On a Municipality-Wide Scale. Social Media Use in Italian Municipalities: Information and Interaction

En una escala de todo el municipio. Uso de redes sociales en municipios italianos: información e interacción

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Abstract

The contribution aims at investigating the role of social media in the Italian local governments in the «maturity models» scenario, between informative and interactive use of digital media. In particular, the paper presents the results of a pilot study on a little sample of Italian municipalities who usually adopt their Facebook

profiles to communicate with citizens. Even if many empirical works are devoted to this issue, less attention is paid at the citizens' needs and expectations in literature. The article has the purpose to provide a better understanding of citizens' behaviors on institutional Fb's pages with the wider purpose to explore what «information» and «interaction» mean in the specific relationship citizen- municipal in a digital environment.

As findings suggest, the information-based use of social media is necessary to improve citizens' quality of life and their effective use of public services. Municipalities, exploiting their «proximity», have a pivotal role as «hub of information», through the integration and reconnection of information contents whether self-produced or produced by other stakeholders.

Resumen

La contribución tiene como objetivo investigar el papel de las redes sociales en los gobiernos locales italianos en el escenario de «modelos de madurez», entre el uso informativo e interactivo de los medios digitales. En particular, el documento presenta los resultados de un estudio piloto en una pequeña muestra de municipios italianos que generalmente adoptan sus perfiles de Facebook para comunicarse con los ciudadanos. Incluso si se dedican muchos trabajos empíricos a este tema, se presta menos atención a las necesidades y expectativas de los ciudadanos en la literatura. El artículo tiene el propósito de proporcionar una mejor comprensión de los comportamientos de los ciudadanos en las páginas institucionales de Fb con el propósito más amplio de explorar qué significa «información» e «interacción» en la relación específica ciudadano-municipal en un entorno digital.

Como sugieren los resultados, el uso de las redes sociales basado en la información es necesario para mejorar la calidad de vida de los ciudadanos y su uso efectivo de los servicios públicos. Los municipios, que explotan su «proximidad», tienen un papel fundamental como «centro de información», a través de la integración y reconexión de los contenidos de información, ya sean de producción propia o producidos por otras partes interesadas.

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Introduction

For a several years now, social media have represented one of the key areas of experimentation in terms of communication methods for local administrations. Fast, cheap and easy to use for communicating with citizens –although less frequently for dialoguing with them– they can also help them achieve the goals of rationalisation and austerity dictated by the current economic crisis, as well as guarantee greater visibility in the public eye.

This strong presence opens up a significant area of study and raises some fundamental research questions. In fact, the growing presence of Public Administrations (PAs) on social media platforms is not matched by a comprehensive understanding of the citizens who use such services; who are they, what are they looking for, what's hiding behind a «like» and above all, what is their digital behaviour?

This essay is the result of research and monitoring activities carried out since 2015 in Tuscany (Solito & Materassi 2015), an Italian region that since the early 2000s has stood out thanks to a certain dynamism and tendential open-mindedness towards public communication and the experimentation of governance models between the PAs and the territories administered, both on a city-wide and regional level. In recent years, monitoring activities carried out on the processes of change that impact on communication facilities and professions have focused on the presence of digital media, studying the needs, habits and expectations of the public targeted by the institutional platforms. The data presented below concern those registered on the Facebook pages of 20 municipalities; in terms of social media, this was one of the first to be used and with greater continuity in such organisational contexts.

As we will see, research presents us with a «digital citizen» that primarily uses Facebook to satisfy the need for information, whilst there is a minor use of the interactive mode. The so-called informative use of social media mentioned in available literature is therefore confirmed.

Nevertheless, our interpretation hypothesis is different to the one primarily adopted. In fact, this current predominantly information and only to a lesser extent interactive use of social media in the relationship between public administrations and citizens should not necessarily be considered partial, unsatisfactory or «immature» (Mergel & Bretschneider, 2013) because it fails to exploit the social aspect and interactivity they were created for or increase the level of engagement of citizens who remain mere (and passive) users of data, news and information. On the contrary, as we will discuss, it is intrinsically effective.

In fact, if the success and benefits of innovation can be seen in a wider process of social interaction, recognition of the value of information does not only depend on the intensity of dialogue with users, but rather on the ability to gradually consolidate trust and acceptance between the parties, and to constantly increase the

level of awareness of citizens and the networks that it will redefine thanks to the exchange, sharing and circulation of such material.

Before discussing our theory based on the data collected, we believe it would be opportune to clarify the meanings that can be attributed to the term information, even in light of those models that can be found in literature that focus precisely on a gradual development in the use of social media in the Public Administration.

1. Information and interactive use of social media: a theoretical framework

New information technologies envisage a widespread digital habitat which involves all areas of production and consumption, relations and interaction, the fields of knowledge and the knowable, experience and the accomplishable. Thus, for some time now, the web and digital media have come to represent an innovation that we can no longer do without and that we cannot avoid.

Although, to a certain extent, we cannot fail to agree with these «evolutionary» statements (Mele, 2001), we however feel they must be correlated to the importance of the results these changes produce.

In fact, as Grunig (2009) suggests, to assess the reach and truly evolutionary effects of digital media we need to move away from looking at the potential offered by such tools and focus on the uses made of them in various environments and contexts. Without doubt, the dynamics of the diffusion of various forms of innovation, including technological innovation, are phenomena that, given their extreme complexity, are difficult to understand. Since the earliest studies conducted by Everett Rogers (1962), it appeared clear that alongside the potential of a new product/technological media, there was a need to consider its «compatibility» on three separate levels (Rossi, 2018):

- with the regulations and values of the context;

- with ideas and practices previously introduced;

- with the needs of users.

Based on this premise and looking at the main uses made by Italian administrations, we will consider how the use of the web and social networks can be interpreted as innovation in the relationship between citizens and institutions and how «compatible» it is with the organisational, cultural and social context in which both move. Actually, if the benefits introduced by the digital world are clear for the public sector too (Canel & Luoma-Aho, 2018; Criado *et al.*, 2017; Mergel, 2013; Bertot *et al.*, 2010; Picazo-Vela *et al.*, 2012), the methods with which digital innovations are used are closely linked to practices and behaviour already well-consolidated in both citizens and institutions, as well as in the way in which such institutions work. Therefore, the use of social media at the height of their functional and so-

cial potential not only and not even primarily depends on the level of diffusion of technological innovation in itself, but rather on the «compatibility» of the same with the context in which it is introduced. The opportunities to produce an effective change through the use of social media depend in this respect on nurturing dialogue and a communication and participatory culture, both within the PA and outside it, in a constant dialogue between online and offline behaviour (Ducci, 2017; Faccioli, 2016).

What emerges quite clearly from available literature is that digital media, designed to promote sociability and interaction, are largely used in the public sector in a mere information perspective, without the specific involvement or participation of citizens. This trend seems to be confirmed by most of the research carried out, drawn from different institutional and geographical contexts (De Widt & Panagio-topoulos, 2018; Lovari & Parisi, 2015; Zheng & Zheng, 2014; Zavattaro & Semen-telli, 2014; Criado *et al.*, 2017; Mossberger *et al.*, 2013; Bonson *et al.*, 2012) and primarily bound by the recognition of a use of digital platforms that tends to be transmissive and only faintly strategic or that primarily adopts the «push» method (Mergel, 2013) of content diffusion. Reference is made to an «information-based» use of channels as opposed to a more dialogue-oriented, two-directional use, capable of fuelling civic engagement and citizen empowerment (Lee & Kwak, 2012), in which the representation of information is seen as an initial, embryonic and «im-mature» stage destined to evolve in terms of interaction, based on an incremental development model. However, although it is undeniable that social media can fuel citizen engagement, it is equally true that new skills and uses must be provided for and developed when implementing this new opportunity. It is a path that requires time and linear development, something very clear to the researchers who proposed what have been defined as maturity models. From Bertot, Jaeger and Grimes (2010) to Lee & Kwak (2012) and Mergel & Bretschneider (2013), the adoption of web 2.0 at its full potential requires organisational, legislative and technological changes, as well as behaviour and know-how that develop over time. However, all the maturity models mentioned share the same assumption; maturity is achieved by way of an intermediate and primarily information-based stage that provides the conditions for active collaboration with citizens, which the use of social media must necessarily target.

As mentioned, in our essay we will argue the adoption of a different interpretation. Without wishing to underplay the importance of the most commonly-held interpretative paradigms, which are backed-up by a considerable amount of international literature and confirmed by most of the studies carried out in Italy too, we would like to attribute an important strategic function to the information-based use of digital platforms. Not only from a point of view that is preparatory to achieving greater interactivity in the future, but as an activity that is effective in itself, given that it is «compatible» –in the original sense attributed by Rogers (1962)– with the public

institutional context and with part of the system of needs of citizens. The focus on the local institutional dimension is not only a sampling choice that methodologically guides research, but is also an interesting area for experimentation: it is here that the Public Administration plays an important role of closeness and proximity to citizens; it is here that the citizen-institution relationship is more direct, personal and steadfast; and it is here that indirect and digital communication makes the continuity and fluidity of the borders between offline and online behaviour more evident. Lev-On & Steinfeld (2014) seem to agree with these peculiarities of the municipal context as, starting with a study on the Facebook pages of Israeli municipalities, introduced the concept of hubs of interaction. Retracing the steps that lead to a «maturity model» –in other words, starting from the socio-demographic characteristics of citizens that lead to their more or less marked tendency to use social media to dialogue– researchers noted that interaction varies based on the specific characteristics of the different municipalities considered.

Therefore, starting from the particular nature of the municipal context it is necessary to remember that the introduction of ICTs in the evolutionary processes of the communication of matters of general interest has helped to underline the centrality of the information capital of the administrations and the administered: in order to act, interact, make choices, legitimize actions and build trust and (good) reputation. From the very earliest forms of e-government, PAs have sought to progressively focus on the citizen, both in terms of information and relational aspects. As some argue (Taylor & Lips, 2008; Taylor, Lips & Organ, 2007), alongside the success of so-called e-processes –that is, processes based on the mediation of electronic tools such as in e-government, e-democracy, e-participation, etc.– it is also necessary to add an «i» as an essential key prefix, thus acknowledging the fundamental and dominant role played by information in the definition of an «information-intensive government» (Taylor & Lips, 2008: 150).

However, in literature, the term «information» is used with a certain degree of ambiguity. We can observe three different meanings here (Buckland, 1991) that will apply in our research: «information as a process», «information as knowledge» and «information as a goal».

Re-elaborating the definitions given by Buckland (1991) and adapting them to our subject of study, we can explain these three different dimensions as follows.

> *Information as a process* means that the result of being informed depends on a process of research and dialogue that changes an initial subjective condition; therefore, it is a process in the sense that it is a dynamic activity whose effectiveness depends not only on the commitment of one of the subjects, either the subject looking for information or the one who has it, of the communication relationship, but rather comes about thanks only to a «fortunate encounter». This is another reason why the confines of infor-

mation are not established once and for all, but are specified, expanded or restricted in relation to the needs and circumstances of those participating and intervening in the process, whether in the role of producer or in the role of consumer.

Information as knowledge means that the information process is based on the acquisition of data, news and notions that can increase individual cognition. However, it is not the availability of information alone that reduces uncertainty or increases the transparency of an institution. On the contrary, the mere diffusion of information frequently generates a lack of clarity (Stohl, *et al.*, 2016). Information generates knowledge when it is part of a context of meaning, when it enables and activates cognitive processes in its beneficiaries and when it is produced and diffused in an inclusive manner.

Finally, *information as a goal* leads us to consider the almost «tangibility» of the information material: documents, news, data, events and messages refer to texts that can be identified by means of direct contact with papers, books, magazines and newspapers, as well as files, photographic material, videos and digital texts that give form to information content.

Using new digital technologies in a complex and mature information perspective means focusing on all three dimensions mentioned, in order to create an advantage not only in relationships between institutions and individual citizens, but also in the broader social and institutional context in which the single process takes place and to which it will add value. As researchers of the pragmatic function of communication (Austin, 1987) remind us, there are words that produce actions, dictate behaviour, educate and start relationships. They can be traced back along the entire process that, from a need for information, subsequently unravels as far as the socialisation of information received. Following such premises, the diffusion and sharing of information between public administrations and citizens has a positive impact on their mutual collaboration only if this unavoidable transition generates diffused awareness of the expectations harboured by the subjects involved and the ability of each of these subjects to satisfy them (Lopez, *et al.*, 2009).

2. Methods and samples

This essay aims to answer some of these questions by interpreting data from research carried out in Italy, in the region of Tuscany[1], which focused precisely on the relationship established by 20 municipalities with citizens via their institutional Facebook profiles. The most densely populated municipality in the study was the regional capital of Florence, with 382,258 inhabitants (ISTAT, 2017), whilst the

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other municipalities, all within the metropolitan area of Florence, were much smaller. However, we must take into consideration the fact that institutional Facebook pages do not only target residents of the municipalities and that the potential target public includes other citizens, such as visitors to the city, tourists and foreigners.

In Tuscany, in 2015 a total of 56.7% of municipalities had at least one social media profile (Authors, 2015) and many of them were active on several platforms, particularly Facebook and Twitter, with both institutional and specific theme profiles (for libraries, museums, specific services), without counting the pages directly attributable to key municipal figures such as mayors or individual councillors. Starting from this significant presence, we sought to measure the methods of citizen participation in institutional life and their relationship with social media. In May 2017, with 3 separate mentions over successive months, on the institutional Facebook pages of these municipalities[2], we published a link to an online survey questionnaire[3]. It included questions designed, on the one hand to build an «identikit» of the citizen and on the other, to explore citizens' habits and the reasons for and methods of participation in institutional life. In particular, both offline participatory methods, in other words, participation that occurs in those places and on those occasions where there is a direct meeting and that require a physical presence of interviewees, and the daily micro-practices of municipality Facebook page use were considered. The explored dimensions consist of 3 different categories, with 3-10 set of questions each one: 1. Personal interviewee's profile (gender, age, etc.); 2. Offline participation forms and online behaviours (in general and the specific social media context); 3. The «reason why» their digital friendship with local institutions and municipalities.

The questionnaire was filled in by a total of 584 citizens (66% men, 34% women), primarily concentrated in the 31-40 (26%) and 41- 50 (27%) age groups. The number of both younger (14% in the 21-30 age group) and older (13% over 61) interviewees was much lower, whilst the age-group of very young users was marginal (2% in the 15-20 age group).

3. Results: the strategic role of information

In light of considerations on the meaning attributable to the concept of information and the synthesis of the maturity models presented by some researchers to

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2 The municipalities taking part, selected on the basis of being part of the metropolitan area of Florence, were Figline, Incisa, Pontassieve, Tavarnelle Val di Pesa, Rufina, San Casciano, Bagno a Ripoli, Florence, Greve in Chianti, Calenzano, Certaldo, Borgo San Lorenzo, Montelupo Fiorentino, Lastra a Signa, Signa, Vaglia, Sesto Fiorentino, Scandicci, Vinci, Empoli and the Mountain Union of the Mugello Municipalities.

3 The questionnaire consisted in 33 closed questions and 1 final open question. Its structure was inspired by previous research carried out in Italy on the relationship between PAs and citizens: in particular, Lovari, Parisi (2012; 2015).

describe the complex path to achieving a truly dialogue-based relationship between PAs and citizens, we hereby present the data that emerged from our research.

3.1. The identikit of the social citizen: lots of information, little interaction

The offline participatory habits of the citizens that answered the survey fall under one of three different types; political-institutional –council meetings or commissions, party meetings; civic– public assemblies, committees, citizens' movements; socio-cultural– participation in events, no-profit activities, membership of recreational clubs. The behaviour of interviewees highlighted a fairly clear result: political participation, in the strictest sense, is rather rare.

A total of 78% claimed they had never attended party meetings and 72% that they had never taken part in council meetings or municipal commissions –data that confirm political disaffection on a local level too. Participation in civic committees and movements and public assemblies organised by the municipality was slightly higher. These meeting opportunities, which are halfway between political participation and civic engagement, are experiences that have happened to more interviewees.

Social and cultural participation, in the various different aspects of voluntary associationism, recreational and cultural associationism and participation in events organised by the municipality are much higher. Therefore, we cannot call this passive citizen behaviour or behaviour of total disinterest, but rather a different way of participating. It is a «warmer» way (Paba, *et al.*, 2009) because it is driven by specific interests and perceptions that on the one hand, can make participatory actions intermittent and fragmented and on the other, can redefine the forms of direct and specific interaction with other local institutional players, which are more differentiated compared to the past.

As we have already mentioned, our particular focus was on the online interaction of interviewees with local authorities and more specifically, on interaction through their Facebook profiles.

Access methods adopted were the standard kind to be expected, although compared to other research, in our sample there was less consultation from the workplace and school environment.

By far the most prevalent activity involved «information», meaning both «looking for information near me» and «sharing information» (respectively 51.1% and 46.1%). Therefore, the large number of those looking for news «near me» –in other words, news concerning events taking place in a specific municipality and involving subjects operating on the territory– was particularly interesting, especially given that most of the municipalities involved in the research were small and medium-sized where one would expect direct methods of access to news. There is no lack of monitoring of what «other friends are doing» (31.3%), which is pretty standard on social

media and which, broadly speaking, is also attributable to an «information-based» activity. Lagging behind these are methods of using Facebook that require a greater level of user activity, such as taking part in discussions, uploading audio and video files, making oneself heard, using chats, contacting public figures and finding new friends. The habit of reading comments left by other users is minimal, both with regard to contacts and to interviewees themselves. So, our interviewees are more interested in what their «friends» are doing, than in their opinions.

Within these more generic data there are minimal differences attributable to gender; men place greater importance on «making their voices heard» (17.4% of men, compared to 13.7% of women), as well as «dialoguing with public figures» (10.8% men, 4.9% women) or «finding friends» (8.2% men, 1.9% women), whereas women are more active in sharing «information of public utility» (52.6% women, 33.8% men) and finding «information near me» (55.1% women, 43.6% men), probably in order to guarantee that service role for themselves and their families or their usual circle of friends.

Not far behind this behaviour are the reasons given for requests for «friendship» sent to authorities and the methods of using institutional pages noted. Once again –especially for women– the information role of the channel, chosen in order to obtain information quickly on what is happening in the municipality, is central (62.7% of respondents). «To feel part to community life» (41.4% agreed, above all women) and «making their voice heard» (47.9% of respondents agreed, above all men) were the second most indicated reasons. Meanwhile, neither the emulative effect, by which users seek to imitate the behaviour of relatives or friends that became followers before the interviewee, nor distracted or «involuntary» adhesion to the municipal page (for example, because suggested directly by the social network) are significant.

With regard to methods of content use, the questionnaire aimed to explore how citizens defined the frequency with which they used this institutional space. First of all, came intermittent participation and a strictly information-based style; in fact, 32% said they read page content and only intervene if driven by a particular interest or a specific reason. More or less similar was the percentage of those who describe themselves as «spectators» (31.3%) of content written by others; in other words, they read it, but do not intervene. This was followed by occasional visitors to the page (15.2%), who check it every now and again without leaving any trace of their visit –that is, without commenting on or sharing any information. In fact, the percentages of those who adopt more active and productive behaviour were paltry: 5.3% said they highlight news of public interest, 2.2% that they create their own content and 0.3% that they take part in debates[4].

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4 In this respect, it is worth pointing out that not all the municipalities in the sample offer the possibility of publishing content produced by citizens or other subjects on their social media pages; in any case, the tendency to use Facebook pages for information and not interactively seems clear.

As this theme was central to our research, we analysed what else citizens do when they visit the institutional pages of the municipalities[5]. The first three results we found seem to leave little doubt; 76.5% look for information on events, 58.3% look for information on emergency situations and 24.3% look for information on public services. Following this and quite some distance behind were reasons focusing on greater participation in institutional life and even further behind, activities of a political nature, such as talking to administrators (7.2%) or expressing personal opinions (3.1%).

3.2. Rethinking the role of the information dimension

The limited interaction noted and the predominance of an information-based use of institutional social channels confirm similar results found by other research, including research conducted in Italy (Lovari & Parisi, 2012; 2015). However, it seems possible to attribute to this characteristic at least a partially different meaning compared to the recurring underlining of an «immature» and poorly strategic use by PAs, contrasted by a partial or «one-armed» use by citizens. These observations have often led to deduce a general inability of citizens and institutions to fully exploit the potential of social media.

Lack of interactivity and limited dialogue need not necessarily be interpreted as indicators of lack of interest amongst citizens or a poor use of such communication channels. Without doubt, they indicate a more «formal» relationship between citizens and institutions compared to the immediacy inherent to social media. However, from a primarily information-based use of the channel they show that signs of interest and motivation –undoubtedly more hidden and less visible– as well as expectations and needs, are important strategic indicators for administrations on how to guarantee the best information performance for citizens.

Returning to the considerations developed in previous paragraphs, below we will try to express these theories through three significant areas that duly take into account the evolutionary path registered in Italy over the last twenty years by public and institutional communication. Underlining these facts is useful for better contextualising the relationship between citizens and public administrations in a scenario that is difficult and not without obstacles that make it unrealistic, in our opinion, to imagine immediately friendly and intensely dialogue-oriented use between the parties:

- In Italy, public communication arises as a duty/need of PAs to open a new *public communication space* capable of guaranteeing the primary right of citizens to be informed, a condition necessary in order to actively participate in public life, which goes beyond the age-old tradition of top-down,

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5 A maximum of 3 answers was possible.

pedagogical, prescriptive and propaganda-based communication (Rolando, 1998; Faccioli, 2000; Mancini, 2002; Grandi, 2007). In 2000, Italian law 150 aimed to give substance to the principles of access, transparency and simplification, identifying communication structures and processes based precisely on the relationship between administrations and citizens and the circulation of information. Just before the 2000s, the start of a process of digitalization and computerisation of public administrations appeared, to all intents and purposes, to be a strong accelerator of the processes of modernisation already underway in the public sector based on transparency, accountability and relations with citizens. The subsequent arrival of social media opened up and offered new opportunities and possibilities to influence relations between citizens and institutions, but also highlighted risks and difficulties. Management of the new channels and tools –with their horizontality and bidirectionality– is both a cultural and organisational test for public administrations because it demands changes that to this day still create considerable difficulty: new skills and know-how, integration and organisational flexibility, the latter of which are areas in which PAs are notoriously extremely weak.

- The Italian context is therefore one in which information acquires particular significance: it is attributed with a key role in the process of open-mindedness, accessibility, transparency, visibility and informed citizenship. It is also predominantly entrusted with the difficult task of gaining trust, credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of citizens. In fact, transparency, accountability and relationality demand the sort of trust, credibility and legitimacy in public institutions traditionally lacking in Italy, especially at the threshold of the third millennium when –after the scandal of *Tangentopoli* and the so-called crisis of the First Republic– the die-hard inefficiency of public institutions has become a «shared feeling», making the construction of any form of dialogue and relationship appear meaningless. Therefore, in the Italian context at least, the «compatibility» mentioned by Rogers is lacking: in fact, that «shared feeling» turns out to be an important though equally negative variable on the reasons for constructing dialogue and relations with institutions, but also on the way citizens «approach» them.

- In this scenario, the information that can be acquired via social media too, becomes the foundation on which to build, with great care, «approach» pathways based on progressive know-how, gradual awareness and satisfaction of needs. In this way, information should be seen as a relational asset to be substantiated in a process of real meaning in the individual contexts of people's lives; its management demands an active and dynamic role for both those who inform and those who are being informed.

In light of these three facts, it is possible to interpret the data that emerged from the research by organising them around certain specific dimensions:

1. «Reflective» and «critical» use of institutional social media pages

   Compatibility between the potential offered by digital media and the ideas, values and practices of the social and cultural context explains both the «incentives» to use institutional social media channels and their methods of use; a use by citizens that is reasoned, thoughtful and «cautious». Confirming this statement are the data relating to the two different methods used to contact the municipality Facebook page: an approach based on *explicit desire* and an approach *following signalling by «others»* (respectively, 48% and 42.3% of respondents).

   The former is a *pull* approach, which occurs after having become aware of the Facebook page by other means. The other is a *push* approach where contact is suggested by other subjects –friends, employees and municipal administrators– or even the social network itself, which suggests a possible «new friend». The former approach prevails amongst men (51.8%), whilst for women, signalling by others, especially those who are part of their circle of friends, prevails (45.8%).

   Reflectiveness and caution also emerge if we explore the reasons of those who state they practice methods that are more interactive (leaving comments, publishing posts, etc.). The circumstances that lead users to post contents and comments are –in decreasing order– know-how of the theme being discussed (84.3%), being called into question by the content of the post published (45.3%), disagreement with the decisions of the municipality and involvement in political debates (42.1%) and finally, the desire to express an opinion (34%) or the more generic pleasure of writing (8%). Therefore, users intervene if they have particular knowledge of the issue being discussed and only secondly, to express an opinion, manifest their disagreement or disapproval or declare their political position. What prevails amongst users is the awareness of being in a space in which the priority is not debate and active participation, but rather obtaining information and the «usefulness» of the content conveyed. Furthermore, a «private» use of information emerges: for 47.9% of citizens, content is not subsequently redirected into the flow of information on social media, whilst 23.3% tend to share content with those who are part of their circle of friends and are interested in the topic and only 2.4% habitually share municipality posts with their friends. When considering who to include, another element of caution, attention and reflection emerges in a world –the world of social media– which, on the contrary, seems to promote the instinctive if not «absent-minded» sharing of content.

2. The role of information as a tool for action, knowledge and awareness of and in personal life contexts

What emerges is the definition previously referred to as *information as knowledge* (Buckland, 1991). However, information generates knowledge if it is part of a context of meaning, when it can be recognised and identified as a resource that enables action, provides the ability to move and choose, makes participation possible and facilitates new experiences that can be used to become attentive citizens aware of what is happening around them.

The need expressed by our interviewees to acquire information and awareness via the municipality's institutional social media pages on what is happening on the territory they live and work in therefore seems a coherent signal. In fact, proximity to personal life contexts and usefulness seem to be the characteristics of the information searched for and certain data confirm this. First of all, there's the diffused behaviour of using social networks to contact other institutions, especially on the territory, such as schools or surrounding municipalities. This data is confirmed by the fact that 14% of our sample accessed the questionnaire from the social page of a municipality other than the one where they reside; in 50% of these cases, the respondents chose the municipality where they work. Therefore, information goes beyond the boundaries of jurisdiction of single authorities to accompany citizens-users along their life and consumption pathways, which are dynamic and mobile.

Our sample highlighted another aspect of the usefulness and «information reliability» of the web: as well as through pages on Facebook, which are the focus of our study, users find information on what is happening in the municipal territory through other institutional channels too, thus confirming a more general interest for the content produced by the authority (57.4% of cases). Furthermore, 54.4% of users read online newspapers that «talk about the territory», whilst 22.5% consult the sites of other authorities and institutions. The social citizen in our sample therefore appears particularly socialised to digital media and use of the municipal Facebook page is part of a broader digital information diet.

3. The «thousand» facets of participation

The more the information sought satisfies the need of proximity to a personal life context, the more the need for in-depth analysis emerges. In fact, if we study the moment following use of information on the Facebook page –which is necessarily brief, as the media impose– we note the need for more information with 79.8% of cases staying in the web environment or else consulting the institutional website. A total of 12.6% find more information, still online but through other containers and only a small part

uses more traditional media with 9.4% making contact by phone and 4.7% at the help desk.

What emerges is a more structured use by citizens that hybridize their pathways through various sources and increasingly frequently, digital sources. The more the information sought responds to a particular perceived need, the more a dynamic and active role of those «looking for information» emerges. We can certainly not call it participation, but it is legitimate to highlight how targeted information, which best satisfies tangible and perceived needs, can involve and stimulate users.

It is probably this that citizens refer to when, whilst reflecting on «what suggestions would you give the municipality to improve its presence on Facebook?», they state that they need more information, but also to be listened to more, often accompanied by a request for greater interactivity.

The request to further add to the amount of information provided concerns *service information* (Solito, 2004), which favours the prompt solution of problems relating to everyday life –obtaining explanations, indications, suggestions, «instructions for use» (school canteens or road maintenance work, etc.)–, *theme information*, which is designed to inform citizens on a single problem, a specific initiative, a service or a particular event, and is diversified in citizen requests based on age group, and finally, *general information* with lots of cultural content capable of contributing to building a stronger identity relationship with the territory, as well as content that can «create community spirit» (history, main political events, figures that characterise the identity of the place). Once again, these requests refer to that key role played by information in creating inclusion and a sense of belonging, increasing awareness and the desire to collaborate. After all, as well as channels such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, increasing numbers of authorities –municipalities, ministries, museums, hospital authorities, universities, etc.– have chosen to adopt instant messaging tools, such as WhatsApp, Telegram and Messenger, just to mention the most common, to keep their users updated and constantly informed. Until quite recently these were only used to manage emergencies but are now used daily to share service, theme and general information[6] produced by the authorities or co-produced by citizens.

Ultimately, access to information is a first stage towards awareness, a gradual process of maturity that could potentially blossom into a greater interaction. Unsurprisingly, when asked to make suggestions to those who produce Facebook pages for municipalities, interviewees wanted to be listened to more and demanded greater interactivity so that the social channel could

6 In this respect, see Talamo, Di Costanzo & Crudele (2018).

guarantee citizens «a voice», «greater transparency and information on decisions and projects» and «less political propaganda and more information». In other words, citizens identify social media as a multifaceted opportunity, they approach them with caution, but not without interest or imagination. It is up to municipal administrations to fuel this process so that social channels become useful access routes to processes of «engagement» and integration with institutions; under certain terms and conditions, obviously!

4. Discussion

The considerations presented thus far and the results from research carried out highlight how local administrations can trace limits as well as opportunities around the information-based use -–or use with little dialogue–- of social media information. However, as mentioned, there must be some «caution in interpretation» concerning the specific Italian institutional context, that lead us to suggest reflecting on the following areas.

The information-based use of social media is part of a scenario in which both citizens and administrations must make up for a «delay»[7] in digitalization processes. On the one hand, Italians are attracted to social media and have all the potential –particularly technological–material potential –to integrate them into their daily life but are lagging behind when it comes to acquiring digital skills and know-how (ISTAT, 2017). On the other hand, administrations, which seem to be equally fascinated by the opportunities offered by social media, seem to use innovation without a shared «driver»[8]. In this respect, the clarifying and regulatory role played by the guidelines for PA websites and the handbook entitled «Public Administrations and Social Media» is fundamental. Here we find two key aspects, above all in light of the considerations presented. The first is the importance of social media in diffusing information of public importance, capable of both exploiting the methods adopted by citizens to use the web and social media and, in turn, of activating relationships of proximity and the exchange of information between citizens. Secondly, the importance of incremental logic that, as highlighted by us through the «maturity models», in the handbook consists of 4 levels of presence: 1. Listening; 2. Overseeing; 3. Interaction; 4. Participation. Since Italian law 150/2000 was introduced, the legislature has issued frequent reminders regarding these latter areas yet the PA –due to various financial, cultural and professional «shortfalls»– has often proved to be fickle and largely ineffective in this respect.

Social media can help to recuperate such dimensions thanks to costs, timescales and skills and know-how that are far inferior compared to the recent past, con-

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7 See, for example, ISTAT (2018) or D'Aquale (2018).

8 BEM Research (2019).

tributing to a greater awareness of what citizens express –ask, suggest, criticise, comment, share– but starting precisely from the promotion of the service and public utility role of diffused information. These two aspects –listening and service logic– are important strategic objectives for the PA, in order to enable it to relate with citizens and best capture real interests, life timescales and how towns and cities are «consumed». Even those who are not exposed directly to social media can be reached thanks to the viral nature of such processes, with a positive multiplying effect on the involvement of citizens and the gradual information capacity of messages.

This form of engagement probably finds more fertile ground in the local institutional dimension (Materassi, 2017); contexts in which citizens already have consolidated relationship networks that accelerate the exchange of information, shared learning and assessment and control of content, as well as the interconnection between different areas and themes (De Widt & Panagiotoupolos, 2018; Mossberger *et al.*, 2013; Bonson *et al.*, 2012). On a municipal level, information content can activate citizens precisely on services directly linked to daily life such as transport, waste management, education, taxes and demographic services, capturing their interest, generating debate and mobilising resources and «civic engagement» (Lev-On & Steinfeld, 2015).

However, with a spirit of providing a service, listening and diffused information also lead us to imagine administrations as, to all intents and purposes, «hubs of information» for citizens, emphasising their key role in the systematization, integration and reconnection of information content whether self-produced or produced by others, i.e., by other institutional subjects (third-sector associations and authorities, companies, cultural institutions, etc.). In this respect, we return to Lev-On & Steinfeld's concept of hub of interaction (2015) and broaden it. If citizens are looking for useful and up-to-date information to improve their quality of life and use of services and the territory, the role of whoever collects, organises and diffuses information of general interest becomes particularly significant. After all, as national data confirm[9], the web is used increasingly by citizens to obtain information; in fact, after television, it is the most popular way of satisfying the need for information. However, it is characterised by consumption habits that can lead to superficial, careless and fragmented use of information content due to, amongst others, the simultaneous use of several channels, the constant use of mobile devices in everyday life, the arrival of new players and new interests in information circles. The municipality «hub» would assume the role of directing communication, becoming a meeting place for all the flows of information that exist on the administered territory, giving the «physical» proximity of the authority to citizens functional, operational and symbolic significance. The role of being a link and the

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9 See AgCom Report (2017).

activity of aggregation, once carried out by the press, radio and television, can now be found and legitimised in institutional information. The advantage that a «hub of information» municipality could provide consists in organising the huge amount of information in circulation, which has grown exponentially thanks to digital communication, attributing it authoritativeness and facilitating citizen navigation and activation processes.

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