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Managing WWW in public administration: Uses and misuses☆

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Abstract

The Internet has emerged as one of the most prevalent forms of communication media in and among public organizations. The construction and management of the World Wide Web (Web) sites are becoming essential elements of modern public administration. This study is intended to provide an in-depth evaluation on the Web sites of Taiwan's central government based on the Web performance indicators provided by Nielsen (2000). Based on the Nielsen's indicators, the authors carefully studied and coded each individual Web site of Taiwan central governmental agencies. The coding results indicate that the government Web sites in general have made many of the mistakes as predicted by Nielsen. Most of the agencies need to improve the coordination between Web designers and the line mangers of the agencies. In light of these research findings, this article provides a number of strategies to improve the Web design practices of Taiwanese public organizations that may also apply to public organizations in general. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

The Internet has emerged as one of the most prevalent communication media in and among public organizations. Various surveys have documented the rapid diffusion of the Web in public administration and signaled the profound changes taking place in public managers' work settings (e.g., http://www.cyprg.azrizona.edu). While the construction and management of Web sites are becoming essential elements of modern public administration, little is known about the effectiveness of the public Web sites. Given the substantial investment in time and other resources being committed to governmental on-line efforts, it is essential to begin undertaking the evaluation of governmental agency Web sites in terms of quality and effectiveness.

To remedy the lack of evaluation research on governmental Web sites, the authors conducted a national study on the public Web sites of the central government in Taiwan. The central government of Taiwan consists of thirty-three ministry level agencies in charge of the national affairs of the various policy areas. We chose to study at the level of the central government for several reasons, including the early development of Web sites at the central governmental agencies, the relative diversity of the ministry functions and organizations, and their tractability as units of analysis when compared to the lower levels of the government.

Following the reinventing government movement in the U.S. (Gore, 1994; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992), the central government of Taiwan launched its own large-scale administrative reform aimed at modernizing the governmental services soon after the reelection of the President Lee Teng-Hui in 1996. A major theme of the reform effort has been the revamping of the central government's management information system. The Prime Minister asserted that he was going to establish an "electronic government," and the first step was to help the government agencies go on-line (Wei, 1999). By the time the authors conducted this study, this reform had been underway for approxumately four years. While all of the central governmental agencies have established their own publicly accessible Web sites for at least two years, there has been virtually no systematic evaluation to assess these on-line efforts. The increasing transparency of the Internet leads to questions of its impact on the administrative ethics of the public employees (Menzel, 1998) as well as on the personal and organizational behaviors of the citizens (e.g., Hsian, 1999). However, there is a lack of evaluation about the contents of governmental Web sites.

The study reported in this study conducted structured content analysis on the governmental Web sites in the context of Web usability. The objectives of this study were to provide useful management recommendations in terms of Web site design, and to suggest a systematic way for assessing public Web sites in general.

2. Research conceptualization

The potential of the Web as a new public medium depends largely on the content of Web pages. In addition to the debates around the regulation of the Web content (that is, what information can/should be put on the Web), and the functions included in public Web sites (Nunn & Rubleske, 1998; Scavo & Shi, 1999), many researchers have begun to ask questions

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