually reduced the results for teenagers at school.

So what does this mean for the nation? Literacy is a national issue that requires national discussion and analysis. Ilana Snyder, in *The Literacy wars*, has criticised newspapers, particularly *The Australian*, for misrepresenting the nation’s literacy and “what goes on in classrooms”. Such a debate misses the point that literacy is an issue that is affected by a much broader set of influences than simply school education. Parents, libraries and communities all have key roles in developing literacy in young Australians, particularly prior to their entry to school.

Australians are supported not only in their development of literacy and reading, but also in terms of education, business, community and digital access through a network of approximately 1,522 public library service points. Australians use these libraries heavily – they made over 108

million visits in 2005-06 (or an average of 9 million visits per month), which represents an average of five visits per head of population. Use of libraries has continued to increase, and today 178 million items are lent each year to 9.9 million members of Australia's public libraries.

Access to the Internet through a new national broadband network will open a door to information for many Australians. Computers in schools will also increase access. Information on the Internet is, however, of variable quality and reliability. Australian libraries, including public and school libraries, have together selected quality electronic resources covering general reference (including encyclopaedia), Australian news & business information, and health information through a national consortium, Electronic Resources Australia. These products represent sources that all Australians should have access to. At present only a small number of libraries can afford these resources, but investing in these online resources would be of great benefit to the community. In addition, support for training would increase computer and information literacy and enable individuals to use the Internet for education, business, health or community information.

The Council of Australian Governments provides a framework to address issues such as this. In its communiqué (Council of Australian Governments, 2008) the human capital agenda was described as follows:

A healthy, skilled and motivated population is critical to workforce participation and productivity, and hence Australia's future living standards. By focusing on the outcomes needed to enhance participation and productivity, the human capital stream of reform aims to provide Australians with the opportunities and choices they need to lead active and productive lives...COAG agreed that human capital reform will be focussed first and foremost on a limited number of outcomes. Indicative outcomes that require further detailed consideration could include:

- an increase in the proportion of children entering school with basic skills for life and learning;
- an increase in the proportion of young people meeting basic literacy and numeracy standards, and improved overall levels of achievement;
- an increase in the proportion of young people making a smooth transition from school to work or further study;
- an increase in the proportion of adult workers who have the skills and qualifications needed to enjoy active and productive working lives; and
- encouragement and support of increased workforce participation among key groups.

Australian Library and Information Association has further suggested that (ALIA, 2008) libraries need to be recognised as providing vital information, information skills and collections:

Access to the Internet through a new national broadband network will open the door to information for many Australians. Computers in schools will also increase access. Information on the Internet is, however, of variable quality and reliability. Australian libraries, including public and school libraries, have together selected quality electronic resources. At present only a small number of libraries can afford these resources, but investing in these online resources would be of great benefit to the community. In addition, support for training would increase computer and information literacy and

enable individuals to use the Internet for education, business, health or community information.

We need:

- Australian culture online with a nationally funded digital program
- Literacy skills with partnerships which recognise and fund roles for schools, libraries and community organisations rather than fragmented, piecemeal solutions
- National online quality resources to support education, business and communities
- Recognition and support for the delivery of government services through public libraries, rather than cost shifting.

The current level of literacy in Australia is not something to be proud of. We have much to achieve and many infrastructure issues to address to ensure that we as a nation have the skills and resources to operate in the digital economy. National debate should go beyond learning at school to engage with business, community and libraries, recognizing that improvements can only be made if the wider community is involved.

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