Chapter 14
Citizen Web Empowerment across Italian Cities: A Benchmarking Approach

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ABSTRACT
This chapter summarizes the results of a research project aimed to enlighten the issue of citizens’ empowerment through municipalities’ Web portals. The study was designed in order to: (a) provide some key-elements to define the content of an efficient Web strategy for municipalities, with specific focus on the issue of citizens empowerment, (b) benchmark the degree of citizen empowerment of public administrations’ Websites across Italian Municipalities through the adoption of a revised version of Citizens Web Empowerment Index (CWEI) for the assessment of the official Web portals of the 104 Italian cities with over 60,000 inhabitants.

INTRODUCTION
A successful city today must offer investors security, infrastructure, and efficiency. It should recognize its natural assets, its environment and, of course, its citizens. Only through the use of ICT these goals can be reached and a city can become a “smart city.” The goal is therefore the creation of a flexible administration fully able to address its territory’s needs through a strong connection and interaction with its citizens.

Internet revolution worldwide has deeply affected relations on every context of exchange of goods and services. We may definitely agree that, since last decade, the major impacts on relations between ‘suppliers’ and ‘customers’ on markets consist in (Porter, 2001): low-cost availability (or availability even free of charge) to the customer of considerable amounts of information useful for purchasing decision-making, a consequent increase in the degree of transparency of markets, a significant enhancement of the empowerment of citizens/customers in many real life situations and in relations with various (public or private) suppliers.

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Nowadays, citizens in developed countries are aware of this historic change that is taking place and they are demanding a wide scale adoption of Web channels, also within contexts such as public services (where, traditionally, exchanges of information between citizen and public administration are significantly ‘asymmetric’ and ‘formal’ as for their nature).

Citizen empowerment, markedly tied in with the spread of the Internet and of technological resources as a part of our day-to-day lives (in which the Internet is now ‘embedded’), represents one of the major challenges that public systems face today.

More broadly speaking, citizens are nowadays the bearers of new demand, which we may summarise as follows:

1. Access of citizens to official, customized and “on demand” information and services.
2. New opportunities for direct and informal relationships of citizens with politicians and civil servants.
3. Role as ‘active player’ within the network, also by sharing their own problems and complaints with others and seeking out information on the experiences of others with these same problems; Web 2.0 logic (O’Reilly, 2005) has considerably amplified this latter development.

Accordingly, public administrations’ Web strategies changed their visions from a technology-centric framework to a content-centric approach and, more recently, to a citizen-centric one (King & Cotterill, 2007).

These changes bring the need to analyse the municipalities’ Web strategies by answering the following question: what are the key elements of a successful municipality Web strategy in order to create “citizen empowerment”?

By focusing on the Italian context, our research tried to investigate to what extent the Italian municipalities did define a Web strategy aiming at the increase of citizens’ empowerment.

The baseline research hypothesis from which the model was developed is that the information and services provided by Local Governments via the Web are capable of enhancing citizens’ empowerment regarding two key dimensions: information held by citizens and control on the information with respect to his/her needs.

The first step was to develop a multidimensional indicator by using the various typologies of Web information which allow to evaluate the level of citizens’ participation via the Web.

The second step was to carry out the analysis (period March-April 2012), using the indicator to assess the Websites of 104 Italian Local Governments with population over 60,000 inhabitants. The aim was to assess the current state of maturity of their Web strategy in relation to potentials for an increase in citizens’ e-participation.

It is important to explain that analysis and rating of sites was based on two fundamental criteria:

- The immediacy with which information or services can be obtained while navigating the site, without impediments and time-consuming procedures coming into play when attempting to access information or services.
- Systematic (as opposed to sporadic) presence of the information or services required from the site.

CITIZEN WEB EMPOWERMENT IN WEB 2.0 AGE

Background

Over the last decade, increasing emphasis has been put on citizens and public involvement in the re-design of a citizens-focused system to help the creation of a good relationship between citizens, the administration and its politicians. So far, many administrations have introduced operational initiatives (European Commission, 2008); however, to assess the actual achievements is not
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