

# Analysis Report

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**Public editable version of report is available on project wiki:**

<http://tidywork.pbwiki.com/TOM+analysis+report>

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# 1. Introduction

This report analyses the current Estonian e-participation tool, TOM (the acronym for “Today I Decide” in Estonian), launched by the Estonian State Chancellery in June 2001. The TOM tool is a public participation portal ([www.eesti.ee/tom](http://www.eesti.ee/tom)), allowing citizens to engage more directly with the legislative and policy-making processes either by proposing new legislation or by suggesting amendments to existing laws. In launching TOM, the Estonian government is among the pioneers in the field of e-participation, itself part of a broader trend towards the implementation of e-government. E-participation initiatives like TOM seek to harness new information and communication technologies (ICTs) to enable greater civic and political participation. E-participation is intended, therefore, both to counteract the phenomenon of supposed civic disengagement – best illustrated by the metaphor of “bowling alone” ([Putnam, 2000](#)) – and to take advantage of ICTs’ ability to foster interaction between governed and governing that were hitherto unthinkable (Komito, 2005).

E-government is actively promoted by governments and international organizations. The European Commission, for instance, has made e-government – with its inherent potential for improving the provision of public services – a major part of its action plan for i2010, its vision for meeting the challenges of the information society (European Commission, 2005). E-participation is similarly a novel priority of public policy in the twenty-first century (OECD, 2003). Moreover, it is a global priority as the spread of ICTs and their instrumental value in promoting political and civic engagement are not confined to the developed world (Ahmed, 2006).

Real world experiments in e-participation have tended to be implemented at the local or municipal level (Kearns et al., 2002; OECD, 2003). For example, in the United Kingdom, seventy per cent of local authorities now use the internet for policy consultation (Kearns et al., 2002: 4), where citizens are asked to comment on various policy proposals or rank their preferred policy choices among those put forward by the local authorities. Alternatively, e-consultation has been used at the national level for discussing a particular policy issue such as agriculture in the Netherlands, national defence policy in Australia or domestic violence in the UK (OECD, 2003). However, few governments have so far

sought to promote e-participation at the national level and to open up a forum for bottom-up legislative initiatives to which public authorities have an obligation to respond. One such example is the UK Prime Minister's online petition website (<http://petitions.pm.gov.uk/>) that, continuing a historic tradition of petitioning central government in Britain, enables citizens to propose legislation as well as add their signature to other petitions hosted on the site. All petitions that meet the guidelines for admissibility and which collect more than 200 signatures require an official government response.

The Estonian E-participation project is more ambitious than an e-petition platform. Rather than being a medium for collecting signatures, the TOM tool is a forum for citizens to discuss legislative proposals, within a ten-day period following submission, and to vote upon them. To take account of discussion between TOM users, authors of legislative proposals have up to three days to amend them before they are voted upon by participants (a simple 50% plus one majority is needed to pass). Once a proposal is backed by a majority, it is forwarded to the relevant government department, which then has a month to respond to the proposal explaining what action was or was not taken and why. This formal government response is then posted on TOM.

Given this design, TOM provides an invaluable example for understanding more about citizens' use of e-participation as well as the merits and demerits of the technological platform for e-participation. Thus the report is divided into two major analytical sections. The first, scrutinizes extensively the usage data, examining general user data including level of activity and the sources of traffic activity. The second part of the report uses detailed survey data from TOM participants as well as interviews with civil servants who responded to TOM-generated ideas to analyse how citizens and public officials engaged with the TOM initiative and their level of satisfaction with the process of e-participation it enabled.

## Bibliography

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Kearns, Ian et al. (2002) *E-Participation in Local Government* (London: Institute for Public Policy Research).

Komito, Lee (2005) 'E-Participation and Governance: Widening the Net', *The Electronic Journal of E-Government*, 3 (1), pp. 39-48.

OECD (2003) *Promises and Problems of E-Democracy: Challenges of Online Engagement* (Paris: OECD Publications).

Putnam, Robert (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Shuster).

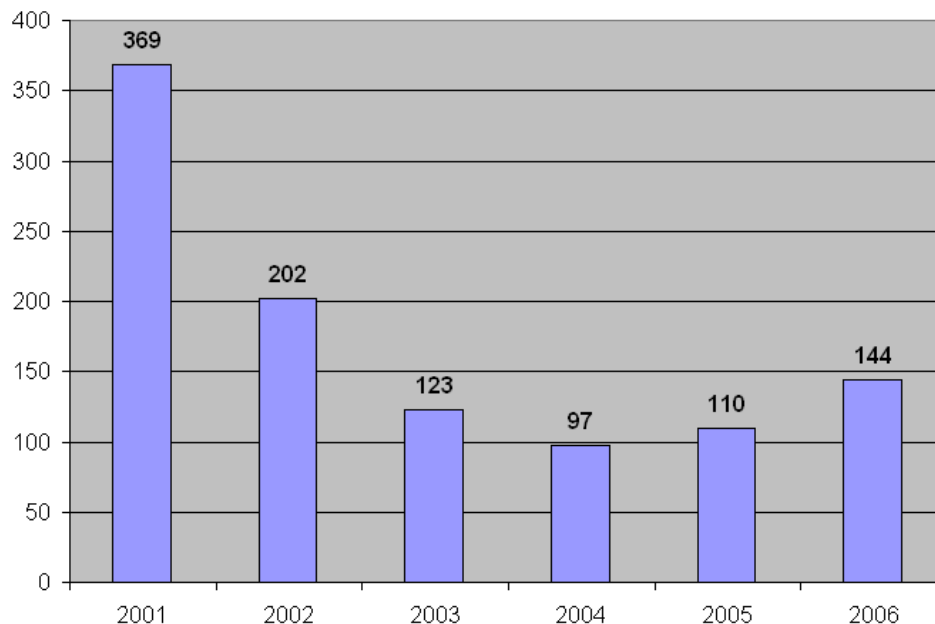
## 2. Usage analysis

### 2.1. Introduction to the usage analysis

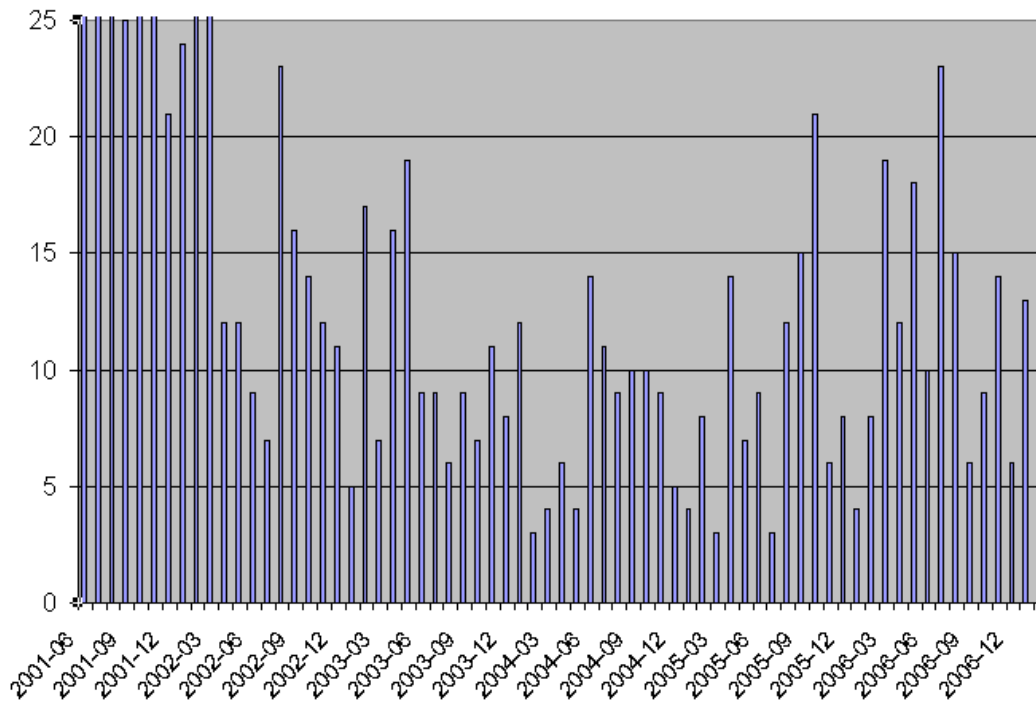
Hitherto only general user activity like the number of registered users and proposed ideas has been analysed. The analysis conducted as part of TID+ project goes much further, finding a number of possible performance indicators, harmonizing the content of TOM, assigning tags (keywords) to ideas and performing a review of answers the proposals have received from ministries as well as using Google Analytics to find the sources of visitors. The analysis thus traces trends in usage, including the number of proposals, their authorship and their subject matter, and identifies the factors explaining variations and patterns in usage.

### 2.2. TOM overall activity: number of new ideas vs website visits

This is the most readily available and most often used data concerning TOM performance from its launch in 2001 to the end of 2006. The number of new ideas, yearly:



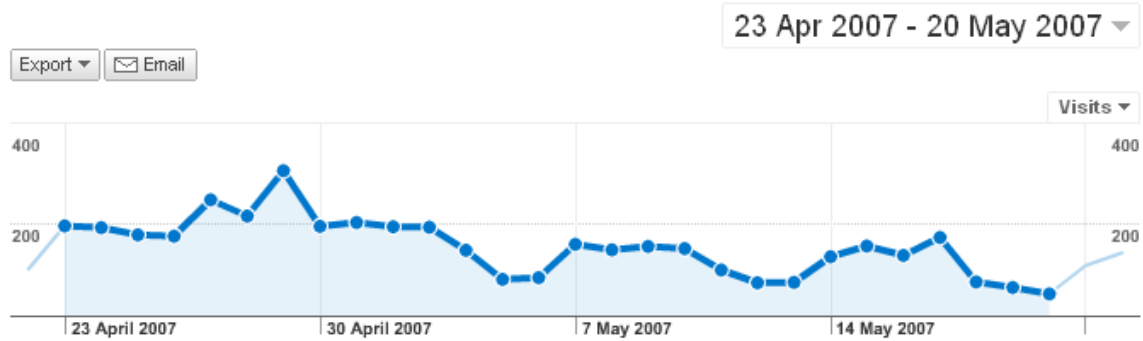
The number of ideas, monthly, with first year out-scaled:



We see a sharp decline in the year after TOM was launched because initially TOM received a lot of media coverage and the ideas for legislation proposed were mirrored on the largest Estonian portal [delfi.ee](http://delfi.ee) - yet after 2004 the number of ideas started to rise again. This can be probably be attributed to overall activation of citizen initiatives and internet usage.

At the same time number of visitors to TOM has remained notably low - typically 150-200 visits per day, peaking at about 300 when an idea author posts a link to online forum or mentions on weblog. Even in Estonian context this is comparable to slightly popular weblog or homepage of a small company. On the public statistics of Estonian online publications available at <http://tnsmatrix.emor.ee> that would compare to websites of Baltic Business News newsagency and some programmes of Estonian public radio (r4.ee is russian-language channel, [klassikaraadio.ee](http://klassikaraadio.ee) broadcasts classical music).





### 2.3. TOM user activity

In six years of existence, TOM has attracted 6000 users whilst over a 1000 legislative ideas have been proposed. General activity data for proposals that had passed the process at the moment the study sample was selected (March, 2007) are presented in the following table. In addition 20 ideas were still in various phases of completion and thus were not included in the analysis: 2 were still under discussion, 5 were yet to be voted on and 13 were still awaiting a government response. 2/3 of the ideas have received the support of majority of votes, although there have been ideas that have passed with a single vote cast (average votes per idea has dropped from 20 in 2001 to 4 in 2006).

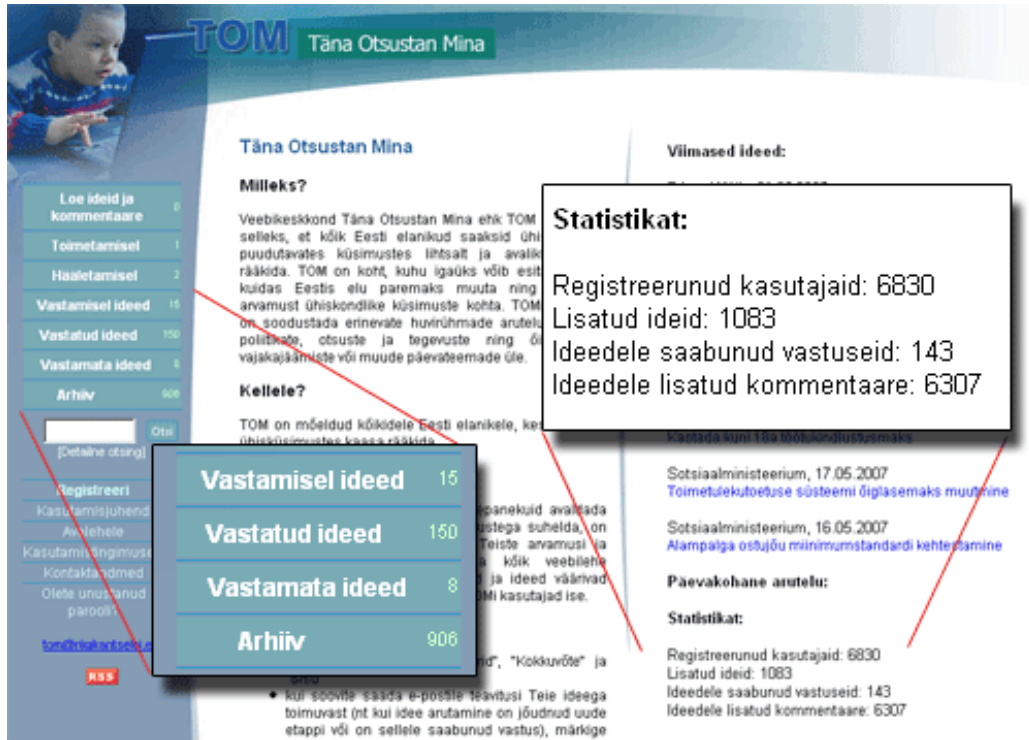
Total proposed ideas	1025	100%
... voted in by users	654	64%
... voted out by users	371	34%
... abandoned e.g zero votes	25	2%

Surprisingly, the number of abandoned proposals, which attracted no votes, is very low (2%). This seems to be due to the presence of regular users and/or frequent visitors, who have stumbled upon proposals and voted on them before the cut-off point (three days following ten days' potential discussion and a further three days for amendment). However, author participation in voting and discussing one's own proposals is extremely poor: only 40% of ideas have had author commenting and 34% actually vote for own idea.

Total proposed ideas	1025	100%
... with at least one comment	911	89%
... author participated in commenting	411	40%
... author participated in voting	350	34%
... author participated in commenting or voting	570	56%

This can only be interpreted as a sign that the initial TOM tool was not designed with the promotion of citizen debate in mind: there is no simple method for notifying authors regarding comments nor is there an integrated multi-step process for linking together commenting, voting and signing. Thus author participation had little influence on the voting result - in this sense TOM has not created an author-led process of citizen interaction.

Interestingly the TOM website displays two different versions of stats that don't agree with each other and are wildly off the mark on what might be considered key performance indicator: number of ideas that have received and answer from government as "Vastatud ideed" and "Ideedele saabunud vastuseid" (slight difference in total number of ideas is due to the screenshot being taken at different time):



So the main indication from the service is, that only 13% ideas get an answer - while in reality it is 89% which we consider surprisingly high:

Ideas voted in and sent for answering	654	100%
... answer received	580	89%

**2.3.1. How TOM-generated ideas fared: government responses**

It is commonly assumed that most government responses to TOM-generated ideas are negative. To verify this claim, we have examined every single government response and categorized them according to the nature of the answer: those that explain how the problem can be addressed using existing legislation; those informing TOM users that the solution to the problem is already in the pipeline as an amendment to current statutes; those expressing a possible implementation of the idea (see [Possibly implemented ideas](#)); those generally supportive; those that were negative; and, as a separate category, TOM-

generated ideas that received positive answers and were implemented at least in part. This categorization is of course partially subjective since lengthy answers could often contain criticism and praise, thus we categorized answers as positive if at least some element of the proposal was deemed worthy.

Total answers	580	100%
Explaining solution	80	14%
Amendment in progress	79	14%
Possible implementation	35	6%
Supportive	43	7%
Negative	276	48%
TOM-related	9	1%
Unclear	58	10%

### 2.3.2. TOM-generated ideas by subject matter

One of the drawbacks of the current version of TOM is the inability to categorized proposals by subject matter. The absence of subject categorization creates several problems: it impedes citizens' ability to find or track topics that are of interest; leads to duplication of proposals; hampers the process of learning from already posted government responses. For the purposes of the analysis of subject matter, therefore, all TOM-generated ideas were tagged with a set of keywords and the database thus created was posted to the social bookmarking site [del.icio.us](http://del.icio.us) that contains a striking visual method for highlighting common topics, as can be seen in the graphic below. The categorization used can be seen at <http://del.icio.us/tom.al.icio.us>



- liiklus - traffic (parking, speed limit, Driving Under the Influence, insurance, driving licence)
- maksud - taxes (proportional vs progressive income tax, VAT on books purchased online)
- noored - youth (alcohol-tobacco-drugs issues, education, crime)
- pere - family (various forms of state family benefits)
- eestiasi - related to Estonia (from citizenship to having a national anthem online)
- põhiseadus - constitutional matters
- keskkonnakaitse - environmental protection
- riigikogu - parliament (mostly concerning the emoluments of MPs)
- eriik, eteenused - e-government, e-services
- valimised - elections
- alko - alcohol policy

### 2.3.3. Finding most active users

		% of all	% of active
<b>All-time registered users</b>	6837		
<b>Users who have presented an idea</b>	595	9%	19%
Users who have presented more than 1 idea	134	2%	4%
Users who have presented more than 2 ideas	61	1%	2%
Average ideas per user	1,78		
<b>Users who have voted</b>	2305	34%	75%
Users who have voted more than 1 idea	1072	16%	35%
Users who have voted more than 5 ideas	362	5%	12%
Average votes per user	5,42		
<b>Users who have commented</b>	1267	19%	41%
Users who have commented more than 1 idea	411	6%	13%
Users who have commented more than 3 ideas	184	3%	6%
Average commented ideas per user	3,68		

<b>Users with at least single action</b>	3081	45%	100%
Users with more than 1 action	1504	22%	49%
Users with more than 6 actions	428	6%	14%
Average actions per user	6,4		

As there is no incentive to sign up, compared with simply visiting, except for authoring, commenting or voting it is particularly interesting to note that only 45% of users have performed any action after signup (it would be fruitful to compare this percentage with that from other systems that do not require a login to read content).

While the above table lists the average activities per user, the table below shows the average activities for percentiles of users who have been active in their respective percentile category:

Percentile	Ideas	Votes	Comments	Total activity
1	3	9	5	10
2	2	4	3	4
3	1	3	2	3
4	1	2	1	2
5	1	1	1	1
6	1	1	1	1
7	1	1	1	1
8	1	1	1	1
9	1	1	1	1
10	1	1	1	1
avg	1,78	5,43	3,68	6,4

While we could interpret the above data as a sign, that a sizeable proportion of active users has performed more than one action we get completely different result when we look at the proportion of activities by top active users. Following table sums actions by top 10% of users with number and percentage of active users producing 50% of actions

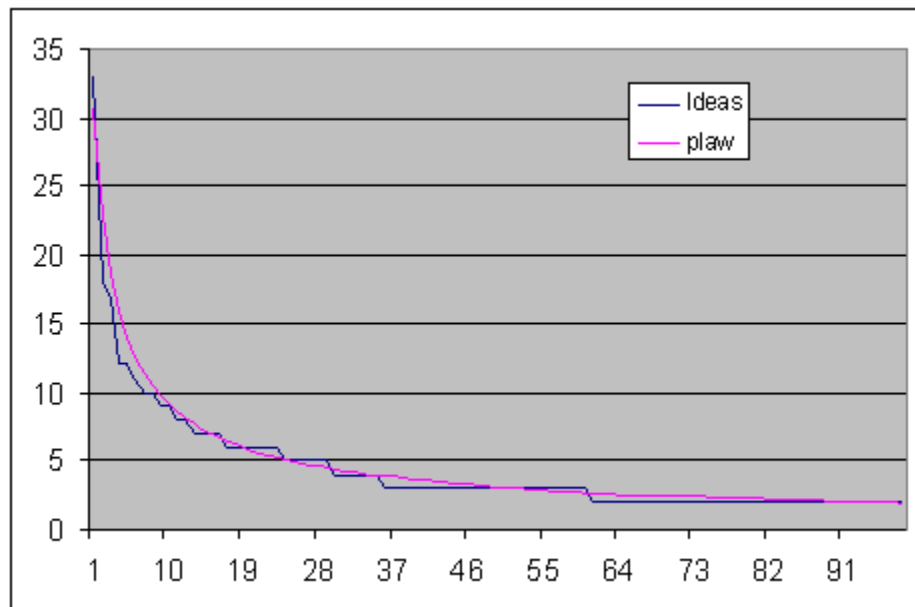
on bottom, together with number of actions performed by the user at the 50% position. Please note that [ComIdeas](#) is not number of comments like counted for total activity, but number of ideas commented by user so it should be better comparable to ideas and votes.

	Ideas	Votes	ComIdeas	Activity
Total	1025	12502	4672	19729
top 1%	18%	26%	30%	32%
top 2%	24%	37%	40%	44%
top 3%	28%	45%	47%	51%
top 4%	31%	50%	51%	56%
top 5%	34%	54%	55%	60%
top 6%	36%	57%	58%	63%
top 7%	38%	60%	60%	65%
top 8%	39%	63%	62%	67%
top 9%	41%	65%	64%	69%
top 10%	43%	66%	65%	71%
50% achieved	98	94	47	86
50% achieved	16%	4%	4%	3%
actions @ 50%	2	24	15	40

It is worth noting, that in fact 10% of ideas are generated by a single user (followed by another user with 3% of ideas; the top nine users have each contributed at least 1% of all ideas in system, whilst the top 10 users have generated 25% of ideas).

Distribution like this is can be expected, as explains Clay Shirky in [Power Laws, Weblogs, and Inequality](#) - in fact, if the top user is left out, the number of ideas generated follows very nicely a power law distribution of  $\text{userIdeas}(r) = 50 * r^{-0.71}$

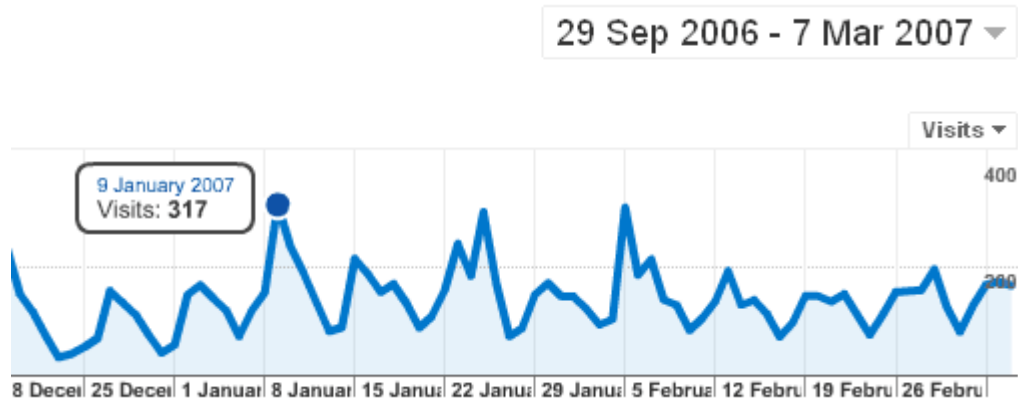




Although expected this distribution might not be the optimal solution for increasing citizen participation: the system is dominated by a small number of mega-users (<100 in TOMs case) who place a heavy burden on resources, most importantly the officials compelled to respond to the proposed legislative ideas but also administrators and other users.

#### 2.4. TOM traffic sources

Google Analytics, a free service provided by the IT corporation Google, generates statistics about website visits, including such elements as where internet traffic came from, length and frequency of visits. According to Google Analytics, actual TOM usage is very low - slightly more than a 100 visits on a typical day, but interestingly usage can double on certain occasions:



All the peaks illustrated above are the result of an idea being discussed outside the TOM tool. For instance, the peak of 9 January 2007 highlighted above was generated by the [auto24.ee](http://auto24.ee) discussion board, the website of a major daily newspaper [epl.ee](http://epl.ee) and two weblogs as demonstrated in the next graphic. This is a crucial finding, which suggests that public interest in e-participation is greatly dependent on how the tool for citizen participation is publicised among internet users, especially the weblog community.

Site Usage		Goal Conversion			Views: [Grid] [Print] [List] [Language]	
Visits <b>317</b> % of Site Total: 100.00%	Pages/Visit <b>2.29</b> Site Avg: 2.29 (0.00%)	Avg. Time on Site <b>00:01:39</b> Site Avg: 00:01:39 (0.00%)	% New Visits <b>85.80%</b> Site Avg: 85.80% (0.00%)	Bounce Rate <b>75.08%</b> Site Avg: 75.08% (0.00%)		
Source/Medium	Visits ↓	Pages/Visit	Avg. Time on Site	% New Visits	Bounce Rate	
<a href="#">google / organic</a>	61	1.72	00:00:31	88.52%	83.61%	
<a href="#">(direct) / (none)</a>	50	3.54	00:02:43	76.00%	60.00%	
<a href="#">auto24.ee / referral</a>	41	1.66	00:00:17	95.12%	87.80%	
<a href="#">epl.ee / referral</a>	31	1.13	00:00:03	93.55%	96.77%	
<a href="#">neti.ee / referral</a>	27	3.00	00:01:45	92.59%	62.96%	
<a href="#">delfi.ee / referral</a>	25	1.32	00:00:14	96.00%	88.00%	
<a href="#">vovaq.blogspot.com / referral</a>	23	2.39	00:01:06	100.00%	78.26%	
<a href="#">wrongparking.blogspot.com / referral</a>	17	4.12	00:10:45	41.18%	29.41%	
<a href="#">riik.ee / referral</a>	11	1.91	00:00:37	63.64%	72.73%	
<a href="#">just.ee / referral</a>	7	1.43	00:00:07	100.00%	71.43%	
Find Source/Medium: containing ▼	Go	Show rows: 10 ▼	1 - 10 of 27			

At the time of the 9 January 2007 peak, the most active TOM-generated proposal was idea number 2050:

Content Performance			Views	
Page Views <sup>?</sup> <b>727</b> % of Site Total: <b>100.00%</b>	Unique Page Views <sup>?</sup> <b>537</b> % of Site Total: <b>100.00%</b>	Time on Page <sup>?</sup> <b>00:01:17</b> Site Avg: <b>00:01:17</b> <b>(0.00%)</b>	Bounce Rate <sup>?</sup> <b>44.32%</b> Site Avg: <b>44.32%</b> <b>(0.00%)</b>	% Exit <sup>?</sup> <b>43.60%</b> Site Avg: <b>43.60%</b> <b>(0.00%)</b>
URL	Page Views	Unique Page Views ↓	Time on Page	Bounce Rate
<a href="/tom/ideas.py/show?idea_id=2050">/tom/ideas.py/show?idea_id=2050</a>	207	<b>166</b>	00:03:16	76.51%
<a href="/tom/ideas.py/avaleht">/tom/ideas.py/avaleht</a>	124	<b>76</b>	00:01:36	40.79%
<a href="/tom/ideas.py/list?cat_id=1">/tom/ideas.py/list?cat_id=1</a>	46	<b>32</b>	00:00:09	15.62%
<a href="/tom/ideas.py/list?cat_id=3">/tom/ideas.py/list?cat_id=3</a>	27	<b>22</b>	00:00:07	0.00%
<a href="/tom/ideas.py/list?cat_id=7">/tom/ideas.py/list?cat_id=7</a>	32	<b>20</b>	00:00:23	0.00%
<a href="/tom/ideas.py/list?cat_id=5">/tom/ideas.py/list?cat_id=5</a>	31	<b>17</b>	00:00:38	0.00%
<a href="/tom/ideas.py/show?idea_id=2051">/tom/ideas.py/show?idea_id=2051</a>	13	<b>11</b>	00:02:45	0.00%
<a href="/tom/ideas.py/show?idea_id=2052">/tom/ideas.py/show?idea_id=2052</a>	9	<b>9</b>	00:01:35	11.11%
<a href="/tom/ideas.py/list?cat_id=2">/tom/ideas.py/list?cat_id=2</a>	11	<b>9</b>	00:00:02	0.00%

Proposal number 2050 proposes a solution to an urban parking problem. This particular problem arises from the fact that in Estonia there is no legislation permitting bad parking to be classed as a traffic or parking violation because of constitutional due process applicable for such sanctions. Certain European countries circumvent this constitutional obstacle by having the regime of fines imposed for such traffic violations classed as local taxes raised on parking mistakes. However, no such legislation has been introduced in Estonia, which prompted TOM-users to ask for such a measure. This particular proposal was then discussed on popular forums and in comments to a newspaper article as well as two blogs written by the author of the TOM idea. The following is a snapshot from one of the TOM-user's blogs illustrating nicely the problems associated with the absence of such restrictions on parking violations. It was precisely by publicising the policy issue across various websites that internet traffic directed towards TOM hit a peak.

## WRONG PARKING

BRAIN INVALIDS AND ALL IDIOTS, WHO CAN'T PARK CORRECTLY!

MONDAY, JANUARY 22, 2007

### Parkimine talveperioodil

Photo @ WrongParking



WRONG PARKING BANNER SINU BLOGISSE...

KUI...

...SUL ON MÕNI PILT (PALUKS KOOS AUTO NUMBRIGA), SIIS ANNA MULLE TEADA: [NEMOZ \[AT\] HOT.EE](mailto:nemoz[at]hot.ee)

OTSING:

KASUTA **BLOGGER NAVBAR** TOOLBARI, MIS ON LEHE ÜLEMISEL SERVAL SINIST VÄRVI. SISESTA OTSINGUSÕNA JA VAJUTA **SEARCH THIS BLOG**.

KES ME OLEME?:

HALDAJAD: 'BC' JA T  
ASUKOHT: TALLINN, EESTI






ÕIGUSED:



CREATIVE COMMONS TUTVUSTUS  
EESTI KEELES

### 2.4.1. Incoming search engine keywords

To complete our analysis of traffic source for TOM users and visitors, it was necessary to identify the internet search engine keywords that brought people in contact with the TOM tool. As can be seen from the following top-10 list of keywords generating TOM traffic, the hit parade unsurprisingly consists of expressions related to the site's name but there are also two real names of TOM idea authors/voters (blurred here for privacy reasons):

Site Usage		Goal Conversion		Views:     	
Visits <b>8,491</b> % of Site Total: 38.58%	Pages/Visit <b>1.69</b> Site Avg: 2.94 <b>(-42.41%)</b>	Avg. Time on Site <b>00:00:40</b> Site Avg: 00:01:39 <b>(-59.60%)</b>	% New Visits <b>85.71%</b> Site Avg: 78.52% <b>(9.16%)</b>	Bounce Rate <b>84.84%</b> Site Avg: 66.79% <b>(27.03%)</b>	
Keyword	Visits ↓	Pages/Visit	Avg. Time on Site	% New Visits	Bounce Rate
<a href="#">täna otsustan mina</a>	211	6.47	00:04:19	63.51%	24.64%
<a href="#">tom</a>	160	5.58	00:03:27	59.38%	36.25%
<a href="#">pronkssõdur</a>	80	1.81	00:01:21	91.25%	80.00%
<a href="#">emapalk</a>	57	1.16	00:00:04	91.23%	91.23%
<a href="#">trahviühik</a>	55	1.13	00:00:08	90.91%	94.55%
<a href="#">[redacted]</a>	37	1.08	00:00:13	89.19%	94.59%
<a href="#">subclub.ee</a>	34	1.56	00:00:18	91.18%	76.47%
<a href="#">õppelaenu kustutamine</a>	30	1.07	00:00:04	96.67%	93.33%
<a href="#">[redacted]</a>	28	1.14	00:00:11	3.57%	85.71%
<a href="#">valsi sammud</a>	25	1.04	00:00:00	96.00%	100.00%
Find Keyword: <input type="text" value="containing"/> <input type="button" value="Go"/>	Show rows: <input type="text" value="10"/> 1 - 10 of 5,236 <input type="button" value="←"/> <input type="button" value="→"/>				

When examining search statistics beyond the top-10 traffic-generating keywords, it becomes obvious that a very notable amount of inbound traffic is generated by searches for the names of people who happen to have participated in TOM - it is impossible to say whether the searches were conducted because the name searched was known to have authored a proposal on TOM, although prima facie this possibility seems highly unlikely. Out of 5435 search phrases 1955 (35%) are names, out of 8783 search instances 3404 (39%) are names. TOM ranks pretty highly in Google searches (often 1st or 2nd page) so it is not unusual for a search for a person's real name to bring up the idea they have proposed or voted on prominent position. Again, without real usernames, here is a list (difference in number of visits when comparing to above illustration due to consolidating searches related to same person):

Keyword	Visits
username	54
username	28
username	24
username	15
username	15

## 2.5. Overview

This section has reviewed the quantitative data relating to TOM general user activity since its launch in June 2001 until March 2007, when the current analysis was conducted. Whilst the total number of users and legislative proposals was easy to establish, this analysis broke new ground by using a variety of data-analysis techniques to trace usage over time and explain fluctuations therein. In addition, every single TOM-generated idea was tagged according to subject matter to show what type of proposals TOM users generated. Moreover, we were able to trace usage statistics of the individual authors of TOM ideas to show the distribution of ideas generation amongst the TOM community. Finally, using innovative internet tools for tracing internet traffic, the report was able to determine the sites and search engine keywords that brought outside internet users to the TOM site.

## 3. Feedback from users

### 3.1. Introduction

This section of qualitative data analysis is based on three separate yet complementary elements: a survey of TOM users; interviews with authors of TOM ideas; interviews with public officials charged with responding to TOM-generated ideas. These three elements enable us to complete the assessment of how well TOM functioned as a means for enabling e-participation.

### 3.2. The Survey

An online survey was conducted among the registered users of TOM between 30 April and 14 May 2007. The questionnaire was sent to 80 persons who had presented ideas via TOM in the period June 2001 - March 2007. The sample consisted of the authors of the ideas with the highest number of votes cast. The survey did not include commentators, voters, and passive users of TOM (portal followers).

The survey contains the answers received from 25 respondents (a 31% completion rate).

The survey aims to analyse the "lifestory" of an idea presented via TOM, focusing on how and why the idea came into being, the efficiency and user-friendliness of the commenting, editing, and voting phase of the portal as well as the eventual outcome. The survey included the following questions:

#### **1) What did you know about TOM before presenting your idea?**

Keywords: How did you come across TOM? Had you previously taken part in commenting and voting before presenting an idea? Did you have an overview of how TOM works before presenting the idea etc?

#### **2) How and why did your idea come into being and how did it get to TOM?**

Keywords: Media influence, relevant and "hot" topic in current affairs, personal problems. Was the idea that of one person or was it a group initiative? What was the

preparation of the idea like? What happened outside TOM (in the Internet, discussions among friends etc)

**3) What was your experience of using TOM like (disregarding the quality of comments, voting result, and the eventual government response)?**

Keywords: Positive examples of using TOM. What did you learn and what should one know before presenting the idea? Did TOM help you in formulating, presenting, and processing the idea?

**4) Could you evaluate the comments on your idea, the voting process, and the answer received from the government?**

Keywords: Was there any discussion on the presented idea? Did you notice a clear "opposition" to the proposal and whether the comments influenced the voting outcome? What was the result of the presented idea and its possible impact? What was the answer from the government department like?

**5) What functions should be added to TOM in order to make it more convenient to use and more effective? What should be changed?**

**6) What could TOM be used for (in addition to its present function)? What would you do with TOM given the possibility?**

### **3.3. Survey results and main findings**

#### **3.3.1. What did you know about TOM before presenting your idea?**

All the respondents were already familiar with the existence of TOM before presenting their idea. The main sources of information included: Estonian Government websites, the Estonian Parliament, internet portals, online newspapers, TV, newspapers. None of the respondents had used TOM before (either for commenting or voting).



Most of the respondents considered themselves not to be active users of TOM, either before and after the idea was presented. Furthermore, a decrease in visiting the portal was mentioned several times.

However, the existence of the portal was highly regarded and the information presented on the portal explaining how to use the tool and propose ideas was seen as clear and sufficient. Nevertheless, in certain cases technical problems of the portal (inability to register, etc) were mentioned.

**Problems:** Most respondents heard about TOM in the immediate aftermath of the portal's launch in June 2001. After the initial burst of publicity and attention, interest in the portal as well as media coverage decreased considerably and the possibilities of finding information related to the TOM or promoting its existence is rather scarce. For example, in 2001-2002 there was a link to TOM from Estonia's biggest Internet portal ([www.delfi.ee](http://www.delfi.ee)) that was simply removed after 2002. Many of the respondents could not recall the last time they had heard anything about TOM. A very low media coverage is directly related to the low number of new registered users of the TOM as well as active use of the portal (low number of voters, comments, etc).

**Possible solutions proposed:** To add a TOM link to all the websites of government institutions as well as online newspapers and large national portals, e.g., [www.delfi.ee](http://www.delfi.ee). Also, articles in newspapers, magazines, etc should be followed by a comment like "the issue could be discussed also in TOM" or for further debate visit TOM", adding the link to the latter.

### **3.3.2. How and why did your idea come into being and how did it get to TOM?**

A vast majority of respondents presented the idea due to personal reasons (either work- or family-related). Also, media interest in the particular issue was mentioned several times (e.g., the subject matter was touched upon in newspapers or other articles). In some cases, respondents expressed a need to draw other citizens' attention both to certain problems and possible solutions alongside a desire to help governmental institutions in their work, legislation preparation in particular.

All the respondents presented the idea alone (not with a group or co-presenter) and most of them had not used any external assistance when formulating the idea. Only in one case was the idea generated in a brainstorming session that was followed by drafting the idea together with an expert group.

Respondents agreed that they had not spent enough time formulating the idea (according to 2 answerers, it took them an hour) nor in advertising the proposal or making active use of others (for commenting and voting). However, in three cases the idea had been under discussion in online newspapers or other internet portals and in one case, the idea presenter had been contacted by a TV channel for an interview. The latter due to the author's activism and personal contacts, not the help of TOM managers or public officials.

**Problems:** The ideas are presented by a single person and are not usually formulated without requisite attention and the use of external expertise. In addition, idea presenters are neither active in engaging others in the preparation, commenting, and voting phase of the proposal nor in drawing public attention to the problem through other channels (newspapers, the Internet, friends, coworkers, etc). This serves as a strong reason explaining the low quality of the presented ideas as well as the passive attitude of other citizens in the idea-generating process.

**Possible solutions proposed:** To support the activism of the idea author in promoting the proposal as well as taking part in the commenting phase and drawing attention to the problem in other fora (TV, newspapers, etc). To draw the author's attention to possible ways of getting expertise and assistance in both formulating and editing the idea.

### **3.3.3. What was your experience of using TOM like (disregarding the quality of comments, voting result, and the eventual government response)?**

From the survey data gathered it can be concluded that the general attitude to TOM is positive as well as the experience of presenting and processing ideas. The structure is seen as logical and the opportunity to follow the procedure after presenting the idea adequate.

The instructions on how to use TOM for various purposes (voting, commenting, editing) is considered easy and no major technical changes were proposed. However, it was suggested to add ways of receiving information on TOM and the new ideas presented. For example, tag-based (keyword-based) e-mail subscriptions.

The inability to edit a proposal when in the commenting phase was considered problematic in several cases (both by commentators and the author of the idea).

Also, the issue of verifying the person's identity with a national ID card was raised a couple of times (whether or not the ID card should be used for user registration, authoring an idea, commenting, and voting). Note, however, that in 2005 the Estonian State Chancellery changed the rules of TOM and introduced a requirement of using an ID card when voting (only the votes given by the persons verifying their identity with ID card were counted). As this change was highly criticised, the State Chancellery decided to abolish the requirement and, currently, registration with ID card is optional and there are no restrictions as to commenting, voting, or authoring an idea. However, this subject is a constant matter of debate both amongst TOM users and public officials.

It can be summarised that the problems raised are related to content and impact rather than technical. Still, the visual design of the portal was criticized and considered old fashioned.

#### **3.3.4. Could you evaluate the comments on your idea, the voting process, and the answer received from the government?**

**Problems:** The majority of respondents identified a lack of user discussion as one of the main drawbacks of the portal. The number of comments had not met authors' expectations and the disengagement of public officials was considered negative.

However, the quality of posted comments are highly regarded and considered valuable and interesting, even if the voting result was negative. The reputation of TOM is considered high and the latter is seen as the reason for not posting low quality or nasty comments that are the norm in many Internet forums.

Voting results and the actual voting procedure were neither considered problematic nor an obstacle for using the portal for presenting new ideas in the future.

In addition to the lack of discussion, public officials' answers to the TOM-generated ideas are highly criticised. All the respondents have received negative answers (i.e., the presented idea is not to be implemented) and all the answers are described as being too general and mealymouthed regarding the actual decision. This is interpreted by respondents as the sign of an unwillingness on the part of civil servants to contribute to the possible implementation of an idea, which respondents believe is merely seen as extra work by these public officials. That contributes to the respondents pessimism regarding the usefulness of the portal that can be illustrated with the statements like „nothing will change anyway”, „our opinion doesn't count” etc.

Still, some respondents point to the the civil servants' inability to implement the idea due to their low status and lack of higher level political support as part of the reason an idea was dismissed.

The lack of relevant knowledge and information necessary in order to be able to post comments and participate in thorough discussions is mentioned upon several times by survey respondents. As most of the TOM-generated ideas concern a very specific policy area and require certain background information, the number of people commenting on the presented ideas is low and the persons involved in commenting and voting tend to be the same ones.

Voting results and voting procedure is not seen as problematic or an obstacle for using the portal for presenting new ideas in the future.

**Possible solutions proposed:** To provide background information on the TOM-generated idea and the subject matter as well as explanations regarding terminology used; to categorise the presented ideas according to subject matter so that it would be possible to get information on the related ideas discussed in the portal beforehand; to involve experts, lawyers, and public officials to assist the idea author and contribute comments on the issue; to hire a professional moderator that should "lead" the conversation between portal users, idea presenters, and public officials; in addition to public officials in the relevant ministries, the ideas should be forwarded straight to higher government institutions (e.g., Parliament) or relevant expert committees (e.g., in the Parliament).

### **3.3.5. What functions should be added to TOM in order to make it more convenient to use and more effective? What should be changed?**

Technical changes for making the portal more functional and easier to use were not proposed by any of the respondents. Overall, respondents focused instead on the following issues:

- anonymity: introducing the requirement of identifying TOM users with national ID card;
- pseudonyms (whether or not to allow users to participate without their real name);
- public awareness (using other channels like the Internet portals, online newspapers, TV, radio, and newspapers for promoting TOM);
- involvement of experts, moderators, opinion leaders in commenting the presented ideas and leading the discussion between TOM users and public officials;

### **3.3.6. 6) What could TOM be used for (in addition to its present function)? What would you do with TOM given the possibility?**

The majority of respondents wish to see public awareness of the portal raised as the number of TOM users is seen as the key element in the portal's usefulness and continuation.

Many respondents would like to foster ways of engaging TOM in wider discussions in society (links to other Internet sites, news in TV, newspapers, radio etc, links to other relevant documents).

The possibilities of engaging opinion leaders, experts, higher officials and politicians in discussion and commenting on the TOM proposals are mentioned in several cases.

It is considered vital to integrate TOM with other services: a public law database, Draft Acts and statute amendments etc.

## **3.4. Summary of the interview with idea authors**

In addition to the web survey analysed above, a smaller number of authors of ideas with a high vote count or the possibility of implementation were contacted for private discussion that allowed us to ask more questions and test the viability of solutions we have

considered as possible solutions to problems visible in the technical website and database analysis.

#### **3.4.1. The main problems of TOM are perceived to be:**

- inactivity and lack of publicity
- discussion was more active when TOM ideas were co-published by major Estonian portal [delfi.ee](http://delfi.ee) – this brought new users and added a more familiar discussion platform
- too many steps during the process of idea makes it difficult to follow
- no feedback to users about the progress of idea
- discussions tend to get personal and move away from topic
- anonymity has not been a problem, as it allows also participation of citizens who are working as civil servants (there are reportedly cases with public petitions where signers have felt pressure from official channels afterwards)
- TOM should be integrated with other services, like a public law database, database of law amendments etc – perhaps making amendments commentable?
- no visible influence of TOM ideas beyond TOM: perhaps ideas should be circulated to respective committees in parliament or coalition council
- lack of structure: need for a categorization of ideas, possibly also relations to law amendments in process (ideas tend to reflect the wider discussions in society)
- there is a need to link outside documents and discussions to TOM-generated idea

**Conclusion:** simplify the process, keep anonymity, make sure users return to participate in subsequent phases, find a way to create a buzz beyond TOM and engage citizens in wider discussions by linking to other sites and external documents, provide structure.

#### **3.4.2. Dialogue or monologue?**

The lack of dialogue between the two participating sides – citizens as idea authors and government respondents – was especially highlighted during discussion.

- active subjects create dialogue, but a lot of subjects tend to get dominated by skeptics as there is no visible path to a policy solution

- TOM should use solutions like email notifications to help users return to the discussion
- how to give more weight to ideas, get less formal answers: there exists the possibility to invite related NGOs to file support after voting, that could also help to find partners who could lobby for the idea
- there is a need for discussion after receiving a government response: currently there are very few comments on answers since users are not notified about them; a possibility of re-submitting an edited version of idea following a negative answer is needed
- raise the bar for voting: quorum of votes required, support must be larger than a simple majority
- including working plans of ministries would make it easier to select subjects government ministries might be willing to discuss
- statistical feedback is necessary for TOM users: how many ideas have been sent to which ministry, what has been the response (negative, positive, has the idea been implemented)
- “send to a friend” – some simple campaign solutions that let users widen the circle of participants
- monitoring functionality – users should have multiple options (email, RSS etc) for receiving information about changes to their idea or ideas on their field of interest
- how to find out during creation of the idea whether there has been any earlier ideas on the same topic, possible providing input? if the ideas were tagged/categorized users could be asked to provide similar information and TOM could provide easy access to ideas: reading, linking as reference etc

**Conclusion:** activate users and provide simple “campaign tools”, create ties with previous ideas, bring users back to discuss government responses and possibly continue the process with a new and improved idea, during the creation of new ideas find a means to inform users about possibly-related ideas that could have solved the same problem or might prove valuable reference.

### **3.5. Summary of the interview with representatives of ministries**

To understand the possibilities of and problems with TOM a meeting with representatives of relevant ministries was organized. Participants were public servants who deal with the questions the State Chancellery has directed to particular ministries in order to have an overview of the process – actual answers are prepared by specialists of the field and approved at secretary general or deputy secretary general level.

The first problem that has influenced the impression of TOM amongst public officials is the fact that ideas that have passed the system with very few votes – answering the ideas is a burden on specialists. Despite this and the fact that there tend to be „loyal correspondents“ who create a sizeable number of ideas the quality was perceived to be higher than that of the general ministry inbox, so in case the system is adjusted to produce a higher vote count it might actually lessen the burden of answering letters from citizens.

#### **3.5.1. Contrasting an Information request vs TOM idea**

The Estonian Public Information Act grants citizens wide rights to request information and a large part of communication with ministries falls under PIA: they are answered using available information within 5 days. TOM ideas are considered different, as they arrive with the resolution of State Secretary and need typically a more in-depth answer that takes of course more time to deliver but is also put through a full approval round and signed by a rather high official meaning this is considered an “official governmental position”. Unfortunately this also seriously limits the possibilities of dialogue: having a position means defense, not discussion. There is no way to engage government officials in discussing the answer publicly on TOM and most follow-up ideas will be considered as an attack on this official position and automatically barred.

Part of the problem is that “politicians decide, public servants execute” – meaning that original ideas directed to the ministry level will be politely rejected unless they fall into a subject category that is already in the pipeline or are effortlessly implementable corrections of minor mistakes.



Sidenote: the same problem was suggested by idea authors with a possible solution of circulating the ideas to parliamentary commissions or a coalition council. We presented this as a possible solution to the public officials and it was rejected.

How to allow discussions? If the approval level is brought down it might create a chance to implement more TOM-generated ideas, but even then the answers-comments in the follow-up discussion should go through an approval round in ministry, as even personal opinions of public servants tend to get interpreted as an official position. Which brings us again to the issue of anonymity or pseudonymity – it should be possible to participate without making one's real name known. But how to manage such a system and avoid the current situation where it is dominated by few users?

Good ideas will be picked up and used, in case they are remembered at the suitable moment. Could there be a solution to send a reminder of positively-answered ideas once there is a related statute amendment in process? Adding subject categorizations to ideas is considered helpful, as this would facilitate finding ideas later. Also adding information about the status of the idea – implementable, rejected etc - was considered useful.

What kind of meta-information might be added to answer? Categorization of the answer, including pointers to laws that it might influence so that the system can notify users about ideas when a law is to be changed in future (sidenote: part of the development of participation tools at State Chancellery is also tied to the development of various databases).

Idea authors suggested that after the idea has been voted upon interest groups should be able to add their letters of support – this is considered a good option by public officials.

**Conclusion:** the current setup does not facilitate discussion, but we cannot point to any good alternative; the public officials' attitude towards TOM could be improved if the system had more users (more authors, more people voting for ideas) and were it to generate ideas that are of a higher quality than the average ministry inbox content; acceptance of ideas would be higher, if they are related to the actual working plans of the ministry; implementation of ideas could be higher if there were a solution to remind civil servants about them once a related law is in process. However, this is not an exhaustive list of how TOM can be made more useful to ministries.

## 4. Conclusions

Based on this analysis of current TOM website usage, the database of TOM-generated ideas as well as feedback from users the following problems hampering e-participation should be highlighted:

Actual usage of TOM is very low, with the number of daily visitors comparable to a moderately popular Estonian weblog. This can be attributed to a lack of publicity, but also to the small number of positive responses from the government and the inability of the system to present even these. The fact that ideas attract only a few votes and are often authored by dominant and dominating users has resulted in a perception that TOM is not a place for real public discussion and thus has limited its potential impact on relations between governed and governing. Also, the process of responding to TOM-generated ideas that are not congruent with the existing work plans and priorities of government ministries tends to produce negative results and leaves no window of opportunity for continuing the discussion, while further development of the idea would need extensive lobbying skills that would give public officials the possibility of changing the original position graciously.

These problems could be overcome by changes to both the TOM process and its software: by finding ways to widen the discussion, add tools that give better access to and an overview of existing ideas and make the system useful for all potentially involved parties: citizens, politicians, public servants, journalists etc.

Suggestions for changes will be outlined in [TID technical specification](#) and [TID procedural recommendations](#), but based on the current analysis of usage data and participant feedback they should definitely include:

- the provision of tools for following/monitoring discussion both within one particular idea and within a subject matter of interest, also ‘campaign tools’ to invite new users etc
- the simplification and speeding up of the entire process, and providing adequate statistical feedback on individual user's TOM-related activity (while not compromising their privacy)

- the categorization of legislative proposals by subject and also by result (e.g. was the idea implemented, explanation of existing solution to the problem described etc), as well as the construction of search tools that use the same categorization and that can be used for customised searches by different user groups (authors, journalists etc)
- a solution to the problem of engendering a wider public discussion, including but not limited to online media, weblogs, the texts of statute amendments, and wider circulation to parliamentary commissions etc
- the design of a follow-up process that could make it easier to re-formulate the TOM-generated idea based on the initial government response so as to re-submit it, while bearing in mind a potential reluctance to change the official position as expressed in the original response