

Chapter 3

Infomediaries and Community Engagement are Key

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ABSTRACT

In the previous chapter, the authors looked at users of public access venues: the majority are young, educated, and from lower- or middle-income backgrounds. Given this user population, the next question was, how do libraries, telecenters, and cybercafés meet the information needs of their users? Three steps are required to serve a population's information needs: (1) understand the culture fo the use population, (2) include decision-makers who understand the user population, and (3) take advantage of direct input from the user population from project inception. Direct input from users enables them to access information and involves them in solving their information needs in ways that are personally relevant (Bridges.org, 2009). The operators of public access venues play a key role in understanding and meeting the information needs of the local population.

A review of the 25 countries studied revealed that public access venues most successful at meeting local information needs of underserved communities often contained one or both of two important features: strong infomediaries and/or strong community engagement. The term infomediary is used in a similar way to gatekeepers (Metoyer-Duran, 1993), key informants (Schilderman, 2002), lay-information mediaries (Abrahamson & Fisher, 2007), or boundary spanners (Mason, 2003). These authors use the term to refer to a liaison or broker between an individual, or group of persons, and another group. They prefer infomediary to emphasize the role of brokering or transferring information in a culturally appropriate manner by taking into account the norms of each group of people with whom the infomediaries connect. Community engagement, on the other hand, is the ability of community members to work together to achieve shared goals. The authors draw from Bieber et al. (2007), who describe “enabling communities” as those that “enable participants to work effectively towards conducting both collective and individual activities and toward achieving collaboratively identified goals.”

Infomediaries and Community Engagement are Key

Based primarily on qualitative data collected in all 25 countries, the authors offer insights into how libraries, telecenters, and cybercafés use infomediaries and community engagement to fulfill the information and communication needs of the communities they serve. The results of the Landscape Study show that telecenters, and more particularly libraries, face a challenge in facilitating access to information for underserved communities. Cybercafés, which are thriving as public access venues even without the presence of trained infomediaries or community engagement, are generally perceived to be well staffed and able to serve community needs. On the other hand, telecenters and libraries, whose missions are to provide access to, and support for, ICT and information needs of their communities, tend to be perceived as having staff insufficiently trained in the use of digital technology.

Building capacity for collecting content and enabling access to information by community members means training staff as well building their digital capacities. The involvement of local community members in the establishment of public access venues, and the ability of the venues to serve the community's information needs, suggests that the focus on technology may be less important than a focus on community-gathering spaces (Hearn, 2005), i.e. the effective exchange of information may be more dependent upon the venue than upon the technology. The expansion of information-gathering tools can develop through these trusted centers.

INFOMEDIARIES IN PUBLIC ACCESS VENUES

A review of the literature confirms that infomediaries are pertinent to the success of public access venues. Sey & Fellows (2009) pointed out that infomediaries “have been found to be important contributors to the viability and sustainability of a public access venue.” The idea is not new. In his study of knowledge and information systems of urban poor, Schilderman (2002) suggests “social networks are the foremost source of information of the urban poor.” The poor tend to believe people they trust rather than perhaps more informed contacts with which they do not have close ties. He identified successful ways to meet information needs of urban poor, including involvement of the poor themselves as equal partners who can draw from and build on local knowledge, using community-based communication methods, and building the capacity of community-based organizations and key individuals within them. These features manifest differently in each type of venue depending on context. As discussed in an earlier chapter, our findings must be placed in the context of the relative proportion of each type of venue

studied: across all 25 countries, approximately 12% of the venues are libraries and another 12% are telecenters. Cybercafés account for almost 75% of all public access venues studied.² Accordingly, in terms of public access, the relative weight of cybercafés is three times higher than that of both libraries and telecenters combined. These numbers are important to keep in mind – both for those who will make programming decisions and for other interested parties – in both libraries and telecenters, which tend to have more defined roles for infomediaries and community-engagement activities than cybercafés.

While infomediary work is generally considered an important component of library services, users put more value in the infomediary role of telecenter and cybercafé operators because they are perceived to offer more effective help with ICT tools and services. Although, the role of librarians is to help users find information, libraries tend to have more limited ICT services and their staff is generally not well trained in the use of ICT tools (if available to them).

Infomediaries can be formal or informal liaisons between communities. A formal infomediary might be a librarian or telecenter/cybercafé opera-

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