

Chapter 33

Public Access ICT in Algeria

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Algeria is one of 25 countries participating in this study, which was designed to assess the public access to information and communication venues, and also to examine the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) across the nation's overall economic, political, and regulatory framework. The study placed an emphasis on the information needs of underserved groups and communities.

The study was supervised by the Center for Information and Society (CIS) of the University of Washington and was conducted in collaboration with the government of Algeria. The intent of the overall project was to examine both the extent to which the general Algerian population has access to public information and the conditions that characterize the nation's communication landscape. Of particular concern were the information needs of underserved communities, the public access to information and communication venues, and the role of ICTs.

The research team combined site visits and interviews to review the physical infrastructure and human resources of a variety of venues, and to determine the information content, service usage patterns, communication, and knowledge development. Additionally, the team examined the effects of environmental factors such as government policies, geography, and ethnic and linguistic differences. Following an analysis of the research, the team developed a set of recommendations for stakeholders and decisions makers to serve as a guide to improve the ability of the public to access and use the materials available in the venues.

Telecommunications and civil construction are becoming increasingly important throughout Algeria, but the existing ICT venues are concentrated in urban localities and typically lack current applicable content. Cybercafés, a few private libraries, and NGO-sponsored libraries are the only venues that are able to serve disadvantaged people and few of these sites have ICT-based services. Some people are able to use ICTs in the workplace, and some are able to afford the fees charged at cybercafés. Most Internet content is in English while most of the population uses Arabic, French, or Berber.

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Methodology

This research was performed as part of an international research project supervised by the Center for Information and Society (CIS) of the University of Washington in the United States. The project was conducted in two phases. During the first phase, the team prepared a draft report that described the information access landscape, presented a national assessment, and compiled a preliminary set of recommendations. In the second phase, the team identified the principal locations where people seek information and then selected public libraries, cybercafés, private and religious libraries, and several non-government organization (NGO) information services as the subject venues for this study.

The fieldwork team focused on fourteen representative provinces, and used a combination of research methods to: (1) observe how people access information, (2) conduct surveys in information venues where they interviewed operators and users in 145 municipalities, and (3) perform secondary research and analysis of existing reports and documents using both local and international sources.

Findings

The most frequently used sources of public information in Algeria are public libraries, private and religious libraries, cybercafés, and NGO information services. The researchers noted a definite usage pattern within these venues that followed four levels of venue preference. First, cybercafés are more commonly used than public libraries (except in the single specific case of the city of Ain salah in extreme southwestern Algeria because of a general lack of connectivity and low bandwidth). Second, most public library users come from the more educated population. Third, youth in general, and especially secondary school students from 15 to 20 years of age, are the predominant users at public libraries and cybercafés. Fourth, females are more likely to use public

libraries than males, but males are more likely than females to use cybercafés. Despite the useful role all of these venues play, access to the venue sites is not easy for many people because many areas lack telephone landline service, there is low bandwidth in some areas, but, more importantly, there are intellectual barriers, social barriers, and politically motivated barriers.

As the study progressed, the researchers identified a broad category of disadvantaged people that included the unemployed, the disabled and impaired, non-urban people, females, illiterate people, children, and elderly people. Additionally, there is a general lack of practical ways to disseminate information about official initiatives and information concerning events happening in remote and rural communities, as well as homework for students, entertainment information, and visa and passport procedures required for travel and immigration.

The research team determined that the most underserved groups were those who were unemployed, physically impaired, and lived in non-urban areas. The inequity variables noted by the team centered on venue access, gender, low literacy levels, and age. Among the more prevalent issues affecting access to public information include the severe inequities regarding employment opportunities, financial aid, subsidized social housing, and social security opportunities.

The researchers identified several concerns that limit the public access to information:

- There is no specific or effective initiative, policy, or strategic plan related to public library development.
- There is no effective collaborative way to link public libraries, cybercafés, private libraries, or NGO information services.
- No initiative or plan exists to promote the concept of public telecenters.
- Information venues are not conveniently located in communities and seldom even exist in remote and rural areas.

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