

APPENDIX 19. FIRSTGOV.GOV: A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT

Note: This is a preliminary evaluation of the FirstGov project, including a comparison of the FirstGov portal with the comparable effort in the United Kingdom, called UK online. The author agreed to undertake this analysis at the request of the Commission in connection with the its Comprehensive Assessment of Public Information Dissemination. The views expressed herein are entirely the author's and do not necessarily reflect the official views of the Commission.

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A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT OF FIRSTGOV¹¹

On June 24, 2000, the lead article on CNN.com announced: "In historic "Website chat," Clinton unveils era of U.S. "e-government."¹² The President said that a new Internet site, FirstGov.gov, would be launched in about 90 days (meaning late September 2000, but the search engine developer, Inktomi, indicates "early November" is a more realistic date). In the words of the President:

It will be linked to all federal information Web sites -- the world's largest collection. ... When its complete FirstGov will serve as a single point of entry to one of the largest, perhaps the most useful collection of Web pages in the entire world.¹³

The President said FirstGov will offer individuals, small businesses, and others a single source for information from the federal government:

Whether you want crucial information in starting a small business, or you want to track your Social Security benefits, you can do it all in one place, 24 hours a day, seven days a week," in starting a small business, or you want to track your Social Security benefits, you can do it all in one place, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.¹⁴

The FirstGov site will be managed by the General Services Administration (GSA). FirstGov replaces WebGov, a project initiated several years ago by this same agency. The GSA Administrator, David Barram, indicated that one error in judgment relating to the way WebGov was approached was the failure to involve the public and private sectors in a partnership configuration. Instead, the government tried to do the whole job itself. A contest to cull new ideas in electronic government service was also announced. The nonprofit Council for Excellence in Government agreed to award \$50,000 for the best ideas.

In articles appearing since the June 24th announcement, the figure of 100 million government Web pages has been mentioned, to be accessible through a "single portal," the new state-of-the-art term of

¹¹ Available at <http://www.nclis.gov/govt/assess/assess.appen19.pdf>. The first segment of this appendix was last revised on September 15, 2000.

¹² In historic 'Webside chat,' Clinton unveils era of U.S. 'e-government' June 24, 2000, <http://www.cnn.com/2000/ALLPOLITICS/stories/06/24/clinton.webcast/index.html>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

preference for a single web site permitting access to a large number of other web sites. The idea of providing a "single, one stop service" for government information is not a new one. To the contrary, the idea is almost as old as the Nation itself. However, all have faced enormous, some insurmountable difficulties in the past for a wide variety of reasons.

FirstGov is a portal that affords citizens, businesses, state and local government officials, and other government information users the opportunity to search using a single federal government home page. Interestingly, an agency or other government entity must "buy into" FirstGov by first agreeing to become a "certified partner." There are certain obligations and conditions that must first be met before the applying entity can be considered certified.

The search engine and database index are being developed by a nonprofit group headed by Eric Brewer, Chief Scientist at Inktomi Corporation in Foster City, California. In press materials the company announced that its search engine could search 500 million Web pages in 0.25 seconds. GSA Administrator Barram indicated that Brewer suggested the idea to the President while attending the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland in January 2000. It remains to be seen if the technology will be as sophisticated as the marketing of this capability.

My purpose here is merely to highlight on some of the more significant challenges. I believe the idea of a "pilot test" is, indeed, a very useful initiative, and the President is to be applauded for forging ahead with this initiative. The very experience of attempting to bring up the Web site will, in my view, underscore the need for fundamental reforms in the way the federal government's information is "captured," identified, organized and structured, maintained and stored, managed throughout its entire information life cycle, and ultimately archived or disposed of. It will also have the sobering impact of exposing millions of Americans to the incredible array of government information that is "theirs for the asking." But it will also, inevitably, carry some disappointments as citizens begin to realize that searching for information is a very time-consuming, complex, and altogether formidable chore, much less having finally located it, then downloading it or otherwise retrieving it for use.

Here are some of the challenges.

1. The United States government generates an enormous amount of information, both nationally from the central federal government in Washington, D.C., and regionally at the state, local, and tribal government levels, as well as abroad at U.S. embassies, military bases, and specialized agency offices that require foreign representation. What will the scope of FirstGov be? Moreover, there is lots of "government information" that is not .gov for a variety of reasons. One is that the government has entered into some kind of contractual or informal arrangement with a contractor, an individual, a university, or some other kind of institution or group, to perform work for it. Is all of the information generated by those government agents and surrogates also going to be included?
2. Retrievability of information, whether government information or any other kind of information, is immeasurably simplified and speeded up the way the information to be searched is organized and structured in the first place. Unfortunately, the government does not organize its data, documents, and literature around commonly used subject headings, like most of the library, archival, museum, and journalism worlds do. Instead, the information is organized around agency names, agency missions, agency functions, and similar "bureaucratic buzz words." Correlating those bureaucratic classifications with commonly used subject terms is a chore that has thus far defied repeated efforts by many different bibliographic experts and expert groups over the years. The need for now coming to grips squarely with this correlation is acute in the electronic information age. Intuition is not much help here. Who, other than an experienced bureaucrat, knows that marriages, births, and deaths is information produced and made available by the

Census Bureau? Who, other than an experienced government documents librarian, would know that permits for operating a boat in an inland navigable waterway is issued by the Coast Guard? The examples are virtually endless.

3. Agencies are already being criticized for bringing information products up one day on one of their web sites and taking it down the next. How will citizens react to this approach to web site integrity? Even worse, an entire web site is brought up one day and disappears the next. Some agencies have admitted they neither know, nor can control the number of web sites their own agencies have established. GSA officials say "the pressure of the public in demanding tighter quality controls over web site and web page integrity will force agencies to correct this situation." One study indicates that of the approximately 20,000 federal web sites, many have been entirely abandoned or their contents is so badly outdated as to be virtually useless.
4. Index terms, like governmental functions themselves, are not static, they are dynamic. The argot of the day changes from hour to hour, from day to day. A dynamic, empirically developed online thesaurus of search terms is a critical requirement to assist users. Many an online database has been wrecked on the shoals of static indexing systems and thesauri that simply could not rise to the challenge.
5. Agency policies, guidelines, standards, and procedures governing the posting of public information products to their web sites are few and far between. Of course to a large extent agencies cannot be faulted too harshly on that score because they are just starting down the path of the Internet. What is less forgivable, however, is the lack of leadership in OMB in this area. There are some commendable policies in place, but they are not being evaluated and extended on a government-wide basis.
6. According to NCLIS, there is no single, central, authoritative official within agencies that has clear responsibility and authority for online publishing. It would appear the public affairs offices in some cases have this responsibility, but in others it is the CIO, and in others it is still the print publishing official who now has both electronic and pre-electronic publishing responsibility. There is nothing wrong with different agencies using different models of responsibility and authority that are tailored to their unique needs, but what is not permissible is the failure of the agency head to pinpoint responsibility *somewhere, in some office, in someone*.
7. It is far from clear how security, privacy, and confidentiality concerns will be addressed. Who controls these determinations, and who will be the final approving authority? One of the most difficult problems faced by librarians and other information professionals is the challenge of determining the authenticity of the data they are viewing on a web page: "Is this the official copy I'm looking at, or is this an unofficial copy?" This is an extremely difficulty challenge and one that NCLIS ran into when it did a survey several years ago of some 23 different federal agencies and over 300 specific government information products. Many agencies felt, for example, that just list their agency name on the web page, or the name of its agency head, was adequate to reassure the viewer that the information was official!
8. Information literacy is another problem. While there is a current excitement over the thousands of new ".coms," ".govs," ".edus" and dot this and dot that which are coming up hourly, already the frustrations of knowing how to navigate even a single web site, much less across sites, are turning many users off. There is certainly a need for an online navigation course that users who do not possess the requisite computer and information literacy skills can take to bring them up to speed with those skills.
9. The "crawlers" as they are called, are blind and is not the best technology to get into a database. Moreover, crawlers can be very intrusive, and too many crawlers acting concurrently have been known to cause very serious problems in searching sites. Moreover, crawls should be comprehensive instead of sampling in their approach.

10. Government Information Locator System (GILS) compliancy is another challenge, and it is doubtful that FirstGov, at least initially, will be GILS-compliant. Experience so far in implementing GILS at the agency level has been uneven at best. However, in the long run, the very existence of a single, one stop portal for accessing government information augurs well for the value of a GILS (whether the current one or a future iteration) since the value of an authoritative, comprehensive metadata tool to assist in identifying, locating, and describing government information should be incontrovertibly underscored.

In short, the challenges are legion, but the need for such a pilot test far outweighs the fear of posing more new questions than answers can be provided. This has always been the classic dilemma of diffusing new technologies, and information technologies are no exception. The government must participate actively in the pilot test, and the lessons learned must be carefully documented so that the next generation of federal search engines can profit by the inevitable shortcomings. NCLIS should participate in the pilot test since it is an inseparable project from their current study of public information dissemination reforms. Certainly the players involved must provide advice and guidance in this Herculean undertaking.

A COMPARISON OF THE UNITED STATES AND UNITED KINGDOM INTERNET GATEWAYS¹⁵

The United States Government and the Government of the United Kingdom are among several national governments to offer an Internet gateway into their official information sources as well as the services available. The United States site is identified as "**First Gov**" and is available at <http://www.firstgov.gov/> and is readily recognized by its colorful banner of the United States flag. The United Kingdom site is identified as "**UK online Citizen Portal**" and is available at <http://www.ukonline.gov.uk/>. These two sites differ principally in the scope of information available. Both are presented in a manner to facilitate ease of use. They offer a new outreach to their citizens in navigating through government information and services that are available.

These two important services were reviewed to determine ease of use as well as the scope and depth of information available. The topics chosen for review focused on three aspects of both governments: acquisition of housing, Federal benefits and National Security intelligence activities.

Summary of Findings

Depending on the information or service sought, navigating FirstGov or UK online to produce desired results can be time consuming and a complicated task. A user will be confronted with the need to use synonyms to "accurately" locate desired information. An example in this review is "home" and "house". The facilities for searching and identifying information are available, but the information is vast and often expressed in unfamiliar terms. Adequate time, patience and determination are required for those in need of the information or service.

The differences in scope and depth of information available from these two systems are indicative of the size of the two governments and size of the Nations they support. The ability to provide a hub or focal point for information from all the components in government is remarkable. Equally remarkable is the effort made by government agencies to capture and digitize information in their sphere of responsibility. These information facilities allow a citizen to cut across agency and department lines to

¹⁵ This segment of the appendix was submitted to NCLIS on January 8, 2001.

locate desired information. An example is "pesticides". Several agencies have responsibility for dealing with this issue, but from their perspectives and spheres of responsibility. To some degree, a citizen may not be required to know the structure of their government, nor the names of the departments as a prerequisite for finding needed information

The Introductory and Welcome Page

FirstGov

The United States site is introduced by a colorful banner of the United States flag and FirstGov - Your First Click to the U.S. Government. The central menu on this page lists key information topics such as "Agriculture and Food, Farms, Food Nutrition"; "Consumer Services and Safety"; "Environment and Energy, Weather", "Federal Benefits and Grants, Social Security, Medicare"; "Money and Taxes"; "The U.S. in the World, Defense, Trade, Immigration" are among the 16 topics presented for selection as a gateway to more information.

Additionally, a citizen can access information from any of the three branches of government as well as state and local governments. Featured Subjects such as Consumer Handbook, Federal Business Opportunities, and Government for Kids are among the subjects that can be accessed by a click.

At the top of this introductory page is the ability to search across the government for information on a subject such as pesticides, water pollution, etc. This is an important feature that can access information which is held by several government agencies with varying responsibilities for a given subject. The citizen may not be familiar with what agencies this information resides in, but this provides the access to wherever the information may reside.

UK Online

This Welcome page also uses a colorful rainbow banner, but it presents the user with fewer choices for access. There are four major topics represented by four graphic icons: Quick Find, Life Episodes, Citizen Space, and Getting the UK online. Unfortunately, the sub-titles that further define these choices are difficult to read because of the font and small font size. Under each icon is a Go button to launch access. Across the top are buttons to access About this site, Contact us, UK online for business, Help, and a Site map.

Citizen Portal Members may Register as a new user, Sign in, or Recover a forgotten password. You may also Personalize Your Citizen Portal as to where in the UK you live – England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland; your language - English or Cymraeg?, and preferences.

This opening page is sparse with choices, but it may offer a citizen a less complicated entry to needs. Important is the ability to search for a subject or topic.

Review 1 - Acquiring a Home

First Gov

Bypassing a selection of Executive Branch Agencies and going directly to search for "House", produced 344,377 irrelevant matches. Even with "purchase" added as a qualifier, the results were similar. Among the matches to "House Purchase" were how to get White House tickets, Colombian Military Aid Package, and "Bipartisan Death Tax Repeal".

Lacking pertinent results from this direct search, the Executive Branch was selected. This produced an index of all government departments. From this list, Housing and Urban Development was selected. This produced a list of agency functions, and "Housing" was selected. This produced a page titled "Own a Home" which contained selections for "first Time Home buyers, and a "Home buyer's Kit". There was also topic titled "Homes for sale by HUD listed by State".

Taking the approach by Executive Branch and Department of Housing and Urban Development had produced results that a direct search of the words "home" and "purchase" had failed to yield. However, the average citizen may not know enough of the government structure to make such a probe.

UK online Citizen Portal

From the Welcome page, the icon "**Quick find**" was selected to produce another page that offered search facilities. The term "own home" produced 254,884 results. The top 500 were arrayed by relevance. However, most of these matches were not pertinent. "Buying on the Internet" was selected, but this produced a page of buying tips, regulations, and rights as a consumer.

The information produced was interesting, but it was not what was sought—specific houses for sale.

Review 2 - Qualifying and Applying for Federal Benefits

First Gov

A search on the Welcome Page for Benefits produced 511,173 matches. Within the top ten, which scored 98 percent relevance, were three that addressed Social Security Benefits, all three were identical, and one gave guidance on Health Benefits. A substantial percentage applied to benefits available only to Federal government employees.

Alternatively, on the Welcome page the Executive Branch was selected, and on the next page a listing of departments in the Executive Branch was presented headed by an emphasized category titled "Interesting Topics" and "Federal Benefits and Grants". Selecting this category produces a list featuring three topics: Social Security, Medicare, and Grants. These are followed by more specific links such as Disabilities Benefits, Disaster Assistance, Earned Income Tax Credit, etc. Selecting any one of the specific benefits will produce the desired information.

UK Online

On the Welcome page, a search for Benefits was made with **Find it**. It produced 10,903 results and displayed the top 500 sorted by relevance, the highest of which was 48 percent. A large number addressed statutory requirements for specific benefits, namely social security, retirement and pension. Ranking 54th in matches with a 42 percent relevance was an item that offered more information to assist a citizen to decide about benefits that may be disabled if one is sick or disabled. This is followed by "Young Peoples Guide to Social Security" and "Social Security Terms and Conditions of Employment"

Items returned by the search have the word "benefits" highlighted where it occurs in the title of explanation. To the right of each is a Button with an Arrow labeled GO to further access information for items.

Review 3 - National Security and Defense

The third and final search used for review was a National security subject common to both Nations, ECHELON. The ECHELON Project is based on a worldwide satellite system for monitoring electronic communications encompassing cell and wireless telephones and other electronic exchanges. This system was developed by the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA) with the participation of several countries. A major part of this system is a large antenna array and downlink station at Menwith Hills, England. The purpose of this review was to determine how forthcoming the information systems of both governments are.

As background, a search for ECHELON on Internet, using Altavista or Excite, yields a number of news articles dealing with this very sophisticated, highly innovative and near real-time system. Yahoo has a collection to references of all articles published on ECHELON. Satellites are used to intercept voice communications and transfer them to a computer system that compares these sounds to a table of keywords in multiple languages. If a match with certain words in the sound bank occurs, the conversation is routed to a linguist for listening and analysis. All of this is done in near real time from intercept to review. One magazine published that the conversation between an official in a government and a party in another country was intercepted, and that money was authorized for blowing up the enlisted men's building in Saudi Arabia. The Army was warned but did not act on the information.

This system has been widely discussed and debated in the Parliament of the European Community. Concerns focus on the invasion of privacy, and the potential use of this information for industrial espionage to give American corporations an economic advantage.

First Gov

A search on the Welcome page produced 2,123 matches, practically all of which were irrelevant. However, the one relevant hit dealt with threats by a Congressman to expose the project, despite the fact that it is already known. No additional searches were performed to locate any information on this subject.

UK online

A similar search was made using **Find it** on the Welcome page. It only produced two matches of 28 and 15 percent relevance. Neither dealt with ECHELON. Since a major satellite downlink station is located at Menwith Hills, a search was made of this name. Twenty four results were found ranging downward from 48 percent relevance. Six of these may address Menwith Hills since two are from the Intelligence and Security Committee, three with House of Commons query to the Secretary of State for Defense, and one with the National Asset Register.

The lack of information from these official organizations only underscores the practice of governments not to confirm materials from unofficial sources.