Chapter XVI
Telecentres:
The New Public Spheres?

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ABSTRACT

Information communications technologies (ICTs) are one of the major areas of research and investment in developing countries because they seem to serve the cause of democratisation and empowering citizens by extending the public sphere. ICTs and especially Internet are regarded as the new public sphere for they seem to lie outside the market and the State, nurtured by civil society serving the cause of good governance and democratisation and empowering grassroots initiatives, giving them access to critical information, organising political actions, influencing public opinion and policy-making. This chapter examines the 'publicness' of the telecentres in the framework of public sphere as defined by Habermas. The chapter uses telecentres as representative of 'technology mediated public space' created by ICTs and Internet and examines two approaches to the Telecentre movement, analysing whether Telecentres can meet the requirements of the rational-critical discussions and if and what factors influence the extension of the public sphere. The chapter concludes that while the telecentres create opportunities to improve communication and reconnect citizens to the State, offering greater access to information and support for group based discussion, they are likely to support only incremental modifications to the democratic system because the current use of information communication technologies (ICTs) concentrates primarily on information provision, and not linkages that improve the quality of democratic discourse.

INTRODUCTION

Information communications technologies (ICTs) are one of the major areas of research and investment in developing countries not only because technology is deemed instrumental for economic development but also because they seem to serve the cause of democratisation and empowering citizens by extending the public sphere (Clift 2004; UNPAN 2003; UNCTAD 2006; OECD 2001; WB 1999). It has been long argued that there is a close inter-relationship between technology – its capabilities and limitations and creation and functioning of public sphere (Dewey 1927) and that special attention must be paid to the way technologies construct, structure, or pre-empt social dialogue (Sclove 1994). In Habermasian terms, international agencies such as the World Bank (WB) and UNDP regard ICTs and especially Internet as the new public sphere for they seem to lie outside the market and the State, nurtured by civil society serving the cause of good governance and democratisation and empowering grassroots initiatives, giving them access to critical information, organising political actions, influencing public opinion and policy-making.

It is argued that the growing deployment of ICTs creates new channels of communication and exchange resulting in formulation of completely new sets of relationships and characterises the development of mediated interactive communication as a major structural change produced by communications revolution and it is believed that such processes lead to the creation of a Public Sphere albeit mediated by technology that is critical to support the emerging civil society in hitherto non-democratic countries (Baker and Ward 2002; Van Djik 1999).

One critical move in this direction has been the setting up of public-access centres, variously known as Telecentres, Telecottages etc. that are considered to have the capacity for creating a 'public sphere' in which information dissemination and access combined with reasoned dialogue strengthens democracy and community formation (Damiris and Wild 1997; Wei and Kuzmanovic 2000).

This chapter examines the 'publicness' of the telecentres in the framework of public sphere as defined by Habermas.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The multiple conceptual threads that intertwine with the core question required a multidisciplinary approach that included the conceptualisation of the public sphere, elaboration on governance, Telecentres and the factors affecting these elements.

Many scholars have extrapolated from Habermas' work in constructing connections between technology, information and civil society (Wishard, 1994; Boyte and Kari 1996). The conceptual framework used to examine the 'publicness' is based on the Habermasian public sphere and its linkages with the system factor encompassing social, technology and use factors (adapted from Lin, 2003) that shape and re-shape it. The left side of the diagram represents the context and the right side, the universal parameters. It can therefore be adapted to analyse varied contexts against a set of universal parameters.

Diagrammatically, the framework can be represented as shown in Figure 1.

Conceptually, the four factors – system, social, technology and use that form the contextual half of the conceptual framework will now be discussed in turn.

The system factor is based on the open system theory (Buckley, 1967) in which a system is dynamic and system structure and innovations continuously interact to not only bring about change but also to alter the power structures within the social system. It is a combination of regulatory and policy environment, technology culture in the society and market forces that constantly create or close window of opportunities.

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