E-Governance in Slovenia—Part IV

Since their modest emergence in the late 1990s, government Web sites have shown uneven, but marked, progress.

by Uroš Pinterič

This last article in our four-part series focuses on the Web sites of key government entities, ministries, and other institutions, such as the Office of the President of the Republic of Slovenia, Ombudsman, and National Assembly.

Darren Purcell made the first serious analysis of the government's Web pages in 1998. Although the analysis underscored the importance of presenting political and administrative institutions on the Internet, it warned of the lack of coherence. Web offerings in 1998 were more or less the domain of individual organizations. As noted in earlier articles, the Slovenian e-governance approach became more coherent over time. For example, with the creation of a legal base, a common e-government portal began to emerge. From one point, citizens could reach all top political and administrative entities, including the National Assembly, President of the Republic of Slovenia, State Attorney's Office, Ombudsman, and other government agencies and ministries.

Nevertheless, Web pages remained very individualistic, offering highly varied and detailed information on diverse topics that individual organizations—rather than a wide spectrum of users, such as the general public—deemed important. Moreover, Web sites were updated irregularly and not very useful.

Incremental Improvements

After the legislative framework for governmental use of Web sites was established, implementation should have begun in earnest. Given the layered nature of Slovenian bureaucracy, however, users didn't see real progress in this area for some time. Fortunately, during the last three years, many changes have taken place to give these Web sites a different look and feel.

A common Web portal for state administrative units was established, offering access to all essential public information organized by generic life situations. At this common portal, each of the fifty-eight governmental units also received its own subpage where users could find telephone numbers, e-mail and postal addresses, official hours, and other information specific to an individual entity.

In 2004-05, the Slovenian National Assembly rebuilt its home page and gave citizens more information on the work of the members of parliament, official committees, and other parliamentary institutions. Some information, such as the text of most legislation, was available before 2004, but there was much to improve upon, especially how information was organized.

Another significant change after 2003 was that information updates became much more effective and enabled citizens to get more information in a shorter time. Also, the government clarified the information that should be provided to the public by specific entities, and, slowly, that information also appeared on the Internet. In addition, more and more documents and forms required by specific organizations became available on agency Web sites as well.

Thus, from 1998 through 2006, we can see progress from sporadic and uneven information made available through highly individualistic Web sites to an increasingly streamlined and efficient system, enabling users to get information (and official forms) from a common government Web site. Furthermore, the public can now become better informed on the inner workings of individual organizations. If in 1998 Web pages were simply window dressing, in 2006 Slovenian public-sector organizations were aware of the utility of communicating with their public through more effective management of Web sites.

Assessing E-Governance Performance

To analyze Slovenian Web sites, we examined three parameters of e-governance activities.

Technical Aspects

First, there is the technical aspect—whether the entity has a Web page or not, whether the page is static or not, whether it is updated regularly with news and press releases, and whether one needs more than a click or two to get useful information. Every click means that the citizen is redirected to another page and needs to read additional instructions and search for additional links. If the user needs a form to register and needs five clicks to subsequent links, he or she is liable to get lost in the sea of instructions—especially if unfamiliar with the information needed to register. The situation is even more awkward (and embarrassing) if the user is searching for information and is redirected to another entity with an entirely different Web design and format. So, in this technical category, we can examine whether the Web page exists, is updated regularly, has a smart design, and is user-friendly.

All Web sites are now sufficiently up, running, and stable, and they are updated much more regularly than some years ago. However, their principal technical weakness is that users still have to click on average six to eight times to get the information they need, and redirection to another Web site during one's search is not unusual. Moreover, in some cases, the user ends up captured in a never-ending loop, permanently redirected between two or three different sites without ever getting the final answer. This is a consequence of setting up a multiplicity of different quasi-portals and offering general information, but no specific answers.

Content

The second category is content, where we look for a short blurb on the organization, updated information on its activities, necessary forms and instructions for administrative procedures (if applicable), and any announcements concerning competitive grant awards, etc. Here, we can also look for more detailed aspects of

Uroš Pinterič is a PhD candidate in political science and an assistant at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, and an assistant at the local Business and Management High School, Novo Mesto. If you wish to contact him or obtain more detailed information on sources (including those in Slovenian), he can be reached at uros@sidip.org. The author acknowledges his indebtedness to the editor of this journal, who helped make this four-part series more readable and accessible to an English-speaking audience. Of course, all responsibility for the articles rests solely with the author.

specific entities. For example, at the National Assembly site, we expect to see complete legislation; at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, we expect information about visa applications for all countries and a list and contact data for Slovenian consular institutions, among other things.

Users are now able to get most of the information they need from virtually all governmental sites—notwithstanding the technical difficulties mentioned earlier and the overly complicated Web arrangements at some sites. One specific issue is the lack of consistency and transparency in organization tables and charts, including the names of key public servants responsible for major functions or activities. Many civil servants still prefer not to be available to the public outside of official hours or directly by telephone. Thus, an operator screens the call, the civil servant avoids it, and the caller has to leave a message. And, the user fails to get the information (or closure) needed.

Contact Information

The third aspect has to do with how well the Web site facilitates necessary communication. In this respect, sites should include working addresses and other contact information, such as operational e-mail addresses, telephone and fax numbers, and office hours. Here, we also search for Internet forums.

This aspect remains the main problem of governmental Web pages. As already noted, civil servants avoid publishing contact information on their organization's Web site. Thus, most sites provide only nominal contact information, but no direct access to key public managers. If users know the name of the party responsible for a particular activity, they can try sending an e-mail to name.surname@gov.si, but in all other cases they can expect to be bounced around for some time before making contact with the right person (by telephone, e-mail, or regular mail). When the citizen finally gets an e-mail address, whether the responsible civil servant will deign to respond—in a timely manner or at all—is questionable.

Nevertheless, many positive practices are in place to facilitate communication. Some government entities are publishing contact information and responding to requests, and some also make it possible for users to debate with one another on e-forums incorporated into their Web sites. These e-forums often involve civil servants as well—in marked contrast to the general reluctance of civil servants to close the social distance from the public mentioned earlier. In fact, at this point, the discussion of Web sites merges into the issue of e-participation in public policymaking.

Series Conclusions

Wrapping up this four-part series on e-governance in Slovenia is quite challenging. We have discussed wide-ranging aspects of the technologies employed and organizational cultures encountered. A few generalizations can be made, and the overall situation has improved demonstrably during the past ten to fifteen years.

Legislative Framework and Implementation

The legislative framework, once almost nonexistent, is now coherent and well-established: the most recent iteration is the adoption of a new e-government strategy through the year 2010. This strategy is arguably not as important as some Slovenian political figures say, although it addresses significant e-governance gaps during past years. Still, implementation of existing legislation and administrative strategies remains the weakest element, tied largely to the plodding, bureaucratic nature of Slovenian public administration and the lack of adherence to modern public management concepts (such as user-friendliness, transparency, and access).

Oversight

E-governance in Slovenia is monitored at several levels. Some data are collected and evaluated by the Organization for Economic and Cooperation and Development (OECD), and some by European Union institutions and others. The main weakness of the information gathered is its focus on legislation and specific types of e-governance (such as providing information on different life situations or online forms) rather than the functionality or efficiency of the site. Surveys merely note the presence of different elements and nothing more; as such, they aren't very helpful. The second weakness of this research is its heavy reliance on the input and collaboration of the public entities being surveyed, thereby calling into question the objectivity of the findings.

The second layer of e-governance oversight is state monitoring, carried out by the Ministry for Public Administration, or at least in cooperation with it. This research is quite similar to the international surveys in that it is politically hamstrung and inevitably nonobjec-

tive. While it surfaces some weaknesses in implementation, it seems more a public relations tool for political leaders and high-level civil servants than an objective mechanism that can be relied upon to ask and follow up on penetrating questions.

The third layer of e-governance monitoring is linked to the academic world and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The objectivity of this kind of oversight varies according to (1) the political preferences of individual researchers, (2) their contractual or financial relationship with the state, (3) their involvement in official policymaking or implementation of e-governance activities, and (4) their involvement in official monitoring of e-governance performance.

This research covers a broad range of questions and can probe deeply or simply scratch the surface of issues discussed throughout this four-part series. In general, NGO analyses are much more critical of Slovenia's e-governance performance, but they also very often blur the line between e-governance and e-democracy. Academic research, on the other hand, varies from very positive to very critical, although constant monitoring among academics is minimal. My doctoral research on the response to citizen e-mails, the basis for this series, seems to be one of the few in-depth analyses of a specific e-governance element in Slovenia.

As indicated previously, my research on this topic has been underway since 2003. Preliminary results show a significant shift in responding to e-mails between June 2005 and June 2006. The most responsive organizations have been administrative units (with a response rate in excess of 84 percent, up from 75 percent a year earlier). The most surprising shift was among Slovenian municipalities, which after three years of a low response rate (20 to 30 percent) jumped to 52 percent in 2006. Five years after the initial e-governance strategy, municipalities have finally started to improve their implementation, realizing that e-communication is a necessary ingredient in modern public administration at the local level.

Prognosis

In the ensuing years, we can surely expect further development in e-governance practices. However, on the basis of deeply engrained cultural patterns and trends, we can also expect tension between e-governance advocates—in government and among the public—and bureaucratic elements that will remain slow to adopt these reforms. ✤

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