

The Role of Public Libraries in e-Inclusion

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Abstract

Despite of many actions taken to speed-up the diffusion and adoption of ICT, Lithuania is still the not satisfactory situation. The annual report 2007 of European Union i2010 Strategy has stated that *“from a low background Lithuania has moved into being a mid-level performer in some regards, but is still low in most indicators”*. The aim of the paper is to answer the question why the efforts were not effective enough and how libraries could help to improve the situation and assure the equal access to ICT for all.

The paper is defending a hypothesis that many efforts are put to the supply side but too little attention is given to the side of demand. The process of the adoption of ICT is analyzed from the perspective of the ICT domestication theory.

The methodology used in the study is based on the literature analyzes and case studies. The paper presents several projects as examples of fostering ICT demand: Rural Internet Access Points project, “Window to the Future” initiative, etc.

As a complex solution for considerably better use of the possibilities of information technologies among Lithuanian population currently developed libraries’ public access computing project “Libraries for Innovation” is presented. It is expected that the project, funded by Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, will significantly increase possibilities for using free computers and the Internet, especially in rural areas; librarians will become active promoters of local communities and assistants in mastering possibilities of information technologies; a lot of people will be encouraged and trained to use computers and the Internet.

Expanding access to information, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is planning to support more European countries for provision of no-cost access to computers and the Internet in public libraries, so the experience of Lithuania might be useful to the academic community as well as to the patricians of librarianship and information fields.

Current situation

Nowadays, about 57 % of public libraries in Lithuania provide public access to computers and Internet both in urban and rural areas. The main goal of this activity is to assure no-cost access to information and communications technologies (ICT) and resources to all inhabitants. Such initiative is seen as an important step in building knowledge and information society in Lithuania. However, European Commission published second annual report on i2010 shows that creating Internet access points is not enough to solve digital and social divide. People demand not only physical Internet access but also training which would help them to use all these resources properly. Very important aspect in this activity is also raising of awareness and social interest about the possibilities of ICT and assuring that these initiatives contribute to the social and digital inclusion in the society. Such approach can be

built on the European Union (EU) E-Inclusion strategy. E-Inclusion, as European Commission describes it, is a project which is trying to ensure that people, extremely disabled or socially exposed, are not left behind and it is also trying to avoid new forms of exclusion due to lack of digital literacy or Internet access. E-Inclusion stimulates the idea of benefiting from an Information society. The best way of reaching socially exposed groups and people with disabilities is making them a part of knowledge and information society.

Public Internet Access Points Projects

For the present, several different projects are implemented in Lithuania that provides all the necessary computer equipment with access to the Internet, giving the opportunity to use public electronic services for free. This paper introduces the several of them.

One of the first steps was activity of private business established association “*Window to the Future*”, which has begun public Internet access initiative in Lithuania with 75 public internet access points (PIAPs), opened in 2002. This project was completely financed by the association founders. In 2003, building upon this initiative, the Lithuanian Ministry of Interiors joined the association and has built an additional 100 PIAPs. The aim of the “*Window to the Future*” was to increase the number of Internet users in Lithuania and achieve the Internet penetration ratio of the European Union over the period of three years.

Another project, called “*Rural Internet Access Points*” (RIAPs), has started in 2005 as the collaboration between the Lithuanian Government and the PHARE Program of the EU. In the first phase of the project, 300 RIAPs were placed in regions where the communication infrastructure was poor. These RIAPs are located in community gathering places: schools, libraries and community centers. Most RIAPs offer public classes on computer basics, using the Internet, e-banking, online job-search, e-citizenship, and e-government. Apart from providing an access to the Internet, the project also offered training courses to small and medium-sized enterprises. 300 RIAP’s tutors were taught, among other things, basic computer literacy, distance training methodologies, administration, coordination and management, public relations. RIAP trainers received support from workshops, online training, and a telephone hotline. The project also has a portal that offers news, information about the latest RIAP campaigns, and training resources. To raise the motivation among tutors special campaigns, such as “Best RIAP tutor” contest and E-cards are created. In order to attract and interest the users of the internet similar campaigns are organized, for example e-declaration, e-banking, e-commerce seminars, contest for seniors “How Internet helps me to take care of my health”, digital photos contests. Most of the PIAPs and RIAPs are located in the public libraries.

Project second phase “*Development of Rural Internet Access Points network*”, also known as RIAP-2, is financed by Lithuanian government together with EU Structural funds and is implemented by the Ministry of Interior (consortium partners - association “*Window to the Future*”, consulting company “S4ID” and Kaunas Technological University provide technical administration, information and publicity service). This stage will add additional 400 public internet access points, which will be opened to Lithuanian people in rural areas by 2008. It is also planned to modernize 83 already active internet access points. During this project all the public internet access points (also created by previous initiatives) will be united in a common public internet access points’ network. It is believed that the project will empower the development of information society and decrease digital isolation in rural areas.

Training Projects

Apart from technological expansion, there were introduced several projects with reason to train people and improve their ICT skills. We represent some of them as well.

The UNDP project, “*Capacity Building of Lithuanian Women through ICT & Networking*”, had taught women to use ICTs in order to increase their involvement in social, political and economic spheres of life. The project is actualized especially to women’s NGOs, also supports training of tutors and offers individual opportunities of improving their ICT skills. The project also provides a possibility for small and medium sized enterprises to participate in the training process. By the beginning of 2004, 970 women had been trained at various women’s centers.

The Open Society-Lithuania project, “*Towards Digital Communities*”, helped rural communities strengthen ICT activities by creating an ICT-based knowledge network amongst participants. The project offered training, consultation on how to prepare ICT strategies, and financial assistance to the best projects. It also encouraged communities to provide information, create and offer services by themselves. The project portal (<http://www.bendruomenes.lt>) created a virtual space where communities exchange information and experiences, as well as create projects for common activities.

More than 45 rural communities had implemented innovative ICT projects. These projects included creating a virtual “House of Trades” to preserve historical heritage by informing about ancient crafts and community activities; providing a digital archive on a community’s past and future; creating an online community presence that attracts business and tourism; offering a virtual tour of a local museum; encouraging members of the community to participate in self-government, communicate with government institutions, and connect with other communities; and publishing online community newsletters to enhance public spirit.

In order to stimulate the usage of PIAPs, association “Window to The Future” initiated computer literacy courses. The project financed by the founders of association was very successful, 20,000 Lithuanian citizens were trained to use computer and acquired basic skills of computer literacy. In order to get the best result, during the courses people were motivated to use e-services to improve their quality of life. Besides this, they also were stimulated to apply their learnt skills in the existing PIAPs.

Due to huge success of a former project, association decided to continue training Lithuanian citizens and in 2006 began realizing a country-wide project “*Computer Literacy Basics for a Lithuanian E-citizen*”. The objective of this project, which is funded by EU Structural funds, is to provide fundamentals of computer literacy as well as the knowledge of safe internet usage to 50,000 adult people till May, 2008. The goal of the project is to reduce the digital divide between rural and city areas of Lithuania, leading to the development of the Information Society in the country, i.e. increasing the computer literacy level of the adult population, encouraging their competitiveness in the labor market, improving their possibilities to get information needed for their job as well as widening their possibilities for lifelong learning. As for October 2007, the project already achieved 34 thousand trained persons among which approximately 760 is library personnel. “Computer Literacy Basics for a Lithuanian E-citizen” could be considered the project with the largest target group by now in Lithuania.

Recommendations and Future Plans

Despite many actions taken to speed-up the diffusion and adoption of ICT, Lithuania is still not in the satisfactory situation. The annual report of 2007 of European Union i2010 Strategy has stated that “*from a low background Lithuania has moved into being a mid-level performer in some regards, but is still low in most indicators*”. So what’s wrong, why our projects cannot enhance people’ interest? Maybe too much attention is paid to “supply” side, too little – to “demand” side?

One of the main ideas of improving the interest in existing public access is creating and publicizing practical services adjusted for different kinds of social groups. Lithuania has many electronic services to offer. Growing number of public libraries with internet access or PIAPs are empowering users to obtain the information from subscription databases and digital documents, study languages from specialized dictionaries and use other various electronic resources.

Lithuanian Librarians Association has signed an agreement with Lithuanian Labour Exchange to begin training courses of using internet search for new jobs. This service is especially useful for unemployed computer-illiterate people.

The new e-health system is being developed throughout the country. Users will be allowed to make a reservation on a consultancy of doctor. In the future it is planned to have individual personal files including the information for both doctors and patients. In the nearest future public Internet access points are going to provide an ability to get information from e-government institutions, filling and sending document forms, browsing juridical information in LITLEX (Lithuanian legal documents database). Already operative e-declaration system, internet banking, tickets or other services and items shops besides other currently in development projects are in significant matter and should be applied to attract users.

Another suggestion would be gathering people with similar needs into conjoint units with the aim of creating valuable local content themselves. It is noticed that the digital content is widely spread among youth and middle age people. However, other social groups are much less using ICT for this reason. The way of solving this problem is not that unclear as we may think. We need to take a look into existing digital products available worldwide. One of the finest and still growing examples is “MySpace” – a website connecting various people with mixed hobbies from all out of world. The system is developed in such way that user could communicate with his friends’ friends, making this process unstoppable and growing organism. We could adapt this method for isolated groups and create a mechanism which could unify people with similar or even totally different needs. Of course, some of websites are already working (for example, already mentioned <http://www.bendruomenes.lt/>), but these web projects are based only on a specific topic.

A communication process is especially important to parents’ needs. It is not cheap to communicate with children working or studying in the other city or abroad. Nowadays cheapest way of communication is through ICT. Traditional mail is almost replaced by e-mails, while telephone just faced VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) technology. Having a widely developed infrastructure of communications in Lithuania, public libraries and PIAPs may be used as the docking ports for users with needs mentioned above.

We are having high hopes that those means will soon be implemented with project “*Libraries for Innovation*”. The project was developed by M. Mazvydas National Library of Lithuania in

partnership with Ministry of Culture and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. It is expected, that the project will start in January 2008 and will include about 1200 public libraries in urban and rural areas. It is expected that the project will significantly increase possibilities for using free computers and the Internet, especially in rural areas. Librarians will become unifiers of the local communities and assistants in mastering possibilities of information technologies; a lot of people will be encouraged and trained to use computers and the Internet; socially disadvantaged groups will be attracted to the libraries by special outreach campaigns. This is going to be a complex solution for considerably better use of the possibilities of information technologies among Lithuanian population through the usage of existing libraries' capabilities. The expected results of the project are about four thousand new computer workstations installed, 2,000 librarians trained, about 50000 inhabitants trained, significantly increased number of libraries with broadband connections, increased access to relevant electronic content and creation of local content.

The project will target poverty reduction and equitable access, especially taking into account the needs social risk groups, such as:

- People with disabilities;
- People over working age;
- Unemployed people;
- Rural populations (except large farmers and workers of governmental institutions);
- Children from families at social risk;
- Children from families, where parents have emigrated to work in other countries.

It is planned to create training centers all over Lithuania, coordinated by the central centre in the M. Mazvydas National Library of Lithuania. These should serve as the places where librarians will be trained to teach users and present public access services. Executives are planning to set up 11 training centers with overall 220 study places. Every place will have installed multimedia, interactive tables, laptops, cordless communication device and multifunctional device. To every group individual plan is provided:

- Tutors/advisers: advanced level in computer literacy, internet resource, work with special users group, public relations and marketing, case-study and English language basics.
- Librarians: basic level computer literacy, Internet resource, works with special users group, public relations, marketing.
- Users: minimal level of computer literacy, Internet resource and skills to find the specific information on the Internet.

The Project "Libraries for Innovation" will give a special focus on fostering the usage of relevant content to provide:

- Better access to labour market (job search and career consultations on-line, information on the situation in labour market and most marketable professions, writing CVs, doing career tests, etc.);
- Better participation in collective governance (legal consultations on-line, access to data base of legal acts LITLEX, communication with local and central government, on-line consultations, e-government services like request for passport, driver license, car registration, etc.);
- Better access to learning (access to Integral Library Information System LIBIS and data bases like EBSCO, Oxford Dictionary Online, Oxford Referente Online, Grove Art Online, Grove Music Online, access to provisional guidance database AIKOS, distance learning, web casts, etc.);

- Better access to health information (access to electronic health history, subscription to the doctor, drugs databases, health services portals);
- Better social communication (e-mail, IP telephony, social networking systems);
- Saving of time and costs (e-banking, e-commerce, tax declarations).

Libraries accumulate local cultural, historical and regional content, which is of interest to people. Seeking to improve their access libraries are carrying out projects designed for development of local Internet content, yet, their possibilities are limited by the lack of resources and competence. During the project implementation it is planned to promote development of digital content in an organized way: the public libraries portal (<http://www.bibliotekos.lt>) will have a content management system installed, which will allow to involve, in the process of Internet content development, not only the librarians, but the users, as well. The content management system will facilitate the transfer to the Internet of the information relevant to local communities: reminiscences of people, regional histories, stories, traditions, accounts of important events, etc. Such activity will vividly and clearly demonstrate the possibilities of technologies, promote cooperation between young and elderly citizens, e.g., schoolchildren will help elderly persons to write down their stories, grandchildren alongwith their grandparents, will be able to describe fascinating histories of the past, etc. Library users will be trained to develop and publicise personal websites: they will be able to use the relevant training and necessary means provided at libraries.

Project outreach campaign is directed at the library patrons (who use other library services but not the Internet access), library non-users and hard-to-reach groups. The goal of the campaign is to highlight the impact of public access computers on users, and to attract adults and senior people as well as disabled and unemployed people, rural populations, children of social risk families and children from families, where parents have emigrated to work in other countries, to come and have benefit from IT usage.

The main part of the campaign will be monthly actions, each time related to the particular target group or particular topic. The following types of events are envisioned: contests, training seminars, events. Most of them will be linked with nationally or internationally celebrated days like Christmas, Easter, Internet Day, St. Valentine's Day, Family Day, Labour Day, etc.

In order to assess the impact of the project on communities, to which the activities of the project are orientated, the big attention will be allocated to the impact assessment activities. The impact of the project "Libraries for Innovation" will be assessed by a complex research model. To perform the assessment, qualitative and quantitative methods will be applied. This will include users survey, librarians survey, library heads survey, focus groups and interviews with users, case studies. It is expected that impact assessment will help to what are the social and economic benefits of free public access to computers and Internet to people who do not otherwise have access.

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