

Chapter 11

Public Access ICT in Argentina

Adrián Rozengardt
University of Washington, USA

Susana Finkelievich
University of Washington, USA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Argentina is one of 25 countries participating in this international study that was designed both to assess the ability of the public to access information and communication venues, and also to review the role of ICTs across the overall economic, political, and regulatory framework. The study assessed how the venues function, how they serve user needs, how they meet operational constraints, and how they realize successes. The study placed an emphasis on public and popular libraries, private information venues (cybercafés and parlors), and social information venues (government and community-associated public information venues). The primary intent was to examine the information needs of underserved communities, public access to information and communication venues, and the role of ICTs in Argentina.

The principal venues that provide public access to information and ICTs formed a key aspect of the study, and the research team conducted literature

reviews, surveys, interviews, and focus groups to gain a thorough understanding of the information and communication landscape. The report describes the access venues selected and studied, the physical infrastructure and equipment, the use dynamics found during the fieldwork process, salient findings, strengths and weaknesses among the public venues, and key recommendations.

The researchers surveyed the processes of communication and knowledge production at the selected venues, as well as the various controlling factors, such as governmental policies, geography, ethnic and idiomatic differences, and social and economic inequities. The research guidelines were structured to identify the inequalities and inequities that affect general living conditions, and identify the role that access to information plays within those conditions. As a result, two types of inequalities were defined: socio-economic inequalities and territorial inequalities. The socio-economic inequalities relate primarily to the external processes affecting individuals and families, including poverty and indigence, income distribution,

employment, the labor situation, gender, ethnic factors, and others. The territorial inequalities are a function of regional and local dynamics, particularly the contrast between urban and rural communities and groups.

The guidelines also led to an examination of the conditions that control information accessibility and an identification of the public's physical access to information. Of primary importance were the 2,186 facilities in the Popular and Public Libraries network. Of that total, 1,995 are popular libraries, and 231 are public and national libraries. The people in Argentina also have public access to information at more than 18,500 private venues, cybercafés, and parlors. Additionally, there are 491 social venues, 99 of which are directly managed by NGOs, and the remaining 302 exist as the result of governmental initiatives implemented mainly in association with community social organizations (SCOs).

In general, the Argentine public places a high value on its capacity to incorporate technology into daily life. An increasing number of people use, or are interested in using, ICT services to fulfill their information and communication needs, although this opinion was more commonly expressed by urban populations. Argentina appeared to the researchers to be an extremely favorable landscape for developing and implementing policies and strategies to increase the public access to information, and to the create and disseminate content with both local and national interest.

INTRODUCTION

Country Overview

Argentina is one of the most advanced and progressive nations in South America, with a stable and well-recognized presence in the world community. The economic position is based on a solid foundation of agricultural, industrial, commercial, and natural resource interests.

The citizens enjoy a relatively high standard of living compared to other Latin American countries, and much of the population considers itself middle class. The country has a high human development index score of 0.869, but according to data developed in 2007, 23% of the population lives below the official poverty line, and income distribution has become quite unequal as a result of the 2001 national economic crisis. The educational level is relatively good, especially in urban areas with ready access to public schools and universities. The Argentine literacy rate reportedly is 99%.

The population is composed of a wide range of ethnicities, races, and origins. People who are predominantly of European descent make up the majority of the population, with estimates ranging from 89.7% to 97% of the total. The last national census, based on self-ascription, indicated a similar figure, in that only 2% declared themselves to be Amerindian of first-generation Mestizo background. The most common ethnic groups are Italian and Spanish descendants.

Eighty percent of the Argentine population resides in cities or towns of more than two thousand inhabitants, and over one-third of those people live in the Greater Buenos Aires area (the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires and Conurbano Buenos Aires). With 11.5 million inhabitants, this sprawling metropolis serves as the focus for national life while the rest of the population is unequally distributed across the rest of the country. With a third of the population in the Greater Buenos Aires region, the city ranks tenth among the 23 largest cities in the world, and the third largest in Latin America, after Mexico City and Sao Paulo. An additional 1.1 million people live in the metropolitan area of Rosario, and 1.3 million in the city of Córdoba.

The Province of Buenos Aires is the most heavily populated province in Argentina, with 13,827,203 inhabitants. A nearly equal number of people live in the neighboring provinces, and Córdoba and Santa Fe have populations of about three million. In total, 60% of the population is

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