Internet Cafes: Connectivity for the Masses?

by Roberto Verzola

Access to the Internet typically requires, at a minimum, a computer with the right software, a modem, a telephone line, and a subscription to an Internet service provider (ISP). In the Philippines, the computer and modem would cost some P25,000 (US$500); phone and ISP subscription combined would require around P1, 000 (US$20) or more per month. This is definitely beyond the reach of most poor families, though perhaps within reach of the middle class, if they were willing to drop other daily expenses. At these costs, the Internet would definitely remain an enclave of the rich.

To make the Internet more accessible to the ordinary citizen, the idea of telecentres, more popularly known as Internet cafes (though very few actually serve coffee), was born. The Internet cafe would take care of the hardware and connectivity requirements and a user needed only to pay a per-minute charge for access to the Internet. Typically, in the Philippines, this would range from P20 to P60 (US$0.40 to $1.20) per hour, or a minimum of P15 (US$0.30) for a half-hour session. Although still expensive for the typical poor who might be earning under P100 to around P500 each day (US$2 to $5), Internet cafes made the Internet somewhat more accessible to the middle class and some of the poor who might need it badly for a specific purpose.

In theory, the competition among telecentres would bring the cost of access still further down until the Internet became truly accessible to the masses. I decided to check this out.

I was not a typical poor. For eight years, from 1992 to 2000, I had operated a small Internet service myself through a three-person outfit called Email Center, which offered E-mail access to the Internet, mostly to non-government organisations (NGOs), non-profit foundations, cause- and issue-oriented groups, church and other civil society groups and activists. I knew very well the advantages not only of my own Internet account accessed from the home but of a 24-hour connection to the Internet where one did not have to worry about per-minute charges.

From 24-hour Connection to I-cafes

In 2000, I closed down Email Center. Instead of getting a personal subscription with an ISP, I decided to try the approach that was supposed to bring the Internet to the masses and do most of my Internet access via Internet cafes. I opened an electronic mailbox (free) with a popular provider called Yahoo, surveyed my neighbourhood for Internet cafes (there was only one when I started; there are around eight now), and announced to my friends and colleagues my new Internet address. On the average, I accessed my mailbox two to four times a week.

Digiserv, an internet cafe in suburban Cainta, Rizal, Philippines, caters mostly to youngsters either finishing term papers for school or playing computer games for leisure.

The first thing I noticed was that most of the so-called neighbourhood Internet cafes were mainly game centres, where majority of the computers were not Internet-connected but dedicated to running games. I found out later, as I checked out other Internet cafes whenever I travelled around the country, that this was true, with only a few exceptions, for most other areas. In many cafes, the computers were often segregated; one side (or one room, in the larger cafes) dedicated to computers running games and another side (or room, usually the smaller one) for Internet-connected computers.

I would estimate that on any one day, 1/2 to 2/3 of the computers in use would actually be devoted to games (very violent and gory ones, at that). The remaining active ones would be split roughly evenly between online chat, word processing/printing, and browsing/E-mail, with a few somewhat more engaged in chatting.

I-cafes: Centres of Youth Addiction

In fact, I soon realised that Internet cafes were not simply game centres. They were becoming centres of addiction among the youth, including elementary school pupils. I even started recognising regulars in the cafe I frequented. They were youths of elementary or high school age but I'd see them at various times of the day, including school hours as well as late evenings, even near midnight at times.

They were mostly boys. In fact, I could not remember seeing a girl at all in that typical game player position

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then becoming such a familiar sight to me: hunched in front of the machine, staring glassy eyed at the screen, with most movement concentrated on the wrist, the fingers twitching frantically against the mouse or keyboard. The gamers were in a fantasy world of their own, engaged in shootouts and sword fights with imaginary enemies or with other game players, and totally oblivious of the din and activity around them. In many centres, the rooms were filled with tobacco smoke.

I particularly remember two tragic victims of this new form of addiction because I knew them personally.

One was a first year high school student. Once introduced to the vice, he became a regular in the cafe I often used. Whenever I saw him, he was engaged in a game or watching others play. He would sometimes acknowledge my greeting with a slight nod, without taking his eyes off the screen. After nearly a year, he dropped out from the scene and I didn't see him again. I learned later that he had become so good at the game that the

cafe operators gave him a lot of free time to keep him playing and attract other players to their cafe. By this time, he had stopped attending classes and became a full-time addict. Eventually, however, his parents found out.

Another victim was an elementary school pupil, living with relatives who sent him to school. He probably learned the game when richer friends taught him or treated him a few times. Hooked, he started spending his food allowance to support his addiction. The money was not enough, so he started missing classes to use his transportation allowance too. Still, it was not enough, so he began stealing money at home. But the small amounts did not satiate his addiction. He was, by then, getting reminders and warnings from his concerned and suspicious housemates. One day, he took two thousand pesos (US$40) from an unattended bag. Eventually, he was found out and was sent back to his family in the province.

Tricks of Seduction

Internet cafes use various means to draw in gamers. Some offer lower rates during periods when their machines are under-utilised, usually during office (and school) hours or after midnight. Others offer bonus hours, like a quarter of an hour for every hour paid, consumable only after accumulating a full hour. To young people supporting their vice with a limited allowance, every peso matters and they take advantage of every offer.

As they acquire skills not only in playing games but also in operating

computers, they also try to make themselves useful to the cafe operators, in exchange for more free time. As ace gamers, they attract players in search of competition. As computer operators, they take a big load off the work of the paid technicians. I have seen youngsters of high school age work eight full hours as assistants to cafe technicians and clerks. Cheap, high-tech child-labour, part-time work in exchange for free computer time. Some of them work past midnight for their gaming fix.

What kind of games do they play? Most games are shoot-'em-ups: one walks through a maze and blasts every creature that crosses one's path; or one commands an army and deploys it to annihilate an opposing army. The scenes are gory: cut limbs, chopped-off heads, and mangled bodies. To the young, however, play is reality and reality, play. Mature minds may be able to distinguish which is which, but young minds often can't.

Right under our very noses, Internet cafes are seducing youths to a new form of addiction, one that may not destroy their bodies as drugs do, but is certainly distorting their minds.

Unfortunately, students today are virtually forced by their teachers to use computers and the Internet. In many schools, essays and term papers are not accepted anymore unless they are printed out. Forget about hand-written or even typewritten submissions. Library sources are not enough. One must include URL sources. So, those without a computer, telephone

or Internet subscription at home have to go to Internet cafes. There, they meet the high-tech addicts, and are lured to the addiction themselves.

Sadly, all this is happening while parents and teachers blissfully think they are securing the children's future through exposure to computers and the Internet.

E-mailing in I-cafes

What about my own usage? Were the I-cafes useful to me?

I indulged in no chats and played no games. I mostly did my E-mail and some occasional browsing. Two or three times, I printed out something.

But it was not the same.

E-mailing via Internet cafes tends to be expensive and inconvenient, because one is doing most things online, while the clock is ticking and every minute has to be paid for. Downloading messages is slow, because the connection is not only between the console and the local ISP, but between the console and the Yahoo server somewhere in the U.S. Reading the messages is even slower. Writing replies takes even more time, if one wants to compose carefully the contents of an outgoing message. My friends and colleagues must have noticed a drop in the quality—and quantity—of my correspondence in 2001; throughout that year (as well as the last two months of 2000 and the first three of 2002), I relied mainly on Internet cafes for my E-mail access. My messages were brief, hurried, and

poorly composed.

The truly important messages, I would save to a diskette that I took back home for further reading. Then I would compose a reply on my home computer, save it to the diskette, and then upload the outgoing message on my next visit to the cafe. On some occasions, I forgot to bring the diskette with me, or the diskette itself became unreadable, resulting in delayed or lost messages, either incoming or outgoing.

Browsing with Notebooks and Diskettes

I had to keep a notebook of keywords and sites I wanted to search on the Web, because I often could not recall all that I wanted to look for when I was already seated in front of the console. Sometimes, I forgot to jot things down on my notebook, or I forgot to bring the notebook itself, and so would miss some of the things I wanted. Then, I had to save the search results to a diskette again, so I can study them more carefully when I came home. Sometimes, the diskette was damaged along the way, or my disk drive was not quite aligned the same way as the cafe's drive, and I lost my work.

Three or four times that year, when I needed to really do a lot of emailing and browsing, I cheated. I biked to a friendly office (the women's NGO, Isis International) that had a 24-hour connection that I could freely use, and had my Internet fix from there.

There is no comparison between access via a dedicated line and access through I-cafes.

I have experienced the whole range of connectivity from a dedicated line to I-cafes. And it is clear that a hierarchy of inequality, not so different from wealth inequalities elsewhere, also exists in the digital world.

The Divide in a Digital World

At the bottom of the hierarchy are the I-cafe users. They are the least privileged, extremely time-conscious due to high costs, and unable to use the Internet to its fullest because of the constraints. They are on the periphery, just barely on the Internet.

To get to the next rung, one must cross a huge gap, one beyond the reach of most poor: acquire a computer, modem, and a telephone line, and get a subscription to a local ISP, paying either regular monthly charges or through pre-paid cards. This buys one the benefit of offline reading and writing of messages, and therefore a huge leap in one's quality of correspondence. Browsing remains an expensive option, and one does this only when the data is badly needed, like the middle class who take a taxi only when terribly late for a very important appointment or in a medical emergency.

A rung higher would be users who set up their own Web sites on a local ISP or on servers like Geocities, maintained through their local ISP connection.

In the privileged stratum are those users with access to a dedicated connection that don't have to worry about per-minute costs. With their cost of communication and access approaching zero, they are the most competitive in the digital world.

But this stratum has a hierarchy of its own:

At the bottom of the hierarchy are those who are paying for "unlimited access," available in the Philippines for around P1,500 (US$30) per month, but must still dial their local ISP for a connection.

Next are those whose cable TV provider also offers an Internet connection, at a fixed monthly cost of around P2,500 (US$50). As soon as these cable Internet users turn their computer on, they are connected, usually at speeds that exceed the 56 kilobits/second that is the maximum, though rarely attained, over phone connections.

Then there are the dedicated connections, usually for servers that have their own Internet Protocol (IP) address, at a monthly cost of around P8, 000 (US$160) upwards. With a server with its own IP address, then one is truly on the Internet, theoretically on equal footing with every other server.

A Familiar World of Hierarchy

But even Internet servers have their own hierarchy, which is not only based on the speed of connection to the Net, but also on the underlying topology of network connections. Today, and presumably for a long, long time to come, the U.S. lies at the centre of these connections, followed by Europe. They are at the highest level of the Internet hierarchy. U.S. and European ISPs dictate their prices and conditions to ISPs of other countries that want to connect to them. In fact, Philippine ISPs that connect to the U.S. or Europe often have to shoulder the full cost of the connection, even if that connection is mutually beneficial to both sides.

Those who want to cross the so-called digital divide will be asked to spend much of their hard-earned money only to find greater chasms confronting them. While they may marvel upon entry into this privileged world, they will find that, due to their higher costs, they are the least competitive among the privileged.

The poor may indeed cross the digital divide through Internet cafes. But they will be confronted with other divides that charge higher and higher fees to be crossed. Along the way, they will find themselves in a familiar world of hierarchy, escapism and addiction that keeps them at the bottom of the heap.

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