THE INSIDE STORIES OF THE WAY TO DESIGN A CORPORATE WEBSITE IN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS : THE CASE OF KOCAELİ BOROUGHS

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-Abstract-

Kocaeli is one of the most industrialized cities of Turkey, located in Marmara region next to İstanbul. The city incorporates many big trade organisations, small and medium size enterprises, non-governmental organisations, a university with fifty thousand students, tourism and leisure time facilities etc. Both social and economic activities are in a massive and complex nature, so the local governments of the city both enjoy the high local council revenue and deal with the problem of high local service demands.

As part of governmental structure of the country, local governments deal with day-to-day relations and services to the public. Today, it is very vital for local governments to find out the best way of service provision and effective communication with less expense, so website communication and service provision by internet/corporate website seem to be the most popular solution. But, this relatively newer communication/service provision tool for governments need to be designed carefully, strategically, up-to-date and professionally. This aspects of website design can help to have a better communication channel and also a place to provide services for local government. That's why, exploring the cases can highlight the inside stories and actual dynamics of how and why they were designed and used in local governments. In this paper, the questions mentioned above were asked in case of Kocaeli boroughs, local governments. A qualitative, structured questionnaire was used to gain first hand information from the local governments in Kocaeli and also website monitoring and content examination was used to compare the data. Results are descriptive, expressive form of a qualitative research approach and maintain inside stories on the procedures and the aim of building a website in the framework of this case.

Key words: *case study, local government, corporate website, communication*

JEL Classification: H10

1. INTRODUCTION

Corporate websites in governmental organisations basically can be seen as a tool in two categories: first communication channel and second service provision. Use of corporate website by central and local governments in Turkey has been arising rapidly for nearly ten years. Those first generation web sites were static and had poor information content. Depending on informatics and telecommunication investments and facilities provided by both central government and telecommunication sector, the potential of website evolved towards the way mentioned above.

Depending on ICTs applications, corporate websites are seen a very productive communication channel in course of information disseminating and virtual space in course of service providing (see Yayinoglu et al., 2007). Another use of corporate website in local government is practice of e-democracy and e-participation (see Alonso 2009). Turkey's practices of local governments' use of corporate website need to be more analysed, but we can predict that applications are quite far from e-democracy efforts in industrialised world. On the other hand, although first generation websites of local governments were non-interactive and static based applications, today's websites continue to be improved by facilities of more secure online services.

2. PROBLEM OF THE STUDY

Together with arising ICTs application and legal necessity, local governments started to establish internet and web-based facilities towards public. Although a marketing goal is not valid properly in local governments, aim of being elected or re-elected among local politicians lead them use a kind of marketing and public relations communication tools such as publicity, events, public information etc. (Yayinoglu, 2007).Websites are the most popular and productive virtual spaces to be able to locate them.

Holzschlag states that while most web development were good attribution of usability, interface and web design, few pay enough attention to interactivity. Meikle, however, who points out that even with basic interactivity many websites "are designed to preserve the one-sided advantages of the broadcast model, with promotion, persuasion and propaganda as the goals" (see Gustavsen and Tilley, 2003).

2.1. The Aim And Importance Of The Study

Depending on above arguments, the aim of this study tends *to explore the inside stories and actual dynamics of how and why they were established, used and maintained* in case of Kocaeli boroughs.

Restructuring local government both in the world and Turkey brought significant change demand

towards attitudes in public services and communication process. Corporate websites are seen a best way to have great impact to build relations between local government and public. A satisfactory public services and interactive communication grounds are core elements of gaining the expected results both in local government and public. ICTs have been changing the aspects of public administration and the way of doing. Local governments are front line units of public administration and deals with the day-to-day public service problems. The ICTs opportunities have been expanding for local governments and the usage of corporate websites is the most visible part of ICTs usage. It is popular, everywhere, cost-effective, fast, statutory, a media and a place of providing service.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Governments, both central and local, all over the world have started using information and communication technologies (ICTs) to establish more accoutable, transparent, interactive and citizen-friendly mechanism. Robins and Burn state that available ICT infrastructure together with government's willingness to implement e-governance have already brought success in e-government initiatives across the industrialised world (see Sharif et al., 2006). In Turkey as well, especially local government restructuring involved ICTs investment more intensive than before.

Georgescu (2007) highlights rising wave of e-government application using internet or web-based network to provide services and interactive communication. In circumstances of metropolitan cities; wide variety of public services, high population and expenditures go behind the limits of local governments traditional abilities. It obviously happens especially in case of public information providing and to make them up-dated quickly. Rolandsson and Björck (2008:55) pointed that by using ICTs, geografical distances can be managed efficiently and direct communication between citizens and public authorities can be facilitated.

Karakaya (2006) points that e-government brings transparancy and accountability in public administration together with effective governance, so this results for public benefit. Erdal (2004) also argues the importance of e-governance today and suggest three step procees as information management, process organisation and quality management.

Güçdemir (2002) points the power of virtual public relations by emphasizing the ability of control it. Sayımer (2008) as well explains the characteristics of corporate websites and list them as: interactivity, openness, up-to-date information and enjoyable. In addition to these four, transparancy is one of the most stated attribution of e-government as part of local democracy and legitimation proccess.

On the other hand, Altınışık et al. (2006) lists of rules to design a good corporate websites and states the importance of understandable information, location of links, connection speed and standard screen resolution. In addition to those four, Okay and Okay (2005) point the necessary part of corporate website as corporate info., operational areas info., publicity and annoucements, electronic corporate magazine, online service facilities and annual report.

4. RESEARCH – THE CASE OF KOCAELİ BOROUGHS

Here is the case of the paper – research part – and includes method, findings and results.

4.1. Method

The study calls upon a qualitative researh approach to obtain data on the procees, perception and background information of how and why built the website and check the data validity by comparing them with monitoring website and its content.

Qualitative research is a type of inquiry which observations, interviews, document analysis is used to have data within natural settings and to enable insights on the issue. Through this approach, it is aimed to gain a more close look at the issue and holistic results. Especially it gives the chance to catch natural process of actions, events, cases, perceptions and explanations (Daymon and Halloway, 2001; Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2003).

The Limitations

First limitation is geographical and the study includes data on the case of Kocaeli boroughs and can not be generalized to the whole local governments in Turkey. Second is time limitation and data were obtained at the end of April in 2009, after the local elections. Third, the study involves the main problem of how and why those local governments' websites were built and what their maintaining stories are. So we did not questioned upwards of this situation.

The Sample

The study covers Kocaeli city and its borough councils – local governments. Those are eight; Bekirpaşa (city center), Saraybahçe, Kandıra, Derince, Gölcük, Karamürsel, Gebze ve Körfez. Prior to the case study, the author checked and confirmed those websites. During two weeks in March 2009, they were checked every day if they continue to be published or not. After two weeks, it was confirmed that the publishing contunity is stable.

Samples were drawn from the list published in the Greater Kocaeli Municipality – at www.kocaeli.bel.tr - website in January 2009. It was not possible to have any formal hardcopy list from the municipality. During February 2009, it was checked several times if the list to be renewed or removed in the website. No changes happened during the time and it was confirmed.

Obtaining Data

Data were collected by in depth interviews with the persons in charge of the relevant duty in local governments involved in the study. A three-part, structured questionaire with mostly open-ended

thirty main questions was used and each interview lasted from 40 minutes to one hour. The interviews were fulfilled by a group of students who took a research methodology course in undergraduate program and they were trained by the author, especially suitable for this purpose. All the answers were recorded with handwriting and taped by interviwees.

Before interviewing, it was discovered the persons in charge of the relevant duty to be ablo to provide necessary information and asked them to join the study. None of the samples rejected to join. Then interviewees visited the person/persons in charge at least twice. First, for a preliminary and then for the entire interview. The author checked every person in charge who was interviewed, by calling. Another control process were monitoring the websites included in the study and comparing their content in general with the told stories.

4.2. Findings and Results

Depending on the nature of qualitative research, the data were presented in a descriptive narratives. All the narratives were analysed by the author. Reduction and presentation of the narrative data made according to qualitative research approach. Results are classified descriptive form of narratives. Those classifications are elementary information on the websites; reason of establishing and their usage, and process of organisation, maintainance and improvement. Results were presented apart in each title.

The Elementary Information On the Websites of Kocaeli Boroughs

As stated in a related chapter, corporate website in local government can serve two aims: first as a communication channel / communication (public relations) function and second as a distribution channel of services / service provision function. Both public relations (communication function) and marketing (services provision) practices in local government tend to use websites on their own sake.

The Public Relations (Communication) Practices of Local Governments Involved in the Study:

 In this study, we asked to the samples that what kind of public relations practices mostly are being involved in local government. Answers included *events, media relations, philantropic activities, publicity* and *website communication*.

Of course, it was not questioned whether they apply any conventional public services or not, by reason of their existantial necessity.

In addition to the general framework above, results show that all of these websites include both communication and marketing aims to the public. Those narratives on use of website is about 'publicity of local government, publishing their news stories, delivering online services, before hand applications through website, anouncements about services or service procurement basically.

From First Versions of Websites to Interactive Versions:

Except two of them, others (six) mentioned that they now publish the second, the third or more versions of their websites. Here are the highligted findings:

- Those six are highly different from earlier versions. All of those first versions were static, non-interactive and made by an amateur and voluntary base. On the other hand, the two websites are first versions and they are being published for five years in interactive stracture.

- It is clearly possible to see that these local governments' actual website publishing age between less than one year and five years. Findings shows that in last five years, more intensive changes happened among these websites. History of website publishing dates back to more than ten years except two local governments.

- Except one of them, it is stated that all persons in charge with website developement and major executives on the operations hold a degree in computer science. The only one holds a high school degree and is the student in social science programme of open university. Slighty different among them, a building process of an earlier website version was executed by an architect (female) depending on her suggestion to the Mayor for a new website need. Later, she moved to another position related to arts and cultural events.

- None of the PR personnel inside the local governments were delegated alone to execute process of building the website. Nonetheless, in most of the cases, PR and ICT (information and communication technologies) personnels work together during the duty.

Reasons to Establish Websites and Its Usage

Findings depict a picture of the reason to update older versions of websites. We can classify them in two types of reason; first is visual and content needs, second is technological opportunities.

Visual and Content Needs:

- Two of the local governments publishes first versions and the need of building a website is basically apart from these factors.

- Some of the samples express the need of placement their corporate identity and establishing its elements. This need is related to PR (communication) function of local governments in general.

- Another one is the need of professional design and visual attractiveness. One of the samples expresses the situation as '*overcome the problem of monotonous look and apply a modern graphical design solutions*'. Another one describe it as '*an old style website problem*'. Those are also related to PR function.

- The content enrichement and interactive application needs are another reason to develop the website.

Technological Opportunities (information and communication technologies-ICTs):

These are one of the noteworthy statements which explain the necessity; '*tendencies towards ICTs usage in local government*' and '*pressure of e-municipality*'. Transformation of local government in use of ICTs reflects its results especially in website communication. Another statement is about the opportunity to use up-to-date ICTs applications in local governments by legal enhancement. It is more meaningfull with the comment as it is 'a statutory necessity' to build a website for local governments. On the other hand, behind the statutory necessity, the samples emphasize public driven pressures on local governments such as ' *a need to fasten the complaint and suggestion procedures*' and '*service provision productivity*'.

The Aim of Usage:

Findings can be classified in two categories such as service provision and communication functions. Both of them were included in narratives by the samples.

- As part of service provision function, most of the samples stated that the aim is '*fastening public services*' and '*facilitating the procedures for the public*' basically. Another statement is '*public access to the local government online and the opportunity of before hand applications for saving the time*'. '*Interactivity and building relations with the public'* is another statement on behalf of service provision point of view.

- As part of communication function (PR practices), all of the samples stated nearly same expressions such as '*providing info – like about borough, council and mayor, public services info*' or '*publicity about projects and activities*', '*public announcements*' and '*news stories of local government*'. All of these are the tools of public relations management usefull both commercial and public sector.

The Process: Organisation, Maintaining and Improvement of the Websites

The findings show that a typical way of doing among samples to develop their coprorate websites. In addition, it is same as maintaining the websites.

Organisation of Building the Websites:

We can list noteworthy findings as below:

- Most of them were designed by *professional web design/development firms*. One of the samples were built by an advertising agency and another were developed inside the local government.

- As depending on the reasons mentioned above to develop the actual websites, many of them started to be renewed by *suggestions of ICTs executives* in local government.

- But it is unique example that a new elected mayor himself asked to renew the website and *he stated its concept and shaped the design style*.

- Almost all renewal process were executed by ICTs managers and *PR department accompanied* them.

- It was stated by all samples that each department provided necessary information and visual materials to the team composed by ICTs and PR departments for website content.

- *Visual attractiveness* and *easy use* are the main concerns among all of the samples.

- Most of the samples were designed based on *a reviewing other local governments' websites*. Especially Kocaeli Greater Municipality website is the targeted one.

Maintaining the Website:

Congruent to above findings, maintaining the website were delegated to ICTs managers basically. Here are the relevant findings:

- To maintain the websites, most of them followed a way that ICTs departments were appointed to become *'the admin'* and *user accounts for each relevant department* were established by ICTs manager.

- Thus, each department updates content quickly and appropriate. Two of the samples are apart of this delegated tasks. They manage all of e-mail flow by ICTs department and publish up-to-date news stories by PR department.

The Improvement of the Website:

- All of the respondents stated that they need to improve the website depending on several legal and technological changes affecting the local government.

- More dynamic, interactive and news portal usage are the stated aims.

- On the other hand, all of them gater user track information or another electronic data, but a few of them applies these to improve their website.

- All of the samples stated that they enjoy the arising ICTs facilities in local government, but some of them highlight that they do not benefit from all the opportunities that ICTs bring them.

- Online inquiry about user satisfaction is the only way that the samples applied to gain feedback. Both this and user's electronic data were used to make little changes in the websites, such as shifting hidden and foreground links.

5. CONCLUSION

Local governments deal with day-to-day relations and services to the public. Both high demands for public services and inadaquate sources enforce them to use ICTs in all aspect of organisation. This seem to be a solution of the dilemma that they faced. Providing services through web-based application such as corporate website is one of the dimensions to evaluate this opportunity. On the other hand, probably the most exiting part of corporate website is its usage as a communication tool, especially for publicity. Because of the necessity being elected and aiming to be re-elected make corporate website usaga very vital for local politicians.

Dual nature of corporate website usage is very suitable for local governments especially under the pressure of doing a job with public finance, legal limitations and accountability. Therefore, it was remarkable question to explore how and why local governments established , managed and maintained corporate website. The paper asked this question and because of time and source limitations of the research., the study involved the case of Kocaeli boroughs. Behind the limitation, Kocaeli offers a high and wide variety of population, broad geografic area, complex nature of public services and mostly mayors of AKP – ruling party in Turkey.

Findings showed that all of the samples had a corporate website and they were second or more versions, except one. Corporate website is a statutory application lately in local governments. But, samples stated that the history of establishing website dates back nearly ten years. One of the remarkable findings is the important role of ICTs department and its executives to be the initiators of building a website for local government. They were the leader of creating process and mostly public relations department accompanied them to coordinate obtaining content materials. Another noteworthy statement was about the nature of first version of the corporate websites; they were static, built by voluntary initiatives of a skilled public servant, old-style appearance. This is also important that findings depicted the use of website for publicity and providing some services to public at most. It is critical point that none of the local governments benefit from all the ICTs facilities to evaluate electronic feedbacks for improving the website properly. The little thing such visitor counter is the only answer stated by respondents.

As stated by a respondent of a ICTs department, local governments enjoy of the opportunities that ICTs developement brought to scene but there is still another lack of use of ICTs facilities in local governments. Lastly, we should note that the case covers Kocaeli boroughs and can not be generalized over all local governments in Turkey.

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