

## 1.5 WHO IS DRIVING THEIR DEPLOYMENT?

Clearly this question is linked to the previous section. However, at this early phase of local open access network development around the world, one important factor seems to mark out the genesis of these initiatives. It is the entrepreneurial 'vision and commitment' on the part of an individual man or woman, which is proving to be the vital ingredient which not only sows the initial seed for an local open access initiative, but also provides the importunity and willingness to battle against opposition over an extended period which is so critical to the project becoming a reality. This is in marked contrast to the conventional wisdom which would suggest that the necessary and sufficient conditions for bringing about 'change' in the telecommunications sector (or indeed, any other) are carefully crafted public policy and focused regulation.

Many of the early pioneering and visionary individuals promoting local open access network initiatives seem to exhibit a deep and heart-felt conviction that there is more to this than simply competing against incumbent operators or 'getting in on the telecoms bandwagon'. Very few if any of them are what might be termed "technocrats" – they are not themselves highly equipped with a deep technical grasp of the underlying digital technologies. Many exhibit a sound, 'plain-man's' view of technology but more important than that, many of them see to have a gut instinct that somehow or other, the average citizen is not getting all the benefit and value that they might from existing technology. There is an unspoken implied conviction that 'all is not fair' in the way in which the digital technologies are being deployed for the benefit of citizens at large. It is as if these individuals are saying to the communities they serve and the world at large, that maybe some of the \$1,500 billion + plus per year [\[iii\]](#) that is being spent by the world's citizens on communications technologies, might yield greater end-user benefit if it were expended on themselves, by themselves.

This concept of "user owned networks" is nothing new in the context of a LAN (local area network) within the confines of a home or office, but it IS something distinctly new in the context of city-wide communities. What is new is the emerging idea of open access networks with strong user control if not ownership, as a means of redressing the failure of the conventional telecoms business model to deliver 'fair value and benefit' to end users. The Economist [\[iv\]](#) was one of the first to bring this point into the public arena in its Quarterly Technology Review in 2003. So individuals, who have already glimpsed the potential of what the Economist calls "Telecoms II", are often to be found as the driving engines behind the growing number of local open access initiatives. They fall into two broad categories: i) elected politicians and ii) visionary community opinion leaders and 'champions'.

In the first category, there are political leaders such as Mayor John F. Street who gave birth to the high profile "Wireless Philadelphia" initiative aimed at making theirs the first major US city to deploy wireless citywide. In Europe, it is local politicians such as the Mayor of Amsterdam and particularly his Deputy Mayor, Mark van der Horst, that have personally grasped a vision of how this can contribute to the competitiveness of their City in the future. (Glasvezernet Amsterdam BV) [\[v\]](#). Likewise, in Athens, Greece, the Municipality of Maroussi under the inspired civic leadership of a 'digital visionary', Mayor Panayiotis Tzanikos [\[vi\]](#) has plans for an advanced open public local access network to serve its citizens. Although there is as yet no conclusive evidence to suggest that there is a direct "ballot-box-benefit" to be garnered from promoting these network developments, it is nevertheless fair to assume that these visionary local political leaders are supporting and driving these initiatives, not for any doctrinaire or naively altruistic reason, but because they believe that it will deliver real and appreciable economic or social benefit to the community which, either directly or indirectly, will be reflected in democratic support for them at the ballot box.

There is a second category of entrepreneurial visionaries who are not formally part of the local political government structure. In reality at the time of this Study, these are far greater in number but often operating on a smaller scale in terms of the scope of network and with lower public profile. Good examples of such individual open access network champions are Mahabir Pun and the wireless project in Nepal; Bjarke Nielsen – the visionary entrepreneur behind the formation of an open access wireless network serving the rural area of Djurslands [vii] in Denmark and Sascha Meinrath [viii] who is Project Co-ordinator of the open access Community Wireless Network project in Champaign-Urbana [ix] in Illinois, US.

The internet provides an excellent platform for global networking between these individual pioneering open access champions, but the movement (to the extent that it can be called a movement) is locally driven and is popping up spontaneously in communities around the world rather than being driven by some centrally orchestrated global mission. It may as yet evolve into a "Green Peace-type" movement, but as yet it is undoubtedly a movement of individual, community-centric "grass-routers".

[<- previous chapter](#) | [next chapter ->](#)

## REFERENCES

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[iii] International Telecommunications Union : [http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/at\\_glance/KeyTelecom99.html](http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/at_glance/KeyTelecom99.html)

[iv] The Economist Technology Quarterly : March 15<sup>th</sup> 2003

[v] [www.citynet.nl](http://www.citynet.nl)

[vi] Transcript of video interview with OpenPlanet Ltd. <https://www.open-planet.net>

[vii] <http://www.djurslands.net>

[viii] <http://www.saschameinrath.com>

[ix] <http://wireless.cu.groogroo.com>