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Volume 3  
Number 4  
*Sex in the Library: Internet Access Issues in  
Oregon (Winter 1998)*

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July 2014

## Surfwatching the internet

Margaret Barnes  
*Dallas Public Library*

### Recommended Citation

Barnes, M. (2014). Surfwatching the internet. *OLA Quarterly*, 3(4), 8. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1460>

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*OLA Quarterly* is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

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The Internet is often perceived as both a wonderful resource and a gigantic robber of time. It has the ability to instill in people a sense of awe, of empowerment, with information right at their finger tips. The Internet also has the capacity to make people feel inept, uninformed, and computer illiterate. This electronic information resource of recent vintage continues to serve as the focal point for an ongoing dialogue concerning questions of equal access, freedom of information, and the rights of the consumer. Both within and without the library profession the conversation furiously continues. It takes place at the local, state, national, and international levels.

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## Surfwatching the Internet

by Margaret Barnes

Director  
Dallas Public Library

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How will libraries provide access to this electronic resource? And once the

access is provided what will access include?

The sophistication and complexity of the Internet has evolved dramatically in the last five years. The public's awareness of this service and consequent demand that it be offered by their local library has steadily increased. The Internet is no longer considered to be an extraordinary service but rather a basic service.

The Dallas Public Library was able to provide more than text based Gateway access to the Internet, which was initially available through our library automation provider, Dynix, once a number of significant opportunities fell into place. In the fall of 1994, the Oregon State Library defined a strategy through the Oregon Information Highway Project to bring public libraries throughout the state graphical Internet connectivity. Once the matching infrastructure grant process was defined, the city libraries of Dallas, Independence and Monmouth, with support from their city administrations, applied for and were awarded one of the state infrastructure grants.

The other major event for Dallas, along with all the other public libraries that are members of the Chemeketa Cooperative Regional Library Service, came when the Salem Public Library applied for and was awarded a grant that included the placement of workstations in CCRLS libraries to provide graphical access to the World Wide Web for their patrons. This was all very exciting and new ground to cover. During this time, the Library Directors of Dallas, Independence, and Monmouth worked on user guidelines and strategies to promote this new resource to the public.

During this period a national explosion was taking place about the WWW, pornography, cyber encoun-

ters, chatlines, and assignments arranged via the Internet. These topics were all prominently played out as news stories both in the local and national printed press. Nightly television news frequently addressed these same stories and issues, sometimes in lurid and alarming terms. At the local level, policy makers understandably were interested in anticipating and addressing potential problems before they arose in providing access to the Internet at their local library. It seemed logical, therefore, to go forward with the project and include an analysis of the various filter systems which were just then hitting the market.

After much conversation and serious reflection, it was determined that a workable approach, enabling the Dallas Library to furnish access to the public, would be the installation of a filter system on all public Internet stations. Without a filter system the Library would simply not have been able to provide public access to the WWW. We chose the product "Surfwatch" to install on the public workstations. This was a compromise solution but the significant and desirable result was our ability to provide public access to the WWW. This solution made the local policy makers comfortable with the concept of the library's having public access to this new electronic resource. As often is the case with something new or a new project, in the initial phase tight controls are put in place in order to monitor the project.

At this point in time we have four public workstations that provide access to the World Wide Web to our public. The Library has been providing this access since June of 1996. Dallas has seen Internet usage reach an average of about 300 users a month. We provide on-going demonstrations of this resource to classes, local community groups and in one-on-one tutorial sessions.

During the almost 1 1/2 years that we have been providing this service we have had no one formally or really informally register an objection about a filter system being in place on the workstations. We have received countless positive comments about this service from all ages in our community.

Libraries continue to be viewed by the public as a safe place to try new things and learn about new resources. For the community of Dallas, we have found this to be our experience. Granted, in a different setting the approach to providing this service may be different. Libraries exist to be of service to their local communities. The interests and needs of our community determine our responses in terms of collection development, programming, information retrieval and the need to acknowledge political imperatives from time to time. If we lose sight of this we risk losing our public and failing to serve their best interests. **Q**