

Distributed Users Support and Operation Centres in the exploration programme as supporting infrastructure for virtual observatories .

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The current manned space science programme on the ISS uses in Europe USOC's which proved successful in assisting the scientists with support close to their home bases. USOC's did not only improve science return but brought operations of the space station closer to a wider audience as the European press prefers to report on news that carry a local flavour. The current mode of operation of the B.USOC and its relations with User Home Bases and ESA operation centres will be described. In 2008, this support will be for the first time extended to external payloads on the ISS in the form of the ESA solar monitoring package on Columbus.

The USOC's experience with ESA and other networks make them an example of a possible support infrastructure for virtual observatories.

This communication describes the scientific and societal advantages of extending this mode of operation to the automatic preparatory exploration programme and to future manned flights.