

Why Public Access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) Matter



Research Summary

Did you know?

- *Over 70% of the developing world lacks home access to the internet*
- *Only 6% of the developing world's population enjoys a broadband connection*
- *Just 28% of households in the developing world have a computer*
- *Worldwide, less than half (40%) of the population has internet access at home*
- *Even in the developed world, 25% of people lack access to the internet at home*

Background

Around the world, there have been significant investments made in providing public access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) over the last 20 years. These multi-million dollar investments have raised many questions about the use and impact of public access venues, particularly those that are publicly funded (by governments and donors). Some early studies and anecdotal evidence suggested that public access was a failure – not being used at all; being used, but by young, affluent males, not by the populations intended as beneficiaries; being used, but only for fun and games; and being used, but not financially sustainable once the initial investment was over. More recently, with the rise of mobile phones and increased connectivity overall, the need for and relevancy of these venues have come into question.

The largest study of its kind to date to look simultaneously at multiple venue types and user and non-user populations, the Global Impact Study of Public Access to ICTs set out to try to answer these questions and others, to more fully understand the public access ICT phenomenon. This document highlights the key findings of the study.

The findings show that people rely on these public access venues – libraries, telecenters, and cybercafés – for computer and internet access and services. Public access to ICTs serves as a social good, available to those who don't have access elsewhere, enabling them to take part in our digital information society. Public access does not have to be used by all people at all times to be relevant, important, and needed. When people do need it, however, the access is there – widely used and beneficial to both individual users and the community at large.

What is public access?

While there is no commonly agreed-upon definition, the Global Impact Study defined public access as access to technology (computers and the internet) that is open to the public and does not have restrictions on who can use the venue. Both publicly and privately funded venues can provide public access, as long as they are open to all members of the public. Common public access providers include libraries, telecenters, and cybercafés.

7 key reasons public access is important

1 Lays a foundation for lifelong ICT use. Public access provides many with their first ever experience with computers (50% of users) and the internet (62%), far exceeding school, home, and other places like work. It is likely that many of these users go on to use technology throughout their lives. In other words, public access lays a critical foundation for lifelong technology use for many.

2 Offers access to those who do not have other options.

Overwhelmingly, the number one reason that people use public access venues is because they do not have technology access anywhere else. Almost half of users (48%) surveyed have no other access to computers and the internet. Without public access, these users could possibly be digitally excluded from today's information society. In fact, the majority of respondents (55%) would use computers less if public access did not exist. Public access fills a critical gap by including those that would otherwise be left behind.

3 Serves as a formal and informal training ground for ICT skill development.

Users credit public access venues with being the most important place where they developed their ICT skills, overwhelmingly more so than home or school. Half of all users (50%) surveyed said that public access venues were the most important place they developed their internet skills, more than double the percentage of those that said home (18%) or school (17%). Public access proved even more important for those users with lower incomes and less education, reaching populations often targeted by development initiatives.

4 Paves pathways for people to achieve various benefits.

Once people have access to ICTs and have developed their technology skills, the possibilities are endless. People use public access for a multitude of purposes and to achieve a variety of goals. For example, 91% of those users looking for jobs filled out job applications using public access computers. Of those users looking for government services, 79% used eGovernment services. 80% of users looking for health information were better able to manage their health. Public access proves to be there and beneficial when people need it.

5 Extends benefits to both users and non-users alike.

The impacts of public access venues reach far beyond the users themselves. Former users of public access venues report many of the same benefits of public access as users do. Public access provided many former users with their first touch with computers (28%) and internet (35%). Venues also proved critical to helping former users develop computer skills (40%) and internet skills (42%). 68% of non-users reported positive impacts from their family and friends' use of public access. Public access clearly serves the entire community.

6 Attracts people who have access elsewhere.

Even users with other computer and internet access (at home, work, school) frequent public access venues for numerous reasons. Users cite features of public access that attracts them to the venue: a social space to be with friends and work with others; equipment that is better than at home or work; and opportunities to get assistance from venue staff and other users. Public access venues offer more advantages than just access alone.

7 Facilitates face-to-face interaction and collaboration.

Public access offers a physical space for people to connect not only to information and technology, but to other people, other users. Up to 40% of users reported sharing computers with other users at least some of the time. The majority of those that share computers do so because "it is more fun to share" and to receive help from other users. In Ghana, 50% of users came to the venue with others, and two-thirds reported that sharing the physical space made them more productive. By providing a physical place, public access offers people a space for interaction and collaboration with others.

Does the type of public access venue matter?

People have asked many questions about the type of public access venue. Some have asked why governments or foundations should invest in venues like telecenters and libraries if privately owned venues like cybercafés thrive in abundance. More recently, some have argued that connection efforts and investments should not be made in new venues, like telecenters, when public libraries already exist. And if users have a choice, why would they pay for access at a cybercafé when they could go to a library or telecenter for free?

	<i>Libraries</i>	<i>Telecenters</i>	<i>Cybercafes</i>
<i>Charges fee</i>	9 %	12 %	90 %
<i>Offers ICT training for users</i>	57 %	57 %	10 %
<i>Proportion of female users</i>	47 %	23 %	28 %
<i>Offers training for staff</i>	91 %	59 %	47 %
<i>Restricts games, chatting, and/or social networking</i>	40 %	18 %	9 %

All three venue types were found to play a similar role in development outcomes. However, each of the three venue types has its own unique characteristics.

While libraries and telecenters are largely free to use, they are also more likely to have more rules and restrictions in place. Each venue type can learn from the strengths of the other venue types to better serve their users. Libraries and telecenters, for example, could consider lifting outdated rules and restrictions on use. Cybercafés, on the other hand, could explore offering ICT training to both their users and staff.

8

countries were investigated

Representing a diversity of socio-economic settings within the spectrum of low and middle-income countries.



Regardless of unique venue characteristics, users are willing to pay to travel to whatever public access venue is available. However, the amount users are willing to pay can vary across venues. In some countries, libraries are more highly valued than other venues, perhaps pointing to libraries specifically being viewed as a public good. In Chile and the Philippines, users are willing to spend more to reach a library than a cybercafé. In Chile, non-users are willing to pay more to keep libraries open (\$49), more than double what they are willing to pay to keep telecenters open (\$16) and seven times more than they would pay for cybercafés to stay open (\$7).

Communication and leisure activities top the list of public access use - is that a bad thing?

Some critiques about public access venues revolve around what people are actually doing on the computers. There are misconceptions that all people do on public access ICTs is play games and chat on Facebook. It is true that communications & leisure (email, chatting, social networking, pursuing hobbies, etc.) tops the list of activities people enjoy at public access venues. Is that necessarily a bad thing though? Beyond the inherent value of play in and of itself, using public access computers for communications and leisure can also contribute to development goals.

Using public access computers for non-serious activities can produce serious results:

Increased ICT skills:

Using computers for leisurely, non-serious activities like gaming and chatting can lead to increased ICT skills overall - 94% of users claim that using public access computers for fun and games led to improvements in their digital skills.

Meeting information needs:

People everywhere increasingly meet their information needs through social media, from crowd-sourcing questions on Facebook to following traditional media for breaking news on Twitter. Public access users are no exception. Users cite emailing and social networking as important online resource - sometimes more important than search engines or other online resources - for completing tasks in numerous development domains, from accessing online health resources to searching for and applying to jobs.

Developing employable skills:

People who use ICTs for play at public access venues were generally as technologically capable as those who use them for "productive" purposes. The most important predictors of skill development are the variety and amount of activities a user engages in, not the type (productive versus play) nor the training they received (classes or coaching).

Maintaining relationships with loved ones who live elsewhere:

Interpersonal communication use (Skype, social networking, instant messaging, etc.) is a large draw for many to use public access venues. Being able to use public access to stay in touch with friends and family can have positive impacts on familial connectedness within families separated physically due to working overseas.

The Mobile Phone Debate:

If everyone has the internet in their pocket, who needs public access?

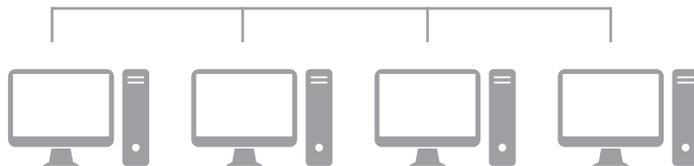
It turns out that the proliferation of mobile phones, particularly in the developing world, has not reduced the need or demand for public access computers and internet.

96% of public access users have a mobile phone yet still frequent libraries, telecenters, and cybercafés for computer and internet access. While mobile phones are abundant in developing countries, the mobile internet is not - 86% of users had never used the mobile internet. Only 4% of non-users say they don't use public access venues because they have a mobile phone.

Overview of Global Impact Study research methods

1,250 venues

to identify venue characteristics and services they provide



5,000 users

to explore how they use public access and their perceived impacts



2,000 non-users

to investigate reasons for non-use and perceived indirect impacts



7 in-depth studies

to dig deeper into salient and contested public access issue



Mobile phones have not met all of the technology needs of users. Users have developed practices that take advantage of the different affordances offered by computers at a library versus what they can do on their mobile phones. Communicating with friends and family can be done on the phone, but for longer, more complicated uses, such as doing homework, they use the technology available at public access venues.

Mobile phones have not closed the digital access divide in all ways. Public access continues to be needed, relevant, and important, even in a world filled with mobile devices.

What's next for public access?

The Global Impact Study was able to address some of the questions and critiques surrounding public access. Many public access users are indeed young, male, and not the “poorest of the poor” – but does that mean public access is a failure? Many credit this demographic – young and middle class – with having the most impact to a thriving economy. Communications and leisure activities top the list for public access use, but the data reveals that even these types of ICT use can lead to an improvement in overall ICT skills, which are critical to compete in today's job market.

The study offers recommendations for governments and donor organizations and public access practitioners that could perhaps help with the issue of sustainability. For example, governments and donor organizations could invest in existing infrastructure such as the 230,000 public libraries in the developing world. For public access practitioners, explore how venues can enhance user experience and serve more people by embracing mobile phone services; venues could offer Wi-Fi that users could access on their phones or offer SMS reservations for computers. More recommendations can be found in the full report.

In spite of the continued public and private investment in public access, questions about public access remain. However, even with mobile phones, tablets, and increased private access, public access to ICTs remains important for millions of people and are indeed still needed, used, and relevant. Public access is just one part of a larger ICT ecosystem – mobile phones, newspapers, TVs – but for many, it is a critical part and should be recognized as such. As part of this larger ICT ecosystem, opportunities abound for public access to contribute to digital inclusion initiatives and development goals.

Based on findings from the Global Impact Study of Public Access to Information & Communication Technologies. The Global Impact Study was a five-year project (2007-2012) to generate evidence about the scale, character, and impacts of public access to information and communication technologies. Looking at libraries, telecenters, and cybercafés, the study investigated impact in a number of areas, including Communications & Leisure, Culture & Language, Education, Employment & Income, Governance, and Health. The Global Impact Study was implemented by the University of Washington's Technology & Social Change Group with support from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and a grant to IDRC from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Learn more at:
tascha.uw.edu/projects/global-impact-study/

The full report is available at:
tascha.uw.edu/publications/connecting-people-for-development

Technology & Social Change Group

The Technology & Social Change Group (TASCHA) at the University of Washington Information School explores the design, use, and effects of information and communication technologies in communities facing social and economic challenges. With experience in over 50 countries, TASCHA brings together a multidisciplinary network of social scientists, engineers, and development practitioners to conduct research, advance knowledge, create public resources, and improve policy and program design. Our purpose? To spark innovation and opportunities for those who need it most.

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