

German village takes digital fate into own hands

June 1 2014, by Marie Julien



A photo taken on May 13, 2014 shows the German village of Loewenstadt, where the residents funded and built their own Internet network as their village was too small to show up on the radar screens of national operators

Too isolated and with few inhabitants, the tiny village of Loewenstedt in northern Germany is simply too small to show up on the radars of national Internet operators. So the villagers took their digital fate into their own hands and built a broadband Internet network of their own.

Peter Kock, who runs an agricultural technology supply firm in the village, couldn't be happier.

Data files that used to take two hours to load onto his computer screen now appear in just 30 seconds.

"It's brilliant. There's no comparison," he enthused.

And that benefits his customers, too, because thanks to the new high-speed connection he can check the availability of parts much more rapidly.

Surrounded by wind power generators and fields, around 30 kilometres (18 miles) from the Danish border, the picturesque brick houses and gardens of Loewenstedt, with its population of just 640, are spread over about 200 hectares (500 acres).

With around 22 kilometres of network needed to link up all of the houses to the high-speed data highway, "we would never have found a company willing to supply the necessary fibre-optics," said mayor Holger Jensen.

Some 58 other communities in Northern Friesland face similar difficulties and so the idea was born of clubbing together—businesses, individuals and villages—to secure access to a modern technology that is taken for granted in most German towns and cities.

Mounted on the walls of Kock's store room are two white boxes bearing the initials BBNG or Citizens' Broadband Network Company, set up in 2012 to collect the funds and build the fibre-optic network.

The firm with five staff has collected more than 2.5 million euros (\$3.4 million) in funds, thanks to its 925 shareholders who each contributed a

minimum of 1,000 euros, said BBNG chief Ute Gabriel-Boucsein.

94% of households involved

Solidarity is high in a village like Loewenstedt. And 94 percent of households, like that of Kock and his family, pledged to sign up to the network for two years before it was even built.

Kock also invested 5,000 euros in BBNG. And his parents who live across the road, aged 76 and 73, invested 1,000 euros.

They receive interest from leasing the network, built in March at a cost of 800,000 euros, to Internet supplier TNG.

"We're too small. Without this initiative we would have been forgotten," said Kock, who added that he feels reassured that his parents would be able to benefit from the advantages of tele-medicine and other technological advances allowing elderly people to continue living in their own homes.

"Living in the country with the luxuries of the town," said mayor Jensen, who is also a farmer, and who says high-speed Internet will enable him to take better care of his livestock.

But there are also wider benefits. The presence of a high-speed Internet network could stem the exodus of young people, help keep companies in the region, support property prices and make the region, which is close to the North Sea, more attractive to tourists.

For now, however, it is only the village of Loewenstedt that has succeeded in mobilising the solidarity of its inhabitants to build a high-speed Internet network. Other villages have been slower and found it more difficult to follow Loewenstedt's lead.

"At least 68 percent of households in a village have to promise to subscribe to the fibre-optic [network](#) before we start work," said BBNG chief Ute Gabriel-Boucsein.

At the end of 2013, just 18 percent of Germany had access to networks with speeds up 10 megabytes per second and above, according to consultancy firm Akamai.

The German government has promised networks of at least 50 megabytes per second by 2018.

"But they don't say how they plan to achieve that," said Gabriel-Boucsein, adding that she was certain that Loewenstedt would remain excluded from such a digital El Dorado.

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Citation: German village takes digital fate into own hands (2014, June 1) retrieved 24 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-06-german-village-digital-fate.html>

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