

GLOBAL
IMPACT STUDY
OF PUBLIC ACCESS TO INFORMATION & COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY



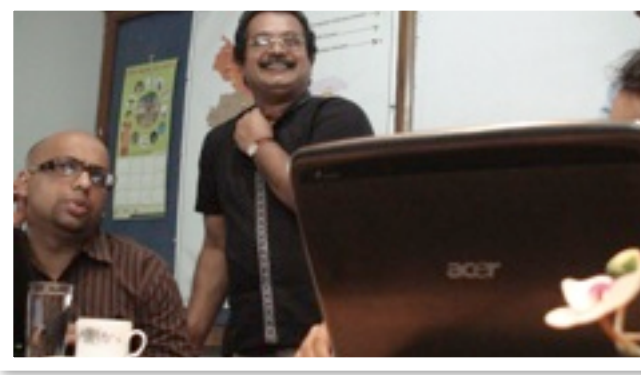
In-depth study
Infomediaries: Brokers of public access

VISUAL SUMMARY OF THE INCEPTION TRIP TO

BANGLADESH, 7-12 DECEMBER 2009

During the week of December 7-12, 2009, Balaji Parthasarathy (co-PI based at the International Institute of Information Technology, Bangalore, India) and Andy Gordon (co-PI based at the University of Washington, Seattle) and visited the Bangladesh Country Research Team (CRT) at D.NET in Dhaka.

The purpose of the trip was to become more familiar with the context and with relevant projects already underway in Bangladesh. Using the Chile Inception report as the template, and building on field visits to representative public access venues (PAVs) in Bangladesh, we worked with the CRT to revise initial hypotheses, refine our methodology, and finalize a work plan. In the process, we succeeded in creating a productive and respectful learning environment.



For two days we toured PAVs selected from the main venue types in Bangladesh. Each visit included a visual survey of the PAVs and their surroundings, informal discussions with infomediaries and patrons, and testing drafts of the affective and ICT skill variables for the upcoming venue survey, user focus groups, and infomediary interviews.

The D.NET team members were wonderful hosts, introducing us to their colleagues and to a range of D.NET projects, some of which have substantive and methodological overlap with this GIS initiative.



This report is a brief visual tour of the sites that we visited on 8 and 9 December, including a community library, two noncommercial telecenters, a commercial telecenter and two cybercafés. All these PAVs described on the pages that follow were in the Tangail and Manikganj districts of the Dhaka division.



Visiting Public Access Venues

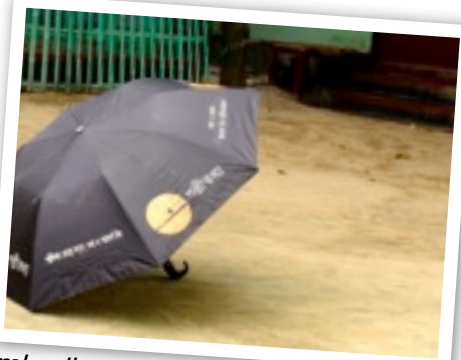
Our first stop was a noncommercial telecenter (a *Pallitathya Kendra* – or Rural Information Center -- in the Bangla language) in Bashail village, Tangail district. This telecenter, initiated and partially supported by D.Net, is part of a complex run by the NGO DHAW. HIV/AIDS awareness and sanitation awareness programs for those living in vulnerable riverbank

areas, and a children's pre-primary school predate the telecenter. This center employs a manager and two infomediaries.

One of the infomediaries at DHAW, a 'mobile infolady' extends the services of well-known (and now less successful) 'mobile phone ladies' by carrying an ICT kit including a laptop computer with an internet connection and a digital camera, and her mobile phone. This mobile infolady, who works 3-4 hours a day, 6 days a week, is employed specifically to extend the reach of the telecenter to the women in the village. We joined her on one of her visits and observed her interact

with a group of women as they discussed issues of concern. This approach to infomediation challenged our conception of the infomediary, both in itself and as an example of evolving forms of outreach which could enhance the economic viability and service offerings from a PAV. This experience led to our modifying hypothesis 3a.

The Pallitathya Kendra center, and others have evolved their services in response to the conditions and needs of their constituents



Umbrella which identifies the mobile infolady



Infomediaries at the DHAW Center



The mobile infolady answers questions in an outdoor compound



A boy uses advanced tools



The visitors attract interested villagers

Our next visit was to a Union Information Centre (UIC), Government, Paikara Parishad is Bangladesh. One of 30 UICs established thus far nationwide, this PAV is housed in the Union Parishad office. Two origin and ready market ICT features were distinctive, thanks to the location for the PAV. First, the PAV has a nationwide, office. Two origin and ready market ICT features were distinctive, thanks to the location for the PAV. First, the PAV has no equipment, thus enabling the telecenter supplement its income with needed local government work. Second, the PAV relies on elected and unelected appointees in the Parishad to spread the word in their respective wards about the PAV.



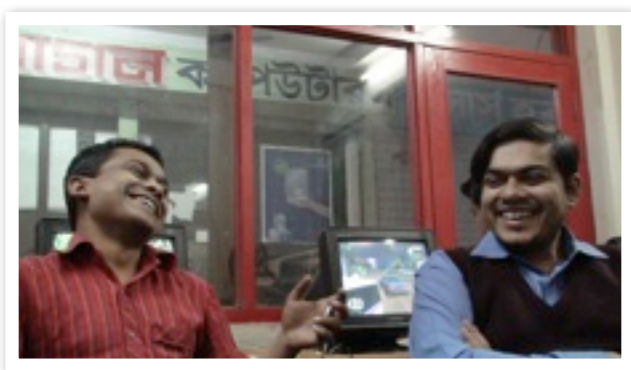
Centre (UIC), Government, Paikara Parishad is Bangladesh. One of 30 UICs established thus far nationwide, this PAV is housed in the Union Parishad office. Two origin and ready market ICT features were distinctive, thanks to the location for the PAV.



The manager of well located, family-owned telecenter, who gives discounts to students, and lessons to all

We then visited adjacent cybercafés in Tangail town (2001 population – 129,000). The first, a 10-year-old café run as a family business, attracts a range of clients including students and journalists despite having only three computers. The students benefit from a discounted rate that they have negotiated with café management; moreover, the infomediary also provides them with free training over weekends and holidays. Journalists and other professionals who use this café can afford their own computers and Internet connections, but the manager (infomediary) said that they often lacked the skills to make full use of their equipment and relied on his intervention. The digital photography service offered by the café was complemented by the photography lab run by the manager’s brother. This infomediary

attributed this business success overwhelmingly to one factor: their location in the heart of town, next to the public library. This location made the café conveniently accessible to various professionals, and thus the infomediary was able to thrive next door to a cybercafé with 20 PCs.



The manager of the 20-station E-Hut Franchise

We went next door to learn more about the competition. This cybercafé is a franchisee of E-hut, a brand of café promoted by BRACNET, an initiative of BRAC, the world’s largest non-profit development NGO. There were two apparent ties to BRACNET -- the prominent display of the E-hut logo, and the bandwidth provided by BRACNET which, in turn, was distributed to other users including the cybercafé next door. In terms of services, what seemed most clearly to distinguish this cybercafé from its smaller competitor was its offering games for its younger clientele.



Clients of the BRAC telecenter, working together in confidential cubicles

Our final visit was to a one-year-old commercial telecenter in Bairabazaar, Manikandj district. It was established under the *Batigarh* (lighthouse in Development (BIID), an the entrepreneur requires that the PAV expanding the since at least one employment, there visa/passport promoter' - an free advice on "brand promoter" brings solutions commercial an interest in cost, together but even those who are not registered can benefit from the advice provided by the brand

Bangla) brand promoted by the Bangladesh Institute of ICT in NGO that provided the initial equipment; all that was expected of (infomediary) was some level of ICT skill. The *Batigarh* brand seek the permission of, or at least inform BIID, before service offerings. Two important expansions were evident: member of each local family goes to Middle East to seek is a continuing demand for this PAV's photography and other related services. Second, this PAV employs a 'brand illiterate farmer who visits other farmers *in situ* and offers agricultural issues. When more information is required, the the problem to the PAV and relies on the infomediary to find online or to utilize electronic help-lines. This model shares with the non-profit "mobile infolady" increasing outreach by providing information free of with PAV registration of some farmers for a small fee; promoter.



The infomediary in the Batigarh center. Added visa services are important for center visibility and responsiveness.

On the second day we visited a PAV in a community library in the 40 year old High School, Mirzapur village, Tangail district. This PAV began in

when BRAC established its *Ganakendra Pathagar* "community library" in Bangla language) with a collection of 1000 books. In 2006, BRAC offered to establish a PAV in partnership with the community. In this BRAC model, of which there are approximately 800, BRAC pays for the initial establishment costs, but requires the community to share the operating costs

equally by depositing TK 50,000. Interest earned from the TK100,000 total pays the salary of the librarian, who also serves as the infomediary who facilitates the use of the technologies. Students are allowed to use the computers during school hours (from 9:00 AM to 3:00 PM) under the supervision of the librarian. Although located in the school, this PAV is accessible only to those students who pay a nominal fee. Additional computer facilities for all students are available in a separate computer facility. The community library is open from 4:00 PM to 8:00 PM to the public for a fee, and is supervised by a volunteer. By requiring payment for access, and by requiring community investment in facilities, BRAC has attempted to devise a sustainable model that also gives the community a sense of ownership.



Helping students in the Ganakendra Pathagar



The book collection and computers are in the same room

Rajabari 2000,

(or the

A central purpose of these initial visits is to ensure that the study design and approaches are appropriate to the settings. Our hypotheses and their refinements are inevitably influenced by what we see during these site visits, and by what happens to be going on and to catch our attention while we are there.



The revised hypotheses for this study as they currently stand fall into three categories:

1. The individual abilities of the infomediary
2. The context for the infomediary's work
3. The impact of the infomediary

INFOMEDIARY ABILITIES AND PRACTICES

1a. Empathy with the users is more important than ICT skills for the infomediary's job

1b. Long-time and frequent users are more likely to seek ICT skills than to seek empathy from infomediaries

CONTEXT

2a. Non-profit PAVs encourage empathy more than ICT skills from infomediaries

2b. Even users with private access seek non-profit PAVs to enhance their ICT skills because of the empathy demonstrated in the infomediaion process

IMPACT ON VENUE

3a. Outreach by PAVs and an adjustment in the variety of their service offerings leads to more effective infomediaion processes.

IMPACT ON USER

3b. The most significant experience/outcome by users will be linked to an infomediaion process



Further details are available in the full Inception report. We are thankful for the enthusiasm, generosity and efficient coordination by the Bangladeshi country research team!