

Chapter 7

Challenges for Libraries in the Information Age

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ABSTRACT

Libraries play a central role as venues that offer public access to information. Increasingly, libraries in developing countries are offering access to computers and the Internet, as well as to books and other types of information services and resources. Given the relatively scant literature on public access to ICT in libraries in many countries, we explore in this chapter the specific challenges libraries face in the countries we studied in the Landscape Study. How are public libraries serving the information needs of marginalized communities in developing countries? How is access to new information and communication technologies (ICT) changing the landscape of public access to information? How can libraries better collaborate with other types of venues (such as telecenters and cybercafés) that offer public access to computers and the Internet? These are some of the questions that we seek to answer in this chapter.

INTRODUCTION

Libraries play a central role in offering public access to information. Increasingly, libraries in developing countries are providing access to computers and the Internet, as well as to books and other types of information services and resources. Due to limited literature on public access to ICT in libraries in many countries, in this chapter we

explore particular challenges face by libraries in the countries we studied. In this chapter, we look at the following questions: How are public libraries serving the information needs of marginalized communities in developing countries? How is access to new information and communication technologies (ICT) changing the landscape of public access to information? How can libraries more effectively collaborate with other types of

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venues (such as telecenters and cybercafés) that offer public access to computers and the Internet?

There are many factors that contribute to the social appropriation of information (the ability to utilize information in ways that can help improve a person's position in society) and how it might be used to improve one's quality of life. How information is used, and how it helps to improve one's life, must be seen through the perspective of the user. Services, resources, and affordability are important but small parts of the picture. Capacity must also be considered, which refers to the level at which the staff and users can utilize the resources, and whether this is meeting the user's information needs. This approach incorporates how the user perceives the information or ICT environment, its utilization, and applicability.

A great number of resources and time have been invested in ICT in developing countries. The past ten years have provided success stories in terms of economic data, such as GDP, growth and reforms in the telecommunications sector, network and broadband connections, telephone subscribers, and productivity (World Bank, 2008), but questions remain about the attribution of this success to ICTs. Looking solely at economic figures ignores important social implications that are much more difficult to measure.

David Tyckoson (Director of public services at California State University in Fresno) proposes a way to look at how libraries can converge with user needs in order to improve the perception of libraries (2008). Library users desire three things from their information venues: information, entertainment, and socialization. Access to information is the traditional use of a library, while libraries providing entertainment and socialization opportunities are relatively new phenomena. ICTs provide important tools for satisfying these needs. Socializing might include book clubs, or access to Facebook or Internet gaming sites. Entertainment might include media centers, scrapbooking, or simple computer usage. How do libraries accommodate these needs? As we found in our

research, public libraries around the world are struggling with traditional notions of library services that regard entertainment and socializing as inappropriate behaviors for users. We also found that the majority of users of public access venues are looking for precisely these kinds of services, which presents a double challenge to libraries in developing countries: How they can include non-traditional library roles while embracing new opportunities that ICTs have to offer.

This chapter presents aggregated data across all countries, giving special attention to commonalities among them. We discuss three key challenges facing libraries as they revisit their public service mandate and embrace the information age. These challenges are interrelated. We describe them one by one and conclude with a set of recommendations to help libraries capitalize on the new opportunities presented to them:

- **Perceptions matter:** The perceptions of users and governments shape the actual uses of library services
- **Users matter:** This study helps inform a more accurate understanding of who libraries actually serve
- **Power and money matter:** Government prioritization in the allocation of resources makes a difference in the success of libraries as public information venues

All three factors are intertwined. Library services are often tied to user perceptions, such as who uses the library and why, and whether the government allocates resources for library services. Government prioritization and resource allocation often correlates with how libraries are perceived by the public, as well as by the government, and who the library has historically served. In addition to the country chapters included in this volume, we draw from the detailed country reports that are publicly available at <http://tascha.uw.edu/research/landscape-study/>. In this chapter, we refer to the reports by country name for clarity's sake.

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