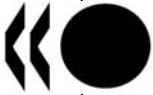


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OPEN DECISION-MAKING: NEW TOOLS FOR TRANSPARENCY AND PARTICIPATION

**Meeting of Senior Officials from Centres of Government on Using New Tools for Decision-Making:
Impacts on Information, Communication and Organisation**

Istanbul, 7-8 October 2004

This document provides background information for Session 3 on Thursday 7 October from 14.30 to 16.00.

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OPEN DECISION-MAKING: NEW TOOLS FOR TRANSPARENCY AND PARTICIPATION

Questions for discussion

Opportunities and challenges of online communication

- Have new tools helped to communicate government decisions to specific target audiences (e.g. youth), the media and the general public?
- What are the opportunities and risks of direct online communication from Centres of Government to businesses, civil society organisations and citizens?

Using online tools for public consultation and participation

- Have new tools raised the quantity and quality of consultation with external stakeholders when preparing government decisions?

Transparent decision-making

- How have new tools impacted on Centres of Government in terms of transparency and accountability?

OPEN DECISION-MAKING: NEW TOOLS FOR TRANSPARENCY AND PARTICIPATION

Role of Centres of Government in promoting open decision-making

1. Centres of Government play a key role in ensuring open decision-making. They constitute the prime interface between political and administrative levels and occupy a strategic position in government decision-making. They are largely responsible for creating the 'rules of the game' that govern decision-making, demonstrating leadership in applying these rules and ensuring that they are applied by others. They contribute to ensuring openness in government by checking that consultation requirements are met and ensuring swift communication of decisions taken by the Cabinet or Council of Ministers.

2. Yet until very recently, their role as custodian and referee was largely invisible to the outside world. With the advent of Internet, Centres of Government (CoG) are now in the public eye. In responding to growing public expectations of government openness, CoGs may choose from a range of new tools including: Internet, electronic discussion groups, SMS messaging, and email distribution lists. These may be applied in ensuring communication (a traditional CoG role), consultation (an increasingly common element of public policy-making) and the provision of information (a novel function for CoGs) to specific target groups and the public at large. While new tools offer significant opportunities for promoting more open policy-making, they also raise a host of new challenges.

Communicating government decisions online

Internal and external communications

3. Centres of Government in most countries are responsible for the day-to-day management and coordination of the politically sensitive function of government communications. Governments are increasingly investing in professional communications in order to: explain government actions (and their limits); ensure public understanding and acceptance of decisions; clarify the impacts of government decisions where there are 'winners' and 'losers'; ensure government collegiality and solidarity. To do so they establish specific communications channels with media, opinion-makers and other stakeholders. New tools such as e-mail, SMS, teleconferencing and webcasting have contributed to both creating, and to coping with, the pressure of 24-hour, global media coverage. Internally, Centres of Government establish mechanisms to ensure consistent, synchronised and well-timed announcements to maximise impact (e.g. regular meetings of communications advisers to Ministers, chaired by the Government Spokesperson; strategic communications planning).

Communication subjects and targets

4. In the past, indirect communications via the media represented the sole avenue for promoting government policy choices. Today, direct online communication can provide 'tailor-made' information directly to the target groups of specific policy measures (e.g. SMEs, youth). Without robust professional standards within Centres of Government communications teams, the new-found liberty offered by unmediated online communication may give rise to improper use (e.g. manipulation of facts). Targets of online communications vary widely, as do their purposes [see Box 1]. A review of CoG websites shows that they tend to focus on the Prime Minister as a public figure, over 90% feature speeches and interviews by or with the head of government.¹ Fewer feature the government programme (around 65%) while only 40% highlight the government agenda [see Figure 1, Annex].

¹ The CoG website review was conducted in April 2004 and included all 30 OECD Member countries plus Brazil, Chile, and Slovenia as observers in the CoG network. The review was limited, in most cases, to the English-language web pages of CoG websites [for URLs see Table 1, Annex].

Impacts and governance implications

5. One of the attractions of e-tools for government communications is their capacity to act as both a broadcast media (e.g. via web pages) and as a means for providing specific information to target groups (e.g. email lists of specialist press or regional media contacts). This allows government communications experts to tailor their messages and contribute to creating more informed and, possibly, receptive public opinion.

Box 1: Centres of Government and Youth

Several CoG websites offer special sections designed for youth featuring engaging text, colourful graphics, online games and quizzes:

- **Germany:** explains key terms and concepts of government and democracy (e.g. elections) in simple and accessible language, offers an online puzzle (of ministers' faces), and a guestbook [see: *Kanzler für Kids* – www.bundestkanzler.de/Kanzler-fuer-Kids]
- **Mexico:** offers information (e.g. on history, biodiversity), features interactive games and invites children and youth to participate in educational online games (e.g. on saving energy) as well as special initiatives (e.g. to fight corruption) [see: *México para Niños* – www.elbalero.gob.mx]
- **United States:** provides news for kids, information (e.g. on history, sports, patriotism), a mathematics quiz, photos and videos [see *WhiteHouseKids*: www.whitehouse.gov/kids/].

Consulting online as a driver for open decision-making

Drivers for change

6. Are Centres of Government taking the lead and acting as 'drivers' of openness in government decision-making? To what extent are they looking to new tools to enhance their capacity? In most OECD countries, Centres of Government oversee rather than undertake the task of informing and consulting citizens, interest groups, business associations and other stakeholders. This is equally true for online consultation, which is still in its infancy and is generally conducted by line ministries, with Centres of Government providing guidance, support and quality control.²

7. New online tools allow for an unprecedented degree of interactive communication and offer the potential to expand the scope, breadth and depth of government consultations with citizens and other key stakeholders to improve the quality of policy-making. They are most effective when integrated with traditional tools for consultation and participation (e.g. online information packages coupled with local newspaper advertisements and public hearings).

8. The degree of interactivity offered by CoG websites varies widely, ranging from simple feedback (e.g. via email features) to more elaborate online dialogue events (e.g. online 'chats' with the Prime

² For example, the Communications and Consultations Secretariat of the Canada's Privy Council Office has developed a "Policy Statement and Guidelines on Consulting and Engaging Canadians" and provides step-by-step practical advice to government officials in planning and implementing citizen engagement processes, including Internet-based consultation. The UK Cabinet Office issued a new "Code of Practice on Written Consultation" in January 2004 including online consultations (<http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/regulation/consultation>)

Minister or via SMS). Very few CoG websites feature 'Question & Answer' services or online discussion *fora* providing a 'public space' for discussion of specific policy issues.³

Impacts and governance implications

9. Centres of Government play an important role in providing guidance (e.g. in developing and issuing guidelines for online consultations) and exercising oversight (i.e. were the guidelines followed). If they choose to expand their own use of online tools for interaction with external target groups, they will need to provide far greater guarantees of personal data protection if they are to maintain public trust. Greater attention to integrating online and 'offline' tools for consultation will help to ensure that the voices of those on the wrong side of the digital divide are heard and included.

New tools for access to information

High public profile

10. Centres of Government websites enjoy a high degree of visibility on the Internet⁴ and are subject to the same pressure of rising public expectations with regard to the quality, quantity and timeliness of online information. While all Centres of Government provide an increasing amount of information online, its quality varies considerably in terms of its accessibility, relevance and utility.

Past vs. future decision-making

11. New tools have often been heralded as a powerful means of improving the transparency and accountability of government. This depends more, however, upon the nature and extent of the information provided rather than the technology. Over 70% of the CoG websites reviewed provide information on past government decisions (legislation, decrees etc), but fewer than 20% provide information on upcoming government decision-making [see Figure 2, Annex].⁵ Thereby undermining the capacity of key stakeholders outside government to prepare, and hence contribute to, policy-making.

Impacts and governance implications

12. Centres of Government in all OECD countries are investing in the development of their 'web assets' as one of the principal tools for ensuring greater access to information and a public presence on the Internet. Web sites are also widely used as a platform for other new tools (e.g. electronic discussion groups) and are increasingly integrated with the use of traditional, 'offline' measures for information. As a highly visible point of access to online government, CoG websites are under pressure to meet high standards for complete, relevant and timely information.⁶ With an emphasis on past decisions, CoG websites could do more to provide timely, relevant and complete online information on upcoming decisions at the centre of government. Addressing this imbalance could bring rewards in terms of more open and better quality decision-making by government.

³ Of the CoG websites reviewed, around 70% provide a CoG 'institutional' email address while half provide the email addresses of the Prime Minister and Ministers. Less than 40% of CoG websites require users to register and around 40% feature a privacy policy on their home page.

⁴ CoG websites can be easily identified and accessed on the Internet. Where government portals exist, the CoG website can be accessed within 3 'clicks' (a key private sector indicator of good design) and via Google™ (a search engine which selects websites generating significant traffic, as a proxy indicator of authoritative content).

⁵ The CoG website review was conducted in April 2004 and included all 30 OECD Member countries plus Brazil, Chile, and Slovenia as observers in the CoG network. The review was limited, in most cases, to the English-language web pages provided by the CoG website (see Table 1, Annex).

⁶ All CoG websites regularly update their main home page, around two-thirds of those reviewed do so within 24 to 48hrs [see Figure 3, Annex].

Openness under conditions of stress

Information online and in 'real time'

13. With the adoption of new online tools, Centres of Government face greater pressure to provide information in 'real time'. This requirement is of even greater importance in the event of a national or international crisis (e.g. natural disasters, epidemics, terrorist attacks) when Centres of Government immediately become the first point of call for line ministries, agencies, local governments, media and individual citizens seeking reliable information, advice and leadership [see Box 2].

14. The special conditions generated by a national crisis reveal the extent to which Centres of Government are equipped to take on the role of 'information hubs' and whether new tools facilitate or complicate this task.

Box 2: CoG: ensuring a whole-of-government response to national crisis⁷

Communication – ensure that a consistent message is delivered across government and via all media. Web-based information is of primary importance, and highly consulted, but multiple channels must also be provided (e.g. dedicated call centres, radio and TV announcements, and regular media briefings).

Security and capacity – ensure that information systems are sufficiently robust to function under any circumstances, to withstand massive increases in traffic (e.g. Website hits, emails) and are supported by adequate and qualified human resources (e.g. to respond promptly to emails, phone calls etc).

Privacy – evaluate the impact of privacy legislation on how much and what kinds of personal data can be shared between government units and agencies; ensure that the law is interpreted and applied across government in a consistent manner.

Consultation – undertake consultation with the affected community before, during and after a crisis to mobilise local or sectoral knowledge, facilitate a co-ordinated response, strengthen their stake in the recovery and establish "a positive partnership of responsibility and decision-making" (e.g. in Australia, the government has negotiated a comprehensive information and cost-sharing agreement with domestic livestock industries covering 63 animal diseases).

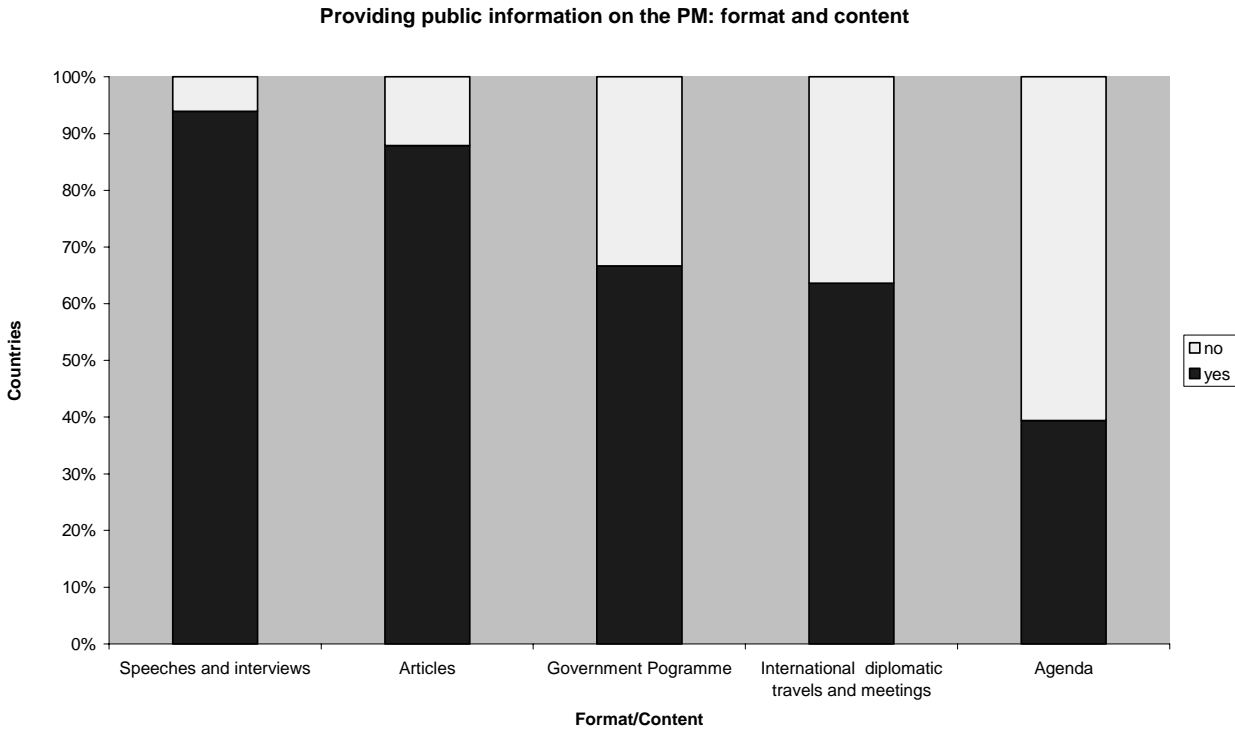
Promise and limits

15. New tools can help to ensuring consistency across government departments when providing public information, against the moving backdrop of rapidly evolving crisis situations. Online information offers the advantage of being easily updated, accessible at all hours and readily relayed by other information and media professionals to a wider public. Of course, the limits remain those imposed by the digital divide. As not all citizens will have access to web-based government information, care must be exercised to ensure that traditional tools (e.g. public television, radio) are also employed.

⁷ Source: Management Advisory Committee (2002), *Connecting Government: Whole of Government Responses to Australia's Priority Challenges*, Commonwealth of Australia, pp. 109-224.

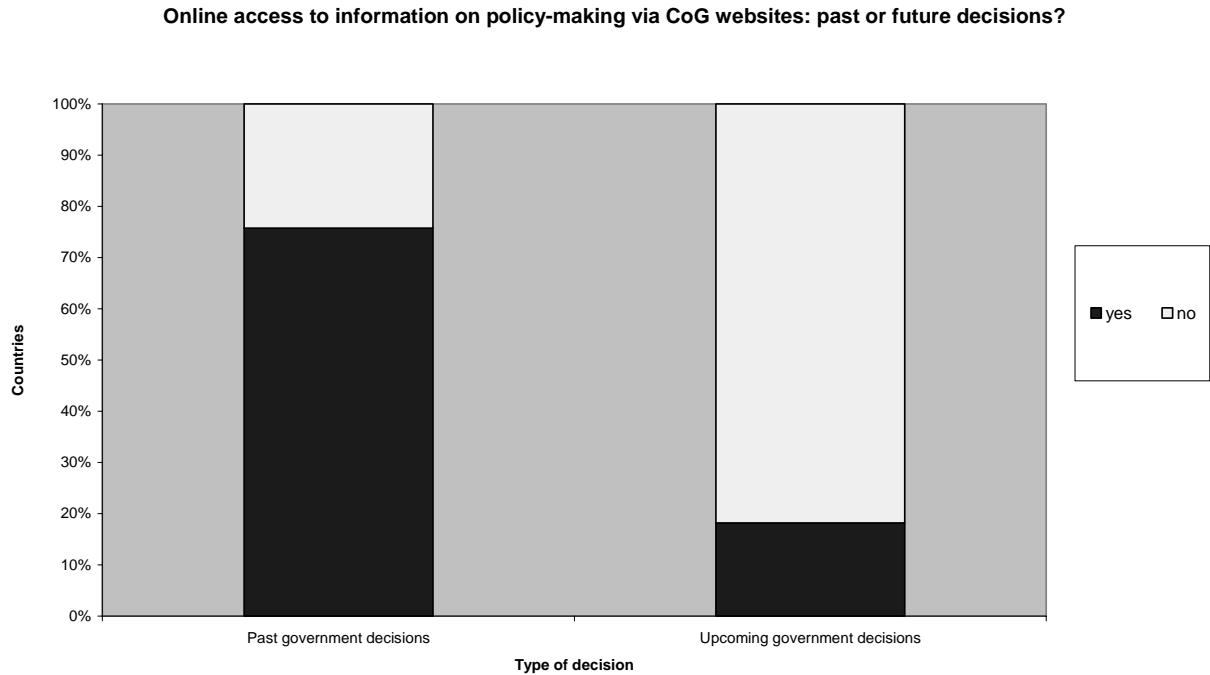
ANNEX

FIGURE 1



Source: OECD

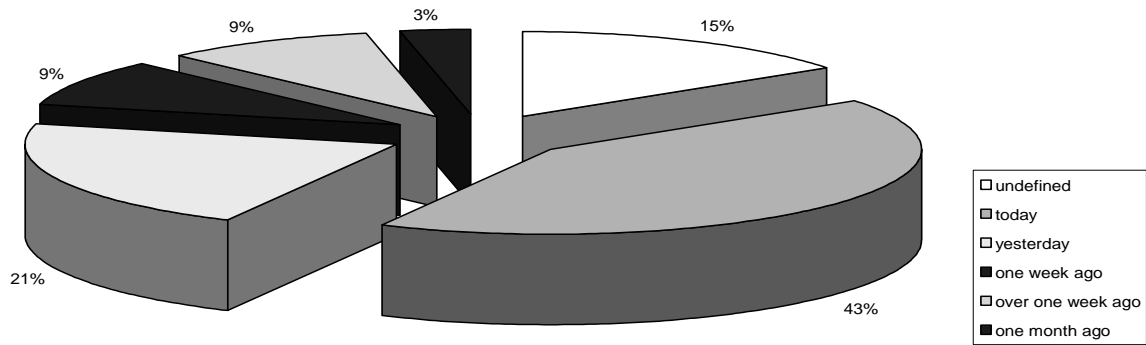
FIGURE 2



Source: OECD

FIGURE 3

Providing information in "real-time"? Last update of CoG website



Source: OECD

TABLE 1 - Centre of Government website addresses

| COUNTRY | COG WEBSITE URL |
|--------------------------|---|
| Australia | http://www.pm.gov.au/ |
| Austria | http://www.austria.gv.at/ |
| Belgium | http://www.premier.fgov.be/ |
| Canada | http://www.pm.gc.ca/ |
| Czech Republic | http://www.vlada.cz/1250/eng/vlada/vlada_clenove.htm |
| Denmark | http://www.stm.dk/Index/mainstart.asp?o=1&n=3&s=1 |
| Finland | http://www.vnk.fi/vn/liston/vnk.lsp?r=915&k=en |
| France | http://www.premier-ministre.gouv.fr/ |
| Germany | http://www.bundeskanzler.de/ |
| Greece | http://www.primeminister.gr/gr/ |
| Hungary | http://www.meh.hu/ |
| Iceland | http://eng.forsaetisraduneyti.is/ |
| Ireland | http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/index.asp |
| Italy | http://www.palazzochigi.it/index.asp |
| Japan | http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/index-e.html |
| Korea | http://www.opm.go.kr/warp/webapp/home/en_home |
| Luxembourg | http://www.gouvernement.lu/gouvernement/premier_ministre/index.html |
| Mexico | http://www.presidencia.gob.mx/ |
| Netherlands | http://www.minaz.nl/english/prime_minister/index.html |
| New Zealand | http://www.dpmc.govt.nz/ |
| Norway | http://odin.dep.no/smk/ |
| Poland | http://www.kprm.gov.pl/english/index.html |
| Portugal | http://www.portugal.gov.pt/Portal/PT/Primeiro_Ministro/ |
| Slovak Republic | http://www.government.gov.sk/dzurinda_en/index.php3 |
| Spain | http://www.la-moncloa.es/ |
| Sweden | http://statsradsberedningen.regeringen.se/ |
| Switzerland | http://www.admin.ch/ch |
| Turkey | http://www.basbakanlik.gov.tr |
| United Kingdom | http://www.pm.gov.uk/output/page12.asp |
| United States of America | http://www.whitehouse.gov/president/ |
| Brazil | https://www.presidencia.gov.br/ |
| Chile | http://www.presidencia.cl/ |
| Slovenia | http://www.gov.si/pv/index_eng.php?vsebina=office |