



In-depth study  
**Infomediaries: Brokers of public access**

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**Lessons report from three inception missions**  
**Summer - 2010**

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## **About this document**

This report provides a review of the study's key variables and articulation of its hypotheses. Having completed Inception Missions to Chile (October 2009), Bangladesh (December 2009) and Lithuania (January 2010) we now have a foundation on which to build this analysis. This “Lessons Report” will be of interest to researchers who are interested in how our methodology has evolved and the data collection tools that we have settled on to work in three different country contexts. The authors of this report are the co-PIs for this study: Balaji Parthasarathy, Andy Gordon and Ricardo Ramírez, yet the content and analysis was the product of our intense interactions with the three Country Research Teams.

## **Purpose and justification**

We hope the lessons we have learned will be useful to other ICTD researchers as they develop and adjust the research objectives. We have recorded the iterations we went through to arrive at hypotheses on the role and impact of Infomediaries. We have developed a common structure to allow for some cross-country comparisons, with adaptations that respond to substantially different country contexts. This balancing act was possible thanks to the country visits where the three co-principal investigators were exposed to the nuances of each context. Of equal importance was developing a team spirit with each country research team (CRT).

This report, or a variation of it, will also inform the ERB application process as we include a summary of all data collection tools.

## **Definition of infomediary**

For the purposes of this research, an infomediary is a person who combines a set of technological resources and coaching to meet users’ information needs and communication capabilities.

## **Hammering out hypotheses: a four-stage process**

When the three co-PIs and the three country research teams met in Valparaiso, Chile (October 2008) we drafted a first set of hypotheses (wording shown as it appears on the original cards - photo above):

- Importance (roles?) of infomediaries will vary by population features
- Quality of infomediaries’ services is associated with soft skills (rather than technical)
- Who the infomediary knows determines who will be invited/discouraged into the venue
- Informal rules by formal infomediaries determine users and usage
- Infomediaries help users migrate across different levels of access...all the way to relevant use
- Infomediaries become redundant over time
- Formal infomediaries provide triggers for informal ones
- Infomediaries’ services carry over beyond direct beneficiaries (also when they leave for other jobs)

▪ Infomediaries change the geography of information access/ecology  
A month later (November 2008) we prepared the first draft in-depth study proposal with the following second set of hypotheses:

- Infomediaries are valuable to users when their skills go beyond the technical (good communication, empathy).
- Infomediaries play the role of gatekeepers - who they know and the informal rules that they lay down determine who can access the public access venue.
- Formal infomediaries trigger the rise of informal ones and thereby ensure that the services carry beyond direct beneficiaries.
- Infomediaries change the geography of information access/ecology (Lithuania tax advisors come to PAV to assist people; Chile advisors for using e-government)

The approved version of the in-depth study (July 2009) had become the following third set of hypotheses:

- The different ROLES played and PRACTICES by infomediaries will influence the impact of the PAV on users. This includes their skills and attitudes, the extent to which their job is formalized, the type of venue they work in, and the rules they improvise as gatekeepers.
- The CONTEXT and type of PAV where infomediaries perform their work will influence the reach and effectiveness of the services. The context includes: information ecology, policies, pricing of services and trust issues across the different types of PAVs. In turn, infomediaries in PAVs change the information ecology (e.g. in Lithuania tax advisors in PAVs to assist people; in Chile advisors assist with e-government services; in Bangladesh, infomediaries enable illiterate people to access relevant information)
- The impact of the infomediaries will vary by patrons' EXPECTATIONS and REQUIREMENTS which will differ by livelihood priorities, including health, education, finances, jobs, democratic engagement, etc.

The hypotheses that we revised during the inception missions (fourth and current set) are based on three initial groupings (from above) that follow a continuum starting with attention to the *infomediary* and shifting to the *infomedation process* (in which the infomediary is still a core component):

1. The individual abilities of the infomediary
2. The context for the infomediary's work
3. The shifting expectation and requirements of patrons

The following are the revised hypotheses that apply to the three countries.

Notes:

We revised wording as follows: "Long-time and frequent users" are not referred to as "Advanced" as this describes a skill level independently of how the achieved.

Newcomers are referred to as "Novices". Both the UW and Lithuanian surveys use a 4-

scale to rank users: we will classify the two top categories as “advanced” and the lower two as “novices” regardless of the differences in measures.

**1a.** Empathy with the users is more important than ICT skills for the infomediary’s job, particularly for novices.

**1b.** Advanced users are more likely than novices to seek ICT skills rather than empathy from infomediaries.

**2a.** Non-profit PAVs encourage empathy more than ICT skills from infomediaries  
*Lithuania adjustment: replace ‘non-profit’ by ‘rural’.*

**2b** Even users with private access seek non-profit PAVs (among other things) to enhance their ICT skills because of the empathy demonstrated in the infomediation process  
*Lithuania adjustment: Even users with private access seek public access at PAV (mainly libraries in Lithuania) for various other purposes, including socializing.*

**3a.** Effective infomediation processes lead to venues with an adjustment of services, and/or an increase in their variety in response to users’ needs.  
*Bangladesh variation: Outreach by PAVs and an adjustment in the variety of their service offerings leads to effective infomediation processes.*

**3b.** The most significant experience / outcome by users will be linked to the empathetic nature of the infomediation process.

**Table 1: Hypotheses, summary of evidence needed and data collection**

<b>Hypothesis</b>	<b>Data/evidence needed</b>	<b>Data collection tools</b>
<b>INFOMEDIARY ABILITIES AND PRACTICES</b>		
Hypothesis <b>1a</b> examines abilities and practices (empathy and ICT skills) that the infomediary brings to the infomediation process, and Hypothesis <b>1b</b> examines the extent to which user demand for empathy vs ICT skills from infomediaries shifts with increasing usage.		
<b>1a.</b> Empathy with the users is more important than ICT skills for the infomediary's job, particularly for novices.	Expect to see more affective variables selected vs technical skills selected by users, particularly by novices.	<b>Infomediary interviews</b> (questions guides in Appendix 1) <b>User focus groups</b> (questions guides in Appendix 2)
<b>1b.</b> Advanced users are more likely than novices to seek ICT skills rather than empathy from infomediaries.	Expect affective dimensions to be emphasized in focus group discussions.  Compare user and venue data (across comparable PAVs).	<b>User Survey</b> Question 3.10 (with same variables for 3.11, 3.14 and 3.15) and <b>Venue Survey</b> Question 3.9 (the variables are listed below)
<b>CONTEXT</b>		
Hypothesis <b>2a</b> examines how venue type (profit Vs non-profit in CHI & BDG; urban Vs. rural in LIT) shapes the abilities of infomediaries, and Hypothesis <b>2b</b> examines how the infomediation process (social environment in LIT) influences the decision of users to return to PAVs despite private access to ICTs		
<b>2a.</b> Non-profit PAVs encourage empathy more than ICT skills from infomediaries relative to for-profit ones.	<i>Moments of encouragement:</i> Selection criteria for hiring (documents).  Training program content (documents).	<b>Review of documentation</b> (training manuals, guidelines)  <b>Infomediary Interviews</b> (questions guides in App. 1)  <b>User focus groups</b> (questions guides in App. 2)
<b>2a.</b> (LIT) Rural PAVs encourage empathy more than ICT skills from infomediaries relative to for-profit ones.	Supervisory visits (interviews)  LIT: Compare rural and urban data from the user surveys (same variables).	<b>Lithuanian survey</b> data (2008, 2009, 2010) – the latter will be published in April 2011
<b>2b.</b> Even users with private access seek non-profit PAVs (among other things) to enhance their ICT skills because of the empathy demonstrated in the infomediation process	<i>Definition of private access:</i> User Survey Q.3.1: all those who include one of the following in the ranking: computer at home, neighbour, work, school	<b>User focus groups:</b> Ensure some participants have private access (questions guides in App. 2)
<b>2b.</b> (LIT) Even users with private access seek public access at PAVs (mainly libraries in Lithuania) for	Expect to see: Affective variables ranked higher than skills.	<b>Infomediary interviews</b> (questions guides in App. 1)

socializing and other purposes.	The Lithuania surveys of users and the population survey include questions about whether those with private access (home, work, students at school) still use libraries. We have data about differentiated use in private Vs public, but we do not have qualitative data on socializing (which the focus groups will capture)	
<p><b>IMPACT ON VENUE AND ON USERS</b></p> <p>Hypothesis <b>3a</b> examines the increase/decrease/adjustment in the variety of services at PAVs reflects the effectiveness of infomediation, and Hypothesis <b>3b</b> examines the demand for a wider variety of services as a consequence of user experience with the infomediation process. In BDG we add the marketing of the PAVs, via ‘mobile-info ladies’ or ‘brand promoters’ to reach out to women, farmers and others unable to visit the PAVs, as a variable that increases the effectiveness of infomediation.</p>		
<p><b>3a.</b> Effective infomediation processes lead to venues with an adjustment or increase in the variety of services that are responsive to users’ needs.</p> <p><i>3a. (BDG) Outreach by PAVs and an adjustment in the variety of their service offerings leads to effective infomediation processes.</i></p>	<p>Baseline list of venue services. Infomediararies’ perspective on the introduction of a wider variety of services. Users &amp; venue operators emphasized the importance of soft (empathetic) skills, and overall environment in a venue. Neither seems to be accounted for or measured in venue evaluations. The variables include: a combination of skills and practices including: flexibility and responsiveness; troubleshooting (interperson, not technical), “the-customer-comes -first attitudes.” We are looking for people often known as “keeners”, “champions”, “sparkplugs”.</p>	<p><b>User Survey</b> Question Q.3.3 (wish list)</p> <p><b>Infomediarary interviews</b> (App.1)</p> <p><b>User focus groups</b> (App. 2)</p> <p><b>Interviews</b> with managers (LIT Appendix 3)</p>
<p><b>3b.</b> The most significant experience/outcome by users will be linked to the empathetic nature of the infomediation process.</p>	<p>Ranked information outcomes showing users’ preferences and infomediararies’ opinions. Users’ perspectives about the quality of the information outcomes. One metric would focus on variety and depth of skills</p>	<p><b>User focus groups</b> (App. 2)</p>

	<p>across in six domains: education, leisure and communication, economics (livelihood, work), health, e-government</p> <p>A second metric is in-depth access to information within categories (awareness and use of specific sites and resources)</p> <p>A third metric is impact as perceived by users: how the skills and services have changed their lives.</p>	
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The data collection tools for this study include:

1. Infomediary interviews (see question guides in Appendix 1)
2. User focus groups (see question guides in Appendix 2)
3. Library manager interviews in Lithuania (see question guide in Appendix 3)
4. The Impact Project User and Venue surveys (see variables below in Appendix 4, which refers to the version circulated on 1 February 2010)
5. Ethnographic studies around “a week in the life of a PAV” to provide: a contextual understanding (patterns of use by different users); opportunities for informal exchanges with users (and invite candidates for focus groups), and a means to document unusual events and users (outliers). The vignettes for each site will provide a context for detailed data analysis.

*An example from Andy illustrates why ethnography is relevant:*

“Just sitting in this Marina Del Rey public library provides such a relevant data-gathering opportunity. The handful of library-provided PACs are constantly busy, and people are scattered about the facility on laptops. The staff includes librarians who know nothing re technology except how to provide permission for Internet access and a technical guy who even has prepared sheets to deal with tougher access questions (though he couldn’t get my Mac online, we went through various attempts). There are several people who are here to collaborate (quietly), at least one in most groups on a computer, as if it were a business setting; others moving back and forth between books and computers; people offering informal infomediation/assistance; people whom I would guess are only here because others are here in a convivial setting – including friendly jibing about my “top of the line” Apple computer; homeless here mostly for the bathrooms, etc.”

## Appendix 1 – Infomediary interview

*(For all questions, wording will need to be developed which captures in each language the meaning of difficult concepts, such as “empathy.” The value of these questions in interviews and focus groups will be determined by the skill with which the interviewers listen to the responses and follow up important issues appropriately).*

**Questions for Hypotheses 1a:** Empathy with the users is more important than ICT skills for the infomediary’s job, particularly for novices) and,

**Hypothesis 1b** (Advanced users are more likely than novices to seek ICT skills rather than empathy from infomediaries.)

- Why do you think that novice users come to this venue?
- Why do you think that advanced users come to this venue?
  
- Do you think this venue is equally welcoming for new and advanced users?
  - What would a typical session with a novice user look like?
  - How would that typical session change as the novice becomes more confident?
  - What would a typical session with an advanced user look like?
  
- What do you think are some other qualities, such as your religion, class or social status, that may influence your effectiveness as an infomediary?
- Have you experienced any unanticipated situations (in terms of technical, financial or organizational demands, for example) and how have you dealt with them?

### **Bangladesh addition:**

- (Specifically for the mobile ladies) – does reaching out personally to users increase the empathy that they sense from infomediaries?

**Questions for Hypothesis 2a:** Non-profit PAVs (rural PAVs in LIT) encourage empathy more than ICT skills from infomediaries

- What do you consider is most important when helping users, the empathy you show or your ICT skills?
- What do you think users value most – the “empathy” they sense and the environment of this place, or the technical assistance they receive? Does this vary among types of users?
- What do you feel users most appreciate from your services at this PAV?
- Are there things you do to make this place feel welcoming? What are some examples?
- To whom are these details most important?
- Why might newcomers (to ICTs) access non-profit PAVs instead of for-profit ones?
- How do different types of users use the venue differently?

**Questions for Hypothesis 2b:** Even users with private access seek non-profit PAVs (among other things) to enhance their ICT skills because of the empathy demonstrated in the infomediation process

*Lithuania adjustment: Even users with private access seek public access at PAV (mainly libraries) (among other things) for socializing.*

- Why do people choose to come to this venue when they have other options – at home, for example, or at work?
- What do users who have private access most like to do when they come to the library?
- How do you explain their behaviour?
- Are there things you do to encourage them to keep coming?
- Do they provide assistance to other users, or to you? Is this rewarding to them?

**Questions for Hypothesis 3a:** Effective infomediation processes lead to venues with an adjustment or increase in the variety of services that are responsive to users' needs.  
*Bangladesh variation: Outreach by PAVs and an adjustment in the variety of their service offerings leads to effective infomediation processes.*

- What attitudes have you had to develop, modify, or take on as an infomediator in order to respond adequately to users' new demands on the PAV?
- What activities have been added or modified to respond adequately to new demands on the PAV?
- Do users request new services from the PAV?
- What new services or service adjustments have occurred at this PAV?
- What do returning users do with the skills they've picked up at this PAV?

Other suggestions to consider:

- Why were new services introduced to the PAV?
- How was the decision justified?
- How were the new services introduced? By whom and when?
- What barriers did you encounter?

If the venue is part of a large institution:

- How is your work, and the work of other infomediators, evaluated?
- Do you think there are important parts of the work here that are not evaluated? If so, why not?
- Can you tell us 3 things you like, 3 things you do not like and 3 things you would add to the evaluation system?

**Questions for Hypothesis 3b:** The most significant experience / outcome by users will be linked to the empathetic nature of the infomediation process.

- Do novices Vs advanced users benefit differently from your assistance?
- Does either group benefit more than the other?
- Are there other groups (for example, students, or business people) who benefit differently from your assistance?

## Appendix 2 – User focus groups

**Questions for Hypotheses 1a:** Empathy with the users is more important than ICT skills for the infomediary's job, particularly for novices, and

**Hypothesis 1b:** Advanced users are more likely than novices to seek ICT skills rather than empathy from infomediaries.

Self-assessment of users (do you think of yourself as a novice or advanced ICT user?)

- What motivates novice vs advanced users to come to this PAV?
- At this PAV they welcome novice and advanced users alike.
  - What would a typical session with a novice user look like?
  - How would that typical session change as the novice becomes more confident?
  - What would a typical session with an advanced user be like?

### **Bangladesh addition:**

- In addition to the formal infomediary, who else enables or supports infomediation at the PAV and in what circumstances?

**Questions for Hypothesis 2a:** Non-profit PAVs (rural PAVs in LIT) encourage empathy more than ICT skills from infomediaries.

- Are there things about this place that make you feel welcome?
- Are there details that you have noticed?
- How have you helped to make the place more welcoming?

**Questions for Hypothesis 2b:** Even users with private access seek non-profit PAVs (among other things) to enhance their ICT skills because of the empathy demonstrated in the infomediation process.

*Lithuania adjustment: Even users with private access seek public access at PAV (mainly libraries) (among other things) for socializing.*

- Those of you who have private access, why do you choose to come to this venue?
- Those of you who have private access, what is it that you most like to do when you go to the PAV?
- How do you explain your decision to come here even though you have other options for access?
- Are there things that the PAV does to encourage you to keep going back?
- Are there reasons you might choose to go to a for-profit site rather than a non-profit site for technology access?
- What else do you do that helps the staff at the PAV?

**Questions for Hypothesis 3a:** Effective infomediation processes lead to venues with an adjustment or increase in the variety of services that are responsive to users' needs.

*Bangladesh variation: Outreach by PAVs and an adjustment in the variety of their service offerings leads to effective infomediation processes.*

- Imagine the perfect PAV with the perfect infomediator...[if you could get them to draw this it would be wonderful!]
- What does your local PAV and infomediator have that is similar to the perfect example?
- What does it have that is better?
- What does it require to become perfect?

**Question for Hypothesis 3b:** The most significant experience/outcome by users will be linked to the empathetic nature of the infomediation process.

- What has been a most significant outcome from using the PAV?
- How was that outcome significant?
- What contributed to making that outcome significant?
- Have the skills and information resources have changed your life in any way?
- How?

**Lithuania variant:**

- What kinds of information do you access [most often] at the library? (domains: education, leisure and communication, economics (livelihood, work), health, e-government)
- How has the variety changed over time?
- What are some of the sites or resources that you have that are most useful to you? (awareness and use of specific sites and resources)
- Have the skills and information resources have changed your life in any way?
- How?

**Possible add on: in-depth interviews** for life–stories with select people who have experiences to share (either representative ones, or unusual ones).

## **Appendix 3 – Managers’ interview questions**

### **Questions for Hypothesis 3a**

- How do you evaluate the librarians and the library?
- What important parts are not evaluated?
- Can you tell us 3 things you like, 3 things you do not like and 3 things you would add to the evaluation system?