

Chapter 5

“Free” Service or “Good” Service: What Attracts Users to Public Access Computing Venues?¹

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ABSTRACT

There is a strong tradition in libraries around making their services free to all users. At the same time, cybercafés tend to charge user fees to drive their business, while telecenters fall somewhere in between: some charge a fee, some are free. When a public access venue charges a fee for use of ICT, does the fee hinder use, especially for users with lower income? Are other factors, such as relevant content and digital literacy of staff, more important in determining whether or not the venue is used, especially by underserved communities? In this chapter, the authors discuss three factors that emerged in this study as important drivers for the use of ICT in public access venues: affordability and cost of ICT use in public access venues, availability of relevant content in local languages, and the digital literacy and helpfulness of venue staff. The authors examine how these indicators influence user attitudes toward, and ultimately use of, ICT in cybercafés, libraries, and telecenters.

Their study indicates that public access venues do play an important role in meeting the needs of underserved communities, and that user fees are not the largest obstacle for people who wish to use ICT in public access venues. In other words, free access is not necessarily a strong driver for helping underserved communities make higher use of public access ICT. Even with free public access to computers and the Internet, other barriers to ICT use still remain. To help frame their findings and discussion, the authors begin with a review of the existing published literature on user fees and other barriers to use of public access venues. At the heart of this chapter lies the findings and discussion section where they offer an analysis on how influential user fees, content availability, and venue staff are in determining ICT use in public access venues. Through this analysis, they seek to have a clearer picture of what users view as incentives and barriers to their use of ICT in public access venues. To conclude, they propose recommendations for public access venues as they move forward and seek sustainability.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

What does the existing academic literature and research suggest in terms of how user fees affect ICT use in public access venues? The impact of user fees in public access venues has been only slightly investigated, especially in public libraries and telecenters, and, again, the findings are often country and venue specific. Most of the existing literature, while revealing user behavior before and after fees are introduced, does not come to any solid conclusions about whether or not fees are detrimental to venue use (Adomi, 2005; Best, Kolko, Thakur, & Aitieva, 2007; Salvador, Sherry, & Urrutia, 2005). One work that illustrates this finding is Egholm and Jochumsen’s article, “Perceptions Concerning User Fees in Public Libraries” (Egholm & Jochumsen, 2000). The article outlines several public library systems that charged user fees, and offers some findings about user attitude towards fees in public libraries. In many situations, the authors note, it is not possible to identify explicit relationships between the impact of user fees on library membership and use. Even when looking at ex-public-library users, studies have shown that user fees were of little consequence in determining library use. In exploring user-fee subsidies in Kyrgyzstan telecenters, Best, Thakur, and Kolko found that distributing waivers for user fees, essentially making telecenter use free, did not increase use of ICT in telecenters among underrepresented social groups (Best, et al., 2007). Additionally, the authors found that users who reported economic benefits from using the telecenter did not take advantage of the user-fee coupons.

The methods in which public access venues charge user fees vary. One model, popular in cybercafés and telecenters, is per-transaction, or pay-per-use, fees where users are charged by the minute or hour of ICT use. Another model is a subscription-based fee system, where users are charged for ICT use through a weekly, monthly, or, most commonly, annual fee. In looking at rural computer kiosks, a form of public access

to ICT, Kuriyan and Toyama found that user perceptions of fees differed depending on which model was employed through user and non-user interviews – the authors assert that annual fees or subscription-based models, either as explicit ICT subscriptions, or included in another subscription (e.g., farmer cooperative membership fees), are more widely accepted by users, while many users and non-users alike feel that per-transaction rates are too high (Kuriyan & Toyama, 2007).

Given the literature’s lack of concrete conclusions around the role user fees play in venue use, we took a look at another characteristic of venues that emerged as an important factor in the results of this study: the role of venue staff. We discussed the role of venue staff as infomediaries in Chapter Three. As noted in that chapter, as infomediaries, staff in public access venues can be evaluated on their digital literacy and willingness to help users as a measure of their impact on ICT use. In their overview of literature and research on public access to ICTs, Sey and Fellows write, “infomediaries... have been found to be important contributors to the viability and sustainability of a public access venue, helping attract users to the site, and providing guidance and guiding users unfamiliar with ICTs” (Sey & Fellows, 2009, p. 7). Other literature also suggests that venue staff is critical in user experience of the venue and its overall sustainability (Best & Kumar, 2008; Bossio, 2004; Ulrich, 2004; Whyte, 2000).

While the literature and research currently available suggests that charging user fees for ICT access may not be detrimental to the success of a public access venue, most of the literature places particular emphasis on staff training and helpfulness, as well as availability of content, as the key drivers to ICT use.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The three most salient indicators of user attitudes and perceptions that can hinder the use of public access venues were: cost and affordability of

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