Chapter 15
We–Transparency

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ABSTRACT

"Transparency" is a term that many speculate about. According to scholars, transparency has three inter-related aims: first, to inform citizens in a simple and understandable way on the government's decisions; second, to foster civil society participation and engagement; and, third, to monitor and to prevent corruption. Notwithstanding these shared thoughts, much has to be done in liberal democracies. The European Commission estimates that corruption costs the EU economy roughly 120 billion EUR per year. The lack of transparency is both an economic and political problem, since corruption and opaque policies may develop degenerative forms of governance, which, in turn, lessens citizens' political participation and understanding on how the governmental machine functions. This "participative deficit" is common in many Western democracies. The notion of popular empowerment, the "core of democracy," has been diluted to the point that most citizens exercise their putative sovereignty only through periodic elections of representatives and thus have extremely limited input into political processes. This deficit is further exacerbated by the fact that elected representatives in fact embody a range of competing "interests"—party, ideological, corporate—which may or may not coincide with those of the voter. This chapter explores a new concept of transparency.

1. INTRODUCTION

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2. SOCIAL INTERACTION AND DEMOCRATIC VALUES

New ways of democratic participation, pressures for new institutional structures, new processes and frameworks that lead to a more open and transparent government are all coming from social media.

Social media refers to a set of online tools that are designed for and centered around social interaction (Bertot, 2011). In practice, social media serves as a catchall phrase for a conglomeration of web-based technologies and services such as blogs, microblogs, social sharing services, text messaging, discussion forums, collaborative editing tools, virtual worlds and social networking services (Hansen et alt., 2011).

Social media technologies demolish the traditional boundaries of time and space for government and other political processes, which have traditionally involved physical attendance or slow input-seeking procedures. Social media technologies, each one with its unique architecture that shapes the types of interactions that can occur (Lessig, 2010), could help to reduce the barrier of representative democracy, empowering the citizen, fostering an interactive dialog and a sharing framework between governments, people, communities. Social media challenge also political stakeholders (parties, institutions and civic society), who have to redraw the relationship between governments and communities, being the crossing line between them becomes less clear (Bertot 2011).

3. SOCIAL INTERACTION AND TRANSPARENCY

The use of social media, like Twitter and Facebook, is often used in Western democracies as evidence that the rulers and politicians have joined the network. Yet, for most of the time they just talk *to* their constituents rather than *with* them, avoiding to create any dynamics of participation. What is being offered by public institutions is just a glimpse into the places of power, where the private mingles with the public: a new political "voyeurism", where the gossip is stronger than democracy.

On the contrary, transparency's ultimate goal is a better accountability of government and politics as well as participation: a "public use" of transparency, "key feature of the democracy of the future" (Levy 2001) related to what Kant had theorized about the need for transparency in the public sphere. In this way the democratic system escapes the logic of the big lobbies, the influence of patronage, the special interests, and moves towards a transparent policy, intended by Foucault as a "kingdom of the opinion of all on all".

New media also reverses the situation of authoritarian regimes: the citizens have the opportunity to become controllers of the centers of power, with a strong potential of self-construction of new political subjects unless they are given a space for dialogue in the public sphere. The new communities that are going to be created could explore new forms of public opinion, as other media did in the past (Habermas, 1962).

4. TOWARDS NEW TRANSPARENCY POLICIES: THE CASE OF WIKILEAKS

According to the English philosopher John Locke, the political legitimacy derives from popular explicit and implicit consent: "the government is not legitimate unless it is carried on with the consent of

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