**ONLINE CONSULTATION IN GOL COUNTRIES**
*Initiatives to foster e-democracy*

project report 6 December 2001

a joint product of the members of the
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*New information and communication technologies can be powerful tools to increase the quality of public policy, citizens' understanding of public policy issues and their participation in government policy making. In this report from the Government Online International Network, we show that governments around the globe are actively promoting online consultations in order to strengthen democracy and development.*

*The report provides guidance for governments that wish to establish a productive form of online public consultations. In order to achieve this, knowledge, initiatives and experience already present in this field are clustered and made available. The material is structured in four sections:*

### *1. Ensuring access to and accessibility of national government information*

*An e-democracy or online public consultation can only be established on the twin pillars of electronic access and accessibility. Knowledge of government decisions and plans is important to members of the public and interest groups, so that they can take action when they do not agree with what is being planned or undertaken. The transparency of national government is a first step towards the realisation of a lively and useful process of online public consultation.*

### *2. Conducting pilot projects in the field of electronic public consultation*

*Initiatives for online public consultation vary in approach, goal, target group, breadth of subject, use of technical tools, territorial level etc. The experiments are undertaken within an administrative space defined by existing institutions, and are intended to provide experience and to show what is actually involved in online public consultation. Evaluations of these experiments thus constitute valuable material and might eventually lead to an institutionalisation of the consultations and adaptations of existing institutions.*

### *3. Co-ordinating the pilot projects, compiling the resulting experiences and developing a certain standard for online public consultation*

*Governments need to consider what online public consultation actually involves, which methods are suitable, what technical tools and supporting services they will need and what conditions must be met by a successful process. The clustering and exchange of knowledge allows experiments to move forward beyond the limits of a certain state-of-the-art situation. Furthermore, the process of clustering and exchange of knowledge in this field gradually leads to a harmonisation of products and processes.*

### 4. Formally adjusting the policy process: making changes in institutions and legislation

*Successful implementation of online public consultations in policy processes requires the adjustment of existing rules and the formulation of new ones. In this way, practices that are considered as desirable or have evolved through experimentation are codified and regulated. Changes to and formulation of rules will not result only from the direct requirements of online public consultation. Nonetheless, it is interesting to see the extent to which countries are actively preparing a set of rules that will enable online public consultation to become common practice in the preparation of policy.*

*Our review of existing practices presents a wealth of approaches, examples, priorities and intentions by national governments. There is certainly not one standard model for online consultations. On the contrary, we see every government experimenting, taking advantage of lessons learned by pilots and experiments, and sometimes also building on examples from governments abroad.*

*As this report is primarily intended to provide insight, our emphasis is not on analysis, recommendations or conclusions. However some general lessons can be learnt from the report, and a number of issues that deserve attention and consideration in the future are identified.*

**Electronic provision of information**
*Most countries have started the implementation of a general policy on making available information electronically. One important question is how far governments go in publishing data. Do they publish only policies that have been agreed upon by parliament, or do they also publish information in the stage of preparation of policies? How complete is that information? This could be an interesting subject for further investigation with regard to the future of e-democracy.*

**Different approaches to experiments**
*All participating countries report experiments with online consultation. The nature and scope of these processes differ greatly. There are differences in purposes, methods, target groups, subjects etc. From this we can conclude that a general approach has not been developed. Online consultation seems to be a case of trial and error, of variety and selection and of ongoing creativity, trying to keep pace with technological innovation and societal developments.*

**Purposes of online consultation**
*The design and management of an online consultation process seem to be highly dependent on the purpose a government tries to achieve. If it strives for inclusion of all in public policy deliberations, then general accessibility and multi-channel marketing are important. If it seeks high-quality ideas from professionals, the consultation could take place in a closed environment, into which professionals are invited personally. This means that the purpose of an online consultation process should be made clear before choosing methods and techniques.*

### Providing feedback

*Most countries are aware that consultation also means providing proper feedback to the participants. How to properly embed online consultation in this process, i.e. how to satisfy the need for accountability regarding the incorporation of the input into a final proposal, is an issue most countries are still grappling with. There is often a lack of clarity on how precisely the input provided was valued and used. A guaranteed follow-up of  the consultation should enhance the enthusiasm of the public and the quality of the debate..*

### Rules and regulations

*Some countries have already started to draw up principles or adapt existing guidelines for discussion in the online environment. It is important to exchange knowledge on the arrangements and procedures by various countries in order to be able to learn from one another and to avoid duplicating work. In the future it could also become important which institution will be responsible for the monitoring of the quality of online public debates and therefore of the application of the regulations in place.*

### Cross-sectoral approaches

*The need for co-ordination of experiments is also felt necessary because public policy issues are to a high degree interrelated and cross-sectoral. One could also consider involving civil society organisations in the preparation and presentation of the consultation and the processing of the results. If this were to be common practice, then the borders between government and civil society would gradually flaw.*

### No necessity for changes in institutions or legislation?

*The countries involved have not yet developed plans for organisational or legislative adjustments with regard to e-democracy in the form of online consultations. Traditional democratic systems have been arranged for the voice of citizen coming through mainly by way of elections and elected representatives. At this stage, however, governments have not found it urgent to adjust its processes and structures. If the practice of online consultations by governments will expand, then that will undoubtedly change.*

*Initiatives to foster e-democracy*

## <u>PREFACE</u>

**Introduction**

The decision to initiate a project on e-democracy was taken at the Leiden meeting of the Governments Online (GOL) International Network in October 2000 (http://www.statskontoret.se/gol-democracy/). The proposal made by the Netherlands was for electronic consultation of the public by national governments. The interest shown by GOL in e-democracy issues is rooted in history. Important groundwork on e-democracy was carried out during the G8 period (1995-1998) of GOL. The 1998 final report, which includes the best practices of a broad range of countries, describes a framework of issues relevant to e-democracy (http://www.governments-online.org/projects/e-democracy/). We have built on this framework in the present e-democracy project. The pace of advance is picking up and various developments caught our eye in 2001. Unlike the former approach we have now chosen to focus on a particular aspect of e-democracy, namely electronic consultation of the public by national governments on public policy issues.

**Focus**

The use of ICT changes various aspects in the general practice of democracy: these include electronic voting, electronic services and the use of ICT by political parties. These aspects are interesting, but do not come within the remit of this project. The members of Government Online indicated that they were interested in tangible results and that the project should therefore not be too broad. One risk inherent in any study of 'e-democracy' is that the authors will add the adjective 'electronic' to everything relating to democracy and then include it in the study. In order to prevent this happening and to be able to present a clear statement in this report, we have decided to concentrate on the organization of electronic public consultations by national governments.

**Motivation**

The decision to concentrate on online consultation by national governments was taken because we believe this new element in the policy cycle brings about a new kind of dynamics. These dynamics lead to an *essential* change in the policy cycle and ultimately require institutional adjustments. Online consultation of the public by governments is an inevitable development, which is spreading to more and more countries.

Online consultation of the public is receiving international attention (EU, Global Forum, OECD and IDEA (http://europa.eu.int/yourvoice/ , http://www.globalforum.it/ , http://www.oecd.org , http://www.idea.int)).  A recent OECD report, *Citizens as Partners. Information, Consultation and Public Participation in Policy-Making,* to which most of the GOL member countries contributed, concludes that "new information and communication technologies can be powerful tools to increase the quality of public policy, citizens' understanding of public policy issues and their participation in government policy making."  The report also provides spin-off in the form of *Citizens as Partners. OECD Handbook on Information, Consultation and Public Participation in Policy-Making.*

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A Gartner Group research note from May 2001 on E-Government entitled *What are citizens really looking for*? concludes: "More attention should be placed on ways to increase democratic participation. .. Instead of asking for more direct or participatory forms of democracy, with frequent voting and referenda, the majority of respondents would be satisfied with being able to see, and possibly issue, written comments to bills and proposed laws; attending meetings through "web casts" is less popular."

Initiatives are also being taken by the European Union to strengthen ties with its citizens and thus enhance the effectiveness of its policies. The recent White Paper of the EU Commission on European Governance says that the Commission will provide "up-to-date, online information on preparation of policy through all stages of decision-making" and "establish and publish minimum standards for consultation on EU policy". These standards specify whom to consult, when and how to consult them, and what to consult them about (http://europa.eu.int/comm/governance/white_paper/index_en.htm).

Notwithstanding the enthusiasm for online consultation, there is still a fair degree of variation in the way governments organize online public consultations. Moreover, most of the promising and original experiments that appeal to our imagination have so far taken place at local level and have involved relatively small government bodies. These bodies have the advantage that their policy issues have a tangible bearing on citizen's daily lives – a factor which helps to engage citizens in the policy process. For national governments the completion of this mission has proved to be more difficult.

**Aim**
The aim of this publication by the Government Online International Network is to provide guidance for national governments that wish to establish a productive form of online public consultations. In order to achieve this, knowledge, initiatives and experience already present in this field are clustered and made available in this project. We are aware that this subject is relatively new for most national governments – including those in GOL member countries. We view this as an extra reason for taking stock of the knowledge and experience that is available. At a later stage we may wish to have a more in-depth study, e.g. a study of factors that can accelerate or impede online consultation by national governments. At this stage the general purpose is to provide information about the initiatives and activities undertaken by several countries. It follows that the emphasis of the report is not on providing analysis, recommendations or conclusions. However, some lessons that can be learned will be explained at the end of this paper, together with several issues that deserve attention and consideration in the future. It should be emphasized that this report is the result of a snap-shot approach. The practice of online consultation is at the moment of writing - December 2001- a field that is evolving rapidly. The material in this report will therefore soon be outdated but no less invaluable for all that.

**Outline of the project report**

To coordinate the material that has been acquired, we have presented it in the form of four steps for initiating online public consultation. The project describes how far the various member countries have progressed in relation to these four steps. Although we believe these four steps are essential for a productive online consultation by national governments, they need not necessarily be taken by governments in chronological order.

The steps are the following:
1.  ensuring **access to** and **accessibility of** national government information (**section1**)
2.  conducting **pilot projects** in the field of electronic public consultation (**section 2**)
3.  **coordinating** the pilot projects, **compiling** the results of the projects and **developing** a certain standard for online public consultation (**section 3**)
4.  **formally adjusting** the policy process: making changes to institutions and legislation (**section 4**).

This stage-by-stage approach allows each country to acquire information from the project that is in line with its requirements. Furthermore, the information already available is recorded and linked to the newly acquired knowledge. Finally, this approach provides points of departure for starting up new projects and for possible collaboration in the future, enabling countries to profit from each other's progress in developing the practice of online public consultations. General lessons and suggestions for further work on e-democracy will be discussed in **section 5: Summing-up**.

# SECTION 1: ENSURING ACCESS TO AND ACCESSIBILITY
## OF GOVERNMENT INFORMATION

**What are we talking about?**

The basis of e-democracy, and thus of online public consultations, involves giving the public the chance to consult government information electronically. It is not enough to give formal permission for information to be accessed, which is why we differentiate between access and accessibility:

- Access means the real possibility of consulting or acquiring government information electronically.
- Accessibility means the ease with which one can actually make use of the possibility of consulting government information electronically. The degree of electronic accessibility is determined by a number of aspects, such as:
  1. *Recognizability and localizability*: the public must know what information is available from which government body, and how and where this can be located.
  2. *Availability*: the information must be stored in a standard digital form and be accessible through an electronic medium or data carrier.
  3. *Manageability*: the public must not drown in the quantity or complexity of the information, but instead be able to find their own way through the system, if necessary using search systems provided by the government.
  4. *Affordability*: the price of the information should not create any barriers, this being dependent on the importance of the information for society at large.
  5. *Reliability*: the public must be able to rely on the correctness, completeness and authenticity of the information.
  6. *Clarity*: the information must be as clear as possible in terms of content, context and presentation.
  7. The information should preferably also be as accessible as possible to the blind, the visually handicapped and people with other handicaps.

**Why is this important?**

An e-democracy or online public consultation can be established only on the basis of the twin pillars of electronic access and accessibility. Without good electronic access to and accessibility of national government information, the public will not know what decisions and plans are being made by government. Public consultation is not possible without the right information from the government, because opinions cannot be expressed without knowledge. Knowledge of government decisions and plans is important to members of the public and interest groups, so that they can take action when they do not agree with what is being planned or undertaken. They need to know who they can contact in such cases. This transparency of national government is a first step towards the realization of a lively and useful process of online public consultation.

**What kind of information does this project provide?**

The aim of this project is to chart the degree of electronic access to national government information in GOL countries, thus enabling us to define the current state of affairs. This has been done mainly by referring to data from existing sources, such as the data from the OECD report, *Citizens as Partners.*

*Information, Consultation and Public Participation in Policy-Making.* As far as access to government information is concerned, the project has various aspects in common with the GOL "portal" project (http://www.governments-online.org/projects/portals/). As the use of portals in national policies on access to government and its documents is dealt with in this separate GOL project, portals are not discussed in the present section.

The OECD publication drawn up by the working group mentioned above and entitled *Engaging Citizens: Information, Consultation and Participation in Policy-making,* refers to laws establishing rights of access to information as a basic building block for enhancing government transparency and accountability. In table 4 on page 43 of this OECD publication we see that all countries participating in this GOL project – with the exception of Mexico – have a Freedom of Information Act that provides for the accessibility of official documents and  public records, in so far as they are not secret. For more information on this Act we refer to the OECD report. We will also disregard for the moment the privacy aspect of access to government information. The information needed for effective online consultation is, in our view, unlikely to contain private data of persons. Privacy issues are therefore not directly raised by discussion of electronic access to government information.

Accessibility is a wide-ranging subject that deserves considerable attention, as it is also relevant to the issue of 'closing the digital gap'. It could be useful to initiate a separate project on this theme in the future. In this section a bit of attention is being paid to accessibility of information by referring to countries' policies regarding charging for online public information.

In the following text we give an overview of different GOL members countries' policies regarding electronic access to information. By their nature they often extend to policies on online consultation. Although we would not wish to draw an artificial line between these two fields, we believe it is useful to describe them separately since online information does not automatically entail online consultation. In this section we stress the features of an electronic information policy, whereas section 3 will be mainly devoted to policies on online interactive consultation.

**CANADA**

The Government of Canada is taking a phased approach to achieving its Government Online (GOL) commitment of putting the Government's information and services online by 2004.  In the initial phase, from October to December 2000, efforts were focused on strengthening the government's Internet presence and improving the organization and presentation of its online information. The following targets were achieved by January 2001:

- The main Government of Canada web site (www.canada.gc.ca) has been redesigned to make it easier for Canadians, Canadian businesses and visitors from abroad to use.
- Federal departments and agencies have ensured up-to-date, accurate, bilingual information on all key programs and services is available electronically.
- Commonly used government forms are available in downloadable and printable format.

Implementation of the Government of Canada Government Online strategy goes beyond putting existing services and information online. Its objective is to redesign services in ways that make sense to citizens, businesses and international clients, and to prepare the public service for e-

government. It means using the Internet to increase the transparency and efficiency of government operations and to engage more Canadians in policy debates and government decisions.

The Canadian Access to Information Act establishes an enforceable right of access to records under the control of government institutions in accordance with the principles that: (i) government information should be available to the public; (ii) any necessary exceptions to the right of access should be limited and specific; and (iii) decisions on the disclosure of government information should be reviewed independently of government.

The 1983 Access to Information Act, is currently under review.  The scope of the review of the administration of the Act includes an examination of the impact on access to information of electronic information and consequential adjustments. The Access to Information Review Task is planning to conclude its review in fall 2001.

The Official Languages Act (1988) ensures respect for English and French as the official languages of Canada as well as the equality of status and equal rights and privileges as to their use in all federal institutions, in particular in communicating with or providing services to the public. The Policy on using Official Languages on Electronic Networks states that institutions subject to the Official Languages Act comply with all applicable official languages requirements when using electronic networks to provide services to, or communicate with, the public or their employees.

Accessibility of information also means addressing the barriers that persons with physical, visual or hearing disabilities might encounter in navigating the Internet to interact with government. Based in part on the W3C Accessibility Guidelines developed by a consortium of industry, academic, government and NGO representatives from around the world, "Common Look and Feel" (CLF) standards for the Canadian government presence on the Internet were approved in May 2000.  The standards – at www.cio-dpi.gc.ca/clf-upe – were designed to ensure consistency in the display of information and services on all federal Internet sites, as well as to provide for a common set of navigational aids so that clients do not have to learn multiple navigation systems. In addition to accessibility requirements, the standards contain requirements for privacy notices, the use of both official languages, minimal mandatory metadata tagging, collaborative arrangements, e-mail and domain name configuration.

A Web Accessibility Testing Service is also available to provide a hands-on review of potential new site designs by physically disabled and/or blind people, who give firsthand feedback to developers.  Implementation of Common Look and Feel standards is now underway, with full implementation required in all federal departments by December 31, 2001.

**FINLAND**

The government has an overall policy for making public information available online. The main document is the Open Government Act. It defines the Internet as the main vehicle for information dissemination. The Act provides that all preparatory documents relating to decision-making will enter the public domain at the latest when the decision concerned has been made. This will lead to greater public access to documents earlier in the policy cycle. According to the Act, public

authorities have a duty to keep a public register of projects and legal preparatory documents of the Finnish government. The register is both a tool for public officials and an information service for citizens. It includes data on preparatory legal documents and other development and reform projects, reports to parliament, committees, boards of state enterprises and agencies and on study projects. Citizens can access this register via the Internet free of charge. The government's principal websites make available press releases, speeches by government leaders, official documents (submissions to Parliament etc.), all enacted laws and regulations, proposed laws and regulations under considerations and transcripts of parliamentary debates.

There is a policy on charging for online government information. Fees are charged for tailored and customized information services. As this principle is applied regardless of the delivery channel, it also applies to delivery via the web. Information relating to basic rights is to be provided without charge; the government takes the position that information needed to monitor the administration or to start a public discussion in society should be free.

**FRANCE**

Since 1998 the government has had an overall policy of making public information available online. The general policy is to make the administration and its documents accessible via the Internet. There is a general policy on the dissemination of public documents. The number of public documents on the Internet will be increased, and the majority of them (especially the most essential ones) will be provided free of charge. In addition, documents formerly not published will be disseminated via the Internet.

The government's principal websites make available press releases, speeches by government ministers, official documents (submissions to parliament etc.), most enacted laws and regulations, proposed laws and regulations under consideration and transcripts of parliamentary debates. There is a policy on charging for online government information. Under this policy, documents that are essential for the exercise of citizenship by the French citizens are made available online free of charge. The government portal www.service-public.fr , which was launched in October 2000, gives access to the main sources of government information, surveys and laws free of charge. In order to facilitate Internet access for citizens who do not have their own Internet connection, 8,000 public access points will be set up in the coming years in both towns and rural areas.

A draft regulation on access to and accessibility of government information will in due course be submitted to parliament by the government. The main chapters regarding access are the following:
- government bodies must give access to all their digital data, subject to strict rules on the privacy of personal data;
- essential data such as public decisions and regulations, surveys, agencies' internal structure and functioning have to be published and to be accessible free of charge;
- public archives should be accessible to everyone who asks for access, although delays may occur in the case of some categories of document.

Accessibility standards for disabled people will be published and assistance provided. The citizens' Internet access points in towns and villages (see above) will be generally free of charge.

**ISRAEL**

At present the Israeli government provides access to 96 sites, which include information about all government ministries and agencies. The sites provide data and information about various aspects of the scope, responsibilities and activities of all government offices as well as information on the economy and society. It is government policy to try to ensure that the public can have access to most websites by 2004 and that information and services are then available on these sites.

The following are a few examples of the website content:

- general information about the specific government office
- reports of studies of social and economic indicators
- the annual national budget
- State Controller annual reports on the activities of all government offices
- investment requirements and opportunities in Israel
- import and export licence requirements as well as other commercial and industrial information.
- reports of conclusions and recommendations of government committees
- general economic data on the Israeli economy
- tax information explaining how to pay taxes
- addresses of senior government officials
- information on tendering for government contracts.

All information can be obtained on the Internet. Last year there were 1.2 million requests for information via the Internet. About 50% of all Israeli families are able to use online communications to access national government sites.

The Freedom of Information Act passed by the Knesset (parliament) requires the government to supply to the public all non-secret information about its activities. All government offices must ensure that their websites carry an annual report summarizing their activities and various reports issued by the office.

The Knesset site includes all minutes of the plenary sessions and the committees. There are discussion groups for particular subjects. This allows citizens to express their views on a given subject and to communicate them to the appropriate committee or member. The committee or member is required to answer citizens' questions. Questions can also submitted online to the appropriate government minister, and his office is obliged to answer within a short space of time.

**MEXICO**

The Mexico Online pilot project is being developed by the President's Office. Its goal is to diminish the distance between government and citizen by involving the latter in public decision-making. This will be achieved by means of a 24 hour-a-day 7 day-a-week digital broadcasting channel, which works interactively with the Internet users, crossing the country's geographic boundaries and allowing every Mexican with an Internet connection to be in touch with his or her government. This channel is only

the first step in a long-running Citizen's Participation Plan, which will eventually include online consultations.

The creators of Mexico Online consider that it is essential for the new government to dispense with the old paradigms about the citizen-government relationship. By using the new technologies they aim to foster a democratic participative culture, where citizens can express their opinion, ask questions of the authority and solve their problems within the institutional framework.

The results that already have been achieved are:
- closer contact with citizens through the provision of information
- use of the available interactivity
- problem-solving by providing a channel for citizens to voice their concerns, which can then be channelled to the responsible authority.

The results expected in the future are:
- greater credibility and an increasingly strong citizen-government relationship
- the holding of opinion polls
- consultation for the purpose of modifying public policy.

The broadcasting channel can be found on the President's web page. It merely requires the installation of free software that can be downloaded from this site. At present the channel has three main segments:
- live broadcasting of the "México en Línea" programme

In a round-table format the presenters chat with the guests, who are leading members of the public administration or of an NGO. The news is commented upon and each day a new topic is raised for discussion. These sessions are enriched with comments from the audience, who are able in this way to propose or express an opinion or ask about the issues addressed.
- broadcasting of the President's Programme

The radio programme transmitted by the President every Saturday is simultaneously broadcast by this channel.
- 24-hour channel

The remaining transmission time is used for Mexican music and public campaigns of the federal government's programmes.

**THE NETHERLANDS**

The government has an overall policy for making public information available online. The Dutch government aims to promote electronic access to its national government information to the greatest possible extent. It has therefore formulated the following policy principle. The government ensures that all basic information of the democratic constitutional state will be made electronically accessible (i.e. 100%). This information comprises all levels of legislation, judgments of Dutch and international courts, treaties, decisions by international organizations that have legal consequences for the Netherlands and also agendas, proceedings and other public documents of representative bodies. At the national level this information is accessible free of charge on the Internet. In 2002 a consolidated database containing all legislation will be available on the national portal (www.overheid.nl).

Subsidies are provided for local government bodies in order to encourage them to make the same kind of information accessible free of charge on their sites. Substantial (financial) incentives have been provided for government bodies to publish basic democratic information on the Internet. Besides the basic information of the democratic constitutional state, national government websites contain press releases, news, speeches, downloadable official policy documents, information on the progress of draft legislation and regulations, organizational information, and information on budgets and services.

There are three systems of charging web users for online government information in the Netherlands. First of all, access to what is termed the 'basic information' of the democratic state (i.e. information on legislation, parliamentary proceedings and court judgments) is regulated in the Dutch Constitution. The policy is that this type of information should be available free of charge on the Internet. Second, access to information of the various several government bodies is regulated in the generic Open Government Act. Under this Act government information is made public on demand (with a few exceptions). Only the marginal costs of dissemination may be charged. This information is generally provided free of charge, both on the Internet and otherwise. The third system regulates access to and the use of a limited number of databases (approx. 10% of all government databases), including those of Statistics Netherlands and the Land Registry. Access, use and the fees are regulated in specific legislation. It should be noted that many of the publications of Statistics Netherlands and several databases containing statistics are available free of charge on their website www.cbs.nl/nl/statline/index.htm.

**NORWAY**
The government has an overall policy on making public information available online. The policy is to encourage central government entities to use the Internet for information and communication. There are no quantitative targets for making public records available electronically. The government's principal websites make available press releases, speeches by government ministers, official documents (submissions to Parliament etc.), all enacted laws and regulations, proposed laws and regulations under consideration and transcripts of parliamentary debates.

There is no policy on charging web users for online government information. In most cases such information is available free of charge. A formal decision regarding pricing policy is still awaited.  In Norway there are examples of administrative bodies that offer some of their information free of charge on the Internet, but charge for printed copies. Practice varies from one administrative sector to another and according to the form in which the information is provided. Official statistics, for instance, are generally regarded as a public good and are on the whole available to the public free of charge on the Internet.

**SWEDEN**
Swedish citizens have the right to inspect and use all official documents. The word "document" includes tape recordings and recordings for automatic data processing, i.e. data stored in an ICT system. The government has an overall policy for making public information available online. The main documents are the IT bill and a bill on government administration. The policy is to make more and more public records available online. There are no quantitative targets for making public

records available electronically. Some government agencies charge for the information they make available and others do not. A new strategy on the provision of basic public information will be developed in the near future. The government's principal websites make available press releases, speeches by government ministers, official documents (submissions to parliament etc.), most enacted laws and regulations, bills and regulations under consideration and transcripts of parliamentary debates.

The policy on charging web users for online government information is that the cost of providing an item of information – usually the costs of distribution only - should be recovered. Gradually more and more information is becoming available free of charge on the Internet. Major hard copy publications for which a charge is made are now to a large extent free of charge on the web and can be downloaded. More extensive databases too are being made available online free of charge. Examples are Statistic Sweden, a legal text database and government and parliamentary documents. All legislation has been available in one database since 2001. One reason why the Swedish government makes a charge for electronic information is to discourage potential abuse of the availability of electronic information.

**UNITED KINGDOM**

Until 30 November 2000,  there was no law giving a general right of access to information held by central government. The Freedom of Information Act 2000, which received the Royal assent on 30 November 2000, provides clear statutory rights for those requesting information and introduces a strong enforcement regime. Although the act became law on 30 November 2000, implementation arrangements have not yet been decided.

The Modernizing Government White Paper commits the UK government to bringing about a fundamental change in the way IT is used. According to this policy, IT should enable government to offer services and information through new media like the Internet or interactive TV. In support of this, the government published a corporate IT strategy for government in April 2000. The strategy focuses on better services for citizens and businesses and more effective use of the government's information resources.

From December 2000, citizens have been able to access all government information through a user-friendly citizen's portal, www.ukonline.gov.uk. All new statutes and statutory instruments are published on the Internet. The government's principal websites make available press releases, speeches by government ministers, official documents (submissions to Parliament etc.), all enacted laws and regulations, proposed laws and regulations under consideration and transcripts of parliamentary debates. All this work builds upon the Prime Minister's 2000 announcement that, by 2005, 100% of dealings with government should be capable of being done by the public electronically. Progress towards this target is published on a monthly basis at www.e-envoy.gov.uk.

It is the government's view that new technologies can play a role in providing new ways for people to access government information. Access to reliable, clear and comprehensive information is a precondition for being an active citizen and participating in the government's policy process. New technologies can be used to facilitate access to public information and information about future and

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existing policies and services. There are already policies in place to promote this, such as web site standards and the e-government metadata framework.

The Code of Practice on Written Consultation sets out criteria for consultations that are binding on central government departments (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/servicefirst/index/consultation.htm). Among many other things, it contains criteria governing the availability of consultation documents online: "Documents should be made widely available, with the fullest use of electronic means (though not to the exclusion of others), and effectively drawn to the attention of all interested groups and individuals." This criterion is elucidated by more specific terms such as:

- Documents should always be available free of charge on a website from the moment of publication, ideally in a range of formats. Internet versions should be quickly downloadable – that is, for example, with the option of avoiding large graphics. It may not be practical to include complex attachments (such as large charts), though early planning will often permit the information in them to be presented satisfactorily on the web.
- Though effective use of the Internet is increasingly important, people should not be excluded from consultation because they are not Internet users. Paper copies of documents should always be available, and paper responses accepted.
- Costs to users should never be such that they are an obstacle to effective consultation. Every effort should be made to avoid charging for paper copies.
- The methods above will often not effectively reach all interested groups. Other methods should be considered including, for instance targeting relevant newspapers and magazines, targeted mailings and e-mail notifications, reproducing the document in different languages and formats (e.g. braille, audio tape), face-to-face visits, presentation and discussion of the proposals with interested organizations, stakeholder groups, user panels etc., funding outreach activity by umbrella groups or independent facilitators.

The development of government executive agencies run on cost-recovery lines has reinforced the tendency for government to make information available in a number of ways, both commercially and non-commercially. The level of charging depends on the type of material and the degree to which it is being sold for commercial re-use. The majority of information posted on government websites is free. Information that has been traditionally charged for and is now available electronically still requires payment.

**THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

The United States federal government has a number of laws, policies, and initiatives for making public information available online. By law the federal government is required to maintain a Government Information Locator Service ("GILS") to identify each agency's "major information systems, holdings, and dissemination products." These include major systems of records, databases, and other collections of agency information. GILS operates in such a way as to promote public access to this information.

Portals are growing in number and importance. In September 2000, the federal government launched FirstGov.gov, the only official U.S. Government portal to 47 million pages of government information, services, and online transactions. The site offers a powerful search engine that searches every word of every U.S. government document in a quarter of a second or less.  FirstGov.gov also features a

topical index, online transactions, links to state and local government, options for contacting government offices, and other tools so that citizens can get the information they want anytime they want it. States are developing online service portals where, at a single web site, e-government services are integrated across different state agencies.

Contacting government agencies has been simplified, making it easier to obtain information. Federal offices are listed on blue paper (referred to as blue pages) in local telephone books across the country. The federal government has initiated a reorganization of the blue pages, with government entities arranged functionally rather than according to statutory structure. For many localities, these functionally arranged blue pages are available both online (http://bp.fed.gov) and in the local phone book.

Federal regulatory agencies have a complex array of "stakeholders," including their licensed (or otherwise regulated) entities, citizen watchdog groups, professional societies, business consortiums, the administration, congressional oversight bodies, the news media, and private citizens. Nearly all of these agencies have web sites that provide public access to various reports, databases, rules, speeches, and other information.

Hundreds of statutory provisions require federal agencies to disseminate specified information to the public. A good deal of information is also released by agencies, not because of any statutory mandate, but because doing so is considered to be part of the agency's mission. Many agencies have moved aggressively to disseminate information over the Internet.

The U.S. is launching a new effort to bringing consolidated information and services to citizens. The Government Paperwork Elimination Act encourages agencies to make their forms and transactions available online. However, there are no laws that encouraged agencies to combine efforts with other agencies. President Bush appointed Mark Forman, Office of Management and Budget, as the Associate Director for Information Technology and E-Government. Within two month of his arrival, he created an E-Government Task Force, Quick Silver. The Task Force began its work August 6, 2001 and concluded six weeks later. What emerged was a vision for e-government that puts the citizen first and the organization second.

The communication mechanisms available on the Internet create a broad array of possibilities for interaction between the citizens and government officials of a democratic society. Officials at all levels of government have begun to take advantage of these tools, holding online web casts, attending interactive chat sessions, raising campaign funds, and, of course, offering direct e-mail access.

Making information available to people with disabilities is a priority in the U.S.  The Workforce Investment Act of 1998, Sec. 508 (Electronic and Information Technology) requires that Federal agencies' electronic and information technology is accessible to people with disabilities, including employees and members of the public.

There is no policy to charge for online government information at the federal, state, and local levels of government. However, a small number of  federal and state sites charge for services and for accessing information such as judicial opinions and up-to-date legislative updates.

## SECTION 2: CONDUCTING PILOT PROJECTS IN THE FIELD OF ELECTRONIC PUBLIC CONSULTATION

**What are we talking about?**

The phase in which policy focuses on making information available electronically is followed by the phase in which national government bodies, acting either on their own initiative or in response to prompting by others, organize pilot projects and experiments to consult the public on national policy by electronic means. Most of the countries involved in online public consultation are currently in this phase.

**Why is this important?**

Various studies show that online public consultation covers a broad and broadening range of subjects. These initiatives vary in terms of their approach, goal, target group, breadth of subject, use of technical tools, territorial level etc. Since they currently involve pilot projects and experiments, most of the public consultation processes are not yet an intrinsic part of the policy-making process. The experiments operate within the space provided by existing institutions, and are intended to provide experience and to show what is actually involved in online public consultation. Evaluations of these experiments thus constitute valuable material and might eventually lead to an institutionalisation of the consultations and adaptations of existing institutions.

**What kind of information does this project provide?**

In this part of the project we make an inventory of pilot projects and experiments undertaken by governments in GOL member countries. These brief case descriptions provide an insight into the wealth of experience that has already been acquired. This experience can be used to formulate new ideas on how to design an online consultation process. The examples in this study show the diversity of approaches and scopes that are possible in the field of online consultation.

**CANADA**

**Canadian Environmental Assessments Agency: Five-Year review of provisions and operation of the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act**

http://www.ceaa-acee.gc.ca/0007/index_e.htm

The purpose of this online consultation was to provide for convenient access to information related to the Five Year Review of provisions and operation of the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act, to encourage submission of comments on the operation of the Act and to encourage suggestions for improvement.  A separate dedicated section of the Agency's website, accessible directly from the home page, included an electronic bulletin board for posting comments and submissions. The site received more than 40,000 visits during the first twelve months. During the 3-month consultation stage 19 submissions were posted, in addition to more than 100 presented at public meetings or sent by mail. Online consultation proved to be particularly valuable, opening up the Five Year Review to Canadians living in rural areas and those unable to attend the public consultation sessions held in major locations. Also those who did attend the meetings found it useful to be able to read the summaries of the meetings and to have quick access to copies of other parties' contributions.

**Canadian International Development Agency: Draft Action Plan on Basic Education Agency**

The purpose of this consultation was to obtain input on an action plan, which provided an overview of the main goals and targets for basic education, and articulated possible options for future action. The consultation was carried out using a moderated listserv. A moderator who had a knowledge of the subject and was able to write weekly summaries of comments (published in both official languages) was contracted. A list of 700 potential participants was drawn up by actively soliciting email addresses from stakeholders. This resulted in 350 subscribers and 140 comments each week. There was a set of FAQs available regarding the process (including - What will you do with my input? Why did you choose this process?). Each week a new question was posted. Participants could review comments received from others through a consultation archive. The lessons learned showed that successful consultation depends on promotion of the process and objectives, accessible  technology for all intended participants and regular (e.g. weekly) summaries of comments received. Moreover, it was concluded that reporting back was the key to the success of the process: participants were concerned that they would provide input and never hear about the consultation outcomes.

**Natural Resources Canada: "Virtual" Workshop on Regulatory Efficiency**

In 1998, Natural Resources Canada  organized a "virtual workshop" on the World Wide Web to build consensus on ways to enhance regulatory efficiency for the minerals and metals industry. Entitled "Review of Regulations affecting the Mining Sector in Canada", the initiative was one of the first interactive consultative processes launched by the federal government through the Internet. The website provided background information on regulatory reform for the mining sector and solicited input from key interest groups. These included representatives from federal, provincial and territorial governments: national, provincial and territorial mining associations and chambers of mines, mining and service companies, environmental groups, regional and national Aboriginal organizations and labour groups. Those without access to the Internet could participate through facsimiles or the mail.

The site was designed to make it as easy as possible for interested parties to participate in a meaningful fashion. It provided background on the approach, *a Guide to Participants* and links to all relevant documentation, including the Fisheries Act, the Navigable Waters Protection Act and the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act.

Once participants had registered, they could enter a restricted access database, view selected case histories, view the comments of others and post their own comments. Comments posted by participants were used to build a solid database of facts and opinions on federal regulatory and decision-making processes affecting mining exploration, mining development, mining operations and mining closures in Canada. The information served as input for an overview report to the Mines Ministers' Conference in July 1998.

The workshop was available in both official languages; opinions and working draft documents appeared only in the author's language. Participants could register using an electronic registration form accessible through the "VW Home Page." In order to interact with others, participants could provide comments on the selected case histories and choose amongst the following virtual rooms: a "Think Tank Room" to share ideas, a "Drafting Room" where an evolving summary report was being put together by NRCan, and a "Retreat Room" where the product of a physical retreat was

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posted. Participants could also explore windows for each province and territory to comment on cases.

The workshop succeeded in involving the key interest groups: the web site was accessed more than 900 times and more than 130 people registered to participate. The Virtual Workshop provided a forum to exchange, compile and synthesize information. A great deal of information was gathered during its one-month time frame, with minimal cost to the Department and other participants.

The workshop's popularity led to an extensive database of facts and opinions. In order to prepare a synthesis of all the information received, the organizers decided to hold a retreat at Econiche Lodge in Cantley, Quebec. The report became part of the draft overview that was submitted to a national workshop between the end of March and mid-April 1998 and formed part of the overview report prepared for the Mines Ministers' Conference in July 1998.

The Virtual Workshop has demonstrated the Government of Canada's commitment to meaningful consultation among all levels of government, the mining industry, the environmental community, Aboriginal organizations and other interested parties. It has also shown that these groups are prepared to participate in innovative consultative processes. The Virtual Workshop has proven to be an appropriate use of the Internet. It has allowed for nationwide consultation at a fraction of the cost of traditional consultation processes. Not only has the government realized cost savings, but the participants' costs were also greatly reduced since travel was not required. A further advantage of this approach is the saving in time.

**Status of Women Canada: Beijing +5 Electronic Roundtable Pilot Initiative**
The Beijing+5 Secretariat, Status of Women Canada (SWC) undertook a two-part consultation process in May and June 2000. One part was an electronic roundtable pilot initiative. The second part was a face-to-face meeting held on 17 May 2000 that was designed as a complement to the electronic roundtable. The purpose of the process was to seek specific input from NGOs regarding Canadian priorities for Beijing +5 and for a UN outcome document. Invitations were sent to women's organizations and others based on selection criteria developed at SWC in keeping with its policy for consultations. 94 non-governmental organizations and women's groups received invitations. 56 NGO individuals participated (a response rate of 47%). 18 government representatives participated.

The electronic roundtable was a closed, confidential and double-moderated e-mail discussion. Discussion took place in both official languages and all information was provided in both languages. Participants were provided with a welcome note and basic listserv instructions, an outline of objectives for the listserv and a suggested timetable and plan for discussion with questions.

Overall, the NGOs which responded to evaluation questionnaires prepared by the Beijing+5 Secretariat, Status of Women Canada or spoke on the issue of electronic consultations at the 17 May meeting approved of the process and especially look forward to future electronic roundtables on issues of concern to Canadian women. The integration of electronic discussions with person-

to-person consultations was strongly endorsed. The response of the departments to the process was also favourable, particularly in relation to having access to the variety of views and concerns of NGOs and, potentially, for information-sharing.

**FINLAND**

At central government level there has been one electronic consultation pilot project. In November 1999 the Ministry of Finance launched a project designed to increase the scope for citizens to exert influence by means of ICT. The project named "New Information Technology and Citizen's possibilities to influence decision-making " consisted of three different dimensions. The first was to find out how government web pages could better serve citizens and what best practices could be found. This involved making a survey covering Finnish state agencies and municipalities and international examples from ten countries. The second part of the project was a pilot project to build a portal for the Finnish public sector (www.suomi.fi) so that the information and services of the public sector could be accessed from one address. The third part of the project was to form a discussion forum www.otakantaa.fi (otakantaa = share your views with us) where citizens can comment and give their views.

The discussion forum has been on the Internet since February. The idea behind this pilot project was to answer the following questions:
- Is this kind of project of interest to citizens?
- What resources are needed to run this kind of forum?
- Will there be real discussions in the forum?
- What lessons can be learned from running the forum?
- How should the forum be advertised?
- What should the forum be like (technical qualities etc.)?
- Should this kind of forum also be used in the future?
- For what kind of issues and questions can the discussion forum be used?

Most citizens writing to the forum have done so anonymously, although they have of course had the opportunity to write in their own names. The principle in the discussion forum has been that it is open to every citizen and that no registration is therefore needed beforehand. The number of inappropriate comments received and needing to be deleted by the moderators during the year in which the forum has been operating has been very small.

Besides the survey questions the otakantaa web pages have carried background material and links. The idea has been to enable citizens to become acquainted with the issues under discussion. The background material also includes the archives of the previous discussions (which include summaries of the discussions as well as the transcripts themselves). The background material has, of course, varied according to the issues under discussion.

The idea of the forum is to air issues that are in the early stages of consideration in the government ministries. The forum thus provides citizens with the opportunity to discuss and give their views at a sufficiently early stage to ensure that they can be taken into account in the decision-making process. It does not therefore deal with issues where there is already a draft decision.

**FRANCE**

The National Assembly and the Senate provide information on their legislative work (bills under discussion, work of commissions, inquiry reports) free of charge and regularly launch online consultation through forums on general or specific topics. For example, the public was asked to give advice on a bill concerning government use of free software and on the proposed five year presidential term.

Government sites (www. internet.gouv.fr) regularly publish draft regulations for public comment and advice before the texts are laid before parliament. Some forums that focus mainly on technical issues (on the digital signature, Internet co-regulation or on government commitment to use open source software) have registered a high level of participation, but it remains unclear what kind of follow-up has been given to all these proposals. Many ministries or inter-ministerial bodies have done the same. A fairly large public consultation project was launched in order to design the French administration portal. At local level, more and more towns are using web tools to collect advice from their citizens. This is particularly true of Issy les Moulineaux and its interactive town council.

The design of the French government portal (www.service-public.fr ) was an interesting example of public consultation conducted by professional means (external consultancy, questionnaires and free expression forums, summing up of proposals) and involving all government ministries. The main questions that the project team wanted to raise were :

- What do citizens mainly expect when they ask for government information and services (general information, public surveys, practical information)?
- What are the needs of the different broad categories of citizens at the different stages of their lives?
- How should the needs of these different categories of citizens be met?

2,400 responses from the general public were analyzed. This consultation process proved quite fruitful and has contributed to the success of the portal project.

**MEXICO**
**Citizen's Consultation and Participation System for the Science and Technology Transition Team.**

Soon after the presidential elections of 2 July 2000, "transition teams" were established for various public issues. Their main goal was to define and plan the direction that the new government was to take on each topic. The Science and Technology Transition Team considered using the Internet to conduct a public consultation.

The goal was to create an effective means of communicating between the transition team (the authority) and the science and technology community in order to foster its participation, promote an exchange of ideas and knowledge and obtain its proposals for new projects. The transition team was keen to secure the scientific community's participation since it recognized that planning and decision-making require permanent consultation with all the actors involved.

The Internet Participation System allowed for the reception, classification, discussion and publication of the proposals made by the members of the science and technology community. It offered flexible catalogues for the classification of proposals, forums for discussion and a virtual library with statistics related to the user's profile. The users could get information about previous proposals in order to enhance their own participation, choose a topic, send a proposal and take part in a discussion forum. It also gave the users the option of making public their participation. Although it was initially designed only for the scientific community, it has now been extended to the public at large.

The system registered 3,509 entries. All the topics were classified in four main subjects: Human Resources, Academic Line, Research Projects and Academic and Productive Sectors Linking. The participation by subject was as follows: 20% about Human Resources, 30% about Academic Line, 30% about Research Projects, 10% about Academic and Productive Sectors Connection, and 10% about others. Although some proposals can be checked online by the citizens, not all the information is available. Despite being a good idea, the system no longer operates for CONACYT, the institution in charge of science and technology policy. A system of this kind would, however, be very useful for measuring performance and as a catalyst for determining the direction of future policy.

**Citizen's Consultation for the 2001-2006 National Development Plan (Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2001-2006)**

The 2001-2006 National Development Plan (PND) represents the Federation's main planning instrument, which contains not only the government's principles but also its objectives and strategies. It is the central document for the whole federal public administration and has been legally approved by the Congress (Congreso de la Unión).

In December 2000, at the beginning of the new presidential term of office, a planning system was organized to promote the participation of citizens in a nationwide programme. The purpose of this programme was to involve the general public in elaborating the 2001-2006 National Development Plan. Civil servants considered that this process would provide a formal way of taking heed of citizen's opinions, proposals and expectations about some relevant development issues at different levels: federal, local, municipal, family and even individual level.

Citizen participation was made possible in two ways: mailed surveys and the Internet (by the *Mande* Programme). In addition, the government ministries organized public meetings in which leading academics and opinion leaders participated. Proposals were collected on about 110 national issues covering three important government areas:

- Human and Social Development
- Growing with Quality, and
- Order and Respect.

A total of 117,040 completed questionnaires were received by mail and the Internet. These questionnaires contained 196,854 proposals. The Internet page built for the PND extended the scope for participation, speeded up the registration of opinions, and permitted the participation of Mexicans that live abroad. 43,230 proposals were received by these means.

The citizen's participation process involved a huge effort by both government and the general public. Everyone could express his or her needs and proposals and also make suggestions. Each of these

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suggestions was gathered and analyzed and many of them were included in the PND's objectives and strategies. All the proposals were sent to the different public agencies for their analysis and possible inclusion in the PND. Furthermore, all the efforts made by government and the public to develop the PND will be important elements in the elaboration of other institutional regional or local plans, thereby making it possible to achieve the PND's goals. Finally, it is important to note that these joint efforts of government and the public will be the basis for evaluating PND's commitments and for possible modifications to the government's mode of operation.

In the end, however, the public were were unclear about how the received proposals were compiled and integrated because they were unable to verify whether the proposals were being used, and if so, how. Even now no information has become available regarding the number of proposals per subject, the gender of the participants, the rural/urban proportion of participation, etc. Nor is there any public information about the offices responsible for the reception and management of the proposals within each Ministry.

**Citizen's Online Consultation at the Local Level.**
There are also some relevant cases of online consultation at the local level.

An online consultation pilot project is being conducted in *Estado de México* (State of Mexico, gem.edomexico.gob.mx/portalgem/sectores.htm). The state government has designed a 'Participation Programme for the Modernization of the Fiscal Law of the year 2002'. The aim is to receive via the Internet all the comments, suggestions and proposals for a reform to the Tax Code of that state and its *municipios* (counties). However, it is stipulated that the ultimate right of legislating belongs to the local congress and that the proposals will not therefore be considered as definite.

Another consultation project that can be seen on the same local page is the 'Consultation Forum for the Creation of a State Attorney for the Protection of the Environment'. Although the consultation will take place personally, participations can be submitted by the Internet and other media. All members of the public are invited to participate, as well as the environmental organizations, universities and society in general.

**THE NETHERLANDS**
**Digital debate on Contract with the Future**
During the summer of 2000, following the publication of the White Paper entitled 'Contract with the future, a vision for the electronic relationship between government and citizen' (http://www.minbzk.nl/international/), a digital debate was organized in which anybody interested could participate. It took place on the personal homepage of Mr Van Boxtel, the minister responsible for public sector information policy, at www.ministervanboxtel.nl. The debate was moderated by an external and independent person. Both civil servants and the minister contributed to the discussion with citizens. The discussion was concluded by a face-to-face meeting between the minister, the participants in the debate, civil servants, and also (partly offline) citizens and organizations. The meeting was broadcast on the Internet and anybody could react via a live chat. The report and summary of the discussion were sent to parliament in order to inform its members of the reactions and views of the public on this matter.

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**Consensus-building in Almere**

Another interesting example of an online consultation best practice is provided by the municipality of Almere, where citizens were given the opportunity in late 1999 - through what was termed a 'co-production of interactive policy' - to exert influence on the redevelopment of part of the city. This was in addition to the traditional participation meetings. In addition to the provision of information on the Almere website, use was made of a so-called consensus meter that allowed the inhabitants to choose between various layouts. The participants had to fill in a questionnaire that presented pairs of proposals. The participants had to compare them and decide which of the pair was the more important for the future of the city. Each participant took about 15 minutes to go through 105 pairs and thus chose priorities from among the proposals. As a result of this process, 20 possible redevelopment projects in the town were listed in order of priority. This list was then matched with the priority lists of the other participants to establish a collective priority list. As the participants also had to complete some questions of a more personal nature, the priority list could also be combined with those data. This made it easy to generate priority lists of specific groups (e.g. participants that did or did not frequent the part of the city to be redeveloped etc.).The use of the consensus meter also clearly revealed matters about which there was no agreement. The municipal council could thus concentrate on the matters to be discussed and base its decision on the aspects on which there was a general consensus.

**Opinion indicator on spatial planning**

Another example of a best practice is the consultation on the website www.geefmijderuimte.nl. This website gave citizens the opportunity to express an opinion on spatial planning choices facing the Netherlands. The questionnaire – a so-called 'opinion indicator' – was developed for this purpose and could be completed at this website. After completing the questionnaire, participants were able to compare their views with those of a couple of NGOs. The questionnaire was also published in national newspapers. Even participation by telephone was possible. In total 4,600 citizens completed the questionnaire. They could also indicate their contribution to a discussion on the subject. On the basis of this contribution they were invited to participate in live meetings organized nationwide.

**NORWAY**

There are essentially two kinds of experiments concerning online public consultation by Norwegian government bodies. First, there have been some early attempts at utilizing electronic means in existing consultative arrangements. Electronic means – and the Internet in particular - are basically seen as ways of broadening the scope of such arrangements. In other words, as a cost efficient way of improving accessibility. Thus, the immediate goals of the primary arrangements still constitute the main rationale of this kind of online public consultation.

Second, there are some early experiments in which electronic means are used to create new kinds of consultative arrangements. These arrangements build upon the new opportunities provided by the electronic means, both as completely new ways of conducting online consultation, and also (provided suitable technology is present) as reasonably inexpensive arrangements. Early attempts to utilize electronic means in existing consultative arrangements can be found at both local and national level. Although there is some variety at local level, most examples of this kind of online public consultation at national level consist of new or additional ways of circulating

political proposals – usually by means of the Internet.  In the case of Norwegian government ministries, this typically means publication on ODIN (www.odin.dep.no); the common Internet site dedicated to (national) government-related information in Norway (the site is owned and edited by the ministries).

Public consultations of this type are commonly announced at the ODIN site  – accompanied by links to the appropriate documents (although they are usually available at the same site). The processes commonly follow the main consultation procedure, which is subject to specific rules and regulations. Examples of electronic means being used to create new kinds of consultative arrangements are rather rare at the national level. And those of which we are aware of are not particularly well-known. Discussion groups on the Internet are a good example. These groups are usually established to encourage discussion on various topics as part of a political process – but have not been very successful. As such, they are more technology 'try-outs' rather than real experiments in extending democracy.

**SWEDEN**
**Demokratitorget – the Democracy Square**
http://www.demokratitorget.gov.se
The Commission on Democracy is an example of online consultation at central government level. This commission was appointed by the government to investigate the future of democracy in Sweden, and to put forward suggestions for revitalizing democracy. The commission has actively used the Internet for consulting the citizens. They invited the public to take part in several discussions on their website, and have made all their publications available online. In total, more than 40 interim reports and over 30 different online forums for discussion were created during the inquiry. A forum for discussion of the final report has now been opened at the website.

Some 600 visits a week were recorded on average, reaching 1,000 a week during the final phase of the inquiry. In addition to the online consultation activities, many different offline activities were undertaken during the inquiry. The commission members travelled all over the country and held seminars and "town hall meetings". The commission also held a number of conferences with national and international experts, for which no charge or only a minimal charge was made in order to allow everyone to participate.

On the basis of the commission's final report, the Minister of Democratic Issues and Public Administration decided to initiate a national consultation process about democracy and public participation and engagement, which was arranged during a half-year long process at the end of 2000. The report was published online at the website, which the Ministry adopted, and was also sent to a large number of agencies, municipalities, counties and organizations, as well as to 501 randomly selected citizens. In total, more than 400 replies were received. All of these replies were published on the website.

The Democracy Square website is today the central arena for the government's ongoing development work, Time for Democracy, which follows up on the commission's work. Via the website, organizations can apply for project funds for development projects that encourage public participation in democratic processes. In addition, the Ministry's Democracy Unit uses the website

to publish news and best practices relating to e-democracy. The website offers a number of deliberative elements, such a theme-based debates with politicians and experts.

The Commission on Democracy's usage of the Internet for public consultations sparked a growing interest in online consultation, and its information and ideas have been in demand by other commissions and committees. Today there is a growing number of national commissions and committees that use various forms of online consultations. A few examples are:

- Open Sweden (Öppna Sverige) (http://www.oppnasverige.gov.se)
- The Delegation on the Cultural Heritage of the Industrial Society (Delegationen för industrisamhällets kulturarv) (http://www.sou.gov.se/kulturarv)
- Action Plan for Health in Working Life (Handlingsplan för hälsa i arbetslivet) (http://www.sjukforsakring.gov.se)
- Committee on Sweden's Policy for Global Development (Kommittén om Sveriges politik för global utveckling) (http://www.globkom.net)
- The European Year for Languages 2001 (Europeiska året för språk 2001) (http://www.sprakaret.gov.se).
- Evaluation of the EU Directive on Personal Data (http://justitie.regeringen.se/propositionermm/ds/pdf/ds2001_27.PDF)

**Ny Flygplats**
http://www.nyflygplats.net

Another kind of online consultation which is seen as relevant in the Swedish context is the online consultations organized by central government agencies. The degree of "policy relevancy" can and will vary since government agencies are, by their very nature, not policy makers and exist instead to carry out the government's policies. However, due to the large size and high degree of independence of Swedish government agencies (by comparison with other countries), many policy issues are indeed handled by the agencies rather than by the government ministries, frequently in cooperation with or on behalf of the ministries.

One such example is "Ny Flygplats". The political debate concerning a new airport in the Stockholm area has been intense during the last couple of years. In January 2000, Luftfartsverket (the Swedish Civil Aviation Authority) decided to open a website, NyFlygplats (NewAirport). Luftfartsverket (LFV) is a government department responsible for all of Sweden's airports and air traffic.

It was a project committed to dialogue with the general public and made provision for information, discussions and opinions concerning this specific and important issue. The purpose of the site was to give all citizens a chance to participate in the important dialogue leading to the final decision on whether to build the new airport and if so where. Every citizen and every organization, municipality or government department that played a significant role in the decision had the opportunity to contribute both opinions and information.

The LFV website created a new kind of forum for advanced democratic dialogue with citizens long before the decision was made. One key feature of NyFlygplats was the "opinion grid" where organizations, action groups, parties, municipalities and authorities contributed their opinions on

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important questions. This meant that visitors to the website could easily obtain an overview of the discussion.

Another highlighted element was detailed descriptions about the different airport alternatives. Text, pictures, maps and OuickTime-movies gave a broad description on the various alternatives. The website also included interviews with citizens, air mail (e-cards), a comprehensive "material bank" and ample opportunity for visitors to contact many important organizations and "speak your voice". For a couple of months LFV also operated a moderated discussion group.

In May 2000, NyFlygplats received Guldlänken (the Golden Link award) for Democracy. The citation read: "The website is unique because it lets involved groups contribute their opinions and information on an important matter and all kinds of organizations are represented". NyFlygplats was shut down in January 2001. The Swedish government had by then decided not to build an airport south of Stockholm, thereby ending the political debate.

**Bollnäs**
http://www.bollnas.se
For a number of years the municipality of Bollnäs has been carrying out activities specifically designed to strengthen local democracy. Various measures have been taken to institute a good dialogue with the local inhabitants. Thanks to various democratic initiatives, including the opportunity to send written suggestions to the authorities, the inhabitants now can follow and shape the political agenda.

In the last few years the municipality of Bollnäs has also concentrated on developing a form of participatory democracy with IT support. The municipality has chosen to publish important documents on the Internet, for example the minutes of the meetings of the local councillors and the records of the local authority. During directly transmitted (webcasted) meetings, the citizens can also put questions to the members by e-mail. Questions that come up before or during the council meeting are read out and commented on directly at the meeting.

By using the Bollnäs Dialogue, the city has established an alternative means of communication alongside the traditional one. The Dialogue is a web-based application on the first page of the city's website. Citizens use the Dialogue to make their opinions and ideas heard, discuss them with others and receive an answer to specific questions to councillors and officials within 48 hours.

As a result of the municipality's initiatives, Bollnäs can now be said to be at the absolute cutting-edge of  IT solutions for enhancing the service to citizens and allowing effective monitoring and participation. However, Bollnäs believes that much remains to be done. The municipality has therefore recently initiated what is known as the Bollnäs e-democracy project. This project, which is partly financed by the Swedish Ministry of Justice, is intended to develop the framework for participatory democracy. With the backing of other initiatives taken in the city, in particular an electronic message and document handling system, a citizens' panel is to be established. This will make it possible for the panel to communicate its viewpoints at an early stage of the decision-making process. Bollnäs also aims to hold digital referendums and electronic trial elections.

**Kalix**

http://www.kalix.se

http://www.votia.com/kalix_demo

During September 2000, Kalix city council introduced an 'online town hall' that allows people to chat with local politicians and urban planners and even to vote electronically on issues pertaining to the proposed renovation of the town centre. All citizens over the age of 11 were given the opportunity to answer questions using the Internet, telephone or traditional paper-based surveys. The Kalix project focused on a subject that people believed would affect their lives. And the result was striking: over 7 percent of all citizens took part in the project in less than three weeks. By comparison, non-electronic forums to discuss similar issues in Kalix in recent years have generated less than a dozen reactions.

The coalition council wanted citizens of Kalix to have their say in the redesigning of the city centre, but not just at the town hall hearings, where most people are too embarrassed to speak out and few people show up anyway. This marked the beginning of the advisory consultation project, Kalix Rådslag. Citizens were asked a dozen questions about the city renovation project and could respond via the Internet or by traditional means such as the telephone and mail. The project had a secure website to which all citizens had their own password. On the site, Kalix residents could read the latest developments or check out maps and plans for the new city centre. To provide access for people who did not own a PC or have one at work, the city council arranged for schools and libraries to make their PCs available in the evenings.

Kalix citizens reacted with enthusiasm, flooding the city council with suggestions for improvement. More than 4,500 people visited the website, over 50 attended the discussion with the mayor and almost 1,200 (out of a total population of 18,000) took an active part (answered questions) in the Kalix Rådslag (86 percent of those using the Internet). Respondents raised a range of different matters, suggesting that Kalix needed more green areas and better cycle paths and pedestrian areas. The consultation process yielded real results. The city centre is now being rebuilt according to the wishes of the citizens. Later on this year the people of Kalix will have another chance to debate and deliberate on a local issue – local taxes - on the Internet.

**Tranemo**

http://www.tranemo.se

In Tranemo municipality, the elected representatives have decided to start a project designed to increase participation in municipal issues and local political debates on a pre-consultative basis. This project, known as the Public Right to Make Suggestions, uses an Internet-based system for obtaining the views and comments of local inhabitant. Using a web form citizens can ask questions and make comments. All questions are presented to the city council, and all replies are published on the municipality's website.

Tranemo municipality also regularly sponsors online chat events with elected representatives. Invitations to the "Politicians Café" are posted on the website. In general, Tranemo's work on

democracy is inspired by the idea of creating more meeting places for politicians and citizens. As all political documents are also published on the website, the municipality has a very transparent political agenda.

**UNITED KINGDOM**

The government of the UK has moved beyond pilots and experiments in online consultations, embedding them into normal practice. The *Code of Practice on Written Consultation*, issued by the Cabinet Office in November 2000, mandates electronic consultations for UK central government departments. It applies to consultation documents issued after 1 January 2001. It can be accessed at www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/servicefirst/index/consultation.htm.

**Government's Citizen Space**

When the UK's new government portal, ukonline.gov.uk, was designed, it was decided from the outset that it should have a space for citizen-to-government and citizen-to-citizen interaction. This was called *Citizen Space* and the main purposes of this feature were:

- to provide a gateway to government consultations
- to facilitate public discussion of policy issues
- to offer useful political and civic information that can help citizens navigate government
- to create a space for e-democracy.

Citizen Space is currently divided into two parts: one provides public information (*Know How)* and the other is a gateway to consultation and discussion (*Say So).* The *Know How* section is an embryonic facility for democracy-related information, such as the name of one's MP, voter information and how to make a complaint. The *Say So* section provides an index of all government consultations (associated with the Code of Practice on Written Consultation) and a discussion forum. The latter is currently the most used part of Citizen Space, with over 2,000 messages posted since its launch.

Citizen Space is potentially a key resource for citizens' interaction with government and with one another. Once fully developed, it could constitute a showcase for e-democracy in action. Citizen Space is experimental at the moment and many valuable lessons have been learned from its operation. Over the coming months it is hoped to radically redevelop the site and expand its facilities. This could, for example, include:

- the creation of much better opportunities for citizens to take part in consultations and policy discussions at, potentially, four levels of participation
- a major expansion of the information section to include a comprehensive resource for adult civic education
- closer and better connections with all levels of representative institutions, including local authorities, Westminster and the devolved parliament and the assemblies, and the European Parliament
- opportunities for citizens to sign up to be informed about upcoming policy issues, debates and events.

**Online consultation – to meet young people's needs**

(http://www.hillingdon.gov.uk/start.htm)

A consultation pilot designed to give young people in foster care a greater say in their lives was organized by the London Borough of Hillingdon. A group of 8 to 16-year-olds were invited by social services to give their views on being in foster care, and to share their care experiences with each other. The young people were able to give their comments on a computer via a special software package, which collects and evaluates opinions in a child-friendly way. The Council had worked to develop an interactive approach that allowed freedom of choice for the young people in terms of the look and feel of the screens they used. The software also provided breaks for games to encourage them. Summing up the day on video the participants were enthusiastic and comments included "I thought the day was great, it was really fun", "the computer now knows what happened in our lives" and "it was really helpful, I know a lot more about my rights in care now."

**UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**
**Department of the Treasury, Financial Management Service**
The Treasury's Financial Management Service has used its Internet website to make available Notices of Proposed Rulemakings (NPRMs), to seek public comment, and to provide access to final rules and policies related to government payments and collections. The site received approximately 80,000 hits for information during 1999.

**Department of Agriculture, Agriculture Marketing Service**
USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) conducted two online rulemaking sessions regarding the National Organic Programme (NOP).  The initial proposed rule was offered online with opportunity for individuals to comment, and to read the comments, e-mail and surface mail, submitted by others. The proposed rule was modified in response to the input and reissued.  A final rule was issued.  All information activity was available on the NOP website.  AMS received national recognition for the e-government programme. The NOP website is at http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop/.  While the rulemaking issue is closed, the site requests public feedback on other items.

**Department of Housing and Urban Development**
HUD is funded (in 2002) to develop virtual team technology and real-time chat technology.  HUD intends to use these technologies to provide opportunities for citizens, partners, and the HUD staff to work together - both in planned scenarios and on an ad hoc basis - to address public policy issues.  HUD is already working on a pilot that is expected to be implemented before the end of the calendar year and that will allow citizens to get housing counselling online via real-time chats. Once HUD proves this can work (interactive, real-time technology), it will approach managers to do more substantial town hall meetings (combining web casts and real time chats) on issues. HUD is also toying with the idea of using a talk show format, where citizens can e-mail in their questions every Friday from 1 to 3 (for example) on how to buy a home.

**Environmental Protection Agency**
The Agency attracted 1,200 users to participate in a series of national online dialogues it conducted from 10 to 20 July 2001 to discuss its draft public-involvement policy. The EPA Online Dialogue is seen as an example of what can be achieved with the web: the Agency is not only informing the public, but the public is also informing the Agency. EPA had received about 1,200 messages by 19 July, with the greatest number coming from the East Coast. The Agency sought

comments from citizens to help devise a plan for a policy and its implementation. One of the biggest challenges has been perusing all the messages and picking the ones that offered best practices and useful ideas.

The Draft 2000 Public Involvement Policy, released last December, is aimed at helping EPA make environmental decisions that take into account the interests and concerns of affected citizens, promoting techniques for public involvement and setting procedures for public involvement in EPA's decision-making processes.

During the EPA Online Dialogue a typical day started at 7.30 a.m. with the moderator posting the topic of the day along with an introduction and messages from a panel of experts. Participants could either post a new thread or reply to a message. The moderator scanned all the messages for spam and formatting problems. The messages were not edited for content and were posted on the site. They will be archived for at least one year.

EPA received about 100 to 200 messages daily, and at 8 p.m. a daily summary was made of the comments and sent to all the participants. The Agency wanted to target consumer, environmental and advocacy groups, minorities, businesses, researchers and education groups. Topics included identifying potentially affected parties in EPA's decision-making process; finding ways of getting them involved; and getting feedback from states, American Indian tribes, local governments and other organizations. To boost participation in the dialogues, EPA conducted a marketing push that targeted public-interest and professional groups

**U.S. Food and Drug Administration**
(http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~lrd/fdavoice.html
As a regulatory agency, FDA publishes rules that establish or modify the way it regulates foods, drugs, biologics, cosmetics, radiation-emitting electronic products, and medical devices: commodities close to the daily lives of all Americans. FDA rules have considerable impact on the nation's health, industries and economy. These rules are not created arbitrarily or in a vacuum. They are formed with the public's help.

By law, anyone can participate in the rule-making process by commenting in writing on the rules FDA proposes. FDA allows plenty of time for public input and carefully considers these comments when it draws up a final rule. FDA gathers public comments mainly through two channels: proposed rules and petitions.

When FDA plans to issue a new regulation or revise an existing one, it places an announcement in the Federal Register on the day the public comment period begins. Published every weekday, the Federal Register is available at many public libraries and colleges, and on the FDA Website. Issues open to public comment are often  reported by the news media and can also be found on FDA's Website.

**The U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT)**
The U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) is the  first - and so far the only - major Federal Agency to create an Internet-accessible system for the review and submission of  documents to all

of the Department's rulemaking and adjudicatory dockets. (A  docket is a public record and contains all the information the agency uses to  establish or enforce rules, such as rulemaking documents, supporting analyses,  and public comment). DOT is, by some measures, the largest Federal rulemaking agency. Its Docket Management System (DMS) allows the public to instantly and  easily submit comments and recommendations to DOT via the Internet, to view the comments others have submitted, and to respond to those comments. Over 1.2 million pages of docketed material are currently available online. In fiscal year 2000, there were almost 309,000 users, an increase of 40 percent from fiscal year 1999's 220,000 users. Through DMS,  DOT has used technological innovation to advance and expand the public's involvement in policy debates.

From the convenience of their desktops, the public can use DMS to determine what rulemaking or adjudicatory actions DOT is proposing; view or download the background material and information DOT is relying upon; and electronically search across all DOT dockets simultaneously. The system also provides other valuable information not readily available in paper files, such as a "running" list of rulemakings open for public comment.

Through DMS, DOT has reduced internal administrative costs by $1.3 million annually, by drastically reducing the amount of space needed to store paper files and the number of staff needed to process docketed material. DMS also saves the government and the public time and money spent on travelling to the dockets facility, reviewing files, copying dockets, and transmitting or picking up documents. Best of all, however, is the tremendous opportunity DMS represents for all public agencies to increase and improve public participation in government decision-making processes. The Department has also taken other actions or pilot projects concerning online consultation with the public. For example, one of the operating administrations has used "chat rooms" to increase the opportunities for dialogue during rulemaking comment periods.

## SECTION 3: COORDINATING THE PILOT PROJECTS, COMPILING THE RESULTS AND DEVELOPING A STANDARD FOR ONLINE PUBLIC CONSULTATION

**What are we talking about?**

Carrying out pilot projects and experiments is a good way of learning and of bringing governments into contact with new ways of democratic policymaking. However, if governments are to be directly encouraged to participate in online public consultation, knowledge and experience need to be clustered and combined. Also, drawing on the lessons learned from pilot projects, they need to be provided with the context of a general policy framework on online public consultation.

**Why is this important?**

Compiling and exchanging best practices is, firstly, a good way of providing governments with ideas once they have decided they are principally interested in online public consultation. Governments want to know what online public consultation actually involves, which methods are suitable, what technical tools and supporting services they will need and what conditions must be met by a successful process. Secondly, the clustering and exchange of knowledge allows experiments to advance the state of the art. It can stimulate the further development of the consultation process. Solutions can be sought for barriers and  common issues. Furthermore, the process of clustering and exchange of knowledge in this field gradually leads to a certain standardization or certification of products and processes. This does not as yet necessitate the creation of dominant or mandatory standards. But noting a particular example as best practice is already a first step towards a "grade".

Government is devoting increasing attention to shaping the process that takes place prior to new policy measures. This is an area where the modern network society has a particular need of horizontal cooperation. Horizontal cooperation paves the way for democratically legitimized proposals and support for implementation. Moreover, it takes advantage of knowledge and expertise that is ready and available in society. Lastly, it breeds a sense of mutual responsibility for public issues. The developments in the ICT field can exert a major influence on policy and government and on public decision-making by making the exchange of information between the public and government more horizontal. This issue requires careful consideration – a fact underlined by the speed and unpredictability with which technical innovations are taking place. We see enormous developments in ICT applications that are leading to a spectacular growth in the scope for innovative policy-making. And it is precisely this speed and unpredictability that create a need for a joint approach to the issues involved.

**What kind of information does this project provide?**

In the project we examine how the promotion of online public consultation by national governments is being coordinated in the various countries. We take stock of the ways in which different countries are organizing this phase in developing a practice of electronic public consultations. At the same time, we also consider their general policies on online public consultation in the policymaking process.

**CANADA**

Since online consultation is still a relatively new and emerging government function for the government of Canada, promotion of online public consultation by national government bodies  is still at preliminary stages of development and implementation. The horizontal coordination of consultation activities is considered to be a high priority and the responsibility of the Privy Council Office, along with the coordination of government policies and of communications.  In this context, online consultation is viewed as an integral element of an overall consultation activity, and is not treated as a separate function.

Based on early experiences with online consultation and engagement, a number of key elements have been identified as critical to building a foundation of support:
- coordinated leadership
- research and development (academic and applied)
- technical infrastructure (including privacy, security elements)
- skills/capacity-building
- learn from experiences and best practices, both domestically and internationally
- build public awareness of online engagement opportunities
- collaborate with external partners (private sector, non-profit organizations, think tanks, etc)

More specifically, the Canadian government is taking action in:
- funding pilot projects through the GOL Pathfinder initiative (http://www.gol-ged.gc.ca/index_e.asp) with online consultation components
- reviewing and testing various software tools and techniques
- providing learning and skills training opportunities through its central management and development centres
- documenting and sharing across the government, domestic and international experiences in online consultation and engagement
- initiating early developmental work on a government-wide consultation portal, as a way of increasing public awareness of and access to online consultation initiatives
- conducting public opinion research with Canadians about public consultation and e-democracy concepts.

The Government of Canada has developed a draft consultation policy, designed to provide overarching advice and support to departments in the design and implementation of both off-line and online consultation processes. Included as an annex item are specific guidelines for consulting and engaging citizens online. The draft policy is currently in the final review and approval stages.

While there is no certification relating specifically to online consultation, there are certain standards and requirements for the government's use of the Internet for public interaction, e.g.
- Common 'Look and Feel Standard' for the Internet (http://www.cio-dpi.gc.ca/clf-upe/a_e.asp)
- Policy on the use of official languages on the Internet (http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pubs_pol/hrpubs/OffLang/uolee.html)

- Government of Canada Internet Guide ([http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/Pubs_pol/ciopubs/TB_CP/ging_e.html](http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/Pubs_pol/ciopubs/TB_CP/ging_e.html))
- Access to Information Act Act (http://canada.justice.gc.ca/STABLE/EN/Laws/Chap/A/A-1.html)
- Privacy and Data Protection (http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/P-21/index.html)

**FINLAND**

In Finland there is no particular central policy on online public consultation. The otakantaa pilot forum has been used to promote electronic consultation. The forum is now run by each government ministry for one month. The forum will be connected in due course to the government portal ([www.suomi.fi](http://www.suomi.fi)) now under construction. It will then be run even more horizontally, possibly with its own editor.

As the name of the forum "[otakantaa.fi](http://otakantaa.fi)" is relatively well-known it was decided that it would be worthwhile to retain it in the future. Different ministries have been under some pressure to set up their own forums. The common forum already in action as a forum for public management issues was seen as a good solution for all ministries, so that the questions would pertain to all areas of government and not just to public management. Citizens would accordingly know at what address they could find the forum. An additional benefit is that the ministries would not have to set up their own forums with new addresses.

The Ministry of Finance/Public Management Department operates the forum for the other ministries (providing technology, marketing and general maintenance). The ministries are themselves in charge of the actual running of the forum. They choose the issues that will be put on the forum for discussion. The ministries' civil servants in charge of the issues discussed in the forum will acts as the moderators. The ministries are, of course, also in charge of providing the forum with background material for the issues under discussion. After the discussions they will prepare a resumé for publication on the otakantaa pages and will take the results of the discussion into account in their preparatory work on the issues concerned.

The ministries are also being encouraged to include in the discussion issues that are cross-sectoral. This will mean that the forum can be run in cooperation with other ministries. Although the ministries tend at present to chose subjects that relate only to their own sector, it is hoped that the trend will in future be towards a cross-sectoral approach with several ministries acting as moderators simultaneously. Care must also be taken to ensure that topical and important issues can be included for discussion in the otakantaa-forum even if they do not come within the remit of the ministry running the forum that month.

Such a forum could also be operated in cooperation with civic organizations. The moderator or host of the forum could be somebody other than the government body itself. In Finland, however, the pilot discussion forum has been run by the State. This has been partly in order to ensure its impartiality and partly in order to get civil servants committed to the work.

There are no national guidelines on electronic consultation at this stage, but there are some general principles for the otakantaa forum. One main principle is that the results of the discussions are used afterwards in preparing issues and that a brief summary is always made of the discussions.

Another is that no system of registration is needed in the discussions. Citizens have for the most part communicated anonymously with the forum, although they could of course disclose their own name if they wished. The discussion forum has been run on the principle that since it is open to every citizen that no advance registration is needed. The number of inappropriate comments received and needing to be deleted by the moderators during the year in which the forum has been operating has been very small.

**FRANCE**

Open online forums are set up by government bodies to gauge public opinion. It is considered important to reach the widest possible audience and then receive more contributions from people interested.

Nowadays online public consultation takes place on specific topics notably related to the use of Internet facilities and also on more general issues. Open online forums are set up by government bodies to gauge public opinion. Any online public consultation launched by national government bodies is promoted through the government portal, on the Prime Minister's website www.internet.gouv.fr and in many cases through various media. This was the case, for instance, in June 2001 in the case of the M. Carcenac survey on e-administration and how to improve electronic service delivery.

In many cases online public consultation involves several government ministries. A team, generally headed by the Prime Minister's office, coordinates the activities of the different ministries. A ministry or an agency is then chosen to launch and manage the consultation process. The most important reason for doing this is that these public consultations are often an extension of inter-ministerial work (for example draft new regulations ) and that the results of the consultation is of interest to these government bodies.

Guidelines were drawn up on how to design a public website, including recommendations for the setting up of forums and management of mail systems. A survey was launched on government bodies' websites last year to evaluate the quality of information and services delivered to the public and to measure the response delay to citizens' claims. A charter is being drawn up and will be published in due course by the Ministry of State Reform. There is as yet no standardization or certification of online public consultations. The draft regulation on access to and accessibility of government includes the rule that everyone who may have been named during an online consultation will have the right to respond or ask for deletion of the message.

**MEXICO**

The Federal Government will implement, as a democratic practice, the Participative Planning System. It will promote a process of definition, understanding, continuation and evaluation of the actions taken by the government throughout the public administration. At the same time, it will take account of public opinion in elaborating and evaluating local and regional plans that will be carried out in the period 2001-2006.

The Participative Planning System includes three processes that will support the adequate performance of the public administration:

I.      Strategic planning

II.     Continuation and control of the federal, local and regional plans

III.    Organizational improvements within the public institutions

Each of these processes involves the use of ICT in trying to promote efficient electronic government.


**THE NETHERLANDS**

Ever since the Dutch government discovered the Internet as a communication channel between government and citizens, it has promoted online consultations by government organizations. Online consultation has been part of the policy expressed in the Electronic Government Action Plan (1999) (http://www.minbzk.nl/e-overheid/) and has been promoted by the vision for electronic government laid down in the Contract with the Future policy paper (2000) (http://www.minbzk.nl/international/). The policy is being implemented by issuing the publications described below, setting up an Expertise Bureau for Innovative Policymaking (www.xpin.nl) and drafting a framework for terms of agreement for digital debates. Progress in the quantity of online consultations is measured by monitoring the quality of government websites.

A Manual for Electronic Public Consultation (http://www.minbzk.nl/international/) was issued by the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations in 1998. This manual describes best practices and provides tips for successful online public consultation. The manual has been distributed among all government organizations. An online publication containing a survey of best practices was published in September 2000, but focused mainly on the various technical support possibilities that were available on the market (http://www.advies.overheid.nl/page.jsp?pageid=1113). The aim of this publication was to assist various administrative bodies in choosing service providers to help them run online consultations. This publication too has now been supplemented by a chapter containing best practices and various tips on how to run a successful online consultation. The technical instruments described in the publication are mainly useful in *gathering ideas and opinions* (divergent), whereas reaching decisions in an online discussion is viewed as a challenge of a different kind. An overview of the technical instruments available as support in *reaching decisions* on matters discussed by an online population (convergent) will therefore be provided this year.

Initiated and funded by the Dutch national government, the Expertise Bureau for Innovative Policymaking (http://www.xpin.nl) became operational in June 2001. The aim of this Bureau is to compile best practices and to promote the development of online public consultation processes by governments. Ministries, regional authorities and local authorities have developed a wide range of techniques, approaches etc. for working together with interested parties and persons in order to achieve public goals. However the same problems are encountered again and again. The trend towards a more horizontal society and the rise of new forms of ICT has prompted the creation of an Expertise Bureau that can compile the acquired know-how and experience and apply it elsewhere in government organizations. This will help to make decision-making processes more professional. It can also help to improve efficiency and possibly even introduce a degree of standardization. The Bureau aims to promote wide use of innovative ICT facilities to support decision-making processes, for instance to communicate formulated plans, to allow the public to express their opinions or to actually support the processes themselves.

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The Expertise Bureau must cluster government know-how and experience gained in respect of new relationships between the general public and administrators. In concrete terms this can involve a systematic database of cases in which such knowledge has been applied in reaching decisions (type, subject, place, time and names), thus enabling other parties to be referred to these cases. The Bureau will organize meetings, conferences and electronic exchanges between these professionals in accordance with relevant themes. Finally, the Bureau can provide a basis for the development of new approaches to experiments and pilot projects that exceed the capacities of a single government ministry. A list of digital discussions on political topics is provided at the national government portal.

Research has recently been commissioned in order to draft a framework of terms of agreement for digital debates in which citizens and government officials alike take part. This framework is meant to offer a level of certainty for all participants in a virtual debating environment. The government hopes that this framework will provide the secure context of an agreed set of rules and mutual expectations, thereby allowing a fruitful and unhampered exchange of views. The framework is planned for completion in March 2002.

**NORWAY**

Norway has not yet established a central policy on online public consultation, although it would not be inaccurate to say that there is general agreement on the importance of working in this direction.

**SWEDEN**

Sweden has a long tradition of democratic, public decision-making processes. Since the last general elections in 1998, Sweden has had a Minister for Democratic Issues and Public Administration, whose task is to reinforce this tradition and strengthen democratic development in Sweden. The government has concluded that there is potential for using ICT to enhance citizen participation in democratic processes, and is actively supporting experiments in this area. In the Swedish tradition, however, public consultation was formalized – and used – long before the advent of the Internet and other ICTs, and online consultations are therefore not seen by the Swedish government as a new policy area per se, but rather as a natural continuation of the existing policy for an open, accessible and approachable government, which however offer new possibilities. "Debates and discussions on the Internet are a new way of working for most of us and certainly for me personally," states Britta Lejon, Swedish Minister of Democratic Issues and Public Administration, on the home page of Democracy Square. "It is important that democracy is represented and discussed on the net, because new technologies must be used to develop society's forms of governance, otherwise those of us who are interested in the development of society risk ending up in the backwater. Moreover, it is important to use all imaginable tools that let you and me as citizens have a voice in our common deliberations."

In the early days of eGovernment, Sweden (like most other governments in the industrialized countries) concentrated on automating the internal working processes and improving the functioning and efficiency of the internal organization. The introduction of computerized processes, internal electronic messaging systems and so on did not directly affect the world outside government. But then came the Internet, and with it the start of the efforts by the government and public administration to put existing services and information online, available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Government websites offering information and simple services such as the downloading of forms were created.

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We are now on the eve of a transition in which government will work on building new informational relationships with increasingly assertive businesses, institutions and citizens. In Sweden, this transition is known as the 24/7 Agency. This is much more than simple 24/7 services; although they are, of course, part of it, there is much more to it: "It is not only [a] question of making public services more accessible through electronic delivery, even if that is very important. More fundamental, in my mind, is the possibilities for greater openness and citizens involvement and participation," (Britta Lejon, Swedish Minister of Democratic Issues and Public Administration, at the EU-IDA conference on eGovernment).

Since Sweden is to a large extent a decentralized society, many policy consultations are organized either by central government agencies or by commissions of inquiry (rather than by Parliament's select committees), or in the regional and local authorities. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that they are making the most active use of online consultations, for example in urban planning processes and in general. In other words, it is in these areas that online engagement is seen as most beneficial to all agencies and government institutions and to the public at large.

**UNITED KINGDOM**
The United Kingdom government has been developing a draft policy on an overarching policy for e-democracy on which it will begin a public consultation. The overarching draft policy regarding e-democracy contains two tracks: electronic public participation and electronic voting. The policy on electronic participation aims to use new technologies to connect the voices of individual citizens and groups of citizens to government and thereby to provide new opportunities for citizens to participate in the policy and decision-making process, to motivate people to get engaged in the democratic process and to improve policies and services.

It is the government's view that the opening of new channels of democratic participation may encourage people to take part in the democratic process and, in particular, may benefit groups that have, in the past, not felt included and  today may find it hard to participate in existing democratic channels, for example: (i) ethnic minorities, for whom new technologies can help build social communities; (ii) disabled people, who with the help of new technologies could more easily and on more equal terms participate in the policy process; (iii) young people who may be inspired to participate by the use of modern methods of interaction.

Open and inclusive communication between citizens and government is crucial for a well-functioning democracy. Individual citizens, as well as groups of citizens, should be able to participate in the government's process of making and implementing policies and delivering services. Citizens should be able to:
- obtain information about policy proposals
- discuss policy issues with the government, their representatives and other citizens
- put their comments on the proposal to the government
- be confident that their comments will be taken into account appropriately as the policy evolves.

It is the government's view that new technologies can play a role in providing new ways for people to:
- access government information

- have a dialogue with policy-makers
- participate in government consultations
- follow and understand the political and democratic process
- discuss and form groups on particular issues.

The government lays out a suggested action plan that may become the expression of the policy for central government, which includes the following measures:

## 1. Redevelop CitizenSpace on ukonline.gov.uk into a showcase example of e-democracy

The UK government portal ukonline.gov.uk provides a single point of entry to a wide range of government information and services. Within ukonline.gov.uk, the CitizenSpace area currently provides a gateway to government departments' online consultations, and also to a set of free-wheeling discussion forums. This policy proposes to redevelop CitizenSpace and turn it into a showcase example of e-democracy within central government. CitizenSpace will then offer the following services:

*Civic education*: a trusted place to which citizens can come to navigate their ways around the complexities of the United Kingdom's political and civic life, including

- accessible information about how the country is governed and how citizens can best make use of government.
- information on how and why to vote, helping to enable citizens to make sense of their rights, opportunities and duties.
- a map of representation and how it works, including links to parliament and assemblies.
- links to information that can inform public debate in general and policy discussions on CitizenSpace specifically.

*Participation in the government's policy processes*: several distinct arenas, each involving a different level of formality, and an appropriate level of commitment on the way in which government will respond to contributions. The arenas might include:

- consultations - opportunities to comment online on draft government policies and to see what others have submitted. Government is already committed to the publication of a formal response to consultations.
- policy forums - established to help shape policy in a particular area. They would generally involve individuals and organizations invited to participate because they have specific experiences and expertise needed to inform the policy development. Government would sponsor such forums, and generally ensure that a summary of their proceedings is published.
- government-led discussion groups - established by government, on areas of policy, including current consultation. They would be available to all citizens as a mechanism for exchanging views and influencing others. Government and departments might participate in such discussions from time to time, and the service might include the periodic compilation of summaries or abstracts of the discussions.

- citizen-led discussion groups – to enable citizens and organizations to be able to develop their ideas and arguments, and gauge support for them, before actively engaging government. Government would not commit to respond to such groups in every case, but would expect to keep a watching brief so that it could engage positively when appropriate.

*Interaction with representatives*: to strengthen the role of representatives.
*Interaction with civil society organizations*: to recognize the very important role played by non-governmental organizations in the democratic process and ensure that civil society is included in the process, CitizenSpace will provide links to non-government organizations.

2. Include online public participation in departments' e-business strategies

Government departments' commitment and approach to online policy consultations and discussions should be formalized in their e-business strategies.

3. Consider how existing award schemes may be used to provide a focus for e-democracy

To encourage departments, authorities and other public organizations to adopt
e-democracy, existing award schemes should include an e-democracy criterion: for example, the innovative use of new technologies to foster greater citizen participation in the democratic process.

4. Develop an e-democracy charter

Guidelines for an e-democracy charter to be implemented by all government departments will be developed, which will include such issues as:
*An Information Statement*: about the availability of e-democracy services, such as online consultations, discussion forums and links to relevant web sites.
*A Responsiveness Statement:* the type of feedback that can be expected when participating electronically in consultations (built on the Code of Practice) and discussion forums.
*A Privacy and Security Statement:* the level of privacy and security that can be expected when participating in online consultations, discussions and voting.

All of the above actions will be subject to wide-ranging consultation within all levels of government including the Westminster Parliament, the devolved parliament and assemblies and local government.

The Code of Practice on Written Consultation sets out criteria for consultations that are binding on central government departments. Amongst many other things, the criteria cover the requirement for consultations to be online: "Documents should be made widely available, *with the fullest use of electronic means (though not to the exclusion of others),* and effectively drawn to the attention of all interested groups and individuals." For elucidation of this criterion see section 1.
UK non-departmental public bodies are encouraged to follow the code, and contribute to the register, but it is not binding on them. Devolved administrations (e.g. the Parliament of Scotland, and the Assemblies in Northern Ireland and Wales) are free to adopt the code, but it will not apply to

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consultation documents issued by them unless they do. The code is not about consultation within government.

Departments are expected to notify the launch of any consultation to ukonline.gov.uk so that it can be included in the consultation register displayed in CitizenSpace. Similarly, once consultations are completed, the register is to be updated and a hyperlink to the department's response is displayed. These provisions will play a key role in ensuring that departmental consultations are coordinated. The Code provides that consultations should be joined up within or across departments wherever reasonably possible: some respondents, especially small businesses, may not have time to deal with multiple requests for comment. Consultation coordinators should encourage such mergers within departments. Departments should contribute as early as possible to the register of forthcoming consultations when established, and examine it regularly for possible partners.

**UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

The basic process by which federal agencies develop and issue regulations is spelled out in the Administrative Procedure Act of 1946. It requires agencies to publish a notice of proposed rulemaking in the Federal Register, to allow interested persons an opportunity to participate in the rulemaking process by written data, views or arguments and publish the final rule 30 days before it becomes effective. Various legislative and administrative initiatives have emphasized the potential of IT to improve the federal government's performance, for example in relation to interactive public participation in rulemaking. Mention should be made here of the Paperwork Reduction Act (1995), the National Performance Review (1993) and a presidential memorandum on Electronic Government (1999).

The Unified Agenda of Federal Regulatory and Deregulatory Actions is published twice a year in the Federal Register by the Regulatory Information Service Centre. It provides uniform reporting of data on regulatory activities under development throughout the federal government. Since October 1995 the Unified Agenda has been published electronically. Notices of Proposed Rulemaking are published daily by agencies in the electronically searchable Federal Register, together with information on opportunities to participate. Some federal agencies provide the service of e-mail notification when they send a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking or when certain keywords appear in Notices of Proposed Rulemaking on the site. According to a study by the General Accounting Office (GAO), agencies still differ substantially in their acceptance of comments submitted electronically.

Senator Joseph I. Lieberman (D-Conn.) and the General Accounting Office regard the Transportation Department's online Docket Management System (DMS), which went live in 1996 at www.dot.gov, as a model for interactive rule-making. Lieberman, ranking member of the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee, and Rep. Henry A. Waxman (D-Calif.), ranking member of the House Government Reform Committee, asked GAO to examine the interactive use of IT for rule-making. GAO studied how five regulatory agencies use IT to pull public input for regulatory analysis and forming of rules. The agencies include the departments of Agriculture, Health and Human Services, Labour and Transportation, and the Environmental Protection Agency.

In  preparing its study, GAO brought together a number of government agencies (and Congressional staff) who were working on such efforts to help coordinate and analyze the efforts. The Bush Administration is also looking into measures it can take to have Internet-accessible dockets created government-wide.

In the fall of 2000 the Office of Management and Budget briefed the US Senate about the focus of the Federal government's e-government efforts. Regarding public consultation, agencies supported moving more rulemaking online. Several noted that in the long run, such activity saves money compared to traditional paper-based rulemaking. There was mixed support for establishing legislative guidelines in this area. Several agencies pointed out that the Government Paperwork Elimination Act already promotes online rulemaking (http://www.itpolicy.gsa.gov/itleaders/omb-skatzen-memo.doc).

In the GAO study on IT-based interactive public participation in federal rulemaking, several individuals and organizations suggested that agencies move to a more consistent organization, content and presentation of information to allow for a more common "look and feel" to agencies' IT-based public participation mechanisms in rulemaking. Although some of them said that standardization of IT-based public participation innovations across agencies could lead to more participation, the agency representatives contacted in the study generally did not believe cross-agency standardization was either necessary or appropriate. According to them, each agency needed to develop systems appropriate for their particular circumstances and there were no data indicating that the current lack of standardization was a problem, or that standardization would improve either the quantity or the quality of the participation.

## SECTION 4.: FORMALLY ADJUSTING THE POLICY PROCESS: MAKING CHANGES IN INSTITUTIONS AND LEGISLATION

**What are we talking about?**

If online public consultation really becomes a standard feature of the policy cycle, stresses and strains will arise with the institutional frameworks within which national policy is being developed. These may involve the way in which the national government communicates with the public, the public nature of certain documents, the responsibilities of holders of office, the way in which elements of government work together, etc. A great deal is already possible within existing frameworks and rules, as has been shown by the examples in section 3.

**Why is this important?**

It is also evident that completely successful implementation of online public consultations in policy processes requires the adjustment of existing rules and the formulation of new ones. This serves to codify and regulate practices that are designated as desirable or have evolved through experimentation. Formulating rules and agreements creates clarity for all those involved. The responsibilities in the consultation process become clear to everyone. Expectations are given greater focus. As soon as governments start to consider these aspects and to take corresponding action, they have passed the experimental phase of online public consultation and have shifted to the last phase.

Changes to and formulation of rules will not result only from the direct requirements of online public consultation. There are usually various reasons for making changes. These are related to the networking in society as a whole and the growing importance of horizontal relations between the government and the public. Nonetheless, it is interesting to see the extent to which GOL countries are actively preparing a set of rules that will enable online public consultation to become common practice in the preparation of policy.

**What kind of information does this project provide?**

It can be assumed that most countries have not yet reached the phase in which rules are established and adjusted in order to facilitate online public consultation. Nonetheless, it is interesting, with a view to the future, to know in which countries these issues are already influencing policy.

**CANADA**

The Government of Canada is still in the early days of online consultation and will await further experience before determining if legislative changes are needed in the area of e-consultation. Currently there are no plans for changes in legislation and institutions.

**FINLAND**

The otakantaa forum is still a pilot project and the government portal to which it will be attached at a later date is still under construction. It follows that changes have not yet been made to legislation or

institutions. The question of how to proceed in the future will probably be considered in the autumn of 2001 when there will be a discussion on making the forum permanent.

## FRANCE

Online public consultation is an important stage of e-democracy, but cannot be separated from other topics such as political campaigns and e-voting. All these topics need to be strictly regulated in accordance with the legal framework. Many questions such as citizens ID (and citizen location) need to be resolved. Free expression of each citizen's opinion through the use of the Internet means that there must be a fair way to manage forums, polls, political campaigns on the web. Many interest groups are actively working on these issues. A special interest group at the National Assembly level is trying to adapt the electoral (paper-based) code to digital means. This is necessary because more and more citizens are using the web in their daily life and are willing to be involved in the decision-making process. It is also regarded as a good way of increasing citizen's participation in public affairs.

Many proposals have been drafted for remote voting, online registration of new voters, and the use of the healthcare smart card already distributed to each French citizen as an ID card for e-voting or to access to public online forums.

The mayor of Issy les Moulineaux is about to set up an online people's panel to gauge citizens' expectations. There are many other projects and initiatives especially at municipal level. But all these initiatives still need to be consolidated by the introduction of a set of legal rules covering the entire democratic process.

## THE NETHERLANDS

The Committee for Basic Rights in the Digital Era has recommended that a basic right of access to government information be included in the constitution. This recommendation reflects the conviction that basic rights must be adapted to take account of the information era. The recommendation has been adopted by the government and the preparations for the amendments to Constitution have now been started.

At present policy documents are generally published only when the government has finished its preparations and has sent the document to parliament to be confirmed. However, it is quite possible that openness regarding policy *in preparation* could become just as customary as openness regarding defined policy.

Another current issue is the wish of participants in an online consultation process to receive feedback on what is being done with their contributions. What are the mutual rights and duties of citizens and government in a digital discussion environment? The Dutch Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations commissioned research into questions of this kind in order to develop a clear set of rules applicable to digital debates in which government bodies participate. This research is part of a broader research programme that focuses on tensions between principles of the democratic constitutional state and specific IT features, such as deterritorialization, virtuality/dematerialization, (knowledge or possession of) IT as a reflection of power, horizontalization, and transparency.

**UNITED KINGDOM**

The UK government is monitoring experience gained from the introduction of online consultations, and will respond to questions concerning changes in institutions and legislation:

- once enough evidence is available for conclusions to be drawn
- after a period of consultation about e-democracy policy generally, probably in the autumn of 2001. A probable outcome is that online forums will be established, with distinct levels of formality and public involvement, to improve public participation in the deliberative process *before* policy is sufficiently mature to be the subject of formal consultation.

**UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

Although federal agencies are in favour of more rulemaking online, there is mixed support for establishing legislative guidelines in this area. Several agencies have pointed out that the Government Paperwork Elimination Act already promotes online rulemaking (http://www.itpolicy.gsa.gov/itleaders/omb-skatzen-memo.doc).

## SECTION 5: SUMMING-UP

The preceding sections have described a wide variety of approaches, examples, priorities and intentions regarding online consultations by national governments. A general conclusion could be that there is certainly not one standard model by which online consultation is brought about ideally. On the contrary, we see every government experimenting for its own purposes, taking advantage of lessons learned by pilots and experiments and sometimes building on examples from governments abroad. It is aimed to feed this process of developing and redeveloping by conducting and publishing this study.

This section sets out some general conclusions drawn on the basis of the preceding material. These conclusions indicate either possible lines of further research or questions to be considered when starting to design an online consultation process.

### Electronic provision of information

We can conclude from this study that most of the participating countries have embarked on the implementation of a general policy to make information available electronically. We did not have the opportunity here to delve into the precise nature of these documents. It would, however, be interesting to consider how far governments go in publishing data. Do they publish only policies that has been agreed upon by parliament? Or do they also publish information relevant in the stage of   preparation of policies? Does that also mean that they publish on their websites all investigative reports regarding the issue under discussion? And all correspondence regarding the issue? Would this also cover internal correspondence between a civil servant and a minister? This would be an interesting subject for further investigation with regard to the future of e-democracy.

### Different approaches to experiments

All participating countries report experiments with online consultation. It is clear that the participation of citizens in debates on issues that affect their daily lives is considered important by all governments taking part in this study. The nature and scope of these processes differ greatly. We see differences in purposes, methods, target groups, subjects etc. In some countries it is taken for granted that participants have to register (UK, Canada), in other countries anonymous contributions too are welcomed (Finland, the Netherlands). Different procedures have been used to manage the process (e.g. moderation, deletion of messages, providing summaries, e-mail notification). We can therefore conclude that a general approach has not been developed. We could even conclude that this will never be the case, given the variety of situations in which online consultation has been tried. Online consultation seems to be a matter of trial and error, of variety and selection and of ongoing creativity, trying to keep pace with technological innovation and societal developments.

### Purposes of online consultation

We can conclude from the experiments described that the design and management of an online consultation process seem to be highly dependent on the purposes a government tries to achieve. If it strives for the inclusion of all in policy deliberations, then general accessibility and multichannel

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marketing of the process are important. If the aim is to obtain high-quality input from professionals, the process should adapt to the specific needs and wishes of the particular group. It can then be conducted in a closed environment, into which professionals are invited personally. Canada has reported significant efficiency gains by using an online environment for discussion. If this were to be a purpose, plans for the use of cutting-edge visualization techniques could be dispensed with. It follows that before choosing methods and techniques, the first step should be to define the purpose of an online consultation process.

**Providing feedback**

Most countries are aware that consultation also means providing proper feedback to the participants. What most examples show, however, is a lack of clarity on how precisely the input was valued and used. This is not surprising since a consultation process takes place within a dynamic political environment and as part of an overall process that is to some extent unpredictable. Policymaking has to do with moving targets. How to properly embed online consultation in this process, i.e. how to satisfy the need for accountability regarding the incorporation of the input into a final proposal, is an issue most countries are still grappling with. It is suggested that there is a negative correlation between the degree of openness of the debate and the numbers of people involved in it on the one hand, and the degree to which the input is seriously considered by policymakers on the other. However, a guarantee of the follow-up on the proposals made in an online debate will also enhance the enthusiasm of the public and the quality of the debate.

**Rules and regulations**

Experiments are being undertaken by the GOL members countries on an encouraging scale. As a result, some of them have already started to draw up principles or adapt existing guidelines for discussion in the online environment. This is due to the need for coordination and for instruments to stimulate the practice of online consultation. These guidelines cover, for example, the accessibility of the consultation process, privacy statements and the provision of feedback. The issue here is how far governments should go in regulating interactive practice on the Internet. Not only are practices and expectations evolving fast, but also the diversity and creativity involved are resulting in practices to suit every single policy situation. Countries have adopted different approaches, depending on their own administrative and political culture. Frameworks may be tight or extremely lenient. Whatever the case, it is highly important to exchange information about the arrangements and procedures by various countries in order to be able to learn from one another and thus avoid duplicating work. In the future it could also become important which institution will be responsible for monitoring the quality of online public debates and the application of the regulations in place.

**Cross-sectoral approaches**

The need for coordination of experiments is also felt necessary, because public policy issues are to a large extent interrelated and cross-sectoral. In a few countries coordinating ministries or other bodies are taking the initiative in bringing together several government organizations in a process of consultation on subjects they all deal with. The public are thus being presented with an integrated approach to the subject and will not be asked for opinions by different organizations on the same subject. Online consultation acts as a trigger for the realization of joined-up or seamless

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government. One could also consider the inclusion of civic organizations in preparing and presenting the consultations and processing the results. If this were to become common practice, the borders between government and civil society would gradually flaw.

**No necessity for changes to institutions or legislation?**
At the time of writing (autumn 2001), the GOL countries have not yet developed plans for adjustments of an organizational or legislative nature with regard to e-democracy in the form of online consultations. But interactive consultation is a newcomer or *Fremdkörper* in traditional democratic systems. These systems have arranged for the voice of the citizen to be heard mainly through elections and elected representatives. Civil servants have traditionally used their professional expertise, research findings and knowledge of the public domain and public opinion as input for their policy products. And citizens' letters have traditionally been answered in accordance with certain bureaucratic procedures. All these processes have been turned upside down in the age of online interactive debate between citizens, elected officials, journalists, civil servants, civil society professionals and scientific scholars. What is the mandate of a civil servant in initiating debate in an online environment? How should a minister account for the development of a policy proposal when so many voices have been speaking? Must they all be taken seriously? And what if parliament disapproves of the minister's carefully and interactively drafted proposal? Such questions will become more relevant in the future. Online consultation will make them a reality that obliges us to find answers. At this stage, however, governments have not found it urgent to adjust its processes and structures. If the practice of online consultations by governments will move ahead, then that will undoubtedly change.

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# <u>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</u>