Evaluating websites from a public value perspective: A review of Turkish local government websites

Naci Karkin [a,b,*,1], Marijn Janssen [b,2]

[a] Pamukkale University, Turkey
[b] Delft University of Technology, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Government website evaluations do not always reflect the websites' aims. Often, only aspects such as content and quality are considered, whereas the primary goal of these websites is to deliver public value. In this paper we introduce the public value perspective for website evaluation. A meta-analysis of website evaluation literature is presented, the findings being that there is no uniform or comprehensive set of website evaluation metrics and that the public value perspective is largely neglected in the website evaluation literature. Next, we describe how we integrated web evaluation and public value literature in order to develop a set of criteria used for evaluating the websites of sixteen Turkish local governments. The websites performed relatively well on traditional indicators, but less well on public values measures. In particular, we found that the websites are good at supporting requests, categorization and usability, but not satisfactory at providing platforms for citizen engagement, responsiveness and dialog. Finally, we argue that the public value perspective should be incorporated in the evaluations of websites and other public efforts.

1. Introduction

Induced by technological developments, governments have initiated and developed institutional websites for public administration purposes. Over time, websites and web portals have become the primary interfaces between government and citizens. Pratchett, Wingfield, and Polat (2006, p. 76) view the websites of local authorities as a "core strategic tool" and "a unique medium for communicating information and providing services". Kent, Taylor, and White (2003) view websites as channels for controlled information-sharing with stakeholders and media. Similarly, Eschenfelder (2004) regards public websites as a means through which public administrations inform and educate the public, provide transparency and promote economic activities.

Many government websites were initially developed and used to disseminate information regarding the business of administration, in line with the cataloging stage in Layne and Lee's (2001) model.

Over time, websites have evolved and now allow public agencies to provide services and information in multiple modes. Yet the objectives behind website development are somewhat vague (Taylor, McWilliam, Forsyth, & Wade, 2002). White and Raman (1999, p. 405) found that "in many cases, web site planning is done by trial and error based on subjective knowledge and intuition, with little or no formal research and evaluation". Many organizations simply copy the best features of other agencies' websites instead of looking at how their website can contribute to their organization's overall objectives, these being derived from its core public values (Kuk, 2002). It seems that the emphasis is on copying some visual functionality rather than representing the values underlying them. Public values such as accessibility, responsiveness, uniformity, accountability, the balancing of interests, equality and privacy form the basis of the democratic system (Moore, 1995) and should be expressed by government websites. Public Value Management (PVM) represents the paradigm of achieving public values (PVs) as being the primary objective (Stoker, 2006).

There is a lack of research that looks at the evaluation of websites from a PV perspective. Most public website evaluation literature focuses on website usability (evaluating quality, content or functionality), user satisfaction, accessibility or citizen involvement (see, for example, Baker, 2009; Barnes & Vidgen, 2006; Bhattacharya, Gulla, & Gupta, 2012; Byun & Finnie, 2011; Domarkas, Laukaitytė, & Mačiukas, 2012; Elling, Lentz, de Jong, & van den Bergh, 2012; Garcia, Maciel, & Pinto, 2005; Kuk, 2002; Middleton, 2007; Rodríguez, Estevez, Giulianelli, & Vera, 2009; Welch, Hinnant, & Moon, 2005). This paper addresses this gap by using PVM to

* Corresponding author at: Pamukkale University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Kinikli Kampus, Denizli, Turkey. Tel.: +90 258 296 2781.
 E-mail addresses: nkirgin@pau.edu.tr (N. Karkin), M.F.W.H.A.Janssen@tudelft.nl (M. Janssen).
 [1] Visiting Scholar, Faculty of Technology, Policy and Management, Jaffalaan 5, NL-2628 BX Delft, The Netherlands, Supported by The Council of Higher Education in Turkey (YÖK).
 [2] Mail address: Faculty of Technology, Policy and Management, Jaffalaan 5, NL-2628 BX Delft, The Netherlands. Tel.: +31 15 278 1140.

evaluate websites. This research focuses on municipal websites, as these are the most common interaction points between citizens and public services in many developed Western countries, including Great Britain (Paris, 2006), the Netherlands (VNG, 2008) and Norway (Flak, Olsen, & Wolcott, 2005).

In this article we introduce the PV perspective for evaluating websites and evaluate 16 websites of Turkish metropolitan municipalities from the conventional and PV perspectives. The underlined PVs in this analysis are accessibility, citizen engagement, transparency, responsiveness, dialog and the balancing of interests. This paper is structured as follows: in the next section the literature background about PVs is presented. Thereafter, the research approach is presented. Based on a synthesis of the literature, criteria for evaluating websites from a PV perspective are derived in Section 4. The criteria are employed to evaluate 16 Turkish metropolitan municipality (MM) websites in Section 5. Finally, the findings are discussed and conclusions are drawn.

2. Background: the public value perspective

As a notion and theoretical conceptualization, PV is relatively new in the field of public administration. Cordella and Bonina (2012) state that there is no common definition of public values. While Moore (1994, 1995) prefers the term "public value – PV", Jørgensen and Bozeman (2007) use the term "public values – PVs". In this study, while making small adaptations needed to make website analyses, we follow Jørgensen and Bozeman (2007) by using the term PVs, denoting a set of multiple values.

Moore (1994) argues that the main aim of public managers is to create PVs. This is not an easy task, as he argues that the term "is too open-ended – too wide an invitation to public managers to use their imaginations" (p. 296). This is one of the reasons why the concept of PV and its informational accumulation have not yet reached much depth or breadth. Some see PVM as a response to the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm (Stoker, 2006; Van Veenstra & Janssen, 2012). Some others argue "it is probably too early to say" (Talbot, 2009, p. 168). NPM was embraced by the public sector as a means to introduce market-oriented management of the public sector, as a response to Weberian bureaucracy, with the intention of achieving higher levels of efficiency (Cordella & Willcocks, 2010; Hood, 1995; Turner, 2002). The creation of PVM was aimed at solving the deficiencies of the NPM paradigm and the inadequacies of Weberian bureaucracy. Though there is no agreement about the precise nature of PVM, there is a consensus that it involves value creation for citizens (Stoker, 2006; Van Veenstra, 2012). Flak et al. (2005) point out that it is still the bureaucracy that decides on the functioning of public administration. Neither Weberian nor NPM paradigms are able to respond sufficiently to the needs of a connected society which utilizes new electronic channels (Stoker, 2006). In the NPM paradigm, citizens are regarded as customers who should be served at the lowest possible cost. In contrast, Cordella and Bonina (2012) suggest that analysis regarding the outcomes should be directed to collective preferences as envisaged by PVM (see also Meynhardt, 2009). One of the main arguments put forward by the PVM paradigm is that citizens who are the collective demanders and users of public services should be the ones to decide what is valuable as a public commodity or service, rather than those who actually produce it (Alford & Hughes, 2008; Cordella & Bonina, 2012). Cordella and Bonina (2012) give reference to citizens' deciding role on PV, extending their identity to being much more than mere consumers. According to Cordella and Bonina (2012), people value things as a collective entity, reaching beyond personal self-interests and forming the basis for values such as equality, equity, justice, rule of law and other society-forming principles (see also Alford & Hughes, 2008; Moore, 1995).

Since the common form of political system throughout the world is the representative democracy (Üstüner & Keyman, 1995) and citizens may have conflicts even surrounding the same facts, depending on their different perspectives, the creation of PVs is usually vested in the policies designed and performed by the democratically elected and legitimized government (Cordella & Bonina, 2012). Since PVs are vested in the practices of governments, it may be assumed that some PVs should be embedded in applications (i.e., responsiveness, citizen engagement, etc.) run through government websites, and that some efforts (i.e., accessibility, transparency, etc.) addressed via government websites should be accompanied by the presence of PVs. As a democratically elected and legitimized authority very close to the citizens, local governments should present a valuable set of PVs in their websites. Pratchett et al. (2006) evaluate websites as a means of providing citizens with opportunities for participation and democratic engagement. Among others, Cordella and Bonina (2012) suggest that analysis of the results of public ICT usage policies must go further than criteria like efficiency and effectiveness. PVM requires that websites meet objectives that go beyond what is envisaged by the NPM paradigm, including notions like efficiency, effectiveness and cost reduction. Websites in public administration should meet aims such as being transparent, providing citizens with engagement mechanisms that allow their voices to be heard, and providing equal access by ensuring accessibility for disabled people. In sum, we argue that the evaluation, thus the implementation, of ICT in the public sector should be broad and should include a wide range of PVs. Jørgensen and Bozeman (2007) provide an extensive list of PVs: 72 values under seven categories. From these factors, accessibility, citizen engagement, transparency, responsiveness, dialog, and the balancing of interests were found relevant for our evaluation of Turkish local websites.

Although PVM is an intuitively appealing concept, it is criticized for being too abstract and hardly able to provide any concrete guidance, resulting in a lack of operationalization (Moore, 1995; Stoker, 2006). One reason is the differences among scholars regarding the PV notion; some oppose it, while others pursue it (Alford & O'Flynn, 2009). Those who object to PV claim that PVM is a normative and empirical theory (Alford and O'Flynn, 2009). In this paper we argue that websites should be evaluated from the PV perspective and show the results of our own website evaluations using these values. In addition to introducing the PV perspective for evaluating websites, this study contributes to the operationalization of public values for websites.

3. Research approach

In this research we introduce the PV perspective for evaluating websites. First, a review was conducted of the public website evaluation literature using the systematical scanning approach proposed by Levy and Ellis (2006). This approach is followed by information systems scholars (for example, BenMoussa, 2010; Lee, Shim, & Kim, 2011). An extensive search of journals, conference proceeding and working papers was performed using ACM, IEEE Xplore, AISnet, ProQuest (ABI/Informs), Science Direct and Google Scholar. These databases contain the top Government and Information Systems (IS) journals and conferences (Levy & Ellis, 2006). Only website evaluation literature directly related to public websites was reviewed. In total, 28 papers were found, out of which the review list was reduced to 22 papers. The other six papers were not included in the review process because they were not directly related to public websites (for example, de Jong & Lentz, 2006; Elling et al., 2012; Garcia et al., 2005; Rorissa & Demissie, 2010; Wang, Bretschneider, & Gant, 2005; Welch et al., 2005). This literature was used to derive criteria for evaluating public websites. The findings showed that no