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Stakeholder Engagement and Environmental Disclosure via Facebook, the Case of Italian Local Governments

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ABSTRACT

Delving on an empirical research conducted in Italy, this commentary highlights the use of Facebook by Italian Local Governments (LGOs) in order to disclose environmental information towards their stakeholders and it examines their reactions and their engagement.

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Introduction

The Social Media (SM) channels have not only transformed communication but also have also become an integral part of everyday life [1]. Following this trend, scholars highlighted the need of further and alternative channels to divulge nonfinancial information and to promote stakeholder engagement by companies or institutions [2, 3]. As a result, organizations are increasingly embracing SM to share their sustainability progress and achievements with stakeholders [4, 5, 6]. Concerning the public sphere, there is a new promise and similar high expectation for SM platforms in government; researchers recognize technology as a challenge facing the future of public administration [7, 8]. In fact, citizens will progressively expect government to allow them a greater voice in the decision-making process with these channels and the new generation of public administrators is expecting access to these SM platforms as tools for cooperating with citizens and others players as they make decisions and evaluate performance [9,10]. Within the Italian public sector, it is valuable to analyze the role of LGOs regarding the use of SM platforms to divulge nonfinancial information and to improve stakeholder engagement with citizens and all the other actors. Indeed, in Italy, LGOs are the closest institutions to citizens and their actions generate a direct impact on communities and environment. The use of traditional nonfinancial disclosure tools (e.g. sustainability reports) by LGOs is decreasing [11]. The main hurdles for their use are cost reductions for LGOs that represent an obstruction to sustainability report preparation. Thus, scholars suggest that governments can exploit SM platforms to increase transparency, support collaboration and enable innovative systems of public participation and engagement [12].

Subject

Concerning the aforementioned themes, Rocca et al. have recently developed a study to deep our knowledge about the Italian LGOs'

capability of nonfinancial disclosure and fostering of stakeholder engagement using SM [13]. Indeed, the studies conducted so far have not analyzed the level of stakeholder interaction that characterizes the use of SM by LGOs [14]. The authors have built their research on legitimacy theory and dialogical accountability perspective. As far it concerns the second approach, SM platforms could be seen as tools supporting the dialogical accountability system thanks the possibility of citizens to express judgments/opinions/needs/interests about organizations via SM. Thus, SM platforms could partially have the characteristics of Habermas' "ideal public sphere" because they have the "the potential to increase the symmetrical communication" [8,18]. The aim of the study is, more precisely, to examine Italian LGOs' use of Facebook in disclosing environmental information as a new way to improve accountability to citizens and to analyze the related sentiment of citizens' judgements through Sentiment Analysis (SA). This methodological technique involves the study of the emotions contained in a textual message. It is also called opinion mining and it uses computational methods to automatically analyze human opinions, sentiments and evaluations of entities [15]. The database used for the study is Lexicon Database [16]. The research takes into consideration all the Italian municipalities with a population of more than 100,000 inhabitants. The total number of posts considered in the analysis is 5,939. The newest posts analyzed were published on July, 30th 2018. In carrying out the SA, the authors analyze the environmental disclosure through five classes: air, energy, territory, waste and water. In addition, they define the quantification of public sentiment towards environmental disclosure in three macro-categories (negative, neutral and positive). The results of the research show that the prevailing sentiment is negative. In fact, for every class, more than 50% of comments express a feeling of dissatisfaction. The lowest value for positive emotion is related to the air class (19%). In contrast, the energy class has the greatest number of positive comments (38%),

and it is the class regarding which stakeholders are more active on the platform. Moreover, the low number of responses by LGOs' Facebook accounts suggests that the engagement stakeholder level is still quite low and that governments implement mainly the "one-way communication".

Conclusion

From the point of view of managerial implications, the findings of the study of Rocca et al. suggests that LGOs should foster the use of SM aimed at pursuing an effective stakeholder engagement with their interlocutors. Then, it would be desirable for LGOs to re-think deeply on the role that SM should assume in the future within the organizations' strategy. Nowadays, the LGOs' platforms are not involved in a "two-way communication" strategy but they are used as an information channel. Moreover, the low number of answers to public comments underlines also the need for a cultural change in public-sector governments that are still poorly prepared on the issue of participation and engagement. In fact, the role of the public administrator should change from that of a neutral expert towards becoming a facilitator of participation and engagement [17]. Stakeholder engagement is therefore necessary to reach consensus between such different stakeholders [18]. This involvement can be more easily obtained thanks to the use of SM. Finally, the choice of using a SM platform to discuss environmental issues – activity not compulsory – could be seen as a chance to talk to citizens on the subject in a shared "public sphere". The process is in its infancy but the potentiality to create a co-accountability scenario in sustainability matter is confirmed to be high.

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