

ODIN : THE CENTRAL WEB-SERVER FOR OFFICIAL DOCUMENTATION AND INFORMATION FROM NORWAY¹

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Abstract: ODIN is the abbreviation for 'Official Documentation and Information in Norway'. The paper presents the Norwegian web site ODIN, an electronic publication for information from the Government and the ministries of Norway. The purpose of the project was to make information from the ministries easier available by means of modern technology. The objective being successfully accomplished, the ODIN is established as a permanent central web-server after being run as a pilot project until the end of 1996.

1. Introduction

ODIN - Official Documentation and Information in Norway - is a joint electronic publication for information from the Government and the ministries of Norway. The ODIN was launched in August 1995, and was designed as a pilot project to run until the end of 1996. January 1997 the ODIN is established as the permanent central web-server for the Norwegian Government, the Office of the Prime Minister and the ministries.

The philosophy behind the project was that the information technology helps making public services more available. By means of the Internet, public information and public services are more easily accessible regardless of time and place. It is important for the public administration to make use of the new electronic information services in a systematic and simple way, thus giving the public a better access to information of their administration bodies.

The national government administration possesses of course large quantities of information that may be easily accessed electronically and free of charge, giving extended possibilities of obtaining material on matters of interest. By presenting public information on the Internet, the availability is good, retrieval is easy, and contextual relations are obtained by the linking to other documents. Electronic

¹ *Paper delivered at the 63rd IFLA General Conference, Amsterdam, August 31- September 5, 1997.* Since the presentation of the paper in 1997 alterations such as those mentioned in point no. 6 (Tasks), have started. The estimate date of completion of the first part of the work is by the end of 1998. Also, the statistics show that the average inquiries have more than doubled compared to the numbers mentioned in the paper.

publishing is thus both efficient and cheap. The purpose of the ODIN is, in accordance with this, to make available information and news from the government and the ministries on the Internet. Our aim is to use modern information technology to make central government services more open and accessible. In line with the Norwegian public price policy, using the ODIN shall be a service free of charge.

2. Organisation

An editorial board who sets the guidelines and to whom the editorial staff reports guides the ODIN. The Ministry of National Planning and Co-ordination heads the board. The other members represent other ministries, the Directorate of Public Management and the Norwegian Central Information Service.

The editorial responsibility has been assigned to the Documentation Centre of the Government Administration Services. Many discussions on who should be responsible for the service, either the Information Technology Section or the Documentation Centre, took place before the decision that went in favour of the Documentation Centre.

Designing and organising the service, advising the suppliers on how to present the material, and code conversion are tasks, among other things, for the editorial office. To present the information on the ODIN, the material need adapting to web, and the code conversion to the HTML standard (HyperText Markup Language) is at times a time-consuming task. To increase the efficiency of publishing, one has, however, started writing the official publications from the ministries in the ISO standard SGML (Standard Generalized Markup Language). The publications are converted from SGML to the HTML before being presented on the ODIN. The documents are in a progressively larger amount submitted in the HTML standard. Today, almost all propositions to the Storting (the parliament) are e.g. submitted code converted, and reports to the Storting will be submitted in the same way later this year.

The purpose of the SGML project is to publish all official publications from the Government and ministries simultaneously in print and electronically on the Internet.

Publicity for the ODIN is done in many ways. One activity for the editorial staff is for instance attending meetings and conferences. The ODIN may in addition be sought through links from numerous web-sites through the Internet search engines (Yahoo, Kvasir, etc.). Press releases, reports and speeches often refer to

ODIN, - this is another important element in making the ODIN known to the public.

The information suppliers (the Government, the Office of the Prime Minister and the ministries) are responsible for the content and the quality of the material they wish to publish on the ODIN. There is a general agreement in the ministries that they should be responsible for their own publications. Likewise, the ministries agree at large upon the importance of presenting the material in the same way. The suppliers must therefore follow a set of rules for presentation made by the editorial board. To maintain the high quality that is required, quality assurance (links, correct codes, organising the received material etc.) is performed by the editorial staff.

3. Security

Presentation of the ODIN on the Internet must be performed in ways that guarantee that the security aspect for the intergovernmental network is maintained. The use of two servers addresses this problem: one is used by the central government administration and is placed inside a "firewall", the other server is the Internet server for the general public and one server is not connected to the other. New information from the server inside the firewall, on which the editing is done, is mirrored once a day to the public server. (The Internet address for the ODIN site is <http://odin.dep.no>).

4. Content

The ODIN represents a new way of spreading public government information. One may state, as a whole, that the ODIN fulfils the main principles for the public information policy, although we still have some unsolved questions regarding the principle of totality and of communicating with our users.

As is the case today, the user cannot be sure to get all relevant material as per area of topics or per criteria for the deliverance of documents. That is, the ODIN offers information from the ministries, but it still varies what the ministries choose to publish electronically. Should we guarantee that the presentation is complete, i.e. that all publications in all publication fields are surely to be found on the ODIN, a lot more resources are needed in the editorial staff, and I believe that is the case in the ministries as well.

Documents to be found on the ODIN are publications from the ministries, press releases, speeches by ministers, reports and "grey reports", catalogues and surveys. The information is mostly in Norwegian, although there is an English edition as

well. 'Statement to the Storting on development co-operation policy' and 'the National Budget 1997' are examples of translated documents. It is more or less by chance documents are translated into English, though due to the Internet's international character, more documents ought to be translated. A daily news bulletin from Norway, "Norway Daily", is however supplied permanently.

The ODIN is updated daily. The link 'What is new on ODIN?' brings the reader to the page where he will find additions, changes and updates in English that has taken place on the ODIN. A similar link is found, of course, on the main Norwegian page. All documents on the ODIN are searchable. In many cases the documents are presented in chronological order and by ministry, making it easy for the users to find the specific information they are looking for.

To fulfil the intentions of the ODIN, it is of great importance that new material is published as soon as possible after being released.

From the ODIN there are links to a number of other Internet addresses, to national and international web-servers. Examples of links are to Norwegian government agencies, international organisations, newspapers, various databases, and search engines for the Internet.

5. Statistics

Users of the ODIN are employees in the central government administration and the general public. About 1/3 of the inquiries comes from abroad.

Users with access by way of commercial Internet agents increase in number within Norway. These are private individuals as well as companies and institutional users. Inquiries from universities, colleges and research institutes show a relative decrease, although the actual numbers of inquiries have increased from these groups as well.

During the first year there were more than 1.6 millions inquiries to the web-site. Average inquiries now are about 490.000 per month. One inquiry means that a HTML file is inquired, graphical files are not included in the statistics. A monthly survey of the most frequently used web-sites in Norway (performed by Kapital Data), shows that the ODIN is among the top ten Internet sites every month. Inquiries made to the server inside the firewall are not included.

The number of files on the ODIN is in April 1997 about 16.000.

The peak in use is in the afternoon (from 3 p.m. to 4 p.m.), and this is probably because upgrading is done at the end of the day. A press release received from a ministry at noon can be read at ODIN between 2 and 3 p.m. Use of the ODIN is

moreover registered both day and night, at night probably by users in other time zones than ours.

There is a distinct connection of inquiries and news value of the information. When documents are presented on the ODIN at the same time as they are discussed in the news, the result is a distinct increase in inquiries.

We also see a clear connection in supplying material from a ministry and the use of the ministry's home pages. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been the most active provider of documents to the ODIN, and this is reflected in the number of inquiries to their pages.

6. Tasks

Organising a permanent Internet server, as the ODIN, must be continuously evaluated regarding context, graphical presentation, functionality etc. The editorial board is now carrying out a user examination as part of the work of developing the ODIN further, and we expect to have the results of the survey in July or August of this year (i.e. 1997).

The editorial staff must also take an active interest in other national and international information services, and follow up on the continuous development of new tools for the Internet publishing. This is essential to keep up the standard of competence regarding maintenance and development.

One current discussion regarding the ODIN is a possible change in design and graphical presentation. These changes must be within the set frames of the coming design programme for the Government Services. We must also take into consideration the intention of the Board: ODIN should not be accessed by using only the newest versions of browsers, those using older versions shall also have reading access.

Concerning coming challenges, I will only mention some topics that must be discussed in the coming year:

- Structure: ODIN is growing very fast, and we very soon have to organise the content in another way. Whether we will choose a database system for all the material or a combined database/flat files system will be one of the questions on this subject.
- Easy access for special groups, such as e.g. the visually impaired
- Search functions: improvements needed on both a shorter and a longer term
- Interactivity: two-ways communication, audio, video etc.

7. Conclusion

By the response received from the general public and from the ministries we venture to say that, as a whole the ODIN concept has become a success. Great challenges lay ahead of us to renew and improve the ODIN. Within the next one or two years, I hope that we have managed to renew it. The ODIN is however, as previously stated, limited to present information from the Norwegian Government, the Office of the Prime Minister and the ministries. As an offer to others in the central government management who is planning to publish on the Internet, we are establishing a web hotel server where the non-ODIN related material might be put. In that way, more public information should be even easier to access than is the case with the ODIN alone. The co-ordinator of the web hotel is working in the Documentation Centre, as is the case for the editorial staff of the ODIN. The Documentation Centre is thus rendering services enabling the central government administration to be even more open to the public by means of publishing on the Internet.

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