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BOOK REVIEW

Proenza, F. J. (Ed.). (2015). *Public Access ICT Across Cultures: Diversifying Participation in the Network Society*. Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press, IDRC; 472 pages.

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The special needs of the disadvantaged are seldom determinedly promoted, if taken into account at all, in political decision making when public access to computers and the Internet is on the table. Within the covers of the book *Public Access ICT Across Cultures: Diversifying Participation in the Network Society*, edited by Dr. Francisco Proenza, the reader finds a great collection of studies assessing the socioeconomic impacts of public access to information and communication technology (ICT) on the lives of vulnerable people. The studies represent 10 developing countries and emerging economies on three continents.

The overall aim of the book is no less than to gather scientific evidence on what works and what does not in the provision of public access venues (PAVs)—such as telecenters and library access points—that are subsidized by governments all over the world. Individual studies reported in the book are diverse in terms of their methods and commitment to the codes of academic research. Some studies are clearly grounded in social, psychological, and communication theories, while others are more like systematic reports of surveys and interview studies. The chapters are tied together by a loose framework with the aims to "assess impacts with scientific rigor," "acknowledge the reach and limitation of findings," and "formulate practical recommendations" (p. 2).

The book is divided into three thematic sections; a fourth section is dedicated solely to a final overview chapter. Below, I highlight topics that are recurrent in the book, and I draw attention to some individual observations that are of particular interest to those interested in ICT, policies, and social equality.

The first section deals with personal achievements reached via PAVs and the impacts of ICT on personal well-being. PAVs must be nearby—close to home or the study or work place—if they are to be used and benefit the user. Many of the chapters' authors endorse the common understanding that the perceived benefits of cybercafés and other types of PAVs are

primarily related to personal communication and social networking, followed by the possibility for searching for information and/or news. These also are the most commonly reported reasons for visiting PAVs.

This section also considers the urban–rural differences in the use of PAVs. For instance, Mazimpaka, Mugiraneza, and Thioune note in their study that, in Rwanda, government-funded telecenters in rural areas are better equipped to provide ICT training, compared with profit-based cybercafés and firms in larger towns and cities that offer Internet access alongside their primary services, such as photocopying and printing. The crucial role of PAVs in small cities and rural communities—and for rural–urban migrant workers—is also highlighted by Proenza et al. in their study, carried out in China. These studies also show that PAVs function as strong social markers, separating people who have no other choice in accessing the Internet from people who can use the Internet at work, for example, and visit PAVs for convenience.

The second section of the book is devoted to social inclusion and social networking. The section begins with the study by Larghi et al. that focuses on low-income youth in Argentina. This study shows how market-based solutions, like in Rwanda, do not meet the needs of marginalized communities. The authors rightly point out that cybercafés are becoming the facilities of marginal neighborhoods, not least because of the fast diffusion of affordable personal ICTs, such as smartphones. Another study worthy of closer attention concerns Malaysia. Aziah Alias et al. provide evidence of the benefits of cybercafés in fostering users' social connectedness and their feeling of empowerment in rural regions. Their chapter points toward Internet-enabled smartphones as alternatives to PAVs, especially when the reasons for Internet use relate to personal communication and social networking.

The third section deals with the impact of public ICT access on women. This section, in particular, underscores that the use of PAVs reflects the many existing gender inequalities within and across countries. In fact, gender inequalities may be even more pronounced and present in the young-male-dominated PAVs than in societies in general. The chapter by Phillippi and Peña skillfully shows that women use PAVs differently than men in Chile, in that women engage Internet resources more often for the common good of the family. Among other things, women visit PAVs to organize family matters and children's education over the Internet. The chapter by Dacanay, Luz Feranil, Silverio, and Taqueban brings to the fore a truly disadvantaged group by examining Burmese female migrant workers and their possibilities to access the Internet in a Thai border town. In order to avoid mistreatment by local police and to communicate freely in their own language, these migrant workers either must find a Burmese-friendly PAV, which are few, or, more commonly, rely on their personal mobile phones.

The book ends with an extensive summary compiled by the editor and his collaborating authors. Despite the apparent differences among the chapters, Proenza et al. succeed in identifying some cross-cutting themes, which they then translate into discreet policy recommendations. The authors argue that PAVs deserve explicit political support and powerful advocates who can make the venues safe for the most vulnerable groups (e.g., women, ethnic minorities). These advocates also could promote the functional uses of ICTs (instead of entertainment) at PAVs and help establish mutually beneficial partnerships between PAVs and educational institutes.

Public Access ICT Across Cultures opens many windows on the status and meaning of cybercafés and other types of PAVs, many of which have already vanished from developed countries. It seems that the functional resilience of cybercafés and telecenters depends not only

on paying customers but perhaps increasingly on the use of personal communication technologies and citizens' opportunities for gaining ICT skills through formal education, which then reduces the need for the ICT training offered by PAVs. The book also reveals, although rather implicitly, that Internet-enabled smartphones have notably different affordances compared with the desktop computers offered by PAVs. Unlike PAV facilities, smartphones are not very practical for accomplishing more complex or time-consuming tasks, such as completing an online job application.

While there is considerable variation in the length of chapters, an overload of tables, and a scarcity of theoretical discussion, this book presents an unprecedented overview of public Internet access provisions. The language of the chapters is consistent in style and easy to read, owing much to the painstaking editorial work of this impressive book. The book is recommended reading for anyone interested in the complex marriage of social, economic, and digital inequalities and policies promoting universal access to ICTs.