Assessing transparency in government: rhetoric, reality and desire

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Transparency in government is a highly regarded value and a critical ingredient for efficient and well-functioning economic and political markets.

Many countries, including Italy, refer to transparency as a tool to enhance government accountability, as a principle to promote in order to reduce corruption in public administration and as a means for circulating information on government performance. However, transparency is preached more often than it is practiced in many cases (Heald 2006). Conversely, not all of the information disclosed is easily accessible or accessed by external stakeholders.

The purpose of this paper is to assess the degree of transparency of governments and to ascertain the type of information that can be accessed by external stakeholders, especially the general public, in order to evaluate the performance of their government. In particular, the paper focuses on the information disclosed through government websites and assesses the case of larger municipalities in Italy.

The paper presents the findings of the analysis and suggests some recommendations for academics and policy makers.

1. Introduction

Transparency in government is a highly regarded value, often studied by academics and emphasized by practitioners. In literature, transparency is discussed as a tool for enhancing the accountability of governments, as a principle to be stimulated in order to curb corruption in public administration and as a means for making information on government performance more readily available.

However, notwithstanding these different connotations, most studies converge on the common underlying assumption that transparency in government is a critical ingredient for efficient and well-functioning economic and political markets. In more general terms, transparency is seen as a cornerstone of democracy. In fact, the claim for a transparent government is embedded with the birth of the modern idea of democracy (Madison, 1822).

Many countries, including Italy, refer to transparency in their constitutional laws and emphasise its application - mainly in terms of free access to information and integrity - as a basic principle in their legal system. According to Heald, however, “Transparency is widely canvassed as a key to better governance, increasing trust in public-office holders. But transparency is more often preached than practised, more often referred to than defined, and more often advocated than critically analysed” (Hood, 2006, p. 3). There is evidence of this thought in literature, as different studies present and discuss theoretical models and practical findings focusing on individual dimensions of transparency (Demchak et. al., 2000; La Porte et al., 2002; Pina et al., 2007; Vishwanath 2003).

This paper reviews existing literature that discusses transparency in government in order to draft and present a framework aimed at assessing the degree of government transparency. The model provides a tool for measuring multiple dimensions of the transparency of the information published by municipalities on their institutional websites.

The paper is organized as follows: section 2 presents and discusses literature on transparency in government; section 3 presents the Italian context; section 4 presents the assessment framework and section 5 considers the methods used to apply the framework to municipality websites. Sections 6 and 7 present and discuss evidence from the Italian trial setting. The final section draws some conclusions, highlighting some of the general managerial implications for governing transparency in Municipalities.

2. Literature Review- Theories and previous studies

In recent years, interest into the issue of government transparency has increased in the international community and it is now
sufficient) in order to strengthen democracy. Of course, several countries have gone further, recognizing that open government is necessary (though not paramount that academics, policy makers and public managers rank it among their priorities.

This paragraph discusses four aspects in existing literature on government transparency that make a useful contribution to this debate and help define its meaning and boundaries in order to ascertain whether there is any distance between how it is preached and how it is practiced.

Information represents a key variable for all types of organizations. Private organizations consider it to be a strategic variable for maintaining and enhancing their capacity for innovation, which is crucial for surviving in markets (Porter, 2008). For public agencies, information is a key element for improving how they function, for enhancing their capacity to fulfill the demands of the public and business, and for enhancing their relationship of trust with all their stakeholders (Nasi, 2008). More information (about government activities) allows better analysis, better monitoring and evaluation of events that are significant for economic and social well-being. (Islam, 2003).

Any organization requires information to be produced, distributed and shared among the pertinent internal and external stakeholders in order to achieve their goals and be held accountable for their results. Heald (2006) argues that transparency of information allows an organization to perform its mission and to periodically release information regarding its performance that will actually or potentially be used for assessment purposes.

Many authors have explored this concept, developing several ideas based on different approaches to transparency, exploring different varieties of transparency. The Oxford Dictionary of Economics defines transparent policy measures as: “Policy measures whose operation is open to public scrutiny. Transparency includes making it clear who is taking the decisions, what the measures are, who is gaining from them, and who is paying for them.” Several studies show that an open and transparent government strengthens democracy by providing a defence against forms of bad government, denouncing abuse of power, offering greater protection to minorities through the provision of equal citizenship rights and providing more opportunities for popular participation. Many government policies seeking greater transparency explicitly recognize the contribution these measures make to the improvement of the democratic process. Some countries have gone further, recognizing that an open government is necessary (though not sufficient) in order to strengthen democracy.

Pina, Torres and Acerete (2007) refer to transparency in government as a component of accountability. Following on this, De Leon (1998) and Mulgan (2000) state that accountability embraces issues concerned with the external control exercised by the audit offices – financial accountability – together with others, such as how voters can make elected representatives answer for their policies.

Some authors also describe transparency as a tool for enhancing the effectiveness of government as perceived by their stakeholders (West 2004). Putnam (2000) and Orren (1997) argue that public satisfaction with government is a result of both public expectation and their perception of government performance. As a result, the more transparent an organization, the better its stakeholders can monitor its performance (Reichard, 1998). Some authors (Stodolsky, 2002) also state that a government with transparent decision making processes can vastly increase citizen participation and, ultimately, democracy.

Evidence shows that narrower and wider definitions of transparency can be established together with unclear or missing scopes (Otenyo and Lind, 2004). However, the debate on transparency is often open to corollary concepts, discussed in the paragraph below, that should enhance and reinforce its promises.

### 2.2. “Transparency” beyond information disclosure: interactivity and accessibility

Interactivity is close to the concept of transparency, since some authors refer to it as “the ability to find out what is going on inside a public sector organization”. One method is offered by the information available on municipalities website (Piotrowsky and Van Ryzin, 2007, p.1). Interestingly enough, Piotrowsky and Van Ryzin (2007) also focus on the relationship between transparency and interactivity. They argue that the demand for more information depends on the amount of information that the public perceives as being available with regard to the different dimensions of government activities, such as public finance and safety. As a result, people who consider their government is unapproachable look for – and demand – more information, whereas those who consider their government to be open and the information they publish to be interactive, tend to expect greater transparency to a lesser extent. The concept of interactivity, referring to the relationship between a government and its stakeholders, embeds a reciprocal exchange of
information that can have a positive influence on the perception of effective communication. This is particularly enhanced by certain channels of communication used by governments, such as their institutional websites. In this regard, some researchers (Liu and Shrum, 2002) argue that website interactivity can be analyzed by assessing the features available (level of interactivity), but also via the “nature” of its interactivity (such as the quality of features available on the website). Furthermore, the Cyberspace Policy Research Group (CyPRG, 2001) states that interactivity measures the ease with which visitors can use information provided on line. Other studies consider the degree of accessibility of information about services provided by municipalities (LoSchiavo, 2000; Kickert, 1997) in terms of the capacity to easily retrieve relevant information that external stakeholders might be interested in. In recent years, some authors have focused on the range of opportunities offered by ICT for enhancing the degree of accessibility of government information. In particular, Letourneau (2009, p.1) refers to the fact that “…anyone using any kind of web browsing technology must be able to visit any site and get a full and complete understanding of the information as well as have the full and complete ability to interact with the site if that is necessary”. In turn, this may also lead to the simplification of the relationship between citizens and various public administrations (Torres, 2004). To sum up, transparency, accessibility and interactivity are all self-reinforcing principles that should lead to better availability of information and the sharing of it among public agencies and their stakeholders. Tools such as information and communication technology can contribute greatly by enhancing the degree of government transparency, as described in the section below.

2.3 ICT as a tool for enhancing government transparency

Information and communication technology (ICT) offers promising tools for increasing the transparency of governments. This establishes a link between e-government and transparency. Margetts (2006) suggests three key ways in which ICT could make governments more transparent compared to a government in the pre-digital era:

- it can aid the implementation of legislation on transparency (the author refers mainly to the US Freedom of Information Act);
- it can also help to provide higher quality information (e.g. by linking decisions to their legal context);
- it can provide better access to information.

The availability of information represents a crucial factor in enhancing democracy, since it allows citizens to have a more equal standing in terms of access to information. This opportunity is also emphasized by Norris (2004), who argues that the link between ICT and government could produce a number of positive consequences on different aspects of democracy.

Accessibility and interactivity can also be enhanced through ICT. Some studies have focused on the “accessibility” of information and the possibility to reach it on the website with a few clicks (Kalbach 2002, Zeldman 2001). Many empirical studies especially have used the number of clicks to measure the steps needed to reach the information published on municipal websites, taking this type of data as a proxy of the level of website accessibility (Huberman et al, 1998; Milic-Frayiling et al. 2004). Glassey and Glassey (2004) conclude that a proximity indicator of the level of accessibility of municipality websites, and e-government websites in more general terms, is represented by “the smallest number of clicks”.

3. The Italian Context

The transparency process affecting Italian municipalities is based on Constitutional law. However, the modernization process that started in the early Nineties, whose aim was to make public agencies perform better while improving the relationship with their constituents, embedded transparency as a tool to achieve such reform objectives. In particular, some of the laws in the Nineties aiming to introduce New Public Management principles, refer to transparency as a fundamental rule for public agencies to govern their relationships with external stakeholders in order to safeguard impartiality and democracy. This led to the establishment of a one-stop front office in all public agencies in 1993 to manage relationships with citizens (called the “Ufficio Relazioni con il Pubblico”) and subsequently to the passing of a law in 2000 that sets out guidelines for external communications. In 2009, the Minister for Innovation and Public Administration passed a law that rationalized existing regulations on government transparency and enhanced its role with government performance.

Furthermore, this law forms the basis for the mandatory publication of information on all aspects of the operations of the public agency
using all possible channels, emphasizing the role of information and communication technology. It requires public agencies to provide their constituents with information about public officials, including their salary, professional background and performance, and information on how effectively the government delivers public services. This was the starting point for the categorization of transparency linked to holding public agencies and their personnel accountable for the results they achieve. Furthermore, this law requires public agencies to have a section on their website dedicated to “Transparency, Performance and Meritocracy” (Trasparenza, Valutazione e Merito), which provides information they are obliged to disclose to external stakeholders.

All public agencies, including municipalities, are required to gradually include this section based on a set schedule, which, for instance, requires public agencies to publish information about individual and organisation performance within January 2011. They have all added the section to their website by now, but not all publish the mandatory information in this section or in other parts of their institutional website. In the following sections, we present the methodology and the results of our analysis.

4. The Assessment Framework

Some studies show that the transparency of government operations and performance may contribute to greater trust in government (Gant and Gant, 2002) and possibly to a more participatory democracy. However, as stated in literature (Pina, Torres et al 2007a, 2007b, 2010; Reichard, 1998; Heald, 2006; Margetts, 2006), governments publish information mainly about their institutional mission and their use of financial resources. Additionally, legal requirements in specific country settings may oblige them to publish certain types of information about their operations and performance. However, the information that could be of interest to external stakeholders is much wider and is not necessarily limited to how the agency operates, but may encompass its political mandate, its priorities and its capacity to fulfil its goals.

Although many studies and much research have attempted to identify frameworks for assessing the degree of accessibility and interactivity, there is scant evidence with regard to the actual practice of government transparency and it is often tested on single case studies or limited to single types of information, mainly mission-related and financial. Based on this, we have drafted some considerations leading to the definition of a comprehensive framework that has been tested on some Italian municipalities.

As a result, we drafted a framework to monitor the degree of transparency based on four different dimensions: institutional, political, financial and service delivery (Figure 1). The assessment model was designed to measure government transparency based on the information published on their institutional websites.

The institutional dimension aims to capture the degree of transparency with regard to the government’s mission and operations, its institutional activities and the information it is obliged to publish by law.

The political dimension aims to capture the degree of accessibility of information on political representatives, their political mandate and activities and other information, such as absenteeism at council meetings and salary.

The financial dimension aims to assess the degree of transparency with regard to the use of financial resources, the solvability of governments and other financial issues.

The service delivery dimension aims to assess the degree of transparency concerning the performance of governments in the delivery of services to citizens and businesses.

Each dimension of the assessment framework is divided into different variables and assessed using specific measurements and checklists. Each was selected to check its applicability to different institutional contexts and types of governments.

Furthermore, the model also aims to explore the degree of transparency. In doing this, we identified three different stages of transparency that governments could reach in each of the dimensions of the framework:

1. static information: mainly information about the public agency and its mission, how it functions, what it offers and so on. This type of information does not change
frequently and some of it is required to be published in order to comply with existing regulations on government transparency (in the Italian context, multiple laws require public agencies to provide information about their mission, how they operate, information on personnel, etc);

2. dynamic information, including information about performance for each of the 4 dimensions identified;

3. feedback information, including performance-related feedback information as stated in stage 2.

We also drafted several checklists to measure interactivity and accessibility.

To address the measure of interactivity, we included selected items in order to investigate if the public agency website allows for different degrees of interactivity. We considered: “one-way communication” to be the opportunity to download/upload a form, “two-way communication” to be the presence of email systems and “multi-party communication” as referring to more dynamic communication systems for the purposes of external communication.

We also introduced a revised version of the “3 clicks rule” to assess the degree of accessibility of information on government websites. This rule was initially introduced in the private sector but has subsequently been applied in the public sector (Glassey and Glassey, 2004).

The framework was subsequently tested on the websites of a sample of Italian municipalities with the aim of assessing their degree of transparency, accessibility and interactivity also in light of the existing regulations. The following paragraphs introduce the context of transparency in Italian municipalities before describing and discussing the methodology used to test the framework and the findings of the analysis.

5. Purpose And Research Method

In this study we conducted an empirical analysis of the degree of transparency in Italian Municipalities.

When conducting this pilot analysis, we defined a purposive sample, which is non-probability sampling but helps to select subjects on the basis of specific characteristics (Bryman, 2008). We identified the following as criteria for the purpose of sample selection:

- dimension of the pilot sample: medium;
- geographical distribution: country wide (all Regions);
- Municipality size (by number of inhabitants): Medium-Large (according to the classification provided by ISTAT- the Italian National Statistics Institute).

Based on these criteria, we decided to take the Italian provincial capitals as our pilot sample: as a result, the research sample is made up of the websites of 113 Italian cities.

Even if this sample is not statistically representative of the whole Italian context, our analysis may lead to some interesting and useful pointers for extending the study, such as all municipalities with more than 40,000 inhabitants, namely 183 in Italy (including all of the 21 regional capitals already explored), or for international comparisons.

We conducted a comprehensive analysis of the contents of 113 websites using an 89-item evaluation checklist: 26 items are grouped under the institutional dimension, 14 belong to the service delivery dimension, 20 to the political dimension and 24 to the financial dimension.

All the websites were assessed between May and October 2010.

In particular, each dimension of the assessment framework was split up into different variables. Each variable was selected to ensure it is applicable to different institutional contexts and types of governments.

The Institutional Dimension contains items grouped in 3 variables:

- ownership of site content (including information about the agency’s involvement with the website, for instance)
- contact information (concerning the people inside the organization)
- information about the organization (including legal requirements)

In defining the checklist for measuring this dimension, we used some items suggested in the Web Site Attribute Evaluation System (WAES) produced by the Cyberspace Policy Research Group, adapting them to our purposes: we introduced new items concerning the specific Italian context and the new Italian legislation in terms of transparency.

The Political Dimension is split into 3 variables:

- profile of political representatives (e.g. Mayor, Cabinet and Council members);
- political activities (information about the political mandate of the Mayor);
- political accountability (how to contact the Mayor, the members of the Cabinet etc).

Furthermore, the model includes the Financial Dimension. We used the model proposed by Pina, Torres et al. (2010) for this
dimension, adding some items and reducing others in order to adapt the model to different sized organizations (in terms of the number of inhabitants, employees, budget and consequently complexity). The final version of this dimension contains items involving economic and financial information and a more general variable concerning the quality and comprehensibility of financial and economic information.

The Service Delivery Dimension aims to explore the level of transparency of information about the performance of service and activities delivered. This dimension includes 5 variables, ranging from a simple to a more complex level. When defining the items included in this variable, we built up a list of items that could be applied to several types of public services. In particular, we chose nursery schools as our example of a public service, since this service is provided by all the municipalities and because it is listed as the public service that most interests the public according to the results of a survey conducted by the Ministry for Innovation and Public Administration in 2009. The variables included in this dimension are: general information about the service, (e.g. office details); activities delivered, (including information about the activities and services to be delivered and the presence of indexes to measure these activities); measurement of activities, (items to explore if the website contains information about services delivered in terms of statistics); information on performance (which analyses if the website contains information about the level of performance concerning the service selected).

All the items identified scored ‘1’ if they appeared on the websites and ‘0’ if they did not.

Furthermore, we identified 3 forms of interactivity in order to measure the level of interactivity:

- one-way communication, which includes activities such as downloading and linking to specific web features within the municipality website, or providing update announcements or a newsletter via subscription;
- two-way communication, which includes on line form completion and submission and e mail links to webmasters and to the head of services. This lets citizens interact with municipalities but does not give them access to services online at this stage (Nasi et al. forthcoming);
- multi-party communication, which refers to the possibility to interact with other agencies, providing links to other government addresses (for related issues or not). The municipality website represents a channel for accessing the information and services provided by other public agencies, promoting multiple level interaction and communication.

All of the items identified scored ‘1’ if they appeared on the websites and ‘0’ if they did not.

As stated earlier, the degree of accessibility was measured using a revised “three-clicks rule”. This rule is now considered good practice for web designers and a rule of thumb by users, who are aware they should be able to find the information they are looking for in no more than three clicks. We set a wider range of possible clicks defining five classes based on the number of clicks required to get the information a visitor is looking for:

1. 5 clicks or more
2. 4 clicks
3. 3 clicks
4. 2 clicks
5. link available on the homepage.

One is the lowest score of accessibility; 5 the highest. If the link or information was not available, it scored 0.

Since the purpose of this pilot analysis was to test the model, to check its validity and extend its usage during further analysis, we focused on a discussion of the preliminary results, based on descriptive statistics and frequency tables. We will undertake more in-depth analysis of the link between results and the characteristics of our sample when the sample is more significant.

6. Findings

Degree of transparency

The analysis shows that municipalities mainly tend to publish information about their institutional dimension followed by information about their political dimension, instead of their financial dimension and service delivery.

The institutional dimension includes information about public agencies in general and most of the information required by law. It is mainly first level information, such as the organization’s mission and its structure, a description of its main activities and the different access channels.

Almost all municipality websites (97%) investigated provide information concerning mission statements, a list of their functions and activities. The same percentage of
municipalities provides the email addresses and phone numbers for the heads of departments. The institutional dimension also assessed the publication of information concerning the ownership and updating of the website. The least-frequently published information includes the agency’s organization chart (42%) and the email address of the webmaster (46%).

The items used for measuring this dimension also included specific institutional information that is either mandatory or will become mandatory from January 2011, in compliance with the 2009 regulations on transparency described earlier.

It is interesting to note that not all items that Italian law requires to be made public on the institutional websites can actually be found online. For example, the 2009 regulation states that all expenditure for outsourced professional or consulting services must be published on the municipality’s institutional website in order to underpin the accountability of the recruitment system and prevent corruption. Our analysis found that almost 15% of the sample did not comply with this legal requirement. We found a better result with regard to the lack of information about the salaries of senior civil servants: recent laws require the bonuses paid each year to be made public on the institutional website and only 7% of the cases we analyzed failed to publish this data.

With reference to forthcoming mandatory information, little information is provided on the individual performance of civil servants (4%) and feedback (1%).

It would be interesting to repeat data collection after these aspects have also become mandatory.

Moving to the political dimension, the variables with the highest percentage involve information about political representatives, followed by variables investigating the level of transparency about information concerning their activities and performance.

If we look at the description of representatives in more detail, we can see that there is less information available about the Council and its members (49%) – beyond the list of their names (95%) – compared to the information provided about the Mayor: 78% of the sample provides a description of Mayor’s profile, his past political activities and roles; 48% includes his or her political plans and main direction on the website. Information about the Cabinet, the executive body supporting the major in his or her duties, is published in 50% of the sample.

This is apparently in line with the electoral system in the municipalities we investigated: the public votes for the Mayor, a bit like a ‘presidential’ electoral system. This could be the reason for the very high exposure of the Mayor on the institutional website (in terms of the information provided) compared to the council and the councillors, as shown by our results.

As far as the financial dimension of transparency is concerned, we noted that 50% of the sample provides very basic, mandatory financial information on its institutional website, such as the current budget year. 46% of the sample provides comparative figures for previous periods, even though such information, useful for longitudinal comparison, will be mandatory within 6 months of the data collection. Just 1% of the 113 provincial capitals investigated provide consolidated financial statements.

The service delivery dimension aims at exploring the level of transparency concerning the performance of the government when delivering services to businesses and the public.

As stated above, this is the dimension with the lowest score (23%). This could be due to the fact that this dimension explores very advanced content in terms of transparency, related to a specific service delivery. Our research checked the level of transparency, but we had no information about the management of services. This may be due to different reasons, such as the time needed to collect and analyze this kind of information and the efforts and skills, resources, information systems demanded of the organization.

It would be interesting to verify in subsequent research if the level of transparency for this dimension is consistent with the presence of information systems, planning and control systems, quality systems, and so on.

Finally, the 4 dimensions could be investigated in terms of the degree of transparency: all the items identified for each dimension could be grouped into 3 different steps of transparency, as explained above, when we describe our model. The three stages of transparency are: static, dynamic and feedback.

Looking at the institutional dimension, we found very high results for the static type of information for this dimension: 97% of the sample provided the mission statement of the agency and telephone or email contact information for the heads of services. 96% also provides a profile description of senior civil servants.

Moving to the second stage, which we called dynamic information, the results seems to be consistent with legal requirements: for example, mandatory information about the
commitment of civil servants, which we considered in the second stage of transparency, is quite frequent, almost 92% of the sample. Forthcoming mandatory information, such as the measure of individual performance, is less common (4%). Almost no feedback information (1%) (third stage) was provided as of the date of the analysis.

The degree of transparency of the political dimension is quite similar to the previous one: most of the information provided is static, scant information that can be classed as “dynamic information”, such as information about the expected activities to be performed (4%), is hosted on websites; only 1% of the information provided is feedback about the activities of councillors.

Looking at the financial dimension, the items described above represent the first stage of transparency, namely providing static information and/or data compliant with legal obligations.

Moving to a higher degree of transparency, items concerning transparency for financial indicators (dynamic stage) or comments on financial results (feedback stage) got very low scores.

Finally, as concerns the degree of transparency of the service delivery dimension, we can again see that results decrease as we go from basic information, such as the general details of activities delivered (65%) and information about how they are delivered (50%), to the dynamic stage, including information about performance (5%). The feedback stage, such as comments and explanations about services and results or suggestions about new strategies and ways to improve services, was found in 5% and 4% of the sample respectively.

As explained in the paragraph above on purpose and methods, we also collected data on the degree of interactivity of the websites of the 113 provincial capitals and the degree of accessibility based on the “3 clicks rule”.

Concerning the results for interactivity, we found that 95% of municipalities provide submission forms onscreen to download and 90% provides update announcements or newsletters via subscription. This means that most of the municipalities provide one-way communication. The municipalities’ websites have a good level of two-way communication, since about 59% provide email links to the heads of services. The third level of interactivity referred to the possibility to find the addresses of external government agencies, be they issue-related or not, via the municipality website, thus enabling multiple party communication. In this case, the very high results may be due to the fact that there is strong communication and collaboration among different levels of government.

Measurement was based on the number of clicks a visitor has to follow in order to get the information he or she is looking for. We eventually divided the data into two groups: information provided within 3 clicks and the rest of the information, in order to ascertain whether information is more or less readily accessible.

This result pointed out another aspect of information transparency for the four dimensions. The two most transparent dimensions in terms of the quantity of information provided, are also the ones with the highest accessibility of information. In turn, almost all of the information referring to the institutional and political dimensions is easily accessible. In other words, if the publication of institutional information stands at an average 69%, the publication of accessible institutional information stands at 66.03%. The difference (2.98%) refers to information that is provided but is not easily accessible. As regards the political dimension, the information provided with low accessibility is marginal (4%). This means that a small percentage of information is not easily accessible even if most information provided in this dimension can be reached within 3 clicks (51.91%). Therefore, the first two dimensions, political and institutional, are those where nearly all information provided is highly accessible.

On the other hand, the dimensions with a lower level of transparency in terms of the information available, are also less accessible. If we look at the service delivery dimension, we can see that it is not just less transparent in terms of the information published (23%), it is also less accessible: 10% of the information provided is difficult to access and only 13.56% of the information provided is effectively accessible. Looking at the financial dimension, the level of transparency rises to 32%, but the accessibility of the information drops to 25.85%.

7. Discussion And Conclusion

Information published by Italian municipalities is apparently limited to certain types of institutional and political information. Furthermore, most of the data published on line seems not only to be required by law but is also rather static information, mainly about the mission of the agency, its people (both officials and elected representatives), their contact information and what they do. More dynamic information about how they are
performing, whether required by law or non-mandatory, seems to be published less often for all the dimensions we identified (i.e. agency information about the allocation of funds and resources based on results; financial statements showing the use of resources for certain programmes; the status of the implementation of priorities included in the political mandate), whereas feedback information about results and the reasons for any discrepancies were not found anywhere.

This lack of information about services and the performance of municipalities may be due to different types of constraints. First of all, it may refer to constraints within the organization regarding the trade-off to process different types of information and communicate it in styles that are easily and readily accessed by the general public. It is well known that governments tend to use their own terminology and heavy investment may be needed in order to have effective, out-of-house communications (Mele and Forghieri, 2002).

Furthermore, it could reflect a cultural and organizational issue associated with the fact that managerial tools for performance measurement are still not fully implemented (Moynihan and Hawes, 2010) and therefore before the public agency can communicate results-related information, it first has to produce it.

On the contrary, lower degrees of transparency might also be due to the inability of municipalities to successfully navigate the huge volume of information they produce, mainly about their services and the allocation of resources to run them.

As per the degree of interactivity, the analysis still shows many limits in the use of information and communication technologies to enhance it. The most used instrument is the email system. However, actual usage for external communication purposes is below its potential. In particular, the extent of publication of the email addresses of key players at municipalities varies for different organizational roles: general email addresses are more likely to be used for general purposes (i.e. information, social services) rather than the emails of departments or personal emails.

Going beyond the volume of information and the degree of interactivity that public agencies offer, accessibility is still an open issue. Although not all information can be displayed on the municipality’s home page or in the “Transparency, performance and meritocracy” section of its web site, there is room to improve the structures of government web sites. From a descriptive point of view, replication of the internal organizational structure apparently prevails over more citizen-oriented logic, such as the life event one, displayed primarily to give basic information about what the government does. This analysis did not focus on the degree of effective communication in terms of the general comprehension of information. This deserves further investigation in order to ascertain whether accessible information is really useful for the constituents of municipalities.

This paper presents an assessment framework for measuring the degree of transparency of the institutional websites of municipalities. The framework contributes to literature by offering a multiple-dimension assessment of the transparency of information published on websites. The limit of the framework is that it only considers information provided on line, rather than offering ways to depict the overall degree of government transparency. However, since information and communication technology is embedded in current society a regular, multiple-dimension assessment of the information that governments present on their website can surely contribute to representing the nature and direction of their transparency.

This work also presents the results of a pilot test on the municipalities of the provincial capital cities in Italy. The analysis points to a low degree of transparency for several relevant dimensions of government operations, such as service delivery and the financial-related dimension. What’s more, the information available on line seems to be rather static and focused on the general boundaries of government operations that rarely evolve (i.e. functions, types of services etc) and, despite being well-maintained, it does not provide a great deal of added-value about on-going operations and programmes, their performance and relative feedback.

Since there is probably too much information that Italian municipalities are obliged to publish on line in order to comply with requirements or due to internal and external needs, they should identify criteria to select the information that is most relevant. This recommendation applies to all governments regardless of their national settings, as they are all subject to information disclosure requirements. One way of selecting criteria for effective transparency may be to assess the preferences of stakeholders by investigating which information is most-clicked on line or by asking them for their static, dynamic and feedback preferences.

The framework enables the depiction of the degree of transparency of government information published on line, however, it does not set itself the objective of measuring the
quality of information available on institutional websites: the use of a ranking scale helps to evaluate the degree of transparency but does not say much about the quality of the information published. This sets the basis for further investigation in this field to assess how much the municipalities in provincial capital in Italy, and other government agencies around the world, take advantage of transparency-related tools to actively engage with their constituents.

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