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## Exploring dialogic strategies in social media for fostering citizens' interactions with Latin American local governments

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## ABSTRACT

Although the benefits of social media for enhancing citizens' interactions with their local governments are well known in a more global context, few studies have focused on Latin America, or on the MERCOSUR countries in particular. This paper examines the use of dialogic strategies in the social media activities of local governments in MERCOSUR countries in order to generate citizens' online engagement. Analysis of this question enhances our understanding of the use of social media by local governments in less developed countries and highlights the need for empirical evidence on the use of dialogic communication theory regarding stakeholder engagement with social media. The findings obtained reflect the positive influence of dialogic strategies on citizens' online engagement, particularly those based on *dialogic loop*, *useful information* and *generation of return visits*, aimed at fostering participation via social media.

### 1. Introduction

More and more Latin American (LA) citizens are using social media to stay informed and share opinions on social or political issues. Consequently, governments must implement the necessary technologies in order to respond to demands for greater online interaction with public institutions (Breuer & Welp, 2014; Sandoval-Almazan & Ramon Gil-Garcia, 2014). Although various studies have focused on how social media technologies are used by LA politicians (Segado-Boj, Díaz-Campo, & Lloves-Sobrado, 2015; Welp & Marzuca, 2016) and social movements (Harlow & Harp, 2012; Sandoval-Almazan & Ramon Gil-Garcia, 2014), there remains a knowledge gap as to how public authorities in Latin America make use of social media as an interaction mechanism for fostering public engagement (Bravo, 2012).

In general terms, public engagement involves consultation and dialogue between citizens and public authorities in order to allow citizens to take part in the public decision-making process, at various levels (Rowe & Frewer, 2005). It is widely assumed that the most important interactions between citizens and government are generated at city level via local governments (Agostino, 2013; Bonsón, Royo, & Ratkai, 2014; Lev-On & Steinfeld, 2015; Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2012), because local governments are geographically closer to citizens and therefore are more likely to have first-hand knowledge of their needs (Ellison & Hardey, 2014). Hence, the use of social media by local governments can be a helpful means of identifying citizens' concerns and can provide an excellent way to generate a relationship of trust (Mergel, 2013a).

Nevertheless, local government presence in social media does not ensure the active involvement of citizens in public issues (Bonsón et al., 2014; Caba Pérez, Bolívar Rodríguez, & Hernández López, 2012; Kamal, 2009; OECD, 2009; Panagiotopoulos, Sams,

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Elliman, & Fitzgerald, 2011). Consequently, local authorities should manage their social media accounts carefully, with a view to facilitating and promoting interaction (Bryer & Zavattaro, 2011; Sánchez Duarte & Rodríguez Esperanza, 2013). In this respect, Agostino (2013) stressed the importance of developing a communication strategy that utilises the full potential of social media as an interaction mechanism to improve public communication and public participation.

The dialogic communication theory (Kent & Taylor, 1998) was developed to help explain the strategies used to foster interactivity. This theory was originally centred on online interactivity, via web pages, but in more general terms it provides a useful framework for current thinking about how organisations can build up positive stakeholder relationships via social media (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Within this framework, studies have analysed the extent to which non-profit organisations (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; De Moya & Cho, 2014; Kim, Chun, Kwak, & Nam, 2014), corporations (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010) and local governments (Haro-de-Rosario, Sáez-Martín, & Gálvez-Rodríguez, 2017; Sáez-Martín, Haro-de-Rosario, & Caba-Pérez, 2015) are developing the content of their social media to improve stakeholder engagement, albeit mostly within the context of developed countries in Europe and the USA.

It remains unclear whether dialogic strategies are more effective than non-dialogic ones in promoting online engagement. With respect to local government, studies have examined the implementation of dialogic strategies in social media (Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2017; Sáez-Martín et al., 2015) and the level of citizens' online engagement via social media (Agostino, 2013; Bonsón et al., 2014; Haro-de-Rosario, Sáez-Martín, & Caba-Pérez, 2016). However, further analysis is needed to determine the outcomes of dialogic strategies applied to the social media and, especially, to clarify whether the adoption of such an approach results in greater online interaction by citizens.

The aim of this study is to assess the relationship between dialogic strategies and citizens' engagement via social media, within the context of LA countries belonging to the Southern Common Market, MERCOSUR (Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Venezuela, Paraguay and Bolivia). The study is motivated by the need, recognised among researchers and policymakers, for recommendations enabling these countries to achieve better social citizenship (Grugel, 2007) and in response to a recent call for proactive communication strategies to enhance transparency and accountability within the MERCOSUR area (García-Tabuyo, Sáez-Martín, & Caba-Pérez, 2015).

Accordingly, in the context of the MERCOSUR countries, this paper examines whether the application of dialogic strategies results in more online engagement than that of non-dialogic strategies, and seeks to determine whether the generation of citizens' online engagement varies according to which of the four dialogic strategies is adopted; in short, to determine which dialogic strategy generates more online engagement among citizens.

The paper makes two main contributions to our understanding of these questions. Firstly, by expanding the slim roster of studies undertaken to consider the implementation of social media by public sector agencies in less developed countries. The importance of this focus arises from the need to identify communication strategies that promote the use and value of social media in enhancing transparency in less developed countries, such as those in Latin America, where transparency is of major importance in the fight against governmental corruption (Ramírez de la Cruz, 2013; Welp & Marzuca, 2016). Secondly, this study addresses a perceived gap in the literature, relevant to all sectors – public, private and non-profit – on the real benefits that dialogic principles can afford organisations in terms of promoting stakeholder engagement.

## 2. Literature

Public entities can benefit in many ways from engaging citizens in political and social issues. On the one hand, such engagement facilitates citizens' empowerment (King, Feltey, & Susel, 2008) and enhances identification with public endeavours (Ramanadhan, Mendez, Rao, & Viswanath, 2013; Ventriss, 2008). It also fosters a sense of community and mutual responsibility (Manetti, Bellucci, & Bagnoli, 2016; Nalbandian, 2008) and bolsters trust in public entities (King et al., 2008). Finally, it can generate and heighten democracy (Cunil Grau, 1997), thus providing greater possibilities for transforming social conditions (Aguirre Sala, 2013).

A vital aspect of citizens' engagement is the use of effective communication channels like social media, which are crucial for ensuring sustained public involvement (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010; Meijer & Thaens, 2013), due to the unique characteristics of related technologies, including blogs, wikis and social networks such as Facebook, which enable public authorities to interact with the public, in the form of user-generated content and real-time communication (Agostino & Arnaboldi, 2016). In contrast to traditional channels, social media can generate a sharp increase in stakeholder's engagement, and this is viewed as a major benefit of its use (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011; Zheng & Zheng, 2014).

Taking into consideration the main goal of this study, namely to examine the usefulness of dialogic strategies in generating citizens' engagement with local governments, the following subsections present a literature review of the question, from two standpoints. On the one hand, the theoretical framework related to the social media content considered to be strategic in fostering citizens' engagement; and, on the other, previous studies that have focused on the level of engagement achieved via social media in public organisations. After reviewing this previous literature, the specific research questions of the present study are addressed.

### 2.1. Building content for public engagement: theoretical framework

Among the theories used to explain the use of social media by organisations, such as legitimacy, stakeholder and agency theories (Bonsón, Royo, & Ratkai, 2015), dialogic communication theory (Kent, 2013) is very relevant to our concerns. This theory focuses specifically on explaining how organisations can foster interactivity with their stakeholders by publishing certain contents on their websites (Kent & Taylor, 1998). This framework has been widely used not only in examining the content of traditional websites (Kent,

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