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In search of information: Investigating source and channel choices in business-to-government service interactions

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ABSTRACT

Businesses, far more frequently than citizens, need government information and services to exert their rights and duties. In optimizing their service delivery processes, governments tend to focus on a set of communication channels they offer to businesses to deliver these services. However, in reality, businesses use not only a plethora of different channels but also multiple information sources, extending beyond governments. The focus of this study is to investigate the use of information sources, communication channels and the interaction effects between these sources and channels. A quantitative survey among 1218 representatives of small and medium-sized businesses was conducted. The results show that in most cases, businesses use set combinations of channels and sources; however, driven by factors such as the exact situation, people deviate from these patterns. The results provide novel and extensive insights into how governments can improve service delivery to one of their most important client groups – businesses.

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1. Introduction

For many years, governments have sought suitable service delivery strategies to interact with citizens and businesses concerning various matters (e.g., tax matters). However, due to the rise of new electronic channels, sharing information with others is easier and less expensive than previously (Mulgan, 2004). As a result, people seek a wider variety of appropriate information sources for various situations (Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, & Rainie, 2006). This also seems true for information seeking about, for instance, tax matters; for example, De Vos (2008) found that businesses consult various information sources when searching for governmental information. Furthermore, electronic channels are used not only for socializing but also for seeking information, making decisions, and exchanging experiences about financial matters (Boase et al., 2006). The primary aim of many governments is to develop service delivery strategies that guide information seekers to electronic channels such as websites and portals (OECD, 2012). These channels are assumed to be less expensive than traditional ones such as the telephone (i.e., voice-phone calls) and face-to-face communication, which implies personal help from employees for each individual information seeker. However, the use of these more costly channels remains high (OECD, 2012, 2014). Electronic channels are not fully replacing the traditional channels, as was first expected, but exist in addition to existing channels (e.g., Pieterse & Ebberts, 2008; OECD, 2012, 2014). The availability of electronic channels has increased the

moments of contact between citizens and the government (Pieterse & Ebberts, 2008). Many individuals use sequences of channels rather than making isolated choices (Stephens, Sornes, Rice, Browning & Saertre, 2008). Therefore, whereas businesses and citizens have more potential sources and channels to choose from – which increases the chance that they will choose inappropriate sources and channels to fulfill their tasks – governments must manage more service channels. This limits the efficiency with which governments can provide services to citizens and businesses. Thus, the increasing roles of other information sources and the growing number of available channels that can be used to obtain information from sources have made the information flow between governments and citizens and businesses increasingly complex (Van den Boer, 2014). These notions lead to the question of how governments should anticipate the availability of numerous information sources and channels for more efficient and effective service delivery.

Current service delivery strategies of governments are primarily rooted in multichannel management and channel choice theories. The strategies solely focus on organizations' own channels without incorporating the role of the source behind the channels they have at their disposal (Van den Boer, 2014). Furthermore, channel choice theories focus on the moment of choice and its influencing factors (e.g., Media Richness Theory of Daft & Lengel, 1986, 1984, Social Influence Model of Fulk, Schmitz, & Steinfield, 1990). These theories frequently neglect possible influential aspects that occur around the moment of choice (e.g., the use of the channel itself). Although some theories seem implicitly to hint about source choice (e.g., Dual Capacity Model of Sitkin, Sutcliffe, & Barrios-Choplin, 1992), there is no explicit attention given

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to the role of the source, and aspects of sequence are not included. This lack of insight must be addressed. It is necessary to search for theories beyond the channel choice domain that (a) do not use the moment of choice as the point of departure but adopt a broader perspective (e.g., the perspective of information seekers), (b) incorporate both channel and source choice, and (c) provide insight into the flow of information-seeking processes related to source and channel choices. Such a theoretical perspective is presented in the information-seeking behavior literature. As such, insight is provided into the various roles sources and channels play in the networked environment, in which businesses must select relevant sources and suitable channels. This paper addresses the following research question and its sub-questions:

Which source and channel choices do businesses make, and in what sequence, during information-seeking processes?

RQ_a: *How many sources do they use (on average)?*

RQ_b: *How many channels do they use (on average) to contact a source?*

RQ_c: *What reasons exist for selecting more than one source-channel combination?*

The scope of this paper is limited to the context of business-to-government (B2G) service interactions. By B2G service interactions, we mean that businesses take the initiative and decide the source from which to obtain information and the channel used to do so. We focus on the channel modes of consultation and conversation (Ebbers, Pieterse, & Noordman, 2008). In consultation, there is single sided interactivity between seeker and source. The information seeker consults a source to obtain the required information. There is two sided interactivity in the conversation mode; the information seeker requests information, and the source provides this information, customized to meet the seeker's needs. These modes are informative, whereas there is also, for instance, a transaction mode in which monetary exchanges occur (Ebbers et al., 2008). The latter mode is beyond the scope of this paper.

Although governments deliver services to citizens and businesses, this paper focuses on businesses. The B2G context is far more complex and networked than that faced by citizens, and there is a lack of substantial insights into this group (van den Boer, Pieterse, & Arendsen, 2011; van den Boer, Wijngaert, van de Pieterse, & Arendsen, 2012). Aspects indicating a complex and networked context include the following: 1) businesses have more contact moments with governments than citizens do because the former are subject to a greater number of rules and regulations (Arendsen, van Engers, & Velde, 2006). 2) Some contact moments between governments and businesses are indirect – via intermediaries – whereas others are direct, which facilitates a network character (Jansen, Van de Wijngaert, & Pieterse, 2010). One of the most crucial aspects indicating a complex context is characterized by the notion that businesses can take many forms, from self-employed to businesses with numerous employees (Jansen et al., 2010). A business is a network of individuals, a network that can be partially influenced by and depend on the environment (Jaffee, 2001). Furthermore, Davis (1981) argues that 1) individuals within a business differ in background, perceptions, and experiences, and 2) individuals react differently to situations. This argument suggests that different employees use public service delivery in a variety of ways. This characteristic makes it rather difficult to determine the unique contact point of a business and therefore hinders a government's ability to realize a straightforward service delivery strategy. This lack of clarity hinders the development of valuable insight into businesses' needs, expectations and search behaviors based on easy-to-obtain characteristics (e.g., an organization's size and form). Therefore, additional knowledge about business behavior related to public service delivery is needed. Since we have found in an earlier conducted qualitative study indications for the influence of the position of information seekers on the flow of the information-seeking process (van den Boer, Pieterse, Arendsen, &

van Dijk, 2015), we decided to further study this aspect. So, this paper studies whether the information seeker's position in the organization is a factor allowing governments easily to anticipate the business's search behavior. Therefore, we formulate one additional research question:

RQ_d: *Are there differences in source and channel choices related to the information seeker's position in the business?*

This paper is organized as follows. It starts by providing some theoretical background on source and channel choices in the information-seeking context, followed by an elaboration on the method employed. The fourth section presents the findings of this study, and the paper ends with conclusions, discussion and implications.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The concepts of source and channel

Throughout this paper, source refers to the person or organization storing the information from whom (or which) that information can be obtained by the seeker (adapted from Christensen & Bailey, 1997). Examples of sources are governmental agencies, advisory organizations, industry organizations, friends, family and colleagues. Channel is defined as the means by which information is transferred between the source and the seeker (adopted from Pieterse, 2009). In this paper we consider channels to be equivalent to media; examples include the telephone (i.e., voice-phone calls), e-mail, websites and face-to-face communication. According to Reddick and Anthopoulos (2014) there are three types of channels for government access: 1) traditional channels such as voice-phone calls and face-to-face contact, 2) e-government channels such as website and e-mail, and 3) new digital channels such as social media and mobile apps. Thus, information can be obtained from information sources by using channels.

2.2. Source and channel choice behavior within businesses

The behavior of employees is normally guided by the norms and social context of the organization. This idea of social constructivism (Giddens, 1979) posits that individuals' interactions create these social norms and affect how people behave in social contexts. This also affects how people communicate in organizations. For example, Contractor and Eisenberg (1990) note that both the communication structure and use of media shape one another through interactions. This observation is further expressed in Poole and DeSanctis (1990) adaptive structuration theory, which argues that structure and action in organizations are being produced and reproduced in the process of interacting via communication technology. However, the starting point of this paper is individual choice behavior. One of the main reasons for this approach is our focus on businesses that are relatively small. Addressing obligatory public matters is often a secondary task outside of the core business of small organizations (Bergers, 2003). It is more likely that a small team or a single person is responsible for the majority of contacts with government agencies and the search for public information. Consequently, it is less likely that (large) organizational aspects (e.g., organizational norms) play a major role in an individual's choice behavior. This situation increases the likelihood that choice behavior in the context of this study is predominantly determined by individual, rather than organizational, factors (van den Boer et al., 2015).

Therefore, although we argue that seeking tax-related information in B2G-service interactions is primarily an individual activity, we do recognize that some of these organizational factors (e.g., vicarious learning and direct advice of colleagues) exert influence on choices in information-seeking processes. For small organizations, or even individual proprietorships, it is likely that influences come from the direct environment of the organization. For instance, Bergers (2003) argued that

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