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Ladies and gentlemen,

This year ver.di launched its initiative “governet: Forum for democratic e-government”. Under www.governet.de we raised 100 questions about the introduction of e-government for discussion in a number of forums. Now these issues can be debated internationally in English at www.governet.info.

We presented the following ten principles at the Congress “e-democracy – e-government – public services”. They summarise the objectives which guide the United Services Union, ver.di, in the work we do in the field of e-government. We hope they will also encourage a broader discussion about democratic and social standards in e-government and the information society in general.

Frank Bsirske
Chair ver.di,
United Services Union

Annette Mühlberg
Electronic Government, New Media and
Public Management, ver.di

10 Principles for Transparent, Democratic e-Government

Technological change is exerting a profound influence, not only on the world of work, but also on democracy and society. Public administration has a significant role to play in this process. It must improve services to citizens, become more efficient and encourage democracy.

e-government – the application of the information and communication technologies to government and administration – can induce far-reaching changes in the way public (administration) services are produced and delivered and renew the relationship between the state and its citizens.

The challenge of e-government is to understand and manage the opportunities – but also the risks – for democracy. The various national and international projects require coordination; models must be found that have predictable effects, promote social justice, enhance democracy and are generally sustainable in the future.

Politics and public administration are seen as just one provider among many in the internet. However, politics and public administration play an important role in creating the framework for our information society. Shaping the electronic environment in which our citizens live must not be determined by economic interests alone. e-government must be considered from the perspective of democracy and implemented as an integral part of the overall “electronic agenda”.

1. Granting access to knowledge

Knowledge is humanity's shared treasure. Surrendering this public wealth to commercial interests would cut society off from its most important resource, hampering creativity in science, the economy and the arts. Access to knowledge must be possible for all under fair conditions. This requires appropriate legislation at national and European level as well as in other international agreements.

2. The knowledge base for e-government and democracy

Democratic participation in public affairs thrives on a freely accessible knowledge base. For this purpose existing educational facilities must be supported and the legal, technical and financial conditions must be created for them to enter new technological fields. The volume of freely accessible, commonly shared knowledge must expand, not diminish. But the state must also offer its citizens reliable and lasting, net-based, active provision. This public provision must be as state-of-the-art and user-friendly as possible, intuitively accessible and clearly distinguishable from private offers.

3. Taking e-democracy seriously

e-democracy is more than just online elections. Political decision-making processes and administrative procedures can be rendered more transparent by using the internet, and more approachable for citizens. There are tremendous new opportunities here. But to fulfil them, politics must fashion procedures in such a manner that the technological options facilitate participation. Access must be granted to public administration files, documents and collections of data, as long as there are no fundamental public or private interests to protect.

In general, all measures and laws that constitute the framework for the new information society (e.g. legislation on software patents, intellectual property, security, surveillance and data protection) must be examined to ensure that they respect – and preferably promote – democratic principles.

4. Preventing a “digital divide” in society

The introduction of e-government must not add another exclusion factor to the detriment of society's weakest members. All citizens, men and women alike, must have free access to public services. In order to guard against the “digital divide” within society, technological and cultural barriers that could discourage citizens from participating in public electronic services must be identified and provision made for their removal. For democracy to function in society and the world of work, public institutions must be universally accessible and people cannot be divided into the “knowledgeable” and the “ignorant”. If digitalisation respects this principle, e-government offers profound opportunities for democracy.

5. Guaranteeing an open, reliable infrastructure

Communication with public administration must be organised technologically in such a manner that citizens are not compelled to submit their private computer equipment to the requirements of certain computer and software products in order to make use of public offers and to be online democratically. e-government requires open standards, e.g. for document formats, signatures and software applications. This alone will guarantee smooth technological exchange and effective competition between commercial providers of equipment. Both help cut costs.

e-government must be built upon a reliable, democratically controlled technological infrastructure and must not impose restraints on (local) self-administration. The conditions for public electronic infrastructure services must be clearly defined and their implementation ensured.

This must also be achieved at international level, e.g. in the GATS negotiations, where the state's role as a provider of services is being seriously challenged.

6. Guaranteeing data protection

Prudent data usage must remain the basis for handling personal information as e-government develops. Safeguarding communication privacy is crucial to democratic participation and competition. The protection of privacy rights is just as vital, if not more so, in a networked world. New options for surveillance, of both citizens and employees, must be effectively curtailed. The creation of user profiles must be prevented.

7. Rights in the electronically networked world of work

Protecting human dignity, the free development of the individual and the principle of equality are vitally important personal liberties, and this also applies to the world of work. Freedom of association, the basic right to organise in trade unions, must be guaranteed in the new, electronically networked world, in spite of changes in the way work is structured and in particular greater decentralisation. For this to function, employees, staff committees, works councils and trade unions must be allowed access to the intranets and e-mail systems of their administration or company, and all employees must have free, uncensored internet access.

8. Honest costing

e-government is being driven with the promise of huge cost-cutting potential and a lean state. It remains to be seen how realistic these predictions are. Mid- and long-term cost-benefit ratios have yet to be defined. Even for proprietary systems, where property rights remain with the manufacturer, the investment and follow-up costs must be calculated realistically. Public administrations must continue to build the expert capacity they need. Greater transparency and specific personnel development plans are essential. Financing for all necessary measures, especially at local government level, must be secured in advance.

9. Training offensive

The far-reaching transformations caused by the introduction of e-government will require a training offensive. Success depends on timely and proficient training for employees in all sectors, especially for online working. The financial resources and periodic budgets for this must be made available. Civil servants, salaried employees and workers must all participate in this skill upgrade for the online world, and to meet this purpose all employees require broad access to the internet.

10. Making participation rights work

In developing e-government, it is important to draw on the knowledge which employees in the administration already have. Involving employees is the key to providing added-value service.

Most e-government innovations lend themselves to monitoring the performance and behaviour of staff. The law, therefore, requires that employees be informed and consulted. They and their representatives should be included early on in any project design.

The wealth of experience accumulated by the men and women on the staff is the most important resource in our information age.