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PortalU® – a Tool to Support the Implementation of the European Environmental Information Directive

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Abstract

With PortalU®, the environmental administration in Germany has created a technical tool in support of the implementation of the European Environmental Information Directive (EEID). PortalU® specifically addresses Article 7.1 of the directive which calls for an "active and systematic" dissemination of environmental information by "means of computer telecommunication and/or electronic technology". PortalU® provides a central access point to web-sites, databases and online-registries of environmental information held by public authorities in Germany.

1. Introduction

One of the major goals of EU Environmental Information Directive (EEID) is to make it easier to access environmental information and data held by public authorities in Europe (EU 2003). In article 7.1, the directive calls for the "active and systematic dissemination" of environmental information as an important strategy to achieve this goal. "Active dissemination" is generally interpreted as making information and data available proactively by publishing it. The directive explicitly names "computer telecommunication" and "electronic technology", i.e. the Internet, as appropriate means for this purpose. In Germany, the environmental administration has adopted this view. With the German Environmental Information Portal - PortalU® - it developed an Internet-based tool to assist public authorities in Germany with the implementation of the EEID (Vögele et al., 2006).

PortalU® is the result of a cooperation of federal and state environment agencies. Funded through an administrative agreement between the federal government and the 16 German states, PortalU® could be established as a sustainable long-term project. As an online information-portal, PortalU® (www.portalu.de) is freely accessible to every Internet-user in Germany. The portal features a number of information services, among them up-to-date environmental news, access to environmental monitoring data, chronicles of environmentally relevant events, and links to new publications and events. Most importantly, however, PortalU® maintains an index of environmental information held by public authorities in Germany. The Portal functions as a highly-visible and central access point to this information.

2. Benefits of PortalU®

In a time where the majority of public authorities already do use the Internet as a medium for public relations activities and the distribution of information, the question about the added value of a central information portal like PortalU® may arise. After all, almost every public agency maintains a comprehensive website that features not only organizational information and PR material, but often also in-depth thematic content. Therefore a large part of the environmental information addressed by the EEID is available online already. Nevertheless, it is exactly this abundance of online-information that can be counter-productive to one of the main objectives of the EEID, namely to provide a structured and comprehensible access to envi-

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ronmental information that empowers the average European citizen to be informed about complex, but important environmental issues.

In particular in a federal state like Germany, this average citizen may easily be overwhelmed by the many government-run web-sites and online-databases that are available on the Internet. Questions like "Where should I start my search, on the federal, the state, or the municipal level?" "Which organisation, which department is responsible for my problem?" "How do I get to their web-site?" have to be answered before the desired information can be found. The large Internet search-engines are often only of limited help. Their result lists are rather unspecific, burdened with advertisements and web-sites of commercial providers. And they do not have access to the many databases, catalogs and expert systems maintained by public authorities. In 2005, the Anglo-German Society published a small empirical study that exemplifies this observation (Zinnbauer, 2005). Using standard Internet tools, the authors had considerable difficulties in finding specific environmental information (here about urban water quality), albeit this information being online and openly accessible on the Internet. The information was hidden in a jungle of relevant and irrelevant web-content.

3. Systematic Dissemination

The objective of PortalU® is to cut a straight path through the information-jungle, a path that leads as quickly as possible to the most relevant content page. This path starts at one central and well-known location (www.portalu.de) and leads to all participating public authorities provided they offer relevant content. Technically speaking, the PortalU® search-space was reduced to web-sites, or parts of web-sites, that cover the environmental themes defined in the EEID. In addition, the information providers allowed in PortalU® are limited to public authorities in the sense of the EEID. Within this limited set of information providers, PortalU® tries to access all relevant information sources. This includes structured data sources like registries of environmental data and addresses (data catalogs), databases, and expert systems. They are connected to the Portal through an array of specialized data interfaces. Currently, the PortalU®-index covers approximately 600.000 web-pages from 180 information providers, as well as the content of 24 structured data sources. All of this content originates from public authorities. Because public authorities usually publish only quality-controlled data and information on the Internet, the content in PortalU® can be assumed to have a high level of quality.

But PortalU® is not only a search tool; it is also a structured catalog. Following the requirements of the EEID for a "systematic dissemination" of environmental information, PortalU® applies a matrix of 21 thematic and 6 functional categories to create a well-defined grid of paths through the information jungle. These paths lead to a small selection of particularly interesting or important content-pages. These manually selected pages offer at the same time direct access to specific topics, and an entry point to relevant web-sites. In addition to the thematic and functional categories, the user may also filter the "topic-pages" according to their regional provenance.

4. Outlook

PortalU® was designed mainly as the central access point to publicly-held environmental information in Germany. However, many of the federal states that contribute to the project see a need to create environmental portals on a regional, i.e. state and even municipal level. To address this need, PortalU® adopted a modular software architecture that allows to create a network of information portals on different levels of the administrative hierarchy. Several federal states in Germany plan to set up PortalU®-type state environmental information portals soon. The network-paradigm may also be part of a technical solution to one of the still unsolved problems of the implementation of the EEID in Germany, i.e. the inclusion of public authorities on the sub-state (e.g. municipal) level.

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