

Global study stresses importance of public Internet access

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Computer users in Bogota, Colombia. New research shows that millions in low-income countries still depend on public computer and Internet access venues despite the global proliferation of mobile phones and home computers. Credit: Joe Sullivan

Millions of people in low-income countries still depend on public computer and Internet access venues despite the global proliferation of

mobile phones and home computers. However, interest in providing such public access has waned in recent years, especially among development agencies, as new technologies become available.

But a five-year, eight-country study recently concluded by the Technology & Social Change Group at the University of Washington Information School has found that community access to computer and Internet technology remains a crucial resource for connecting people to the information and skills they need in an increasingly digital world.

"Our study finds that many people in low- and middle-income countries, including the underemployed, women, rural residents and other who are often marginalized, derive great benefits in such areas as education, employment and health when they use computers and the Internet at [public access](#) venues," said Araba Sey, Information School research assistant professor and lead investigator of the study.

The Global Impact Study of Public Access to Information & Communication Technologies surveyed 5,000 computer users at libraries, telecenters and cybercafés and 2,000 nonusers at home to learn about patterns of public access use.

The researchers also surveyed 1,250 operators of public access venues and conducted seven in-depth case studies to examine issues that have generated controversy. The study was conducted in eight low- and middle-income countries on three continents: Bangladesh, Botswana, Brazil, Chile, Ghana, Lithuania, Philippines and South Africa.

The researchers' findings include:

- Public access venues were the only source of the Internet for one-third of users surveyed, and provided the first-ever computer contact for more than half of those users—a number that rose

among lower socioeconomic groups and female populations.

- More than half said their use of computers would decrease if public access venues were no longer available, and about half cited a lack of computer access as their main reason for using public venues.
- Forty percent of users surveyed said public access venues had been crucial to their development of computer skills, and half said the same of learning Internet skills.

The study's [final report](#) also makes recommendations for government and donor organizations as well as libraries and telecenter practitioners. Their suggestions include:

- Support the wide availability of public Internet access venues and incorporate them into national initiatives involving digital resources and services for health, education, governance and other areas.
- Use existing infrastructure such as libraries when considering investments in public Internet access.
- Embrace games, as they help build technology skills.
- Value the role of social networking and communications, which have become critical venues for accessing important resources.
- Embrace the use of mobile phones, which the study found do not pose a threat to the relevance of public access.

Chris Coward, director of the Technology & Social Change Group, said the motivation of the study was "to provide governments and the international development community, which have expended tremendous amounts to support the availability of computers and Internet, with empirical evidence about what types of impacts have resulted from these investments."

The researchers have made all the data from this study publicly available

for others to use on the project website,
<http://www.globalimpactstudy.org>.

Provided by University of Washington

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