

Democracy on the Web - <http://www.nordpol.dk>, case study submitted by Christine Maria Andersen <cma@nja.dk>, Projektmedarbejder, <http://www.nordpol.dk> :

In 2000 the County of North Jutland, Denmark launched a large digital administration project.

One of the ambitions of the project is to re-enable the democratic process in the region in a time of ailing civic interest and participation in the democratic forum.

The task of the Democracy project was to create an electronic forum for the democratic dialogue among citizens and politicians.

The task was solved by inviting citizens, politicians and first time voters to take part in the project from the very beginning. The result was a very much alive and well-visited web site with a good dialogue among citizens and politicians.

A Need for Breathing New Life into Democracy

The conventional channels of the democracy are ailing. In North Jutland this manifested itself clearly in small polls when regional level of democracy called the citizens to the ballot box. In 1997 North Jutland experienced the lowest polls in Denmark. The object of the Democracy Project is based on this problem. The goal of the project is to render visible the decisions made on a regional political level, and to put in an effort to involve the citizens in relation to the process of democracy.

What do the Participants Want?

The target group of the Democracy project in its widest definition is the citizens and the politicians. Specifically the County of North Jutland also wanted to reach the first time voters with their tradition for small polls.

The guidelines for the design of the project were created in focus group meetings with "adult" citizens, politicians and first time voters. Here the groups were asked to define their requirements to a web site representing the democracy of North Jutland. The essential conclusions reached in these sessions were that the dialogue between citizens and politicians should be a central element of the web site. The citizens wanted "to get to know the politicians" and to be involved in the political planning at an early stage of the process.

Also it was agreed that this was not intended as a place for municipal or county officers providing answers to the citizens; rather it should accommodate an open debate between the citizens and the politicians.

The participators were quite sceptic towards opinion polls owing to the risk of manipulation and the lacking representation on the Internet.

Also the young people put great emphasis on the availability of presentation of points of view held forth by politicians and parties as a vital element, a quiz with prizes to win, as well as a colourful and dynamic nature of the web site with regard to news handling and new topics for debate.

The Product - the nordpol.dk Web Site

The web site was designed in close cooperation between the project group of the County of North Jutland, and the KMD, the large Danish IT enterprise. Also the KMD contributed as a partner in relation to the user survey and in defining the design of the web site. The web site was structured with a discussion forum as the central element: see the English version: <http://www.nordpol.dk/english/default.htm>

The web site offers: · A discussion forum as the central element · A presentation of the politicians · A Chat Room · A Calendar of political arrangements · News sites, where the daily news are available from e.g. the regional broadcasting station · A quiz with prizes to win · An Info page with e.g. information on how to influence the political decision-making · A Search function

The choice of design, colourway and graphics was based on a wish to create a page with a sympathetic, inviting and friendly image, which will not put off young people at the first click. The web site has been designed with an emphasis on user-friendliness. It is based on ASP and HTML and requires nothing more than a computer with access to the web.

The politicians have been provided with a special log-in facility partly to avoid "fake contributions", partly to give a better overview through a graphic distinction between contributions from politicians and citizens. Contributions from the politicians are marked with a dot and a link to the profile of the politician.

Building the web site - Total cost: 58,250 euro.

The first task of the Project was to create a democratic forum with a particular aim towards November 20, 2001: The next County Council Election Day.

During this first project period of September 10 to November 20, 2001 the www.nordpol.dk experienced 23,000 visitors and 450 contributions for debate.

November 20 saw record-breaking high polls in North Jutland. The www.nordpol.dk is hardly allowed to take all the credit for this, though - A general election was issued and scheduled for the very same day, and by tradition the general election polls are higher than those of the county elections.

Profiling

The reason for the www.nordpol.dk being so well visited and used to such a degree is partly to be found in the extensive involvement of users, in particular the candidates for the county council who received comprehensive and repeated information about the project, and partly in the profiling potentials of participating and providing information.

Furthermore the project was intensively profiled in North Jutland as part of the county's campaign to draw attention to the county council election. Nordpol.dk was profiled through radio spots, TV and cinema commercials, on bus advertisements and posters and in relation to teachers of social studies on the youth educations.

Profiling campaign - Total cost: 123,000 euro.

Engaging the citizens Since the election in 2001 the web site www.nordpol.dk has been used as a forum for dialogue between the members of the County Council and the citizens of North Jutland.

The topics of the dialogues are current issues in the decision-making of the politicians. The ideas and comments from the citizens are used as a source of knowledge and inspiration for both the administration and the politicians and integrated in the political planning.

Our experience so far is that a successful debate demands:

- A clear and very specific topic for the debate
- A directly engagement of the citizens - through user groups, existing networks, direct mail and so on.
- Launching the debate in the beginning of the decision-making process, so the citizen can participate in the agenda setting.
- A clear objective for the debate and a description of how the contributions of the citizens are used in the process.
- Visible and active participation from politicians.

The most successful debates on www.nordpol.dk has been debates with very specific target groups, for instance a debate about improving the conditions for the handicapped (target group: the employees working in this area, the families, interest groups and of course the handicapped) and about changes in the education for adults (target group: employees, students, other education centres and so on).

With more specific topics for debate, the target group of the debate is of course narrower. In a period of two months the handicap-debate had 7,300 visitors and 95 contributions for debate. In a period of one month the education-debate had 94 contributions and 10,586 visitors.

The resources spend in the nordpol.dk project is mainly wages for the team behind the web site and the officials responsible for the decision-making processes. Each debate has a small profiling campaign, but as the target groups are quite specific, the major part of the campaign relies on direct mail, which is quite inexpensive.

Part of The Digital North Denmark

<http://www.nordpol.dk> is a project in The Digital North Denmark - a regional project designed to explore the potentials of a networking society in relation to every citizen of North Denmark by the deployment of information technology. Read more on The Digital North Denmark-web site: <http://www.detdigitalenordjylland.dk/en/welcome.htm>.

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