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Factors influencing social media use in local governments: The case of Italy and Spain

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ABSTRACT

Social media offer governments a new approach to create transparency and accountability, to increase citizens' opportunities to participate and collaborate in decision making or to enable the improvement of public services. This study is a first step toward understanding the use of social media tools by local governments for transparency purposes. The aim of this paper is to construct a synthetic indicator to measure Facebook use by local governments to disclose information and analyse the determinants of varying levels of Facebook use. Our sample consists of 217 Italian and Spanish local governments which used Facebook in 2014. Our findings show that level of e-participation, population size, citizens' income level and level of indebtedness have an impact on Facebook use by local governments. A high level of Facebook use would suggest that local governments tend to enable citizens to oversee government making more transparent information, data and processes. Thus, this study contributes to the debate on local government transparency and provides important guidelines for developing appropriate social media strategies and policies.

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1. Introduction

The importance of transparency is acknowledged by practitioners in many policy fields. It is an essential ingredient for effective political control and public sector monitoring. Public sector transparency stems from policies, institutions and practices that provide information in ways that improve understanding of public policies, enhance political effectiveness and reduce policy uncertainty (Guillamón, Bastida, & Benito, 2011).

Transparency requires the disclosure of all relevant information in a timely and systematic manner. Thus, transparency helps societies to enhance their governments' positive contributions while also helping to solve problems inherent to government activity. Information about policy is an input for ex-ante political control of the public sector, for day-to-day responses to policy and for ex-post monitoring and evaluation. It is therefore an essential component of appropriate public governance (OECD, 2003).

In the past few years, there has been considerable growth of electronic government (e-government) projects using information and communications technology (ICTs) to help governments in service delivery and information provision online (e-disclosure). New technologies promote interconnectivity between government and citizens, companies, employees, and others, as well as encouraging transparency, decentralization, and internal and external accountability (La Porte, Demchak, & De Jong, 2002; Currie & Guah, 2006).

The Internet has become an important tool in increasing public transparency and accountability, which are key drivers for good governance in the public sector (Bonsón, Torres, Rayo, & Flores, 2012). The Web 2.0 applications, in general, and social media, in particular, represent the latest step in Internet use by government. The social media can be considered as the best expression of Web 2.0, a term coined by O'Really (2005) to indicate a second generation of web based applications. Social media provide new and innovative methods for immediate interaction between citizens and governments (Jaeger, Bertot, & Shilton, 2012), becoming "a central component of e-government in a very short period of time" (Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, 2012). Specifically, scholars have highlighted the benefits of social media in the public sector for openness and transparency (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010; Picazo-Vela, Gutierrez-Martinez, &

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Luna-Reyes, 2012; Bertot et al., 2012; Bonsón et al., 2012; Oliveira & Welch, 2013; Zheng & Zheng, 2014). In particular, Bertot et al. (2010) show that social media offer governments a new approach to create transparency and promote anti-corruption. For example, politicians have several incentives to disclose information in order to improve citizens' control of public activities, especially the use of public resources, so reducing barriers of space and time (Ingram & Dejong, 1987). The success of social media use as transparency and anti-corruption tools implies (Bertot et al., 2010) a culture of transparency embedded within the governance system; and a transparency "readiness" factor, such as technology penetration, technology capabilities, and social and technology readiness of the citizens.

In recent years, many municipalities have started to use several social media to communicate with citizens as an additional form of online communication (Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube). Through social media, citizens leave their passive role and become "customers" that are able to interact with government (Bonsón et al., 2012). In particular, the benefits of social media for municipalities include (Bonsón et al., 2012): (a) easier mass distribution of the content of the official website, allowing users to redistribute these contents through their own blogs or social networks; and (b) open corporate dialogue, so that citizens have the opportunity of publishing their own points of view on the material distributed by local governments.

These issues have become an interesting area of inquiry for Public Management scholars and Information Systems researchers. In this vein, Mossberger, Wu, and Crawford (2013) state that local government is an important subject for the study of social media because of traditions of citizen participation at the local level. However, although the adoption of Web 2.0 applications by municipalities is rising considerably, academic research on Web 2.0 applications and social media in the local governments is still in its early stages.

Accordingly, this paper aims to contribute to this research gap by analysing the social media use by local governments for enhancing transparency. Specifically, we build a synthetic indicator to measure Facebook use by local governments and we analyse the determinants of varying levels of Facebook use, using a sample of Spanish and Italian municipalities in 2014.

A high level of Facebook use implies that local governments making information, data and processes more transparent tend to enable citizens to oversee government.

We focus on Facebook because this social media dominates the web landscape and is being used more and more by local governments. Moreover, local governments in Italy and Spain provide an ideal institutional setting to analyse these phenomena. Both countries already have legislation that regulates the mandatory e-disclosure through municipalities' websites. However, in these countries, e-disclosure through social media is rising ever more, despite its being voluntary.

Our findings reveal that level of e-participation, population size, citizens' income level and level of indebtedness affect Facebook use by local governments. Therefore, these factors influence on the level of municipal transparency through social media.

This study makes important contributions to the existing literature on transparency. First, we extend prior research on local government transparency (e.g., Bonsón et al., 2012; Kavanaugh et al., 2012; Mossberger et al., 2013), focusing on factors that determine the propensity of municipalities to the information disclosure via social media. We believe that social media have some features that differentiate greatly from website, tool mainly investigated in the empirical literature on e-disclosure. Therefore, the literature needed further development with regard to the factors that contribute to transparency via social media as well as to the contexts in which transparency is applied. Moreover, understanding the factors that influence the use of social media offers public managers important guidelines for increasing the level of transparency as to suggest input in order to develop appropriate strategies

and policies for enhancing the potential of social media. Today, the challenge is to understand how social media applications are used and interpreted within the public organizations (Bretschneider & Mergel, 2011).

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature and the determinants of e-disclosure and goes into social media use by municipalities. Section 3 provides details of the research context (Italy and Spain). Section 4 describes the sample, variables and econometric model. Section 5 presents the empirical results and the discussion. Section 6 concludes.

2. Literature review

2.1. The basis of e-disclosure in local governments

Agency theory and neoinstitutional framework represent the most commonly applied theoretical backgrounds for understanding disclosure online (e-disclosure) by local governments.

The relationship between politicians and citizens (voters) can be described as an agency relationship, where the politician is the agent and the citizen is the principal (Banker & Patton, 1987). Both politicians and citizens (voters) are assumed to be self-interested (Zimmerman, 1977). Among incumbents' interests, Zimmerman (1977) highlights re-election, advance in political/professional careers and increase in current and future incomes. Citizens' wealth is related to agents' actions and therefore they have an incentive to monitor politicians' actions (Baber, 1983). Accordingly, citizens press politicians to disclose information as a way of weakening information asymmetry and of enabling monitoring of politicians' activities (Zimmerman, 1977; Ingram & Dejong, 1987). On the other hand, politicians disclose information to citizens in order to gain public confidence and honour pre-election promises (Laswad, Fisher, & Oyelere, 2005). In this regard, Pina, Torres, and Royo (2010), argue that local governments can use information disclosure on the Internet to allow citizens to monitor their performance better. In particular, Bertot et al. (2010) show that social media offer governments a new tool to create transparency.

The neoinstitutional theory highlights the role of social influences and environmental pressures on organization behaviours (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). According to Meyer and Rowan (1977), formal organizational structures arise in highly institutionalized contexts, incorporating practices and procedures and increasing their legitimacy and survival prospective. To survive, organizations must accommodate institutional expectations, and thus, their organizational behaviours are responses not only to market pressures but also to institutional pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). In this perspective, institutional pressures lead organizations to adopt the same organizational form, generating a phenomenon known as isomorphism. According to this framework, institutional pressures could affect e-disclosure style in the local government (Wang, 2002). In fact, Berry et al. (2004) state that e-government projects and, therefore, online disclosure practices, are often implemented in response to external pressures.

2.2. Social media in local governments

Social media refers to "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In practice, Web 2.0 is the technical platform on which social media applications are built to create and exchange user-generated content (Picazo-Vela et al., 2012). These tools offer services such as blogs, microblogs, media (audio, photo, video, text) sharing, collaborative projects, virtual worlds, and social networking, so promoting the creation and support of social interaction, collaboration, and the exchange of information between users (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Nowadays, there are hundreds of different social media

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