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Websites Proliferate to Generate FOI Requests

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By Toby McIntosh

AsktheEU, Fragen de Stat, InformataZyrtare.org, spinfo, Acceso Inteligente, and Queremos Saber.

These names reflect six new websites that allow requesters to draft and file freedom of information requests online. Plus, they they track the requests and archive the answers.

All were launched in the past few months, doubling the number of sites that provide this service.

More are expected to emerge, some encouraged by the development of ready-to-use open source software from Avaleteli, a project spawned by the British site, WhatDoTheyKnow.com, sponsored by mysociety.org.

A list of the six newest request generation sites:

Frag den Staat in Germany.

AsktheEU.org for the European Union

InformataZyrtare.org in Kosovo.

Acceso Inteligente in Chile.

SpinInfo in Macedonia

Queremos Sabor in Brazil

Older Sites Paved Way

The new generation joins a small club of other websites with similar capacities. The oldest one started in 1996 in the United States.

The six sites FreedomInfo located are:

WhatDoTheyKnow.com in the United Kingdom

InfoMex in Mexico

IAIP in Honduras

FOIA Letter Generator in the United States

[FYI](FYI) in New Zealand

Muckrock in the United States

More on all the sites below.

Why Not Government Sponsorship?

To some, the existence and growth of "private" sites exposes a gap that governments should fill, but rarely do.

A notable exception is InfoMex, the official government site in Mexico for submitting requests under the Mexican FOI law. Most Mexican states have now adopted a similar system.

Honduras also has an official request system, run by the information commissioner.

In addition, few governments post the results of FOIA requests.

New Systems Use Alaveteli Software

Helping spark the creation of some of the newest websites for FOI letter generation is a project known as Alaveteli.

The organization has devised an open source software package available for anyone to use. The effort was a spinoff of the British site, WhatDoTheyKnow.com, sponsored by mysociety.org.

Funded by the Open Society Institute and the Hivos Foundation, the project "aims to support the launch of dozens of FOI websites around the world." The name comes from the name of the town (now in Finland) where the first right to information law, the Swedish law, was made.

The founders believe that Alaveteli, when correctly installed and customized, can put positive pressure on government bodies through four different mechanisms, as expressed by project manager Seb Bacon.

    1) By facilitating the asking of questions that might otherwise never be asked because the barrier to asking them would be too high.

    2) By getting people to use Freedom of Information laws even if they don't actually

know or care about the law itself – they just have practical problems that need solving.

3) By making it easy for public servants to see that other public servants are doing a better job at replying to requests, simply by browsing through the site.

4) By allowing the production of statistics showing relative agency performance, and by making failure to reply quickly or with meaningful answers completely transparent.

Alaveteli is derived from the UK system and still connected. Improvements developed by mysociety developers will become available in Alaveteli.

Although Alaveteli can't finance adoption of its software by organizations, it can provide some technical support. Most of the new sites are using its software.

In mid-October, Bacon provided an upbeat [update](#) on progress. "The Alaveteli software is starting to look in reasonable shape," he began, citing things such as faster installation time, better documentation, small improvements to the user interface, the beginnings of a user-friendly advanced search, a better way for the user to decide who follow-up messages should go to, faster speeds and more.

Application, Maintenance Not Burdensome

The addition of FOI letter generation software, from Alaveteli or otherwise, is not generally a high-cost matter, according to those with experience in the area. Bacon figures it takes one to two months of fulltime work to kick it off, and then several days a month thereafter to operate, develop and promote it.

Among other things, volunteers are recommended to help with the continuing operation of a system. [WhatDoTheyKnow](#) in the UK has a volunteer pool of around six or seven people, of whom about three are active at any one time depending on their other commitments). "They are dedicated, committed, knowledgeable and enthusiastic, and the website quite simply wouldn't function without them," according to the Alaveteli website. Rowan Crawford, the administrator of the New Zealand site, fyi.org.nz, noted to FreedomInfo.org that he's "in the (slow) process of converting it to the newer Alaveteli platform at the

moment," adding, "It's a hobby project for me."

An Alaveteli Getting Started Guide goes into more detail for nontechnical folks, and there's also a more technical Developers Guide – beginning: "The software is written in Ruby on Rails 2.3.x. We support postgresql as the backend database.

UK WhatDoTheyknow Website Grows

The WhatDoTheyKnow.com website sponsored by mysociety.org in the United Kingdom has grown so much since its start in 2008 that it now is responsible for about 14 percent of all FOI requests to the national government.

These results, explained in a blog post, with some caveats, attest to the popularity of the site, which assists requesters in making free requests not only to federal agencies, but also to local bodies. All the results are posted.

As explained on the site: "You choose the public authority that you would like information from, then write a brief note describing what you want to know. We then send your request to the public authority. Any response they make is automatically published on the website for you and anyone else to find and read."

The site has more detail to guide requesters, who made almost 8,000 requests in the first quarter of 2011.

The site comes with numerous bells and whistles. You can track requests by email or RSS feed. A side panel with links invites users to "Act on what you've learned" with categories of Get help investigating, Write your politician, Pledge with others and Start you own blog. Related requests are listed. View all this at the "Recently Successful Responses" page.

Among current issues for the nonprofit group is whether to provide a mechanism to facilitate submission of so-called "bulk requests" – the same question to many different agencies. A June blog post said, "We are considering adding such a system, for requests which have been sanity checked by the WhatDoTheyKnow team."

Also under discussion is creating an option for allowing requests to be made in private, for a fee. "The idea would be that once the findings were published then the FOI response could be opened up to the public providing access to the source material backing up the story." The group solicited comments on the ideas.

The organization is able to use the data it gathers to evaluate what sorts of requests are most common, for example. Recently they asked for help on this oddity: FOI requests are more frequent in odd-numbered quarters compared to even ones.

WhatDoTheyKnow is created and run by mysociety, and was initially funded by the JRSST Charitable Trust after the idea was the winner of a 2006 call for proposals.

AsktheEU Up and Running

A web portal to facilitate public information requests to European Union bodies was unveiled Sept. 28 by the pro-transparency human rights group Access Info Europe. (See previous FreedomInfo.org report.) Early reports suggest is it working well despite a few glitches and a bit of push-back, including from the EU Parliament.

AsktheEU.org is designed to radically simplify the process by which the public puts requests to European Union bodies," the group said in an announcement. AsktheEU.org runs on the Alavateli software.

An email is sent from the website to the relevant EU body. The responses are instantly made public. Requesters will have the opportunity to "me too" a request so that more than one person receives the answer, easing the workload on EU officials.

Other features include allowing requesters to rate responses for quality and comprehensiveness, permitting other users to comment on answers. "If requesters are dissatisfied, the site helps them file appeals ("confirmatory applications") and gives guidance on how to complain to the European Ombudsman or to go to the European Court of Justice," the group said.

The sponsors said AsktheEU.org will generate statistics on response times, the exceptions applied, and the rate of administrative silence.

So Far So Good

Helen Darbishire, Executive Director of Access Info Europe reported recently that the site is "going well." It's functioning in four languages and the system is stable, she said despite "a few little glitches."

"We have removed the limit on sign on so anyone can use it now. We have had a total of 15 requests to the EU and 2 to national delegations based in Brussels. Of these 13 received acknowledgements," according to Darbishire. Two requesters were asked by the European Parliament to use an online form in future. Quite a few EU bodies have online forms for answering requests.

AsktheEU may bring attention to some systemic issues. One agency, for example, has nationality, gender and organization type as mandatory fields, but AsktheEU believes that a name and an email address should be sufficient.

"In total we have had 5 successful requests so far where information was provided (2 partial answers). In addition we have had plenty of visits from around the world (I need to get the actual data which I can't do now as I have to go to a meeting). We know there are various CSOs planning to use it. In January we will start doing translations into other EU languages.

"For the first time the European public is seeing how requesters are treated and what kind of information is provided and how," Darbishire told FreedomInfo.org. "There are still problems with the system: insisting that requesters use online forms rather than emails, and providing information in PDFs which are scanned images and so not machine readable."

Acceso Inteligente Starts in Chile

A new website as on 2011 in Chile is "Acceso Inteligente" (Smart Access) allows citizens to

request public information from any Chilean government agency, all from a single website, a "one-stop-shop."

Once an individual submits an information request, Acceso Inteligente automatically connects with the online form of each public agency to which information requests are addressed. Because agencies each use different forms, it was not feasible to use the Alaveteli software.

All answers to the requests are then published online as a searchable data base, so that citizens may consult relevant information within previous requests (and answers to them) before submitting a new request, explained Maria Luisa Sotomayor, who helped start the project that went live a few months ago.

Bën një kërkesë *të re për* informata zyrtare

That's "Make a new freedom of information request" in Albanian.

The requesting system was started this year in Kosovo, also using Avaleteli software. The site will eventually operate in three languages.

InformataZyrtare.org offers requests to 111 authorities and so far has generated only a few requests.

Macedonian Groups Launch Request Site

On International Right to Know Day, Sept. 28, 2011, the website www.spinfo.org.mk was inaugurated in Macedonia. The project involved Open Society–Macedonia, Transparency Macedonia, Metamorphosis Foundation, Macedonian Young Lawyers' Association, Youth Educational Forum and Civil–Center for Freedom.

"This is a new online tool that will assist citizens, journalists and all interested parties in submitting Freedom of Information (FOI) applications, as well as to share their experiences related to the exercise of this right and compare them against more than 2,500 cases

available on the website," according to the announcement. "By using the new tool available, citizens will have the opportunity to identify the shortfalls and best practices related to the right to free access."

The site used Avaleteli software.

Frag den Stat Opens

In Aug. 1, 2011, Frag den Staat **–** Ask the State **—** went online, run by the German Chapter of the Open Knowledge Foundation. The goal of the website is to act as a central online hub for requests to German federal ministries and authorities. It supports requests under the federal FOI law, the Environmental Information law and the Consumer Information law.

"Many citizens are not familiar with the possibilities and the potentials of Federal Laws which

grant access to records, "according to a press release announcing the site. "The threshold for applying access apparently is high. The new website is aimed at lowering this threshold. "

Like others, the site uses an online form, sends requests to the appropriate and automatically publishes both requests and responses. The site is modeled on "whatdotheyknow.com."

Stefan Wherever, the project manager said, "Via the web a mighty and democratic tool such as Freedom of Information can be used in an ideal way." In Germany only an average of 1,600 federal FOI per year were made between 2006 and 2010, notes the release.

Daniel Dietrich, chairman of the German chapter of the Open Knowledge Foundation said: "With the platform FragDenStaat.de we hope to accelerate the cultural shift towards open government within state authorities. We want to support German legislators in considerably improving Freedom of Information Laws. Those German Federal States which are still lacking a state Freedom of Information law have to urgently introduce one. On federal level the different information laws should be merged into one comprehensive law to make requests easier."

The portal allows nongovernmental organizations and journalists to make nonpublic requests that will be published later.

New Zealand System Processes 1,200 Requests

The New Zealand letter generation system, FYI, is a run by Open New Zealand and was adapted from the UK's WhatDoTheyKnow.com.

A rough tally by FreedomInfo.org shows that about 1,200 requests have been made through the system.

FYI is maintained completely by volunteers.

InfoMex Run by State Agency

InfoMex, the official government system for submitting requests to the Mexican government, has been adopted by most states and is widely considered a successful system.

InfoMex, which started Dec. 1, 2008, is an improved version of its predecessor, SISI, begun in 2003. The site is operated by IFAI, the Federal Institute for Access to Information.

InfoMex is the general name for the system. "We have Infomex gobierno federal (to make requests only in federal government), Infomex Chihuahua, Infomex Sonora, Infomex Puebla (all Mexican states are forced to have this electronic tool since the constitutional reform in 2007)," explained Gabriella Aguirre of Fundar, a civil society group in Mexico.

"Almost all the Mexican states have already introduced InfoMex within their states," she said, indicating that only Baja California Sur, Tamaulipas, Campeche, Yucatán, Oaxaca, Estado de México, Michoacán are still in the adoption process. The constitutional reform can also compel counties (municipios) with populations above 70,000 to also create electronic systems.

The InfoMex system was originally created only for the federal executive, legislative and judicial branches. Autonomous institutions like IFE (Instituto Federal Electoral) have their own electronic systems.

She noted that some work still needs to be done to improve the uniformity of the online request systems

Not all requests have to be submitted via InfoMex. The options of making a request in person, by phone or through the mail also exist. However, almost all requests are submitted electronically, Aguirre reported, noting that IFAI's annual report documents the numbers. Responses come online, too.

"In general, I think InfoMex is a pretty good system, even internationally recognized, very practical and useful," Aguirre concluded.

Honduras System Run by Commissioner

Another national online request system operates in Honduras.

Requests are made on the website of the information commission, the Instituto de Acceso a la Información Pública, IAIP.

The form has many of the usual features – drop-down menus for the agencies and a place for a description of the requested document – and also asks for the requesters' gender, education level and occupation.

Early Letter Generator Started in 1996

Perhaps the oldest system offering computerized assistance in writing FOI letters was begun 1996 by the Reporters Committee for the Freedom of the Press in the United States.

Mark Caramanica, RCFP Freedom of Information Director, reported that in October 2011, 1,841 letters were generated through the tool. "Of course, we do not track whether such

letters were actually filed but the number certainly gives you an indication as to the immense popularity of our service," he said.

The online FOIA Letter Generator locates the address for the chosen agency and helps with wording, including necessary language for the media to avoid fees. It also allows requesters to seek their own records under the Privacy Act. "It is a very valuable resource, Caramanica said, "because there are many journalists who no vaguely of FOIA but don't know where to start." They also can get help with drafting appeal letters and motions for injunctive relief by the courts, among other things.

"We get a lot of thanks you's for having it," he noted.

Caramanica says administration of the site has been "fairly easy" with the occasional need to make updates because of amendments to the law and to incorporate agency address changes. The system does not post responses, but allows users to open a FOIA Tracker account to keep notes on the progress of their requests.

Muckrock Looks to Grow in U.S.

The Muckrock site was conceived by two journalists who got backing from the Sunlight Foundation. Their interest in encouraging trustable local reporting, including by citizen-activists, animates the site, launched in mid 2010, which highlights the journalistic results from FOI requests. Featured recently on the front page was an article analyzing parking ticket appeals in Somerville, Mass., including "a simple trick that could increase your chances of getting off easy by up to 11 percent!"

Attention is drawn to some of the most interesting requests filed by those who a pay a small fee, to join Muckrock. The standard fee of $20 permits the filing of five requests. Institutions also could join, but so far that has been limited to a few newspapers. Most of the 185 registered users are journalists, bloggers, researchers, and citizen-activists and about half are active.

There are "featured documents," a list of "most viewed documents," and the "most

overdue requests" column. By the end of October, 775 requests had been filed, with 165 of them successfully completed.

"Bringing a very antiquated in the 21st Century," co-founder Michael Morisy explained, Muckrock not only helps requesters write the letters, which get submitted electronically, it also tracks the responses, which go to Muckrock. While a request is ending, the requester can see when it is due and when it's overdue.

The Muckrock service includes digitizing all the responses, which so far has amounted to 16,763 pages of government documents. The result are viewable on Muckrock, although it possible for requesters to keep the request and results confidential, a feature some scoop-sensitive journalists want.

The openness of the site is enhanced by features that connect the requests with Twitter and Facebook content, making it "a very living document," Morisy said.

The average successful request is 100 pages – much higher than Muckrock expected – and more come in via paper than they would like, or than do in other countries. "I have to say the US is so so so so far behind" in responding electronically, Morisy said.

The State of Washington is the most likely to respond electronically of the 8 states for which the Muckrock software works: Washington , Massachusetts, New York, Arizona, California, Connecticut, Florida, Maine and Washington, D.C. And the U.S. government.

The software was designed on the Django web framework and the project took about .. to set up.. It is closed source software. They looked at making it open source, but that entails time and money.

It costs about $1 per request from start to finish on average, but that cost doesn't include the development costs and some overhead costs for the small organization. Moresy and co-founded Mitch Kotler work on it part-time.

Looking to the future, they are exploring ways of supporting and expanding the venture.

Grants would be nice, he said, but they also would like sustaining backing from institutional clients.

Some news organizations have passed on the Muckrock spirit by distributing Muckrock accounts to their readers to use and writing stories about the results. They would like to encourage more use, such as by allowing to users to earn free requests. They

Taking a small cut from crowdfunding is one possibility. Most requests don't entail fees, but when they do, "we have a widget that pops up and asks people to contribute," Moresy said. This operates through spot.us – .. and has "worked every time we have tried it." The founders also do some consulting and would like to help with tools to visualize and explain data.

They also envision using their system to help corporate clients or governments track FOI requests.

He praises Avaleteli as a great project, commenting that they were conceived separately, but are fairly close, though Muckrock emphasizes journalistic output. "Data and documents by themselves do not tell a story – you need an extra element to tell a story."

Tags: implementation

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