



# Habermasian Public Sphere and the Telecentre Discourse in Governance

Vineeta Dixit<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*Telecentres are one of the major areas of research and investment in developing countries not only because technology is deemed instrumental for economic development but also because they seem to serve the cause of democratisation and empowering citizens by extending the public sphere. Through analysing two different Telecentre experiences, this paper seeks to answer whether and to what extent do Telecentres extend the Public Sphere? It is argued that while Telecentres create opportunities to improve communication and reconnect citizens to the State, offering greater access to information and support for group based discussion, they are likely to support only incremental modifications to the democratic system because the current use of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) concentrates primarily on information provision, and not linkages that improve the quality of democratic discourse. For any real transformation to occur, changes at both the government as well as the citizen end must be concurrent and feed into each other. At the same time, for these processes to become meaningful and self-sustaining over long term, initially they must be protected from market mechanisms and not be driven by it.*

**Keywords:** Public Sphere, Telecentre, HTM, Drishtee, Habermas

## 1. Introduction

Telecentres are one of the major areas of research and investment in developing countries not only because technology is deemed instrumental for economic development but also because they seem to serve the cause of democratisation and empowering citizens by extending the public sphere (UNCTAD 2002; OECD 2001; WB 1999). Through analysing two different Telecentre experiences, this paper seeks to answer *whether and to what extent do Telecentres extend the Public Sphere?* Dewey (1927) argued that there is a close inter-relationship between technology – its capabilities and limitations and creation and functioning of public sphere. Sclove (1994) pointed out that special attention must be paid to the way technologies construct, structure, or pre-empt social dialogue. Thus, the paper examines the ‘publicness’ of the Telecentres. I argue that while Telecentres create opportunities to improve communication and reconnect citizens to the State, offering greater access to information and support for group based discussion, they are likely to support only incremental modifications to the democratic system because the current use of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) concentrates primarily on information provision, and not linkages that improve the quality of democratic discourse. At the same time, for these processes to become

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<sup>1</sup> NeGP Programme Management Unit, Department of Information Technology, New Delhi 110003, India  
(Email: vineeta@negp.gov.in)

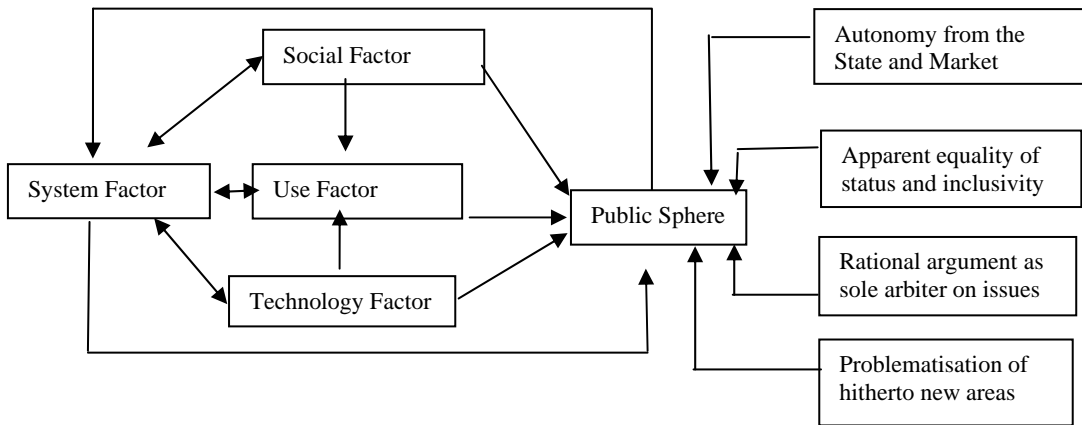
meaningful and self-sustaining over long term, initially they must be protected from market mechanisms and not be driven by it.

**1.1. Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework is based on the Habermasian public sphere and its linkages with the system factor encompassing social, technology and use factors (adapted from Lin, 2003) that shape and re-shape it. The left side of the diagram represents the context and the right side, the universal parameters. It can therefore be adapted to analyse varied contexts against a set of universal parameters. Diagrammatically, the framework can be represented as:

**1.2. Methodology**

The research methodology is based on comparative case study method (Agranoff & Radin, 1991; George, 1979) to compare and contrast the two approaches to the Telecentre movement, analysing whether Telecentres, can meet the requirements of the rational-critical discussions and if and what system, social, technical and use factors influence the extension of the public sphere. These case studies are chosen because they provide us with the opposing ends of Telecentre discourses - commercially driven and civically oriented. A contrast between the two elucidates alternatives omitted when the analysis is limited to just one type of Telecentre and provides operational links over time with the aim of generalising and not particularising analysis (Lipset, Trow & Coleman, 1956: 419-420, as cited in Yin, 2003:11). The comparative case study method will focus on four elements of the public sphere to review Telecentre’s capacity to create and support “new forms of ‘publicness’ within public spheres dominated by privately owned and controlled media and the State” (Tsagarousianou, 1998:175). The conceptualisation, elements and critique of the public sphere will be addressed in literature review. However, the analysis would be incomplete if we do not clarify the contemporary notion of governance driving the Telecentre movement worldwide using the system, social, technological and use factors. Thus, in literature review, the literature on governance, Telecentre and their relationship will also be clarified.



**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework**

**1.3. Structure**

The paper begins with literature review on the public sphere, including a brief justification for choosing the public sphere as theoretical framework. After this conceptual clarification, the extant literature on governance and Telecentres is examined explaining the relationship between the two. Next, the case study section provides brief description of the two case studies. Finally, the analysis section using the case studies, evaluates the Telecentre discourse against the parameters of the public sphere developed by Jurgen Habermas enriched by the system, social, technological, and use factors. The conclusion brings together the

various debates and discussions outlined in the paper together with its main findings. It also highlights some of the social policy implications emerging from this scenario.

## **2. Literature Review: Public Sphere, Governance and Telecentres**

In recent times there has been a growing interest in potential uses of ICTs in the delivery of government services and enhancing government citizen interaction. A large body of literature has focussed on the concept of 'informatisation' that has fired the imagination of theorists, governments, and civil society alike (Hudson, 1999). It is legitimated in terms of a desirable move away from mass communication and back toward forms of interpersonal communication that are seen inherently more desirable and liberating. The theory of 'public sphere' is the basis for current and widespread revival of interest in direct, deliberative or participatory democracy, as an essential complement to representative components of diverse political systems (Garnham, 1992). This chapter reviews the public sphere—its conceptualisation, elements and critique, including a brief justification for choosing the Habermasian public sphere as theoretical framework. Following the conceptual clarification, the extant literature on governance and Telecentres is examined explaining the relationship between the two and how the inter-relationship is impacted by contextual factors.

### **2.1. The Public Sphere**

The idea of public sphere is not new and can be traced back to the times of Aristotle. However, the most widely acknowledged attempt to elaborate came from Jurgen Habermas who theorized the 'discursive Public Sphere'. Edwards (2004) claims that all societies have an array of these public spheres at different levels that wax and wane depending upon the issues at hand. He further asserts, "a single, unified Public sphere would be impossible at any significant scale" (Edwards 2004: 57). However, this is precisely what Jurgen Habermas proposed in his thesis 'The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere' (Habermas, 1989). He developed a normative model of the bourgeois public sphere, its creation and its subsequent degradation or corruption and described the public sphere as an "intersubjectively shared space" (ibid, 1996:360) reproduced through communicative rationality in a "domain of social life through which such a thing as public opinion can be formed" (Habermas, 1989:231). He contended that the function of the public sphere was to mediate between private concerns of individuals in their familial, economic and social life, and demands and concerns of social and public life. Communicative modalities of the public sphere initially consisted of face-to-face communication, which were later supplemented by newspapers and journals that permitted public dialogue to flourish and develop. Situated as an interface between the private realm of civil society and the public realm of state authority, "the bourgeois Public sphere was based on the fictitious identity of the two roles assumed by the privatised individuals who came together to form public: the role of property owners and the role of human beings" (Habermas 1989: 56) to put the State in touch with society through the vehicle of public opinion, which was based on rational-critical discourse among these individuals. Habermas adds that he conceived of "bourgeois public spheres a category that is typical of an epoch and it cannot be abstracted from the unique developmental history of that 'civil society'" (1989:xvii).

Given the vast scope of Habermas' work, it is impossible to distil his key ideas into one paper. I will therefore attempt to provide a brief and limited overview of his concept of the public sphere. The public sphere can be understood as a space for public dialogue where people meet and discuss socio-political issues of their concern. Various people have defined public space in ways more converging than diverging and through these interpretations public sphere emerges as a domain that bolsters democratic values and social justice. While many scholars agree with Habermas concerning the importance of citizen debate for strong democracy, his theory has been criticised from many perspectives especially with respect to his specific public sphere formulation.

Calhoun (1992) suggests that a central weakness is that *Structural Transformation* does not treat the classical bourgeois public sphere and the post transformation public sphere symmetrically. Citing other scholars such as Eley, Baker, Garnham and Fraser who argue for a notion of multiple, sometimes overlapping or contending public spheres as opposed to *one* public sphere, Calhoun notes that criticism points not only to the need of a more pluralistic and inclusive approach to conceptualisation of the public sphere but also to a need for analysis of its internal organization that Habermas neglects. Collectively, criticism about Habermas's 'bourgeois sphere' ranges from gender insensitivity to lack of depth in understanding of rationality in social forces.

Garnham (1992) argues that while criticisms are broadly justified, they do not undermine the conception of public sphere as a fruitful starting point for work on democratic policies. He argues that it is impossible to conceive of a viable democratic polity without at the same time conceiving of at least some common normative dimension. There "must be a single public sphere, even if we might want to conceive of this single public sphere as made up of a series of subsidiary public spheres, each organized around its own political structure, media system, and set of norms and interests" (Garnham, 1992: 371).

Habermas presents the most comprehensive piece of work on the subject of the public sphere in relation to state power, distinguishing it from other theories of democratisation (see Held, 1996) that link it only to markets and nation-states, due to his account of the emergence of a communicative space in which democratic practices evolve. Monberg further argues that since the role of public in the discussions of the development of ICTs is explicitly framed as apolitical therefore the use of public sphere" as an analytic lens to identify the issues of political consequences is essential ... that highlights aspects that would otherwise remain submerged and depoliticised" (1998: 435)

## 2.2. Governance

Governance has become a key concept in the international democratisation debate since 1990s and marks the transformation in focus from micro-level to macro-level issues (Hyden 2004; Rhodes, 1997; Kooiman, 2003) and resonates the policy debates in western democracies and multilateral institutions such as WB. Taylor argues that "whilst governments have taken shape universally through their creation and use of institutional structures of the State,... the perceived institutional failure of these institutions has established enthusiasm for *governance* rather than *government*" (1998: 144)

The review of literature suggests that there is little consensus on the meaning of governance and has many theoretical roots (Stoker, 1998; Hyden, 2004; Kjaer, 2004). Rosenau (1992) talks about governance as global solutions for global political problems; Leftwich (1993) identifies three dimensions of good governance: systemic, political and administrative; Ahrens (1997) defines governance as capacity of institutional environment; Rhodes (1997) refers to governance as a term for reforming the public sector; Stoker (1998) defines the essence of governance as its focus on governing mechanism that does not base its actions solely on authority and sanctions of government; Kooiman (2003) sees governance as a societal quality made up of public as well as private 'governors' and relates it to governing; and Hyden (2004) relates it to theories of development and democratisation in the developing countries. The different theories in various degrees do however agree that in current context governance is no longer just about government, that it refers to a complex set of inter-related and yet autonomous self-governing institutions and actors resulting in blurring of boundaries of responsibility and accountability for socio-economic development and the role of state.

For Taylor " this paradigmatic shift in thinking towards an interpretation of the state... is occurring alongside another shift of emergence of organisation and service innovations whose provenance is usually understood by reference to the rhetoric of the Information Age... and we see the intensive application of ICTs emerging to sustain and support this paradigmatic shift" (1998:145) The two developments put

together gave rise to the concept of e-governance. Thus, “e-Governance lies at the heart of two global shifts: the information revolution and the governance revolution” (Heeks, 2001:21) resulting in a paradigmatic shift in the process of the understanding of democratic governance (Becker, 1998:343) and help build new spaces for citizens to participate in their overall development (Gasco, 2003). Van Dijk (1999) characterises the development of mediated interactive communication as a major structural change produced by communications revolution and it is believed that such processes lead to the creation of a PUBLIC SPHERE albeit mediated by technology that is critical to support the emerging civil society in hitherto non-democratic countries. One critical move in this direction has been the setting up of public-access centres, variously known as Telecentres, Telecottages etc. that are considered to have the capacity for creating a ‘public sphere’ in which information dissemination and access combined with reasoned dialogue strengthens democracy and community formation (Damiris and Wild 1997; Wei and Kuzmanovic 2000).

### **2.3. Telecentre**

A Telecentre is typically a building or a room with computers, a telephone line, Internet connection and other office automation equipments such as photocopier and fax. It is a common meeting place where people are exposed to tools, skills, attitudes and values of ICTs (Fuchs, 1998); provide public access to ICTs for personal, social, educational and economic development (Harris, 1999); offer a range of services and vary in their location and business models (Proenza *et al.*, 2001). Roman & Colle (2001) identify five basic purposes of a Telecentre – to provide access to rural areas, to reduce marginalisation, to facilitate dialogue between communities and policy makers, to encourage participation in decision making and finally to gain information and resources. Proenza *et al.* (2001) discern two main types of Telecentres. The first type are micro-enterprises typically run by small entrepreneurs generating revenue by offering basic telecommunication services, marketing low cost products and by providing services related to government departments such as payment of electricity bills etc. The second type is meant to facilitate the provision of public and private information based services to support local socio-economic development. International agencies such as IDRC, USAID, ITU, UNESCO, WB, in conjunction with the local or central government supports many of these enterprises (Ernberg, 1998), with a belief that the Telecentres create this public sphere in which information about civic affairs can be subjected to “rational debate and discussion”, is ‘open to inspection by the citizenry’ and can be used to form ‘public opinion’ (Webster 1995:101). For ordinary citizens, ‘computer technology can help to reduce isolation; enable more informed contributions to local management and politics; and stimulate the sharing of knowledge and experience’ (INSINC 1997:1).

### **2.4 Factors of Conceptual Framework**

Many scholars have extrapolated from Habermas’ work in constructing connections between technology, information and civil society (Wishard, 1994; Boyte and Kari 1996). Lin (2003) in her analysis of the adoption of ICTs has presented a research framework that has been adopted for this paper and merged with the elements of the public sphere to understand the ‘publicness’ of the Telecentres. The four factors – system, social, technology and use that form the contextual half of the conceptual framework contribute to our understanding of the ‘publicness’ of a technology mediated public sphere, specifically Telecentres.

The next section presents two case studies from Hungary and India to explore whether and to what extent do Telecentres extend the public sphere.

## **3. Case Study: Comparative Analysis of the Hungarian Telecottage Movement and Drishtee Telecentre Initiative**

This chapter evaluates the Telecentre discourse against some specific parameters of the public sphere developed by Jurgen Habermas using the case studies of the Hungarian Telecottage Movement (HTM) and Drishtee Telecentre Initiative (DTI). While HTM demonstrates how Telecentres can innovatively be

structured to approximate the forum for rational-critical discourse and socio-technical and political impediments can be mitigated through innovative thinking, sustained efforts and empathy; DTI is very clearly oriented towards the economic development model that presupposes the democratisation and inclusion process just by its existence. The next two sections provide further details on each of the case study and the final section in this chapter compares them against the requirements of the Habermasian public sphere.

### **3.1. Hungarian Telecottage Movement**

The Republic of Hungary is a country in transition and is attempting to re-integrate itself in the European mainstream. It has a large number of very small villages and towns, of which about 4,500 have fewer than 2,000 residents each. These communities are poorly serviced by state and public service delivery, educational institutions, business services, and offer few job opportunities. Personal computer (PC) penetration is only around 15-17%, while the Internet penetration rate is around 13%. Only 8% of households have Internet access. The idea of telecottage was developed organically to service this neglected population of Hungary. As a result, telecottages are mostly located in small towns and villages and currently more than 500 telecottages across Hungary serve these rural communities.

Each telecottage is an independent, autonomous body, where a local NGO provides legal and business framework for lawful operation. Sometimes, the local government provides support by offering office space, personnel, and financial services and by contracting out work to the telecottages. The operator could often be a private firm that signs a contract with a local NGO. The nature of a telecottage thus incorporates attributes of business, not-for-profit and public administration, creating a highly flexible and hybrid structure (UNDP, 2002), with differing foci such as social problems, children, minorities (generally Roma), small and medium enterprises, computer literacy, NGO support, local democracy, empowerment, etc. As present, the most widespread services (80% and above) are civic service centre, local advertising and information services, public Internet access, office services, public information services, community development and program services, computer games, computer working, and public administration client services (ITU, 2001). The telecottage movement has received support from international aid agencies, notably the Democracy Network (DemNet) programme, funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) as well as the Hungarian government. As the movement developed, it also received in kind help from the local and national businesses (Bihari, 1999; ITU, 2001).

“The explicit goals of the Hungarian telecottage movement are, on the more general level, rural modernisation, economic development, and a strengthening of democracy and civil society” (ITU, 2001:9). They have a six-point operation characteristic defined as minimum that each centre must meet in order to qualify for the telecottage label. These are - Public benefit, “NGO-ness,” societal oversight; Open services that constantly adapt to serve the community’s changing needs; Community space and memory, a public forum, and a catalyst; Public services for everyone; Responsible, independent, competent manager and servicing organization; and Modern information and communications technology. It is further emphasized that the telecottage must exist at the service of the community. It must investigate and be sensitive to specific needs of local residents, organisations and enterprises. Furthermore, the telecottage must secure a public meeting place and instigate public debate, ‘civic virtues’ and free access to information. Besides the general operational principles the material also lists ten basic services, namely, civil organisations’ service centre; Assistance (with official procedures); Internet access; electronic mail for the citizens; Public information; Local centre for announcements and news; office services; multimedia use; computer games and computer related work. (Adapted from Bihari, 1999; UNDP, 2001)

Although a majority of these services are related to ICTs, notable is the emphasis on civil services organisation, assistance with official procedures and dissemination of local information. While prima facie they may seem innocuous, they are critical to the basic purpose of the telecottage i.e. enhancement of civil

society, assistance to citizens dealing with public authorities due to scarcity of information regarding procedures, rules and regulation and provision of more effective and trustworthy information for the only other source of information available to the citizens is a bulletin board in front of the Municipal office, administered by municipality staff (Gaspar, 2001). Telecottages provide information on and organise citizens' dialogues with candidates standing up in local elections, opportunity for telework and source funds for other social activities. 70% of visitors enter telecottages to meet friends and relatives, 62% of visitors believe community life has been changed since the telecottage was set up in the settlement, while only 9% claimed they have not experienced such transformation. Meanwhile 48% thinks the telecottage should organize more community programs. The communal influence of telecottages can be seen in the opinion of 81% of visitors who see the influence of telecottage services expanding towards non-visitors. This compared merely 3% who disagreed and claimed that telecottages did not have influence beyond its immediate sphere. Interestingly, it is citizens between 36 to 55 age group who play the most important part and to encourage other people to use the services (72% of the 36 to 45 age group, and 79% of those aged between 46 and 55) not the younger generation (Molnar, 2000). Telecottages are not merely collections of dispersed best-available technology instead the success of telecottages is due to the public service, community organization, and self-reliance that they provide to often economically depressed and isolated areas.

The telecottages operate under the umbrella of the National Association of Telecottages (Magyar Teleház Szövetség - MTSz). The MTSz was formed to assure the best conditions for the network and the services to expand, to make telecottages sustainable over the long run, to guarantee a high level of operating quality, and to preserve their community-based origins and character. A key player in the HTM, MTSz lobbies the central government for equal rights and equal access to information, education and public resources. It was a key partner in the formulation of the National Telehouse Strategy and often figures prominently in programmes of political parties, as well as in the national plan for the advancement of the country and in a number of special country-wide strategies especially those related to public administration, agricultural, social and employment-fostering (Gaspar, 2001).

### ***3.2. Drishtee Telecentre Initiative***

In February 2000, Cyber Edge (renamed Drishtee) entered into an agreement with the district administration of Dhar in the Indian State - Madhya Pradesh, to develop e-governance modules for the state's Internet project - "Gyandoot". Encouraged by the experience, in 2000, Drishtee signed an agreement with the administration of a small but prosperous and developed district in the Indian state of Haryana - Sirsa.

The aim of the project was to deliver both governmental and private services efficiently to citizens, provide a forum for interacting with government directly and to generate revenues for financial sustainability of the project by charging fee for these services (IIITB, 2005). Citizens would come to kiosks and send any of these queries/requests/grievances via the intranet in a standard format. As there was no connectivity at either the district or block level, Drishtee employees at District Rural Development Agency would download and print the forms and send them to appropriate department (Drishtee, 2005). The business model was a franchisee based three-tier structure and comprised of the management (Drishtee staff), the district operators (hub owners), and the village operators (kiosk owners).

In the initial phase, three kiosks were set up and the Additional District Collector took personal ownership and explained in detail the operation of the 'complaint system' to the citizens. In the first year of its operation, the kiosks were a huge success because there was a sense of empowerment amongst citizens who believed that they could now hold government officials accountable. It also built in transparency in the system, as now the citizens understood the processes involved in various transactions. Most importantly, the system allowed the poor and the marginalized to voice their grievances (WB, 2003).

In late 2001, buoyed by the success of the first three kiosks, 25 new kiosks were added. To improve back-end support, at the district administration level, attempts were made to computerize land records, issuance of pension and payroll system and certificates. However, the degree of computerization was limited as digital signatures were not legally valid and therefore nearly all processes remained manual. As a result, while due to the increased outreach of the kiosks, the number of complaints mounted, Drishtee employees found it increasingly difficult to follow up and keep track of the complaints. On the side of the government, the initial enthusiasm was buried under the ever enlarging mountain of applications and grievances and often went pending for further action as they had to follow the manual system as well keep the intranet updated (IITB, 2005; WB 2004a; WB, 2004b).

The kiosk owners were neither authorized nor qualified to vet the application before submission and all applications were submitted regardless of their eligibility. The kiosk owners refused the offer of the District Collector to vet the applications as each application was a source of revenue to them. In addition, the budget allocated in each scheme was limited and the same was neither conveyed to the kiosk owner nor to the citizens. As a result, the 'customers' of the kiosks felt cheated because in spite of paying to the kiosk owner, their application was not considered. This problem was further exacerbated due to the fact that the government offices such as the village council and block level offices continued to accept these applications free of charge thereby creating a conflict between the two systems. The citizens therefore started to question the reasons and the efficacy of the charged process. As a result, the kiosk owners stopped taking the applications, as no guarantee for response could be given. In the next two years less than 20% of applications and complaints through Drishtee were addressed. By end 2002, most of the kiosks were floundering and by 2004, only about half of the kiosks were operational, and none of them offered any e-governance services for which they were originally established. By early 2003, Drishtee also took a cue from the kiosk owners' experience and moved on to private activities such as insurance, computer education and rural newspaper and decided not to pursue its e-governance initiative (Digital Partner, 2004; IITB, 2005; WB, 2004c). They however operate on the same model in 8 other Indian states.

### 3.3. Analysis

Drawing from the description of the two case studies and the conceptual framework, this section seeks to establish how does the Telecentre discourse of Telecentre functions in reality. Thus, the section answers the research question: '*whether and to what extent do Telecentres extend the public sphere?*' For analysis, the discourse will be evaluated against the four elements of the public sphere, namely – autonomy from the state and market, apparent equality of status and inclusivity, rational argument as the sole arbiter on issues, and problematisation of hitherto new areas. Against the backdrop of the contextual factor analysis, the HTM and DTI will now be examined against the four universal elements of the public sphere to determine whether and to what extent Telecentres extend the public sphere.

*Autonomy from the State and the Market:* This parameter defines not just functional autonomy but emphasises that the discourse itself must be driven by citizens rather than by market or the state. The case study evidence demonstrates that it is not a case of simple autonomy from the state and the market, but a case of hybrid forms containing both public and private organisational structures. While the character of HTM cannot be considered truly 'autonomous', the list of the basic minimum requirements set out for their qualification as a telecottage, quite clearly sets them out as independent from both state and market. It is true that they receive funding from both the state as well as the market, but their zeal and dedication to protection of civic virtue remains undiluted. They are not affiliated to any political party or interest group. The MTSz insists on training the new telecottagers in the civic responsibility to ensure freedom including financial sustainability that is often obtained through government contracts and offering its services to citizens for a fee. Nevertheless, it cannot be deemed as commercialisation for if the operating expenses (\$20,000 annually, Bihari: 1999) are not met through legitimate means, increased dependence upon government and other sources of funding can have adversely impact on the telecottages. Drishtee



Telecentres on the other hand, are not only been promoted with active support of the State are also very clearly influenced by market as the model was based on a public-private partnership ethos (Hunt, 2001), and although Drishtee's original vision incorporated e-governance, its primary focus remained financial viability of its kiosks. Unlike HTM telecottages, it firmly placed itself in the realm of market that eventually resulted in the closer of the majority of the kiosks.

One therefore cannot but agree with Fraser (1992) who argues that any conception of the public sphere that requires a sharp separation between (associational) civil society and the State will be unable to comprehend and encompass various requirements and configurations of management, inter-public coordination, and political accountability that are essential to democratic and egalitarian society. Thus, although both the movements do not seem to fulfil the conditions of this element of the Habermasian public sphere, under the new context of governance they do extend the public sphere in their own limited manner by involving all three participants – the state, the market and the civil society.

*Apparent equality of status and inclusivity:* This element is in principle applicable to both the Telecentres. In the process of the commodification of services and treatment of citizens as customers, there must be a balance between promoting entrepreneurship, the services being offered to citizens as well as issues regarding the agency's legal right to charge for services that are and ought to be available free-of-cost from government offices. This principle was judiciously followed by HTM but largely ignored by DTI. Analysing the social and use factor, in case of HTM, the telecottage is open to one and all and does not discriminate against any citizen based on race, class or status and all can participate freely, bracketing their differences.

Drishtee's case demonstrated that one of the biggest hurdle while attempting to operationalise an e-governance initiative through a private agency is maintaining equality of service in principle as the goal of universal provision of service because market based mechanisms choose to segment the market to seeks maximum profits and need for higher profits eventually drives the agency to seek greener pastures (Ciborra, 2003). Also, "the notion of 'customer' entails a number of market mechanisms, which cannot be completely transferred to a public administration" (ibid:9, emphasis in original). In DTI's case, technically speaking while the kiosks were open to all citizens, only those who were able and willing to pay for the services were entertained. The kiosks also did not keep in mind the need of the citizens and chose not to provide citizens with impartial advise on eligibility under various schemes and were more interested in making profit.

*Rational argument as the sole arbiter on issues:* This not fully realised in either of the cases because, while the State uses them successfully for 'informatising' the public, as Chadwick argues the information available to citizens is controlled and filtered by government and thus the interaction between the citizen and the State is very much on the terms of the State. Further, Pigg (2001) argues that communities have not yet learned how to apply this technology to creating public dialogue about community issues, concerns or capacities because the use of Telecentres for civic purposes takes longer to develop than other functions. In similar vein, Monberg opines, "for access to be meaningful, individuals must possess the necessary literacy skills and find and interpret information and participate in debates that involve public issues as well as necessary hardware and software" (1998:441). HTM did attempt to mitigate this deficiency by providing space for political debate about the socio-political and economic issues especially related to local elections and mainstreaming with Europe because providing a forum for public debate, enforcing citizens' rights, and empowering people were considered as critical issues in the transition from socialism to democracy and a free-market economy (UNDP, 2001). Local residents also had the opportunity to recommend new services or programs after due deliberations at the cottage. The MTSz used the rational critical discourse at the national level by engaging in debates about the role of the telecottages in the various socio-economic sectors. As such, each telecottage serves as a centre of information and debate. Methodological collection

and dissemination of national, regional and local information on behalf of local users takes place only electronically, but also through traditional bulletin boards and newspapers. It provides a coercion-free space for more rational deliberations of local issues.

In DTI's case however, there was no space for rational deliberation or participation. Rational deliberation involving both the administration as well the citizens was limited; the former was viewed as the deliverer of the services and the latter as the client. No debate even amongst citizens was possible regarding government policy, for no information was available. The entire exercise was purely transactional where the citizen filed grievances/applications and the administration chose to respond or not. Unlike HTM associates, the DTI staff did not view the creation of a debating platform as part of their mandate. For them the ability to complain was good enough. Had a rational deliberation through the staff and citizen participation taken place while designing the e-governance solution, they might have pointed out the need for whetting the application at the kiosk level or information sharing regarding the budget constraints or even involvement of the village councils and the block development office to deal with more complex requirements thereby creating a more transparent system. Instead a preconceived solution was foisted on both thereby further muddling an already complex relationship.

*Problematization of hitherto new areas:* This element is an eclectic one. From a system factor perspective, does technology-mediation make it a new area or from the social factor perspective, the unveiling of apparent issues connotes new area? Hungary is a country in transition therefore we may contend that every democratic issue is an un-addressed issue. HTM raised many issues - access to information, democratisation, civil rights and most prominently the gap between rural and urban populations in access to information and technology, which the movement argues is increasing the widening economic gap between rural and urban populations - that can be viewed as issues that are new for Hungarian society and polity. With over 15% population over 64 years, it also draws attention to the problem of internalisation of newfound freedom where required and acts as a mediator between the old and young generations and secure a smooth transition to democratic life. These issues are new both from a system as well as social perspective. However, the HTM initiative has not yet created reciprocal response from the government, thus, it has not been able to directly influence the delivery of government, administrative or public services by central agencies and telecottage expansion have not yet proven to be enough for the feedback loop to reach the affected ministries (Jokay, 2002).

In DTI's case, the system factor perspective was solution oriented rather than problematised, for they did not view the service provision as new area. Although from the technical factor perspective it was new for them, for till now they had relied on face-to-face communication. From the social and use factor perspective, although it managed to raise the expectations regarding accountability of public officials to ordinary citizens - an unknown in Indian context, the absence of accountability measures in case the agency fails to deliver the promised services, or when the district administration does not respond to the citizens led to what is termed as blame avoidance or scapegoating (Stoker, 1998) with each actor blaming the other for not keeping its end of the promise. Thus although an unknown issue was problematised, instead of providing solution, the Telecentre further complicated the issue and alienated the population for it never even sought to create a feedback loop.

Thus, for any real transformation to occur, changes at both the government as well as the citizen end must happen simultaneously and feed into each other. For as Kanungo (2004) argues, sustainability of public sphere hinges upon collaborative and discursive frameworks and the process must allow stakeholders to influence and experience the process of value creation, which in turn becomes a process of collective learning and dialogue.

#### **4. Concluding Remarks**

In this paper I have examined whether and to what extent do Telecentres extend the public sphere. The multiple conceptual threads that intertwine with the research question required a multidisciplinary approach that included the conceptualisation of the public sphere, elaboration on governance, Telecentres and the factors affecting these elements. In the literature review, first of all, the concept of the public sphere was clarified to show that although the specific conceptualisation of the Habermasian public sphere may be contested, the concept of public sphere underpins the idea of a space where citizens are able to deliberate in a democratic process and the importance of public sphere lies in its conception of public discourse or communicative action that has the potential to link the state, market and the citizen – the three components of governance in the current context. It is also “useful for understanding the consequences of target marketing technologies. When the commercial factors determine who is connected to whom and on what terms” (Monberg, 1993, as cited in Monberg, 1998: 431) and repoliticise an issue that is being presented in an essentially apolitical terms, for technologies do not exist in isolation. The social, political and economic environment conditions the scope of imagination that assigns technology certain roles in our lives, as well its use, acceptance, integration and utility. By introducing the concept of governance and the role of Telecentres in governance, it was established that the public sphere could no longer be viewed as distinct from the State and the market.

In light of the established conceptual framework, two Telecentre case studies were evaluated against four elements of the public sphere against the backdrop of the system, social, technology and use factors. The analysis demonstrated Telecentres could enhance the public sphere only when they are community embedded and oriented. They must therefore, function more as a community space rather than technology space. Also, the public sphere demands an informed, educated, objective and rational polity. Resource availability too plays a key role in a citizen’s ability to participate consistently in democratic debates and the government must be sensitised and willing to engage in a fruitful dialogue with the citizens, moving beyond the simple norm of provision public services. It is something that cannot be achieved either overnight or by sheer presence of technology or ability to file a complaint or apply for a grant. Thus, Telecentres create opportunities to improve communication and reconnect citizens to the State, offering greater access to information and support for group based discussion, they are likely to support only incremental modifications to the democratic system because the current use of ICTs concentrates primarily on information provision, and not linkages that improve the quality of democratic discourse.

The paper concluded that while Telecentres create opportunities to extend the public sphere, it is unlikely that any major transformation in the system is will result as a consequence of this extension because the current use of ICTs concentrates primarily on information provision, and not linkages that improve the quality of democratic discourse. For any real transformation to occur, changes at both the government as well as the citizen end must be concurrent and inter-related. At the same time, the must be protected from market mechanisms and not be driven by it. This is not to argue against the potential positive impact such ICT based interventions can have on enhancing and supporting the public space, however, it is critical at the stage of design of such interventions that context based support may be detailed in terms of technology, finance and integration into the existing social fabric.

Telecentres can play a crucial role in linking the hitherto unlinked or distant areas to the centre of politics and give the marginalized citizen’s voice, however akin to the Habermasian public sphere, they cannot ensure if the voice will be heard and acted upon. Habermas observes “whereas the growth of systems and networks multiplies the possible contacts and exchanges of information, it does not lead per se to the expansion of an intersubjectively shared world and to the discursive interweaving of conceptions of relevance, themes, and contributions from which political public spheres arise” (Habermas, 1998:120-121). Therefore, “the extent to which ICTs foreclose or promote community contact is crucial and community

centres are shaped by their positions relative to their surrounding region ... and local and national economy" (Monberg, 1998:445). Telecentre's role therefore in technology-mediated 'public sphere' may be important but for the moment it is limited.

At the policy level, it implies first, the understanding of the complex weave between technology and context that informs underlying structures and processes; second, efficiency does not always equal effectiveness and transparency does not automatically lead to accountability; third, technology-mediated space must at least correspond in some fashion to the nature of the information infrastructure that would normally be used for civic or community building purposes; and finally, the proponents of technology-mediated public sphere must identify and meet the pre-existing needs of the community member as well as to identify and meet those needs that emerge as community members dynamically interact with one another, otherwise, participation rates decline and the Telecentres runs the risk of becoming irrelevant, and eventually abandoned.

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### **About the Author**

Vineeta Dixit is a Senior Consultant to Department of Information Technology, Govt. of India for the National e Governance Plan. She holds a MBA from The Business School, University of Jammu & MSc in Social Policy & Development from London School of Economics. She has over 16 years of experience in India and UK and has worked in the areas of education and technology. In the last 7 years she has transitioned from mainstream corporate life to developmental organisations, working to help make learning and governance more accessible in India.