Chapter 74
Web Accessibility and Transparency for Accountability:
The Portuguese Official Municipal Websites

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ABSTRACT

Local government is a political power close to citizens and constitutes a mainstay of democracy. Because of their mission, the guidelines promoted by local government must be embedded in strategies of accountability and public communication. In that sense, it is worthwhile to ask if "local government accountability is being an inclusive concept?" In Portugal, transparency of municipalities is being accessed through the Municipality Transparency Index (MTI). The study aim was to investigate whatever MTI measures accessibility. This study examined the availability of local government information on the website for a sample of 86 Portuguese municipalities and presented the results of a quantitative evaluation of the web accessibility based on W3C guidelines, using an automated tool. Based on the main concepts of transparency and accessibility, it explored static association between MTI and web accessibility. This study contributed to the discussion about transparency as a social value and is of great importance for local policy makers and civic movements in favor of disabled people.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, accountability and transparency in public administration are two interrelated issues that have gained a huge relevance in political discourse. These issues are now inevitable for discussion in developed societies.

- How well are public resources being used?
- What are the outputs and the outcomes of public resources?
- Are citizens' needs being satisfied in an effective and efficiency way?

These are some of the key questions involved. Therefore, one can say that there is no real democracy without real accountability. By being accountable, it means to provide information about what is being done, in what way, with which motivations and how much it costs. In other words, it means being transparent and practicing good governance (Arnold & Garcia, 2011).

More than any other organization, public entities has a vast list of stakeholders.

- Citizens,
- Customers,
- Suppliers,
- Government bodies,
- Political bodies,
- Civil movements,
- Consumer advocates,
- Environmentalists,
- Special interest groups and
- Media are just some of them.

The importance of each stakeholder depends on its attributes of power, urgency and legitimacy (Austen et al., 2008; Flak & Dertz, 2006). Normally, social minorities face some difficulties in being recognized as important stakeholders.

In an instrumental approach, this question may be of little relevance. However, if one follows a political perspective, then there are some moral or philosophical guidelines that should command the way public entities manage their stakeholders (Fontaine et al., 2006; Donaldson & Preston, 1995). Disabled people represent a minority of the population, but each person is a citizen, no matter what are their physical conditions. Therefore, developed societies should ask themselves if their public entities are being accountable for all.

Local government is the political structure most closed to day-to-day citizens. Because of their mission and their activities, the moral or philosophical guidelines promoted by local government must be embedded in the processes and strategies of accountability and public communication. There is no doubt that the way public bodies communicate with their stakeholders has changed a lot over the two decades. Technology and the Internet have driven social life changes. The digital era arrived to Portuguese public administration some years ago. Nowadays in most Portuguese municipalities, citizens can apply for public local services through the respective websites. In the other hand, local governments use websites and other digital instruments to inform and communicate with their citizens.

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