Chapter 13
Translucent States:
Political Mediation of E-Transparency¹

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ABSTRACT

This work focuses on online state communication through the analysis of Latin-American presidential portals. It postulates that even though governmental websites contribute to the dynamics of democracy in terms of greater transparency and participation in government processes, online government communication is neither completely symmetric nor transparent, since the ways of constructing, presenting and accessing the information are linked to cultural schemes. In this sense, the work argues that the search for transparency in Internet communication can expect -at best- clear and even translucent States, where transparency limits are determined by the sets of values and symbolic representations already existent in each society’s political culture.

INTRODUCTION

Together with state’s modernization process, government communication has acquired new relevance. In this context, new information and communication technologies (ICTs)—especially Internet—have achieved wide recognition. This is mainly due to the fact that an innovative capacity is attributed to them, as a contribution towards increasing public officials’ decision transparency and supporting new ways of communication between government and civil society. As a result, Government portals and websites are then seen as being synonymous with State modernization. Furthermore, they appear to have an informative function free from any determining influence and their very presence is regarded as a contribution to transparency in public management and as an access door to citizen’s participation in governmental processes.
The purpose of this work is to demonstrate that, since ways for building and displaying information as well as preparing means to access it are linked to cultural schemes, the conception of completely symmetric and transparent online government communications is not strictly speaking possible. On the contrary, it is suggested that the search for transparency in web communication can expect—at best—clear and even translucent States, where the transmission of messages and their meanings, are tinged with the political culture characteristics of each society.

The work is divided into four parts: The first one (point 2) explains the fallacy in the assumption of neutral communication imposed by the ideology accompanying the diffusion of new technologies. The second one (point 3) deals with communications’ cultural mediation and introduces the possibility of hybridization and glocalization processes in the production of discursive practices on the Internet. The third, (point 4) deals with the relationship of communication, culture and hybridization from the point of view of political communication, and the systems of meaning and online representation within the political culture of each society. And the fourth one (point 5) analyzes empirically the political plot of virtual discourses in Latin-American States.

THE IDEOLOGY OF INFORMATION

In the late 80’s, Latin American States began modernization processes focused on the notion of governance. In order to achieve equitable and democratic growths, these processes centered on the capacity of government institutions in terms of legitimacy and transparency. Thus, governmental communication acquired crucial significance, and problems related to diffusion, transmission and access to information became key elements in state management (Vega, 2002).

The notion of transparency is then associated to the free flow of, and access to, information regarding public actions and decisions, and this is considered a main link towards institutional strengthening and democratization (Heeks, 2004). The underlying hypothesis suggests that, if people can understand and be aware of government’s management, they will participate more regularly in decision making, thus generating in officials and representatives a greater sense of responsibility in public affairs, and consequently contributing to the establishment of a better government (Balkin, 1998; Heeks, 2004).

Under these premises, when ICTs started, they were widely recognized, and their identification with transparency became omnipresent in the speeches of politicians, mass media and social elites (CEPAL, 2000; Wolton, 2000; Tapscott, 2004). There is no doubt that, under certain circumstances, their impact is beneficial to social and political development and welfare. However, in general, their incorporation has been associated with emphatically positive, neutral, and transforming discourses promising the eradication of almost every problem affecting society (Wiesner, n.d).

In this sense, there is a technological ideology according to which a change in technologies necessarily brings about a change in social relationships. This ideology arises from a classical definition of information, which considers that the communication act is a symmetric process between a sender and a receiver, and corresponds to a technical view of the social world that denies every principle of purpose and influence in social exchanges, and also rejects the influence of the effect of enunciation in communicative acts (Moragás, 1985; Wolton, 2000; Charauer, 2003).

This ideology has concrete consequences in the political sphere in particular. On one hand, by negating the possible existence of a purpose in exchanges, it does not take into account the possibility of officials and politicians simulating transparency virtues through rhetoric and media manipulation. Thus, it prevents the Internet from being understood as a tool of political action (Balkin, 1998). On the other hand, by stating that