Public Access to ICTs in the Gambia: The Case of Cybercafés

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Introduction

New Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), the internet in particular, have the potential to bring about unprecedented social and economic development (World Bank, 2011). In developing countries, ICTs have been envisioned as innovative and indispensable tools of growth and poverty reduction. This view, which is being promoted within the framework of the Information Society (Castells, 1996) and later the Millennium Development Goals (Byrne, Nicholson & Salem, 2011), is envisaged to be achieved through development interventions (Mercer, 2005; World Bank, 1998, 2000; UNDP, 2001). This is premised on the notion that ICTs, the internet in particular, is the biggest driving force behind economic growth and access to them will help poor and marginalised communities to get access to the information and services they need to improve their livelihoods.

This vision, however, raises some critical issues and challenges. Prominent amongst these is the issue of access and
affordability giving rise to a popular concept within the ICTs for development discourse known as the “digital divide” (Bichler, 2008; Braga et al, 2000; Okpaku, 2007; Wilson; 2004). The “digital divide”, basically, refers to “the disparity between those who have use of and access to ICTs and those who do not” (Foley et al. 2002). This divide can both be local (within national boundaries; individuals, households and rural-urban divide) and global (across national boundaries; the north-south divide). The discourse therefore argues that the solution is to make ICTs and the internet in particular more accessible to poor societies so as to enable them leapfrog the rest of the globe into the information age and to ultimately participate in the global market economy (UN, 2000).

However, a majority of people living in developing countries lack both the knowledge, financial and infrastructural resources to get access to ICTs and the internet in particular. This is particularly appalling for most Sub-Saharan African countries where it has been estimated (Waters, 2011) that, while accounting for 15 per cent of overall global population, only 13.5 per cent of Africans has internet access. Moreover, less than four out of 100 Africans currently use the internet, and broadband penetration is below 1 per cent.

Therefore, to mitigate the problems of access to and bridge the digital divide, shared models of access through public access points such as telecentres and cybercafés have been prescribed. Public access points are defined as “venues that offer public access to information and services that are available to all” (Baron & Gomez, 2013). It is anticipated that shared public facilities will help provide internet access to people who cannot afford to have private Internet connections. Therefore, the late 1990s saw a proliferation of initiatives which are aimed at getting more people online and
one such initiative were investments in public access ICTs such as libraries, telecentres and cybercafés (Gómez, 2012). The strategy converges on the premise that, although the provision of internet access to every home is too ambitious a goal, especially in poor countries, universal access can be achieved through public access points.

Within this context, cybercafés have begun to play a crucial role as they have become the most popular model of public Internet access, especially in the urban and peri-urban settings of developing countries (Gomez, 2012; Nisbett, 2006; Rangaswamy, 2008; Sey & Fellows, 2009; Haseloff, 2005). Stewart defines the cybercafé as “a cafe or shop open to the public, where a computer can be hired for fixed periods to access the Internet to carry out diverse activities” (Stewart, 2000). Within developing country contexts, referring to facilities that provide public access to ICTs as cybercafés is generally a misnomer (Burrell, 2012) as none of these facilities serve any food or drinks. Be that as it may, cybercafés are mushrooming and have become ubiquitous mostly in the urban areas of most African countries. The general aim of this article is to explore the public access to ICTs landscape in the Gambia. Specifically, the article examines the role played by public access to ICTs in the Gambia, cybercafés in particular, the users, patterns of use and how they are regulated.

The Gambia: Setting the Scene

The republic of the Gambia is a former British colony which is situated along the banks of the River Gambia in the West African Sahel zone. The river empties into the Atlantic Ocean in an 11-mile mouth, which stretches from Cape St. Mary at the south to Jinnak Creek in Senegal at the north (Gamble 1988: xi-xiv). The river has its source in Guinea and travels for over 680 miles through Senegal and finally enters The Gambia.
With the exception of a 30-mile stretch of The Atlantic Ocean along the country's western border, The Gambia is entirely surrounded by Senegal. England and France delineated the country’s boundaries at the end of the 19th Century, partly from determining the furthest point inward that the river could be navigated (Gray 1966: 1-4).

Being the smallest country in mainland Africa, the entire country is a narrow strip of land, with a total population of about 1.9 million (GBOS, 2014), almost half of which live in the urban and the other half in the rural areas. The percentage of the population with access to electricity is 63.22 percent for the urban areas and 18.75 percent for the rural areas (DOSCIIT). The official language is English, but the country has about eight local languages, which include Mandinka, Wolof, Fula and other indigenous vernaculars. The leading sectors in the Gambia are agriculture, industry and services.

Post-colonial Gambia’s national economy is based on agriculture, the tourist industry (mainly along the Atlantic Coast) and the re-export trade (Sallah, 1990; IMF, 2015). With no important minerals or other natural resources and despite commercial agriculture suffering from climate and market constraints over the past decades, the country continues with peanuts and peanut products, fish, cotton lint and palm kernels as its main export products (Wane, 2009). The country’s relatively low trade taxes has promoted its role as an ‘entrepot’ in the sub-region (Golub and Mbaye, 2008). This entrepot role has contributed substantially to government revenues, as imported goods destined for re-export generally pay full duties when entering the country (Ibid).

The country ranks 172nd out of 187 countries in the United Nations Human Development Index according to the 2014 Human Development Report (UNDP, 2014) which is in the low human development category. This position has
declined, taking into account that in the 2011 HDR, Gambia was ranked 168 out of 187 countries (Ibid). The Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) indicates that 60.8 percent of the population are poor (Ibid), faring just better than the Central African Republic in this index. The Gambia’s literacy rate (defined as those who are 15 and over and can read and write) for the total population was estimated at a mere 51.1 percent in 2012 (male: 60.9 percent, female: 41.9 percent) (MOBSCE, 2012). The school life expectancy (the average number of years that a child is likely to spend in the educational system), primary to tertiary education, in 2013 totalled to only 9 years (Ibid). Although the financing of education in the Gambia is basically in the hands of the state, which allocates roughly 4 per cent of GDP, external multilateral and bilateral aid finances more than 50 percent of government development expenditures on education. As such, the various school types in the Gambia can be categorized as: Government, Grant Aided, Private Schools and Madrassas. The Madrassas system is taught through an Arabic medium and it is managed by the private sector (Sarr & Hydara, 2005).

A new basic education programme has been introduced in the country since 2002. At the primary level, the Lower basic covers Grades 1 to 6 and upper basic covers Grades 7 to 9. Senior secondary education, which covers grades 10 to 12, is for pupils between the ages of 16 and 18. At the end of Grade 12, pupils sit for the West African Secondary School-leaving Certificate Examinations (WASSCE). The University of The Gambia, which was created in 1999 and comprising of four faculties, provides higher education in The Gambia together with the Gambia College (UNESCO 2005). As the Gambia’s first and only University, it has the potential to significantly contribute to the e-government project in that it can provide
the educational tools need to for the human capital base. The computer to student ratio in middle/upper basic school is 1:110, 1:29 in senior secondary schools and 1:10 in tertiary and higher education. The percentage of ICT qualified teachers are 2.4 percent in lower basic schools, 4.2 percent in middle/upper basic schools, 15.8 percent in senior secondary schools, 38.5 percent in vocational/technical institutions and 13.9 percent in tertiary education. There are also a few ICT training institutions offering short-term courses in basic ICT proficiency (DOSCIIT).

The country’s ICT policy within the framework of the National Information and Communication Infrastructure (NICI) was launched in 2004. The objective of the policy is to lay plans for the technological framework necessary to enable The Gambia to “leapfrog’ several stages of development by establishing a participatory approach in building human resources and a conducive environment that utilises ICT as a platform to disseminate and exchange data, information, and knowledge, and as a tool to implement applications and provide services in order to achieve higher growth rates in all spheres of socio-economic activities” (NICI Policy, 2004).

Remarkably, the government of The Gambia’s ICT policy is, as with most developing country ICT policies, informed by and driven within the framework of the donor aid complex. Hence, the policies bear all the hallmarks of a top-down approach to ICT initiatives that fail to consider local realities and context of implementation. This prompts Heeks (2002) to argue that a majority of ICT initiatives in developing countries mainly end in failure; either partial or total. The reasons that underlie these failures are attributed to large ‘design – reality gaps’ (Ibid). This was illustrated by the dismal failure of two donor sponsored e-government projects in The Gambia (Sanders et al., 2005) that were designed to provide public
access to a variety of government information and communication services, hence, underscoring the significance of participatory design of ICT policies that pays attention to local conditions and sustainability issues.

Be that as it may, also encapsulated in the ICT policy is a broad vision of a modern Gambia based on harnessing ICTs. As such, The Gambian government has designed an economic blueprint clearly indicating its medium and long-term economic and social policies. These policies became subsequently encapsulated in what is popularly known today as ‘Vision 2020’. Basically, ‘Vision 2020’ pledges to transform The Gambian economy and make it more globally competitive, diverse and highly integrated into the global economy and locally improve living standards and social services (Saine, 2009). Specifically, these policies set out the invaluable role of ICTs in enabling Gambians to achieve “high quality livelihoods with peace, stability and unity; good governance; a well-educated and learning society and a strong competitive economy capable of producing sustainable growth and shared benefits.”

Despite these policy declarations, the amount of people with access to the internet is very minimal and exclusively an urban phenomenon. Internet access in The Gambia is costly and is quite a luxury. The vast majority of the population do not have private access due to restrictions in electricity supply, tele-density and purchasing power. But moderate numbers of public users are found mostly in Banjul, the capital, and its surroundings with smaller numbers located in peri-urban settings.

Mobile internet is becoming increasingly available especially among urban elites. There are four telecom companies that provide both phone and internet services. General IT knowledge in The Gambia is quite poor as this has not been
integrated into the primary and secondary education system. Very few people own PCs and IT artefacts are regarded as luxury tools. Nonetheless, internet use in cybercafés is getting popular especially among the youth who can neither afford personal computers nor the expensive mobile internet charges.

Mwesige (2004) observes that “the expansion of internet access in developing countries is generally facilitated by arrangements for public use” and recent studies (e.g. Gomez, 2012) on public access ICTs has also confirmed this trend. These observations quite fits The Gambian situation where an exponential mushrooming of cybercafés is visible in urban settings due to investments by Gambians living in the diaspora who ship second hand PCs from Europe and the US to equip cyber cafes which are in turn run as a family business. These privately-owned and profit-oriented cybercafés provide opportunities for ordinary Gambians in economically deprived conditions to access the internet at various rates and connection speeds.

According to statistics from 2011 (PURA), the number of internet users in The Gambia have already reached record 195,433, about 11 per cent of the population. These figures, while infinitesimal compared to other countries, are still promising in comparison to 1990, where the amount of people using the internet was zero. Meanwhile, the number of internet subscribers have sky rocketed from 36 in 2004 to 350 in 2010. Therefore, the widespread public use of the internet explains the rapid growth of internet users as compared to subscribers and a significant segment of Gambians today gain access to the internet through cybercafés.
Public Access Points: Telecenters, Cybercafés and Libraries

The literature on public access to ICTs has identified three main types of public access venues in developing countries: public libraries, telecentres and cybercafés (Gomez, 2012; Gould et al, 2010; Haseloff, 2005). Public libraries are venues that are usually funded by the government and are open to the general public with the aim of meeting a local community’s information needs as a public service. Although libraries offer books and printed materials, most public libraries in developing countries nowadays are increasingly also offering access to computers and the internet.

Telecentres on the other hand are non-profit venues that offer ICTs as part of its services and are open to the public. Telecentres offer shared premises where the public can access information and communication technologies and function largely within the dogma and vision of bridging the digital divide (Colle, 2005; Keniston & Kumar, 2004; Whyte, 2000). Crucially, telecentres are set up to enable various community welfare schemes by adapting information technology to deliver focused deployments of ICTs in pursuit of development goals (Rangaswamy, 2008). The telecentre concept is quite expedient in that it is a venue where people “can access computers, the Internet, and other digital technologies that enable them to gather information, create, learn, and communicate with others while they develop essential digital skills” (Proenza et al, 2001). Telecentres are normally NGO-sponsored within the framework of rural internet projects and their vision “emphasizes communal good over individual gains and collective or patron-driven process over private ownership of means” (Rangaswamy, 2008).

Cybercafés, also known as internet cafes, are mostly found
in urban and peri-urban areas (Gomez, 2012) and are increasingly becoming important spaces of communication and interaction for many people in developing countries. They are for-profit venues that are open to the public and offer computer access and related services by generally charging a fee. Haseloff (2005: 4) defines cybercafés as “for-profit facilities, open to the general public to access the Internet, other network facilities and/or a variety of information technology tools on a temporary contract basis (pay per use) without the necessity for the users to own hardware or software themselves.” Burrell (2012) and Smith (2008) argue that the term ‘café’ is a misnomer as few of these facilities served food or drinks of any kind. Be that as it may, countries such as the Gambia, where few people cannot afford private access to the internet, cybercafés “readily become high-tech access nodes” (Haseloff, 2005: 16). They have become useful spaces that people frequent to get access to the internet for communications and to get access to other ICT products such as printing and scanning.

The key differences between telecentres and cybercafés are mainly related to “ownership, financing, and the provision of variety of services” (Salvador et al., 2005). Telecentres operate mostly on a non-profit basis and therefore rely on various sources of external funding. Cybercafés, on the other hand, are profit-oriented and are based on service fees above costs (Salvador et al., 2005). Moreover, another key difference has to do with their goals. While the goal of establishing telecentres is to provide the informational, hence developmental, needs of underserved communities, cybercafés do not necessarily intend to support community development although this may happen as an incidental benefit. Be that as it may, cybercafés have been found to be the most common type of public access venue.
A recent global study by Gomez (2012) on comparing the different public access models in 25 countries reveals that cybercafés represented almost three quarters of the total number of venues included in the study, and this is most likely to grow. Despite these findings, it was noted that research on cybercafés is not as extensive as telecenters or libraries. The study recommends for an increase in research on cybercafés as the study indicates that cybercafés are the most commonly available public access venue, especially in urban locations.

Studies have also been carried out to investigate how public access venues are spatially located with respect to the urban/rural divide. Research on this (Gomez, 2012) indicates a distinct concentration of public access venues located in urban areas. While telecenters have a high proportion of non-urban locations, public libraries and cybercafés are primarily pervasive in urban settings indicating that public access to ICTs is mostly an urban phenomenon. The urban predominance and bias of public access venues is quite problematic and has implications for the issue of physical access to ICTs in terms of providing universal access. Indeed, this is in some disjuncture with the idea that public access ICTs are initiatives implemented to reduce the digital divide as they fail to serve the majority of the rural populations.

Consequently, this confirms Proenza’s (2006) assumption that the urban/non-urban divide is by far the most significant divide in public access to ICT (Proenza, 2006). These findings are to a large extent consistent with the situation in The Gambia. Although no studies have been done yet to verify this, anecdotal evidence suggest that cybercafés are the most ubiquitous in The Gambia and are mostly found in urban and peri-urban settings. Other models, such as public libraries and telecentres do not exist. However, other models of public access venues, though of restricted nature, can be
found. These are the café-restaurant and bars that provide internet facilities to their mostly affluent customers through WiFi networks. In The Gambia, café-restaurants like “La Parissienne” and “La Palaise”, located in the opulent Kairaba Avenue area provide these services. However, these spaces are mostly frequented by elites and the well-off in society who can afford to hang out in these expensive spaces.

The Role of Cybercafés in the Gambia and their Future Relevance

The Gambia has experienced an exponential growth of cybercafés in urban settings in the past 10 to 15 years. The great majority of cybercafés are established as family businesses, mostly by Gambians living in the diaspora who ship second hand PCs from Europe and the US to equip cybercafés which are run to provide subsistence for their families back home. Some are investments by civil servants or other public sector workers as a side business to supplement their low incomes. There are no statistics on the number of cybercafés in operation in the country. This statistical void is partly due to a lack of research and regulations for registration on the one hand and limited institutional oversight mechanisms on the other hand. Nonetheless, cybercafés in the Gambia play a crucial role in the Gambia in terms of providing opportunities to get access to the internet and other ICT services.

In addition to providing ordinary Gambians with their online communication needs, cybercafés also offer spaces for sociability and socializing with other café users as is the case in many developing countries (Venables, 2009: 100; Nisbett, 2006: 245). Thus, Musatov (2001) considers the cybercafé to satisfy a combination of physiological and information needs of the individuals and Laegren and Stewart (2003:370) argue
that “the technical, social and spatial spaces are deeply intertwined in cybercafés”. Relatedly, Nisbett (2006) and Venables (2009) bring our attention to the dual nature that exist in cybercafés in terms of space; the social space of the cybercafé itself and the online social spaces provided by the internet. This resonates with Liff & Steward’s (2003) contention that the cybercafé implies a “heterotopian juxtaposition” of the virtual world of ‘cyber’ space and the real place of the ‘café’.

Nonetheless, there exists a discrepancy in the literature over the role played by cybercafés and other spaces of media consumption for sociability. Whereas studies highlight the cybercafés and other spaces of media consumption as nodes of sociability (e.g., Miller and Slater 2000; Laegren and Stewart, 2003; Weis, 2002), Burrell (2012) found very limited amount of sociability occurring in Accra’s cybercafés, noting that cybercafés in Accra are spaces where networks of youths “travel through”. The cafés she observed in Accra serve as places of escape, transporting customers to distinct places outside of Ghana. This displacement fed into the fascination with abroad and as she put it: “walking into the cybercafé, customers were suddenly transported from a hot, tropical climate to the air-conditioned environment required by these machines from the cool North” (Burrell, 2012: 92). This fascination with abroad was indicative through the names of Accra’s cybercafés (normally adopting non-local names such as ‘Sky Harbour’).

The physical spaces of the cybercafés in the Gambia are distinguished by their basic furnishing. This is the case in many developing countries, particularly in SSA. For example, studies of cybercafés in Accra (Burrell 2012), Bamako (Steiner, 2011) and Umuahia (Smith, 2008) found that the interiors of many cybercafés they visited had a homogeneous quality. In order
words, they all look similar to one another. Burrell describes cybercafés in Accra as ‘strikingly place-less’ as they were typically located in bland, often windowless rooms and sparsely decorated. She observes that the arrangement of the computers were done in a way that fails to promote interaction between customers. The arrangement of equipment and furniture, however, was designed to provide customers with some privacy thereby minimising unwanted interactions.

Although a few scholars have begun to question the future relevance of cybercafés in the age of the mobile internet (Ajao, 2012; Samii, 2009), others are of the view that these assertions are largely “untested and worthy of further scrutiny” (Walton & Donner, 2012). In their article ‘Your phone has internet - why are you at a library PC? Re-imagining public access in the mobile internet era’, Walton and Donner (2012: 1) argue that while the mobile internet is opening up opportunities for young people, “its current form still conflicts with the easy (global) rhetoric of a closing digital divide and the end of public access venues”.

The authors conclude that no evidence exists that the demand for public access venues among resource-constrained, mobile Internet-using communities will decline in the near term as the desire for big screens, faster and cheaper bandwidth will remain. In the Gambian context, mobile internet complements rather than competes with cybercafés. Most young internet users who can afford to possess smart phones are faced with the challenge of affording the high fee of mobile data provided by one of the six mobile ISPs in the country. Cybercafés offer cheaper alternatives for young people to access the Internet.

**Cybercafés in the Gambia: Users and Patterns of Use**

Cybercafés in the Gambia in terms of users and patterns of use are somewhat similar (except for the gender dimensions) to those found elsewhere in developing countries. Studies have
used demographic variables such as age, gender, education, occupational status, income differences and ICT access (Gomez and Camacho, 2009; Sciadas et al., 2012) to characterise cybercafé users in developing countries. For example, in their study to profile public access to internet users in 25 developing countries, Gomez and Camacho (2009) observed that the typical profile of Internet users in cybercafés, are likely to be young (15-35 years), male, low to middle income, high school or college educated in an urban location. These findings are consistent with the findings of similar studies in Nigeria (Abdulkareem, 2010), Botswana (Sairosse & Mutula, 2004), Uganda (Mwesige, 2004), Indonesia (Wahid et al 2004) and Manila (Bringula et al., 2012). Internet use in cybercafés in the Gambia is not characterised by significant gender gaps when compared to other contexts where cultural barriers inhibit women from using public access to ICTs (see for example Gomez and Camacho, 2009; Terry and Gomez, 2012; Nisbett, 2006; Huyer, 2005; Burrell 2012). Although internet users in cybercafés in the Gambia are predominantly male, gender biases and cultural norms do not restrict women from using cybercafés.

As in other developing countries where the majority of the population rely on public access points like cybercafés to have access to the internet, ‘consolidated use’ (Wyche et al., 2013) of the Internet in cybercafés can be found among Gambians. This involves instrumental use (job searching, business and bureaucratic activities, general educational activities and seeking information), recreational use (chatting and playing online games) and social use (interacting with friends and family online) (Hong and Huang, 2005; Wahid et al, 2004; Boase et al, 2002).
Regulation of Cybercafés in the Gambia

Although the establishment and operation of cybercafés in the Gambia should be regulated by the Public Utilities Regulatory Authority (PURA) in accordance with section 14 (1) (g) of the PURA Act 2001, the body has had a lax approach towards cybercafés due to lack of enforcing capability. As such, cybercafés were (and some still are) established and operated without being registered or following procedures. However, cybercafé registration and regulations were tightened in September 2013, which required operators to provide thorough details for a license, as well as mandating the physical layout of cafes and the signs that must be displayed. Many interpreted this as part of the government’s efforts to control the flow of information, particularly to government dissidents living in the diaspora who use online radios to criticise the government.

In April 2013, PURA further issued a press release banning cybercafés from offering Voice over IP (VoIP) calling services such as Skype, citing the need to protect the country’s “national interest” (PURA, 2013). Cybercafés were also banned from offering Internet dating services, with the government providing no justification. In response to a public outcry over the ban, the Ministry of Information and Communication Infrastructure issued another press release two days later clarifying that the use of VoIP services was not in fact prohibited. Rather, the government restricted Internet cafes from commercialising VoIP services, or charging additional rates for VoIP calls on top of the standard Internet access rates (Daily Observer Online, April 23, 2013).

These developments led to arduous regulatory requirements for the operation of cybercafés. For instance, cybercafé owners are now required to register with PURA for
an operating license (in addition to a requisite business license) through an application that requires details of existing bandwidth, the ISP, the number of computers installed, and services provided and a fee of 100 dalasis (about £1.50) (PURA, 2013). Existing cybercafés were given a deadline in May 2013 to submit their applications and registration fees to PURA or face closure. In September 2013, PURA issued further guidelines that dictated specific requirements for the physical layout of cybercafés and the signs that must be displayed. Prominent among these are that: “cafés must not have fully enclosed cubicles which will isolate a computer user from other computer users; that café operators display a signboard communicating that "Cyber Crimes and Pornography are prohibited" and the service provider shall also not publicly advertise or provide dating services or solicit or host dating services” (Ibid).

Despite these regulations, many cybercafés are still unregistered and are still maintaining the status quo in terms of operations. Although a few cybercafé owners rushed to register in the aftermath of the announcements, this however subsided with time, as is the case with the public’s reaction to the government’s many declarations. As a result, PURA lacks definite figures as to the number of cybercafés that are in operation today in the country. What is evident is that they are mushrooming on street corners, on main roads and in many other spaces.

Conclusion

In this article, I have examined the role of public access points, the cybercafé in particular in the Gambia. The article also explored the types of users and the patterns of internet use in cybercafés and how they are regulated. I show that the patterns of Internet use in cybercafés by young urban
Gambians are not specific to the country. This, in some way, suggests that this study provides new ways of approaching and understanding novel forms of Internet use in cybercafés.

I have also illustrated that the typical profile of users in cybercafés in the Gambia is very likely to be people in an urban location, very likely young (15-35), low-to-middle income, and those with a high school or college education. Overall, users are equally likely to be male or female. This typical profile highlights the notion that public access venues are serving people who are already benefiting from other social services, especially formal education. In sum, public access venues like cybercafés are not serving the poorest and most marginalized and excluded sectors of society in the Gambia. The most salient gap revealed that user profiles is not based on gender, age, education, or income, but based on geographic location: public access venues are predominantly located in urban and peri-urban settings, while rural areas are dramatically underserved, albeit with very few exceptions.

References


