Chapter 13
E-Government and Transparency: The Degree of Interactivity and Openness of Italian Municipalities

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ABSTRACT

Governmental transparency is a highly regarded value, often studied by academics and emphasized by practitioners. In literature, transparency is discussed as a tool for enhancing the accountability of governments, as a principle to be implemented in order to reduce corruption in public administration, and as a means for making information on government performance more readily available. This chapter drafts a framework aimed at measuring the degree of governmental transparency and interactivity based on the multiple dimensions of information published on the institutional websites of municipalities. The framework has been tested on a purposive sample composed of the 21 municipalities in Italy’s regional capital cities. The results show that they primarily display information about what they do, how they use resources, whereas acknowledgement of government performance with regard to service delivery is still scarce.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The principle of transparency is highly considered as a means for enhancing and underpinning democracy. Many authors (Demchak et al., 2000; Hood & Heald, 2006; La Porte et al., 2002; Pina et al., 2007a) have focused on this topic, adopting a range of disciplinary approaches and investigating different streams of research, leading to some key considerations.

In particular, literature discusses definitions and scopes of transparency from different perspectives which fit in most contexts. International organizations have also been focusing their attention on transparency, offering their perspective on the scope of transparency and its relationship with other relevant concepts, such as government openness, interactivity and accessibility. Other studies provide guidelines and assess the degree of transparency by applying checklists and frameworks to certain dimensions of transparency, mainly in relationship with financial accountability (Demchak et al., 2000; La Porte et al., 2002; Pina et al., 2007a, 2007b, 2010; Vishwanath & Kaufmann, 2003). Recently, due to the pervasiveness of technology in society, certain leading authorities have focused on the role of information and communication technology (ICT) in governments as tools for enhancing the level of government transparency. They assumed that these instruments, especially the institutional website of public agencies, reduce most barriers - including time and spatial ones - boosting government accessibility (Stevens & McGowan, 1985).

In this chapter, we review some of the existing literature on government transparency with the aim of drafting and presenting a framework intending to assess the degree of government transparency. The model offers an opportunity to measure multiple dimensions of the transparency of information published on the institutional websites of municipalities.

The framework was tested by assessing the websites of a sample of Italian Municipalities. Evidence of this preliminary analysis is also presented in this chapter, showing that information about what municipalities do and how they use resources is displayed to some extent, whereas acknowledgement of government performance with regard to service delivery is still scarce. Moreover, some of the information presented is hard to access and external stakeholders are offered limited opportunities for interactivity.

The chapter is organized as follows: section 2 presents and discusses the relevant literature about government transparency; section 3 presents the assessment framework; section 4 considers the methods adopted in order to apply the framework to the websites of municipalities; sections 5 and 6 present and discuss evidence from the Italian test and the last section concludes by highlighting more general managerial implications for governmental transparency at Municipalities.

2. BACKGROUND

In recent years, interest among the international community with regard to government transparency has increased, becoming paramount for academics, policy makers and public managers to be addressed in their priorities.

This trend is linked to four main factors:

- The birth and growth of organizations operating on a global scale;
- The explosion of information technology, which has fundamentally changed the way we interact in today’s society;
- The attention paid to issues of international security,
- The third wave of democratization of the movement leading to the end of the Cold War (Relly & Sabharwal, 2009; UNDP 2004).

In more general terms, democratic societies firmly believe that granting access to information