

eParticipation guide for Oman government

A practical guide to implementing eParticipation within Omani government organisations

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Submitted by

The Danish Technological Institute
Kongsvang Allé 29
8000 Aarhus C
Denmark

Prepared by:

- Louise Thomasen
- Jeremy Millard
- Morten Meyerhoff Nielsen
- Richard Warren



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Introduction

This guide to eParticipation has been prepared by the Danish Technological Institute for the Omani Information Technology Authority (ITA). The intended audience is the staff of ITA and all other Omani government employees and decision-makers.

His Majesty Sultan Qaboos has given directives concerning the development of direct communications channels between citizens and government bodies. Such communication channels may be physical meetings, but they must also be supported by the online efforts of Omani government.

eGovernment is not just about putting government services online and improving their delivery. Rather, it is also a set of technology-mediated processes that can improve the overall quality of policy and decision making and change the broader interactions between citizens and government.

Governments everywhere are struggling to improve the quality of engagement and decision making, whilst widening the involvement of all citizens. Governments are also under pressure to do more with less. Most are working hard to deliver effective policies and services at least cost to the public purse; many are trying to leverage resources outside the public sector. Last but not least, governments are seeking to ensure and maintain high levels of public trust, without which government actions will, at best, be ineffective and, at worst, counterproductive. At the same time, more educated, well-informed and less deferential citizens are judging their governments in terms of their policy and service delivery performance.

eParticipation is the use of digital technology to help the citizen participate in government. The aim of eParticipation is to...

- Connect ordinary people with the political and policy-making process
- Ensure that citizen understand decision-making processes
- Allow citizen to speak with politicians and decision-makers
- Ensure that people are, and feel, heard and included when decisions are made
- Ensure that citizens can directly engaged with and influence:
 - Government policies and decisions
 - Public services, including eGovernment services
 - The arrangements and procedures of government and the public sector
- Enables government to tap into the collective knowledge of society quickly and directly

This guide explains the principals of eParticipation, the commitment and requirements for successful implementation and some of the tools that can be used,

With the spread of social media globally, people are connecting with each other electronically and in new ways. For governments this means both opportunities and threats. Some of the tools for eParticipation are government controlled and owned, some are not. The essence is that government can offer eParticipation through government owned means, but will also *have to follow the users* (citizens, businesses, visitors etc.)

and be where they are. Government needs to join in, monitor and contribute within any relevant on-line communities, in order to reap the full benefits.

eParticipation is about communication rather than technology

Social media is now so widespread, and there are so many tools available, that competition and innovation has forced suppliers to come up with ever easier ways to manage and integrate tools for websites and applications. Many solutions exist that only require website managers to embed a few lines of codes. As a result technical skills (whilst still important) are not as essential as good, proactive communication skills.

In practice, good eParticipation requires similar communication skills to those used in traditional media, such as press releases and newsletters, but in a slightly more concise form. The departments or people responsible for publishing, monitoring and managing the contents of the government-owned and commercial eParticipation and social media activities should be part of the same organisational unit that is responsible for publishing and managing the organisations content on “traditional media”. *There must be coordination and integration between the government communication of on-line and off-line messages.*

However, this organisational unit must and will change to include listening and dialogue functions in addition to the publishing and one-way push functions of traditional media.

How online communication channels (e.g. social media and so-called Web 2.0) differ from traditional off-line communication.

- Online communication is more one-to-one, even if it is the wider public that is the audience and who ‘listens in’. It tends to be interactive and not as authoritative compared to traditionally broadcast media. And as it is more specific, the right message from government can quickly and directly be sent to and reached by the right audience.
- In the online dialogue between government and citizens, a collaborative environment is key to the success of reaping the benefits of participation and online communities. Every participant should have the feeling that their contribution matters, and that the end result is greater than the individual parts.
- Online channels offer both the potential of increasing citizens’ understanding of policy, service and process issues, and governments’ understanding of everyday citizen needs and concerns. If done right, government can react faster and handle problems as they emerge in real time or very rapidly thereafter. Citizens will gain a better understanding of how government decides priorities and feel more empowered to make useful contributions.
- Online discussions are often spontaneous, informal and unpredictable. Not every contribution is equally well thought out. Not all content contributions are reliable. There is a delicate line between moderation and censoring content. When government does moderate content and/or contributions it should always be stated why the action has been taken. Unexplained removal of user comments or discussion

topics leads to a suspicion of “cover-up”. By being open and honest about why certain moderating actions are taken maintains trust and educates users.

- There is a 24/7 access and response to government and decision-makers on social media, platforms and networks. Traditional government keeps working hours, internet users don't! In the future, government organisations must seriously consider manning their online channels 24/7 too.

You will make a difference if...

- You are transparent
Be open, and show questions and answers. You can demonstrate how the government organisation is taking input into consideration, and you have a unique opportunity to explain why if you don't.
- You are open and ask for input
Government does not always have the perfect answer to every problem. If you are in the process of gathering inputs, ask people and say why you do it.
- You are involved and interact
eParticipation is not only about technology, it is about dialogue and communication
- You listen and act
People will talk anyway – some will agree and some will disagree. Do not ignore issues just because you disagree, be proactive and explain why you disagree

eParticipation will succeed if...

- Goals, objectives and targets are clear
- Social media profiles and Web2.0 features are:
 - focused on users
 - relevant, current and of interest
 - continuously updated
- Linked to other relevant sites e.g. oman.om, A'shura, private discussion forums such as Sablat Oman, newsletters etc.
- Promote use, encourage input and provide feedback
- Specific social media are only used if there is a specific and well thought through purpose
- Unused social media applications are removed before they become an embarrassment, unless they do have an as yet unachieved purpose in which case the reasons for non-use should be investigated and corrective action taken.

Security

There are three security issues that require attention for safe eParticipation

1. Technical Security
Prevention of damage to your own systems by viruses, hackers or people with malicious intent.
Also spam and spam prevention though for example entering email details, registration, logging on

via Facebook profile, etc.

2. Citizen Security

The security of personal citizen data such as passwords, personal ID-numbers, bank account and health details.

3. Reputation Security

Prevention of publishing or displaying content, such as pornography, that would cause offence to users. This requires co-operation between authors, discussion moderators, marketing and legal departments. Also prevention of, or positive response to, inaccurate, or potentially illegal material. The requires a proactive approach by marketing and covers not only your own “in house” domain but also any online social media systems where the government might be discussed.

Types of Social Media

Web 2.0 is online technology or tools which allow users to author and contribute their own content, or manipulate the content of others. Social media are one major type of Web 2.0 tools which enable users to socially interact with each other. The use of all Web 2.0 tools blurs the distinction between producers and consumers of content.

As highlighted, the real ground breaking changes brought about by Web 2.0 and social media is that the distinction between consumers and producers of content has become blurred. We are all consumers and producers of content, and the more we contribute the greater value we can reap from its use. Even just “listening in” to a conversation makes us creators of content, as our views or entry is often logged and added to a statistic showing the popularity of the content. The more views, the more popular or interesting the content is perceived to be, and even this piece of information is of value to other users.

We know the social media by names such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, but there are many other tools and technologies available, and change is very rapid. Table 1 describes a useful categorisation of Web 2.0 tools, their advantages and disadvantages. More detailed descriptions of key social media tools are given at the end this guide (pages 12 - 19).

Table 1: Web 2.0 participatory tools

Tool	Description	Advantages and disadvantages
Networks	An online service or platform built upon and reflecting the networks and relationships between people (e.g., interests or activities). A network generally consists of a representation of each user (often a profile), social ties and a broad range of services (e.g. e-mail, chat, messages, blog	Advantages: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• User and target audience is present• Informal tone, two-way dialogue and open to all• Input directly from users and stakeholders• Can be combined with various publications and

Tool	Description	Advantages and disadvantages
	<p>posts and content). It offers the users the opportunity to exchange ideas, activities, events and interests with members of a personal network.</p> <p>Examples: Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn and Twitter.</p>	<p>feedback components as well as portal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dialogue creates ideas and innovation • Good communication and PR channel • Independent, neutral platform <p>Disadvantages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use and feedback is not guaranteed and the dialogue on social networks is often superficial and difficult to encourage a constructive debate • Alternative channel for debate and voting, opens another channel for communication • Added value and tipping point unknown • Not necessarily full control
Platforms	<p>An online collaborative platform, facilitating the cooperative and work processes that help more people to interact and share information to achieve a common goal and thus promote innovation. The internet makes it easier to disseminate and exchange information and knowledge as well as facilitates contributions from individuals. A crucial element of collaboration is that ideas occur everywhere and that individuals are able to share these ideas. Social cooperation corresponds to crowd sourcing, where individuals work together towards a common goal.</p> <p>Examples: Wikis like MediaWiki, DokuWiki, TikiWiki, Google page wiki, blogs like Wordpress or Blogger and collaborative office solutions as digitaliser.dk, Debategraph, Teamwork or Work Spot.</p>	<p>Advantages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two-way dialogue and discussion forum • Input directly from users and stakeholders • Can be combined with various publishing and feedback components as well as a portal • Dialogue creates ideas and innovation • Common platform, forum and resource <p>Disadvantages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use and feedback is not guaranteed and can be difficult to encourage a constructive dialogue • Alternate channel • Added value unknown
Publication	<p>An online service or platform that facilitates sharing, publication, changes, folksonomies, user creation and mash-up of content. Content may be in the form of video, images, text, etc.</p> <p>Examples: YouTube, Flickr, SlideShare, RSS feeds and Twitter</p>	<p>Advantages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active update of user and stakeholder • Helps to maintain interest • Gives the user a "share" in the content and how it is used • Alternative tools for mediation and alternative to text - web accessibility • Complement a platform with audio, pictures and text • Give users a choice of medium • Can be used on different networks and collaborative platforms and a portal <p>Disadvantages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential information overload • The value of user-generated content can have large fluctuations

Tool	Description	Advantages and disadvantages
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copyrights not always respected • Can be heavy/time-consuming material upload/access
Feedback	<p>An online service or platform facilitating input from an audience through one or two-way communication. Two forms of feedback exist: Quantitative forms like voting and rating and qualitative forms as commenting, discussion, surveys, wikis and blogs.</p> <p>Feedback types are often combined and are often found on website or as functional elements in different networks and collaborative platforms.</p> <p>Examples: Vote and debate on borger.dk or Debategraph, rating and commenting on Facebook or digitaliser.dk, surveys as survey monkey, pirate survey, free online surveys, blogs, wikis, Wikipedia's article feedback tool, various public solutions etc.</p>	<p>Advantages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be used on different networks and collaborative platforms and oman.om • Two-way dialogue and discussion forum • Input directly from the users and stakeholders, facilitate inclusion and involvement <p>Disadvantages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use and feedback is not guaranteed • Alternative method of user and stakeholder feedback • Added value and resource unknown

The eParticipation Policy / Statement

The first thing to realize is that social media and Web 2.0 are only tools, and should not be led or managed by the IT department. Using social media is about communication and dialogue, about using more channels to better reach your audience. It should be led by the communications and media departments.

“Let’s use social media” is neither a strategy nor is it a plan.

It is extremely important that the government organisation develops a policy for how they will use eParticipation, both for social media and for other tools. It is also imperative that a policy is created both for eParticipation and for civil servants use of and behaviour in such media. If these two elements are not in place, users will lose trust in government. Civil servants will either use the media in an official capacity as they do as a private person (which is not appropriate), or become paralysed and refrain from engaging with citizens at all. In both circumstances the government organisation’s brand, general esteem and important messages to the public become weaker.

“We need management approval first” is a general phrase used by civil servants, who are not properly guided and who do not know the correct behaviour as the ‘rules of the game’ are unknown to them. In such circumstances websites with deactivated links to social media or closed down discussion forums can be seen. Users visiting the websites will see these ‘half-efforts’, sending out the signal that government really doesn’t want, or perhaps dare, to engage with the public, nor let them participate in any way. Another example is websites with feedback/suggestion functionality, where a form for user input is displayed without any accompanying introduction or explanation of how input will be handled, leaving the user with a sense that all inputs go into a ‘black-box’ and disappear.

As government you can put some ‘rules-of-the-game’, i.e. guidelines in place, but you need to be very straightforward about them, so that users know what to expect from government and how to behave. Many such guidelines have been developed, for example as shown in the box based upon international experience

eParticipation policy for websites

The eParticipation policy can be anything from a small statement to a full eParticipation document that you can link to from the pages on your website, which contain eParticipation facilities, or your social media pages like the Facebook home page or a YouTube channel.

An eParticipation policy for websites:

It is a statement about what eParticipation is in your context, how it is used and how you will handle it

It will be the government organisation's policy, or mission, for eParticipation explaining the rationale, objectives, procedures, tools, etc., which the organisation uses or plans to use, including the principles for engaging users, using their inputs and providing feedback to them.

Typical guidelines in the form of success criteria for eParticipation

- Be clear about the purpose and what you expect eParticipation to do (and not do), and focus on real (e)participation needs at the outset of the process.
- Overall processes and outcomes must be highly transparent, open and in most cases negotiable, as this helps build confidence.
- High level (political) backing can be critical.
- Use words and language people understand, and not just 'coded' information.
For example, there may be cases where, in order to involve stakeholders in policy-making, providing policy drafts may not be enough but instead such drafts should be explained or commented in terms simpler than those used in European law.
- Listen as well as ask and tell, including let people express their anger and frustration.
- Timing – get participants involved early in the policy lifecycle.
- Provide feedback on inputs, show how it is used so the citizen doesn't feel that their input is simply disappearing into a black hole ... if does not affect the outcome, explain why.
- If inputs are ignored, cynicism breeds.
- Before start, decide how to collect input, how to analyse it, how to use it, and make this clear to participants.
- Directly address the needs/interest of participants, and involve them in this.
- Use careful, independent, trustworthy moderation ...with transparent guidelines.
- Clear, transparent, rules-based discourse and accountability may be more important than ICT to increase participation.
- Different tools/processes (like ePolling, eVoting, eConsultation, ePetitioning) if part of the same policy process must not be disconnected.
- Must take citizen inputs very seriously (whether they are asked to give them or they give them anyway), show how they are used, etc. A rationale needs to be provided for the final outcome or decision which specifically addresses participant inputs.
- Provide independent monitoring where appropriate to ensure balance as well as to minimise mis-use and inappropriate online behaviour.
- Always be wary of the digital divide, so do not assume that every view or need is captured.
- Evaluate – including asking the participants!

The policy has four elements:

1. The overall philosophy – why are you doing it, i.e. the specific purpose it serves
2. List of facilities functions – how you are doing it, i.e. the specific role and rationale of each function
3. Commitments to how you will handle participation – service delivery obligation
4. Expectations about user behaviour

The basis for a very simple eParticipation policy might be as shown below.

Fill in the blanks:

Our goal is to communicate with *[audience]* about *[topic]* using *[tools/platforms]* over *[time period]* in order to *[objective]*. When we receive inputs we will *[...]*

Overall philosophy

Explain why you are choosing to let users participate, why you are engaging with users. What is your goal with eParticipation?

Examples of rationale could be.

Because ...

- you want to initiate a dialogue between government and citizens
- you need citizens input to become better informed
- you want to be transparent and open and you want to build trust
- you want to offer accountability to the public

List of facilities functions

What tools will you offer to the users for participation? Table 1 on Web2.0 participatory tools outline the four main types of categories of tools. But as a rule of thumb you can think for social networks, platforms, publication and feedback as:

- Facebook connects
- Twitter coordinates
- WordPress (or whatever) debates
- Wikis collects and organises knowledge
- LinkedIn builds professional networks
- YouTube shows the result

But it could also be:

- Polls rank or rate

- Surveys collect feedback
- Simulations with voting for most preferred combinations of options
- Blogs with comments
- Discussion forums
- Suggestions/feedback forms
- Questions and Answers to top management
- ePetitions (i.e. Majlis A'Shura's Citizens Requests)
- Live transmissions with user comment functionality
- Etc.

Commitments to how you will handle eParticipation

It is extremely important to make it clear who is accountable for what, and how redress is to be handled and who should act on the outcomes. In this way trust in the system can be increased.

For eParticipation and engagement to work, you need to make a statement as to how you intend to handle the process so that users feel safe and confident to contribute.

You must be transparent. If you do not tell the users what will happen with their inputs and contributions, government will seem like a 'black box' where all inputs 'disappear'. This is not promoting the process, and mistrust of government will result.

The (e)participation efforts (messages) by the citizen:

- if moderated, you must state by which criteria. Moderation criteria must be clear, transparent, rules-based and accountable
- must be acknowledged, recognised and communicated, so that a participative culture is created and maintained
- give appropriate feedback, must be given evidence as to what impact they have had, even if this did not fundamentally change anything, although the reasons for this must be clear and transparent.

Commitment is the 'rule-of-the-game', *what you as government promise to do when you receive inputs.*

- Will you moderate discussions?
- When can users expect a reply from you?
- When will you reply?
- How will you reply?
- Will you publish users contributions in an archive? If not, tell why (privacy, anonymity, sensitivity)
- When will you evaluate contributions?
- How long do you expect the evaluation and analysis process to take?
- When can users expect a conclusion?

Part of your commitment should include being fair and outlining a code of conduct appropriate for all parties. It will explicitly state what forms of content are prohibited and will be removed (moderated).

Examples of such unwelcome contents are:

- Comments that are out of context or irrelevant.
- Profane language.
- Comments that promote discrimination.
- Comments that promotes illegal activity.
- Comments that violates any legal or intellectual property rights.
- Spam and automated commenting
- Comments that offend accepted cultural or social norms without providing any broad benefit.

How it works

Imagine you have moved into an apartment block and invited the neighbours round for an evening meal to get to know them. You may serve a lovely meal, but if the guests all sit there in silence, just staring at their plates and eating the food you will never get to know them. You are the host, so it is your responsibility to “break the ice” and get conversation started. You also need to help the conversation along if it gets a bit dull. Otherwise the neighbours will never come back. The same approach is needed for managing social media. You are providing the platform so you are responsible for helping your visitors overcome their shyness. You need to get communications started and maintained. If you let any inactivity (silence) last for too long your visitors will not return. The internet is full of unused and neglected discussion forums and bulletin boards – make sure yours is not one of them. Initiating the debate, ask questions, and turn the argument around to get people to think about their arguments. As a good host, you try to facilitate the conversation, but not dominate or dictate it. You need to create a conducive environment so your guests can relax, feel at home and participate on equal terms with you and each other.

Expectations about user behaviour

It should be made clear to the user what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour using social media.

- You should expect the user not to offend accepted cultural or social norms, and which do not otherwise provide broad benefit.
- You should also note here whether inputs will be monitored, and whether persistent abuse of these will incur any penalties.
- You should remind users that they are part of a community and they should respect the views of other members, whether or not they agree with them.

The eParticipation Calendar

This is a calendar of eParticipation events and activities.

- Announce your eParticipation activities.
Both upcoming and past activities should be in a calendar. It shows that eParticipation is part of a process, it sets time limits to contributions and commits both users and government to the process
- Individual calendar events must be downloadable
This means that it can be saved, and even shared. If events can be downloaded, this commits government who cannot then just erase the calendar; this builds trust in the participation process.
- The calendar must be searchable
Website organisation and structure might change, the users must be able to search and (re)find eParticipation events.

Which events? Examples of eParticipation events for Oman

- Planned inquiries from Majlis A' Shura (where A'Shura asks citizens for input, thus informing and enriching the process and collective knowledge)
- Upcoming/current polls and surveys on government websites
(when do the polls start, when do they end ?)
- Upcoming investigations from government organisations
- Talk to the minister, e.g. in a live chat
- Online discussion on a certain topic (start and end time)

Guidance for civil servants

Civil servants who engage with the public on websites and in social media should abide by the following principles:

- **Be credible.** Be accurate, fair, thorough and transparent.
- **Be responsive.** When you gain insight, share it where appropriate.
- **Be integrated.** Whenever possible, align online participation with other offline communications.
- **Be a civil servant.** Remember that you are the ambassador for your organisation. Whenever possible, disclose your position as a representative of your department or agency.
- **Be clear and open about what you can and cannot do.** Make sure you openly **distinguish situations where you can give concrete advice** as a representative of government from **situations where you can only inform** citizens how to get such advice.

Social media however are about individuals talking to each other and interacting. That is the whole social aspect. As a civil servant engaging on behalf of the organisation in social media, you will act as a person (but representing your organisation).

Security and privacy

The organisation's IT and other security policies also apply to social media websites, but a few additional precautions must be taken:

- Employees should not use their official email address or password to log into their private accounts on social media websites. It is essential that an employee's professional and social profiles online are kept separate.
- Websites such as Facebook offer access to additional applications which may pose security risks such as spam, phishing and security attacks. Further, such third party applications may misuse or keep data indefinitely.
- The incentive to share data is so strong, that the user becomes more lax when it comes to their own personal privacy, especially on third party applications like social media sites. Employees should be educated about these security risks. They must be aware that:
 - Information shared can potentially remain on the internet indefinitely
 - They must never share sensitive government information such as confidential data or private information about themselves or others
- It should be clearly stated what type of information civil servants can disclose when using social media.

Direct communications channels: Citizens give feedback

Citizens may want to engage government in certain areas that they feel needs attention. They may want to point out a problem, express their views on service delivery, or make unsolicited suggestions. There are many reasons why citizens want to engage and notify government about something. Government may also want to receive inputs from citizens in specific areas to inform the administrative or political process.

Regardless of citizens' rationale, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos has given directives as to the development of direct communications channels between citizens and government bodies. Such communication channels may be physical meetings, but they must also be supported by the online efforts of the Omani government.

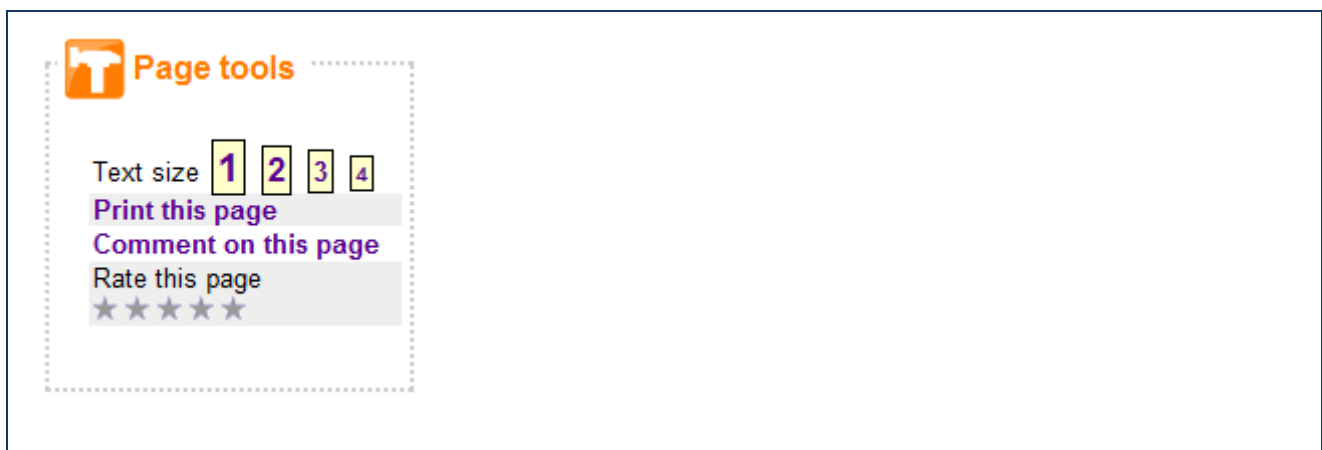
eCommunications channels and functionalities may take many forms. Below is listed advice for using and implementing some of the most common ones in government organisations and their websites.

Chat/comment/poll facility on each webpage

Government websites should consider setting up a comment facility at bottom of each page for users to chat with each other about the page and/or with civil servants. This will provide direct feedback to the IT departments on their service delivery and the authors on the quality of information on the webpages (from a user perspective). As civil servants it is quite natural for IT departments to assume that users have the same knowledge about government organisations and processes as they themselves do. Very often citizens do not possess this knowledge, so this is a very easy way to get structured feedback from users on how well information and content on webpages is understood and how well it works. Problematic electronic services and misunderstood or erroneous webpages can be identified and improved very quickly, if feedback from users is available.

When a comment facility is supplied each comment should be vetted before released for publication and if necessary moderated.

Example 1 Simple page rating and commenting



Source: Canterbury City Council Online (UK) - www.canterbury.gov.uk

Example 2 Rating eServices

The left screenshot shows a 'Service Rating' form with the following questions:

- Did you find the eService easily?
- Was the eService easy to use?
- Will you use the eService again or prefer to visit the ministry premises personally to apply for the service?
- Will you recommend the eService to your friends?
- Was the service as you expected?

The right screenshot shows a 'Rate This (By Pearls)' form with the following question:

- How do you rate the amenities provided by the shopping malls in the UAE?

The rating scale for the right form is: Weak, Average, Good, Very Good, Excellent.

Source: The official website of the UAE government (UAE) www.government.ae

Example 3 Elaborate page evaluation

Was this information useful?

☐ Very useful ☐ Quite useful ☐ Unsure ☐ Not very useful ☐ Not at all useful

Personal information: please do not leave any personal details, for example your name, address or National Insurance number. All information you provide will be shared with relevant government departments

500 characters left

Submit

[Your Privacy](#)
[Why are we asking for this information?](#)

Source: DirectGov - the UK government's digital service for people in England and Wales.
www.direct.gov.uk

Opinion polls and surveys

Polls and surveys must ask *relevant* questions and not give the user the feeling that they are provided just to fill up space or because a poll was required by an external evaluator.

- Users should be able to view poll/survey results, also old polls/surveys displayed as results in an archive.
- Users should be able to see how long the poll/survey will run (and has run)
- Answering categories must not be biased, i.e. only displaying favourable answers. There *must* be a balance between positive, neutral and negative answering categories, not as shown in the “bad practice” example below.
- When displaying results do not use percentage points, unless:
 - The percentages are very close so need to be distinguished (e.g. 49.75% and 50.25%)
 - There are a very large number of votes. For more than 1000 votes one digit can be displayed. For more than 10,000 double digits can be displayed.
- Users should be informed if any action was taken, as a direct result of the poll or survey.

Example 4 Do's and Don'ts

Do's – good practice	Don'ts – bad practice
<p>How would you prefer to give us your opinion?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="radio"/> Comment on Facebook<input type="radio"/> Take a poll<input type="radio"/> Comment on our blog<input type="radio"/> Use our 'Contact us' page<input type="radio"/> Send us an e-mail	

Discussion forums and suggestion/feedback/input forms and social media

As government organisations it is perfectly acceptable to establish guidelines for government provided or sanctioned discussion forums. But there should not only be obligations put on the users. Government should also tell the user how they intend to handle the dialogue in its discussion forums. Will they moderate discussions? Will they act on feedback and suggestions from the users?

Such principle for eParticipation and dialogue should be put into the eParticipation policy for the government organisation, and parts of that should be included as eParticipation statements on pages containing eParticipation functionality.

We have seen successful and well visited discussion forums in Oman. However, the general experience of governments globally is, that discussion forums and conferences hosted on government websites are not very well used. Just having the functionality does not automatically mean a lively discussion with many posts.

Sometimes governments must go where the users are, and they may be on social networks and discussion forums hosted by third parties. If government wants to engage with citizens and further the dialogue and increase transparency, they must in some cases cease control. But it should be done in a manner appropriate for government, and the civil servants engaging on behalf of government must know that they act on behalf of and as spokes persons for government. This means that a social media policy is created for the civil servants, so that *they* know how to conduct themselves. (See also section above)

Example 5 When government asks questions to become better informed



The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying a discussion forum on the website www.reach.gov.sg. The forum is titled "Recycling" and was posted on 4 Mar 2011 at 4:34PM. It has 5 comments and replies, with the first comment by MEWR titled "Air, Sea and Land, My Habitat". The forum content includes a "SUBMIT YOUR SAY" button and a question: "We can all do our part to reduce the amount of waste we each generate and dispose of, through simple everyday actions. We would like to hear your views. With the proposed enhancement of the National Recycling Programme from 2011 onwards, every HDB block will have a recycling bin which will be cleared daily. In your opinion, will more people recycle after this? If not, why?". A red callout box is overlaid on the forum content, containing the text: "We would like to hear your views. With the proposed enhancement of the National Recycling Programme from 2011 onwards, every HDB block will have a recycling bin which will be cleared daily. In your opinion, will more people recycle after this? If not, why?". The forum also includes a section for "Available Categories" with links to "Welcome and Announcements", "Our Common Space", "The World and Us", "Learn and Earn", and "Mind and Body". At the bottom, there are social media sharing options and a "Recommend" button.

Source: www.reach.gov.sg

Automatic receipt of feedback

Ensure that every time a user makes an input or request or asks a question (except in an open on-going discussion), that an automatic receipt (acknowledgment) is generated on the page (and/or sent by email if appropriate). For every relevant facility ensure a statement is made so the user knows to expect such a receipt

Example 6 Rating eServices

Just as important in getting feedback from users is also to acknowledge the feedback and inform users about the process (what happens now):

Thank you

Thanks for spending the time to give us your comments on how we can improve our pages.

Directgov welcomes feedback on the quality and usefulness of its webpages. We do our best to act on it when we can.

What happens to your comments now?

All the comments we receive are collected into one central database. These are reviewed every week by a team of people from across Directgov. The team is made up of people from editorial, design, technical and customer services.

The team will review all the comments and ratings, including those you have just given. Some comments may be about improvements we can make quickly to the site. Others may involve areas that need further development.

We're currently working on a number of projects to improve various parts of this site as a result of feedback we've already received.

Some of the projects we've been working on include:

- changing of name and address on your driving licence
- providing a faster response to national emergencies eg Swine flu, flood warnings and school closures
- writing a step-by-step guide on how to deal with redundancy

Responding to comments

Directgov can't respond directly to your specific comments or guarantee that every comment will be acted on.

Your privacy

Directgov takes your privacy very seriously. We haven't asked for any of your personal data but if you do leave any, it will be treated in line with our privacy policy.

Read more about your privacy in the link below.

► [Your privacy](#)

Source: Thank you note from DirectGov - the UK government's digital service for people in England and Wales. www.direct.gov.uk

The government blog


A blog (web-log) is like a written diary or journal. It is a frequent, chronological publication of personal thoughts and Web links. The blog is usually written by one person, or in the name of one person. Each 'post' or entry is usually listed with the newest one first and the oldest at the bottom.

Blogs are most often about a particular topic, just like a daily or weekly column in a newspaper. It can be used as a tool to present the blog writers personal thoughts, and often blogs invite readers to make comments to the blog posts at the bottom of the page. This concept of sharing personal thoughts on a particular subject on a blog is a good way for top-management as well as for other government key personnel or experts to have a permanent communications channel to a targeted audience. A minister might share his or her thoughts on certain political issues or upcoming initiatives. It gives the author a place for providing in-depth analysis on the particular subject, and, through commenting, engaging with his/her audience.

Example 7 Blog

blogs.ec.europa.eu/neelie-kroes/

Search | Contact | Legal notice | English (en)



Vice-President of the European Commission
Neelie Kroes

EUROPA > European Commission > The Commissioners (2010-2014) > Neelie Kroes > Blog

Digital Agenda

BLOG

Taking stock of digital progress in the EU


May 31st, 2011

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Rating: 4.0/5 (1 vote cast)

Share

How the EU scores on the Digital Agenda targets



Change: 2010, dark blue; 2011, light blue. Labels refer to targets, outline is 100% achievement. Targets refer to 2015 unless otherwise stated. 20% reduction in energy use not included.

It has been 1 year since I launched the [Digital Agenda for Europe](#) so it's the perfect opportunity to tell you how we are delivering on our targets. I've made [open data publicly available online](#) about how the EU is performing.

I'm happy that overall progress is good. The [Scoreboard](#) shows that **more and more Europeans are using the internet**. 65% of citizens now use it at least weekly so we are nearing our target of 75% by 2015. Activities that usually are carried out offline are increasingly performed online. For example, one third of citizens now use internet banking and read the news online. The numbers of EU citizens shopping online and making use of public online services is also on the rise. In terms of getting Every European Digital, this is already a great achievement.

But there is still work to be done. 95% of Europeans now have access to broadband internet infrastructure. But that still leaves **a lot of people – 10 million households, in fact – who we are still to reach** to deliver our 2013 target. So I'm still concerned about [how are we going to deliver broadband for all](#). I am confident that we can reach our goal but we need to be open-minded and creative about the solutions. Terrestrial or satellite wireless networks for instance can step in where landline solutions become too expensive to cover large, rural areas.

There is a lot of food for thought in the Scoreboard and its implications will be further discussed in Brussels on June 16-17 at the [Digital Agenda Assembly](#). And to all the data fans: you can play around with the data sets and statistics in the Scoreboard to carry out your own analysis and conclusions. Let me know what you come up with.

Number of views: 714

[Read the full entry](#)

RECENT POSTS

- [Taking stock of digital progress in the EU](#)
- [The World's Most Powerful Join the Digital Revolution](#)
- [My passion outside of work](#)
- [Big day for better EU telecom services approaching](#)
- [ICT can help reduce road deaths](#)

June 2011

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Source: Vice-President for the European Commission, Nellie Kroes's Blog. blogs.ec.europa.eu/neelie-kroes/

Using the social media link buttons

A good way of propagating the information on your website is to use the save on, sharing on, like, tweeting, etc., buttons offered by social media.

If your users encounter anything on your website they find interesting and want others to see, they can 'spread-the-word' by clicking on one of the social media buttons.

Social media sharing buttons are easy to integrate on webpages, as it is just embedding a script. Once installed they require no intervention from the webmaster, they are just added functionality.

Some of the buttons also offers statistics, showing how many times your content has been spread by your users.

Tip: Share is between friends (on Facebook) If you publish something on Facebook, it means it is posted on your wall and your friend's news feed.

Example Social media sharing buttons

