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Digital transparency and Web 2.0 in Spanish city councils

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to provide a Web 2.0 Disclosure Index to measure the Web 2.0 presence of Spanish city councils and the information disclosed by them on these media, and to test whether the use of Web 2.0 tools and social media by local governments improve their Web 1.0 digital transparency. We have structured the Web 2.0 Index as the sum of three partial indexes, referred to presence, the content and the interactivity of the Web, and we have estimated these indexes by a content analysis of the city council's websites. We find that the use of Web 2.0 tools has an essentially ornamental focus, and thus it is necessary to increase the content disclosed, especially at the information level. The results also show that, although there is a positive relationship between the Web 1.0 information transparency and the presence of the city councils on social media, and their intensity of use, the effect on transparency is basically ornamental, focused on general information. We also find that those city councils that obtain better Web 1.0 scores also have higher scores in the Web 2.0 setting, but are more focused on promotional issues than on the disclosure of information about the entities' management.

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1. Introduction

Transparency and accountability are the focus of the discussion about the transformation of organizations in the society. Among public administrations, these concepts have an essential importance. Transparency, access to public information, and good government must be the main focus of public administrations. On the other hand, alongside the need for greater transparency in public administrations, communication and the transmission of information have dramatically changed in recent years, being carried out nowadays mostly via the Internet. In the field of public administration, the Internet has been used to modernize the management processes within administrations, enabling citizen participation, promoting transparency and providing easier access to information.

There is a growing body of literature about the use of the new technologies in the public sector. Most of the papers focus on the use of the Web as a tool for transparency (Caba, Rodríguez, & Lopez, 2005; Pina, Torres, & Royo, 2009; Styles & Koprowski, 2008), on the e-government proposals (Alcaide Muñoz, Rodríguez Bolívar, & Garde Sánchez, 2014) and on the factors that affect the disclosure of information on the Internet by public administrations (Cárcaba & García, 2008; Detlor, Hupfer, Ruhli, & Zhao, 2013; Gandía & Archidona, 2008; Grimmelikhuijsen & Welch, 2012; Laswad, Fisher, & Oyeler, 2005; Saxton & Guo, 2011; Serrano, Rueda, & Portillo, 2009a, 2009b). Some of these studies are focused on the disclosure of financial information of local governments via the Internet.

On the other hand, a new area of research concerning the use of Web 2.0 tools in the public sector is emerging. Studies in this area are recent

and scarce, and examine if these new tools can be used in the same way as the Internet and Web 1.0 as a mechanism for transparency and an instrument for dialogue with citizens (Chua, Goh, & Ang, 2012; Cockerill, 2013). Papers in this field have examined the use of social media (Kavanaugh et al., 2012; Bonsón, Torres, Royo, & Flores, 2012; Bonsón, Royo, & Ratkai, 2015), the determinants for the adoption of Web 2.0 and social media (Reddick & Norris, 2013), and the factors that obstruct the adoption of these platforms in governments (Eimhjellen, Wollebæk, & Strømsnes, 2013).

Web 2.0 technologies can develop important synergies with Web 1.0, amplifying the visibility of the information provided in the corporate website through the distribution of its content in social media, and promoting interaction between citizens and administrations. Therefore, Web 2.0 should play an important role in the improvement of the transparency among the local administrations, and thus an in-depth study of the relation between the use of Web 2.0 tools and digital transparency is needed (Alcaide Muñoz et al., 2014; Mossberger, Wu, & Crawford, 2013). However, despite the potential of Web 2.0, there is a lack of literature that examines its use in the public e-government setting (Magro, 2012), and most studies present anecdotal evidence on the impact of Web 2.0 on governments.

For these reasons, this study examines the presence of Web 2.0 of Spanish city councils, as well as the content they disclose through social media, and empirically tests the relationship between the use of Web 2.0 tools and the Web 1.0 digital transparency of local governments. To do this, we first quantify the level of disclosure in Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 of the Spanish city councils. Next, we examine if the participation of the councils in the social media has an impact on their digital transparency, as well as whether the different levels of Web 2.0

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disclosure and the intensity of use of social media affect the Web 1.0 digital transparency.

The paper contributes to the existing literature in the following ways: firstly, the development of a Web 2.0 Disclosure Index is interesting because it allows for measuring not only the presence of public administrations in Web 2.0, but also their use of Web 2.0 tools; on the other hand, an analysis of the relationship between Web 1.0 digital transparency and the use of Web 2.0 tools is important, because of the potential synergies between both platforms.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Digital transparency and accountability in local governments

Since the concept of transparency affects a wide range of public and private settings, there is no single definition. However, all of them have a common element: the need to access information, and to understand and interpret it. Furthermore, three characteristics are common to the different concepts of transparency: i) the need for the availability of the information in a timely manner; ii) the quality of the information disclosed, understood as precise and relevant (Justice, Melitski, & Smith, 2006; Detlor et al., 2013); and iii) the accessibility to the information (West, 2004).

Transparency is a basic democratic ideal (Harder & Jordan, 2013) and its role in the public setting involves public administrations having the obligation to disclose general interest information to the citizenship, who pay for the resources needed by the administration and thus have the right to know how these resources are employed (Fairbanks, Plowman, & Rawlins, 2007; Guillamón, Bastida, & Benito, 2011). According to Ball (2009), transparency can be seen from three perspectives: i) as a public value that is established in society to fight against corruption and is strongly linked to accountability; ii) as being synonymous with open decision-making by governments and non-profit organizations, which is related with the ease of access and use of government information; and iii) as an instrument of good governance.

Focusing on the second perspective, transparency involves the use of suitable mechanisms to ensure that information is correctly supplied to the citizens. In this sense, information and communication technologies (ICT), and particularly the Internet, play a key role in achieving higher efficiency and effectiveness in the public sector and promoting transparency, accountability and higher levels of citizen participation (Alcaide Muñoz et al., 2014; Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010; Ebbers, Pieterse, & Noordman, 2008; Vicente & Novo, 2014). The Internet is a more effective disclosure instrument than the traditional communication media, since it has a more extensive reach, is faster and cheaper, as well as being more ecological (Ebbers et al., 2008). The most usual way to access the Internet is via the Web, differentiating between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 generations.

With regard to Web 1.0, it is a system based on hypertext and is considered the easiest way to access the information available on the Internet. This first generation Web is only informative and unidirectional, composed of static websites with contents that are not continuously updated and whose possibilities of interaction are reduced to contact forms and the inscription to newsletters and the like. However, Web 1.0 still has important advantages over the traditional paper-based means of disclosure, allowing for the disclosure of online corporate information and the incorporation of new communication strategies.

Previous literature has examined the relationship between Web 1.0 and transparency both in the private sector (Kent & Ung, 2003; Linsley & Shrivs, 2005) and in the public one (Lee & Fisher, 2004; Caba et al., 2005; Gandía & Archidona, 2008; Gallego, Rodríguez, & García, 2010; Armstrong, 2011). Following Gandía and Archidona (2008), we consider digital transparency as the level of disclosure that organizations show in their websites. The empirical evidence shows, in general, a lack of disclosure or transparency in both settings when referring to financial information.

Regarding the literature concerning the use of Web 1.0 in the public sector, although most papers examine the local setting (Gallego et al., 2010; Groff & Pitman, 2004; Justice et al., 2006; Moon, 2002; Moon & Norris, 2005; Styles & Koprowski, 2008), there are also studies in the regional and state settings (Armstrong, 2011; Caba et al., 2005; Grimmelikhuijsen & Welch, 2012; Saxton & Guo, 2011; Torres, Pina, & Acerete, 2005). Part of the empirical literature has examined whether budgetary and financial information is available on the governments' websites (Armstrong, 2011; Caba, Rodríguez, & Lopez, 2008; Cárcaba & García, 2008; Gandía & Archidona, 2008; Groff & Pitman, 2004; Laswad et al., 2005; Lee & Fisher, 2004; Saxton, 2012; Serrano et al., 2009b; Styles & Koprowski, 2008), and shows that the impact of Web 1.0 on transparency is actually limited. Gandía and Archidona (2008) conclude that the presence of city councils on websites is mostly an ornamental strategy, rather than an intention to improve information transparency.

2.2. Digital transparency and Web 2.0

Although there are many definitions of Web 2.0, the concept most commonly used refers to the new trends in the design and use of webpages where the user is, in addition to being a consumer, also a creator of information and content. Its main characteristics are the interactivity and the ability to disclose information, and it encompasses a wide variety of online applications and services based on common principles. Osimo (2008) adds to his definition three basic parts: i) one part consists of values (user as a creator, collective intelligence, extremely easy to use); ii) another part relates to applications (Blog, Wiki, Podcast, RSS, Social networks); and iii) a third part is connected with technology (Ajax, XML, Flash/Flex, etc.).

In comparison to Web 1.0, the irruption of Web 2.0 has involved the transition from a unidirectional model in which firms and public institutions were the only issuers of Web information, to a bidirectional model in which the users are not resigned to accepting a passive role, but they participate, generate and share content, adopting a leading role in the Web (Chun, Shulman, Sandoval, & Hovy, 2010; Sandoval & Gil, 2014).

The move from the Web 1.0 to the Web 2.0 generation is not radical, but involves a gradual evolution that changes the technologies based on static websites, noticeboards and e-mails for more sophisticated tools belonging to the Web 2.0 generation, such as blogs, social networks or video and audio services, which provide higher dynamism to the information and increase the interaction level (Allen, 2013). Furthermore, both generations must be seen as complementary tools, rather than substitutes.

In recent years there has been an important growth in the literature related to Web 2.0, both in the public and the private sector. Previous literature shows that private companies have different motivations for the use of the new technologies. Therefore, firms use both their own websites and Web 2.0 to carry out marketing campaigns and attract new clients, to relate with investors, to disclose information about the company (Saxton, 2012) and to communicate user information about the social commitment with the environment (Fieseler, Fleck, & Meckel, 2010). New technologies also involve a reduction in information asymmetries (Blankespoor, Miller, & White, 2010) and an increase in the visibility of the companies (Rubin & Rubin, 2010).

In the public administration setting, previous papers have examined the factors that affect the adoption of Web 2.0 (Cockerill, 2013; Eimhjellen et al., 2013; Reddick & Norris, 2013), the content that is published (Golbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010), the level of adoption of the new tools (Chua et al., 2012; Ganapati & Reddick, 2012; Kavanaugh et al., 2012; Meijer & Thaens, 2010; Sandoval, Gil, Luna, Luna, & Diaz, 2011; Sandoval & Gil, 2012) and the impact of Web 2.0 on transparency (Piotrowski & Van Ryzin, 2007; Bonsón et al., 2012). The literature shows that, despite the arrival of Web 2.0 in the public sector and the perception that it may be helpful in improving transparency, accountability and citizen participation (Meijer & Thaens, 2010; Picazo-Vela,

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