

An Anglo-German Foundation Report

**Vital environmental information
at your fingertips?
UK and German e-government strategies
under scrutiny**

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Executive Summary

This paper is a report on the findings of an exploratory research project examining the accessibility of data on the quality of the local environment, such as water and air quality, via the Internet and how these efforts are integrated into e-government initiatives in the UK and Germany. Environmental information disclosure is increasingly regarded as a promising regulatory innovation. Being able to access real-time information about drinking water quality or air pollution in one's neighbourhood can assist citizens in critical health and lifestyle choices for themselves and their families. What's more, being able to evaluate how pollution levels have changed over time or how they compare to other neighbourhoods can have an enormous impact on political choices and environmental accountability. Key to all this is the ability to find the data that matter and to gain easy access to them in timely fashion; new information and communication technologies, particularly the Internet, appear to provide ideal tools to support this process and dramatically enhance the efficacy of such environmental information systems.

This exploratory study represents a first step in assessing the status quo as regards electronic access to environmental quality indicators in both the UK and Germany, using two neighbourhoods in Berlin and London as case studies. Despite the promise of the Internet and engaged strategies for electronic government in both countries, the study found a mixed performance with regard to both water and air quality indicators. While some data are available online, they are typically very difficult to locate, insufficiently contextualized, poorly coordinated across different levels of government and presented in ways that make them difficult to use in effectively holding environmental policy-makers and service providers to account.

The Berlin and London cases also show that a number of very innovative techniques and approaches are being experimented with, albeit in a very fragmented manner. Overall, the provision of environmental data online could benefit enormously from a greater readiness on the part of e-government practitioners to cede control over information

presentation by also providing access to the raw data sets which users could then process and manipulate according to their own needs.

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Notes to the editor:

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