Gannett Releases Database Tracking Public Library Trends

Gannett News Service released a searchable database July 17 that compares trends affecting public library systems between 2002 and 2006. The analysis used data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) as well as statistics collected from state library data coordinators, compared figures for the some 9,200 library systems, and found that library visits increased by roughly 10% during that five-year period and that circulation of materials rose by 9%.

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Database users can select a library system from a dropdown list of counties by state to learn about changes in book and video circulation, number of visits, operating expenses, and the number of public-use computers. The Library Systems Database also offers lists of public libraries serving populations of 10,000 or more that have the highest circulation per capita, the most internet-capable computers per capita, and the highest operating expenses per capita. "If you didn't do that you'd have very small systems looking very robust and off the charts," Ledge King, one of the two reporters who created the database, told American Libraries. "Rate is always truer than whole numbers. If you did straight numbers of computers, all the big cities would be on top but might actually be below average per capita."

With 85 newspapers around the country "Gannett News Services has taken a particular interest in a lot of data-rich stories," King said. Local papers are more interested in running stories supplied by Gannett when they are accompanied by "specific information about what's happening in their local libraries," he explained. Libraries are "not a well-covered issue in the media," King observed, "yet every community has one." He added that local reporters were being encouraged to "use us as a national lens but talk to their local libraries and talk to people about why they are there, what they like about it, or don't like about it."

King said that he and news assistant William Risser initially believed they could construct the database with information collected by NCES but they soon realized that the latest information available to them would be from 2004, "which was too old for us." The only way to get current data was to go directly to the data coordinators for all 50 states, who were "for most part helpful, eager in some cases," to cooperate. Robert Benincasa, Gannett database editor, joined the team, and it took only about three months to collect all the numbers.

While the Gannett findings do not rank libraries per se, they are based on much of the same statistical information analyzed by Thomas Hennen in his annual HAPLR public library rankings, which are published in American Libraries. Reed Elsevier's Library Journal announced June 15 that, in partnership with Bibliostat, it will publish a new ranking system that focuses "more transparently on ranking libraries based on their performance" than HAP-LR does. SirsiDynix recently suspended work on the Normative Data Project, an effort similar to the Gannett database.

Asked if Gannett plans to continue to update the database, King said, "I don't know. We have set the template, but the next federal data is for 2005, so it's going to be a year behind ours." He said many people at the state level observed that NCES "does not move fast enough" to make the numbers useful to news reporters. The Gannett database, said King, "gives us a fairly up-to-date and geographically accurate impression of what is happening in libraries around the country, how some are progressing more than others in computers available or funding available. It gives our newspapers much more of a connection to libraries in general and what's happening, and allows them to see what's happening in their own backyard in the context of national trends."

King also noted that Gannett's 23 TV stations are being encouraged to use the database for local stories about libraries.

— L.K.

@ data.gannettnewsservice.com/libraries/library_start.php