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Brokers of Public Access

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STUDY

Infomediaries, infomediation, and ICTs in public access venues

Infomediaries provide the human face for the information age. They are facilitators, coaches, teachers, and trusted gatekeepers. In their absence, those left behind, due to age, socioeconomic status, level of education/literacy, gender, disability, or caste, will face significant, often insurmountable, barriers.

Background

An infomediary is a person working in a public access venue (PAV) who combines coaching and technological resources to serve users' ICT needs.

This brief summarizes some of the findings from the study, *Infomediaries: Brokers of Public Access*, by Ricardo Ramírez, independent researcher and consultant and an Adjunct Professor at the University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada, Balaji Parthasarathy, ICICI Professor at the International Institute of Information Technology, Bangalore, and Andrew Gordon, Professor with the Evans School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington.

The study investigated the process of infomediation in shaping outcomes for users at public access venues in Bangladesh, Chile, and Lithuania. It is one of seven in-depth inquiries of the *Global Impact Study of Public Access to Information & Communication Technologies*.

Research design

The *Infomediaries: Brokers of Public Access* study examined:

- the extent to which technical skills and empathy are relevant to and appreciated by different types of users;
- whether differences in infomediary behavior are evident across different types of PAVs; and
- whether particular infomediary behaviors were associated with outcome differences as reported by PAV users.

This study incorporated ethnographies, focus groups, infomediary interviews, panels, field visits, and analysis of survey data from the Global Impact Study. In each country, preliminary findings were shared with panels comprised of users, infomediaries, and policy makers.

The following table describes the data collection sites and methods used:

Method	Bangladesh	Lithuania	Chile
Ethnography	30	3	16
Focus group	7	4	6
Infomediary interview	10	21	16
Panel	3	1	3
Field visit	2	1	2

Findings

Infomediaries demonstrate empathy (in many forms). Effective infomediaries are technologically savvy and connect users to information. They also tend to be trusted gatekeepers who are embedded in local community life. Their performance is often not captured by formal job descriptions that don't acknowledge empathy. Instances of empathetic service range from giving a novice personalized attention to leaving an experienced

user on her own. It is about adjusting schedules, pricing, venue layout, and equipment to enhance patron experiences.

Advanced users need empathy too, not just novices. While the technical abilities are consistently rated as more important than empathy, data show that novice and advanced users value infomediary empathy. Empathetic services can include:

- understanding a user's individual needs;
- offering a friendly and informal communication style;
- being flexible about rule enforcement; and
- demonstrating caring, sympathy, politeness, respect, patience, and goodwill.

In all three countries, the empathetic competencies of the staff were more important for patrons with lower ICT skills. Yet even for advanced users, some forms of empathy are still also appreciated.

Infomediaries' success is user-centric, regardless of venue. Successful infomediaries have a “user-first” approach across all types of PAVs. They apply skills and intuition to meet the needs of different types of users—experienced users may be left alone, while novices are given personalized attention. This dynamic is present in both non-profit and for-profit PAVs.

Infomediary judgment increases user skill and independence. Users visit PAVs based on services offered, price sensitivity, and convenience. Effective infomediaries are part of the bundle, but not a primary consideration. Adaptation is driven by business-savvy infomediaries. What matters is the extent to which the infomediary experiments and adjusts in order to help develop user capacity and confidence to use and explore

ICTs with increased independence.

Infomediaries boost user ICT literacy.

While causality between effective infomediation and ICT literacy outcomes is direct, what is not evident is the extent to which these outcomes are causally linked to impact (in the form of measurable changes in well-being, health, income, education, employment) due to the many other variables that intervene. Among the outcomes, however, the contribution by infomediaries to enhancing ICT literacy is notable.

Recommendations and Takeaways

Develop systems to select and train infomediaries. Experimentation and improvisation by infomediaries is crucial. The policy challenge is to identify and train individuals for this type of creativity and latitude. Careful planning is needed to find and retain people with technical skills, social skills, and sufficient innovative zeal.

Over time, infomediation will be more important than individual infomediaries. As users' (and populations') ICT skills mature, PAVs will provide more “bang for the buck” by developing systems of infomediation over individual infomediaries. With ICT-literacy, users will gain insight into which technologies they wish to use and how they would like to use them. They are then likely to seek communal spaces, where their concerns will be less about whether advice or access comes from a librarian or an attendant at a private kiosk. They will be more concerned with: convenience, services, pricing, location, and whether their friends will also be there. Thus, the “infomediary” will be less important than “infomediation.” Users may be more concerned over time with the infomediation process, as opposed to the individual providing it.

The **Global Impact Study** of Public Access to Information & Communication Technologies 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 cybercafes, the study investigated impact in a number of areas, including communication and leisure, culture and language, education, employment and income, governance, and health. The research was supported by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Learn more at globalimpactstudy.org.



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Information School

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Source

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