

Down to business



KEVIN O'NEILL / STAFF ARTIST

Matryoshka nesting doll likenesses of Uncle Sam, right; County Commissioner Corey O'Brien, left; Gov. Tom Corbett, lying down in rear; and Scranton Mayor Chris Doherty joined together recently to view each other's official government websites.

Federal website gets the job done

(Editor's Note: This is the fourth in a series of four columns about the websites of Scranton, Lackawanna County, Pennsylvania and the federal government. This week's column focuses on the federal government.)

America's website at **usa.gov** is the least political and most "government-looking" of all the sites I've reviewed over the last four weeks.

While the websites for the city and state both devote generous space to the achievements of the mayor and governor, and the county site at least lists the commissioners' names on the home page, you have to go several pages deep on **usa.gov** to find even the name of a government official. The fed's portal site is the epitome of nameless, faceless big government, which isn't necessarily a bad thing.

A little bling wouldn't hurt

Lackawanna County's site strikes a nice balance between providing services, promoting the county and giving visitors a taste of the region's personality. The federal government's site is all business. You won't find photos of the Statue of Liberty, Independence Hall or the Grand Canyon gracing its pages, just links to hundreds of government agencies and programs. Some purple mountains majesty or amber fields of grain wouldn't hurt, though.

What the site lacks in personality it makes up for in content and organization. The U.S. government is a monstrosity with hundreds of heads and thousands of tentacles that reach into nearly every facet of our lives. The home page does an admirable job of taming the beast in an understated, uncluttered way.

Almost everything you need to access any government agency is consolidated in four tabs with dropdown menus and a search tool at the top of the page. Clicking on the first tab — Get Services — reveals links to a half-dozen popular topics, such as government job listings or changing your address. Another link in the menu takes you to an alphabetical list of well over 100 different services offered.

The next tab — Explore Topics — is a list of nearly 20 broad topics linking to pages of ever more specific topics. Everything from money and taxes to art and culture to science and technology is covered. When you get down to the most specific links, such as ID theft, the links take you to the website of the federal agency that deals with that topic.

Find Government Agencies is the third tab. It features an A-to-Z index of the U.S. Government containing hundreds of links to, I assume, every federal agency there is. Besides the comprehensive list, there are featured links to the executive, judicial and legislative branches. Each of these takes you to a page with links to the many departments contained within the three main branches. These links take you off the portal site to the websites of the various departments.

There also are featured links for state, local and tribal governments. From these you can navigate to the websites of all the states, territories, cities, municipalities and tribal governments in the country.

The fourth tab — Contact Government — allows you to communicate with elected officials from the president down to your local state representative via phone, email or snail mail. You can even Tweet your congressional representatives.

While **usa.gov** could accomplish its mission with just those four tabs, there is a little more to the home page. Just under the tabs is a

section that spotlights topical issues. This week features information on dealing with hurricanes and floods, back-to-school resources and a contest to develop apps geared toward protecting college students from dating violence and sexual assault.

A popular topics section highlights some of the most sought-after information, saving you the trouble of searching through the tabs. Jobs and benefits top the list.

"Just for You" is a section geared to different demographic groups, such as seniors or veterans. This allows you to search the site for agencies and services that are relevant to your particular situation.

Functional also can be fun

The government's impressive collection of apps also is accessible from the home page. The apps run the gamut from deadly serious, such as locating shelters during a natural disaster, to downright silly, as in morphing a photograph of yourself into a Neanderthal.

A blog, links to social websites and a poll question round out the home page.

As a portal site to the vast array of websites under the federal government's umbrella, **usa.gov** does a fine job. Its clean design, logical organization and simple navigation allow you to access thousands, maybe even millions, of Web pages with relative ease.

The site lacks visual appeal though. A nation as large and diverse as ours presents so many opportunities for great images, be they people, places, industry or natural wonders. It's a shame someone didn't find a way to incorporate some of those images into the site.

KEVIN O'NEILL is a graphic artist for The Times-Tribune. Contact him at koneill@timeshamrock.com with links to your favorite websites.



KEVIN O'NEILL

InSites