Chapter 12
Public Access ICT in Brazil

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Brazil is one of 25 nations to participate in a study about the public’s ability to access information and communication technologies through public access venues, such as libraries, telecenters, and cybercafés. The study was organized by the Technology & Social Change Group (TASCHA) at the University of Washington. In recent years, Brazil has undertaken substantial efforts to provide the public with access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) as a way to foster its social and economic development, which is impeded by widespread poverty and economic inequality. A national shift towards an information-based society is occurring in both government and civil society. This movement includes initiatives to promote ICT access in underserved communities, lower tax rates to reduce computer prices, and investments in telecenter and school information technology laboratories through national policies. In addition, an entrepreneur-driven boom in cybercafés — mostly located in low-income neighborhoods — has altered the Internet access landscape in the country (Santos, 2008, p.35).

The study team was composed of Brazilian researchers and was coordinated by the internationally recognized Fundação Pensamento Digital, an organization dedicated to creating and supporting telecenters in partnership with other institutions. Many of the foundation’s lead staff are social scientists holding or pursuing doctoral degrees with connections to the telecenter world — a status that enabled the team to draw upon pre-existing contacts with policy makers, government officials, non-government organizations (NGOs), and community leaders.

To provide context for this study, the researchers reviewed the existing literature on ICT access in Brazil. Most importantly, the Brazilian Internet Steering Committee (CGI) conducted a comprehensive survey on ICT access in 2007. The results revealed that from 2006 to 2007, there were marked increases in the number of Internet
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users, computer owners, broadband connections, cybercafé users, and free access centers.

The study results were developed while giving due consideration to the interacting financial, political, and, most importantly, the socio-economic circumstances in Brazil. Consequently, the study placed an emphasis on disadvantaged and underserved communities.

To assess how the underserved population is benefiting from these efforts, and to determine what remaining information needs and opportunities exist, the researchers examined public access to ICTs in libraries, telecenters, and cybercafés. The investigation was conducted in two phases. The first phase was composed of (1) individual interviews to gather information from key stakeholders, policy makers, government representatives, and venue network coordinators, and (2) a review of secondary literature that covered the CGI study on ICT use in Brazil, government documents and websites, and studies on Brazilian poverty, social research methodology, and urban definitions.

During the second phase, the researchers interviewed 43 venue operators throughout the five Brazilian regions regarding ICT services, and then surveyed 1,284 venue users to discuss their ICT needs, barriers, and untapped opportunities.

The results of the Brazilian efforts to expand ICT access are clear. Even in underserved communities, the ability to access information and ICTs frequently exists. For example, adolescents often visit social networking websites in cybercafés, and educators are using ICTs at telecenters to network with other NGOs, plan and execute their activities, and broadcast their achievements and challenges. E-government services are becoming increasingly available, and a significant amount of content in Brazilian Portuguese is accessible on the Internet. However, there is a serious capacity gap among the underserved population; most lack the ability to use ICTs or obtain and apply information that meets their daily needs. Furthermore, little has been done to overcome or address the various inequities.

In all of the venues studied, there are few services, such as training courses, workshops, tutorials, or assistance to address the overall lack of technological capacity, and that perhaps is due to the Brazilian concept of “service,” or the cultural role attributed to these venues. The researchers observed that people do not necessarily view public access venues as sources for information, but rather as opportunities for communication. Locally relevant content accessible to those with low levels of functional literacy is greatly needed.

From an ideal perspective, public access venues would incorporate the sustainability and infrastructure of cybercafés, the community appropriation and social approach of telecenters, and the qualified personnel researchers observed in libraries. Given the realities in Brazil, the researchers identified several promising opportunities to help address the need for ICTs. Among those opportunities, Brazil must work to transform venue operators from passive facilitators of ICT access to active agents of change and develop them to become persons who promote reading and information appropriation and who understand the needs in their communities.

Other important forward-looking steps include: (1) creating ICT training courses based on modules that will engage users in a variety of skill-building exercises, (2) establishing more community-based libraries, either in telecenters or as stand-alone entities, (3) encouraging schools to open their libraries and computer laboratories to the public and to interact with families in the community, and (4) helping cybercafés adopt educational goals, relieving them of their association with video games and enabling them to participate in the information-based transformation of Brazilian society.