Public Communication in the Processes of Transparency and Accountability in the Era of Open Data

Gea Ducci^a

Abstract

In recent years, transparency and accountability seem to find new impulse, with the development of ICT (information and communication technology) and the prospective of open data that invest the public system at a national and supranational level. Public institutions tend to make available to the public, more data and information concerning the administration, the manner of use of public goods and resources. At the same time, each institution is called upon to deal with the demand of transparency and participation by citizens who increasingly use Internet 2.0 and social media. After a reflection on how public administrations acted in the phase of Web 1.0 to practice transparency and accountability in terms of communication, this paper considers the elements of continuity and the new opportunities linked to the advent of Web 2.0 and open data. At the end of this analysis, the focus is on the strengths and weaknesses of this process, with a particular attention to the role of the public communication.

Keywords

Public communication, civic engagement, transparency, accountability, open data

Transparency and accountability of public institutions are again at the centre of the contemporary public sphere in a context of deep economic crisis which implies a renewed governance of territories by local, national, and international administrations. A governance based on a culture of public communication, a way of understanding and managing the relationship with citizens that follows to the principle of shared, relational, and participatory administration (Faccioli 2000; Rovinetti 2010; Arena 2002), supported by network technologies.

New forms of civic engagement of citizens, from the bottom, enabled by the social and participatory web (Dahlgren 2009; Castells 2009; Faccioli 2013) and new possibilities of transparency, publicizing, and sharing of data by public institutions (public system)

(i.e., open data, open government, and crowdsourcing), accelerate the development of capacity to be accountable toward the citizens of the way in which public resources are found and used in times of “spending review”, of the way to express the “responsibility” in the public decision-making processes.

This paper seeks to focus on the key strengths and weaknesses that the impact of open data can have on

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^aUniversity of Urbino Carlo Bo, Italy

Correspondent Author:

Gea Ducci, Department of Communication Science and Humanities, University of Urbino Carlo Bo, via Saffi, 15, 61029 Urbino (PU), Italy
E-mail: gea.ducci@uniurb.it

public administrations' transparency and accountability, emphasizing the outstanding role played, in this change, by the culture of public communication within the institutions, the way of understanding and performing the relationship with citizens.

TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY BEFORE OPEN DATA

In the last years, the attention has been raised on institutions' transparency, accounting, and citizen participation to local administration, given the new opportunities offered by network technologies evolution. In some national contexts, new rules on transparency have been adopted and announced as if they were an absolute novelty. However, one must remember that we are not faced with principles and processes which are new to the life of supra-national [i.e., EU (European Union)], national, and local institutions.

Looking at the last 40 years, we can notice that in Europe, an important step of development of public communication as regards transparency and accountability matched with the period going from the early 90s to the end of the first decade of the second millennium (about 2008), when the economic crisis seriously affected the old continent and a real internet revolution began (Web 2.0).

It should be noted that the concept of "accountability" refers to the public administration's taking responsibility in decision-making and implies the reporting to citizens of the ways that public resources are administered, of the link between goals set out and results achieved, through the stakeholders' involvement and participation to the various steps [ex-ante, *in itinere* (during), and ex-post] of public policies life cycle. This should help the citizens evaluate the administration work and contribute to its continuous improvement (Pezzani 2003; Tanese 2004). Thus, accountability is strictly intertwined with the transparency of institutions and with the citizens'

participation to the governance of the territories, and it results from the administration capacity of implementing a public policy evaluation system of an "inclusive" type, encouraging active involvement, through dialogue and listening, and of being able to process hints and suggestions from citizens.

On this basis, accountability has tried to innovate traditional systems of reporting dealing merely with data and economic information (financial statements of public bodies) and which, therefore, were based on measurement criteria and languages quite far apart from the citizens, unable to describe the work of a public body. To this regard, models and tools have been conceived aiming at building the sense of public action, connecting aims, actions, and results of an administration activity, such as, for instance, social responsibility reports, sector reports (more often said environmental report or gender report), participatory balance sheets of an entire local authority, etc. In adopting these new reporting tools, special attention has been paid to the role of public communication, which is following this process in all its steps, in order to make its content visible and accessible, to favour its evolution by the development and enforcement of a communication network connecting all the players dealing in the territory concerned (institutions, associations, enterprises, and citizens).

There has been much discussion and thought about the features of public communication in this process: A communication that should help fill social gaps and aim at giving everybody the same opportunities, a communication seen no longer according to political propaganda logic, but as a real "service" which should contribute to feed reciprocity and citizens' reliance on administration (Faccioli 2000; Rovinetti 2010). This is why attention has been drawn to the fact that it should be treated according to standards of maximum clarity, understandability, and accessibility, and it has been deemed urgent to solicit administrations to plan institutional communication, to manage it in multichannel mode (Forghieri 2010; Ducci 2007),

using several communication tools in an integrated way (from traditional media to digital media), and to entrust such task to qualified staff within administrations (valorisation of professional profiles expert on institutional communication). The possible social effect of these processes has also been stressed: Enterprises, associations, citizens, taking part to these routes, would develop their social capital, the whole of the reciprocity relations, valuable asset for the good performance of a participated administration of public resources, of common goods (Putnam 2000; Donati 2013).

In order to draw conclusions from this first step, a number of fundamental aspects should be taken into account. First of all, at least at a European level, the way of looking at and practicing the relationship with the citizen and of sharing with him/her the administration of a territory by public administrations has differed from country to country, from region to region: From a culture of accountability deeply rooted in the United Kingdom to countries like Italy where this approach has only recently been introduced. These differences can result from the political-institutional features of each country with a democratic form of government (form and culture of the political system representing it, election system, political system, etc.), from the digitalization level achieved by the public system, and from the type of culture of public communication prevailing among administrators. As far as public communication of EU institutions is concerned, it is only around the end of this first step that it gained strong and important recognition. The EU acquired new tools and communication strategies, mainly after the adoption of the White Paper on Communication in 2006 and the introduction of a European citizenship where the citizens' right to be informed by institutions and to take part to decision-making processes, was considered essential. Moreover, e-government and e-democracy plans have followed at EU and national level, at a constant pace (Ducci 2013), though

differently from country to country.

Overall, the implementation of innovative reporting tools and their communication can be regarded as a valuable work, however, only partially achieved by institutions. The main difficulties have often been raised, in some countries, by a tendency and culture of measuring results, on one side, and also by the lack of adequate communication skills and abilities in dealing with stakeholders, on the other side. Besides the administration efforts, citizens have rarely had the appropriate tools for evaluating the administrations' work and participating to the various steps of processing and evaluating the policies. A critical issue has concerned the logic of inclusion/exclusion underlying the stakeholders mapping to involve in the participatory processes, the level of communicative skills in public administrations and the lack of resources available. It is a sensitive issue aiming at reducing the micro-macro link possibilities these tools should encourage, which is the possibilities of mutual influence and connection between citizens—single or associated, and institutions as social macro-systems (Mazzoli 2009; Mazzoli 2012). Moreover, the use of the net, under Web 1.0, although in a bidirectional way (management of forum, civic networks, and e-democracy spaces), has had some known critical issues: the digital divide, the lack of broad band in a number of territories, the different citizens' will to "get involved" together with institutions (a not uniform and quite limited will).

A culture of self-referentiality has seemed to prevail, a way of understanding communication as a one-way process and an involvement of citizens mainly regarding the final step of the policies evaluation and reporting processes that is a sort of "post" involvement. Therefore, in order to enhance the ability of the new reporting tools to qualify the democratic processes, methods of representative democracy have been chosen (e.g., discussion and approval of the financial statements within

commissions and town councils). A line model of “reconstruction of sense” of reporting has prevailed at the expense of really inclusive, participatory processes.

This step ended as mentioned above, around 2008, when the economic crisis was at the utmost, and the web evolved to 2.0, social media spread among people (social network sites like Facebook and Twitter), and new digital systems of content generation and sharing prevailed (crowdsourcing, open data, and open government).

ACCOUNTABILITY AND PUBLIC COMMUNICATION 2.0 WITH OPEN DATA

Second generation web (Web 2.0) is allegedly based on a participatory architecture, enabling web users to cooperate, interact with others, and share content (thanks to User Generated Content platforms and social network sites) (Jenkins 2009; Ito 2008). These activities were partially possible also with Web 1.0, but they differ in quantity, strength, and ease of doing them (Lovari 2013). Eventually, people have generally improved their network skills (Mazzoli 2012), feeling not only as simple users (public), but also as producers of content (co-authors), in a state of more or less active constant connection (Varnelis 2008; Boccia Artieri 2012). This new condition is leading to a widespread feeling of reassessment of the traditional communication asymmetry between citizens and institutions (Jenkins 2009; Ducci 2013), also because—as Castells (2009) put it, in network society, top-forced frames, and top-down logics, today risk to reduce the possibility of getting acceptance and support.

Therefore, with social and participatory web, on one side, civic engagement forms are developing, through the use of new spaces and tools, enabling each citizen to often afford issues of general interest independently from institutions (Dahlgren 2009; Castells 2009; Faccioli 2013). On the other side, administrations have new tools available in order to

become more transparent, accountable, to involve citizens in decision-making and to build a renewed relationship with the territory. These new opportunities offered by the internet have also some strongly critical aspects, mainly referable to digital divide among citizens, undertakings, associations, and within local administrations themselves (Bentivegna 2009).

In the last years, the advent of open data has burst out, as an event of great social interest, with a strong impact on the relationship between institutions and citizens. With open data, administrations are urged to make the data they own public and usable, in a usable and editable form, and to publish them so that they can be redistributed and reused. Data which are interesting for people (biographical, location, environmental details, health data, etc.) can be “released”—with due regard for privacy, thus improving public administration transparency and, therefore, accountability, the ability of expressing their own responsibility on the way public resources are dealt, hence to account to the citizens for their conduct. Overall open data can improve citizens life (e.g., availability of data on crime, the environment, etc.), making public sector more efficient for the fact of being more exposed to public opinion, and having a positive impact on the economic system of the area (data can be used by enterprises, investors, and third sector). Open data can thus enhance relations and interactions with the citizens and the main players of the territory (Lovari 2013), arousing their active engagement.

As far as accountability is concerned, open data can change the point of view, given the possibility of developing a reporting system based on a different aggregation of information coming from a number of sources (not only institutional sources). This can lead to an extension of participatory “inclusive” democracy, which joins, collaborates with (and it does not replace) the prevailing form of representative democracy, because citizens are involved and can give their

contribution using data, commenting them and providing data themselves. Open data cannot be regarded just as a tool of institutional system transparency, considered as simple publishing of large quantities of “row” data, in a one-way system, but also as a vehicle of citizen participation to the management of public affairs. A second phase of open data is already under way (Osservatorio smart cities of ANCI, ForumPA 2014), moving from the central role of data producer to the central role of the demand, paying attention to the needs of the data users themselves. Public administrations are thus urged to ask themselves about data use and reuse by all the players of the territory, about the reason and the way citizens, enterprises, and associations refer to them and on the implementation of routes ensuring them an easy access and use, as well as their production and exchange by the communities themselves, through the use of effective communication strategies.

A case in point is data.gov.uk, the British government open data platform, which counts as much as 40 data series and resources coming from governmental agencies. In addition to lots of raw data, the site offers a variety of applications that help to aggregate data that are presented by subject areas, with graphics modes of immediate impact and the use of a very simple language that helps the users make the best choices, according to their needs (e.g., Collegio Navigator, Alternative Fuel Locator, Health Centre). Moreover, citizens are encouraged to continuously provide suggestions to improve access and use of the platform and are placed at the center of the entire system.

As for the above mentioned accountability tools, already tested in the step prior to the open data, they can now be improved as regards their participation potential. For example, participated social balance sheet traditionally was mainly based on face to face meetings with stakeholders and citizens and online contacts through the interactive tools of the Web 1.0. Thanks to the advanced digital communication tools

(e.g., social media), you can reach greater capillarity and cultivate a dialogue with the various players and, therefore, strengthen the relationships with the wider community. Furthermore, institutions can encourage the involvement of citizens even in poor participation areas, such as promoting exchanges of cooperation in multichannel mode between technically skilled public employees and residents. These modes can replace one-way communication and eventually favour greater mutual trust between institutions and citizens, a more participated governance of territories (Goldsmith and Crawford 2014).

A FEW CRITICAL COMMENTS

At this point, let us briefly highlight some of the strengths and weaknesses of the impact that open data can have on the system of transparency and institutional accountability.

As for the benefits, there is no doubt that open data:

(1) Can ensure greater “objective” transparency by public administrations and greater opportunities to look for data that were previously supplied “from above”, thanks to the availability of raw data by multiple sources;

(2) Can foster the exchange and sharing of content on the network with a consequent increase in social capital from institutions and citizens and positive impact at the level of community cohesion and sense of trust within the institutions;

(3) May favour the extension of the forms of inclusive participatory democracy and the strengthening of a participated governance of the territories;

(4) Can change the way institutions and citizens see their position in communication (Boccia Artieri 2012; Ducci 2009): Greater symmetry is stimulated by the co-generation of content, by the dialogue and the civic engagement, owing to the citizen being placed at the centre of the process and to the ability to offer a path of meaning in publishing these data, taking into

account the real needs of the users.

These benefits can be achieved if there are some “enabling conditions” that institutions themselves should try to promote in the territory concerned, including:

(1) Increasing the spread of digital skills among the population and within institutions;

(2) Enhancing the skills of internal and external public communication within public organizations focused on (off and online) multichannel strategies;

(3) Strengthening the engagement supporting activities, e.g., by cooperating with the so-called “digital intermediaries” that is expert people often not belonging to institutions, through whom involve the greatest number of citizens, therefore, enhancing existing digital infrastructures and promoting digital culture with the help of the “expert” citizens themselves (Goldsmith and Crawford 2014).

Besides strengths and benefits, weaknesses and critical issues cannot be overlooked. There remain:

(1) Problems of infrastructures. The different information systems used to make data available must be compatible with each other to achieve interoperability between institutions and usability of data at a local and global level. However, in many local contexts, this compatibility has not been implemented yet;

(2) Problems at a socio-cultural level. Different approaches are still co-existing in the way of understanding communication with the citizen, and thus of using digital technologies. One-way modes of communication prevail. Poor and not widespread communication skills among institutional players do not encourage the adoption of forms of dialogue with the community, enlarged sharing and production of data, or the use of an effective multi-channel communication;

(3) As to compliance with new transparency rules and open data, public administrations tend to adopt self-referential and one-way communication methods and to imitate the activities of other institutions,

focusing on advertising raw data, without thinking about the purpose and the real expectations regarding open data and without considering the characteristics of each local context (institutional isomorphism) (Powell and Di Maggio 1991; Weick 1995). All this often results in “outward” activities or in a widespread difficulty to implement a real change of communication that is a vision prevails placing the authority—rather than the citizen at the centre of the process;

(4) Another critical issue is digital semantics that is the current simultaneous use of different access codes to data. There is a risk of generating information overload making difficult for citizens to read and understand data concerning public administration activity, given that they do not have the same codes, the same language and knowledge to construe such data.

These issues, if not addressed and tackled at an institutional level, will lead to the persistence of different cultures of open data and accountability with the risk of unequal development of advanced digitization globally.

INSTITUTIONS LISTENING AND URGES “FROM THE BOTTOM”

Nowdays, institutions are provided with platforms for sharing online information and participatory processes that can be used to raise awareness and involve citizens in decision-making, through crowdsourcing. To this regard, most worth of notice in Europe is Santander Municipality in the north of Spain¹ or the City of Amsterdam². In both cases, through Web 2.0 and social media, ideas and suggestions are gathered from citizens on urban innovation (participated planning) or on socio-cultural aspects of the territory (health, school, unemployment, young people, elderly, environment, leisure time, etc.), aiming at enhancing resources that individuals and organizations can provide to the community.

Besides examples of positive actions taken by institutions, in the last years, a stimulus to a better institutional reporting comes from the citizens themselves, as emerging practices of civic hacking show (constructive actions of hacking with a civic scope). In Italy, OpenPolis Association has been active since 2006 in creating open data systems and opensource platforms concerning public administration. Worth of mentioning is the OpenMunicipio system recently adopted by a few municipal administrations such as Udine and Senigallia. Using this platform, citizens can be informed in real time about all the political administrative activity by accessing to the body's official data always available on the web site, monitor a deed trend, politicians' activities or a subject matter of special interest, participate to the political life of the town, through comments and opinions on the administration activity, become a member of the community³.

Another initiative of this association is Openbilanci⁴. It is a space on the web where you can view all the balance sheets of all the Italian municipalities whose data have been made available, extracted from the Ministry of Home Affairs. The scope is that of encouraging minorities of active citizens to use them so as to involve other people and groups, extending this opportunity to as many people as possible. Citizens provide suggestions on the platform about the methods of standardizing data and they act to make them more accessible. This results in a greater awareness among people and an increased demand of data by various players in the territory.

Last but not least, the initiative called Openspending⁵ of the association Open Knowledge, a no-profit worldwide network of citizens promoting the availability of data deriving from the principle of maximum dissemination and sharing of knowledge. Openspending collects and makes available on the net public financial information (balance sheets, expenditures, contracts, etc.) related to administrations

of more than 70 countries worldwide.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, open data offers new opportunities for institutions' transparency and accountability, the possibility of extending democracy forms and participatory governance. However, the results will depend greatly on the culture of public communication within administrations. It is necessary to adopt a citizen-centered and relational vision of the relationship with the community concerned, in order to become really "connected" institutions.

Notes

1. <http://www.santandercitybrain.com>.
2. <http://amsterdamsmartcity.com>.
3. <http://udine2013.openmunicipio.it>.
4. <http://www.openbilanci.it>.
5. <http://www.openspending.org>.

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Bio

Gea Ducci, Ph.D., assistant professor, Department of Communication Science and Humanities, University of Urbino Carlo Bo, Italy; research fields: sociology of communication, public communication, civic engagement, participation, social media, and public opinion.