

INFORMATION RESOURCE CENTRES IN SOUTH AFRICA

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1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to review the nature and status of information resource centres (IRCs) in South Africa.

It is, however, not easy to define clearly what is meant by an information resource centre. The notion of IRCs developed alongside that of traditional libraries. Although libraries can also be regarded as IRCs, it appears that connectivity to the Internet as the primary focus of information resource centres distinguishes them from traditional libraries. As products of the information society, IRCs are associated with vehicles that can provide the general public with information and access to the World Wide Web (Adeya, 2001).

Various configurations of information resource centres attempt to fulfil the diverse information needs of different target groups, such as farmers, health workers, teachers, etc. A search on the Web provides one with a variety of IRCs that are partly or completely Web-based – virtual information resource centres, in other words. In the developing world, IRCs are mainly associated with information and communication technology (ICT) community centres whose aim is to provide disadvantaged communities with access to ICTs (Mchombu, 1999; Benjamin et al., 2000).

These two variations of information resource centres embody the dichotomy of the digital divide: the overload of information available to those who have access to the Internet versus the lack of information for those who have no Internet connection. In South Africa, this dichotomy is glaringly obvious. Only 10.3 per cent of the population are Internet users (Internet World Stats, 2004). The rest are excluded from the “Information Super Highway”.

Two types of information resource centres can be distinguished in South Africa: Web-based IRCs targeting the general public, and community ICT centres targeting disadvantaged communities.

2. WEB-BASED INFORMATION RESOURCE CENTRES

As far as could be established, Web-based IRCs take on two formats, one being an IRC that operates from a specific location but also has a Web presence, and the other a networked IRC.

2.1 IRCs operating from a specific location with a Web presence

This type of IRC is a combination of a physical structure and a virtual presence. These IRCs usually function as designated “libraries” for selected interest groups and provide printed, and/or audiovisual, and/or audio as well as electronic information. A random search produced the following examples.

• Fire Protection Association of Southern Africa

FPASA’s website describes its “dedicated fire library housed in the Fire Information Resource Centre [which is] dedicated to providing practical, usable data and the wealth of fire-related documents”, some of which can also be accessed electronically.⁽¹⁾ The IRC material includes reference books, journals, indexed journal articles, a pamphlet collection, technical reports, newspaper clippings, codes of practices and standards, relevant legislation, conference and seminar reports, product and buyer’s guides and statistical reports. As a member of the Confederation of Fire Protection Associations International, FPASA also provides links to related sites.

• Ditsela

The Development Institute for Training, Support and Education for Labour (Ditsela) is a joint project of the two largest labour federations in South Africa, Cosatu and Fedusa, and is primarily funded by the Department of Labour. It hosts an Education Resource Centre containing education course materials, support materials and exhibitions for trade union educators. All materials are also available electronically on a searchable database.⁽²⁾

• Trauma Centre

The Trauma Centre for Survivors of Violence and Torture, a non-governmental human rights organisation, also maintains an information resource centre containing books, articles, journals, newsletters, reports, videos, and conference and research papers. Although most of these sources are not available electronically, there are links to related sites.⁽³⁾

• IRCs hosted by universities

The Child Health Unit and the Health Economics and HIV/Aids Research Division (HEARD) are examples of information resource centres that are externally funded and hosted by universities.

The Child Health Unit at the University of Cape Town supports the information needs of health care workers in maternal and child health by means of newsletters, books, training manuals, directories of service organisations, a telephone information service and an electronic mail discussion group.⁽⁴⁾ HEARD at the University of KwaZulu-Natal is described as “a unique source of socio-economic HIV/AIDS-related

1 www.fpassa.co.za/technical_services.asp

2 www.ditsela.org.za/index.php?option+content&task+view&id+13&Itemid+36

3 www.trauma.org.za/information_resources.html

4 web.uct.ac.za/depts/chu/mchirc.htm

information” for students and staff through the services of a Library and Information Specialist and the establishment of a searchable database for all information materials housed at the centre. These materials include journals, audiovisual resources, journals, press items, etc.(5)

2.2 Networked IRCs

Networked information resource centres that are not (also) located in a physical space can be defined as a model in which related information is provided by a variety of institutions and individuals to various target audiences through a virtual centre. Networked IRCs exist in cyberspace and can be connected to as many databases or directories as deemed necessary. They usually target people with similar interests, and are set up and maintained by organisations and individuals ranging across a wide spectrum of interests. A random search produced the following examples:

- Health Systems Trust is, for instance, linked to the Global Directory of Health Information Resource Centres.(6)
- National Information Services Corporation, a publishing entity, provides access to a worldwide directory of agricultural IRCs.(7)
- The South African Medical Research Council, a statutory council, provides access to a wide variety of databases.(8)
- Storiwerf, an information resource, provides access to various databases and information about Afrikaans youth literature. It is developed and maintained by an individual.(9)

3. COMMUNITY ICT CENTRES

Community ICT centres refer to a physical structure in which members of (usually) a disadvantaged community can access the Internet. This type of information resource centre includes telecentres, multipurpose community centres (MPCCs) and various other variations. Benjamin et al. (2000) describe them as information resources and communication nodes that are usually established in disadvantaged areas to provide in the information needs of the community.

The idea that computers connected to the telecommunications network could be used to provide information to isolated rural communities by connecting them to the Web and, consequently, the new economy, originated in the developed Western world. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) has been establishing similar ICT centres in developing countries since 1990 and soon many other international donors joined this trend (Benjamin et al., 2000).

5 www.nu.ac.za/heard/aboutheard/aboutheardResourceCentre.htm

6 www.hst.org.za/links/215

7 www.nisc.co.za/databases?id+42

8 www.mrc.ac.za

9 www.storiwerf.co.za



The computer literacy laboratory run by Siyabuswa Educational Improvement and Development Trust (SEIDET) at the ICT Centre in the rural town of Siyabuswa in Mpumalanga.

(Courtesy of SEIDET)

Given the legacy of apartheid, large sectors of the South African population were not able to access information when the African National Congress (ANC) came into power in 1994. The ANC government embraced the reigning worldview that information delivered via ICTs could be an instrument to accelerate development and become a positive force for social change.

The government's inclination towards the community centre approach was mentioned for the first time in a paper delivered at the Information Society and Development Conference in 1996, where one of the proposals was the possibility of establishing MPCCs to provide community access (NITF, 1996). Berlyn (1998) also mentions the use of MPCCs, telecentres and other community ICT centres as possible ways of empowering communities in the information era.

In 1997, Chapter 5 of the Communications 2000 report (ComTask, 1996) was devoted to improving community access to information, particularly through MPCCs and community ICT centres. At about the same time, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) commissioned the National Information Technology Forum (NITF) to investigate the possibility of establishing MPCCs in South Africa. This led to the publication in 1998 of a study on the use of ICT in community projects, showing many hundreds of existing centres (Benjamin, 1998).

In the first quarter of 1999, the Government Communication and Information System (GCIS) commissioned a study on community information needs. Its report (GCIS, 1999a) was accepted by the provincial communications partners and later the same year

led to a conclusion that MPCCs were a viable channel and institutional structure for disseminating development information and implementing the government's communications strategy of July 1999, called *A nation at work for a better future* (GCIS, 1999b).

Not only the government is responsible for erecting ICT centres; non-governmental organisations (NGOs), tertiary institutions and the private sector are also role-players in this field. ICT centres established to provide information and telecommunications to developing communities in South Africa are consequently nearly always subsidised and supported in various ways by the government or donors, and require extensive external support.

The following types of ICT centres are found in South Africa.

3.1 Telecentres

Defining a telecentre is problematical. Roman (2000) counted more than 30 names for such centres. According to Conradie (1998:98), the word "telecentre" broadly refers to a facility "that offers the public access to advanced IT [information technology] and telecommunications equipment, together with some degree of support and training and a range of information-based services". Conradie (1998), as well as most other sources, refers to the existence of different categories of telecentres.

For instance, the National Telecommunications Cooperative Association distinguishes between three categories of telecentres: basic telecentres, multipurpose community telecentres and phone shops (NTCA, 1998). The only comprehensive South African study, that of Benjamin et al. (2000), identifies three similar broad categories in South Africa: phone shops, telecentres and MPCCs. A report of the IDRC (Espitia, 2001) recognises multipurpose and community multipurpose telecentres, as well as mini and standard telecentres (i.e. telecentres of the Universal Service Agency). The report also views community radio, computer training centres, schools and libraries as possible telecentres.

In South Africa, phone shops such as those of Vodacom and Telkom are generally private profit-seeking enterprises, situated mainly in urban areas. They have no development intention and focus on the provision of telecommunications, not information (Benjamin et al., 2000:6; Snyman et al., 2001).

3.2 Multipurpose community centres

An MPCC can be defined as an integrated community development centre (Berlyn, 1998). Ideally, community participation should form the basis of such a centre, which has to meet people's information needs by providing relevant services. The aim of MPCCs is to empower the poorest and most disadvantaged communities with access to government and non-government information and services. They are described as "one-stop shops" through which communities can access government services, information technology and training (Safrika, 2002).

International funders and NGOs have established and manage a number of MPCCs in South Africa. The GCIS was tasked to establish MPCCs to disseminate useful information about government and other matters to the South African public (ComTask, 1996).

3.3 Public information terminals

Public information terminals (PiTs) is an initiative of the Department of Communications and the South African Post Office. PiTs are standalone units through which the public can access information from the government and business via the Internet (SAPO, 1999). These terminals are placed in post offices and what were then called “Internet labs”. Internet labs were later incorporated into what became known as Internet kiosks or “citizen’s post offices” for previously disadvantaged areas (SAPO, 1998).

4. THE CURRENT STATUS OF COMMUNITY ICT CENTRES

A brief discussion of the current status of three types of community ICT centres in South Africa follows in the section below.

4.1 Telecentres

The Universal Service Agency (USA) planned to erect about 100 telecentres a year (Van Audenhove, 1999) in under-served areas in order to provide access to telephony and information services, meet basic developmental needs and provide education in “information age” skills (USA, 2005). These services were to support the policy of tele-governance and distance education. It was estimated that 3000–4000 telecentres would be needed for full coverage of the country (Van Audenhove, 1999).

Already in 1998, the USA openly admitted in a report to having several problems with the first telecentres, including inadequate financial systems, inadequate training of managers, no clear tariff structure, unclear expectations (several managers expected salaries from the Agency), as well as theft without the property being insured. The need to clarify the role of the USA as franchisor was also mentioned. The report recommended that it would not be good practice to go ahead with implementation on a large scale before proper management could be guaranteed (Khumalo, 1998).

Schreiner (1999) confirmed that there were serious problems in this regard. She found that the great anticipation created around the launch of the first USA telecentre in April 1998 was not met. There were frequent technical problems and little support for the managers from the Agency, yet the project continued.

In 2000, the DRA-Development and LINK Centre Report (Benjamin et al., 2000) found only 65 USA telecentres in operation, of which a mere five were online. Forty of the remaining 60 telecentres had working telephone lines. Snyman and Snyman (2003) found that less than half of the 56 telecentres listed by the USA could be reached by telephone during office hours. Telecommunications services were poor and only nine telecentres had Internet connection. In 2005, 111 telecentres were in operation (USA, 2005).

Nevertheless, the project continued and was expanded. Another initiative was added to complement the USA telecentres. In May 2006, the first Community Digital Hub was launched and described as follows (SAGI, 2006):

... advanced ICT centres where local communities can access ICT services, including access to skills development and capacity building for optimal utilisation of ICT services and to foster integrated (sic) approach in

the use of ICTs for social and economic development in nodal areas of South Africa.

In 2007, Stones reported that of the 133 telecentres that were set up by the USA “many are underused, entirely dysfunctional or have turned into private businesses”. At the end of 2006, the lack of delivery was addressed. The USA was renamed by an Act of Parliament to the Universal Service and Access Agency of South Africa (USAASA) (USA, 2006).

This was followed by the announcement of a three-year project in which telecentres of the USA would be assessed and redirected. Sangonet is leading the project, partnered by Microsoft and a technology training group, Torque IT. They aim to rectify previous mistakes that repeatedly surfaced in evaluation reports, such as placing too much emphasis on providing a physical infrastructure, using ill-judged locations and paying too little attention to training and community involvement (Stones, 2007).

The perception is that the success rate of telecentres established by private enterprise and others is also not high. Hulbert (2006) describes the failure of Technikon Southern Africa to erect and implement sustainable and efficient telecentres. The same factors mentioned above were cited as reasons for failure. A few exceptions, such as the



A pamphlet of the Agricultural Research Council, used to distribute information to rural communities.

(Courtesy of the Agricultural Research Council)

successful and enterprising Gazaleka telecentre in the Northern Province, have been documented (Dagron, 2001).⁽¹⁰⁾

4.2 MPCCs

The vision of the GCIS was to establish one multipurpose community centre per municipality across South Africa (Safrika, 2002). These ideals have not been fulfilled.

A report of the IDRC (Espitia, 2001) estimated that, in 2001, 47 fully functioning MPCCs existed, of which only ten then formed part of the GCIS mandate. In 2002, 20 MPCCs of the GCIS were listed, of which eight did not have a centre manager or general information centre manager, and only two had a fully equipped telecentre with telecommunications facilities, including Internet access from which information on the government websites could be downloaded. The rest of the MPCCs depended on traditional media such as pamphlets and interpersonal communication for disseminating government information (Snyman & Snyman, 2003).

Four years later, in a follow-up study by Holmner and Snyman (2006), it was found that 77 MPCCs were listed. About a third of these could not be reached via telephone during office hours. This constitutes an improvement of 3.3 per cent since 2002. The number of MPCCs with Internet access had increased from 9.5 per cent in 2002 to 35 per cent in 2006.

The focus on the physical construction and establishment of these centres, as seen in the widely publicised launches, distracts the attention from infrastructural problems such as the provision of electricity, telephone lines and transport; expensive Internet costs; lack of hardware and software support; and ineffective management.

The key input that the GCIS hoped to make with the MPCCs – namely to identify community information needs, provide as much appropriate information as possible, and being the means through which citizens can communicate with the government (Pahad, 1998) – has not yet been fully realised.

4.3 PiTs

The South African Post Office Report of 2006 states that 700 public information terminals have been implemented, despite challenges ranging from vandalism and “occasional reluctance on the part of branch staff to buy into the idea of having Internet kiosks within their environment” (SAPO, 2006). In general, the PiT system is stable, needs constant monitoring, and is reliant on the databases that continue to grow daily.

Apart from the above in-house report mentioning that the PiTs are successfully disseminating information, the majority of the MPCCs and telecentres in South Africa seem to lack effective management, well-maintained and working equipment, as well as unhampered access to the Internet gateway that should empower the disadvantaged rural areas with appropriate and relevant information.

¹⁰ The MAICIS telecentre in Mamelodi in Pretoria, mentioned in the same source as a successful telecentre, has since closed its doors.

5. CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that both Web-based information resource centres and community ICT centres are needed in post-apartheid South Africa.

Although no database for these resource centres exists, it is apparent that the types of IRCs are many and varied. Research into the scope of these centres and the role they play in providing information to South Africans could be interesting. Due to their Web-based nature, the cost of Internet access and various other barriers to personal Internet access, these centres mainly target the educated and affluent sectors of the population.

The only points of access to ICT available to the majority of the population (89.3 per cent) who are not Internet users are the community ICT centres, yet their impact is limited. Centres established with government support in South Africa are, with a few exceptions, struggling, ill-managed communications “shops” where hardly any information is being disseminated. The government, however, does seem to be slowly succeeding in providing communities with access to information via MPCCs.



Inspecting a spinach crop in the vegetable garden at the Appel ICT Centre in the Limpopo province.

(Courtesy of Maritha Snyman)

The acknowledgment that the USA failed to deliver on its mandate and the fact that the reasons for failure were identified and new role-players with the know-how to change the status quo have been appointed, will hopefully lead to a change for the better.

The picture is not as bleak as it seems, however. High growth rates in, for instance, mobile penetration in some developing African countries suggest the potential for using other technological options. Mobile technology is viewed as the technology that has the power to drive the uptake of the Internet in developing countries.⁽¹¹⁾ This is confirmed by the growth in usage of second-generation mobile services such as Wireless Application Protocol (WAP) and Short Messaging Service (SMS). Third-generation mobile services are the next step and are already being deployed in some developing countries (Cellular Online, 2006).

New initiatives of industry that could help accelerate the use and growth of community ICT centres are, for example, i-Burst.⁽¹²⁾ i-Burst is to establish 20 000 Internet cafés in South Africa by 2010. These cafés will be able to accommodate 30 computers and Internet access will be charged at about R5 per half hour, thus removing the economic barriers that prevent many South Africans from accessing the Internet.

It would be advisable for communities, governments and aid organisations in Africa to take note of the new opportunities and explore their possibilities, while always bearing in mind that technology is only a tool. Many other interventions are needed to overcome the social, cultural, economic and educational barriers that exist in South Africa.

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