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AN EVALUATION OF AND A MODEL FOR SOUTH AFRICAN GOVERNMENT WEBSITES

by

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Hilda Korsten
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To the memory of Tiekels and my mother

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ABSTRACT

Governments have a responsibility to make government information available easily, widely and equitably, increasingly also in electronic format. The South African government embarked on various initiatives with regard to the electronic dissemination of information, one of which is the development of government websites. The main objective of this research was to contribute towards improving the quality and usability of government websites to enhance the effectiveness of online information and service delivery by the South African government. To reach this broad objective, the research assessed the effectiveness and usability of the *SA Government Online* website and South African national government websites, with the aim of identifying issues that government will have to address to improve the effectiveness and usability of these websites, so to ensure that they contribute optimally to online information and service delivery.

The evaluation of *SA Government Online* was conducted during the period 14 August – 16 September 2000. The methodology used was selecting suitable assessment criteria against which the website could be measured, and thereafter using them to develop test instruments for data collection. The evaluation methods chosen were a heuristic evaluation by experts, a critical evaluation of the website by the author, user testing and an online survey. The findings indicated that the website generally fulfilled its purpose, but that it did not conform to various usability criteria and to expectations for government websites in each of the broad areas of usability criteria evaluated, i.e. content, information architecture, navigation, search and design.

A government website audit, which made use of a shortened version of the criteria used for the evaluation of *SA Government Online,* was conducted by means of the heuristic evaluation method during February/March 2001. The findings of this audit indicated that although South African government departments had embraced the Internet for information dissemination, government websites generally did not conform to many basic principles of good website design.

The research indicated that the challenge to improve South African government web publishing lies firstly in improving the quality and usability of individual government websites. Government websites should be improved to address the needs of a wider audience, to communicate government news, policies, projects, programmes and events, to provide online services and transactions, and to provide a tool for interaction between government and the citizen. They should convey a more consistent and unified message,

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thematic feel and structure and government image and branding. In addition, the *SA Government Online* website should ensure a user-friendly entry point that promotes virtual access to all online government information clustered according to the needs of the audience, regardless of the institution. In order to improve government web publishing the South African government will have to develop an integrated approach to web development within the broader framework of its e-government initiatives and create an environment conducive to the development and implementation of professional, usable and effective websites. Coherence and unity between government websites could inter alia be achieved through a web guideline document that guides web developers in all aspects of web development, from the management of a website, through content development, planning and information architecture and navigation scheme, to the professional design of a website. A model for such a document is presented in this thesis.

Keywords: e-government; electronic government; online government; government websites; South African government websites; SA Government Online; usability; website guidelines; government website norms; government website standards; website evaluation.