

# GOVERNMENT WEBSITES AS A TOOL TO ESTABLISH TWO-WAY SYMMETRICAL COMMUNICATION WITH CITIZENS



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*The article* focuses on the potential of online government tools to develop dialogic communication with citizens. To assess dialogic capacity of Ukrainian government websites the research has been carried out. The research found that all the government agencies analyzed had interactivity tools and usability features on their websites enabling them to establish two-way communication with citizens. However, Ukrainian government agencies analyzed don't fully use the potential of their websites to establish two-way symmetrical communication with citizens.

**Keywords:** dialogic public relations, government websites, interactivity of websites, usability of websites, favourable government-citizens relationships.

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## ВЕБ-САЙТИ ОРГАНІВ ДЕРЖАВНОЇ ВЛАДИ ЯК ІНСТРУМЕНТ ДВОСТОРОННЬОЇ СИМЕТРИЧНОЇ КОМУНІКАЦІЇ З ГРОМАДСЬКІСТЮ

*У статті* розглядається питання використання онлайн інструментарію органів державної влади для здійснення двосторонньої симетричної комунікації з громадськістю. Проведено контент-аналіз веб-сайтів центральних органів виконавчої влади України. Встановлено, що на веб-сайтах органів влади наявні інтерактивні інструменти, що дозволяє здійснювати діалогічну комунікацію з громадськістю; вони мають окремі характеристики, що визначають зручність і простоту їх використання. Утім, органи влади не використовують повною мірою потенціал своїх веб-сайтів для здійснення двосторонньої симетричної комунікації із громадськістю.

**Ключові слова:** діалогічний підхід до зв'язків з громадськістю, веб-сайти органів виконавчої влади, інтерактивність веб-сайтів, зручність і простота у використанні веб-сайтів, сприятливі відносини між органами державної влади та громадськістю.

With a recent shift in PR theory to the relational approach which emphasises the PR function of building, nurturing and maintaining relationships rather than managing publics and public opinion [8, 23] the role of dialogic communication has increased. In the academic literature two-way symmetrical communication is associated with dialogue [3; 8].

Thus, for instance, Wolstenholme [16, 27] defines dialogue as “communication that is balanced equally (or symmetrically) between the all sides”. Kent and Taylor [7] see the relationship between the two-way symmetrical communication and dialogue as one of process and product. According to them [8, 24], two-way symmetrical communication

implies “a procedural means whereby the organisation and its publics can communicate interactively” while dialogue is a product of communication and relationships.

A number of PR scholars view dialogue as an effective strategy for building relationships with publics. Thus, Waymer [15, 323] considers dialogue to be one of the basic principles of building quality relationships between an organisation and its publics in a democratic society along with access and participation. Many writers emphasize dialogic communication potential to set mutual understanding and build trust. Thus, Pieczka [3, 747] states that dialogue is not merely an exchange of ideas to know what others think, but “understanding how they think, and being similarly understood oneself”. Bohm, Factor and Garrett [1] state that as a perception of shared meaning emerges in the process of dialogue trust between its participants increases.

Many PR scholars nowadays emphasize great potential of the Internet to develop dialogic communication and view it as an effective tool for building and improving the relationships between organisations and their publics. Thus, Idenhoff and Koelling [14] state that the Internet enables organizations to engage publics in dialogue that is “a key characteristic of excellent public relations”. Hiebert [4] stresses the capacity of new communication technologies to facilitate dialogue in the public sphere and thus “preserve a role of public relations as two-way communication”.

Kent and Taylor [7] suggest five main principles for building dialogic public relations through the Internet which include: dialogic loop, usefulness of information on the web-site, ease of its interface, generation of return visits to the site and conservation of its visitors. Among them the dialogic loop principle is the most important as it indicates the incorporation of interactivity. A dialogic loop (or a feedback loop) represents the starting point for dialogic communication between an organisation and its publics through the Internet as it allows publics to query organisations as well as enables organisations to respond to questions, concerns and problems [7, 326].

The emergence and rapid development of new information and communication technologies have influenced much the practice of public relations in the public sector. Nowadays they are used by many governments to expand and facilitate citizens' access to government information, to obtain

public feedback, to respond to citizens inquiries, and to encourage citizens' participation in the government's decision-making process. The use of modern information and communication technologies by the public sector is defined as e-government [13, 1].

PR scholars emphasize the potential of e-government communication tools, such as government websites and social media to create two-way symmetric communication between the government and citizens. They argue that the use of websites and social media as a medium for promoting dialogue with citizens could be an effective strategy for building favourable government-citizens relationships [5; 11]. Some studies also have found that the use of online government tools by the citizens may have an indirect effect on their trust in government [5, 349; 11].

Researchers of dialogic potential of websites define websites capacity to create dialogue as interactivity [9; 11]. Welch and Hinnant [5, 348] identify transparency and interactivity as two major characteristics of government websites. According to them, transparency is mainly achieved by one-way communication while interactivity is ensured “by being open and responsive to citizens input”.

However, mere existence of interactive online tools doesn't guarantee creating dialogic public relations. A number of empirical studies on dialogue on websites and social media [2; 5; 9; 6; 11; 14] have revealed that in practice most organisations in private as well as in public sector don't fully utilize the potential of websites and social media to generate dialogue with their publics. For instance, Hong [5] as well as Searson and Johnson [11] state that one-way communication dominates over two-way communication in the government's online space, and online government tools are often used to merely improve one-way communication rather than to build dialogic relationships between governments and citizens.

This research paper **aims to** establish whether Ukrainian government agencies use the potential their websites to establish two-way symmetrical communication with citizens and to engage them into dialogue. Given this aim, the following research questions were set:

- What tools to establish interactivity are used by Ukrainian government agencies?
- Are Ukrainian government agencies websites easy to use?

To address the research questions the web-portal of Ukrainian Government and websites of two Ukrainian central executive bodies – the National Police of Ukraine and the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine were selected as a sample for the research. Their websites were selected from the top 10 mostly visited websites of public authorities of Ukraine<sup>1</sup>. The research was carried out in February 2016.

Given the nature of this study, content analysis which is used to analyse written, verbal and visual media content [12, 211] was selected as a research method.

This study draws upon the theory of dialogic public relations developed by Kent and Taylor [7; 8]. For the purpose of the study Kent and Taylor's approach [7; 8] to the relationship between the two-way symmetrical communication and dialogue as one of process and product was adopted. It implies that dialogue is the product of communication and in order to implement dialogic communication organisations should be able to provide concrete structures to communicate with publics interactively. To assess dialogic capacity of Ukrainian government websites the dialogic loop principle suggested by Kent and Taylor [7] was adopted. To develop the list of interactivity tools used on government agencies websites for this study Kent and Taylor's interactive online strategies [7] as well as interactivity characteristics of websites proposed in previous studies [9; 11] were found helpful and were used.

The following list of interactivity tools for government websites was proposed for this study:

- online forums
- blogs
- online polls or online surveys
- online petitions or online appeals
- “ask the expert” sessions
- social media
- contact information (e-mail address, mailing address, telephone number).

1 point for the presence of each interactivity tool was given to the website. Following Searson and Johnson [11], the government websites were classified by the level of interactivity. Thus, websites which provided only contact information and scored 1 point were defined as low-interactive ones.

<sup>1</sup> Rating of public authorities websites 2016. [online]. Available from: <http://top.bigmir.net/show/administrations/>

Those which scored 3 and 4 out of the 7 points were regarded as medium interactive websites. Those which scored from 4 to 7 points were defined as highly interactive websites.

In addition the research aimed to assess usability of the selected government websites. The concept of usability is based upon Kent and Taylor's ease of interface principle [7] which provides for that a website's content should be organised so that its visitors could find it easy to understand and navigate. Usability of a website influences much its dialogic capacity and is a necessary prerequisite for establishing dialogue [9]. Variables measuring the websites usability in this research had been developed on the basis of websites usability characteristics proposed in previous research [9; 11] and were the following:

- the availability of a sitemap which is clearly identifiable on the website,
- the availability of a search bar which is clearly identifiable on the website,
- the availability of a font adjustment option,
- the availability of a multiple language option (Ukrainian, Russian and English),
- the availability of links to other related government websites,
- the availability of page formatting for printing,
- the availability of a press room,
- low reliance on graphics (this means that most of the website content should be textual rather than graphical [7]),
- the absence of visual clutter (multiple toolbars, multiple webpages, etc).

Also a “focus on information useful for citizens” variable was added to assess the websites usability. This means that a website content is organized so that information on public services provided by the government or its agency is clearly identifiable on the website and could be easily found by citizens.

1 point for the presence of each usability feature except for the variable “the absence of visual clutter” was given to the website. As the presence of visual clutter seriously impedes the perception of information on a website its absence there was given 2 points.

Further the level of usability of the government websites was assessed. Those websites which scored less than 6 points were defined as having low usability. Those which scored from 6 to 9 were regarded as having medium usability. Those which scored from 9 to 11 points were defined as highly usable websites.

Table 1. Interactivity tools on Ukrainian government agencies websites

Interactivity tools	the Ukrainian Government web-portal http://www.kmu.gov.ua/	the National Police of Ukraine website http://www.npu.gov.ua/uk/	the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine website http://www.mlsp.gov.ua/labour/control/uk/index
online forums	✗	✗	✗
blogs	✗	✗	✗
online polls or online surveys	✗	✗	✗
online petitions or online appeals	✓	✓	✓
“ask the expert” sessions	✗	✗	✗
social media	✓	✓	✓
contact information (e-mail address, mailing address, telephone number)	✓	✓	✓
Total score	3	3	3

## Findings

As it can be seen from the table above, all the websites had tools to establish two-way communication with citizens that means that the government agencies analyzed provided means to communicate with publics interactively and followed the dialogic loop principle.

All the websites used the same interactivity tools offering their visitors to reach the government agencies (contact information), send online petitions and appeals as well as interact on their social media accounts.

However, none of the websites offered opportunities for their visitors to vote on issues, express opinions on blogs or forums as well as ask the agencies' experts questions online.

All the websites analyzed scored 3 out of the 7 points that suggested that they could be defined as medium interactive websites.

As it can be seen from the table above, two of the websites analyzed (the Ukrainian Government web-portal and the National Police of Ukraine website) scored 6 points and thus displayed medium usability level. The Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine website scored 4 points and thus was assessed as having low usability.

It should be noted that all the websites analyzed heavily relied on graphics using a great deal of photographs and images that distracted users' attention from the textual content. Of course, a website shouldn't be boring, but government websites' main aim is to provide publics with useful information rather than to entertain. As Kent and Taylor [7, 330] put it, “content should take precedence over aesthetic consideration... and graphics may not be the most useful tool for providing publics with information”. To be easy to use and thus more dialogically oriented a website should be concentrated on textual content and graphics should be used very moderately.

All the websites used a combination of more than four colors for their homepages that along with multiple visuals made the written content less readable.

Also, the presence of visual clutter was found on two of the websites analyzed. The Ukrainian Government web-portal contained some of it (multiple banners in the bottom right corner of the homepage) and thus was given 1 out of 2 points. The Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine website had a great deal of visual clutter (multiple toolbars, webpages and banners) and thus had a score of zero. In addition to visual clutter the Ministry's website design was complex, it didn't include a search bar and multiple language option (only Ukrainian language was available) that inhibited its navigation and usage.

Table 2. Usability of Ukrainian government agencies websites

Usability features	the Ukrainian Government web-portal <a href="http://www.kmu.gov.ua/">http://www.kmu.gov.ua/</a>	the National Police of Ukraine website <a href="http://www.npu.gov.ua/uk/">http://www.npu.gov.ua/uk/</a>	the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine website <a href="http://www.mlsp.gov.ua/labour/control/uk/index">http://www.mlsp.gov.ua/labour/control/uk/index</a>
Sitemap	✗	✗	✓
Search bar	✓	✓	✗
Font adjustment option	✗	✗	✗
Multiple language option	✓	✓	✗
Links to other related government websites	✓	✓	✓
Page formatting for printing	✓	✓	✓
Press room	✓	✗	✓
Low reliance on graphics	✗	✗	✗
Absence of visual clutter	✓	✓	✗
Focus on information useful for citizens	✗	✗	✗
Total score	6	6	4

It was also found that none of the websites were focused on information useful for citizens as most of the content on their homepages was dedicated to the current agency's activity. All the websites analyzed had sections with information for citizens, however their websites homepages were not centered on it. Almost 80 % of the content on the websites homepages was news about what the agency had done or its minister said. Also, the information on public services provided by the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine was scattered among different sections on its website and thus was difficult to find. Thus the websites content was found agency-centric rather than citizens-oriented.

It should be noted that none of the websites had font adjustment option while all of them used font size of 10 pt for most textual content that made the websites difficult to read. Having font adjustment option (as, for instance, on the Estonian Government web-portal) could make the websites homepages more readable and easy to use especially for individuals with sight problems.

## Conclusion and recommendations

The research found that all the government agencies analyzed had interactivity tools on their websites enabling them to establish two-way communication with citizens. All of them used the same tools on their websites to establish interactivity: contact information, online petitions or online appeals and social media. However, all the websites were assessed as having medium level of interactivity. Two of the websites analyzed (the Ukrainian Government web-portal and the National Police of Ukraine website) displayed medium usability level. The Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine website was assessed as having low usability.

On the whole, the research has shown that Ukrainian government agencies analyzed don't fully use the potential of their web-sites to establish two-way symmetrical communication with citizens. In order to make their websites more dia-

logically oriented and useful for citizens the agencies should enhance the design of their websites in order to raise the level of their usability and interactivity. Thus, adding to the government websites such features as online forums, blogs, online polls, online surveys and “ask the expert” sessions could enhance the level of their interactivity and enable the government agencies to more effectively utilize dialogic potential of their websites. The websites usability could be enhanced by excluding visual clutter and unnecessary graphics, optimizing color design of the homepages and adding features making websites highly usable, such as sitemaps, search bars, font adjustment options, press-rooms. The

government agencies websites content should also be more citizens-oriented focusing on information useful for citizens rather than describing the agency’s everyday activity. It should be organized so that citizens could easily find information on public services provided by the agencies.

The research found that all the government websites analyzed had different design. It seems that developing common design and layout standard for all the Ukrainian government websites homepages, as for instance it has been done in Estonia [10], could make them more convenient and easy to use for visitors.

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