

What is the role of government on the Web?

Gerry McGovern – Published in *New Thinking* June 2008

Web government is about helping citizens and businesses make easier, faster, better-informed decisions.

More and more government websites are unmanageable. The sheer size and number of websites are vastly greater than the human resources available to manage them. Recently, I spoke to a government agency that has a total of 600 employees. It has 100 websites; 1 for every 6 staff members.

“In 2002, our predecessors concluded that there had been a lack of progress in implementing the recommendations from an earlier report,” a report by the UK House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts stated in March 2008. “Five years on, a quarter of government organisations still cannot provide data on the cost of their websites. And, where data were provided, over 40% of organisations provided only estimates.

“Further, 16% of government organisations do not have a good knowledge about the users of their websites. Even where user data are being collected, they are not always being used to inform and improve websites.”

While the report does state that, “Generally, the public consider government websites to be satisfactory,” it goes on to state that, “Overall, however, the quality of government websites has improved only slightly since 2002, and a third of sites do not meet the Cabinet Office’s own user accessibility standards.”

The UK government is seeking to do something about the problem. It plans to shut almost 1,000 websites, and move most government services to just two.

There are many governments, with websites just as messy as the UK’s, who have no strategy to bring them back under control. In fact, many governments never had control of their websites to begin with. There was some vague strategy about getting everything online. The letter ‘e’ got abused a lot and a few people talked excitedly about portals.

At a senior level, many governments don’t understand what the Web is about. Politicians think it’s a place to put their pictures. Senior bureaucrats think its about technology, and therefore not something they need to be concerned about, because that’s something the IT department does.

Some believe that the government should remove itself entirely from the website management process, and instead provide structured data to private businesses who would then create easy-to-use websites.

“If the next Presidential administration really wants to embrace the potential of Internet-enabled government transparency, it should follow a counter-intuitive but ultimately compelling strategy: reduce the federal role in presenting important government information to citizens,” states “Government Data and the Invisible Hand”, a study published by Yale University in May 2008.

“Rather than struggling, as it currently does, to design sites that meet each end-user need, we argue that the executive branch should focus on creating a simple, reliable and publicly accessible infrastructure that exposes the underlying data. Private actors, either nonprofit or commercial, are better suited to deliver government information to citizens.”



It's a great idea to supply well-structured data to private enterprises so that they can develop simple, fast web services. However, the government still has a vital role on the Web. Not everything can be privatized.

For the government to truly serve its customers on the Web it needs to address the following issues:

1. Get away from a technology obsession
2. Manage customer top tasks, not government websites
3. Get politicians off government websites
4. Stop government vanity publishing
5. Develop a government archive

Get away from a technology obsession

Letting the IT department manage the website is like letting a printer manage a publishing house. This might have been okay in 1998, but in 2008 a government web strategy should be driven by professionals who are trained in customer focus and a self-service ethos.

It makes me shiver to hear about a new government 'portal' initiative. Translated this means the government is going to waste millions and millions on cool, really complicated technical toys that are a joy to the IT department but a total horror to use for anyone who doesn't have a PhD in geekness.

"Between award-winning tech projects and satisfied users, there's a chasm," Prasanto Kumar Roy writes in PC Quest in June 2008. He was writing about the difference between what is technically brilliant and what is usable.

There is an annual survey carried out in India by Dataquest and IDC that measures how citizen-centric India state's e-government initiatives are. Some states are not happy with their low ranking.

"Look here--we've got these awards for our project, so your survey is nonsense," Kumar Roy writes. "Another said: "Our budget for this one award-winning project is more than the complete IT budget of that state you've rated so high!"

"Did they miss a point? The awards they got were for projects: technology, spend, planning, idea, maybe execution. Our survey was about something else: user satisfaction. Were citizens, and businesses, satisfied? Did they see an improvement in their government interface? Speed, transparency?"

Manage top tasks, not websites

Governments should manage neither the technology nor the content. In fact, at a very basic level they should not even manage the website. The website is not the point, the purpose. It is the task of the customer that is the point, the purpose.

People do not wake up on a Saturday morning and say: "Hey, it's the weekend! Think I'll browse some government websites. Educate myself about the school system even though I'm not a teacher and have no children." People go to government websites because they have to; they have a task.

The question should be: "What is the best way to help the customer complete this task? If that means sending out structured data so that a nonprofit or private entity can make a better web service, then do that. If it means getting engaged with Wikipedia or some other website, then do that.



I have a website therefore I am. That's how a lot of government entities think. They think a website fulfils them, makes them whole. Get over it. Not every government entity and initiative needs a website (or even a webpage).

Get politicians off government websites

Shouldn't there be a law against having politicians' pictures on websites, particularly on homepages? Taxpayer money pays for these websites. So what gives politicians the right to take taxpayer money and hijack government websites and turn them into campaign websites?

If you look at the homepage of North Korean websites then you will inevitably see pictures of "great leaders." But if you look at the government websites of Irish, American, Canadian or European Union websites, you will also see pictures of "great leaders."

Recently, I came across a government website responsible for famine and relief aid. On the left was a picture of a starving child. On the right was a picture of a politician. Some PR eunuch somewhere thinks that this will enhance the image of the politician.

The Web is about the informed, skeptical, cynical, questioning, impatient society. Citizens feel empowered by the Web. The last thing a clever politician should do is use old, failed North Korean propaganda tricks.

Stop government vanity publishing

If most government websites are to be believed then most government entities have massive insecurity complexes. When you arrive at a typical government website it's like sitting beside a bore on a bar stool. The bore drones on endlessly about all that he has done for everybody.

The Department 'welcomes, launches, improves, exceeds, excels, is celebrating its anniversary, ceases, releases, increases, gives, and on and on and on.' It's all about them. Giving control of a website to a government communicator is like giving control of a pub to an alcoholic.

Nobody cares.

Nobody cares about the vision and the mission statement. The Web is about putting a vision into action, not talking about it. Nobody cares about how much money is being invested in health care. They care about their health and the health of their children and loved ones. They're at a health website to solve a health problem, not to eulogize the Department of Health.

I came across a government flood warning website recently. Here's the first piece of content that greets someone who's worried about whether their house is in danger of being flooded:

"Welcome to XYZ flooding information & advice website. In Vanityland XYZ is the flood warning authority and we work closely with other organisations to manage flood risk in Vanityland. (Click to see exactly who does what.)



Develop a government archive

Governments urgently need to develop a national archive strategy. The vast majority of information that governments produce has minimal productive value to society or business. In fact, it gets in the way, acting as a weed and smothering the very small percentage of productive information that is produced.

In one city council website I dealt with recently, out of 22,000 pages on the site, 200 were getting 80 percent of the demand from citizens. This is quite common. It is probably safe to say that 1 percent of government information has the potential to deliver 80 percent of the value citizens and businesses require from government on the Web.

The other 99 percent delivers the remaining 20 percent of value. Thus, 80 percent of government effort should be spent managing the productive 1 percent, and 20 percent of effort should be spent creating a separate giant archive where the rest is stored.

Right now, we mix the 99 percent and 1 percent in the same website. There's an old saying: What do you get if you cross a fox with a chicken? A fox.

If we manage the 99 percent archive (fox) in the same environment as the 1 percent of high value information (chicken), we get the giant, sprawling out-of-control website that sucks resources and delivers a frustrating and unusable experience for everyone.

We can do much better. And it's still all to play for.

Gerry McGovern
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Related links:

House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts. [Government on the Internet: Sixteenth Report of Session 2007–08](#)

Robinson, David, Yu, Harlan, Zeller, William P and Felten, Edward W, "[Government Data and the Invisible Hand](#)" (2008). Yale Journal of Law & Technology, Vol. 11, 2008.

[Closing The Gap](#): Prasanto Kumar Roy

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