

Chapter 8

How do Public Access Venues Meet Information Needs in Underserved Communities?

Elizabeth Gould

University of Washington, USA

Ricardo Gomez

University of Washington, USA

Kemly Camacho

Cooperativa Sulá Batsú, Costa Rica

ABSTRACT

User information needs vary by geographic location as well as by economic and social standing, among other factors. These factors drive the format, content, currency, and language in which information is produced and presented. Information needs of users of ICT in public access venues are satisfied in a variety of manners. The question arises as to how public access venues determine information needs in a community, and how best to satisfy those needs. There is no lack of information. What needs to be established is where do people presently get information, and if ICT can help to service their needs in a better way. In this chapter, we consider what types of information users need, and what they seek when they go to public access venues to use ICT.

INTRODUCTION

Information needs vary by geographic location as well as by economic and social standing, among other factors. These issues drive the format, content, currency, and language in which information is produced and presented. Information requirements of ICT users in public access venues are

satisfied in a variety of manners. How do public access venues determine information needs in a community, and how are those needs satisfied? There is no lack of information: what needs to be established is where people presently get information, and if ICT can help to service their needs in a better way. In this chapter, we consider what types of information users need, and what they seek when they go to public access venues to use ICT.

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The Landscape Study revealed three key factors that are important to consider when evaluating how user information needs can best be served. Most of the countries studied emphasized that user needs vary according to social, religious, gender, cultural, economic, educational, and geographic variables. (In addition to the country chapters in this volume, detailed country reports are publicly available online at <http://tascha.uw.edu/research/landscape-study/>; in this chapter, we refer to them by country name.)

One cannot generalize that all people within a particular environment require the same things, or that community and individual needs are the same, although there are recurring themes. We describe these themes below, with a primary focus directed towards content, followed by a discussion of user and operator capacity, concluding with a set of recommendations to help information venues develop and provide information that serves its users:

1. Production of locally relevant content is essential for serving individual and community information needs, which includes up-to-date information.
2. Information produced in local languages makes an enormous difference for access to underserved populations. It is also necessary to consider literacy levels, and to create content for illiterate users.
3. ICT user capacity must be developed in order to provide underserved populations with access to ICT-driven information; ICT training for and by venue operators is also imperative.

PRODUCTION OF LOCALLY RELEVANT CONTENT

Content must be applicable to the users. As our Peru report states, “Each group or specific community would benefit from better public access

to information, but such information should be appropriate, it means that it should be relevant, opportune, understandable, and usable.” Information venues such as libraries, telecenters, and cybercafés may provide access to information, but information must be geared towards the targeted audience. If indeed the goal is to provide information to underserved communities, then providers would do well to determine what type of information is needed, and supply that information in a manner that is accessible and approachable for all users.

Different cultures, regions, and sub-regions require variable content, as needs are based upon the users’ educational status, their vocational and entertainment requirements, cultural, sexual, and religious constraints or conditions, and technological and economic restraints. The political environment in which information is presented will also influence content, format, and access to certain types of information.

Several of countries that we studied (Sri Lanka, Honduras, Indonesia, Nepal, and Uganda) are primarily agriculturally based economies. In these environments, user-information needs focus on weather conditions, market prices, government support, improved production, etc. Other areas, where there are high emigration rates (Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Honduras), users require information about obtaining visas, passports, immigration requirements, etc. These particular needs also affect the information and communication needs of friends and relatives who are emigrating or who have emigrated. Those who are “left behind” are motivated to learn how to use ICTs in order to stay in touch with their loved ones.

Not surprisingly, mobile phones have begun to fill holes in user information needs. Many examples (Bangladesh, Indonesia, Mongolia, Namibia, the Philippines, South Africa, and Turkey) were presented in which mobiles were used to obtain government data, account services, food and health information, and stock data, and of course they provide opportunities for long-

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