



Listening to digital publics. Investigating citizens' voices and engagement within Italian municipalities' Facebook Pages



Alessandro Lovari*, Lorenza Parisi

Department of Political Science, Communication Science and Information Engineering, University of Sassari, Italy

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ABSTRACT

Several studies underlined the impact of social media in the public sector, investigating the adoption process and uses of these digital platforms by public administrations. This paper adopts a public-oriented perspective to investigate citizens' voices and engagement within 10 Italian municipalities' Facebook Pages. In particular, it investigates the motivations to become Facebook fan of a municipality, and the variety of digital practices carried out by citizens to communicate and relate with this type of public administrations. The study was carried out through the administration of an online survey of 35 questions to 1196 Facebook users. The research proposes an active digital public typology (likers, mono interaction users, multi-interaction users, full interaction users) based on the extension of the activities that citizens carry out on municipalities' Facebook Pages. The thematic analysis of the digital publics' opinions reveals that citizens ask for a tangible and actual two-way communication with local administrations on social media. Theoretical and practical implications for public sector institutions using social media are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the 20th century public administrations and government institutions started to use information and communication technologies to relate and communicate with citizens. Many countries worldwide implemented strategies and policies of e-government in order to digitalize public services, to foster transparency and to promote participation in public life and deliberation among citizens on relevant issues (Clift, 2004; OECD, 2009). The adoption of digital technologies in the public sector was scattered and differently implemented, with several recognized best practices together with countries where innovative e-government practices are far from being fully implemented (ONU, 2014).

Later on, the development and adoption of web 2.0 platforms enriched the opportunities of interactions with citizens and influenced the delivery of services, fostering new practices of public communication and civic engagement. In particular, in the last five years public administrations invested on social network sites (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) especially on Facebook and Twitter, considering these web 2.0 platforms as strategic tools to enhance participation and to relate faster and effectively with digital publics.

Scholars from different disciplines, such as sociology of communication, public relations, informatics and administrative studies, focused their research on how public administrations are colonizing and using social media, adapting them to the given political, administrative and communicative situations. Most of the research in this field has adopted an

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +39 079228948.
E-mail address: alovari@uniss.it (A. Lovari).

organizational-centered point of view, using quantitative methods and techniques to detect the number of social media managed by public administrations and to analyze communication strategies developed in these platforms. At the same time, there is an evident general lack of knowledge on the categorization of public administrations' social media users, on their motivation to become fans, likers or followers, and on the active behaviors they carried out in these digital channels (Criado, Sandoval-Almazan, & Gil-Garcia, 2013). This article aims to partially fulfill this lack, adopting a public-oriented perspective to investigate citizens' voices and patterns of engagement within Italian municipalities' Facebook like Pages.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social media and public sector

Several studies have underlined the impact of social media in the public sector, investigating the adoption process and uses of these platforms by federal governments, public administrations and municipalities in different countries worldwide (Abdelsalam, Reddick, Gamal, & Al-shaar, 2013; Criado & Rojas-Martín, 2013; Criado et al., 2013; Larsson, 2013; Mergel & Bretschneider, 2013; OECD, in press; Zheng, 2013). Some scholars have focused their attention on potential benefits, such as increasing accountability, openness, transparency, and access to services and public policies (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010; Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, 2012; Bonsón, Torres, Royo, & Flores, 2012; Mergel, 2012). At the same time, various scholars have focused their research on social media's impact on communication and public relations activities, allowing administrations to inform citizens about public services and opportunities in a bi-directional way (Bryer, 2010; Hofmann, Beverungen, Räckers, & Becker, 2013; Lovari & Parisi, 2012; Mergel, 2010). Other researchers have studied how social media enable governments' abilities to achieve productivity by involving employers (Chun & Luna-Reyes, 2012), to enhance citizens' participation, public voice, trust and civic engagement (Coleman & Shane, 2012; Dahlgren, 2009; Hong, 2013; Kent, 2013; Rheingold, 2008), stimulating grassroots solutions and the co-production of services for government departments and local administrations (Sirrianni, 2009). Furthermore, some academic studies have investigated the use of social media by local administrations in order to strategically manage crisis situations from routine to critical events, such as floods and earthquakes (Bruns, Burgess, Crawfords, & Shaw, 2012; Kavanaugh et al., 2012).

Besides all the potential opportunities offered by the use of social media in the public sector, scholars have started to point out some negative effects, risks and limitations in the adoption of these platforms for privacy issues, for relating to and engaging with citizens, and for fostering a participative democracy (Human Capital Institute, 2010; Loader & Mercea, 2011; Picazo-Vela, Gutierrez-Martinez, & Luna-Reyes, 2012). These constraints are not only related to the technological and relational affordances of these platforms, but very often they depend on the actual use of social media by organizations. This is particularly evident in public relations and communication activities where digital media are mostly used in the same way traditional media have been used by organizations and practitioners for disseminating messages and pushing general information (Duhé, 2012; Grunig, 2009; Keller, 2010). Indeed, despite the differences on social media use and adaptation influenced by political, social and organizational factors, many studies found a prevalent use of one-way, broadcasting strategies by public administrations (Criado et al., 2013; Mergel, 2013; Zheng & Zheng, 2014). Thus, social media are generally used asymmetrically and as promotional or advertising tools instead of developing relationship building with publics (Bonsón et al. 2012; Kent, 2013; Waters & Williams, 2011). These platforms are not strategically used and managed to foster interactivity and a two-way communication flow between administrations and citizens. In fact, Kent (2013) affirmed that social media favor a "symbolic participation rather than genuine participation, making people feel a part of the process but giving no one a genuine voice" (Kent, 2013, p. 343).

It is important to note that the majority of international studies investigated how social media are influencing government public relation strategies mainly by adopting an administration-centered perspective and quantitative methodologies (such as the number of platforms, fans, metrics, etc.). Only a few pioneering researchers have started to study this topic, adopting a public-oriented perspective in order to describe citizens' needs and communicative behaviors in the social platforms managed by public administrations (Hong, 2013; Hong, Park, Lee, & Park, 2012). Indeed, the analysis of social media users is in its infancy, and there is a general lack of knowledge and a paucity of empirical studies about the public's demand for social media in government (Criado et al., 2013).

2.2. Digital publics: from readers to active civic contributors

Publics carry out several activities in a wide range of digital platforms in order to get informed, to solve problems, and to relate and communicate with peers and governmental organizations. On the Internet, publics can play different active communication behaviors to solve their problems (Kim & Grunig, 2011): social media, and online environments in general, offer informational and relational strategic resources for publics who can choose to seek for information, or can decide to increase their activeness in information giving, with information sharing and information forwarding's behaviors (Kim, Grunig, & Ni, 2010). Citizens rely more often on the social web to search for public interest related information. Media consumption patterns have rapidly changed, highlighting a broad use of Internet and social media, despite age and education, for seeking and sharing information for different purposes, such as music and movies, sports, religion, politics, and community issues (Pew Research Center, 2012). Indeed, the study "Government Online" reported that almost one-third (31%) of online adults use online platforms such as blogs and social networking sites to get government information: these

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