Evaluating shared access to ICTs

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Book Review of "*Public Access ICT across Cultures: Diversifying Participation in the Network Society*," Edited by Francesco J. Proenza, Cambridge: MIT Press 2015.

Two decades ago when the dot com revolution was at its height, the "information for communication technologies (ICTs) for development" movement had just taken off. It sought to bring the benefits of ICTs to the masses through the deployment of desktop computers in telecentres across the world. The movement floundered with poor network connectivity, expensive machines, arduous maintenance costs and little relevant content.

With the advent of mobile and laptop technology, attention shifted away from the public provision of access to the internet to personal ownership of ICT devices through programs such as OLPC (one laptop per child) and facilitating connectivity through mobiles. With the growing numbers of middle income households joining the elite in shifting to private access, there was little pressure on governments to provide and maintain affordable public access to ICTs.

This edited volume "Public Access ICT across Cultures: Diversifying Participation in the Network Society" is a very timely reminder that there is still a large segment of the world's population that is dependent on public access points. In light of the recent World Development Report 2016, "Digital Dividend", emphasing the need to bring people into the digital fold, this book provides valuable insights on the experience of ICT inclusion projects around the world. It presents a collection of case studies of urban and rural telecentre projects from ten countries including Malaysia, Thailand, China, Argentina, Chile, Peru, India, Jordan, Cameroon and Rwanda.

The role of ICTs in shaping educational outcomes was the subject of the case study on Cameroon. The Government of Cameroon set up thirty-four rural telecentres to provide computer and internet training, and facilitate communication through technology, along with introducing IT in the school curriculum. Out of these, 1015 users across five centres were surveyed. These centres were frequented by students, most of whom learned to use the internet for the first time. An interesting finding was that students who did well in school and spent more hours studying, were also the ones using the internet to improve their access to learning materials, including text books.

However, it was not possible to conclude that the internet was giving them an edge over others; rather, being motivated to learn and putting in the required effort to study, were still the dominant variables in determining school performance. These rising performers were able to use the internet more effectively to further their learning goals, compared to stable or falling-performers. Further, there was some evidence that more than three hours of internet use per visit correlated negatively with school performance. This study did not provide information about the class, ethnicity or religious background of users, which may have influenced the ability of students to access the telecentres and to be able to derive benefits from its use. Thus, although the study supported the view that internet access could enhance learning outcomes, it could not be established that without the internet, learning outcomes would suffer.

Two case studies of internet usage in China provided a rare glimpse into the world's largest non-English speaking internet population. Ninety million people (15 per cent of all internet users) were connecting to the internet in China from public places in 2013. The first study on China's internet

cafés sought to understand what value they brought to people's lives by comparing what goals users perceived as having been achieved by visiting such places, with goals and achievements of nonusers. Based on self-determination theory, which emphasizes the 'self-determination' of goals as a motivational force behind every day activities, it showed that younger users reported higher achievement of life goals such as 'learn more knowledge', 'leisure, entertainment', 'keep in touch with friends and family who don't live nearby', and 'relax, relieve tension' in comparison to nonusers. These goals 'help[ed] users fulfil important psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness' (106). The study suggested that nonusers were missing out by not participating in an avenue which could help satisfy basic human needs.

The second study on problematic internet use among internet café users in China showed a high correlation between the possibility of staying overnight in a café and its patronage by users addicted to internet use (2.4 per cent as defined by the survey). The most common activity of such users was gaming. The findings suggested that limiting overnight service and providing access to useful tools such as printing services, data storage, word processing, photocopying, and other educational software, could help curb such practices.

Although the second study did not provide comparative data on internet addiction of users who accessed the net from personal devices with 24x7 availability, such information would be important to understand net addiction in a broader context. Five hundred milllion plus people accessed the net from mobile phones in China, accounting for nearly 81 per cent of users. Despite private access users being more than five times the number of shared access users, media criticism of internet addiction had focused largely on net bars in China, perhaps unfairly targeting those without private means of access.

The negative media reporting on internet cafés in China did not take into account the positive dimension of internet café use at all, perhaps because reporters, and those interviewed by them (parents, educators, officials), were not using the internet much and did not realise its importance to young people. Labelling internet use as exclusively entertainment, and thus, a waste of time, did a disservice to the multiple activities of users and the facilitation of their personal goals, according to the authors of the first study.

Other case studies showed how internet cafés were helping migrant Burmese women in Thailand to engage in political activities and connect with friends and family in other parts of the world; how they supported the fund-raising activities of grassroots organisations in rural Peru; how they provided access to information for women in Uttar Pradesh and Chile who needed to help their children with homework; and how they promoted social connectedness amongst rural Malaysians especially when a trained facilitator supported learning activities of users. There was little evidence, however, to show that ICT use enhanced employment opportunities, income, or schooling outcomes in any significant manner.

Multiple studies in this book presented evidence of social exclusion of women from cybercafés in Uttar Pradesh, Jordan, Peru, and Thailand. From the choice of location of the internet centre to the interior layout of the computers, all of it mattered in making internet cafés inaccessible to women. The book argues that telecentres were more inclusive than cyber cafés, since they were designed keeping this in mind; cyber cafés were intent on profit and providing access to pornography was a profitable enterprise. However, even in telecentres, the choice of facilitator made a difference. Young unmarried girls were not sent to learn computers if the teacher was a young, unmarried man. Cafés located in busy marketplaces were also inaccessible to women as many were not allowed by their families to go to the marketplace itself.

The summary chapter by the editor suggested simple measures, such as tax breaks or low registration fees, that could be provided as positive incentives to those telecentres which created

a safe environment for women and minors in the following ways: a) venue layouts that are open and promote social interaction as opposed to privacy in browsing b) places which provide access to software and hardware for storage, printing, and other skilled activities and c) places which provide training or facilitate learning activities and classes. These are valuable suggestions that policy makers can use to enhance the learning experience of users, and especially help women in achieving their self-determined goals, while curbing negative activity.

One of the most interesting findings of this research was that public or shared access venues were also used in large numbers by those who had personal ownership of ICTs and accessed the internet from home, office or school. Apart from providing better equipment and faster connectivity, public access venues serve an important social function: for almost one-third of users surveyed in six countries (Bangladesh, Brazil, Chile, Ghana, the Philippines, and China), they were a place to be with friends or other people. This is an important finding regarding the value of shared access centres especially since increasing internet use has often been associated with greater anomie and loneliness (Turkle 2011). Policy makers, and those interested in technology and rural development, would do well to heed the advice in this book.

REFERENCES

Turkle, S. (2011). *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other.* New York: Basic Books.

Original article at: http://ijedict.dec.uwi.edu/viewarticle.php?id=2206