Helping municipalities to market broadband for the masses

December 12 2005

Experimenting with the idea of municipal provision of sophisticated Internet services, European researchers have come up with some very promising results that were positively received by all municipalities involved in the trials.

When it concludes at the end of the year, the IST-funded VisionAIR project will have successfully completed over six months of trials of Internet services provided by European municipalities. Although the idea of public Internet services might sound slightly anachronistic in these days of free market ideology, Vassilis Nellas, technical coordinator of VisionAIR, points out that they can be an essential way to 'seed' advanced technological infrastructure. "While businesses will provide the services in big cities, in isolated areas of Southern Europe for example, it is not yet commercially interesting for them to do so," he explains. "In places like these, municipalities can lead the way in offering broadband services from a social, rather than commercial, point of view. Indeed, the example of Northern Europe shows that, when a public investment has been made in broadband, commercial investment follows."

VisionAIR targeted homes (between 30 and 40 households) in each of four cities in different areas of Europe: Bari, in Puglia, Italy; Amaroussion in Greece (now well-known as an Olympic location); Bremen in Northern Germany; and Eindhoven in The Netherlands.

The wide geographic spread was deliberate, and circumstances not

surprisingly varied enormously between the areas concerned. "For end-users in Amaroussion, the speed of connection was the most appreciated thing," explains Nellas. "That's because the most advanced commercial provision in Greece is 1 Mbit/s; so these end users suddenly had 10 Mbit/s and could download video, and so on. In Eindhoven on the other hand, access is already fast, so speed was not the issue. Here, it was the seamless integration of all services, including telephony and home automation, that was appreciated by end users." This feedback was obtained by a workshop held earlier in the year, he adds; more detailed feedback, gathered by a questionnaire survey, will follow shortly.

The municipalities were offered a variety of services, some of which were standard, others optional: they included fast Internet access (10 Mbit/s), VoIP telephony, IPTV, Video on Demand, home automation, live municipal events, healthcare applications, online lectures, and a car sharing application. These were supported by a triple play platform, designed and developed by adapting open source software, mainly by the Technical University Eindhoven (TUE) and InAccess Networks, with contributions from the project's technology partners. The home gateways were designed by InAccess Networks and manufactured by ANCO, and video phones were provided by Sagem and Alcatel.

"The technical challenges were in large part resolved by having each city select a key technological partner right at the outset of the project," explains Nellas. "TUE for Eindhoven, Cable Link Hellas for Amaroussion, Tecnopolis for Bari, and BIBA for Bremen."

Other challenges, he adds, were organisational: "For example, in Amaroussion the municipality had to make a deal with a fibre operator to lay fibre networks for the trial," he says. Other issues included the difficulty of finding copyright-free content to use. "But one way or another, these issues were tackled in the four different locations, and ultimately the trials went more or less as planned," Nellas says.

The municipalities were unanimously positive about the experience, he adds. "They all showed considerable interest in such low-cost services as flat-fee local calls," he says. "Of course, real-world deployment will involve them running such services in connection with other partners. VisionAIR has given them the opportunity to develop the know-how in this and other areas, and has also allowed them to consider what they want to do next, in terms of real-world deployment. In Amaroussion, for example, they are currently discussing how to expand the fibre service, and make it more commercial."

Although VisionAIR officially ends at the end of the year, the four cities involved have only just begun their technological progress, says Nellas: "Thanks to the VisionAIR experience, all the municipalities now have a good idea of how to attract government, business and EC funding for broadband activities."

Source: IST Results

Citation: Helping municipalities to market broadband for the masses (2005, December 12) retrieved 5 May 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2005-12-municipalities-broadband-masses.html