

Rural PCs but not Rural Kiosks

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Rural PC kiosks and telecentres are perhaps the most-discussed form of ICT4D, or “information and communication technologies for development.” Proponents of rural kiosks hope that these centres can be used to support health, banking, governance, agricultural, and other applications that contribute to development agendas. Over the last three years, with the goal of understanding social, cultural, economic, and technical aspects of kiosk projects, we have undertaken qualitative and quantitative studies that involve surveys involving hundreds of kiosks, site visits to 200+ kiosks spanning 20 kiosk agencies, in-depth interviews of over 100 kiosk operators, intensive participant observation of kiosks in operation, conversations with kiosk agency leaders, software-based logging of kiosks, and reviews of relevant literature in social science, development, and technical journals.

This research has resulted in several broad conclusions that we present here are first, operating a successful kiosk is an incredibly difficult endeavor and there are no known formulas for establishing a successful kiosk, particularly if they must serve social causes and break even as a business at the same time. Second, the real obstacles confronting most services meant to be delivered in rural PC kiosks are not within the kiosk itself rather, the blocks are somewhere else in the “supply chain. Third, although rural kiosks providing “a bouquet of services” are difficult to run, there are business involving PCs in villages that can thrive, if carefully set up. These conclusions suggest that if taking PCs to villages is the goal, there are alternatives that may be more viable than the multipurpose rural kiosk or telecenter.