

THE USE OF ICT IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR AND ITS INFLUENCE ON COMMUNICATION WITH CITIZENS IN SLOVENIA

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ABSTRACT

The internet has become one of the most important means of communication in all areas of our life. In the paper we focused on central and local government bodies and their attitude towards information and communication technology. By analysing web pages, inquiring public servants and testing the responses on citizens' questions we tried to discover influences of Internet on better informing of citizens, their participation in making decisions of public interest and communication between citizens and central and local government bodies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years the Internet has become one of the most important means of communication in all social areas and the public sector is no exception. However, the expectations of experts from the administrative field and those who are engaged in public sector from a more organisational, sociological or political perspective are enormous [Schalken, 2000]. Taking into account the nature of the public sector where efficient collection, processing, storing, distribution and exchange of information between administrative bodies and between administrative bodies and citizens is one of the fundamental activities, expectations of deep changes and advantages being ushered in by the use of the Internet are completely legitimate. Furthermore, the more the number of Internet users in the population of an area approaches the degree of penetration of other mass media (particularly television), the more realistic considerations about the use of Internet in political processes and enforcement of democracy will become. The influence (and use) of the Internet on democratic processes in a certain environment can be direct or indirect. By direct influence we can understand the use of Internet for the realisation of public opinion polling, different referenda and in finally, even elections. Literature on the topic reveals a series of pilot projects and experiments with Internet usage for direct democracy introduction (the city of Amsterdam, American elections, etc).

Unfortunately in Slovenia the political elites would not think in this way yet, and also the penetration of Internet is not so high (the latest information suggests 15% of households have access to Internet [RIS, 1999]) that would allow similar experiments. However, Internet and its intensive use in public sector can indirectly influence on the democratisation of public life and democratic processes in a particular area. Intensive, creative and stimulating use of the Internet in public sector can essentially contribute to better communication between political and administrative bodies and citizens. It can also contribute to better-

informed citizens and at the same time increase their opportunity to directly participate in political processes and forming of public decisions. Certainly, all these have indirect influence on democratisation of society. This is particularly true for young democracies, like Slovenia, which are still suffering from some of the weaknesses of old regime. Its basic characteristics included the hiding of information from the public and authoritative decision-making without public consultation.

The research presented is a continuation of last year's research [see Vintar et al., 1999]. It is focused on the assessment of indirect influences of Internet usage in central and local government bodies on democratisation of Slovenian society. Because in the past the principal problems of this society were the informing of citizens and their ability to track and influence public decisions, we focused our research particularly on such influences via the Internet.

2. ELECTRONIC GOVERNMENT SERVICES

We can understand electronic democracy as capability of new information society to increase the level and quality of people participation in democratic processes [Garson, 1999]. Electronic government services are one of the key enablers of electronic democracy. Already today there exist a series of electronic government services, which offer citizens a new way of accessing information, new possibilities of communication with central and local government and new forms of cooperation in their strategy and policy formation. Electronic services vary greatly in all fields of central and local government operation. This is evident from Table 1, which shows one of possible electronic government services classification. The European Commission published this classification in a Green Paper on Public Sector Information in the Information society [European Commission, 2000].

	Information services	Communication services	Transaction services
Everyday life	Information on work, housing, education, health, culture, transport, environment, etc.	Discussion for a dedicated to questions of everyday life ; Jobs or housing bulletin boards	e.g. ticket reservation, course registration
Tele-administration	Public service directory Guide to administrative procedures Public registers and databases	e-mail contact with public servants	electronic submission of forms
Political participation	Laws, parliamentary papers, political programmes, consultation documents Background information in decision making processes	Discussion for a dedicated to political issues e-mail contact with politicians	referenda elections opinion polls petitions

Table 1: *A topology of electronic government services*

The abovementioned classification or topology as it is called in the Green Paper, distributes electronic government services among three fields of government work and the three functions they discharge, which is easy to understand and is supported with several practical examples. A cursory examination of the table gives us a conception of what electronic government services are and how extensive and diverse they are, so we used it as a tool in our research for easier and simpler estimation of the level of electronic government services development.

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODS OF WORK

In formulating and focusing our research we tried to lean on similar researches from other countries [for example Ministry of Research and Information Technology, 2000].

The central research objectives were the following:

- Discover the current penetration and distribution of the use of web pages in Slovenian central and local government bodies.
- Analyse the information content and organisation of those web pages from the viewpoint of their efficiency of communication and usability for citizens and other users in the sense of electronic democracy. Analysis was made regarding to:
 - Contents of web pages and their usability focusing on the support of democratisation of society and better informing of citizens.
 - Functionality of web-pages, focusing on enabling interactive contact between central and local government bodies and users of public services, i.e. citizens.
- Discover the influence of Internet usage on the improvement of communication between central and local government bodies and elected representatives and citizens.
- Discover the influence of Internet usage on opportunities for citizens to actively participate in public discussions and decision-making.

For this purpose, beside web-pages analysis, we:

- Investigated an opinion poll with a questionnaire that was sent to different public employees by e-mail.
- simulated an e-mail communication between a citizen and a public servant and checked the response, timing and content.

4. PRESENTATION OF RESEARCH RESULTS

4.1. Analyses of Web-Pages and Web Applications of Central and Local Government Bodies

We surveyed web pages of the Slovenian National Assembly and all ministries with agencies and directorates, administrative districts and municipalities, which have their own web sites. Web sites were accessed through the governmental web site [Vlada republike Slovenije, 2000] and the Slovenian official web site [Matkurja, 2000].

National Assembly

The main mission of National Assembly is certainly the legislative procedure. To follow that procedure they have set up an internal information system that is based on document oriented technology (e.g. Lotus Notes). Each MNA has all necessary ICT assured and is able to use Internal IS and Internet. The databases, built in IS, contain data and documents of laws, acts, sessions, reports and other general documents.

The legislative procedure starts when a bill comes from the information system of government, which composes bills and suggests them to National Assembly. Each bill is given an identification number and waits for proceedings.

Throughout the various procedures MNAs can follow what is happening with a particular bill on their computer. They can see all the changes, the phase of executing the law, etc. There are a lot of other formulised documents that are attached to the proposal and are hierarchically organised and gathered in a data folder. All these documents are easily accessed in the system. When the National Assembly passes a bill it is moved to the database of accepted laws and published in the Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia. All laws are available to the MNAs as well as session reports, word-to-word session notes, full text search capabilities, tape recordings, etc.

Citizens can also follow the phases and changes of each bill through proceedings in the National Assembly on the Internet and they can search through the database of bills and passed laws. Following the session live on Internet is also possible. They can also search through the word-to-word reports of the National Assembly sessions, working bodies, agendas, etc. Full text search and alphabetical index are also available.

Ministries

Ministries are a central part of central government and can therefore have their web pages on the government web server. All ministries have their own web pages, but they differ in content, quality and design. Most of them offer basic information about the ministries, addresses, phone numbers, present the leading staff, organisational structure and descriptions of tasks and competences (Figure 1). It is interesting, that on the web pages of some ministries one cannot find any e-mail addresses, although most of the ministries web pages have contact e-mail addresses. More and more pages include search options that allow a user to find specific information by typing words of interest.

Almost half of the pages offer various public tenders and descriptions of proceedings. Different documents in .doc or .pdf format include forms, applications, and orders that can be printed, filled in and sent by mail. Documents and forms in .doc format can be downloaded and edited or filled in with computer, because a lot of citizens use Word as a text editor. Then these documents can be sent back by e-mail or printed and send by ordinary mail. A few pages offer interactive forms and citizens can participate in discussions about different subjects that concern a particular ministry or send their comments and suggestions about bills, public tenders or other matters.

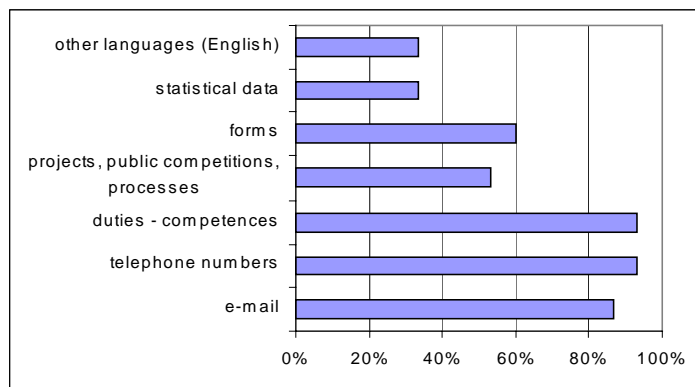


Figure 1: Contents of ministries' web pages

If we look at topology defined in the Green Paper on Public Sector Information in the Information Society (Table 1), web pages are ranked as information services, and used by many citizens today in everyday life. Communication services are slowly being brought in and compared to analyses of web pages last year we can see a small progress. The number of contact e-mail addresses has risen, but is not sufficient. In the frame of transaction services we can detect more options for discussion groups.

Administrative Districts

In Slovenia there are 58 administrative districts and half of them (36% last year) have their own web pages. They are differently designed, but their contents are similar. Almost all administrative districts that are present on the Internet publish basic information like addresses, telephone numbers and official hours (Figure 2). In most cases they also present their organisational structure and describe duties and competences.

For citizens, information about administrative procedures is particularly important. 41% of administrative districts have descriptions of some of them. Sometimes descriptions are too short and sometimes they

include everything from guidelines for filling in and sending applications, lists of all necessary additions to applications, legal groundings for procedure execution to forms for applications. In most cases forms are prepared for printing or downloading, but in only two administrative districts have we found interactive forms. Mainly this is because electronic payment is not legally settled yet.

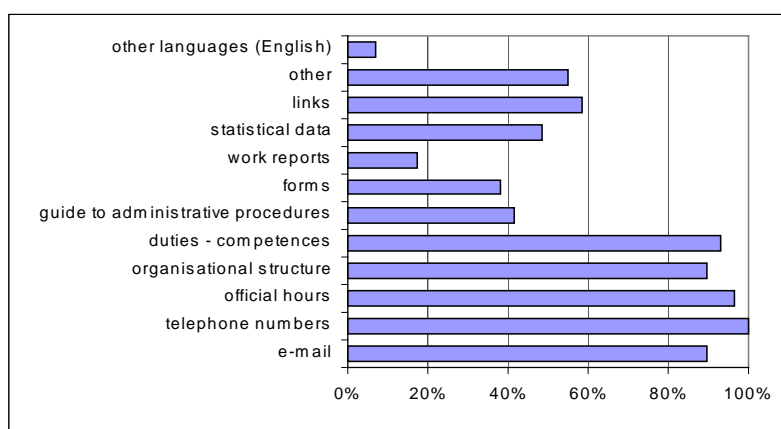


Figure 2: Contents of administrative districts' web-pages

It is also significant that e-mail communication is possible with 90% of administrative districts. In this way citizens can forward their questions, remarks or claims to the head of an administrative district. In some places messages can also be sent to some other employees. But some administrative districts have a central e-mail address.

According to the electronic government services' topology (Table 1), administrative districts' services fall into teleadministration field and mainly belong to information services, where we found out some increase in the quantity of information by comparison with last year research.

Municipalities

Municipalities are represented on the Internet much less than ministries and administrative districts. There are many reasons for this situation. While the Government Centre for Informatics (GCI) takes care of both systematic implementation and support of ICT and also for training of central government's employees, municipalities are in this respect left to their own resources and initiatives. Therefore we can understand that only 38% of all municipalities (16% last year) have their own web pages.

Electronic services of municipalities that are offered to citizens can be ranged in three main categories: basic information (territory, population and places), tourism (history, places, people, culture, events, offers, etc) and work of the municipality (mayor, local administration, municipal council, etc) (Figure 3). The majority of municipal services can be placed into the first two categories, however the last category of services is the most important for electronic democracy development. Through them municipalities can inform citizens about their activities and provide them with new ways of communication and cooperation in arranging of different local business.

More than 70% of municipalities presented on Internet also have e-mail. Mostly they are central, but sometimes messages can be sent to mayors and other employees too.

It is surprising that there are almost no guides to administrative procedures and application forms. Therefore the example of one municipality, which offers some interactive forms for environment and urban planning procedures and municipal urban plans, is so much more impressive.

Interactive visitors' book and forums are also very infrequent. Citizens can use these services to send questions, remarks and suggestions about the contents of web pages and more importantly about activities, policy and strategies of municipalities. All these messages and also the answers from the municipalities are

then published. But in interactive discussions and debates citizens can discuss different topics. Such services can improve the partnership between citizens and municipality, so we hope that they will be more frequent in the future.

Municipal electronic services are much more diverse than services of administrative districts. They interfere not only on the field of teleadministration but also in the field of everyday life and political participation. On the other hand most services belong to information services however a few experiments of implementation of more advanced services as interactive forms, visitors' books, forums and discussions are highly interesting examples where municipalities enable citizens to actively collaborate in their activities.

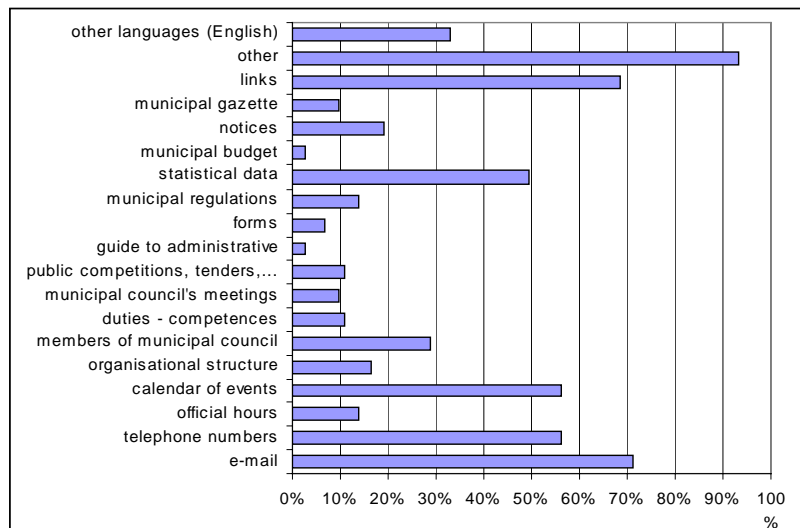


Figure 3: Contents of municipalities' web pages

4.2. Inquiry of Members of National Assembly

A questionnaire was sent to all Members of National Assembly by e-mail in form of four short questions with closed answers. We found all 90 e-mail addresses of the MNAs on the web pages of the National Assembly. The questionnaire was presented as anonymous because the results were to be published only in graphical form.

The questionnaire included four questions. How much and where (at office or at home) MNAs use e-mail, how often they use Internet to search for information in context with their work. How often they use internal information system and communicate with the citizens electronically about current legislative matters. The available answers were in closed type and the options for time were daily, weekly, monthly or never and for location from office or from home as well.

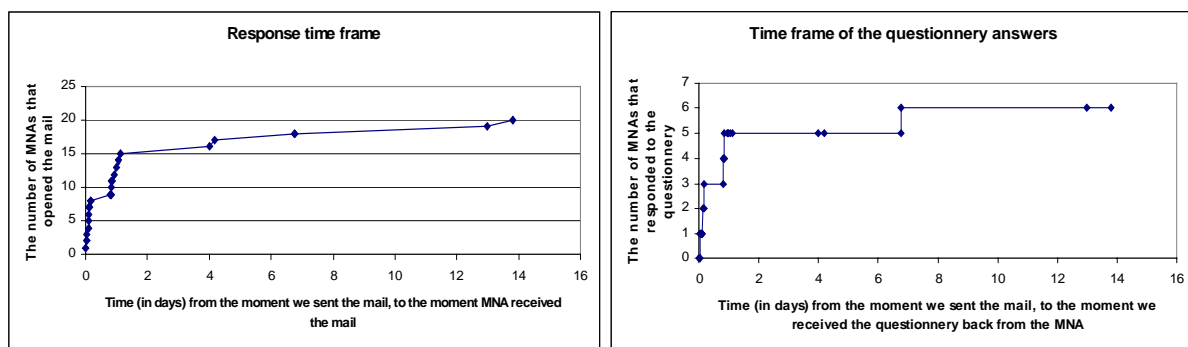


Figure 4: Time frame of responses to the questionnaire

Of 90 e-mails sent, we received 89 confirmations of delivery, 20 MNAs received the message in their mailbox and saw it. Of these we received 6 answers to the questionnaire (Figure 4).

Perhaps these 6 answers show a comically low number and therefore we cannot make conclusions of the general situation or attitude towards ICT in National Assembly. But we can for example conclude that around 20% of MNAs read e-mail weekly. Of those MNAs that read e-mail, 30% answered the questionnaire. Given that fact that the Slovenian government was changing at that time we shall consider the response satisfying.

The results show that half of the MNAs that answered the questionnaire use e-mail daily, and the other half weekly, out of these 33% also at home. Searching for information connected with their work, 33% of MNAs use Internet daily, 50% weekly and all the others monthly. Half of them use the Internet at home as well. The internal information system is used daily by 50% of those who answered that question and the other half weekly (16% of them use it also from home).

The last question was concerning the frequency of communication about legislation affairs between citizens and MNAs. Surprisingly half of the returned answers said that it happens daily and the other half communicates monthly. Right now the only way of communication with MNAs is by e-mail because no web discussion groups are available. It is interesting that these answers match with those on frequency of e-mail usage.

Compared to last year research we conclude that the situation has not changed much.

It seems that the intensity of usage of ICT in National Assembly depends more on interest of individuals and enthusiasm of MNA toward modern technologies than on general directions of National Assembly toward the approaching era of electronic communication, electronic business, electronic government and finally electronic democracy. We expect that electronic communication will be spread to the degree where special employees with technical skills would be needed as a link between MNAs and citizens. MNAs will not be able to handle all the messages and control the situation and the only option to avoid the communication overload will be the formation of groups of public relation people concerned only with electronic democracy. The current situation reveals that this kind of solution will not be needed for some time, because those few MNAs that communicate in that way with the citizens can well handle it by themselves. By implementing these methods of citizen participation in democratic processes, especially where citizens are better experts for specific fields than MNAs, we can expect better legislation and level of democracy.

4.3. Real Case of Communication between Citizen and MNA

The second part of the research was executed 2 weeks later in a similar way to the first one. We sent to MNAs a question by e-mail about how a citizen can get an electronic signature, considering the new law about electronic commerce and electronic signature. A new e-mail account was created for the fictional citizen that was sending e-mails.

Out of 89 e-mails that reached the recipients address 24 were read. We received back 10 replies. Considering the poor result from the first phase we were pleasantly surprised. We thought that one MNA representing 20,000 citizens would not have time to answer questions to individuals. Replies contained e-mail addresses or telephone numbers of person that can in the MNA's opinion provide more information about the topic of a question from e-mail. Some e-mail also included an attached file with the corresponding law. We saw that the same MNAs who answered this e-mail had also answered the questionnaire before.

The number of MNAs that read e-mail in the second case is almost the same as the number of them in the first one, which confirms the results. But in the real case simulation the response was bigger which shows that MNAs are more interested in helping citizens than answering questionnaires. Looking at the time frame of the second test (Figure 5) in less than 4 days 21 MNAs read the e-mail and another 3 later. The answers to the citizen are spread through the whole time frame, which shows that readiness to help the citizen is not dependent on intensity of MNAs' usage of ICT but on readiness to cooperate with citizens in general.

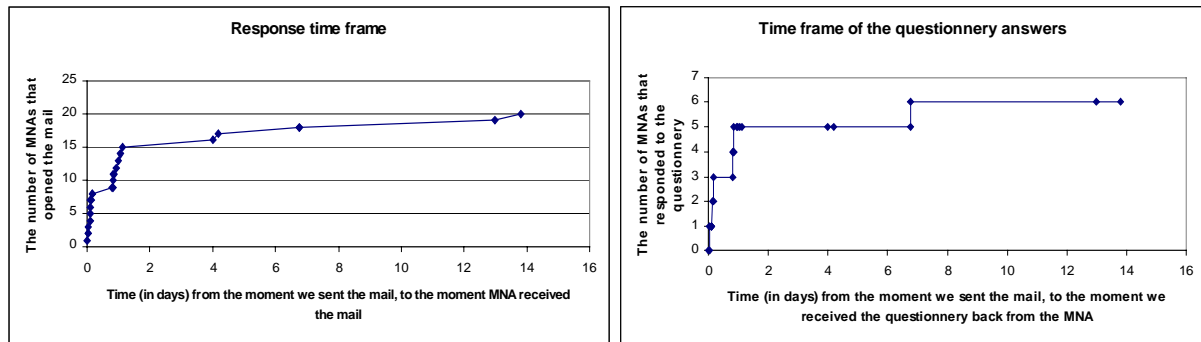


Figure 5: Time frame of MNAs responses to a real case

4.4. Opinion Poll of Ministries, Administrative Districts and Municipalities

The purpose of the opinion poll was to find out what influence the use of ICT, particularly the Internet, has on information and communication processes between citizens and government on central and local level. Because we did not want to use polls too much, we tried to compose as short a questionnaire as possible. The questionnaire contained three closed questions referring to the government body as a whole. And we promised to send the results of the opinion poll.

Questionnaires were sent by e-mail to all ministries, administrative districts and municipalities, which have e-mails, published on their web pages. If possible, the questionnaire was sent to the central e-mail address, otherwise it was sent to the director's address.

We sent 93 questionnaire (for two government bodies there were no valid e-mail addresses). So from 91 questionnaires, we then received 32 (35%) completed ones: 36% from ministries, 58% from administrative districts and 25% from municipalities. The greater part of the questionnaires was returned in the first three days.

The first question is composed from two parts: how frequently and about what are citizens communicating with a government body electronically (by e-mail or web-forms). The answers differ greatly. Ministries receive citizens' questions every day, but the experiences of administrative districts and municipalities are different (Figure 6, e-democracy). These all indicate that citizens communicate with government bodies electronically, but such communication is not very widespread yet. An exception is the 23% of municipalities, which indicated that they receive e-mail messages every day.

Answers on second part of the first question were different because of the different duties and competences of particular government bodies. As is shown in Figure 7, ministries receive from citizens mainly remarks, suggestions and questions about their activities, public competitions, tenders and offers and also about existent legislation. The majority of questions, which citizens send to administrative districts, refer to administrative procedures, but municipalities are mainly asked about tourism and their activities.

The second question was related to the frequency of e-mail, internal information system and Internet usage by civil servants. Here, answers were more united (Figure 6), only the low level of internal information system usage in municipalities stands out. This is quite understandable because many municipalities do not have such a system at all.

With the third question we tried to learn something about legislative procedures. We asked government bodies if they cooperated in drafting a new urban planning law and if they did cooperate, how. The number of negative answers (ministries 40%, administrative districts 86% and municipalities 62%, however 20% of ministries and 8% of municipalities did not answer this question) was very surprising, because the law is very important considering its influence on all levels of government. But from all these we cannot make conclusions that cooperation with government bodies is so bad on the whole - there are only some indications of problems in this field.

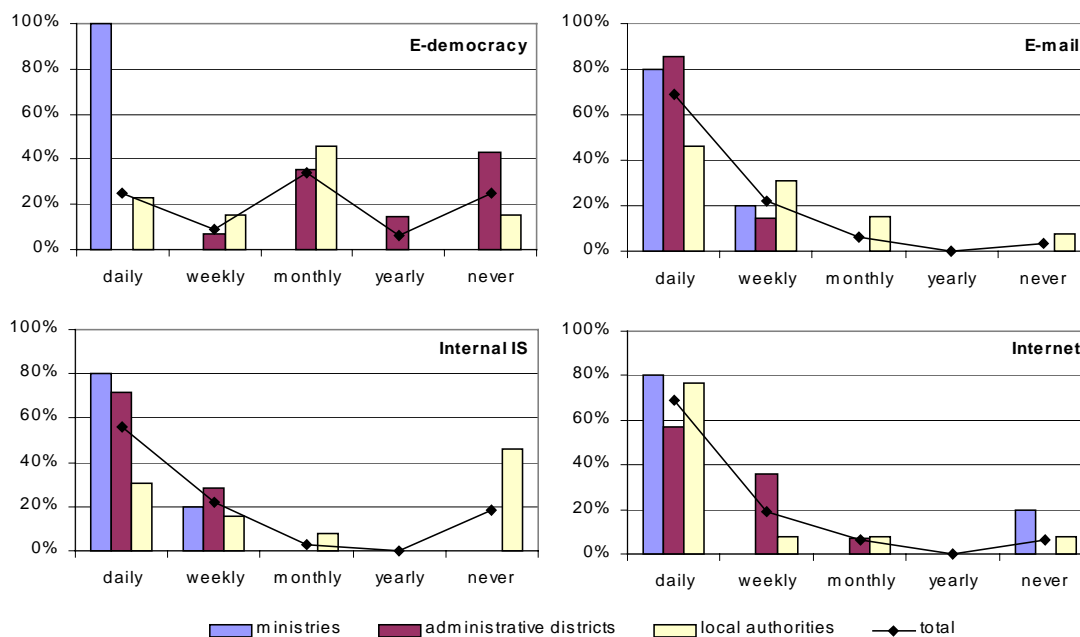


Figure 6: Usage of Internal IS, e-mail, Internet and frequency of electronic communications of citizens with government bodies

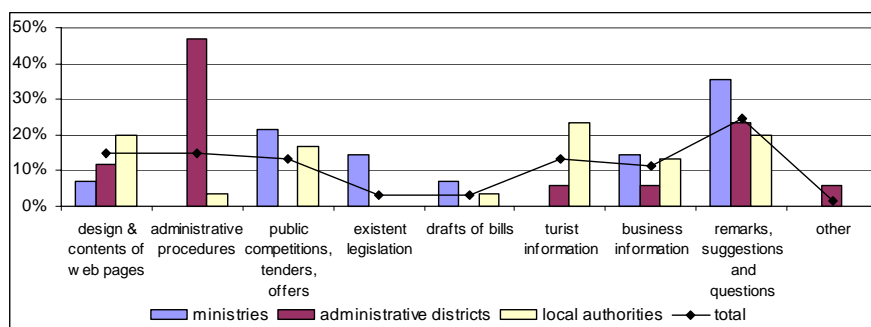


Figure 7: Types of citizens' inquiries

Answers to the second part of the question were interesting too. Only those who cooperate in new law drafting answered this part of question. All administrative districts said that they cooperate via e-mail, while ministries and municipalities cooperate in many different ways (from internal IS, e-mail and telephone to meetings, post and questionnaire).

4.5. Real Case Communication between Citizen and Central and Local Government Bodies

In the web-pages analysis we noted that citizens could use e-mail to communicate with most government bodies. But is it true? Will a citizen really receive an answer to his/her e-mail? In order to test actual government body response, we sent an e-mail message from a fictional citizen to all ministries, administrative districts and municipalities with their e-mail addresses. We prepared two different questions, one for ministries and the other one for administrative districts and municipalities. Ministries were asked how one might obtain drafts in the process of being written within that ministry. But we asked administrative districts and municipalities about building permission on a parcel of land in the area of the administrative district or municipality respectively and about the possibility of obtain this information via e-mail. Information about building permission on particular parcels is in the competences of municipalities, but a lot of citizens do not know that due to the division of competences between administrative district and

municipalities at the time of local government reform in 1995. Therefore it is interesting to find out how administrative districts react to a question, which is within municipality competence.

We created an e-mail from a fictional citizen and if it was possible the message was sent to the civil servant responsible for the question asked, otherwise the e-mail was sent to the central e-mail address or to someone from the management.

As was expected, the response to the question from the fictional citizen was better than response to the opinion poll; on average 62% (ministries 50%, administrative districts 79% and municipalities 58%) and the majority of answers arrived in two days. From the response it may be concluded that civil servants strive to solve citizen's problems also in less frequent and usual ways as far as existent legislation allows and with this contribute to a higher quality of services, although diversity of answers indicate the current disorder of this type of operation. But on the other hand the current situation is far from satisfactory as because 40% of citizens on average, would not get an answer at all.

5. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF RESEARCH RESULTS REGARDING ORIGIN SUPPOSITION

A detailed presentation of research results was given in Chapter 5, but in this chapter we will try to make a synthesis of those results and confront it with the starting supposition about influence of Internet usage in central and local government in Slovenia on democratic processes and relations between citizens and central and local government.

5.1. Internet Influence on Informing of Citizens

From the web-pages analysis we can determine the scope and variety of information and other services, which are on hand for citizens. We found out that possibilities are not equal for all citizens with regard to their place of living, because particular government bodies are differently presented on the Internet. Many municipalities (62%) and administrative districts (50%) do not have web pages at all. We also found out that accessibility of information and other services does not depend on the level of geographical development of particular area nor even on the size of particular administrative district or municipality, because really good web pages can be also found at very small or faraway municipalities or administrative districts. Certainly, accessibility of information on the state level is equal for all citizens, but information is distinguished regarding to their scope and quality according to particular domain.

For citizens, not only is the web presence of particular government body, but also the content of web pages is of great importance. The information on web pages must be accurate and must cover whole questions or problems. Only thus can citizens use information profitably and save themselves further dealings with government. We found out that there are some mistakes or out-of-date information on web-pages, but it is also evident that there is not enough complete information, which would be helpful in solving citizen's problem from the beginning to the end.

The structure and clarity of web pages for a government body is of special importance for accessibility of different information and other services. On some sites we could use search engines to find information within the web site quickly and easily. But elsewhere there are also tables or structure-trees of web pages contents. It is regrettable that these services are not more widespread.

5.2. Citizens' Influence on Preparing New Legislation

Certainly, for citizens this is one of the most sensitive and important fields, where Internet as a means of communication should play an important mediating role between the legislative body and general public. But it is not yet so. Considering the information system of ministries and the National Assembly, citizens can see on web pages only drafts, which have already passed government (at the stage called bills) and which are

waiting execution in National Assembly, but they cannot see actual drafts. Therefore one has no chance to see the laws in their phase of formation when the cooperation of the public is the most important. The solution could be a discussion group on a web page, where citizens could put their comments, questions or suggestions and discuss the topic between themselves and with employees on ministries. Two ministries already offer some forms of discussion groups on their web pages and this shows that the idea is present and we can expect that in the future it will evolve and get better. Until then citizens will have to get information about drafts from other resources and use e-mails to contact public servants in ministries or Members of National Assembly. The results of the questionnaire for current situation show that citizens use e-mail for this purpose very rarely. Just one local district and one ministry stated that they received e-mails on this topic.

5.3. Communication between Central and Local Government and Citizens

In our research we also studied whether communication between executive authorities and citizens is at a higher level of quality when ICT is used. The answer can be extracted from web-pages analysis and the testing of citizen's question response.

The basis of electronic communication today is of course e-mail, because it is simple to use and widespread. The main element is of course the e-mail address and we usually find it on web-pages. The ones we visited usually had it. In most cases there is one general address for general enquiries, but also somewhere we can turn to individuals regarding their field of work. However, we found out that not all addresses were valid.

In the case of communication simulation with the MNAs we received quality and transparent answers, which solved the citizen's problem or led her/him to the right expert. But the truth is that the response was poor and relatively slow (Figure 6). But in the case of communication simulation with public servants (Figure 11) the response was quick, although 40% of servants did not respond at all.

Because of many advantages of web-forms (they enable easy transfer to different databases, easier searching, better surveying and statistics) and different discussion groups (question from one, answer to many), we expect faster development on this field in the future.

For the time being, the examples of electronic communication are only exceptions, but when there are more services in this field, we anticipate that citizens will use them more frequently. In comparison to telephone, post or personal contact electronic communication can be used 24 hours per day, we can exchange documents and the communication is fully documented.

6. CONCLUSIONS

With the help of analysis of central and local government web-pages contents and opinion poll of MNAs and public servants we tried to gain an answer to the central question of our research, which is to find out if the Internet is a significant information source, which has an influence on the better informing of citizens and on their ability to track activities in the public sector and politics and transparency of public sector operation. According to the relatively high degree of population with Internet access (25%) [RIS, 2000] on the one hand and the intensity of communication between citizens and central and local government bodies, the answer is certainly positive.

But it is true that this is forming a kind of information differentiation within the population, which could, in the future, divide people more and more into those who do not have access to all relevant information and those to whom this new quality will not be given in sufficient extent. As the research results show this differentiation will go in two directions. On one side access to modern ICT and Internet depends on the social and economic standing of individuals. Internet users are predominantly higher on the social scale. This was not the subject of our research but this finding is known from other studies, which have been performed in Slovenia.

On the other side, the accessibility of public sector information depends on where a citizen lives. This is, when we talk about the Internet as global medium, somewhat paradoxical. As research showed, municipalities are very differently presented on Internet. Their presentations vary from nothing to exceptionally good. This division is not dependent on social standing of an individual or even on the development of the area where he/she lives but more or less on the goodwill and awareness of local administrators in a particular environment.

The second central question was whether citizens really can with the use of the Internet, interactively and actively in a more up-to-date manner, participate and influence the preparing and making of decisions that are in public interest. The answer could be that this influence is still negligible. The reason for that is in the fact that the political classes and management in public administration do not take the Internet seriously enough. They do not yet accept it as an influential medium, which if they wanted and knew how to use, could be to their benefit, but which could also be turned against them. In this respect the Internet will, by its power and influence, not compare with other media, such as newspapers and especially television for some time.

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