

# Chapter 1

## Libraries, Telecenters and Cybercafés: A Comparison of Different Types of Public Access Venues

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The goal of this book is to portray the landscape of users and uses of public access to computers and the Internet in developing countries around the world. In 2007-2010, the Technology & Social Change Group at the University of Washington conducted a ground-breaking study in 25 countries, the Landscape Study, to better understand who uses information and communication technologies (ICT) in public access venues and how. Each country conducted a discrete section of the study and shared a report. All the data was then collated and analyzed. This book attempts to put all the pieces together in order to make comparisons and cross-references for further research.*

*In order to understand the implications of this study, it is important to understand the context in which it was conducted. Consequently, this book begins with a chapter that explores the differences and similarities, strengths and weaknesses, of each of the three different types of public access venues studied: public libraries, telecenters, and cybercafés. To begin, the following descriptions define each type of venue in the study:*

*Public Library: a venue that is open to the general population, funded by the government, and intends to meet a local community's information needs as a public service; while all libraries offer books and printed materials, public libraries in developing countries are increasingly also offering access to computers and the Internet.*

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*Telecenter: a nonprofit venue open to the public, which offers ICT as part of its services, or other activities intended to help community development. It may or may not charge a fee.*

*Cybercafé: also called an Internet café, is a for-profit venue that is open to the public, offers computer access and related services, and generally charges a fee. A key difference from the telecenter is that cybercafés do not necessarily intend to support community development (although this may happen as an unintended consequence).*

*Although this study focused on public access venues, it includes cybercafés because they are open to the public even though they generally charge user fees. Excluded from this study are schools and specialized libraries that are not open to the public as they limit access to students, faculty, and staff only.*

## **DISTRIBUTION AND LOCATION OF TYPES OF VENUES**

To accurately describe the various strengths and weaknesses of the different types of public access venues, a broad understanding of the entire picture of the public-access-venue landscape is important. It is significant to note which types of venues are available, as well as in what areas of the country they are available. Figure 1 describes the total distribution of public access venues included in this study, with proportions by type of venue and by geographic location (urban/non-urban).

This figure shows that cybercafés are by far the most common type of public access venue, representing almost three quarters of the total number of venues included in this study. Libraries and telecenters account for only 11% and 12% (respectively) of the total count of public access venues, with other venues accounting for only 4% of the total. There are exceptions, of course; four countries (Georgia, Honduras, Malaysia, and South Africa) did not report any numbers for cybercafés, and seven more countries reported numbers for cybercafés that are lower than other types of venues (Bangladesh, the Dominican Republic, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Mongolia, Namibia, and Sri Lanka). Based on the descriptions offered in the country reports, these low numbers can be attributed to strong public access initiatives leading to other types of public access venues (religious libraries, school libraries, health cen-

ters), as in the case of Sri Lanka and Namibia. Furthermore, the Dominican Republic in particular mentions a lack of official data for their venue counts, the lack of which may lead to an underestimation of the number of cybercafés. In any case, the field of cybercafés is probably the most understudied, and the numbers of cybercafés are the most difficult to measure and the most likely to grow. It is our hope that research about cybercafés flourishes, as our study indicates that cybercafés are the most commonly available public access venue, especially in urban locations.

Since it seems that most public access venues are cybercafés, we wondered where they are located in a country. This study indicates a clear concentration of public access venues located in urban areas. While telecenters have a high proportion of non-urban locations, public libraries and cybercafés are primarily urban, with 64% and 91%, respectively, in urban locations. Furthermore, on average, only 31% of the public libraries offer ICT as part of their services, and these libraries tend to be in urban centers. Given that cybercafés account for 73% of all public access venues studied (the majority in urban areas), and given that over half the public libraries are urban, it is clear that public access to ICT is mostly an urban phenomenon. With a concentration in urban areas and populations, public access to ICT, for the most part, fails to serve the majority of the rural populations in the countries studied. The urban/

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