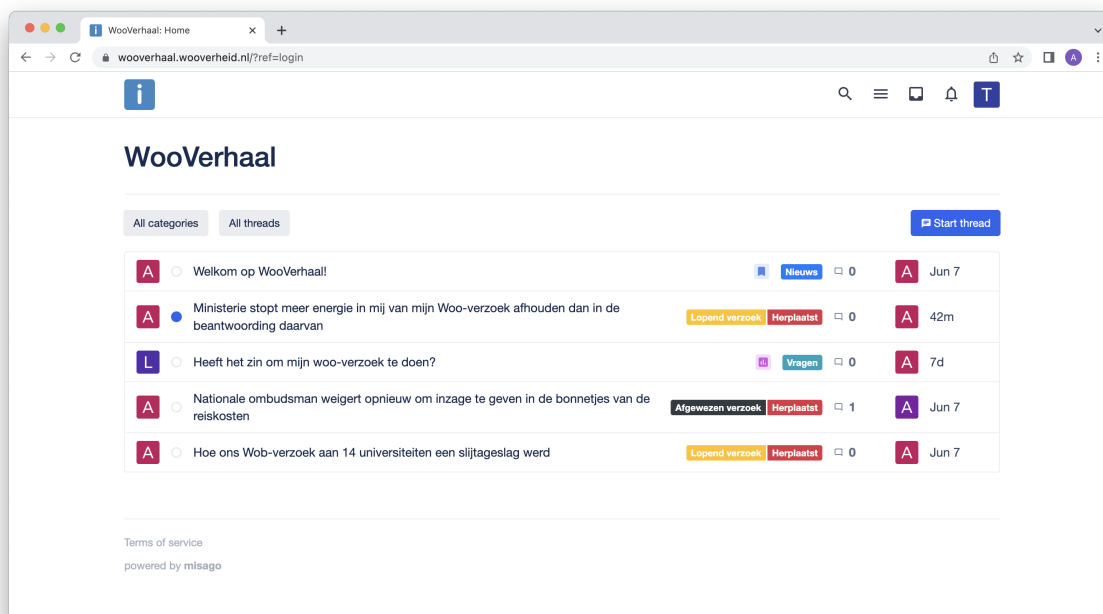


WooVerhaal: a FOIA knowledge sharing forum



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WooVerhaal: a FOIA knowledge sharing forum

Designing a political forum for Dutch Freedom of
Information Act knowledge sharing

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Abstract

Information surrounding Dutch freedom of information act (FOIA) requests is currently difficult to find as it is shared at random places on the internet or not shared at all. Think about dramatic timelines, rejected requests, court appeals and context information surrounding a FOIA request. This research set out to investigate how to create and design a forum for effective knowledge sharing surrounding these FOIA requests. It answers the questions why people would share their information and how features could promote knowledge sharing on a dedicated online beta forum website called "WooVerhaal" (FOIA story). The research was done following the design cycle of practice-oriented research. After investigation of the problem, context and previous research, a beta forum was created and evaluated using semi-structured interviews. The interviewees ($N = 3$) praised the design and thought it was a good solution to the problem. They also identified a few usability problems that should be improved. This research contributes to the field by creating a dedicated place where Dutch FOIA request information can be stored and interested parties can find support from each other. Moreover, it investigated a forum design for FOIA specific knowledge sharing opposed to the previously researched educational and business settings.

Keywords: Freedom of Information Act, forum design, usability, knowledge sharing

Word count: X

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1 Introduction

2 On 1 May 2022, the Dutch government instated an updated version of the Free-
3 dom of Information Act (FOIA). It started a period of transitioning from the, in
4 Dutch, ‘Wet openbaarheid van bestuur’ to ‘Wet open overheid’. Its main difference
5 focuses on more active disclosure of information by the government (Drahmann,
6 2021). A FOIA enables citizens of a country to ask any government body to make
7 information public. This can range from text messages to official documents. The
8 change of legislation was initiated because requests often did not get answered
9 in a timely matter or the reasons for rejection were not clear (Drahmann, 2021).
10 What might be the most impactful is that they are now also obliged to upload the
11 released information online for anyone to access.

12 In 2018, when the Dutch government invested in a platform called ‘PLOOI’ that
13 would host this kind of information, sharing of that information was not obligated
14 yet. Therefore, the realised platform is unfit to handle the higher than imagined
15 amounts of data (Adviescollege ICT-toetsing, 2022). Furthermore, connecting the
16 platform with the locally used systems of different government bodies, is deemed
17 too difficult at this time (Adviescollege ICT-toetsing, 2022). The Adviescollege
18 ICT-toetsing (2022), in English the Advisory Board ICT testing, even decided
19 that PLOOI was so unfit that the government should opt for a new quick fix. The
20 minister that read the report accepted the advice, therefore it can be concluded
21 that any such platform run by the government will not be used any time soon.

22 At the University of Amsterdam research has been done on how to design a
23 platform like PLOOI, that makes data sharing and searching for information easy
24 for all parties involved (Marx et al., 2022). However this tool, called WooGLE,
25 only deals with successful requests and does not allow users to react or elaborate
26 on their request. This gap is what I will try to fill with this thesis. I propose
27 a platform, not for successful FOIA requests, and not filled from the perspective
28 of the governing body answering the request, but from the perspective of the re-
29 quester. This can take the form of unsuccessful requests, dramatic timelines, court
30 appeals, interesting findings, or requests for help or (legal) information. Currently,
31 examples of such outings are distributed in random places on the internet. For ex-
32 ample the detailed story by Mom (2022) where he explains the different processes
33 he had to go through to finally get the information he was looking for. This can
34 give insights into how well the new FOIA law is working and if the government is
35 really more willing to share its information. Or the Twitter thread by ‘Stichting de
36 Verbeelding’ where they share their frustrations about a government official that
37 is unwilling to substantiate his travel costs (Stichting de Verbeelding, 2023).

38 The goal of this platform is to create a dedicated community where FOIA
39 interested parties can help each other and share their stories. Moreover, as this
40 information is so hard to find and is generally not shared as much, it could help

41 scientific research in the field by collecting the information in one place.

42 Previous research has investigated ways in which knowledge sharing can be
43 promoted and why people share knowledge online through online discussion com-
44 munities. However, these researches were often about brand, educational and
45 health communities. A FOIA specific forum or online community has not been
46 investigated yet.

47 Thus, this research sets out to investigate how to create and design a forum
48 for effective knowledge sharing among people interested in FOIA requests. To an-
49 swer this question, existing examples of such forums will be analysed and a beta
50 version of a forum will be created. The beta forum will be called 'WooVerhaal'
51 from here on, in English: FOIA story. Potential users will be asked to evaluate
52 the beta version. Resulting in concrete advice about how to effectively develop a
53 forum that promotes FOIA knowledge sharing. The following research questions
54 were used to investigate the design of the proposed forum:

55

56 **RQ1:** What makes people share information on an online Dutch Freedom of In-
57 formation Act forum?

58 **RQ2:** Are there any technological features that will promote knowledge sharing
59 on an online Dutch Freedom of Information Act forum?

60 2 Theoretical Background

61 When designing WooVerhaal one should pay attention to the fact that in the
62 current context, a lot of online platforms are competing for a user's attention.
63 Therefore, it is important to investigate how to attract and keep users on the forum.
64 Also, the nature of the forum where political matters opposed to commercial or
65 personal subjects are discussed, could influence its success. In this paragraph these
66 questions will be answered by evaluating existing research. Section 2.1 is related to
67 the research question why people will share their information online. Section 2.2
68 belongs to the research question that investigates possible technological features
69 which could promote knowledge sharing.

70 2.1 Participation in online discussion communities

71 An Online Discussion Community (ODC), such as the proposed WooVerhaal fo-
72 rum, is only effective when experiencing active user engagement (Kumi & Sabher-
73 wal, 2019). The forum depends on FOIA requesters to post their story, otherwise
74 there is nothing to discuss about. But with so many possible places on the internet
75 to go, it is crucial to design a forum that actively supports and encourages users
76 to partake in knowledge sharing and interactions.

77 Extensive research has been done to answer the question what stimulates users
78 to actively share their knowledge in an ODC (Kumi & Sabherwal, 2019). Knowl-
79 edge sharing can be defined as an exchange behaviour that involves knowledge
80 seeking and contribution (Tsai & Kang, 2019). Three main social scientific the-
81 ories were identified as main motivators. These were: the social exchange, social
82 capital and social identity theories. Moreover, the uses and gratifications theory
83 explains why people choose to interact with a certain medium. Research has also
84 identified intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. In short, individual and social factors
85 are critical for promoting contribution of knowledge in online communities (Tsai
86 & Kang, 2019). Last the political nature of the platform will be touched upon. In
87 this section, these six subjects will be discussed shortly.

88 **2.1.1 Social exchange theory**

89 The Social Exchange theory proposes that users of an online community will con-
90 sider the total cost and total benefit of participation when deciding to contribute
91 or not (Tsai & Kang, 2019). That is, if the benefits exceed the costs, knowledge
92 seekers will feel more inclined to reciprocate the knowledge sharing behaviour. Tsai
93 & Kang (2019) also mention the importance of perceived community support for
94 the level of reciprocation of knowledge sharing and therefore community building.
95 If there is a high level of perceived community support there is less doubt whether
96 the benefits of knowledge seeking will outweigh the costs, resulting in more partici-
97 pation. So-called linking actors, who help knowledge seekers in finding information
98 by referring to other sources, are key in determining the level of perceived commu-
99 nity support (Tsai & Kang, 2019). If these linking actors are perceived as caring
100 for the common good and acting for the benefit of the community, they drastically
101 improve the perceived levels of community support. It could therefore be argued
102 that WooVerhaal should strive for these linking actors to become active members
103 in the community.

104 **2.1.2 Social capital theory**

105 Wang et al. (2022) propose that the Social capital theory acts as a partial mediator
106 between the transition of knowledge seeker to knowledge contributor. Social capi-
107 tal can be described as the value derived from social networks that bridge diverse
108 people and bond similar people, generally creating norms of reciprocity (Wang
109 et al., 2022). Users with similar interests, experiences, and values are more prob-
110 able to establish and build relationships in a social network. Three dimension of
111 social capital are introduced in the article. High levels of structural social capital
112 is when the network establishes and forms many social ties and high degrees of
113 mutual contacts between users (Wang et al., 2022). The network stickiness will al-

low users to have a broader reach and therefore more influence which will increase the probability of cooperation within the network (Wang et al., 2022). Relational capital refers to the interpersonal relationships formed through the social interactions in the online community (Wang et al., 2022). These relations will increase trust between users that in effect will influence the willingness to trust that their investment in the community will be reciprocated. Resulting in more knowledge sharing behaviour. Last, cognitive capital is connected to the cognitive benefits from participation in the community (Wang et al., 2022). An example of this is professional knowledge enhancement. On WooVerhaal this could be in the form of journalists learning from each other or government officials hearing the other side of the story. This can in effect help users with becoming experts and helping with knowledge contributions within the community (Wang et al., 2022). To conclude, WooVerhaal should opt for strengthening the social aspect of its network to facilitate social capital building that may lead to knowledge seekers turning into knowledge contributors.

2.1.3 Social identity theory

Furthermore, the Social Identity theory proposes that sense of oneness or identification with an organisation or community activates an individual to take the organisation's goals and perspective as their own (Chiu et al., 2015). If members of an ODF strongly identify with the community they are more likely to invest in, make sacrifices, and be committed to the community (Chiu et al., 2015). This in effect may result in pro-social actions that will benefit the community (Chiu et al., 2015). Last, Chiu et al. (2015) propose that people who strongly identify with an online community may feel a sense of involvement with the community. This can encourage them to actively share knowledge and promote the community by word of mouth. In effect, a community can grow in size and more knowledge will be shared. By interacting with one another, members of online communities start to feel a sense of belonging and begin to adopt the collective objectives of the community (Kumi & Sabherwal, 2019). Thus, it is important that WooVerhaal facilitates members to interact with one another so they can form collective objectives.

2.1.4 Intrinsic and extrinsic motivators

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivators also play a role in knowledge sharing on online platforms (Kumi & Sabherwal, 2019). These motivators are more related to the individual than interpersonal interactions to explain behaviour motivations (Kumi & Sabherwal, 2019). The promotion of feelings of capability and autonomy are intrinsic motivators and tangible benefits or rewards are extrinsic motivators of

151 knowledge sharing in online discussion communities (Kumi & Sabherwal, 2019).
152 An example of an extrinsic motivator would be career advancements through par-
153 ticipation in an online community. The help or stories that are shared on WooVer-
154 haal could create valuable information for politicians, scientists, or journalists.
155 Intrinsic motivators can be achieved by for example implementing certain gami-
156 fied design features in an online community platform (Xi & Hamari, 2019).

157 **2.1.5 Uses and gratifications theory**

158 The uses and gratifications theory can be used to analyse why a consumer chooses
159 to use a certain medium. The audience or user is not merely a passive recipient
160 of media messages, but is considered to have significant influence. Individuals
161 are conscious of their own requirements and take proactive steps to find media
162 that cater to their needs (Moore & Chuang, 2017). Generally, people have four
163 motivations for traditional media use, these are: cognitive needs, affective needs,
164 tension release or escape, and integrative needs such as connection or fitting in
165 (Griffin et al., 2015). Affective needs can be seen as mood management where
166 people choose certain media that they expect will regulate their present mood
167 best (Griffin et al., 2015). In the current examples of WooVerhaal content, people
168 share their frustration with others on the internet. Such as Rosa Juffer in the
169 Matglas report, she mentioned that the government puts more effort in keeping
170 her from her requests than answering it (Fanoy et al., 2023). She probably wrote
171 this down to release tension or manage her mood as proposed by the uses and
172 gratifications theory.

173 Newer research also identified additional needs that emerge from the technology
174 itself. These are modality (newness, coolness and realism), agency (perceived pop-
175 ularity), interactivity (does the technology work well), and navigability (whether it
176 is easy to use) (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). A research by Moore & Chuang (2017)
177 investigated the needs reported by Reddit users following the uses and gratifica-
178 tions theory. Reddit is a popular network of communities. The research had 536
179 participants fill out a survey asking for their perceived motivations for using Red-
180 dit. The results indicated that most respondents used Reddit to socialise or for
181 community building, entertainment and status-seeking (Moore & Chuang, 2017).
182 A few behaviours were correlated with the features from Reddit. For example
183 being able to upvote comments creates so-called karma points which contribute
184 to the need for status-seeking. Frequent visits were correlated with the need for
185 entertainment.

186 2.1.6 Online political participation

187 Last, it is of interest to briefly discuss the topic of online political behaviour. As
188 this thesis does not cover the design of a general forum, it is particularly focused
189 on people that display political participation through a Dutch FOIA request. The
190 internet, and more specifically social media platforms, offer novel ways for political
191 involvement. Some of which call for considerably less time, energy, and financial
192 investment compared to traditional forms of political participation (Rueß et al.,
193 2021). As this new form of political participation lowers the threshold, academics
194 hope that under-represented groups will show stronger engagement (Rueß et al.,
195 2021).

196 If WooVerhaal would go live, and display user participation, it would become
197 part of the political information environment of the Netherlands. That is, the
198 demand and supply of political information and news within a specific society
199 (Van Aelst et al., 2017). By becoming part of this environment, WooVerhaal
200 could help with lowering the increasing inequality in political knowledge (Van Aelst
201 et al., 2017). Before, there was a low-choice media environment. Citizens who were
202 not interested in the news nonetheless learned and encountered political informa-
203 tion as the few options available frequently showed newscasts (Van Aelst et al.,
204 2017). Later, the broader media environment makes it easier to avoid political
205 information that one is not interested in. In effect, these people encounter less ac-
206 cidental exposure to political information and consequently will have less political
207 knowledge in general (Van Aelst et al., 2017). This caused an increase in political
208 knowledge inequality, resulting in the exclusion of the unmotivated from demo-
209 cratic politics (Van Aelst et al., 2017). Nonetheless, with the internet, people once
210 again accidentally come across political information when recommended to them
211 by an algorithm or shared in their social network (Holt et al., 2013). Likewise, if a
212 WooVerhaal would be shared in social networks, more unmotivated citizens could
213 be reached with important political information.

214 Last, the owner of a forum like WooVerhaal should be aware of the moderation
215 that could be needed in political environments. Research has shown that in polit-
216 ical subReddits, the tone of messaging can get quite heated (Soliman et al., 2019).
217 However, moderation of content (for example removing hate speech) is widely done
218 by many online communities (Kim & Mrotek, 2016). If the forum is deemed unsafe
219 because of disrespectful discussions, (potential) users might not feel safe to post
220 their opinion or stories on the forum.

221 2.2 Forum design choices

222 Social media platforms and well-known forum software are known to be so success-
223 ful because of certain addicting or motivating technological features. An example

224 is the "karma points" on Reddit where users are rewarded with a great rating
225 based on their participation. This promotes users to be more active because of
226 social status. WooVerhaal should adopt features that promote knowledge sharing
227 or usage of the forum as inquired in the second research question. In section 2.2.1,
228 certain gamification features are discussed that are known to influence the par-
229 ticipation of users in an online community. In section 2.2.2, features specifically
230 tailored towards the social aspects of design are discussed.

231 **2.2.1 Gamification features**

232 Adding gamification features to an online community or forum can help with sat-
233 isfying intrinsic needs of a user which in effect may positively influences their
234 participation and perception of the community (Xi & Hamari, 2019).

235 The term gamification describes the process of creating services, systems, activ-
236 ities, and organisations that elicit comparable experiences and incentives to games,
237 with an additional objective of influencing user behaviour (Huotari & Hamari,
238 2017). Immersion-related features that satisfy the need for autonomy are for ex-
239 ample avatars and narrative or storytelling with the main attempt to immerse a
240 player in the fictional game world (Xi & Hamari, 2019). Achievement, which is
241 related to the need for competence, is mostly represented by for example points,
242 levels, leaderboards, and badges. Finally, examples of social-related features are
243 groups, chats, and blogs.

244 Ding (2019) created a gamified online discussion tool for political science stu-
245 dents to investigate if the gamified elements would predict more participation
246 (Ding, 2019). Badges were achieved by having a certain amount of XP's and when
247 obtained it would yield a certain reward such as being allowed to hand in an as-
248 signment late. Furthermore, a progress bar showed the class' average XP's and
249 how many the user would need to achieve the next badge. Last, students could
250 react and like or leave other emoticon reactions. The results indicated that stu-
251 dents who were more aware of the gamification, commented more frequently than
252 the control group students (Ding, 2019). Thus, it is also important that the user
253 of a gamified product, is aware of the gamified elements.

254 **2.2.2 Social features**

255 van Varik & van Oostendorp (2013) empirically tested the Community Activity
256 Framework to investigate if implementation of its guidelines could boost partici-
257 pation in an online community that was struggling with user participation. After
258 implementation, and some delay, community usage statistics saw an increase and a
259 member survey indicated positive evaluation (van Varik & van Oostendorp, 2013).
260 The Community Activity Framework guidelines have been summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Community Activity Framework Guidelines

Guideline	
1.	Create a document with frequently asked questions, but do not build a large information portal.
2.	Do not be too selective when defining the target group of the community, so interested visitors will not be excluded.
3.	Provide members of the community with a section that is not accessible to guests.
4.	Provide members with the possibility to add one or more photos to their user profile.
5.	Create a set of house rules, and let new members read and accept these during the registration procedure.
6.	Let members use graphical emoticons in the messages that they post.
7.	Notify members by email of new posts in the topics they have subscribed to.
8.	Give members insight in the activity of others by displaying the total number of posts next to their messages.
9.	Add a CAPTCHA to the registration procedure. It helps to stop automated (fake) account creation, but won't influence the activity within a community.
10.	Set up a section with periodical news postings. It may serve as a daily attractor of visitors.
11.	Acquire organisational backing if possible, as it influences the total number of members positively.
12.	Members do not need to add greetings and closures to each of their messages.
13.	Put a request or question in the title, as it triggers people to react to the corresponding topic.
14.	Give members the option to add a poll to their topics, as it increases the average number of replies.
15.	Write in short and simple sentences, as long and complex sentences decrease the number of replies.
16.	Allow a few social topics, which are easily approachable.

Table 1: Community Activity Framework Guidelines (Continued)

17. Motivate members to fill out their profile and add a profile picture.
18. Give members the option to place messages on others' profiles (e.g. 'walls' or guestbooks).
19. Guide members into befriending each other, as members with more friends receive more replies in their topics.

263

264 Although the research by van Varik & van Oostendorp (2013) was conducted 10
265 years ago, it is still relevant as some of these guidelines are indeed used by current
266 popular community sites like Reddit and StackOverflow. Last, Tep et al. (2022)
267 propose that the effect of social features differs for different levels of involvement
268 on the attitude towards contributing. They defined two groups: 'lurkers' (low
269 involvement, passive readers) and 'posters' (high involvement, contributors). Their
270 experiment included star ratings for profiles and posts as well as displaying user
271 information such as location, occupation, and number of posts next to a user's
272 comment as social features. The results indicated a negative significant effect of
273 social features in the high involvement group and a positive significant effect in
274 the low involvement group (Tep et al., 2022). Therefore, social features can help
275 to get more users but is not necessary for the active users.

276 3 Methodology

277 This thesis is a more practice-oriented research as the research goal comes from
278 the professional practice and the knowledge created in this research immediately
279 contributes to this practice (Hermans & Schoeman, 2015). The methodology of
280 this study is based on the design cycle of practice-oriented research (see Figure 1)
281 as explained in Hermans & Schoeman (2015).

Figure 1: Design cycle of practice-oriented research



282 The goal of the research was identified by exploring the current context and
283 asking questions to the problem owners. The design demands and assumptions
284 were identified based on what was done in previous research on the development
285 of an online product (Oliwa, 2021; Willard et al., 2018). Both researches investi-
286 gated what other existing examples of their product could do, to understand what
287 people most likely expect from a similar service. Moreover, previous research as

288 discussed in the theoretical background on design choices for online discussion fo-
289 rums, was used. This created an overview, the structural specifications, that was
290 used to create the beta prototype (WooVerhaal). The prototype was distributed
291 by hosting it on wooverhaal.wooverheid.nl. In the following section the evaluation
292 of the prototype is explained in more detail.

293

294 **User feedback study**

295 Three people were asked to participate in a semi-structured interview. During this
296 interview, interviewees were first asked to interact with the beta forum following
297 the think aloud method. The concurrent think aloud method is widely used to test
298 the usability of websites and online products (Alhadreti & Mayhew, 2018). During
299 the concurrent think aloud method, subjects are asked to perform a certain task
300 and interact with a website while saying what they think aloud. By voicing what
301 they think, usability problems are uncovered (Alhadreti & Mayhew, 2018). The
302 interviewees were also asked to share their ideas and thoughts about the platform
303 after the interaction. Example questions are "What can be improved so that you
304 are more inclined to share your story?" or "Do you think the (political) content
305 discussed on the platform will influence its success?". The interviews were recorded
306 and on average took about 45 minutes.

307 The interviewees were selected based on example FOIA requests stories I had
308 found on the internet. They were a diverse group of people with different levels
309 of technological knowledge. One participant had a background in political science
310 and works for the Open State Foundation as project employee and did extensive
311 research on the FOIA law transition. Second, someone from SPOON, who admin-
312 ister "woo-knop.nl", was interviewed because they are currently running a similar
313 service as WooVerhaal. Last, I tried to interview an information officer that posted
314 a WooVerhaal on his blog, but after two cancellations this was not possible any-
315 more. Instead, I interviewed a random citizen to see if the platform would also be
316 understandable for someone that is not familiar with the Dutch FOIA.

317 **4 Results**

318 **4.1 Example forums analyses**

319 In this section I first introduce the existing examples and why they were not suited
320 for the problem. Then in Table 2, I compare the features of the examples with
321 those of the beta forum WooVerhaal. The comparison is done to see how WooVer-
322 haal fits in the current landscape.

323

324 **Reddit**

325 Reddit is an online platform that hosts multiple communities. Many different top-
326 ics, including politics, are discussed in so-called subReddits that users can start
327 themselves. Users can post, comment or vote. Posts consist of stories, links, im-
328 ages, and videos. Community members can comment on these posts. Comments
329 and posts can be downvoted or upvoted. Therefore, the most interesting content,
330 according to the users, is at the top of a page. It could be argued that WooVerhaal
331 could exist as a subReddit, however Reddit is owned by a foreign company and
332 users would be obliged to create an account and accept their terms of policy. The
333 recent protests from Reddit moderators about the increase of API costs, is also
334 an example of the negative and unavoidable dependence on the platform owners
335 (Tenbarge & Khogeer, 2023). Moreover, for people that are unfamiliar with Reddit
336 it might be confusing as it is not a dedicated platform solely for WooVerhaal. Last,
337 the uploaded content, which is likely to include Dutch government information,
338 is uploaded to the servers from Reddit and therefore shared on a place that the
339 WooVerhaal administrators cannot access.

340

341 **Huddle**

342 Huddle is an example software company that sells software for community build-
343 ing. Organisations can buy the software and adjust it according to their needs.
344 Huddle is an example of a 'ready to go' commercial system and is the most used
345 by businesses in the Netherlands. More than 1700 businesses use Huddle for their
346 communities (Huddle, 2023). If WooVerhaal would want its full functionality, it
347 would cost 125 euros per month. Although the software has very useful features,
348 it was not deemed as appropriate for WooVerhaal. First, it costs quite some
349 money but you would also, like with Reddit, be dependent on their servers and
350 databases to store information. Moreover, if the company would cease to exist or
351 if they would change an important feature, WooVerhaal would be quite vulnerable.

352

353 **MySociety: Woo-Knop**

354 MySociety is a not-for-profit social enterprise that funded the development of
355 Alaveteli software. This software is used by 25 different countries to make FOIA
356 requests easier and more accessible to the public. The software is open-source
357 and in the Netherlands "SPOON" is currently running a version on woo-knop.nl
358 (FOIA button). Users can send a request to government bodies through the web-
359 site, and the software will take it from there. Automatic reminders are sent to the
360 government body and the user can send in an appeal after the result. Other users
361 can also leave comments or follow requests. The software was translated to Dutch
362 but still sometimes uses English texts. On 17 May 2023, 1080 requests were done
363 through the website. Citizens that did not send their FOIA request through the
364 software, cannot upload their story to the website. Therefore, Woo-Knop it is not

365 suited for the proposed problem. Moreover, the design and social functionalities
366 are very limited to promote community building.

367

368 **Comparison with WooVerhaal**

369 In Table 2 on the next page, the different fora are compared with what the beta
370 WooVerhaal can do. It can be concluded that WooVerhaal has more functionalities
371 than WOO-knop but less than Reddit or Huddle. This is because the main goal
372 of WooVerhaal is not to be a social media but to share information. Therefore,
373 not all social features are deemed necessary on the beta forum.

Table 2: Comparison of features between the example existing fora softwares and WooVerhaal (beta).

Feature	Reddit	Huddle	Woo-knop.nl	WooVerhaal
About this user/ bio	x	x		x
Avatar	x	x		x
Badges / trophies / levels	x	x		
Banner profile image	x	x		
Birthdays		x		
Captcha detection or email validation	x	x	x	x
Chat / private messaging	x	x	x	x
Coins for premium features	x			
Comments	x	x	x	x
Community statistics		x	x	
Display name	x	x		x
Document upload			x	x
Explore/ homepage	x		x	x
FAQ	x		x	
FOIA request function			x	
Follow FOIA request or specific post			x	x
Follow users	x	x		x
Groups	x	x		
Leaderboard		x		x
Mobile app	x	x		
Personalised homepage/ feed	x			
Photo or video upload	x	x		
Picture boards		x		
Points	x	x		
Polls	x	x		x
Posts or threads	x	x	x	x
Private profile	x			
Social links profile	x	x		x
Trending / news		x		
Upvote & downvote / best answer	x			x
User contribution indication	x	x	x	x
User profile	x	x	x	x

374 4.2 Beta forum WooVerhaal design choices

375 I started by searching for existing solutions that could be adjusted based on the
376 theoretical framework and the examples analyses. The following options were
377 considered but the final forum is based on the open-source Misago forum code
378 base.

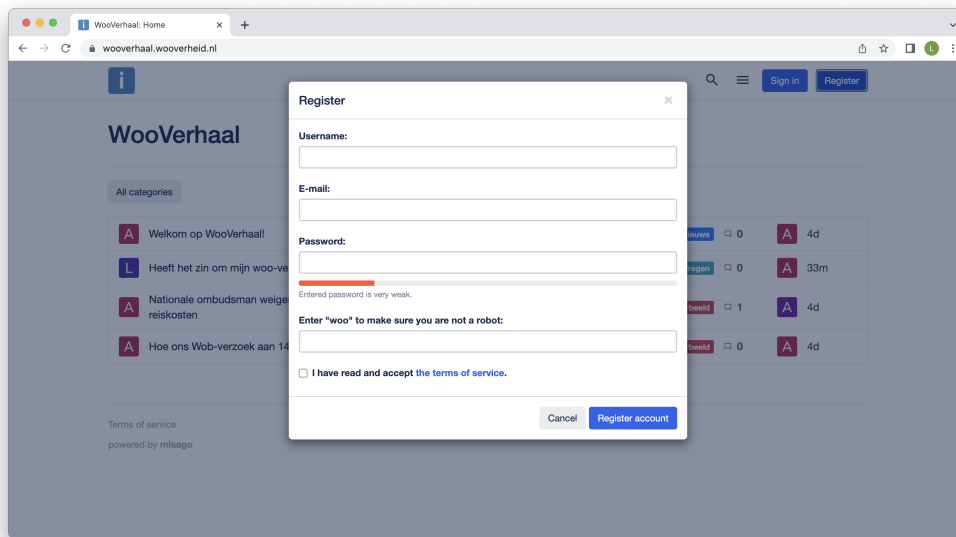
379 At first, a WordPress site was considered as this required no coding experience
380 and is considered as a cheap and approachable option. For example, an existing
381 forum for FOIA lawyers is using a WordPress forum (NKOO, 2023). However,
382 WordPress was deemed too difficult to personalise as one is stuck with pre-coded
383 templates. Existing software, such as the Dutch Huddle, was assumed too expen-
384 sive and not versatile enough.

385 As I have extensive knowledge in web-development with the Python package
386 Django, an open-source Django boilerplate was selected. This allows for easy code
387 management, feature extensions and the possibility of complete control over data
388 management. However, there is no Dutch translation of the website. The re-
389 searcher searched for solutions but due to time restraints had to continue with the
390 English website. The open-source boilerplate selected is called Misago (GitHub
391 repository). This code base is build using Django (Python) in a Docker con-
392 tainer and with a PostgreSQL database. Some features were already provided by
393 the codebase and others I added to match what the analyses and the theoretical
394 framework suggested.

395 In this section I will show the most important WooVerhaal features that are
396 thought to contribute to community building.

397

398 **Sign up**

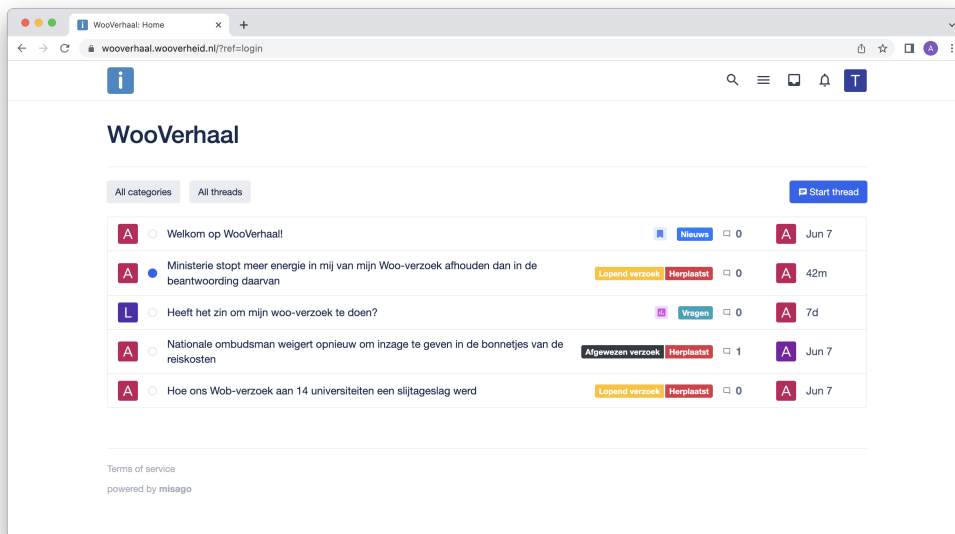


399

400 In line with the other platforms and point 9 from the Community Activity Frame-
401 work Guidelines (section 2.2.2), during sign up users are asked to do a very simple
402 Captcha task to prevent bots from registering. They also have to accept the terms
403 of service which lists some simple rules surrounding language and respect for oth-
404 ers in the community. This is in line with point 5 from the Community Activity
405 Framework Guidelines (section 2.2.2).

406

407 **Homepage**

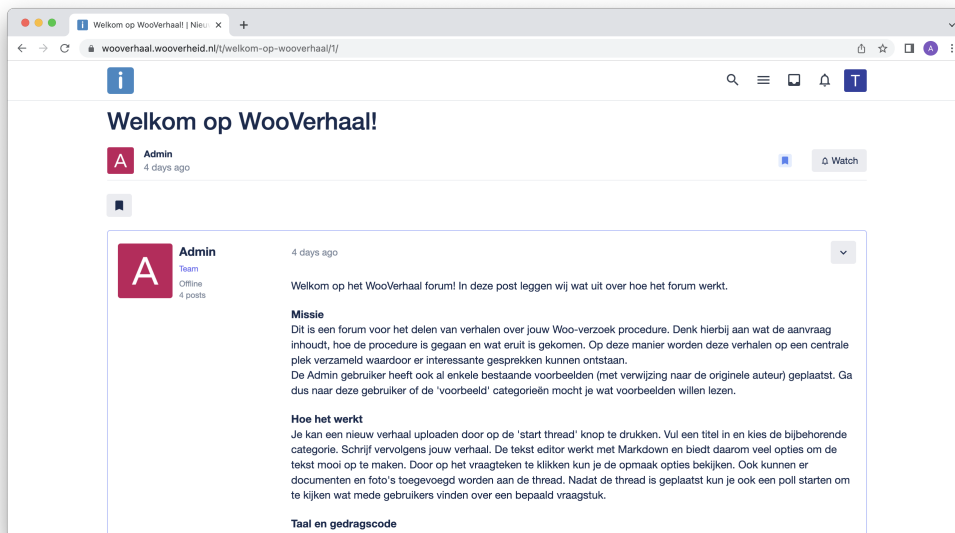


408

409 On the homepage users can see all threads on the platform. Threads appear in
410 order of post date. However, if a thread is pinned by the admin, it will appear
411 first. Users can use a filter if they want to see specific content such as only unread
412 threads or the ones they are watching.

413

414 **Information page**

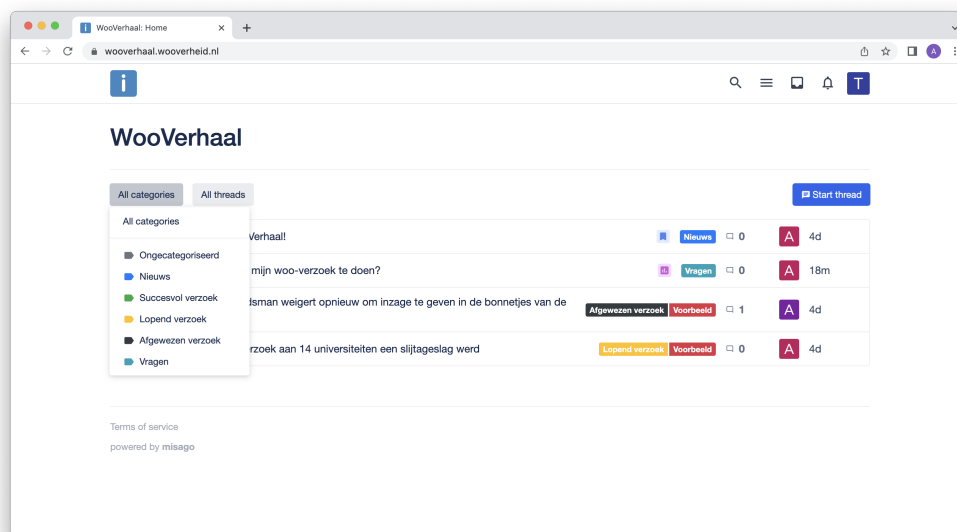


415

416 The "Welkom op WooVerhaal" post is globally pinned and therefore always listed
417 as the first post. In this post the mission, general workings and terms of service
418 are explained.

419

420 Categories

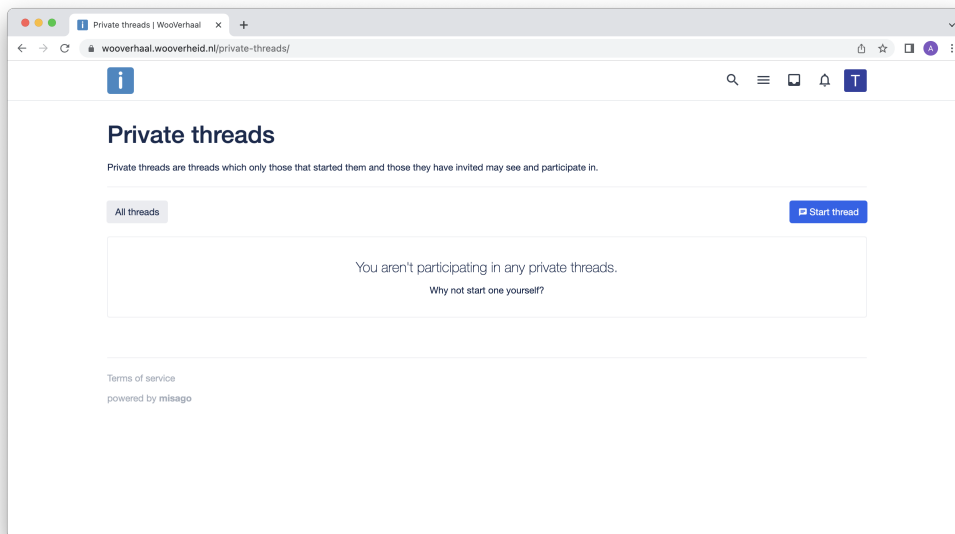


421

422 The categories that are created by the forum admin indicate what the thread is
423 about and can make searching for a specific thread easier. Permissions for reading
424 and writing can be set per category per user group.

425

426 **Messages**

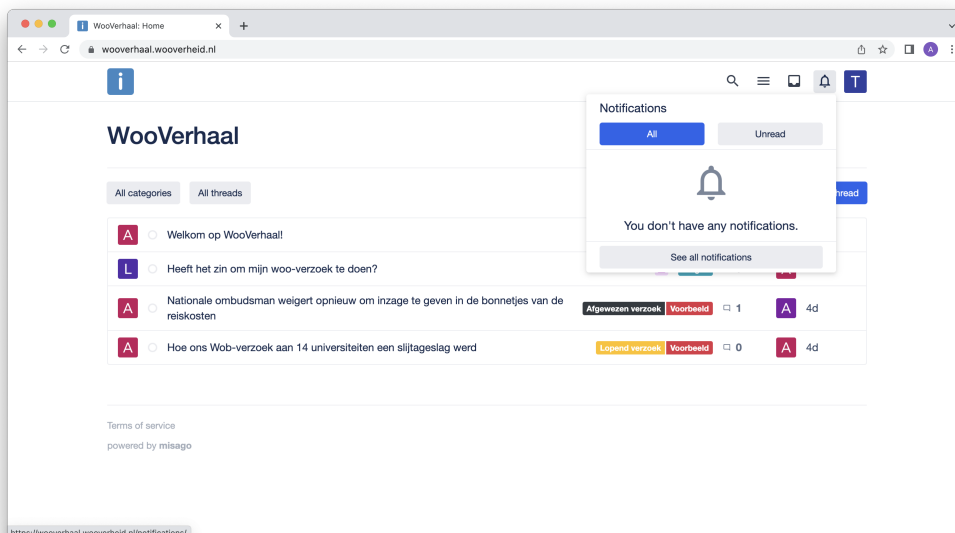


427

428 Users can start private threads and invite other users to join them. In this way
429 users can exchange messages or start group chats. According to the social ex-
430 change and the social capital theories it is important that users can interact with
431 each other to create social capital and collective objectives.

432

433 **Notifications**

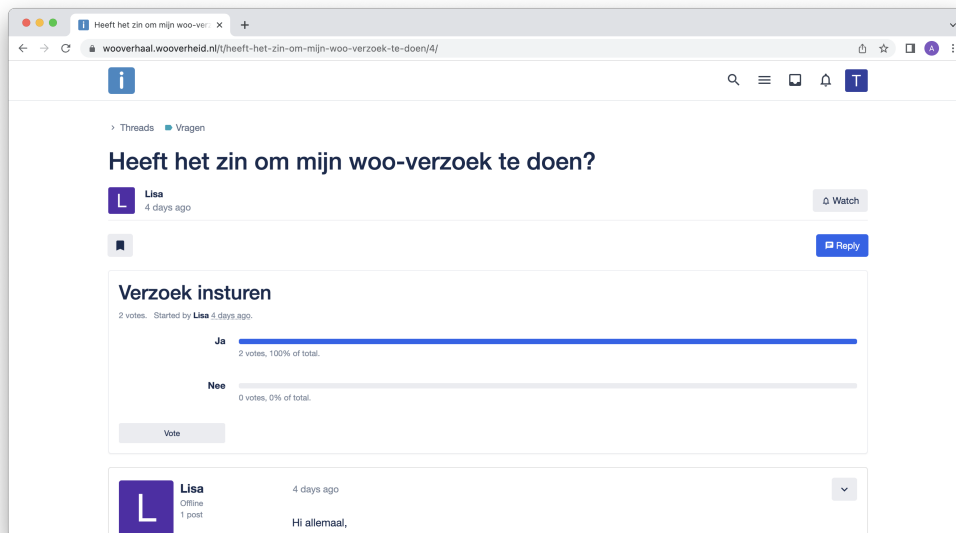


434

435 Notifications can be turned off, shown inside the forum, or send to their email
436 address. In this way users are notified about their threads or the ones they are
437 watching. This is in line with point 7 in the Community Activity Framework
438 Guidelines (section 2.2.2).

439

440 **Poll**

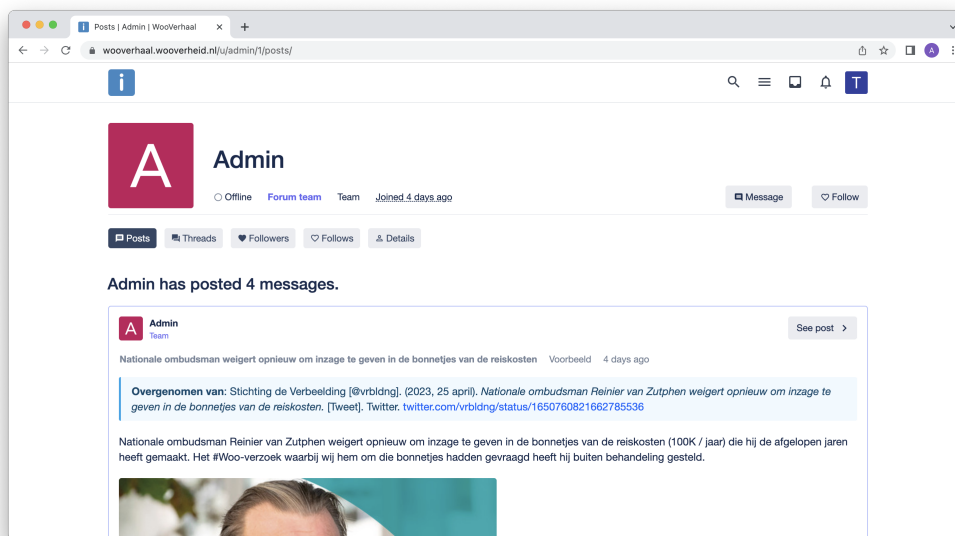


441

442 Users can start a poll to make interactions even more easy and quick. This also
443 gamifies the interaction and it is in line with point 14 of the Community Ac-
444 tivity Framework Guidelines (section 2.2.2). It might also show other users how
445 active the community is which is beneficial according to the social exchange theory.

446

447 User profile

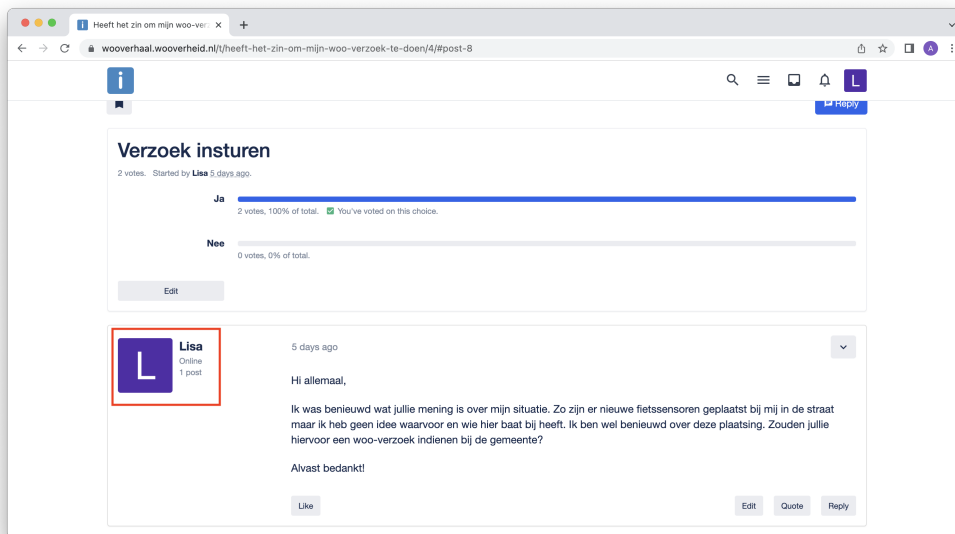


448

449 The user profile includes the possibility to upload a profile picture, links to other
450 social pages, a bio, location, contribution indication and following stats. People
451 can therefore get a better idea of the user and see how active they are in the com-
452 munity. Users can thus follow each other, in line with the social capital theory, in
453 this way a user can have a broader reach and increase the probability of coopera-
454 tion.

455

456 **User activity**

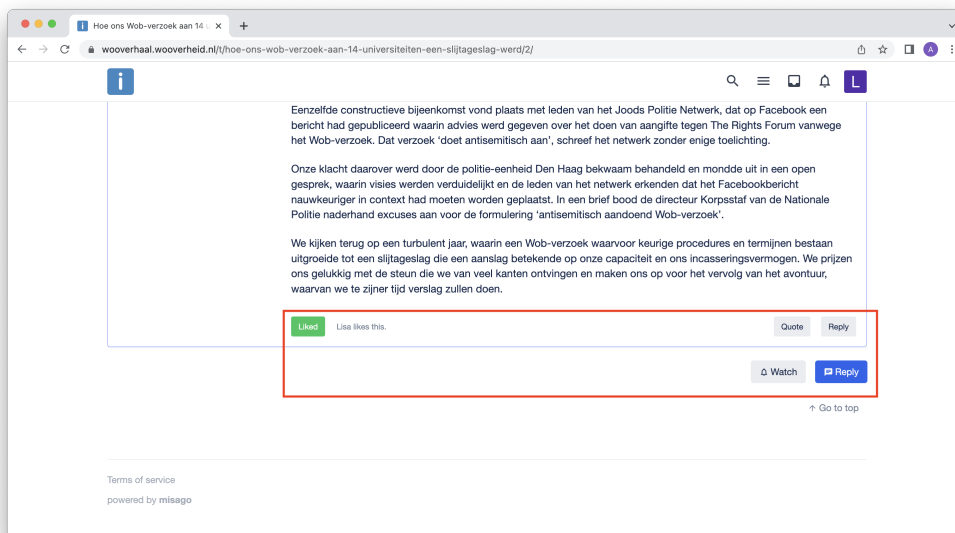


457

458 Beside every post and on the user's profile there is an indication of the activity of
459 that user. This is good for the social exchange theory as it will give an indication
460 of community support. This might make knowledge seekers more sure that their
461 benefits with exceed the costs of participating in the community.

462

463 **Likes**

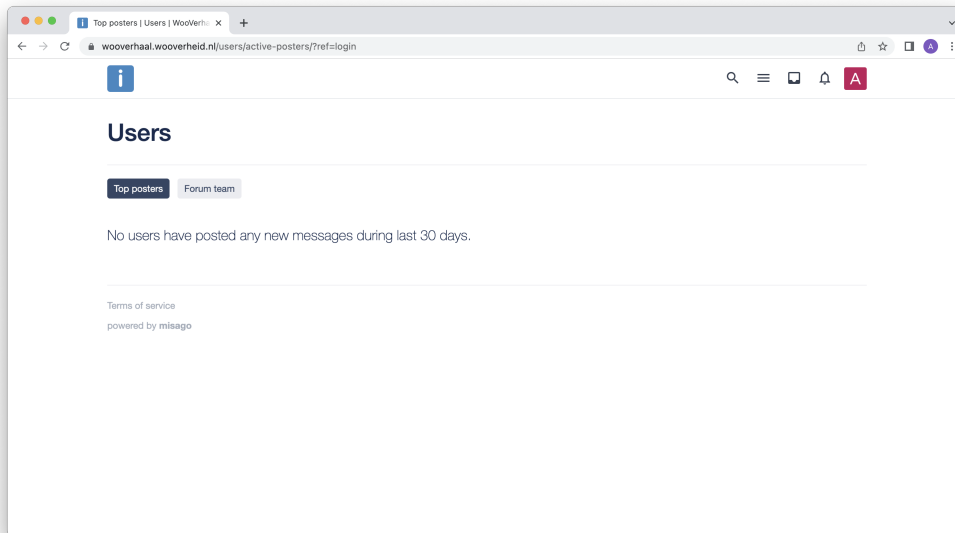


464

465 Users can like, comment, or quote reactions, which all contribute to the social
466 features on the platform. Moreover, these features have become so omnipresent in
467 the current context, it would feel weird to the user if they were missing.

468

469 **Leaderboard**



470

471 There is a possibility for users and guests to view the forum's top posters. This
472 can create the feeling of a very active forum to guests or can motivate users to
473 participate more so they are more noticed on the platform. In this way their need
474 for competence or achievement might also be met.

475 **4.3 User feedback**

476 The user feedback study is divided into two parts. First I will talk about the
477 usability findings that followed from the think aloud method. Then I will discuss
478 the general findings regarding the concept.

479

480 **Usability of the forum**

481 The main findings of the think aloud method were that interviewees thought the
482 design was very intuitive but could improve in a few areas. Also, all three men-
483 tioned that they did not expect a very "fancy" design from a forum such as this
484 one. They said basic and intuitive design is key, as the content of the platform
485 should be the main goal.

486 All three started the session by opening the "Welkom op WooVerhaal!" thread
487 to see what to do or how things work. One interviewee mentioned that they had

488 liked to have more explanation about the functionalities of the forum. Another
489 suggested to add more information about the FOIA in general. The interviewee
490 mentioned that WooVerhaal could link to the information from SPOON, the ex-
491 pertise centre for the Dutch FOIA. Therefore, the owners of WooVerhaal will not
492 have to write that information down again if it already exists. That the design was
493 not completely clear was reflected in one interviewee not recognising the profile
494 pictures as such. Just like the categories should have a description. These points
495 of feedback could all be implemented by creating a separate documentation page
496 on how to use the forum.

497 Moreover, for now it is only possible to upload files and pictures as attachments.
498 If you want to add a picture in the text you have to reference to an external web
499 address in markdown like style. One interviewee saw this and said it was "very
500 annoying and confusing" and therefore it should be changed.

501 Last, an interviewee mentioned that it would be nice to have more meta infor-
502 mation about a thread. Such as what government body it entails. The interviewee
503 suggested to add some form fields to the creation of a thread such that the data
504 can be standardised. However, another interviewee was against this, as it would
505 make the creation of a thread more difficult. They said it should be as simple as
506 possible so people will easily share their information.

507 Something that was not mentioned was the language of the forum. Although
508 the content is in Dutch the interface is in English due to the boilerplate that was
509 used. Contrary to my expectations, none of the interviewees mentioned this.

510

511 **General remarks about the forum**

512 After the think aloud session, interviewees were also asked to share their opinion
513 about the concept and its feasibility. In general all interviewees were positive and
514 thought that the creation of such a forum would be beneficial to the users. At the
515 moment, indeed only people that have their own channel can share their stories
516 or ask for help. Others are more difficult to find and will therefore have a lower
517 chance to be helped. The negative sides to the forum that were mentioned were
518 related to management, moderation and findability.

519 Positive remarks were mainly about the possibility for questions to be answered
520 by a dedicated community. Legal advice is costly and not accessible for all, there-
521 fore a community that will answer those questions would be an accessible place
522 to find help. Another interviewee mentioned that it could also be beneficial for
523 government officials to see the other side of a request. They often do not realise
524 that people are very passionate about their requests and they would like to get an
525 answer in a timely manner. The forum could be used to train the officials to get
526 a better understanding of the context. Moreover, a FOIA coordinator could look
527 at the stories to see how their department is performing.

528 Another topic that was discussed was that of who should be the administrators
529 of the forum. But also should they actively participate in moderating the content
530 of the forum. Interviewees mainly mentioned that who administers the forum is
531 not very straightforward and that it basically could be anyone that wants to. As
532 to moderation, most mentioned that it will most likely not be an issue. They
533 expect the people that will come to the forum to be professionals and people
534 genuinely looking for information. Therefore, polarising or hurtful conversations
535 will be unlikely. One interviewee also mentioned that those types of conversations
536 are innate to these types of online places and that it cannot be avoided.

537 This also led to the discussions of who they would expect to be the users of the
538 forum. One interviewee really did not have a clue and the other just mentioned
539 general citizens and people that are interested in the subject. The third interviewee
540 did have a very clear vision. They would expect retired enthusiasts or people that
541 have done it before to help the people on the platform. It was also suggested to
542 maybe get interns or people that would want to work for a small incentive to help
543 build the community and answer questions.

544 The last noticeable finding of the user study was that the name of the forum
545 might be too specific for the story sharing function and less towards the questions
546 and help functionality. This should be investigated further but for now I plan on
547 keeping the name as "WooVerhaal" as only one interviewee mentioned this.

548 5 Conclusion and Discussion

549 To conclude, this research set out to investigate why people would share infor-
550 mation on and how to design a forum for Dutch FOIA knowledge sharing. These
551 questions were answered by following the design cycle of practice-oriented research.

552 This study has contributed to the field by investigating the design of a FOIA
553 specific forum. Previous research has mostly investigated educational or business
554 solutions. Moreover, the knowledge created in this research immediately con-
555 tributes to the real life practice. I started this thesis by introducing the problem
556 of valuable FOIA information not being shared or at difficult to find places on the
557 internet. The beta forum that was designed alongside this research, can solve this
558 problem by giving users a dedicated place and community to share that informa-
559 tion and find answers to their questions.

560 The most important reasons for people to share their knowledge are linked to
561 the social exchange theory, social capital theory, social identity theory, extrinsic
562 motivators, intrinsic motivators and the uses and gratification theory.

563 Users will evaluate their total costs and benefits when choosing to participate in
564 a forum or not. If the community seems active, through for example linking actors,
565 the expected benefits will increase. Therefore they are more likely to contribute.

566 Through social interactions in the network, the users are building structural, rela-
567 tional and cognitive capital. The created capital will then help to increase activity
568 within a community. Moreover, the social interactions help build a social identity
569 where if one identifies with the community, they are more likely to help the com-
570 munity. All these incentives are promoted by implementing social features in the
571 design of the forum. In WooVerhaal, and forums like it, this is reflected in the
572 possibility to send private messages, react, like, follow and share threads or users.
573 Moreover, by using polls and indicating the number of posts of a user, it can create
574 a feeling of an active community.

575 Users will also use a forum to satisfy uses, intrinsic motivators, or extrinsic mo-
576 tivators. Extrinsic motivators of WooVerhaal would be new work connections or
577 an answer to your questions. Intrinsic motivators such as autonomy and achieve-
578 ment are satisfied by letting users fill out their profiles with a bio or avatar and
579 having a top posters leader board on the website. The forum will most likely be
580 used by users to release their frustrations surrounding their requests. This is in
581 line with the uses and gratification theory that states people will use specific media
582 for tension release or mood management. Moreover, it is also important that the
583 forum is easy to use and works well according to the uses and gratifications theory.

584 Feedback from potential users on the beta forum indicated that the explanation
585 of the forum and its functionalities could be improved. Moreover, it should also
586 display some general information surrounding the FOIA, or have a link to a website
587 where the user can find this information. They further indicated that the design
588 of the platform was just right, not too difficult but still nice looking. Last, users
589 should have an easier way to upload pictures in the text instead of attachments.
590 They expected the forum to be a good solution for what is missing in the field.
591 That said, the administrators should be aware of possible moderation and users
592 being able to find the forum.

593 There are three main limitations to this study. First, the usability evaluation
594 was done using the think aloud method. However, this method has been criticised
595 for not being very true to life (Alhadreti & Mayhew, 2018). The unnaturalness
596 of the setting could make people act differently than usual. This threatens the
597 external validity of this research. The external validity can be improved by moni-
598 toring user interactions when the forum is live. Second, only three interviews were
599 conducted because the target population was difficult to find and time restraints
600 did not allow for a longer data collection period. Therefore, it is very likely that
601 not all insights have been captured by this research. This threatens the population
602 validity and therefore the generalisability of the results. Future research should try
603 to conduct more interviews. Last, the design cycle has only been followed once,
604 but to get a good design one should implement the results of the test and do an
605 evaluation again (Hermans & Schoeman, 2015). Therefore the beta forum is not

606 yet ready but should follow the design cycle again.

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