

Users of ICT at Public Access Centers: Age, Education, Gender, and Income Differences in Users

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ABSTRACT

Libraries, telecenters, and cybercafés offer opportunities for wider public access to information and communication technologies (ICT). This paper presents findings of a global exploratory study on the landscape public access venues in 25 countries around the world. The goal of the project was to better understand the users of public access venues and their needs, this being one of several papers that result from the global study. This paper identifies profiles of the users of the different types of venues with respect to age, income, education and gender. While findings are not new, their value lies in the compelling evidence drawn from 25 countries and across different types of public access venues, which has never been done before. Results highlight the importance of strengthening public access venues in non-urban settings and to strengthen programs that reach out to underserved populations. The authors also point to special challenges faced by libraries and telecenters given the immense growth of cybercafés as public access venues in most of the countries studied.

Keywords: ICT, ICTD, Public Access, Qualitative, Users

INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies (ICT) can play an important role in human development. Venues such as libraries, telecenters, and cybercafés, which offer public access to ICT, can help offer more access and use of ICT for development among underserved populations in developing countries. While there have been many previous studies about public libraries and

ICT (Rutkauskiene, 2008; Walkinshaw, 2007), especially in the US (Becker et al., 2010; Bertot, McClure, Thomas, Barton, & McGilvray, 2007), about telecenters for community development (Best & Kumar, 2008; Gomez & Ospina, 2001; Kuriyan & Toyama, 2007; Proenza, Bastidas-Buch, & Montero, 2002), and to a lesser degree, about cybercafés and their contribution to social and digital inclusion (Finquelievich & Prince, 2007; Gurol & Sevindik, 2007; Haseloff, 2005; Salvador, Sherry, & Urrutia, 2005; Wheeler, 2007), we found no previous studies that have

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done a systematic comparison of the different types of venues and across multiple countries.

Who are the users of public access to ICT in developing countries around the world? To answer this question and other questions related to the user needs and opportunities to strengthen public access venues for human development, in 2008-2009 we conducted an exploratory, mostly qualitative study of libraries, telecentres and cybercafés in 25 countries around the world. The study was designed to help understand who is using these public access venues, how different types of public access venues are meeting the needs of underserved communities in different countries, and how they can be strengthened to better contribute to human development. This paper is focused on presenting a profile of users of public access venues as part of the results of the study. Other papers that result from this study analyze user needs, user perceptions, venue differences and similarities, and contributions to development, among other topics (Gomez, 2011).

The study was done in partnership with local researchers in each country, and designed with multiple data-collection and analysis methods to provide broad insight into the nature of these public access venues and their users. Approximately 25,000 people were surveyed in 25 countries, providing a thorough picture of the types of users who visit libraries, telecenters and cybercafés. This study does not include surveys of non-users, a sector of the population that deserves further research but requires a different data gathering strategy than what was used in this study.

We defined *Public Access Venue* as an institutional venue with a mission to offer public access to information tools and resources, with services that are available to all and not directed to one group in the community to the exclusion of others.¹ Based on this definition, we identified three main types of public access venue of importance in most countries, and grouped them under the generic headings “public library”, “telecenter” and “cybercafé”, with room for “other” venues of interest and importance in a particular country. Public librar-

ies are often confused with school libraries, other specialized libraries, and community or popular libraries. Telecenters are often labeled community technology centers, communication community centers, or eCenters. We used the following definitions for each one of the three main types of venues included in this study, based on Wikipedia.org:

Public Library A **public library** is a library which is accessible by the public and is generally funded from public sources.

Cybercafé An **internet café** or **cybercafé** is a place that is open to the public, set up as a for-profit business where people can use a computer with Internet access, usually for a fee. It may also offer food and drinks, as well as other services.

Telecentre A **telecentre** is a place that is open to the public, set up as a non-profit service intended for community development, where people can use computers with or without Internet access, as well as services such as training courses and other development activities (usually related to health, education, agriculture, etc.). Sometimes there are fees for service, sometimes they are free.

We did not analyze use of ICT in non-public venues (home, school, or work), or the use of newer technologies, such as mobile phones or wireless plazas (hotspots), or the use of older technologies such as community radio, TV, and press. Important as these communication technologies are, they fall outside the boundary of this study. Further research can shed more light on the interactions between ICT in public and private venues, and between ICT and other communication technologies of importance for community development.

The study is exploratory in nature, and provides an initial perspective of broad patterns in the profiles of users, based on aggregated data across all countries, with special attention to commonalities across them. Local teams followed a shared research design that included document review, expert and operator

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