

# **Creating Dialogue in an Effective Democracy - the Danish Case**

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**Abstract.** Today the potential of eGovernance technology goes beyond simple eGovernment service delivery, and includes an unrealised potential for wider interaction with the citizen. For the Danish Government a key element in the work with eGovernance is dialogue - between authorities, but also between authorities and citizens, i.e. end-users. Therefore the Government has developed an application called DanmarksDebatten (The Denmark Debate). DanmarksDebatten is a citizen-oriented opportunity to have a geographical-determined, issue-determined and institutions-determined overview and entrance to present dialogues/debates about public issues as well as a decentralized adaptive service offered to every public institution with a wide array of integration opportunities. DanmarksDebatten brings debate opportunity where the citizen demands it as well as a coherent national overview. For the public administration and politicians DanmarksDebatten offers a unique opportunity to engage with their users or their electorate.

## **1 Interactive Policy-making and Citizens-oriented eGovernment**

For the Danish Government a key element in the work with eGovernance is dialogue - between authorities, but also between authorities and citizens, i.e. end-users. Hereby the Danish Government recognizes that the very same technologies used in eGovernment can be used to improve our democracies, to help bridging the increasing gap between politicians and public officials and the citizens.

The Danish Government has announced that its' IT policy should be measured against the yardstick of how well it contributes to furthering individuals' opportunities for active participation and contributory influence.

For this reason, the National IT & Telecom Agency under the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation developed an Internet application that allows collecting information from citizens about their views on any policy. It is more specifically an online consultation tool. This tool is called DanmarksDebatten (The Denmark Debate) [1].

Communities of service are a major IT policy goal for the Danish Government. DanmarksDebatten is a nationwide XML-based ASP-type of service, that the National IT and Telecom Agency offers to any central and local public institutions wanting to expand their dialogue with the citizens/users.

DanmarksDebatten is a dialogue-oriented Internet-based tool to support these efforts via qualifying input from citizens and elected representatives. If there is no dialogue, which means less opportunity to learn about the citizens' requirements, the public sector is less adaptable. This may in turn lead to increased expenditure on investments and activities based on previous, not future, needs.

## 2 Background

An important reference point for the Danish Government's IT and telecommunications policy is the individual citizen. In theory, information technology can provide greater flexibility, increased transparency and more choice in everyday life for the individual citizen. But for many citizens it can be difficult to see these benefits in practice. All too often, IT projects in the public sector have not been able to focus on the individual citizen and a digital divide between citizens and government has been the result.

With DanmarksDebatten the National IT and Telecom Agency wanted to shift the focus from a strictly technical approach towards a greater focus on the citizens' need and citizens' knowledge – we wanted to *rehumanize* the eGovernment project through eDialogue. As part of what we refer to as the citizens-oriented eGovernment, DanmarksDebatten - strives to put the individual citizen in the centre.

### 2.1 Objectives

The main objective of DanmarksDebatten is to establish a democratic forum, where citizen, public administration and politicians can engage in debates. The vision has been to create one common platform for all public debates taking place within the public sector, be it on local, regional or national level.

The objective is to facilitate a geographic, issue-specific and administration-/institution-specific overview over ongoing debates about public issues. In this way DanmarksDebatten, over the next three years, will analyse and explore the Internet's potential in terms of strengthening democracy and enhancing information and dialogue between citizen, politicians and government.

With DanmarksDebatten political and administrative decisions can be qualified, not only in terms of enhancing democracy but also from what could be called an economic point of view. When aiming at making government more responsive we also mean striving towards *balancing citizens' demands and governments supply* - meaning reducing the need for stock and overcapacity by responsiveness.

While the National IT and Telecom Agency facilitates the technical system, DanmarksDebatten is based on the participation of the local and national government. The individual institutions are responsible for running/facilitating and moderating the different debates. Every debate can be customized to the local needs and appears in most cases as an integrated part of the individual institution's homepage.

DanmarksDebatten offers transversely search facilities (horizontally and vertically) and is accessible where and when the citizen desires a debate.

### 3 A Democratic Decision Process Support Tool

DanmarksDebatten is both a national portal offering a unique overview over ongoing debates as well as one coherent entrance and platform for dialogues between citizens, between citizens and administration and between citizens and politicians. DanmarksDebatten is also a decentralized, adaptive system offered to all public institutions as well as non-governmental organizations and local and national media. DanmarksDebatten offers a wide range of integration opportunities, ranging from a simple pop-up solution with standard design, over XML-integration to an xml-based iframe solution with an individual, adjustable style sheet for every institution.

Compared to other deliberation systems, DanmarksDebatten is a unique service that stimulates what we have called 'the situational engagement'. Based on the assumption that the citizen will be more motivated to engage in a debate when they address a public website with a specific purpose the individual institutions can, through XML-feeds and/or via an (i)frame-solution, give the citizens the opportunity to engage in an eDialogue where, and when the citizens wants it.

Public authorities and elected representatives may use DanmarksDebatten to qualify their decisions - to present an issue from all angles.

The City of Aarhus chose to use DanmarksDebatten for a public exchange of ideas in relation to the framework for traffic investments and initiatives in central Aarhus in the coming years [2]. In Funen County, the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee decided to put the question of student fees at the adult education center (VUC) up for debate [3], and the Danish Digital Task Force did the same with the issue of efficiency gains on digitalisation projects.

### 3.1 The Situational Engagement

Recent studies suggest that citizens today tend to centre their (democratic) engagement on issues that directly relates to their everyday life at the expense of overall (inter-) national and ideological issues [4,5,6]. As a consequence DanmarksDebatten aims at creating a framework for debates where and when the citizens wants them. The vision of DanmarksDebattens 'situational engagement' can be explained by the following example:

If a family can see from the municipality's website that the waiting time to get day nursery for the crèche is six months, the municipal authorities may on the same page invite the family to discuss the municipality's future childcare policy. There may be links to various sources of background information as well as links to similar debates at local, regional or national level, where the family may find inspiration or voice its opinion. From a discussion of municipal childcare policy the family may thus rapidly proceed to e.g. a debate on government family policy. Debates are linked and made accessible, whether they take part at national, county or municipal level. This gives citizens an opportunity to navigate the various public debates on the Internet, and the public authorities and elected representatives on the other hand can gain valuable information on the citizens' preferences, values and attitudes. DanmarksDebatten is thus both a national debate portal and a local *eDialogue tool*.

### 3.2 The technical solution

DanmarksDebatten is an ASP service. This means that the National IT and Telecom Agency hosts the system used by the authorities for debates with citizens, while the authorities themselves are responsible for the debates, including the appointment of moderators and debate owners. Debates may be adapted to local requirements, and in most cases they are presented as an integral part of the relevant authorities' websites. This is possible because the authorities can place their own design on top of the template supplied by the National IT and Telecom Agency.<sup>1</sup>

DanmarksDebatten applies the XML standard,<sup>2</sup> which is supplemented with a classification system from OIO - Offentlig Information Online (public information online)[4]. This means that the web pages with public information and debates registered with the OIO link service are categorized by standardized types and topics. Categorizing debates by topic makes it easier for citizens to search the web for relevant debates. This central system is updated regularly and will be transferred to a web service in the near future.

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<sup>1</sup> Integration to specific websites is possible through either an XML/REST-type web service or an old-fashioned frame solution for those not yet familiar with XML.

<sup>2</sup> XML is a mark-up language used to structure data so that it becomes recognizable and thus searchable

The National IT and Telecom Agency offers personal and telephone assistance during the initial phases of a debate. The Agency also provides a set of recommendations for preparing, starting up, running and concluding debates, as well as a technical manual.

### 3.3 Resources and accessibility

Development costs, including salaries, rent, pilot phase etc. sums up to a total of 160.000 euros. Also in terms of man-hours the project has turned out to be very modest, to some extent because we had internal access to extensive knowledge when it came to democratic theory and practice, especially in the area of eDemocracy. Also in-house knowledge about community-building and project management have been valuable assets.

In terms of accessibility the project validates as XHTML 1.0 Transitional according to W3C standards as well as the WAI standards at Priority 1.

## 4 An Open public Issue System

An important element while working with metadata is the issue element. To ensure interoperability and coherence DanmarksDebatten uses the open public issue system OIO, and as the first Danish public service ever it has implemented all of its three levels. The open public issue system enables DanmarksDebattens unique possibility to search for debates horizontal as well as vertically.

By offering both a national portal as well as decentralized integrated solutions DanmarksDebatten offers multiple access for its users. Following this there is also no limits in terms of scalability except from server capacity. By using the open public issue system, and by being a web-based service the project offers a high degree of interoperability.

Also by offering a standard solution on one hand and a more customized solution on the other, DanmarksDebatten strikes a fine balance between customized turnkey solutions and standardized solutions on the other.

## 5 Implementation

The project was kicked-off by an initial pilot period where twelve individual institutions participated. This was done in order to test the system's practical usability and quality, and to test the need for any further software development.

The National IT and Telecom Agency provided help and guidance during the entire pilot process and will continue to do so in the future. Also a paper with guidelines for "The good eDialogue" has been produced and is provided to any new institution

signing up. The paper offers advice and good practice in regards to good debate ethics, moderation, dialogue strategy, and e-democracy in general.

A communication-strategy template has also been developed and is provided along with consultant assistance on this matter. However, the individual institutions are responsible for supporting their own users and for making sure that the dialogue between citizens and government officials is stimulated.

Furthermore, a nationwide digital network for eDemocracy has been established. The members of the network also meet physically at specially arranged seminars four times a year. One of the goals for the network is to produce a white paper on eDemocracy.

Based on the positive experiences from the initial pilot period, the project has just recently been extended for a period of three years during where it is to prove its *raison d'être*. During this period, studies will also be carried out in order to document values and gains generated from the project.

## **5.1 Implementation management**

DanmarksDebattens debate module is offered free of charge to any public institution interested. Be it local municipalities, counties or national governmental bodies, public sector research institutions etc. Also non-governmental organization and media can apply.

The debate module, used for conducting discussions of a specific topic, can be integrated on any public website via a simple frame implementation or via an XML-based web services.

Every institution signing up is given access to a simple personalized content management system allowing them to prepare the debate by creating consultation documents, applying links to background information or to similar debates, adjusting integrations values in a simple style sheet, creating XML-feeds etc., etc..

The users (citizens) are offered an e-mail service that announces new debates as well as they are offered the possibilities of subscribing to newsletters on issues/debates of their own choice.

## **5.2 System export**

A public/private partnership agreement has also been made between the developer (Mondo A/S) and the National IT and Telecom Agency allowing for the system to be exported to third countries at a very favourable price. In Europe, the concept, a copy of all functionality on "DanmarksDebatten", implementation of the system, including design and translation into a specific country's language is priced 50,000 euros.



In the near future we aim to include the service into OeresundDirect [5] - a cross-boarder project between Denmark and Sweden in the Oeresund Region - hereby trying out the project's pan-European potential.

## 6 Results and impact

As the project has only just been launched and marketing efforts just recently have been initiated (in March 2004) and given that empirical research studies are yet to be conducted, it is still too early to say anything substantial about the project's results and impact. However, what we can do is to highlight some of the trends we have seen so far.

Until now marketing efforts have been limited to an email sent by the Minister for Science, Technology and Innovation to every Mayor and public sector director in Denmark followed by subsequent follow-up phone calls. Despite these rather modest marketing efforts, 50 public authorities at local, regional and national level have already signed up (as of March 2004). Amongst these, the most successful implementations have integrated DanmarksDebatten on their own website using the frame solution. This has given the debates a more local underpinning and has generated very positive feedback from the individual institutions.

What we also have seen so far is that there seems to be a fairly even distribution amongst those institutions using the debates as a basis for specific political decisions and those using the debates as a more general eDialogue tool. A few examples might illustrate this:

In the county of Funen they used DanmarksDebatten to discuss a new adult education program and subsequently they let the same discussion form the foundation for the decision and implementation of a new payment system for students. The Municipality of Vaerloese used DanmarksDebatten to qualify their decision on what to do with a former military airbase that they were taking over from the government. In the Municipality of Aarhus (Denmark's second largest city) they first ran an overall debate on how to manage the inner city traffic problems and the input from this debate was then used to form a traffic plan. This plan is, at this very moment being debated again via DanmarksDebatten. Lastly, the national eGovernmental Task Force has used DanmarksDebatten to run a debate on why so few eGovernment project leads to actual measurable effectiveness.

Also, it seems like the majority of the debates are being organized under the OIO-issues 'Environment and physical planning', 'Traffic and Transport' and 'Governance and democracy'. Both 'Environmental and physical planning' and 'Traffic and Transport' cover debate issues that probably are considered very relevant for the citizens in the citizens' day to day life, in so far as they deal with subjects that are both physically and mentally close to the citizens - bear in mind the debate about the 'Inner

city traffic plan" and the debate about what to do with the former military airbase. Also, another characteristic of these debates, apart from them being locally anchored, is that they all have had a tight time schedule. The period you were allowed to debate was very clearly defined. This seems to have had an effect on the citizens' credence towards the actual debate and the institution behind it. Also the institutions' willingness to follow up on a debate seems to be of importance when it comes to citizens' confidence and hence willingness to participate in a debate.

The majority of the debates organized under the OIO-issue 'Governance and Democracy' almost exclusively concern the future organization of municipalities, which probably is due to the forthcoming municipality reform.

Lastly, as seen in the examples above, institutions using DanmarksDebatten have, as yet, to fully utilize the potential of 'the situational engagement'. This could amongst other be explained by immature it-systems not being able to handle XML and web-services' but also by the fact that many institutions still need to think of dialogue as an important part of their communication strategy.

## **7 Learning points and conclusions**

In general terms, what we have learned so far is that, if citizens are to be engaged online, rational incentives for the ordinary citizen to enter into dialogue needs to be present. Facts must be made clear and stated in an understandable form, and the issues at stake broadcasted widely. Another challenge is to develop administrative means and a sufficient back office, consisting of resources, funding, and personnel, to tabulate and assess the responses received from the citizens.

Success with eDialogue requires careful planning, well-defined themes and clear goals. Likewise, one cannot expect the citizen to engage in constructive and valuable dialogues, and respect other citizens' right to do the same, if there is no one there to guide them. Therefore an (pro) active and committed debate moderator is a necessity.

The following being inspired by a web based e-facilitation course arranged by the Hansard Society [9] in the UK and mixed with our own empirical and theoretical studies on the issue of eDialogue, list respectively the citizens' and the public administrations', politicians' and decision makers' objectives for eDialogue. It also presents a short checklist useful to bear in mind when preparing a debate.

The Citizens' objectives:

- to extend their knowledge about a given political issue
- to express their own point of view
- to exchange their views and opinions with each other
- to know that someone is actually listening

The public administrations', politicians' and decision makers' objectives:



- to listen and communicate better with the citizens
- thereby representing and reflecting the citizens' views and opinions better
- and qualifying the democratic process by creating a more open and transparent process.
- to become more effective when it comes to decision making, both in political and economic point of view.
- to increase their responsiveness and adaptability.

When preparing a debate we have found it useful to bear the following checklist in mind:

- A clear objective - what is the purpose of the debate and how do you plan to use the outcome afterwards?
- Relevance - what is the relevance for you and for the participants
- Recruiting participants - create a participant profile, use existing networks and partner with local media. "Timing is everything".
- Adaption period - make sure that the citizen feels comfortable and has access to any help or guidance that they might need
- "What's in it for me" - make sure, that the citizens' know what the outcome of their participation will be.
- Only run time-limited debates and remember to maintain the interest as well as the visible overview by making small summaries every now and then.
- When closing a debate - remember to express your appreciation for the received contributions and be keen on announcing any related activities regarding the same issue - be it town hall meetings, workshops etc.
- Results and feedback - remember to brief the participants about any outcome of their efforts.

Lastly, but not least, to create dialogue in an effective democracy, one needs to think and establish participation and partnership between all of the stakeholders in government and the citizenry alike.

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## **Part III**

# **Legal and Identity Issues**

