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COMMUNITY MEDIA FORUM EUROPE

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CMFE - Contribution to the public consultation on the EC - Digital Divide Report

The Community Media Forum Europe (CMFE) as a platform including Community Media from 13 European countries feels much concerned by the effects of the digital divide. A large number of non-profit mostly local Community Media in Europe are working in rural areas fulfilling their work for building up and running communication structures to involve citizens in democratic process and political debate in local, regional, national and European level. Community Media very often started as radio or TV initiatives but due to convergent development of the whole media sector nearly all Community Media are running their web media and simultaneously have enlarged their training capacities from traditional broadcasting media to web-based activities. It is especially for that reason Community Media are often taking the role of mediators or training centres for media literacy related to the use of internet in rural and remote areas. It happens that in areas which are usually not covered by broadband technology local Community Media have the role of a physical access point for internet communication.

At the other hand we feel concerned as main users of broadband technologies due to a general migration from traditional terrestrial channels towards internet services via cable, DSL or WLAN-technology. So in all discussions on new technologies there should be included the importance of a must carry status for local Community Media.

Even if this report has a focus on broadband access (technical connectivity) in rural and remote areas we have to stress out that there are at least three different reasons for the actual digital divide:

1. Lack of technical access to broadband internet connection
2. Lack of access to devices/computers for people in rural areas especially for citizens in economic disadvantaged situations.
3. Lack of media literacy and training for educating democratically involved citizens.

Regarding the general questions (1. – 7.) posed in the public consultation on the Digital Divide Report:

1. YES – There is a need for new public policy actions at the European level to stimulate the provision of broadband in remote, rural or sparsely populated areas of the European Union.

2. There is not only the need for access to broadband for individuals but for local community media initiative and other locally engaged social enterprises which can contribute a lot for bridging the digital divide in remote, rural or sparsely populated areas.

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The infrastructure should be technically designed to include community media services, even if from a strictly technical point of view this makes necessary extra investment and technical adaptations to this systems. Settop-boxes also should be open to all media-services and 'excluding' systems should be forbidden. Providing access for community media lowers the level of active media participation, helps media literacy and thus helps narrowing the digital divide. This reflection should be included in national broadband strategies, there should be financial support e.g. by opening European and national funds and the exchange of best practice could help to spread available solutions.

3. There is a explicit need for public intervention for broadband-use in each of the three asked perspectives, we rate the importance at 5 for all of them:

Lack of coverage – 5

Affordability – 5

Quality of service – 5

4. There is often a lack of training facilities and useful applications for citizens in remote and rural areas. That fore there should be a specific focus on social aspects in this ongoing discussion. The use of ICT in rural and remote areas should be promoted in a sense that the range of direct social communication and contact is supported.

There is also the problem of prices as in rural areas. Due to a lack of competition of broadband-providers access is often much more expensive for the users than in cities where divers providers and solutions are available. That for we state the necessity of declaring broadband access to be part of Universal Services.

5. – 7.

Active assistance could be useful if e.g. a specific website contributes a platform of local links and would be a result of a local consultation process in the more general perspective of rural development. Especially in bordering regions such a public consultation process could contribute to foster contacts and cooperation across the borders as a basis of social and economic development in such rural areas.

The CMFE is ready to contribute to any further consultation or to participate in future discussion on the Digital Divide and related topics.