Roles of Mosques in Bridging Digital Divide

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ABSTRACT
The digital gap has been broadly articulated as the troubling gap between those who use computers and the Internet and those who do not. In bridging digital divide of rural communities, ICT public access centres are established in various locations including in a mosque. This adds value to the mosque in serving the community apart from being a religious-based institution. In general, a mosque is often treated as a place to exclusively serve for religious activities. Hence, this paper presents another important roles of a mosque in bridging digital divide. A single-case study approach was adopted. The unit of analysis is the community in the khariah of Masjid As Syakirin, Kg. Oran. Survey, observation and informal interview were conducted to gather the required information. The study concludes that location, community participation and good governance are important attributes in ensuring the effectiveness of a mosque as a centre for human capital development.

Keywords: Telecentre, digital divide, mosque, ICT.

I INTRODUCTION
Avgeron and Madon (2005) defined digital divide as the gap in ICT access that exist between the have’s and the have not’s. The digital gap has been broadly articulated as the troubling gap between those who use computers and the internet and those who do not. In casting the digital divide as important national problem, scholars, policymakers and the public recognize the tremendous potential of the internet to improve everyday life for those on the margins of society, and to achieve greater social equity and empowerment (Figueiredo et al., 2006; Mehra et al., 2004). ICT has been recognized as one of the tools to support the achievement of individuals’ educational and economic development goals (Wolskeet al., 2010; Gomez, 2011; Muhammad Saniet al., 2011). These explain the statement by Wolfensohn (2000),’the Digital Divide is one of the greatest impediments to development … and it is growing exponentially.” Therefore, such gap needs to be reduced. Efforts in this context are widely known as bridging digital divide (BDD).

In Malaysia, the Economics Planning Unit, Office of the Prime Minister defined the BDD based on three-generations socio-economic value of ICT development (Yogeesvaran, 2007). The first generation, Diffusion of ICT emphasizes on the access to ICT, which aims to address the access gap. The second-generation, Intensify ICT Adoption, aims to address the adoption gap. It does not only focus on access to ICT, but also on how people appreciate the use and the benefits of technologies. The third generation intends to address the value gap by focusing on the value of the development benefits ICTs make possible than in the actual physical access to the technology (Zulkhairi et al., 2013).

One of the Malaysia’s BDD efforts is through the establishment of telecentres as a mechanism and strategy for rapid rural community development (Muhammad Sani et al., 2011; Wolskeet al., 2010; Elijah & Ogulande, 2006; Hazitaet al., 2007; Lennieet al., 2005). A telecentre is a public place where people can access computers, the Internet, and other digital technologies that enable people to gather information, create, learn, and communicate with others. While each telecentre is different, the common focus is on the use of digital technologies to support community, economic, educational, and social development; reducing isolation, bridging the digital divide, promoting health issues, and creating economic opportunities.

Telecentres are often initiated by private or public business initiatives with the aim to achieve a variety of development objectives (Rao, 2008; Bishop & Bruce, 2005; Proenza, 2001). Telecentres in Malaysia are mainly initiated and later monitored by the respective lead ministries, agencies, state government, and universities. Various business models are adopted in the establishment and implementation of telecentres. However, the success of these telecentres is commonly through a private-public partnership model, that is the collaboration of private and public entities (Naik et al., 2010; Wan Rozaini et al., 2010; Huda et al., 2012). The private-public partnership model is suitable especially for developing countries where the operations of the telecentres cannot solely depend on the government due to lack of fund (Nampijja, 2010). This is crucial in supporting the roll out of the project, funding for various programs, and financing operating costs (Bailur, 2007).

The locations may vary depending on the purpose of the telecentre establishments. Such locations may include religious centres and worship houses.
(Gaiani et al., 2009). An example of these is a mosque. In general, a mosque is often treated as a place to exclusively serve for religious activities such as prayers, Quranic studies and readings, discussions on hadith and sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and other similar matters. Less highlighted by the general public are its roles as a library, grocery store, computer centre, and last but not least as point of reference for other matters concerning the community that it served, in particular as an info-mediator. This is inline with Rohaizan et al. (2011) and Laug (2007) that state a mosque as a centre of human capital development for spiritual, moral or social life. As a centre for human capital development, this paper highlights another important role of a mosque that is to bridge digital divide particularly in supporting the success of telecentre establishment.

II TELECENTRE AT MASJID AS-SYAKIRIN, KG. ORAN

Kg. Oran is situated in Mata Ayer District, Perlis. The community in the village is dominated by Muslims. This makes Masjid As-Syakirin in Kg. Oran naturally served as the community centre for the community from nine villages from the district. The mosque, as other typical mosques in rural region in Malaysia, is a centre of attraction for community gathering. In addition, being located next to a primary school, the mosque also becomes a venue for most school’s activities, and also as a tuition centre.

The governance of the mosque is under the auspices of the Perlis State Islamic Department that plays a role in monitoring the management and activities of the mosque. The management committee of the mosque is elected in an annual general meeting held every two years. The committee is comprised of a Chairman, Vice Chairman, Secretary, Vice Secretary, Treasurer, and seven mosque officers. Six bureaus are formed to assist the committee in looking into specific agendas and issues for the benefits of the served community. One of the bureaus under the mosque committee, the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) bureau, is responsible for planning and executing ICT related activities. Among the activities organized by the bureau include basic ICT trainings such as computer usage and Microsoft Office workshops. For ICT development, a telecentre called the Masjid As-Syakirin Community Internet Access Centre (PusatAkses Internet Komuniti Masjid As-Syakirin) was set-up.

The centre is equipped with 13 PCs procured through purchase and sponsorship. The internet access is provided by TM Bhd. and is sponsored by Malaysia Department of Islamic Development (JAKIM) at the bandwidth of 1 Mbps. Analysis on the utilization of the centre is very encouraging where communities have been using the PCs until late of the evening. However, the users are mainly primary school children. They usually come to the centre to use Internet applications such as Facebook, online games, and YouTube. Each user is charged based on hour, RM1.00 for adult and 50 cents for children. The amount collected is used to support the operating costs of the centre. A part-time operator is appointed by the mosque ICT committee on voluntary basis to man the centre.

III SUCCESS FACTORS OF COMMUNITY-BASED ICT CENTRE PROJECTS

Previous studies have indicated that the success of an ICT-based project is related to community participation (Keen, 1981; Proenza, 2001; Roman & Colle, 2002; Colle, 2005; Bailur, 2007; Rao, 2008; Zahurin et al., 2009, Huda et al., 2010). This is characterized by the existence of a local champion, the appropriate locality, as well as users’ supports (Norizan, 2005; Nor Iadah et al., 2009; Huda et al., 2010). A local champion does not necessarily be from those who hold position in the community leadership committee. But rather, it refers to a person who is able to convince others on the vision of the project, has the capability to translate the vision into activities benefiting the community, and has the enthusiasm for such activities (Colle & Roman, 2003; Tarawei, 2007). His supports on such activities are crucial in ensuring the success of a telecentre (Norizan & Jalaludin, 2009).

Apart from local champion, the success of a telecentre is also contributed by the availability of well-trained staff to man the telecentre and execute the planned activities (Norizan & Mohamad Zaki, 2008; Supyan et al., 2009). Having a well-trained staff, the telecentre can offer better training and services and this is found to attract community participation (Zahurin et al., 2009). Strong support from the community members, both in monetary form and involvement in the organized activities, is also regarded as a factor that can contribute to the sustainability of a telecentre (Mohd Amir et al., 2013). It is important for the members of the community to feel belonged to be encouraged in participating towards the advancement and sustainability of the telecentre (Nor Iadah et al., 2010; EPU, 2012).

In addition, community participation is very much depended on the locality of the telecentre as it determines users’ accessibility (Eita & Parvyn-Wamahiu, 2003; Colle, 2005; Kumar & Best, 2006). If the telecentre is not accessible, then it will be very difficult for the users to go the centre hence made it
impossible for them to be actively involved in the activities organized by the telecentre. In fact, through empirical observation, Bailey and Ngwenyama (2009) and Muhammad Saniet al. (2011) have proven that locality is a key factor of telecentre success. Telecentres in many places have not only been the places for ICT-based programmes, but also as public places for other social activities (Colle, 2005; Zahurin et al., 2009; Huda et al., 2010). Non-ICT-based activities organized in or at the centre can be viewed as means for continuous promotion of the centre in which it helps to create awareness and stimulate interest among community members towards the centres (Zahurin et al., 2009; Nor Iadah et al., 2010). On top of those important characteristics of telecentre success, effective management and coordination must also be adequately emphasized (Wan Rozainet al., 2010). This is made possible by having a good management structure and practices (Nor Iadah et al., 2010) as well as competent leader (MohamadSaniet al., 2011).

IV METHOD
This study has implemented a single-case study approach with the unit of analysis is the community in the khariah of Masjid As Syakirin, Kg. Oran. Data collection was carried out among the community within the vicinity of Masjid As Syakirin during a social event organized by the research team in commemoration of the launching of the telecentre.

The mosque’s official record indicates that there are approximately 400 families living within the served area (khariah) with an average of 50 families per village. Hence the total community population is estimated at 2000. Through observation made during the event, the estimated turnout was 250, which is 12.5% of the population. Out of this, 203 had participated in the survey. The survey comprised of a set of questionnaire that seeks information on profile of respondents, access to ICT facilities and usage of electronic applications. Informal interviews with the committee were also conducted to obtain information on management and operation aspect of the mosque in greater depth. The information gathered was analyzed to extract the information related to the roles of mosque in bridging digital divide. These include the information on community participation and the management of the telecentre. A statistical tool (SPSS) was used to extract and analyze the information from the data collected. Descriptive analysis was employed to describe the demographic part of the questionnaire.

V ROLES OF MOSQUES IN TELECENTRE SUCCESS
As mentioned in Section I, the mosque plays an important role in human capital development. In regard to this idea, this paper presents the role of mosque, specifically Masjid As-Syakirin, in bridging digital divide. This will be discussed in relation to the success factors of an ICT project mentioned in Section III namely locality, community participation and local champion.

The profile of the respondents shows that almost all (99.5%) are Malays. This reflects the homogeneity of the racial composition in the studied rural area. The mosque in which the telecentre is located serves a number of neighboring villages as stated in Table 1. The respondents are generally young (65.5% less than 30 years of age), single (57.6%), and are either school-going or self-employed.

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Table 1. Neighboring villages
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Being located at Masjid As-Syakirin, the telecentre is considered successful whereby it manages to draw crowds from various walks of life thereby inviting community participation including those from the nearby villages. This is due to the fact that almost all Islamic social activities are conducted in the mosque. Besides focusing on Islamic social activities, as a community centre, the mosque also organizes various activities for the community such as career development fair and sports. The telecentre plays a role in supporting the organized activities by providing and disseminating information to the...
community. In addition, the community can have convenient access to information regarding both religious and social matters. By having these activities, continuous promotion on telecentre is indirectly being accomplished. This is contrary to the telecentre model implemented presently by government and private sectors, where only the village in which the telecentre is located would normally reap the full benefit of its presence, even though as a public facility, communities from other villages can also use the facilities at the telecentre. By having a telecentre at a mosque, the community in the surrounding villages has equal access to the mosque where every member of the community irrespective of the village he/she belongs is a member of the same mosque. By implementing a telecentre at the mosque, there is a multiplier effect where one telecentre can effectively serves several villages under the mosque’s khariah.

Masjid As-Syakirin is managed by a committee lead by an Imam who is a former university lecturer. The Imam is the leader in organizing the mosque activities, particularly in the areas of worship and preaching. In addition, the Imam plays a crucial role as a reference point for the community by being an info-mediator. Having enthusiasm, experience and profound knowledge, the Imam manages to fulfill his responsibilities and meet community’s expectations. The leadership quality of the Imam supports the human capital development programmes including ICT-related activities. Another significant attribute portrayed by the Imam is to maintain good relations and understanding between the mosque staff, committee members and the community. This is evidenced through the cooperation gained from the mosque committee members and members of the community in most activities organized. As a mosque manager, the Imam allows the creation of a systematic mosque administration. This indicates that the mosque and its telecentre have a good management structure and practices as well as a competent leader. This also reflects the quality that should be possessed by a local champion.

VI CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In defining telecentre, the emphasis on the words ‘public access’ by Harris (2007) and ‘public connectivity’ by Roman and Colle (2002) provide strong indication that telecentre should be set-up in public places. In Malaysia, community centre, library and post-office are generally chosen to locate the telecentres. However, in Kg. Oran, the telecentre is situated in a mosque. Apart from being a religious centre, it is also a place for public congregation for the served community. Hence, it is interesting to look into the mosque’s role in ensuring the success of the telecentre as one of the platforms for bridging digital divide. The Masjid As-Syakirin Public Access Centre is managed by the mosque committee comprising of professionals of various backgrounds that have close relationships with the community and willing to adopt new technology. In addition, supports from the village management committee as well as the community members strengthen the telecentre management team from various aspects including financial, promotion and service and delivery. This creates the sense of belonging and sense of ownership among the community towards the project. Active involvement of the local champion, who is also a member of the mosque committee, inspires the community and thus encourages users’ participation. Furthermore, collaboration with other agencies including Institution of Higher Learning can add value to the telecentre. This proves that a typical Malaysian mosque or other similar religious establishments would support any initiative for community development including telecentre.

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