



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“HeritageQuest Online: Use this resource to search and view 1790-1930 U.S. Federal Census Records and to find information on people and places in a collection of 25,000 family and local history books.”

-From the alphabetical listing of the Alameda County Library Articles and Databases (www.aclibrary.org)

Sometimes numbers can tell a story best. I was particularly struck by this fact recently when I opened an email from the Alameda County Library’s Web Services Coordinator, Susan Fisher. It was one of those emails that would be easy to put aside until later, since it was simply a monthly report of the Library’s database usage statistics. But when I took the time to read each item I was surprised and impressed.

I was surprised because if someone had asked me to predict which of our online databases gets the most use, I would have immediately answered *Infotrac OneFile*. After all, this is the one I demonstrate most often when I am at the reference desk and it is the one I use whenever I am looking for a magazine or newspaper article on a particular subject. When I looked at the usage numbers for it, I found that there were 609 logins (people accessing it from either home or the library), 1,740 searches and 1,297 re-

trievals (number of items viewed, printed or downloaded). This seems like a lot of action for one month, right? Except when I looked at some of the others I was shocked to see how much higher the numbers were. For instance, *Opposing Viewpoints*, which offers arguments on popular debate topics, had 193 sessions/logins, 594 searches and 2,519 retrievals. And that’s just the beginning.

The *Student Resource Center*, described as a resource that “contains a selection of primary documents, topical essays and multimedia images designed to complement the curriculum of high school students,” had 230, 736 and 3,358.

Or how about *Safari Tech Books Online*? This “collection of books for programming and IT [Information Technology] students and professionals from O’Reilly and other technical publishers” had 5,479 retrievals in one month.

And then there is *HeritageQuest Online*. I was aware of

this resource, because I try to at least know what we offer, but I have never been asked about it or used it. So I assumed – obviously erroneously – that it didn’t get much attention. When I saw there were 6003 retrievals from this database in January 2007 alone, I was completely taken aback. 6003? That is a lot of information gathered.

The most surprising of all, though, was *Morningstar*, the investment database. It contains “independent opinions on stocks and mutual funds, as well as screener and a Portfolio X-Ray to help you make solid investment decisions.” At the reference desk we keep binders for current investment information and I know they get regular use. But I would never have anticipated that in a month *Morningstar* would have 14,068 retrievals – that’s about 469 a day. Amazing!

Perhaps one of the reasons these statistics startled me

was that I had the impression the online resources weren’t being used much. This would be a shame, since my library system and other systems in the area, like Contra Costa County, Berkeley, Oakland, San Francisco and Richmond, are all spending money every year maintaining and expanding what we offer. The Alameda County Library now offers 50 databases, covering such diverse subjects as health, business, history, custom newspapers (full text of over 100 national and international newspapers), Alameda County school profiles and even something called “What Do I Read Next?”

Fortunately, I was wrong. Judging from these numbers, it looks like a lot of people have discovered the power of combining access to the Internet – either from home or at the library – with their public library card. It is a lesson I am happy to learn.