OPEN GOVERNMENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES: A NEW MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUE OR A REAL CONTRIBUTION TO STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY?

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Abstract

Public organizations around the world are embarking on open government initiatives, pursuing transparency, public participation and collaboration, and are working to redefine their relationships with citizens and with each other. In this endeavor, they are more and more using social media as public information tools that may have an impact in terms of transparency, accountability and legitimacy. This paper presents the first results of the project “Social media, transparency, and open government in Catalonia”, aimed at assessing the social media strategy of Catalan public administrations. Our main research question is exploratory in nature: how are Catalan public administrations using social media in order to become more transparent? We preliminary conclude that, although more information is usually perceived as more openness and transparency, social media is mainly used as an extra channel for delivering messages, instead of as a means of empowering citizens.

Keywords: Open government, social media, transparency, Catalonia
INTRODUCTION

On January 2009, President Obama signed the Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government. The memorandum declares the new administration’s commitment to creating an unprecedented level of openness in government and establishing a system linking three principles: transparency, public participation and collaboration.

In the academic literature, openness has been approached from two different perspectives: (Meijer et al., 2012): transparency and participation. It is the first one which frames this exploratory study. The literature on transparency revolves around terms such as freedom of information, Internet, active dissemination of information, access to documents and usability of websites (Curtin & Mendes, 2011). The core question tackled by these works is: what is being made visible/transparent? Literature discusses, among other issues, the nature and scope of transparency, the usefulness of information, and the timing of the release of documents. The premise underlying these studies is that transparency yields to accountability. At the same time, a more accountable government is a more legitimate one (Sandóval-Almazán, 2011). Finally, legitimacy strengthens public trust in the government (Hood, 2011; Hazell & Worthy, 2010, Jaeger & Bertot, 2010).

Although the idea of openness in public administrations and organizations is not new, the current spreading use of information systems and technological advances in modern societies has attained new information demands and claims (Sandóval-Almazán, 2011). In particular, social media is used as public information tools. It radically reduces the cost of information diffusion and makes sharing with the citizenry feasible and useful.
Given this context, this paper presents the first results of the project “Social media, transparency, and open government in Catalonia”, funded by the Autonomous Government of Catalonia and aimed at assessing the social media strategy of Catalan public administrations in their attempt to be more transparent and accountable and, therefore, to enhance their legitimacy. Four specific research questions are explored within this framework:

1) Which are the relationships between the concepts of transparency, accountability, and legitimacy in Catalan public administrations?

2) Which is the technological strategy implemented by Catalan public administrations in order to be more open and transparent? What role do social media play in this strategy?

3) How is social media impact assessed?

4) Which are the critical success factors of social media initiatives that pursue transparency?

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. In the next section, we present part of the conceptual body that frames this research. Next, we briefly explain the research methods that were used to collect information and data during the first stage of the study. Subsequently, we present the results and main findings. Finally, we describe the theoretical and practical implications of our findings and what further steps are to be taken.
SOCIAL MEDIA USE BY PUBLIC ADMINISTRATIONS

In taking on our exploratory main research question (how are Catalan public administrations using social media in order to become more transparent?), we build on the theoretical stream of open government and, particularly of that of social media use by public administrations. Because the open government concept has always been defined taking into account the three principles proclaimed by Obama, we start with an attempt to clarify and operationalize such concept and, then, turn to the review of works on social media and public administrations.

On open government

Although there is agreement on the popularization of the term by the Obama Administration’s Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government, the concept is not new. Despite the first written reference dates back to 1957, when Parks (1957) published “The open government principle: applying the right to know under the Constitution”, its use goes back to the 70s, when the British government promoted several initiatives aimed at achieving more information freedom and more access to government’s activity and, therefore, at reducing opacity (Chapman & Hunt, 2006). Along time, and as a consequence of contributions from different fields, this first approach has been refined, giving rise to a definition related to enhancing transparency, collaboration, and participation by means of open data and open action. Gascó (2013) summarizes and operationalizes these dimensions stating that an open government is (see Table 1):

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1 Such as the open innovation perspective (Chesbrough, 2003, 2006) or the evolution of ICT adoption by public administrations approach (Jiménez, 2013; Jiménez & Gascó, 2012; Coroján & Campos, 2011; Gascó, 2009)

2 Catalonia is an autonomous region of Spain with four provinces: Barcelona, Tarragona, Lleida, and Girona.

3 Actually, the few references that have explored these relationships, such as Gascó & Fernández (2013),
- A transparent government, that is, a government that is accountable and that delivers information to citizens about its strategies, plans, and performance.

- A collaborative government, that is, a government that involves citizens and other external and internal actors in the design, delivery and evaluation of public services.

- A participative government, that is, a government that promotes citizen engagement in political processes and, particularly, in the design of public policies.

- A government that prioritizes the use of two key tools: open data (that is, data that are available in standardized and structured formats, that are machine-readable, and that are guaranteed to be freely available over time) and open action (that is, the use of web 2.0 tools and, particularly, of social media and blogging).

Table 1: Open government: Principles, tools and related concepts

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Source: Gascó (2013).
Social media and public administrations

Social media applications are new types of information production and sharing tools, which are used in digital environments (Mergel, 2011). Social media practices in the public sector include the use of online social networking services, such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, blogs or other digital media sharing sites to support the organization's mission, service delivery and relationship management (Mergel, 2011).

The use of social media by public administrations is a recent and multidisciplinary phenomenon and, at the same time, one that is quickly expanding (Criado & Rojas, 2012). Social media's attributes (immediacy, ubiquity, and availability) make them very useful when it comes to share information, especially in times of crises or emergency situations (Landau, 2011; Lindsay, 2011).

According to Picazo-Vela et al. (2012), public administrations use social media with different purposes: to carry out recruiting tasks, to reach citizens and other stakeholders, to share information with other public organizations, to promote citizen participation in public issues or to improve transparency. Criado (2013) contributes to the debate along the same lines. The author follows Chun et al. (2010) and states that social media potential is the result of, among other, 1) the new available capacities that enable the search of information and knowledge resources, 2) the opportunities to link, which give rise to the development of complex and valuable social networks, 3) the possibilities to publish, which make easier the exchange of opinions, experiences, and knowledge, and 4) the development of information structuring, that facilitates information sharing and effective use in a specific field.
Mergel (2013a and 2013b) summarizes and builds on her own research as well as on the contributions of several authors and identifies three possible strategies regarding social media use by public administrations: representation, involvement, and networking. The first one is a communication strategy that suggests that governments have to be represented in all potential interaction channels. Its objective is to reach audiences in those social spaces they frequent on a daily basis using a press-release style that seeks for no interaction. According to the author, the resulting social media tactic can be described as a “push strategy”, “where minimal additional resources are invested into tailoring the content specifically for social media channels on active bidirectional interactions” (Mergel, 2013b: 128). Mergel (2013b) links the representation strategy with the transparency dimension of open government since, for her, the goal of such strategy is to increase transparency by voluntarily releasing government information through channels other than the traditional ones.

The engagement strategy suggests that governments and public administrations realize that their audiences want to interact with them in a more natural and informal style instead of reading governmental reports or official memoranda. Mergel (2013b), who refers to this strategy as a “pull strategy”, states that it promotes bilateral interactions: “the engagement strategy goes beyond mere broadcasting of information to the public. Instead, agencies are actively trying to encourage their audiences to co-create and share content in different formats with them. The engagement strategy in many ways uses social media applications for their initially intended purposes to connect users with each other” (p. 128).

Finally, the networking strategy focuses on listening to citizens. This way of proceeding allows public administrations to absorb comments and to gain valuable perspectives about citizens’ feelings or the issues they worry about. It is a highly interactive and bidirectional strategy, which also allows users to reuse government information and knowledge (that is,
the content of social media). In sum, in Mergel (2013b)’s words: “a networking tactic of a social media strategy therefore does not necessarily only include active interactions with the public, instead it can be seen as an enhanced interaction of the public with the content an agency is producing and a snowballing of the content through the audiences' own networks” (p. 129).

Despite their benefits, social media also present managerial and technical challenges. Several authors refer to privacy and security issues, to restrictions posed by hierarchical organizational cultures, to difficulties in the storage of government information, and to the need to meet legal requirements, to give a few examples (Lee & Kwak, 2012; Bertot et al., 2012; Bryer & Zavattaro, 2011; Sherman, 2011; Landsbergen, 2010). Actually, for some authors, social media does not necessarily make an organization more transparent for transparency means empowering citizens with information so that they can understand, appreciate and trust their governments to do the right things for all citizens in their community. Thus, the mere use of social media does not necessarily result in more openness and transparency (Picazo-Vela et al., 2012; Bertot et al., 2010a; Bertot et al., 2010b). What’s more, apparently, it neither results in greater deliberation or participation in public issues (Ganapati & Reddick, 2012).

The particular characteristics of the different social media networks add further challenges. Kavanaugh et al. (2012), for example, state that Twitter in particular has one important problem: the limited information in a tweet (that is, a maximum of 140 characters) makes it difficult to identify its meaning and context, which may lead to incorrect classification and misleading analysis of data.

Therefore, despite the potential social media has for governments and their public administrations, there are still restrictions and barriers that hinder its effect in terms of
transparency, legitimacy, or citizens’ trust. This paper aims at shedding light on this discussion.

**METHODOLOGY**

The ongoing research project “Social media, transparency, and open government in Catalonia” uses a mixed-method approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods, where open questions are combined with near-survey data (Creswell, 2003). This enables the researchers to provide both qualitative analyses as well as statistical testing of relationships. This paper delivers the results of the qualitative approach, adopted during the first stage of the fieldwork.

Qualitative analysis is a powerful method to identify topics and their interconnections if the phenomena under study are largely unexplored, as was the case here. Individual semi-structured interviews were used in order to find preliminary relationships regarding social media and transparency. Our goal was to look deeply into the opinion of experts to gain better knowledge and understanding of our topic of research as well as to start planning for the quantitative approach (a survey addressed to Catalan public administrations).

Interviews were conducted with open government experts, with practical or academic experience in Catalonia, in the rest of Spain or at an international level. Interviewees were identified in the literature, on one hand, and in press releases, on the other. We wanted the interviewees to have relevant knowledge in open government, in conceptual or practical terms. From an academic perspective, we prioritized scholars with published articles on open government and/or social media in relevant journals or conferences. From a practical

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2 Catalonia is an autonomous region of Spain with four provinces: Barcelona, Tarragona, Lleida, and Girona.
point of view, we selected consultants and practitioners that had been involved in relevant open government initiatives.

15 people were contacted by e-mail, provided with an overview of the research project, and asked to take part in the study. 12 accepted to do so. Well-established methodological guidelines regarding case study research were followed by carefully preparing a structured interview protocol (Yin, 2009). The open-ended questions were used to collect rich, context-specific and qualitative information on three specific topics: the concept of open government, transparency, and social media. Interviews lasted between one and two hours. All of them were recorded and later transcribed.

FINDINGS

Several interesting issues were brought up during the interviews. In this paper, we will focus on the following: the concept of open government, the role of technology in open government initiatives, the relationships between open government and other terms such as accountability and legitimacy, types of open government initiatives, the use of social media by public administrations, and the evaluation of open government.

The concept of open government

Although all the interviewees agreed on defining open government as a transparent, collaborative and participative government, agreement proved to be superficial and several ideas were presented in this respect. To start with, different dimensions had different importance for different interviewees. For some of them, openness had mainly to do with transparency and with opening data while, for the rest, it was more related to participation.
Also, some of the interviewees stated that open government was a management technique (that helped to improve decision-making processes) while others believed open government entailed a change of paradigm (it was not very clear though if it was a new cultural, political or governance paradigm and what the differences between these three perspectives actually were).

There was also controversy around the notion of open government as an end in itself or as a tool. For some of our interviewees, becoming (or being more) transparent was the goal of open government. Along the same lines spoke the ones who believed that the purpose was participation. For this group of people, open government initiatives were aimed at achieving transparency and participation. Yet, for a few, open government was intended to increase citizens’ quality of life, generally speaking; for them, open government projects had to be more ambitious and had to bring about real changes in the society. In this endeavor, being more transparent or promoting citizen participation was only part of the process, therefore, a means to an end.

**Open government and technology**

Another relevant topic regarding open government had to do with the role of technology. Again, two extreme positions were found. On one hand, some interviewees dissociated open government from technology. They declared that there are many examples of openness in the past, which did not make use of sophisticated technology. On the contrary, for others, open government necessarily involves technology. Technology is widely present in our societies and, therefore, open government cannot ignore it. In one of our interviewees’ words: “an open government inevitably needs to use technology; what’s
more, a closed government inevitably needs to use technology. Nowadays, nobody can ignore technology”.

Despite these opinions, a third point of view prevailed: governments do not need technology to become more open but technology speeds up opening processes.

**Relationships between open government, transparency, accountability, legitimacy, and good government**

The twelve experts agreed on the existence of some sort of relationships between the aforementioned concepts but, since there is not much empirical evidence about them, it was difficult to assess these associations\(^3\). On that note, statements were made emphasizing potential bonds rather than real ones.

Different perspectives arose regarding transparency and accountability. Thus, on one hand, transparency was believed to have a direct and positive effect on accountability. In fact, open government changes accountability dynamics, which is no longer a temporary concept: governments are held accountable every minute due to the constant flow of information on social networking websites and open data portals. On the other, transparency initiatives per se do not necessarily strengthen accountability for information and data have to be explained in order for them to be useful to citizens and to make sense.

Similar points of view were given with reference to the relationships between transparency and legitimacy. In this respect, for some of our interviewees, the single action of opening

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\(^3\) Actually, the few references that have explored these relationships, such as Gascó & Fernández (2013), conclude that open government in general, and transparency in particular, has not resulted in greater governmental legitimacy.
and disseminating data gives legitimacy to a government, regardless the real impact of such action. For others, transparency does not result in legitimacy; what’s more, being transparent can be risky for corruption, mismanagement, or resources-waste situations, just to give a few examples, can be unveiled.

Finally, some of our interviewees referred to the link between open government and good government. For them, it was pretty clear that a good government was one which was transparent, collaborative and participative. However, they stated that there are no guarantees on the contrary: open government initiatives do not inexorably result in a good government⁴.

**Types of initiatives**

Several answers were given in relation to the most popular types of interventions in the field of open government. On one hand, some of the interviewees pointed out that many governments have included in their open government plans e-government projects that were already being implemented (such as interoperability or electronic services projects). This has clearly been the case of commitments developed in the framework of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) action plans⁵. To a lesser extent, due to the lack of consolidated initiatives in this field, something similar was reported regarding e-participation. On the other hand, some other interviewees referred to the development of specific legislation on open government at national, regional, and local levels. As examples,

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⁴ In fact, this is certainly the case in Spain. Many governments, mainly at the local level, have so-called good government codes, which primarily include anti-corruption measures and ethical issues.

⁵ The Open Government Partnership was launched in 2011 to provide an international platform for domestic reformers committed to making their governments more open, accountable, and responsive to citizens. Since then, OGP has grown from 8 countries to the 63 participating countries, where government and civil society are working together to develop and implement ambitious open government reforms (more information at [http://www.opengovpartnership.org/](http://www.opengovpartnership.org/)).
they acknowledged national and regional transparency laws or local ordinances/regulations on open government (and, mainly, related to the participation dimension of open government).

Nevertheless, despite the already mentioned types of interventions, all the interviewees but one coincided in the importance of open data portals. In this respect, it was our perception that, for them, opening data was an imperative when implementing open government. Yet, several individuals drew attention on the current deficits of open data portals and suggested a change of mindset to improve them and put new ones in place. Some of the problems our interviewees referred to included: overload of data and information, interpretation difficulties (citizens do not usually understand raw data), little relevant information (transportation or environment data, to name a couple of datasets categories, do not matter in terms of accountability), internal disorganization in terms of data location and storage, and lack of reuse of public sector information.

The use of social media by public administrations

Presence in social media platforms was also referred to as a type of open government initiative. However, we approach this topic in a different section since exploring social media use by public administrations is the purpose of our research project. In this respect, we asked the experts to assess the use of social media. The following are interesting insights we were provided with:

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6 One of our interviewees told us: “I do not care too much about transportation or environmental data. What I know to know is how my government is spending its budget. I care about budget execution. That is relevant information so I can make further decisions”.

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- There is a lack of strategy regarding the use of social media by public administrations. The majority of them have not reflected on why and how they want to use social media. Usually, public administrations have opened accounts “forced” by their social environment: citizens are intensively using social media (that also explains the preference for Facebook and Twitter). What’s more, within a single institution, different ministries/departments/units may follow different motivations and procedures, which adds even more confusion.

- Social media are primarily used as additional (sometimes alternative) communication channels, following traditional communication patterns, which result in unilateral interaction. According to our interviewees, this is the consequence of placing the responsibility for social media management in communication departments, usually staffed with journalists. This fact also affects the content of the messages, which is generally aimed at managing the organization’s reputations/image/prestige.

- Participation on social media platforms has been delegated to the so-called community managers. However, it seems there is not a shared profile for community managers. Generally speaking, the interviewees identified two profiles: journalists/communication specialists and public services managers. Some concerns were raised regarding the former, particularly in terms of being able to properly communicate the organization’s culture. In the words of one of our experts, “when you have a communication specialist managing the city council account on Twitter, you are taking some risks for he does not need to understand/share the council’s culture but, what’s more, if he makes a mess of it, your legitimacy will be damaged and that, believe me, it is very difficult to overcome”.

- There is confusion between personal and institutional social media accounts. Particularly in small and medium-size cities, when mayors or members of the governing team are popular on social media, there are frequent misunderstandings about who says what. This is usually related to the lack of a clear strategy but has important implications since it can easily lead to serious misinterpretations among citizens on the content of the messages.

- Public administrations are not that easily adopting social media. One of the most relevant obstacles has to do with the disassociation between social media’s attributes (such as immediacy, ubiquity, speed, or availability) and public administrations’ organizational culture (top-down, hierarchical, clear rules and regulations on how communication has to take place). One of our interviewees put it this way: “social media are horizontal but governments are hierarchical in nature; also, in governments, things do not happen on a daily basis but, on social media, things do happen every minute, every second”.

- Social media brings about good (better) results when it gives rise to an emotional response by citizens. “You have to look for the “wow moment”; then, you are making a difference”, one of our interviewees stated. Emotional responses raise citizen engagement and trust in governments and, therefore, reinforce government legitimacy.

To complement these views, we asked the experts to list critical success factors of social media use by public administrations. Several answers were given emphasizing the need for:

- Political and executive leadership. “Social media projects fail when they are led by technologists”, one of the interviewees declared. Political and executive leaders have a
transversal and global understanding of the organization, which is needed in order to implement successful open government initiatives. Also, political and executive leaders can champion the internal transformation entailed by open government projects.

- A legal framework. Laws, norms are regulations help institutionalize open government initiatives. Freedom of information/right of information laws, local ordinances on open government and participation, or regional regulations on transparency and open government are just a few examples of legal frameworks that support open government initiatives. Yet, specific regulation on social media is still necessary.

- A strategy. Those organizations that have a clear idea of what they want from social media and how they can achieve it, have more opportunities to make the most of it.

- Management. Despite people think that social media are free, according to one of our interviewees, “social media are free but their management is not”. Monitoring social media, coordinating different social media accounts, or evaluating the information retrieved are only some of the tasks that need to be performed by social media strategists/managers. More emphasis was put in the need for change management for transparency and openness start inside the organization, with the involvement and training of public employees. “We have been trained to protect data and that is what we know how to do”, we were told. But also, open government requires a lot of time and effort: “at the end of the day, people realize that they have worked on openness but they have not done their regular work; therefore, huge incentives are needed if you want to be successful”.

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- A co-responsible citizenship. An open government does not make sense without an open citizenship. Citizenship involvement is essential for social media projects to be successful.

**Open government evaluation**

Finally, all the interviewees reported important difficulties regarding open government evaluation. On one hand, the lack of conceptual clarity does not facilitate the evaluation of the interventions aimed at greater transparency, collaboration, and participation. On the other, it is soon to assess open government initiatives due to its youth. Many of the so-called open government projects started only 3-4 years ago. This also makes easier focusing on outputs (short-term results) rather than on outcomes (impacts/long-term results): measuring the number of tweets posted by an organization or the number of datasets that an open data portal has is undoubtedly simpler than assessing the level of interaction on social media or the volume of public information re-use.

Some of the experts referred to indexes which aim at measuring some items and, particularly, to the Transparency Index, developed by Transparency International Spain. It appraises the quality of transparency of several types of Spanish public institutions (local, regional, and provincial public bodies). By means of 80 indicators categorized in 6 transparency areas (information about the organization, relationships with citizens and society, economic and financial transparency, transparency in public procurement, transparency in town planning and public works, and indicators related to the new Spanish Transparency Law), data and information available on the public websites are assessed. For our interviewees, the tool is valuable for it rates and ranks public administrations according to their level of transparency but it shows deficits. For example, the information may be on
the website but, if it is in pdf format, it is not reusable. Also, sometimes it is more important what it is not shown than what it is and the Transparency Index does not take this fact into account.

Despite the general agreement on the need to keep investing on useful open government evaluation tools and methodologies, our interviewees stated slow progress and pointed out only a few interesting initiatives that have been considered successful.

CONCLUSIONS

Our preliminary findings can be distilled as follows:

- There is no clarity/consensus on the concept of open government nor on the role technology can play when pursuing open government.

- There is no evidence on relationships between open government and transparency, accountability, legitimacy and good government. This is very important because many initiatives, particularly those related to opening data, have been based on political discourses that have established direct links between these concepts.

- Public administrations’ presence on social media is not usually guided by a formal strategic planning process. This lack of formal approach results, most of the times, in the so-called social media tactic “push strategy” (Mergel, 2013b), which hinders taking

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7 At the international level, individuals spoke of the cases of the United States, Canada, Chile, Ecuador, and the UK. At the Spanish level, they referred to Euskadi, Castilla y León, and Aragon (regional level), and Zaragoza, Gijón, and Alcobendas (local level). Finally, at the Catalan level, they mentioned the Autonomous Government of Catalonia, and the cities of Terrassa, Mataró, Sabadell, and Lleida.
advantage of social media potential in terms of interaction. This absence of strategy generally goes with poor political and executive leadership and deficient management.

Our conclusions show that more research on social media use by public administrations is still needed. In this respect, as Criado et al. (2013) show, former research has been very descriptive but there is a need for more explanatory research. This paper has only been a very first attempt to approach the topic. Arguably, following this vein the next step would be to empirically test this model within a sample of public organizations and see how it explains the use and impact of social media. As a concluding remark, we are convinced that only by understanding what makes public organizations more able to develop successful social media practices we could be able to foster its development around the public sector.

REFERENCES


