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Dot-Govs Get a Much-Needed Facelift.

Several big cities are decluttering and redesigning their government websites to make them easier to use.

Is it time to give the government website a makeover? For years, city and state sites have been designed as portals through which the public could find as much information as possible. The motto was clearly, "the more, the better." But the result has been an overwhelming hodgepodge of columns and boxes filled with tiny text, drop-down menus that run on and on, and buttons everywhere.

With so much information crammed on to a home page, visitors are lucky if they manage to find what they're looking for, says John McKown, president of Evo Studios Inc., a Web design firm that works with municipalities. "The problem with so many government websites has been information overload."

That's certainly the case with the city of Philadelphia's website, which contains more than 66,000 pages and documents, some of which have never been viewed, according to Aaron Ogle, the city's former civic technology director.

Information overload is just one problem. Another is the way information is organized, typically around the name of an agency or department, rather than how it can help someone. And exacerbating the issue are the growing number of online services that cities and states have added. These and other new services, such as slideshows and videos, weigh down sites, making them slow and frustrating for users.

Perhaps the biggest problem is that these sites were built for PCs, but users are going mobile. Forty percent of people who visited a federal website in the first three months of this year used some kind of mobile device, according to the site analytics.usa.gov. This is a real concern since lower-income users tend to rely on their smartphones as their one and only device for accessing the Internet.

Aware of the issue, some states and localities have begun modernizing the look and feel of their websites. In 2014, New York state updated its 15-year-old site. In the redesign, the state emphasized ease of use, simple design and a more intuitive way to find information. The new home page uses a photo-rich design, with a high-resolution image dominating the screen and just a few buttons to direct the user to content. Gone is a typical photo of the state's chief executive, Gov. Andrew Cuomo. The refresh has paid off: Page views jumped from 313,170 in 2013 to 1.1 million in 2014.

Boston and Philadelphia are redoing their websites as well. Both cities have launched beta versions of their new websites that users can visit and try out while the existing website is still up and running. The pilots will give the cities a way to test with actual users what works and what doesn't.

Boston's new pilot version went live in January. It's far cleaner looking and more efficient. "It represents a cultural change around what a portal is," says Lauren Lockwood, the city's chief digital officer.

The biggest lesson that cities and states are learning is to make the new websites more reflective of the work that is done by the city and to present the information in a more readable fashion. Some of the information on Boston's site was found to be written at a post-graduate school level. "Everybody is your audience," says Lockwood, "so you want to humanize their experience."

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