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From Knowledge to Wisdom

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Transparency Policies in Italy: The Case of Venice Municipality

Renato Ruffini

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Transparency is a complex phenomenon characterised by aspects that can be linked and interpreted differently. In particular transparency is associated with information and participation. In order to better understand how to manage transparency in a municipality, the paper analyses the case of Venice that adopted a strong policy to increase citizen participation through information and communications technology (ICT). Starting with the idea that transparency is achieved only when perception of transparency between management and citizens (users) is aligned, the author has verified this alignment administering the same questionnaire separately to managers/officers and citizens. The author also analyses the alignment of perception for the different elements (motivation, issues, tools and relation) that administration has to manage to achieve transparency. The results show that for managing administration's transparency it is necessary to manage the "transparency triangle", i.e., addressing the information to a specific necessity of access to services or to citizen participation, with a different mix of high relational tools.

Keywords: transparency, information, access, citizen participation

The structural distinction between property and control in public administration (Fama & Jensen, 1983), coupled with the complexity of evaluation of public interests, obfuscates the clear identification of the effectiveness of the public actions. In this highly complex context, accountability of public institutions is fundamental for the "good administration" and transparency is the core element to achieve accountability because it creates a better confidence between controlled—public administration—and controller—citizens. Moreover, a more transparent decision-making cycle could prevent or reduce corruption (Tanzi, 1998; Hood, 2001; Fozzard & Foster, 2001).

The literature has already highlighted the relationship between transparency and citizen participation (Kopits & Craig, 1998; Reissman, Patricia, Richard, Terri, & Prior, 2006). This link is possible only if public administration speaks to its citizens focusing on the quality of information. But, despite a general consensus concerning the usefulness of transparency, there is no clear agreement at the level of transparency to be adopted (Finkelstein, 2000). This is caused by the high transaction costs related to the enhancement of the participation of the citizens both in the decision-making phase and in the service delivery phase. The development of the information and communications technology (ICT) led to a reduction of transaction costs (Snyder, 2004). Nevertheless, these tools are not a panacea that could solve all the issues related to the transparency matter. Thus, it shows the need for an in-depth analysis of the relationship between participation and transparency (Alt

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& Lassen, 2005) focusing also on ICT tools used.

In order to observe the relation between transparency with the other concepts (information and participation) and tools (ICT and others), in this paper the author analyses citizens, public managers and officers' perceptions of transparency in the Municipality of Venice.

The author focuses on how the mix of information, access to the services and participation should be designed and used as a driver in the development of the concept of transparency.

The paper is organized as follows: firstly a section reviews the literature and gives a definition of the concept of transparency; then the recent legislation relating to transparency in Italy (up to 2011) is briefly described and lastly a case study is analyzed and discussed, finally some conclusions are proposed.

Theoretical Framework

Transparency is a complex phenomenon characterized by manifold aspects that can be linked and interpreted differently. In recent years, both the legal and managerial literature (the latter with a greater delay than the former), has dealt with the transparency issue with numerous contributions (see, for example: Florini, 2007; Hood & Heald, 2006; Roberts, 2004; Fairbanks, Plowman, & Rawlins, 2007; Piotrowski & Van Ryzin, 2007).

The management literature focuses mainly on technical documents, such as plans, budgets, etc. In particular, after the 1970s, planning documents concerned with the control of the accumulation of public debt have grown unabated (Considine, 2002). In addition to this, interest grew in relation to the transparency of programming documents (especially budget transparency) concerning the fiscal policy of central government (Alesina & Perotti, 1996; Hagen & Vabo, 2005; Stein, Talvi, & Grisanti, 1998). On the matter of corruption, some authors noticed that there was a positive relation between the breach of the accounting and reporting rules, and the risk of corruption phenomena (Matheson & Kwon, 2003). Moreover, transparency in public administration is seen as a critical aspect to prevent corruption and increase accountability (Tanzi, 1998; Hood, 2001; Fozzard & Foster, 2001).

In the analysed studies, scholars define fields and variables related to transparency. In particular, the main variables related to the concept of transparency are: the knowledge of the society; the ease in acquisition of and access to information; equity; trust; and impacts (real and/or perceived) of economic policy decisions (Reissman et al., 2006). Also, according to Kopits and Craig (1998), who described the features to increase public sector transparency, information should be reliable, complete, timely, understandable and comparable. Transparency means that information should be freely accessible to those who are affected by political decisions. Moreover, such information should be delivered in the appropriate forms through the media. Furthermore, information should arrive to the right people at the right time and for the right reason (Goleman, Bennis, & O'Toole, 2009). ICT tools, which brought substantial changes in the modalities of use of information, should allow an increase in citizens' participation in public choices (Snyder, 2004).

In fact, transparency is also strongly connected to citizens' participation. This may be more or less active, and goes, in the widely citing Arnstein's "ladder of participation" (1969), from manipulation and placation of the public, to informing and consultation and, on the higher rungs, to partnership and eventually citizens' control. These forms of partnerships are also known with the term "co-production" that could be defined as "the public sector and citizens making better use of each other's assets and resources to achieve better outcomes or improved efficiency" (Loeffler & Power, 2013). Also Pestoff (2012) highlighted that co-production often can

lead to expanded opportunities for participation, along with cost reductions, higher service quality, and greater satisfaction with and support for public services. Even these aspects that are changing the structure of the public sector, have like an essential prerequisite transparency and accountability.

Nevertheless, in everyday life, transparency and accountability are difficult and poorly practiced activities, both in the public sector and the private sector. First, there is a strong complexity concerning the information to be processed; this can lead, especially for public managers, to produce redundant information using very specialized languages. Moreover, public administration generally acts on a wide range of sectors and it is not interested in one single program, so complexity is higher. In addition, a low political motivation to give clear objectives can often be found in public institutions. These factors facilitate the development of opportunistic behaviors by public managers that hold information, and use it to preserve their power. Organizations and individuals should adopt transparency for ethical reasons but in the everyday practice this happens very rarely. For all these reasons, information is essentially ineffective and useless for the citizens. Consequently, despite it always invoked, transparency is rarely effectively developed. So it is necessary to better understand how to manage transparency.

It is believed that transparency is achieved only when preferences between public managers/officers and citizens are aligned or, in other words, when transparency is associated with the request of the citizens. Therefore transparency is a complex issue composed by the interaction between information, access and participation and it is not limited to “the availability of information about an actor that allows other actors to monitor the workings or performance of the first actor” (Meijer, 2013, p. 2). In fact, this definition considers transparency mainly like an accountability problem, while striving transparency management is multifaceted. Information is necessary for the development of transparency, but it is not sufficient. It is necessary that, besides information, public managers/officers engage citizens in some forms of access or participation or both of them. Politicians and managers have to search the right mix of this three elements (or almost two of them) striving to meet the citizens’ declared and hidden needs.

For these reasons, transparency is defined as a dynamic equilibrium between the methods set up by managers and politicians for improving information, access and participation, and the declared and hidden citizens’ needs (see Figure 1).

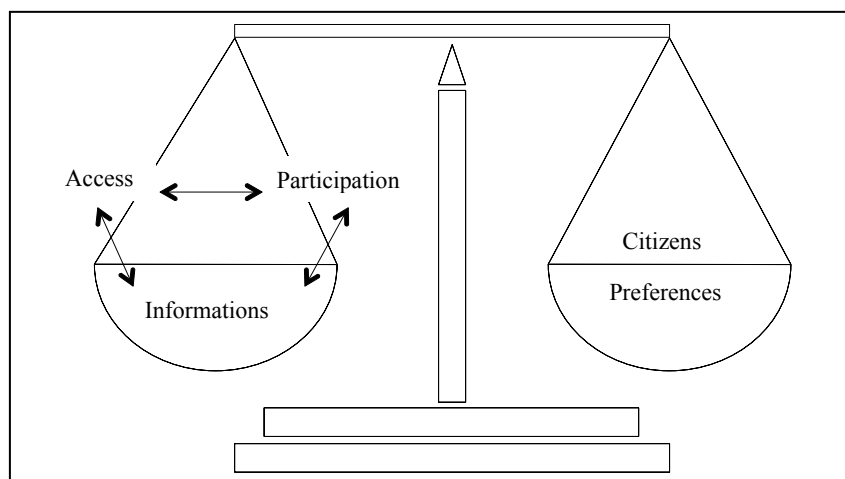


Figure 1. The transparency equilibrium.

In particular information regards all data that public administration should provide concerning input, administrative process, and the output obtained by each institution. Access regards the ability of citizens to be informed about all issues directly concerning them; for example, being informed on the progress concerning their authorization, as well as the use of “self-service administration” as self-certification or obtaining or participating in certain services through the internet. Participation regards co-decision, in the sense that public administration actively encourages citizens to contribute with ideas in order to decide how to address administrative actions; for example, citizens’ participation in urban planning, budgeting, or in problem-solving meetings with police; or other forms of co-production, where public administration co-plans and co-delivers some public services with citizens’ association.

This research tried to test the hypothesis by means of a questionnaire administered to public managers/officers and citizens asking their preferences on these four sections: tools, motivations, issues and relationship between civil servants and citizens. The questionnaire is the same for all the categories of enquired subject. The questionnaire allows verifying what are the differences related to these four elements between the actors involved and also allow determining the perception of the transparency level of the municipality analyzed in terms of the level of information and participations.

Methodology

The research is based on exploratory case study (Yin, 1994). Data gathering are based on different sources, thus ensuring their triangulation and the internal validity of empirical evidence, through observational and interpretational replicability (Stake, 1995). More specifically, documental analysis, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews are combined. The author made five interviews to municipality managers: one of them to the Director General and the others to the quality assurance managers. Moreover, the author administered the same questionnaires separately to public managers/officers and citizens. On the municipality side, the author opted to administer the questionnaires only to managers and middle managers. The author collected 111 questionnaires among them with a very high response rate (81%). On the citizen side, the author was interested in selecting people who had just had some business with the municipality. To assure it, the author sent the questionnaires to all citizens who had previously authorized municipality to send them communications and the author directly administered the questionnaires inside the town halls or by mail. In particular, the author collected 190 questionnaires, 114 of them directly and the remaining parts through mail reply.

The thematic structure of the questionnaire provided a two-fold level of analysis for each section covered: one level of a general nature and aimed at creating an analytical structure suitable to other case studies, and a second level specifically designed for each case study considered. Table 1 shows the questionnaire administered.

This structure is aimed at identifying the best tools for increasing transparency and participation, in order to evaluate the activities carried out by the City from the two-fold perspective of citizens and administrators. The last three questions ask respondents to express an opinion concerning the overall level of transparency of the City, how it influences the administration itself, and a global assessment of the policies adopted in relation to transparency, participation and listening. The last two questions were constructed to verify the existence of the connection between transparency and participation.

The analysis was based on the differences between the data collected from citizens and those from the

public officers, and secondly on the differences between the perceptions of respondents concerning the concepts in abstract terms and in the analyzed case study.

Table 1

Questionnaire Administered

Interviewed database								
Have you already known transparency before now? Yes/No/Partially.								
Section 1—Tools								
<i>To what extent are these tools useful for enhancing transparency?</i>								
Information tools	1	2	3	4	5			
Public billboards								
Press								
Institutional website								
Internet								
Radio/local TV								
<i>To what extent are these listening/participation tools useful to enhance transparency?</i>								
Listening tools	1	2	3	4				
Customer satisfaction								
Public meetings								
On-line services								
Telephone (Public Relation Office—URP)								
Participation tools	1	2	3	4				
Participatory budgeting								
Public meetings								
Suggests for future actions								
Complaints/suggestions								
<i>In your opinion, which tools have the Municipalities recently used?</i>								
Section 2—Why transparency?								
<i>In your opinion, what motivations among those listed below are pushing the Municipalities towards greater transparency and participation?</i>								
Motivations	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Political competition/consensus								
Political will to be more effective								
Employees civic sense								
Pressure from press and media								
Legislative obligations								
Possibility to acquire new resources (financial, know-how, etc.)								
Section 3—Issues								
<i>In your opinion, what is the transparency level of these activities in the Municipality of Venice?</i>								
Issues	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Services delivered in municipality's offices								
Political programmes and objectives								
Level of objectives achievement								
Budget								
Offices organization								
Public officer individual performances								
Section 4—Citizens-Municipality relationship								

(to be continued)

<i>In your opinion, which elements are able to affect the relationship between citizens and administration?</i>								
Elements	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Political consensus								
Quality of the monitoring instruments								
Professionals capabilities								
Commonly usage of ICT tools								
Commonly usage of listening tools								
Financial resources for new ideas								
Growth of the general agreements of the society								
Overall assessment	1	2	3	4	5	don't know		
Information level of the Venice Municipality								
Participation level of the Venice Municipality								
<i>Would you make suggestions to improve the linkage between transparency and participation?</i>								

Transparency Policy in Italy: The Legal Framework

In Italy, a legislative reform has been recently implemented (Act No. 150/2009) which introduced transparency measures with the aim to develop the accountability of public administrations also through a better use of the ICT tools.

Before this reform, the Italian legal system had no organic standards on transparency, except for those that protect the citizen in his relations with the public administration. Act No. 241/1990 rules the relations between the public administration and the citizen and it is based on full access to the proceedings that concern each one. There are also country standards, introduced in 2000, aimed at the development of “citizen’s charter” usage, even if ever since all these instruments have been rarely used, and standards concerning the development of public communications. Since 2006, in connection with growing of the public finance constraints, the legal system has introduced a myriad of “disorganized” new obligations for public administrations related to internal management and activities, rather than developing transparency for citizens. In particular, institutions have to communicate the following information on their institutional website: consultancy agreements and individual collaboration; costs related to provision of equipment like computers, service cars, etc.; costs of collective labor agreements; annual salaries, curriculum vitae, e-mail addresses and phone numbers of the managers; staff absenteeism rates for executive-level officers; and the organogram. According to Act No. 150/2009, the idea of transparency was the “total disclosure” of all things related to the public administrations. Moreover the Act prescribes mandatory requirements such as: the redaction of a transparency plan; the opening of an area called “transparency, evaluation and merit”, within the institutional website, where all the information requested are published; and the organizing of an annual meeting with stakeholders and consumers’ associations.

Failure to comply with these requirements is subject to penalties ranging from the reduction of managers/officers salaries, to the possibility to block hiring of new staff. New internal supervisory bodies (but composed of external persons) were connected to a national agency, the CIVIT (independent commission for the evaluation, transparency and integrity of the public administration) whose task is, among others, to monitor the implementation of the laws obligations.

This brief description sets out clearly how transparency legislation fits within the Italian administrative tradition, where the legislator supposes that timely and compelling legislation is enough to ensure

organizational change.

The Case of the Venice Municipality

Venice is one of the most famous cities in the world, with 25 million tourists every year against 260 miles inhabitants. This particular situation makes Venice Municipality very attentive to inform tourists and citizens, and to manage relationship with stakeholders and citizens, so that Municipality adopts all kind of useful tools to increase transparency. Venice Municipality has a long tradition as far as transparency is concerned. The City has always been rather sensitive to relationship with its citizens and over time has constantly developed information tools and forms of civic participation (from budget participation to environmental protection projects managed by citizens). Lastly, in the period of 2004-2010 Venice has invested a significant amount of money aimed at improving transparency.

In particular, the City has implemented a project called “*Amministrare 2.0*” (Administering 2.0) that aims to increase the citizens’ participation through ICT, with the clear intention of improving services accessibility to citizens. The project took its cue from the so-called web 2.0 logic, a term coined in 2004 by Tim O’Reilly and Dale Dougherty to indicate the second-generation internet services that were intended as social networking websites and emphasize collaboration and sharing among users. Keywords selected for the development of the project were: collaborate, communicate, and de-materialize. These three actions are the basis of change promoted by the City of Venice in dealing with its citizens and its employees.

On this basis, the Municipality also developed a “manifesto” around which it wanted to sum up its view of the relationship with users that is the cultural underpinning of the project (see Table 2).

Table 2

The Manifesto for “Amministare 2.0”

The network is the space of collective knowledge.
Everybody can participate in knowledge development.
Web 2.0 procedures and philosophy transform favors into rights.
Web 2.0 is not a technology, it is web generated by the collaboration process between users.
Citizens too become leading actors in the collaborative process.
Citizens want to see their rights implemented, they don’t need favors.
The aim of the collaborative process is the resolution of citizens’ issues.
The quality of final products is determined by the optimization of the collaborative process among its many users.
The positive actions of the organization are based on collaboration.
Productivity growth of the public administration is based on collaboration process.
Knowledge is the outcome of sharing.
As a consequence, the implication of collaboration is term “mine” replaced by “ours” (from my document, my procedure, my knowledge to our documents, our procedures, our knowledge).

In recent years, the Venice Municipality has expanded the range of services offered through its web portal (see Table 3). It started a phase of de-materialization of paper documents through the use of an integrated and computerized protocol; the use of certified electronic mail; the digitalization of administrative documents; and the use of digital signatures by officers and service managers. In a section of its website, it made available all the documents that citizens have a right to access and open some services of interaction between the administration and users like taxation schedules, building permits, and other services. Moreover, from 2010, it

started some specific projects in various areas by means of portals dedicated to interaction with all users interested in the services.

The intense activities put in place by the Municipality administration, within a fairly limited amount of time, allows Venice to be considered as a good case study. In this analysis, the paper aimed at understanding the effectiveness of the policies promoted in the light of transparency.

Table 3

New Services Developed in the Manage 2.0 Project

Function	Service
Tourism	VeniceConnected (www.veniceconnected.com). This enabled the creation of a unique information platform for access to tourist services, aimed at monitoring and managing the influx of tourists each year.
Viability	IRIS (Internet Reporting Information, www.system-iris.comune.venezia.it). This offers the opportunity for citizens to report directly to the administration any problems related to maintenance of roads and other traffic-related problems.
	ARGOS (Automatic & Remote Observation System Grand Canal, www.argos.venezia.it). That allows users a continuous monitoring and real-time of ship traffic.
Moorings	BARIS (Boat Areas Research Information System, baris.comune.venezia.it). A system related to the management of the release of moorings.
Schools	GeoScuole (www.geoscuole.comune.venezia.it). That reports useful information related to waiting lists and services of kindergartens and pre-schools
Public works	GEOLP (www.geolp.comune.venezia.it). That allows citizen to watch the development of public works in real time and enables users to call for related information.
Public relation	They also give a lot of customer satisfactions questionnaire and develop the services' chart.
Internal services	They develop a lot of instruments (like Google docs, sharing calendar, Intranet, etc.) aimed to enhance collaborations between public servants

Ingredients for Success

Data from questionnaire have been gathered in a three-month period. The 95% of the managers and officers confirmed to know transparency, whereas only 49% of the citizens in the examined sample declared to be confident with the topic. This percentage difference indicates a significant gap about the knowledge about the matter between managers/officers and citizens. The results concerning the information tools used show a stronger orientation to the use of the website among managers and officers compared to citizens. In particular, the former considered the website (44%) as the best tool to inform, followed by the traditional tools of public billboards (24%) and the Internet (20%). Citizens are substantially indifferent between the different kinds of information tools, their preferences ranging from 22% to 19%.

Concerning the general opinion of participatory tools, citizens preferred complaints and suggestions (24%), while officers prefer on-line services (28%). The only equivalent scores (23%) are the level of satisfaction with the Public Relation Office (URP).

The section 4 of the questionnaire, concerning the City of Venice, shows different results compared to the general analysis: both citizens and managers/officers identified the URP as the most effective tool, followed by on-line services, while both of them placed the participation budget in the last position. This opinion emerged also in the interviews with the managers/officers, in which they admitted the ineffectiveness of this tool also because it has been subjected to pressure from interest groups. About the favored participation channels, again citizens show to prefer complaints (24% of the sample), followed by the URP (22%), while managers/officers show to favor on-line services (28%) followed by the URP. These results point out that the citizen prefers the direct contact and relationship with Municipality employees, while managers/officers opt for the on-line

services.

On the motivation side, there were several differences between citizens and officers. In fact, the latter identified the legislative obligations as the main motivation (32%), followed by pressure from the business community and citizens (20%), and the civic sense (19%). On the other hand, citizens argued that such processes were motivated by political programs and objectives (20%); all other options, ranging from political competition (15%), pressure from the media (12%) and those just mentioned, were considered to be heterogeneous and of low importance. In the third section, data show that both officer and citizens appreciate the higher level of transparency in the delivered services. On the contrary, all the other items reach just a sufficient level on average.

The data of the section four show that officers, with their expertise, are the principal successful factor for an effective relationship between citizens and administration (45%—Very much), while both gave no importance to political consensus (46%—None).

The relative differences between employees and citizens vanished when they were asked to assess the level of participation and transparency of the City of Venice: both reported a sufficiently adequate level (more than 50% of the population interviewed gave a score higher than 3 in a scale of 1-5). This result appeared satisfactory, independently from the numeric level, partly because the officers were aware of the need to keep on doing this way, and partly because the citizens recognized this level as being acceptable.

Table 4

Comparison Between Public Officers and Citizens on the Information and Participation Issues

		1	2	3	4	5	Don't know
Public officers	Information	0.90%	5.40%	40.50%	49.50%	3.60%	0.00%
	Participation	4.50%	13.50%	45.00%	31.00%	3.60%	1.80%
Citizens	Information	4.20%	19.00%	43.90%	23.40%	2.10%	6.30%
	Participation	5.60%	23.40%	42.50%	17.70%	2.80%	7.80%

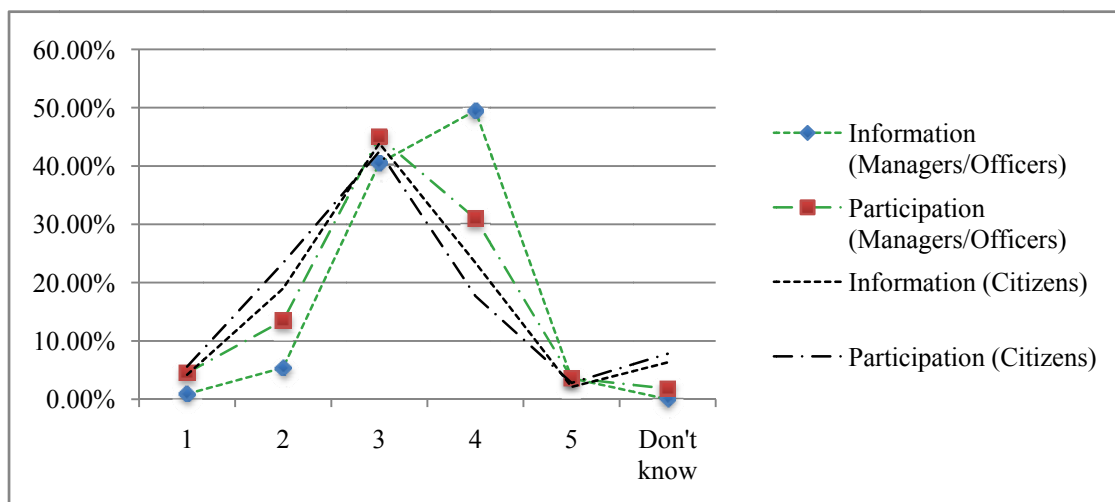


Figure 2. Comparison between public officers and citizens on the information and participation issues.

Analyzing more deeply the common perception of managers/officers and citizens at the overall level of information and participation, the data show some little gaps (see Table 4 and Figure 2). Almost the 92% of the managers/officers consider the level of information above adequacy level (> 3 on the Likert scale), while 80%

citizens is satisfied. As regard participation, the 69% of managers/officers gave a judgment over the sufficiency, near to citizens (63%).

So, according to the definition of transparency as dynamic equilibrium between the methods set up by managers for improving information, access and participation, and the declared and hidden citizens' needs, it is possible to deduce that the level of transparency in the Municipality of Venice is in equilibrium, i.e., at a good level. This result can be asserted even despite a partial misalignment in the perceptions of bureaucrats and citizens related to the level of information.

Conclusions of the Analysis

Transparency is something that requires more complex organizational and relational conditions, especially if the concept is given a large range of meaning also in terms of participation.

The main problem is that public institutions, especially in civil law countries, should not manage transparency only in a compliance manner. Looking at the transparency web links of the Italian Municipality, immediately it becomes clear that information on the websites is limited to compliance with the prescribed legislation but is not citizen-friendly (Cucciniello, Nasi, & Saporito, 2012).

In setting up the model, it was assumed that the level of transparency (understood in the broadest sense as a phenomenon that includes information up to participation) is identified as a level of consistency between the activities of administrations, designed to improve transparency, and their responsiveness to citizens' needs.

The case analysis leads to the following conclusions. The motivation to be transparent is different between managers/officers and citizens, but this does not affect the good perception of transparency. While managers/officers are more susceptible to external pressures, citizens tend to attribute the responsibility directly to the elected politicians who are considered to be the main reference for the development of transparency. The second observation deriving from the case of Venice is that ICT is a relevant instrument for managing transparency, but also emerged that citizens need direct relationship. On the whole, in Venice, the strong utilization of ICT tools in order to create new ways of access to the services improved the perception and the effectiveness of transparency and the appreciation of this kind of tools. The uses of the web only to increase a generic level of information, without relation with access or participation, probably have not positive effect on citizens' transparency perception. This is also evident analyzing the low interest that managers/officers and citizens show about some internal mandatory information, such as budget and employees merit pay. In addition, such information exists on the administration's website (due to legal obligations), but it is not easy to read due to technical reasons.

Concluding, the case of Venice shows how transparency must be managed as a complex relationship with citizens aimed to involve them into the services.

From this first analysis of the case, a number of issues/perspectives can be proposed for further development, such as:

(1) Transparency is a phenomenon whose development depends on the willingness of an administration and on the action of its citizens (who have low level of basic information and poor expectations, and who are easily influenced). The intention of an administration is based on a strong political leadership and, to a lesser extent, by external drivers (legislation and stakeholder pressure);

(2) ICT is a powerful media tool for the development of transparency but only if the administration uses this tool in an interactive way in order to increase access or participation;

(3) Transparency (understood in a general sense) is activated more effectively where joint actions for improving information and participation are developed.

The statements above are still weak in terms of empirical evidence and should be the object of further investigation, as well as the techniques of analysis of alignment between an administration and its citizens on the subject of transparency.

Nevertheless the case analyzed clearly shows that for managing transparency, it is necessary to master the “transparency triangle”, which means addressing information to a specific need of access to services or to citizen participation.

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