DIGITAL COOPERATIVES
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THE PARTICIPATION OF ALL USERS AND STAKEHOLDERS IN DIGITAL PUBLIC SPACES

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This thematic brochure is a result of the shared analysis operated by the E-COOP project partners about the evolution of "digital mediation" policies.
It focuses on the participation of all citizens and stakeholders in digital public spaces.
The project has two more thematic brochures; one on the coproduction of public services through digital cooperation and the other one on the mediators' profile and missions.

WHAT IS A DIGITAL PUBLIC SPACE (DPS)?

A digital public space goes by different names...
In some EU countries it is called Telecentre or Cyberbase, but more often than not it has no specific designation. A DPS, above all, is a powerful channel for the distribution of services with social impact, for the well-being and development of communities and individuals.

... welcomes all audiences...
Targeting all kinds of audiences, a digital public space not only provides internet and multimedia access. It also offers information on IT services, basic training programmes and support for individuals or groups, often through a variety of supervised activities: group workshops, or through the support of individuals.

... to whom it offers all kinds of (digital) services
As a local community centre, a DPS strongly contributes to enhance on-line and off-line community development. While facilities and usage vary across DPS, all reflect the intention to address the issues of access by providing technology, develop human capacity and encourage social and economic development.

WHO ARE THE MAIN STAKEHOLDERS TODAY?

The Internet is all pervading: it is part of our everyday lives and most people who use it think nothing of it. It provides us with tools to communicate, a vast database of information and opportunities to share experiences with our communities.

As such we are all stakeholders. We all use the internet in different ways:

- **Individual members of the community** show a wide uptake of online services in Use is for personal, business and leisure.
- **Community groups and organisations** are engaged with online services.
- **National government services** set the tone and lead the way for the development of DPS and online initiatives.
- **Private business** provides most of the infrastructure through which DPS are provided.
- **Non-governmental organizations** often play a significant role in working with particular groups to deliver digital services and training.
- **Educational institutions** deliver IT training. Some institutions work more widely within their communities.

WHO ARE THE NON-USERS?

Despite the ubiquitous nature of the internet studies in the UK (source: Digital Inclusion; An analysis of Social Disadvantage and the Information Society. Helsper, Dr E. 2008) and elsewhere have shown a large number of non users. There is a recognised correlation between social exclusion and a lack of access to the internet. People classed as socially isolated due to a lack of skills, confidence, internet access or due to issues related to age, money or disability emerge as being particularly excluded from the internet.

WHAT DIGITAL PUBLIC SERVICES DO PEOPLE USE TODAY?

There are almost as many types of service as there are users but they can be broadly categorised as follows:

Volunteering opportunities: In the UK main agencies Advertise for volunteers online and there are roles for volunteers in helping people get online. The UK partner uses www.do-it.org.uk to advertise the Digital Champion volunteer role.

Finding out information about services: Across the partners the internet is a key source of information for the public about private, public and community organisations. It is a key resource for health information and for leisure pursuits.

Developing skills: Accessing e-learning – such as www.learndirect.co.uk or www.learnmyway.com in the UK or as in Poland where education is one of the core functions of the DPS. People in the 50+ age are targeted in Poland through capacity building initiatives aimed at developing the competences of this particular age group.

Finding work: The internet has become one of the key mediums for job advertising, with most businesses either advertising directly through their own websites or suing online agencies to recruit staff.

Social Networking: In recent years social media has changed the way people use the internet and has engaged with people in a new way.

As a communication tool: Email meant that people could make contact with each other in an instant no cost way.

Professional networks: Professional networks exist across Europe and enable people to interact with each other.

Finding information on everything and anything from aardvarks to zymurgy: using Wikipedia and other online encyclopaedias, finding out about news and current affairs

Transactions: buying and selling, online banking, booking holidays

WHICH STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE PARTICIPATION?

There are clear socio-economic arguments for increased digitisation for individuals, businesses and communities but to move from academic debate to practical actions requires all actors to work together to ensure that a digital underclass is not created. Strategies to help improve digital capabilities really need to be focused on those factors which stop people being digitally included and which place them in a position where they become capable of using and benefiting from being online.

The ECOOP partnership identified 4 key factors in engaging people and getting them online: access, skills, motivation and trust.

Access: this could be an issue of affordability, broadband speeds, old equipment or no access to publically available equipment. Possible ways of combating this are investing in broadband structure, making the internet freely accessible for the public and/or recycling equipment from businesses to communities

Skills: to use the internet successfully people need a range of skills and understanding. They need the practical skills of using a computer but also digital literacy to enable them to interpret the environment they are operating in.

Motivation: the reason most often cited by those who do not use the internet is that they see no reason for using it or are just not interested. Trying to engage with non users involves trying different approaches for each individual: one size simply does not fit all.

Trust: deal with people's concerns over both falling victim to crime but also deal with issues around the accuracy and legitimacy of information.
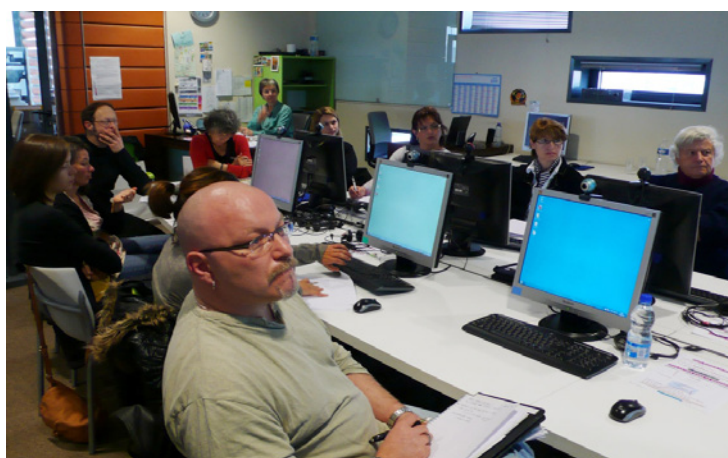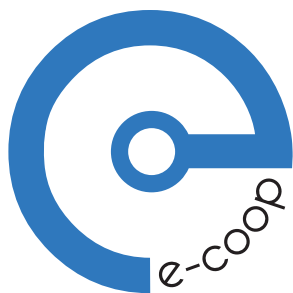
HOW TO ATTRACT DIGITALLY ADVANCED USERS?

Digital Public Spaces are often associated with two types of users: the beginner who needs help and the independent user who is self-sufficient and requires a space and takes advantage of (increasingly available) free wi-fi. One of the challenges for the DPS is to link these two groups up and by doing so bring benefits to both sides of the digital coin.
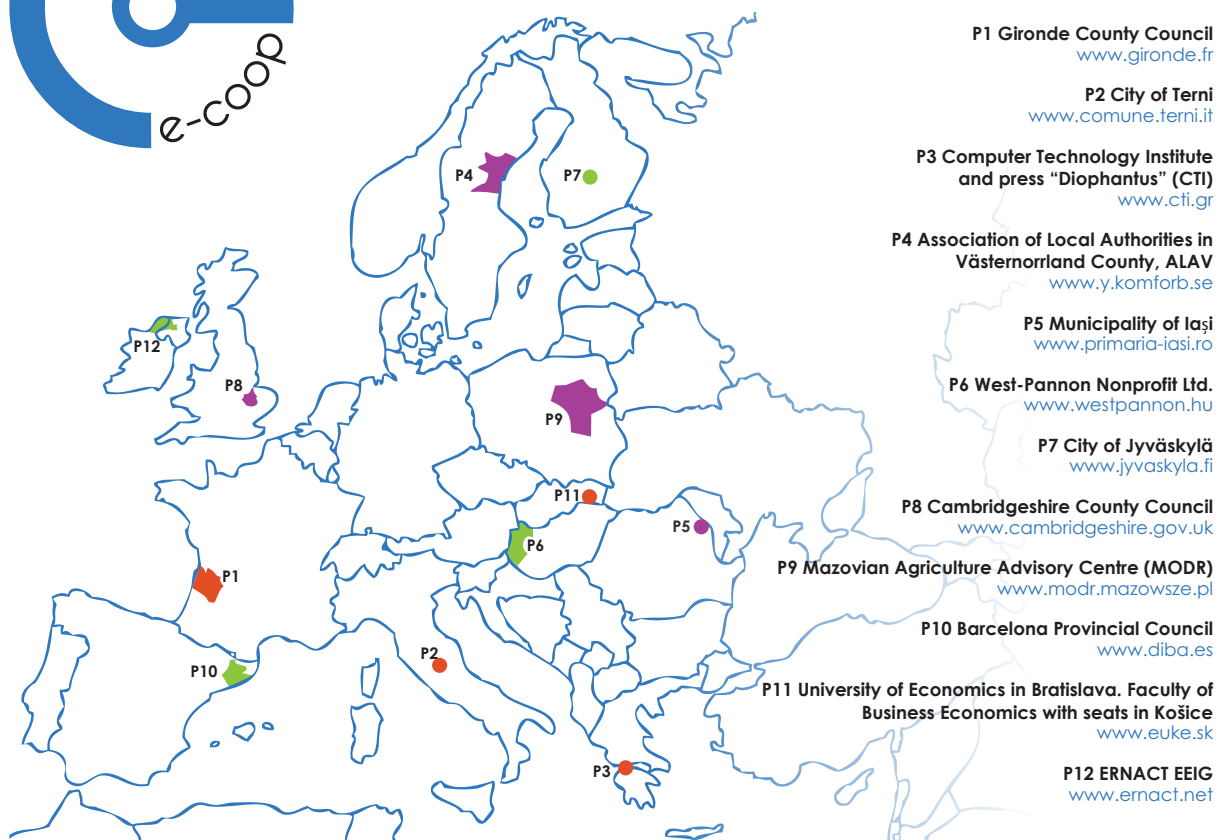
The issue is more about getting a range of users with different skills into the DPS and creating an environment that allows them to work together and share skills. Skill sharing amongst peers is an effective way of growing both an individual's and community's capacity and as technology develops the higher level skills are becoming skills that are required everyday by more people.

The DPS will always struggle to attract more advanced users if it cannot provide the technology and software that is up to date enough to attract them in. An advanced user will think that a DPS is not for them if it is running out of date software on old equipment. This poses a particular challenge to the DPS, most of which are publicly funded therefore not having sufficient budget to keep up-to-date.

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www.cti.gr

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