

# Jacques and Jill at VPL: Citizenship and the Use of the Internet at Vancouver Public Library

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In recent years, many claims have been made about the potential of new communication technologies to enhance public participation in democratic society. Popular writers and government officials alike have equated access to the Internet with new possibilities of citizenship, and organizations such as the Washington D.C.-based Center for Democracy and Technology work to advance “democratic values in new computer and communications technologies” (Balas, 1998). Libraries, historically seen as institutions important to democracies (Schiller and Schiller, 1988), have been targeted to deliver equitable access to online information (Gutstien, 1999), and are seen, increasingly, as essential to supporting emerging forms of cyber-democracy.

Libraries are expected to play an important role in Canada’s strategy to provide citizens with Internet access. For example, Recommendation 13.12 of the Information Highway Advisory Committee (IHAC) report (1995) suggested that because Canadians are comfortable with public libraries, “in the new information age, libraries can play a new role in the provision of sophisticated technical assistance and mediated access to ever-expanding sources of electronic information and services” (<http://strategis.ic.gc.ca/SSG/ih01027e.html>). The IHAC calls upon the government to “develop and support pilot projects aimed at promoting libraries as public access points.” Recognizing that public policy might not guarantee individual access to the Internet, however, the IHAC also advo-

cates the establishment of public access points in locations such as schools and libraries.

The federal government has embarked on an ambitious plan to give all Canadians access to the Internet by 2000 (Kilgour, 1998). The placement of Internet terminals in Canada’s public libraries reflects the goals of LibraryNet, which “aims to provide Canadians with affordable access to the Internet through our public libraries and to promote the use of the Internet in libraries for lifelong learning, community, and economic development” (Canada’s SchoolNet, 1999, p. 1-2). In addition to being heralded for filling an important role in economic growth, lifelong learning, and community and economic development (Canada’s SchoolNet, 1999, p. 1-2), the Internet is seen increasingly as “a way to access federal, provincial and municipal information services” (Connecting Canadians).

**The Internet as infrastructure for new forms of citizen involvement with governments.** The Internet is seen as a new vehicle for serving citizens and exercising influence throughout the world. “The knowledge-based society poses important issues of governance, challenging the capacity of nation states to regulate on the one hand, but providing new vehicles to serve citizens and to exercise influence in the world community on the other” (Policy Research Initiative, 1999). The Government of Canada has recognized a growing desire among Canadian citizens to be more involved in their country’s governance. In the