

Chapter 14

Social Media and Public Administration in Spain: A Comparative Analysis of the Regional Level of Government

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ABSTRACT

The chapter investigates the employment of digital social media by Spanish regional administrations: its presence, the factors that determine that presence, as well as the self-perception of those responsible for its management. This study raises the following questions: What are the key factors that explain the use of social media in public administrations? What is the self-perception of those responsible for the management of digital social media about its current level of development within their organisations? What are the main inhibitors-facilitators for the development of digital social media in public administrations? What are the next steps to promote digital social media in the sphere of public organisations? This chapter is based on a questionnaire that was responded to by those responsible for the management of digital social media in the Spanish regional administrations. This research shows that Web 2.0 tools are more oriented to explore potential changes in the relations between the public administrations and citizens, than to innovate the functioning of public sector organisations. In sum, this chapter offers a relevant analysis, although it is of an exploratory character because of the almost total absence of systematic studies about the diffusion of digital social media within Spanish public administrations.

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INTRODUCTION

Recently, the debate about the diffusion of digital social media in public administrations has intensified. This chapter addresses some of the key aspects related to the diffusion of these technological innovations within the public sector, with the aim of throwing light on a reality that is still under construction, but that attracts great social and academic interest. Specifically this study focuses on regional level government in Spain, whose public administrations are increasingly adopting digital social media. However, very little is known about the most widely used tools, the reasons for their use, the factors that inhibit-facilitate their establishment, as well as the areas forecast for development in the future. The following pages present an exploratory analysis that is based on data drawn from a questionnaire responded to by those responsible for the management of digital social media in regional Spanish administrations. This work also seeks to contribute to understanding the role that digital social media are already playing in the construction of public administrations that are both more open and in closer contact with citizens.

This study is framed within a collective effort that aims to identify and characterise the consequences and results of the diffusion of Web 2.0 tools within public administrations. The interest is twofold: on the one hand to understand the implications for the functioning of organisations that make up the public sector; and on the other to explore potential changes in the relations between the public administrations and citizens that flow from its establishment. With this in mind, the introduction of digital social media in the public sector can be analysed by following some of the patterns employed in previous studies on the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and the Internet within public administrations. This work departs from the opposition to the technological determinism that is commonly found in many of the works undertaken in this

area of academic study (Gil-García, 2012; Heeks & Bailur, 2006; Yildiz, 2007).

This study assumes that Web 2.0 represents a qualitative leap forward in the role of ICT and the Internet within public administrations. This advance has been made possible thanks to the existence of new tools and applications that allow citizens to become active participants in the creation, organisation, publication, combination, exchange, commentary and evaluation of public web content, which has created a network through which people can interact and link up among themselves or with government institutions (AGIMO, 2009; Chun et al., 2010). Consequently, digital social media offer a new area of academic interest that must be addressed, without forgetting the history of the use of ICT and the Internet in public administrations, but at the same time particularly focusing on a new generation of technologies with some unique functionality.

The interest of the Spanish regional administrations in ICT derives from their growing political power and the increase in the volume of responsibilities assigned to them. Spanish regional governments are political structures that manage some of the largest areas of public activity (in terms of budgetary size), particularly in the areas of health and education. Regional governments also therefore have a 'superior weight' in comparison with other levels of government (central and local) in terms of the number of public employees. For these reasons, this collection of organisations are of enormous interest in understanding the technological dynamics that are developing around the adoption, use and diffusion of digital social media in the Spanish public sector.

At the same time the interest that has been generated by digital social media in public administrations is not surprising. The use of digital social media has rapidly grown in recent years, incorporating 77% of Internet users in Spain (ONTSI, 2011). The same study situates Spain in third position in the world ranking that calculates the use of digital social media. Specifically, the

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