



E-government and citizen's engagement with local affairs through e-websites: The case of Spanish municipalities[☆]

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ABSTRACT

As a mixture of new technologies, processes and services oriented to the citizen, e-government has become one of the most important keywords for the public sector reform with proponents claiming that it guarantees transparency, accountability and better communication between local and national administrations and their public. Few if any studies have investigated the factors that might contribute to the establishment of trusting relationship between city councils and citizens. This paper examines the relative importance and significance of three types of information communication technologies (ICTs) towards the use of e-government and the development of civic engagement. We conduct an empirical investigation of 179 Spanish official town websites (web sites in the municipalities). The research findings suggest that implementing ICT not only involves a step towards an increase in the use of e-government services by people, but also provides numerous opportunities for their civic engagement. The main conclusion of this study is that although ICT can leverage the adoption of e-government, it cannot create alone engagement with traditional activities of the local government. What is missing from this relationship is a mediating variable (adoption of e-government by government officers), which in turn can greatly help to better understand how ICT impacts relationships between governments and their citizens.

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1. Introduction

In general terms, local government institutions can be considered repositories of knowledge in the form of laws, regulations or specific cases. These institutions provide and deliver public services that are of key importance to citizens and business. In countries like Spain, the factors that influence the nature and structure of the Spanish Public Administration (e.g. demand, costs, regulations, organisation, etc.) are undergoing rapid change. Recent reforms have regionalized the Spanish Public Administration in order to improve the response time and increase the participation of communities in the development and management of electronic online services at regional and local levels (Cohen & Nijkamp, 2004). According to a report recently released by the Press Office of the Spanish Ministry for Public Administrations (MAP in Spanish, 2011)

in September 2011 Spain found itself among the ten most advanced countries in this area and ranked fifth at the European level in terms of both availability and sophistication of on-line public services (SIPA, 2011). The progress of e-government in Spain has undoubtedly been favoured not only by the greater awareness and predisposition to engagement shown by potential service users but also by the planning and legislative efforts made by Spain's public sector in the last few years (Gonzalez, Gasco, & Llopis, 2007).

In Spain, most if not all municipalities (so-called *municipios*) are engaged in the development and delivery of efficient services to the public. These include collecting and paying money according to the laws and bylaws of Spain as well as resolutions of city councils. A key component of local services is that of official town websites (OTW). These are highly visible manifestations of city developments and are used for service delivery and information. They enable local governments to provide citizens, business and other organizations with convenient access to local services and opportunities of collaboration via information communication technologies (ICT) (Lean, Zailani, Ramayah, & Fernando, 2009).

Despite the fact that the majority of municipal governments have their own ICT and web sites to provide public information to citizens (Moon & Norris, 2005), there has been neither emphasis on offering online financial and service transactions nor on providing opportunities for electronic and interactive political and policy

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participation (Criado & Ramilo, 2003; Morris and Moon, 2005). As Criado and Ramilo noted in a previous study of Spanish local government websites (2003), a low level of two-way interaction between local governments and citizens could be characteristic. To address this, the Law on Citizens' Electronic Access to Public Services published in June 2007² in Spain sought to strengthen the commitment towards e-government implementation and use by autonomous communities and local authorities through the improvement of coordination mechanisms between various levels of government in providing e-government services (eServices) to citizens. There is thus a need to investigate in more detail the reasons of this lack of two-way engagement through e-government in Spain and in particular how e-government websites implementation and management can be improved.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the use of ICT in government has been widely termed 'e-government', but its scope, impacts and possibilities are still yet to be fully assessed. Tapscott (1996) initially asserted that electronic government (e-government) is an internetworked government, which links ICT with legal systems internally and, in turn, links such government information infrastructure externally with everything digital and with everybody – the tax payer, suppliers, business customers, voters and every other institution in the society. Abramson and Means (2001) define e-government as digital governmental information or a way of engaging in digital transactions with the public (citizens and businesses) and employees. Fraga (2002) suggests that e-government is the transformation of internal and external relationships in the public sector through net-enabled operations. Durrant (2002, p. 101) defines e-government as "a permanent commitment by government to improve the relationship between the private citizen and the public sector through enhanced, cost-effective and efficient delivery of services, information and knowledge". Heichlinger (2004) defines it simply as a set of activities supported by information systems with the aim of improving the relationships between government institutions and citizens. For Holmes (2001), e-government is about developing a citizen-centred government environment which serves citizens (customers) at any time and regardless of their physical location.

The above definitions suggest a variety of processes and services that can be supported by the use of ICT in government affairs, as well as the diversity of perspectives that can be adopted to assess their impacts in both governments and citizens. These perspectives also provide us with an illustration that e-government is a way for public administration to become: more open and transparent; enabling democratic participation; more service-oriented, providing personalised and inclusive services to each citizen; productive, and delivering maximum value for taxpayers' money as well as for any ICT investment. Researchers agree that e-government has considerable potential to contribute to learning efficiency, gains and cost reductions for local government (e.g. Badri & Alshare, 2008; Carter & Belanger, 2005; Criado & Ramilo, 2003; Lean et al., 2009; Warkentin, Gefen, Pavlou, & Rose, 2002). The opportunity to access new knowledge, learn about government and conduct online transactions can reduce red tape and simplify regulatory processes, therefore helping citizens to engage more in issues that are important to local communities (e.g. public transport or street design issues).

Just recently, in countries like the US there are a number of e-government projects to help communities address their local problems with the use of websites (Bertot, Jaeger, & McClure, 2011). In this way a form of civic engagement is promoted which focuses on public concerns and which includes both political involvement

in political institutions as well as community involvement in associational or voluntary activities or institutions (Bennett, 2008; Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Putnam, 2000). Despite these trends and premises, worldwide only a few cities continuously engage with citizens in policy dialogues or partner with community organizations to strengthen citizen engagement and participation at the neighbourhood level (Ho, 2002). What seems to be dominating research in the use of e-government websites is the study of the dynamics of networks of communication that emerge in political campaigns, most of which are dominated by incumbent groups (Araya, Barria, & Campos, 2010; Hindman, 2009). Whilst the study of such dynamics may offer in-depth insights into political engagement and interaction with ICT, few, if any, studies have considered the relationship between the use of e-government and civic engagement in cities.

In this paper we consider how and which ICTs are more likely to lead to successful use of e-government by official town websites and how e-government use can be related to civic engagement. Factors that might influence the use of e-government local websites are discussed in the next section from which we derive a set of hypotheses. Details of the empirical study are presented in a third section whilst the results of testing the hypotheses are presented in a fourth section followed by a discussion and conclusions.

2. Conceptual framework

Civic engagement in general may be defined as individual and collective forms of action that are designed to identify and address matters of public concern (Hays, 2007). Another way of describing this concept is the sense of personal responsibility individuals should feel to uphold their obligations as part of any community (Putnam, 2000). This means that civic engagement can take many forms—from organizational involvement to electoral participation to individual volunteerism. This paper is particularly concerned with the latter. That is, it focuses on those aspects of civic engagement that are mediated through involvement in associational or voluntary activities or institutions (Putnam, 2000), rather than formal political institutions. More specifically, it is concerned with civic engagement facilitated by local governments to deal with local affairs concerning pollution issues, school affairs and street design issues (Lim, 2007). From this perspective, civic engagement includes efforts to directly address an issue, work with others in a community to solve a problem or interact with the local institutions.

In the last decade, there has been a growing theoretical debate about the effects of ICT – particularly online technologies – on civic engagement. This debate is essentially polarized between those who hail online technologies as facilitating social spaces in which virtual solidarity and activism are produced (Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001) and those who bemoan online activities as indicative of the rise of consumerism over citizenship, the fragmentation of social relations and the consequent erosion of civic engagement (Levine, 2000). In this regard, Barraket (2005) highlights that although the empirical research to support either position in this debate remains limited, works such as that conducted by Horrigan (2001) suggest that some people are using ICT to engage in new forms of collective activity, and to access more traditional forms of civic activity in new ways. In this light, local governments may indeed support a process of creative encounter between them and citizens by a coordinating mechanism based on ICT, so that cross-cultural engagement may ensue from the resulting complementary talents around such ICT (Go, Lee, & Russo, 2003).

Nowadays, gaining access to information is one of the main motivations for individuals to access the Internet (Criado & Ramilo,

² <http://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2007/06/23/pdfs/A27150-27166.pdf>.

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