Report of the COST-CONNECT workshop entitled "An interdisciplinary approach on the Next-Generation Internet", held on 12-13th September, 2017, in Brussels.

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Introduction

The workshop utilised a mechanism called a "Pro Action Café" format, which is a gathering of participants coming together on a question to create an inspirational group conversation where each individual has an active voice. In the plenary session, participants were asked to share their relevant questions (around projects – seed ideas) to get group input (deeper questions – knowledge sharing – experience) from the others via a white board (Figure 1). Once the questions were selected, the proposer of the question acted as session host over three sub sessions – introduction, deepening and harvesting.
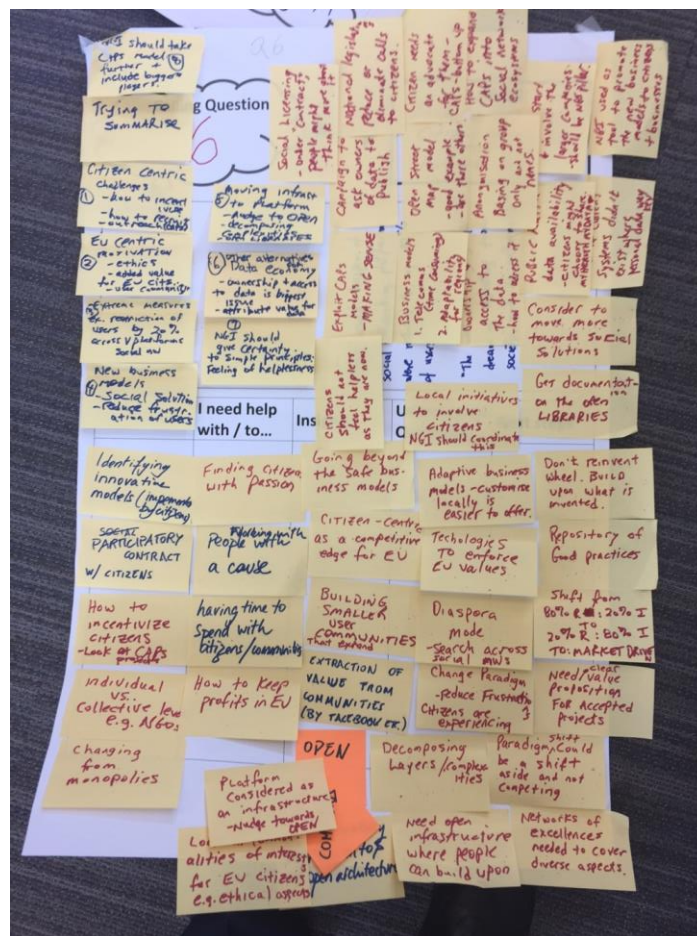

Figure 1 – Pro Action Café White board

The following question was proposed by Jim Clarke of SpeakNGI.eu and it was accepted for animation within a "Pro Action Café" setting. This report summarises the result of that session. The organisers will be sending a report of the entire event in due course.

"How can we best ensure that the NGI is truly citizen-centric while still encouraging innovation and disruptive business models? How do we successfully balance these sometimes conflicting drivers through research and innovation agendas in the next 10 years?"

Session results

In the introduction session, the question was redefined as trying to address how to come to a balance between citizen-centricity and business models for the Next Generation Internet (NGI). In the three sub-sessions on this question, the participants focussed on previous experiences, difficulties encountered and some limited successes in how to attract citizens themselves to participate in EU projects and programmes. They brainstormed a number of challenges, ideas and insights, including the following:

Challenge 1. Identifying innovative business models focussed on the improvement of citizen's lives, without impinging on their fundamental rights.

The participants agreed that there is a need to change the paradigm to reduce frustration and feelings of helplessness that citizens are currently experiencing with the current internet. It was suggested that this paradigm shift could be a shift aside and not competing, but more based on social solutions and based on EU values. A number of examples were put forward including a French farming community using open maps for movement of goods and an EU based airline offering different loyalty benefits based on flying patterns of citizens in different Member States.

Challenge 2. Changing from the current business models based on monopolies would be a big challenge and how to design the business models to keep profits in Europe.

A number of EU-centric possibilities were put forward, such as going beyond the safe business models, using "citizen centricity" and ethical values as a competitive edge for EU based tools, not competing with the large players but focus on building smaller user communities / local initiatives to actively involve citizens that will eventually expand. An example was given of a local farming community where truck drivers are using open maps, which has expanded to other regions quite substantially. Adaptive business models that could be customised locally would be easier to offer; to do this, the platform could be considered as an open infrastructure and this would help in the move towards open platforms with easier entry points for businesses. It would help in the decomposing of the layers and complexities for involvement of other players into the development activities to make and benefit from new businesses. An interesting (and somewhat radical) suggestion about limiting the audience reach of large social networking platforms was put forward. "What would happen if social networking platforms were restricted to, say, 20% of users. A discussion ensued on how a "diaspora model" could be incorporated into such a % restriction model, whereby there could be collaboration and searching across a number of smaller social networking platforms i.e. a Kayak for social network platforms.

Challenge 3. Incentivising citizens to participate in the building of the NGI.

Some approaches were discussed including looking at some success stories within the Collective Awareness Platforms for Sustainability and Social Innovation (CAPS) programme[1], finding citizens with a passion or a cause to participate, decide whether it is best to approach citizens on an individual or collectively e.g. NGOs, and thinking about a notion of a social participatory contract with citizens was raised. It was subsequently presented that the CAPS programme already have an initiative called the Digital Social Innovation

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[1] https://capssi.eu/

Manifesto (DSI Manifesto) that took on board submissions from 60 stakeholders on setting priorities and identifying the measures to be put in place for digital innovation to be at the service of the whole civil society[2]. The DSI Manifesto, as defined during the consultation phase, can be found at: https://www.dsimanifesto.eu/manifesto/. It is important to look at the commonalities of interests for EU citizens e.g. ethical aspects. It was felt that having such a contract might incentivise the users to consider more closely the value and importance of their data. In addition, this is an approach taken in India and Asian countries, where they are working towards a "Digital Charter" for citizens, based on their inputs on what they expect when building the internet of the future, recognising the power it carries and it's potential to transform and disrupt[3].

Challenge 4. Incorporating these diverse, multi-disciplinary activities in the Research and Innovation programmes for NGI.

A number of suggestions were made including shifting R&I percentages from 80% Research: 20% Innovation → 20% Research: 80% Innovation and look again at the instrument of Networks of Excellence, which were successful at addressing and covering diverse aspects within R&I. In addition, it was suggested that proposals should have a clear value market/citizen driven proposition before they are accepted. Finally, it was suggested that the NGI programme could take the CAPS programme to the next level, by inviting the larger players to get involved in improving the platforms, applications and services for the citizens without focussing so much on the data economy. It may not be an easy road ahead to accomplish that but the attempt should be made to promote new business models that will improve the lives of citizens without raising the frustrations and feelings of helplessness being encountered today by everyday citizens.

Impressions of the event

In the closing session, the participants were asked to personally answer two questions: 1. What were the main take-aways of the event for you; and 2. What inspired you most about your participation to the event.

My main take-away from participation to the event was being involved in a very relevant workshop, whose cross cutting results and multi-disciplinary attendees from COST and DG CONNECT could be called upon proactively in Europe's NGI initiative's exploring and gathering of topics, and the consultation that would be of significant benefit to these activities in the next years. I was very thankful to be included in the workshop that coincided very well with the NGI Management Team planning meeting held during the following days.

What inspired me most was the team that worked in the "Pro Action Café" on my question, who remained on that session over the two days, even though there was an opportunity to move around to the other sessions. This showed a true level of committment to getting answers to the important question being put forward.

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[2] https://www.dsimanifesto.eu/consultation/
[3] http://dsummit.defindia.org/