SPECIAL SECTION

Translucent States:
Political Mediation of E-Transparency

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ABSTRACT

This work focuses on online state communication through the analysis of Latin-American presidential portals. It postulates that even though governmental websites contribute to the dynamics of democracy in terms of greater transparency and participation in government processes, online government communication is neither completely symmetric nor transparent, since the ways of constructing, presenting and accessing the information are linked to cultural schemes. In this sense, the work argues that the search for transparency in Internet communication can expect—at best—clear and even translucent States, where transparency limits are determined by the sets of values and symbolic representations already existent in each society’s political culture.

Keywords: communication; executive power; information ideology; Internet; Latin America; presidency; political communication; political culture; semiotics; Web design

INTRODUCTION

Together with state’s modernization process, government communication has acquired new relevance. In this context, new information and communication technologies (ICTs)—especially Internet—have achieved wide recognition. This is mainly due to the fact that an innovative capacity is attributed to them, as a contribution towards increasing public officials’ decision transparency and supporting new ways of communication between government and civil society. As a result, Government portals and websites are then seen as being synonymous with State modernization. Furthermore, they appear to have an informative function free from any determining influence and their very presence is regarded as a contribution to transparency in public management and as an access door to citizen’s participation in governmental processes.

The purpose of this work is to demonstrate that, since ways for building and displaying information as well as preparing means to access are linked to cultural schemes, the conception of completely symmetric and transparent online government communications is not strictly speaking possible. On the contrary, it is suggested that the search for transparency in web communication can expect—at best—clear and even translucent States, where the transmission of messages and their meanings, are tinged with the political culture characteristics of each society.

The work is divided into four parts: The first one (point 2) explains the fallacy in the assumption of neutral communication imposed...
by the ideology accompanying the diffusion of new technologies. The second one (point 3) deals with communications’ cultural mediation and introduces the possibility of hybridization and globalization processes in the production of discursive practices on the Internet. The third, (point 4) deals with the relationship of communication, culture and hybridization from the point of view of political communication, and the systems of meaning and online representation within the political culture of each society. And the fourth one (point 5) analyzes empirically the political plot of virtual discourses in Latin-American States.

THE IDEOLOGY OF INFORMATION
In the late 80’s, Latin American States began modernization processes focused on the notion of governance. In order to achieve equitable and democratic growths, these processes centered on the capacity of government institutions in terms of legitimacy and transparency. Thus, governmental communication acquired crucial significance, and problems related to diffusion, transmission and access to information became key elements in state management (Vega, 2002).

The notion of transparency is then associated to the free flow of, and access to, information regarding public actions and decisions, and this is considered a main link towards institutional strengthening and democratization (Heeks, 2004). The underlying hypothesis suggests that, if people can understand and be aware of government’s management, they will participate more regularly in decision making, thus generating in officials and representatives a greater sense of responsibility in public affairs, and consequently contributing to the establishment of a better government (Balkin, 1998; Heeks, 2004).

Under these premises, when ICTs started, they were widely recognized, and their identification with transparency became omnipresent in the speeches of politicians, mass media and social elites (CEPAL, 2000; Wolton, 2000; Tapscott, 2004). There is no doubt that, under certain circumstances, their impact is beneficial to social and political development and welfare. However, in general, their incorporation has been associated with emphatically positive, neutral, and transforming discourses promising the eradication of almost every problem affecting society (Wiesner, n.d).

In this sense, there is a technological ideology according to which a change in technologies necessarily brings about a change in social relationships. This ideology arises from a classical definition of information, which considers that the communication act is a symmetric process between a sender and a receiver, and corresponds to a technical view of the social world that denies every principle of purpose and influence in social exchanges, and also rejects the influence of the effect of enunciation in communicative acts (Moragís, 1985; Wolton, 2000; Charaudeau, 2003).

This ideology has concrete consequences in the political sphere in particular. On one hand, by negating the possible existence of a purpose in exchanges, it does not take into account the possibility of officials and politicians simulating transparency virtues through rhetoric and media manipulation. Thus, it prevents the Internet from being understood as a tool of political action (Balkin, 1998). On the other hand, by stating that the Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW) are culturally neutral tools which permit transparent communication, it assumes that these technologies homogenize the design and contents of websites, detaching them from their cultural roots and consequently facilitating universal understanding (Ess and Sudweeks, 1998; Zhao, 2003).

As pointed out by Wolton (2000), the danger of this standpoint is forgetting that, beyond its utopian nature, the essential point in communication technology is the existing link between this technology, the cultural model of relationships between individuals, and the project this technology is concerned with. The ICTs are related to an integrated information system, the purpose of which is involved with the ambition of an “economy-world”, and are

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also marked by the characteristics of the business model, insisting on a functional communication focused on results and speed of transmission (Wiesner, n.d.; Moragás, 1985; Wolton, 2000). On the political sphere in particular, ICTs are related to the individualistic, liberal ideal. This is expressed in a technocratic liberalism in the following way:

- we do not have enough access to information;
- information is knowledge and knowledge is power, and,
- the access to information is the extension of democracy and the achievement of social equality (Winner, 1987).

Nevertheless, this line of reasoning has a number of fallacies. One of them—the one on which this work is based—is that the emphasis on the easiness of consulting and accessing information does not take into account cultural issues (Winner, 1987). The problem with online communication is not the access to information—as pointed out by technocratic liberalism—but the division and hierarchy of knowledge, both before and after information is accessed, and in the information itself. Information is not simply the piece of data introduced, but is also the organization of data carried out in order to produce meaning or to make sense, i.e.: what is called discourse, and this accounts for the way in which the different value systems organize the circulation of signs in order to produce meaning (Barón Porrrás, n.d.; Wolton, 2000; Charauadeau, 2003).

This means that, unlike the principles of the ideology of information, the way to construct and show information and establish the means to access it, is not universal but is related to cultural schemes (Brunner, 1988). In communicative actions among individuals, culture interposes symbolic mediations, i.e. organized sets of rules, values and meanings that function as implicit orders in every communicative act, establishing preferences with regard to the way individuals relate to themselves and others (Maturana, 1991). Thus, messages turn into discourses, i.e.

sets of symbols invested with meaning within a time-space framework (Verón, 2004).

From this point of view, the fallacy in the assumption of transparency upheld by the information ideology arises from reducing communication to supports and techniques when—even though they are necessary—these conditions are not in themselves enough to deal with the issue. Apart from ignoring the purpose of communicative acts, its model overlooks the main cultural factor which goes beyond the technical aspect of information, referring to the processes of meaning inherent in communication (Bartoli, 1991).

Therefore, after this acknowledgement, the "technological revolution" becomes denaturalized. Even though the WWW and the Internet may be considered neutral tools, communication is inseparable from culture, so the setting looses its neutrality in the hands of the person using it and it becomes mediated by his culture (Martín-Barbero, 2003). Technology then appears to be insufficiently capable of changing society and its appraisal in terms of benefits and impacts stop being undeniably positive and becomes subject to the considerations of each different social context (Wiesner, n.d). Culture is fundamentally interwoven with communication, technology seems to be full of values, and the setting and its messages cease to be undeniably transparent as they become, at best, translucent.

INTERNET COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE

In online communication, the relationship between communication and culture can be seen in a website's design and content. This relationship has been studied in depth in the area of the Marketing studies oriented to e-commerce, advertising, and social Information Technology studies. In these fields, researchers oppose a standardization of navigation interfaces and web contents with a globalized consumer profile to their adaptation to regionally and culturally localized markets (Singh et Al., 2005).

Although of a much more specific nature, this search parallels the one carried out by
Social Sciences centered on the diffusion of new technologies, their consequences on the transnationalization of information flows and diversification of communication channels, and the emergence of new crossings between global and local spheres of information reception and production (Moragás, 1985). In both fields, there is a polarization among those who view these changes as a homogenizing process with consequences in terms of the acculturation and erosion of significant spaces in communication, and those who see them as an opportunity for local identity vindications (Vizer, 2003).

At the beginning, specifically in the marketing field, it was believed that as the Internet was a technology developed mainly by the U.S.A. and Europe, its contents and that its designs would tend to represent developed industrial countries' values (Sackmary and Scalia, 1999). A similar argument stated that because of the user's predominant profile—most of them belonging to Western middle and upper classes—the Internet would tend to show some homogeneity in its sites' design, organization and contents (Simon, 1999). Some authors even predicted the existence of an "Internet imperialism" that would destabilize online's representation of different cultures in favor of a universal and deterritorialized cultural matrix associated with consumption and interactivity values.

In the analysis of this possibility, Sackmary and Scalia (1999) compared the portals of some Mexican and American companies and confirmed that, even though the sites had different designs, the content tended to be "neutral" towards differences of their cultural origins. This finding led authors to identify the emergence of a transnational web communication style avoiding specific visual or linguistic references. Similar conclusions were reached by Stengers, Troyers, Baetens and Mushita (2004), who stated that the Web promotes the emergence of a cosmopolitan online culture, neutral to traditional cultural differences.

However, the increasing spread of the Internet revived the discussion, making way for a new kind of literature which emphasizes the persistence of local values in web communication. This perspective argues that, since websites are developed in different places around the world, their designs are influenced by the characteristics of the cultures in which they originate (Stengers et al., 2004). Generally speaking, this standpoint agrees with the perspective held by Social Sciences stating that homogenization caused by communicative globalization may be accompanied by differentiation processes based on unchangeable cultural and identity vindications (Bayardo and Lacarrieu, 1997). The marketing field in particular, agrees with those who assert that in order to attract or retain users, it is necessary to adapt the websites to their characteristics, localizing: texts, visuals elements and contents so that they become "culturally appropriate".

A similar study was carried out by Del Galdo and Nielsen (1996), demonstrating the existence of variations in the use of color and web design in different cultures. Barber and Brade (1998) have also concluded that elements such as colors, texts, graphics and the space orientation of a website change according to different contexts, determining the navigation capacity of the users. Fink and Laupape (2000), on the other hand, showed Australian and Malaysian websites to people of these nationalities and found that, in general, Australians evaluated positively Australian websites, whereas Malaysians preferred those originating in their own country.

Finally, as a third position of this debate, the work of Zhao, Massey, Murphy and Fang (2003) established that the Internet is neither completely neutral—in the sense of a universal cultural matrix—nor is it specific to local values. On the contrary, they state that there is a hybridization phenomenon in the web characterized by the coexistence of changes and permanencies. On one hand, there are differences in the design and content of websites according to their cultural origin, and on the other hand, there are some similarities in design that may be attributed to the generalization of a neutral or non-specified cultural model.

This argument is compatible with the concepts of hybridization and "glocalization". In
the area of cultural and anthropologic studies on identity, these concepts question the modern-traditional dichotomies in the processes of political and social development, suggesting possible crossings between these dualities (De Grandis, 1995; López de la Roche, 2000). From this perspective, hybridization is a process by which social actors take certain benefits from modernity, combining discrete structures or practices which exist separately in order to generate new structures, objects and practices (García Canclini, 2003).

Such a phenomenon may be understood as the result of a double movement: a “globalized localism” that involves a process by which a given local phenomenon is successfully globalized and a “localized globalization” that involves a specific impact of transnational practices or imperatives on local conditions, which must be structured and restructured in order to respond to such imperatives (Lozada, 2004). The result is then a process of “glocalization” in which globalization, established as monolithic and universal, is adapted to local conditions: Local communities adopt global values appropriating and incorporating them into their own way of doing things (Lull, 1995; Fernández Parrat, 2002).

As described by Martínez (2004), in the specific case of the production of discursive practices, this process occurs as a result of a balance of tension between global and local representations. In this relationship/tension, global representations do not “destroy” local ones; but instead, social actors try to cope with universalistic institutions—globalizing practices of other actors—in order to retake some control of their practices and representations, either individually or collectively.

From this angle, differences between websites from different countries may be seen in terms of a relationship/tension between hybridization and glocalization. From an intermediate position, it can be asserted that countries carry out design and content adaptations during the process of the adoption of a globalized technology and communication; but, even within this framework, there are pre-existing differences that correspond to domestic cultural patterns (Zhao et al., 2003).

From this point of view, Internet does not necessarily force the importation of globalized values, but instead local communities retain their systems of values and preferences, adapting the use of the web to them, and generating an interaction between the global and the local (Hongladarom, 1998; Ess and Sudweeks, 1998). Thus, Internet contents and designs may fulfill the material, syntactic and even aesthetic characteristics which are typical of globalized formats but, at the same time, they maintain their own semantic characteristics which are related to local, social and cultural institutions (Wiesner, n.d.). In this sense, the Internet is culturally mediated, and the relationship between online communication and culture may be understood as an ongoing transformation of identity processes in which new and old representations coexist and integrate in a variety of socio-cultural contexts (Lozada, 2004).

**POLITICAL CULTURE IN THE STATE DISCOURSE**

Generally speaking, political communication refers to the type of messages circulating within the political system and those essential for its functioning insofar as they determine its activity (Panebianco, 1982). Online state communication in particular, reflects that aspect of political communication concerned with communication as a non-propagandistic organizational instrument of the political and administrative activity.

Along similar lines, it can be stated that, since online communication is mediated by culture, political communication—within its own specific area of social communication—is mediated by political culture. It can also be stated that, in the specific sphere of politics, it also duplicates the conceptual relationship between communication and culture in the Internet, thus generating the possibility of hybridization and glocalization processes. The only difference is, in this case, the phenomenon refers to the conflict of values centered on society’s power-relationships.
Political culture can be understood as a set of elements which compose the subjective perception of power and authority on the relationships held by a population, as well as tendencies and attitudes towards the political system (Peschard, 1996). In this sense, the relationship between political culture and communication is inherent to their nature: communication creates a political space and politics produce legitimizing symbols and signs understood through political culture (Colomé, 1994).

Hybridization processes have already been confirmed in other political communication spheres (Plasser, 2004); therefore, they may also exist in the area of state Internet communication. The emerging interrogation deals with establishing to what extent online representation systems respond to a globally legitimated political-communicative paradigm or whether they are rooted in local political culture. In other words: can we expect a transparent, globalized online communication detached from local political culture?

Assuming the existence of a dominant scheme determining the premises of a communications cultural construction, it might be expected that technological mechanisms controlled by democratic States transmit meanings and condense values associated with an articulated political culture centered on the democratic-liberal notion of citizenship. Specifically, a cultural identity inspired by liberal principles, sustaining the idea of a society with large autonomy from the State, and a democratic political culture viewing citizens as rational, free and equal individuals, subjects par excellence for participation in public affairs and power legitimization (Peschard, 1996). Moreover, it is precisely in this political conception, centered on individuals and democracy, where the use of new technologies for transparency is promoted (Wolton, 2000).

However, the permanence of heterogeneous cultural identities—even anti-values—mixed with this global discourse but also rooted in the local political system might be expected behind the veil of these values (Perina, 2002:6). Political culture is a composition of values and perceptions that, as such, does not include orientations of just one kind but usually combines democratic and/or modern perceptions and convictions with more or less authoritarian and/or traditional behavior patterns (Peschard, 1996; Perina, 2002). Therefore, it is possible to think that beyond the similarity among political-communicative forms, local political culture may prevail and even alter forms and meanings of the leading political discourse. So that despite the predominance of a specific model, communication is not universal but linked to the cultural schemes that determine it.

In the political-virtual sphere, the right path in the debate over communication and culture is abandoning the idea of a global and transparent political communication which is composed of all countries and cultures, and adopting a position supporting the existence of the phenomenon of hybridization of communication practices, which implies a complementation of national traditions and specific globalized cultures with components connected to Western liberal democracy. In other words: a point of view that considers the possibility of processes both of permanence and negotiation or merging of political identities, values, democratic practices and anti-value or non-democratic practices.

However, the possibility of this standpoint is connected to the theoretical perspective which is adopted on the concept of political culture. Specifically, to the set of perspectives which, with a multidisciplinary approach (anthropological, sociological, political) shapes what is known as “interpretative current”. In opposition to the behaviorist school, this current approaches political culture as a part of typical cultural meanings in a community. Thus, political culture is not a sphere independent of general culture or civic culture (considered in relation to democratic values), but part of a sedimentation of representations, symbols and institutions giving meaning to a set of social actions. It is basically a configuration of meaning regarding the organization and hierarchy of power in some spheres (family, school, institutions, communities, nationalities, etc.) which eventually acquires, as main point
of reference, codes built around the political order and the political system constituted and legitimized in society (Sánchez, 2000; Heras Gómez, 2002).

Only from this theoretical perspective, is it possible to consider political communication processes from a viewpoint that questions democratic discourse as an established reality and recovers the possibility of value mixtures and heterogeneous permanencies of meanings in societies' political discourses (Cruces Villalobos and Díaz de Rada, 1995; Heras Gómez, 2002).

The particular richness in the view of political culture as a “hybrid mentality” lies, in this sense, in the fact that it possible to understand the communication processes in political systems taking into account the construction processes of modernity that are typical of each society (Brunner, 1998; López de la Roche, 2000). Then, from this point of view, it is possible to analyze the relationship between communication and culture in LatinAmerican States' online communication, and to answer to which extent political culture—with its systems of values, symbolic representations and social imaginary—permeates online messages, imposing a local language on the intended global transparency.

**POLITICAL MEDIATION OF COMMUNICATION**

In general, websites can be analyzed from both a functional and a symbolic dimension. The functional dimension refers to the way in which information is published on the sites; i.e., architectures of the texts (subdivisions and navigation bars or tools). Their analysis reflects a classification system that divides the social universe the site is informing about.

The symbolic dimension refers to meanings of site elements (visual images, symbols, signs, colors, textures and forms of the sites) and their relationship with mental guidelines or models that guide their organization of information (hierarchy, distribution, composition, disposition and differentiation). Their analysis crystallizes characteristics of national identity (shared images about the historical past and its relevance to collective projects and institutional loyalties of the present) and, through them, reflects society's political culture (Buchrucker, 1994).

Each of these dimensions can be approached with a specific method and show, at the same time, complementary results. Their analysis is explained below, considering as universe the presidential portals of the Spanish speakers of Latin America and the Caribbean (see Table 1). First, sites are analyzed according to a functional and quantitative measurement of their transparency; subsequently a symbolic, interpretative analysis is made on two of the most transparent sites of the region.

The functional dimension can be analyzed by gathering information on the site's main characteristics, according to the E-transparency indicators suggested by the “E-Government for Development” of the University of Manchester (United Kingdom) (Heeks, 2004). For the purposes of this work, these indicators were adapted in order to elaborate a questionnaire of 65 variables later applied in the 15 functioning presidential websites in September, 2006 (see Table 2).

According to information gathered, it can be observed that, in general, regional sites present a 21 percentage point average; the Mexican presidential site being the one that most stands out with 62.3 points. With a lower score, but still higher than average, Chilean and Nicaraguan sites also stand out with 40 points each. The sites with lower values are the Uruguayan (18.4 points) and the Venezuelan (14 points) ones (see Graph 1).

When results are broken down according to index categories, it can be observed that in general the most developed aspect of sites is the provision of information, with dimensions of “report” and “openness” following in importance. “Transaction” and “responsibility” are below the average. This means that, in the region, sites are being used mainly to spread information, whereas the possibilities offered by the web for interaction with citizens and democratic control are aspects which are poorly exploited (see Graph 2).
Table 1. Websites sample (Hispanic countries, Latin America. N = 17)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>URL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td><a href="http://www.presidencia.gov.ar">http://www.presidencia.gov.ar</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolivia</td>
<td><a href="http://www.presidencia.gov.bo">http://www.presidencia.gov.bo</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td><a href="http://www.presidencia.cl">http://www.presidencia.cl</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td><a href="http://www.presidencia.gov.co">http://www.presidencia.gov.co</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td><a href="http://www.casapres.go.cr">http://www.casapres.go.cr</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td><a href="http://www.casapres.gpb.sv">http://www.casapres.gpb.sv</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td><a href="http://www.guatemala.gob.gt">http://www.guatemala.gob.gt</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td><a href="http://www.presidencia.gob.hn">http://www.presidencia.gob.hn</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>México</td>
<td><a href="http://www.presidencia.gob.mx">http://www.presidencia.gob.mx</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
<td><a href="http://www.presidencia.gob.ni">http://www.presidencia.gob.ni</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panamá</td>
<td><a href="http://www.presidencia.gob.pa">http://www.presidencia.gob.pa</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraguay</td>
<td><a href="http://www.presidencia.gob.py">http://www.presidencia.gob.py</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uruguay</td>
<td><a href="http://www.presidencia.gub.uy">http://www.presidencia.gub.uy</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td><a href="http://www.venezuela.gob.ve">http://www.venezuela.gob.ve</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecuador *</td>
<td><a href="http://www.presidencia.gob.ec">http://www.presidencia.gob.ec</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>República Dominicana *</td>
<td><a href="http://www.presidencia.gob.do">http://www.presidencia.gob.do</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perú **</td>
<td><a href="http://www.presidencia.gob.pe">http://www.presidencia.gob.pe</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: * Not available site. ** Not available: maintenance. September, 2006.

Table 2. Online transparency dimensions and indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Information</td>
<td>Provides detailed information about government’s functions and staff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Participation</td>
<td>Provides online tools for citizens’ consultation and participation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Report</td>
<td>Provides detailed information or statistics about government performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Openness</td>
<td>Provides comparative information about government’s performance during different administrations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Accountability</td>
<td>Provides mechanisms to punish or to award public servants.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Graph 1. Online transparency index (Presidential Sites; Mean: 21)
Graph 2. Online transparency index, by transparency dimensions

If these results are analyzed in dimensions, a closer approach is possible. Regarding the “information” dimension, it can be observed that—on a regional average of 46.47 points and with Mexico and Chile still leading—Bolivia reaches an important third place, whereas Venezuela, Guatemala and Costa Rica show the lowest development.

This dimension can be broken down into sub-dimensions of “general information” and “contact information”. The “general information” sub-dimension takes into account access to the following information: general introduction to power, Presidential Palace presentation, general information about the country and its national symbols, information about the President, First Lady, Vice-President and Cabinet and its members. In this category, on a 51.18-point average, presidencies that score most points are the ones from Mexico (90.91), Chile (72.73), El Salvador (72.73), Bolivia and Honduras (63.64 points each) (see Table 3).

On the other hand, the “contact information” sub-dimension refers to publication of information allowing users to contact—either electronically or in a traditional way—the President, First Lady, Vice-President, Cabinet and its members, the remaining government powers and organisms dependent on the Executive Power. On a 37.83 point average—apart from Mexican and Chilean sites—developments in Bolivia and Nicaragua stand out with 66.67 points each (see Table 3).

The second dimension of analysis in the index is “report”. This refers to the publication of information about: President’s agenda, First Lady, Vice-President and the Cabinet, presidential speeches (text and multimedia), the government plan, performance indicators and management statistics, access to government publications, laws and documents, existence of a press or novelty section and the possibility of subscribing to an e-bulletin. In the region, on a 35.21-point average and behind the Mexican leadership, Paraguayan (57.14) and Nicaraguan (57.14) sites stand out. These sites are the most transparent in terms of providing specific details or indicators about public administration decisions and actions (see Table 3).

The third dimension in order of importance in the region is “openness”, and it refers to providing information allowing website users to access management indicators and documents for tracking public issues over a period of time. Specifically: archives of presidential discourses, comparative indicators, indicators about the government’s plan and its specific goals over time. This dimension presents a 22.6-point average. The Guatemalan presidential site stands out in it with the same values as the Mexican one, 60 points (see Table 3).

The “participation” and “responsibility” dimensions of the region are below the average. “Participation” dimension refers to providing online consultation and participation mechanisms, and presents a poor evolution in the
Table 3. Transparency values and user friendliness per country and dimensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transparency dimension</th>
<th>Argentina</th>
<th>Bolivia</th>
<th>Chile</th>
<th>Colombia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Information</td>
<td>52,94</td>
<td>64,71</td>
<td>70,59</td>
<td>47,06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General information</td>
<td>54,55</td>
<td>63,64</td>
<td>72,73</td>
<td>54,55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact information</td>
<td>50,00</td>
<td>66,67</td>
<td>66,67</td>
<td>33,33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Participation</td>
<td>11,11</td>
<td>11,11</td>
<td>11,11</td>
<td>11,11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Report</td>
<td>28,57</td>
<td>35,71</td>
<td>42,86</td>
<td>35,71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Openness</td>
<td>20,00</td>
<td>20,00</td>
<td>20,00</td>
<td>40,00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Accountability</td>
<td>20,00</td>
<td>0,00</td>
<td>0,00</td>
<td>40,00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 User friendliness</td>
<td>6,67</td>
<td>6,67</td>
<td>46,67</td>
<td>13,33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transparency dimension</th>
<th>Costa Rica</th>
<th>Ecuador</th>
<th>El Salvador</th>
<th>Guatemala</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Information</td>
<td>23,53</td>
<td>47,06</td>
<td>47,06</td>
<td>23,53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General information</td>
<td>27,27</td>
<td>54,55</td>
<td>72,73</td>
<td>27,27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact information</td>
<td>16,67</td>
<td>33,33</td>
<td>0,00</td>
<td>16,67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Participation</td>
<td>11,11</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Report</td>
<td>35,71</td>
<td>28,57</td>
<td>21,43</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Openness</td>
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<td>Contact information</td>
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<td>33,33</td>
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<td>11,11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Report</td>
<td>21,43</td>
<td>71,43</td>
<td>57,14</td>
<td>42,86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Openness</td>
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<td>60,00</td>
<td>40,00</td>
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<td>5 Accountability</td>
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<td>20,00</td>
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<td>6 User friendliness</td>
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<td>46,67</td>
<td>6,67</td>
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<th>Venezuela</th>
<th>Regional mean</th>
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<td>29,41</td>
<td>23,53</td>
<td>46,47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General information</td>
<td>50,00</td>
<td>27,27</td>
<td>36,36</td>
<td>51,18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact information</td>
<td>33,33</td>
<td>33,33</td>
<td>0,00</td>
<td>37,83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Report</td>
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<td>14,29</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Accountability</td>
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<td>20,00</td>
<td>0,00</td>
<td>12,00</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 User friendliness</td>
<td>13,33</td>
<td>26,67</td>
<td>6,67</td>
<td>15,53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
region. Only Mexico, Uruguay and Venezuela exceed the 12.56 point average; nevertheless some analytical remarks must be made about each case.

The Mexican site stands out because it provides a link to a general consultation office, presents a guide to the consultation procedure, and makes them available online; but it does not provide participation mechanisms. The Uruguayan site does not provide information about consultations; but on 2005 it provided an online survey mechanism. Although nowadays it is not available, up to 3,500 people participated in this proposal. Finally, the Venezuelan site—just like the Mexican one—provides general consultation mechanisms, but does not offer participation mechanisms. Following this tendency, regional presidential sites present a 25-point average with regard to provision of consultation mechanisms, and an 8-point average in the provision of participation mechanisms (see Table 3).

On the other hand, "responsibility" dimension refers to the amount of information, the contents of published mechanisms for contacting those in charge of sites, and the possibility of complaining or commenting on government employees’ performance, as well as the presence of contact links or information with an Ombudsman. Despite its importance in terms of public management transparency, this is the dimension that is the least developed in regional presidential sites. It reaches an average of 12 points, exceeded only by half of the cases; whereas the other half presents values equivalent of zero (see Table 3).

Finally, apart from the 50 variables of the transparency index, values obtained by sites in an analysis of "user-friendliness" should be emphasized. This small gathering of information (15 variables) takes into account web tools provided by sites in order to make it easier for citizens to navigate. Included among them are: the FAQ section, site map, content index, absence of dead links, help menu, services for specific groups, etc.

The relevance of this analysis consists in showing that it is reasonable to think that a site which is difficult to navigate is less transparent than one that is easier for citizens to use; therefore, those sites with low levels of user-friendliness have less transparency degrees. However, it is noted that, while 11 out of 15 sites analyzed are below average, Uruguay—for example—which has a very low transparency level, is among the most user-friendly sites. Consequently, the question about the relationship between design, navigability and transparency, is still open.

In general, results revealed by the index suggest that there is a varied range of e-transparency in the region and, therefore, it is not possible to assert that the construction and publication of websites in public administration guarantee homogeneous levels of transparency. Moreover, when comparing the e-transparency index with offline transparency indicators, it was confirmed that in some cases online transparency is even lower than the institutions' real transparency. Or, conversely, that certain countries reach higher levels of online transparency than of offline transparency. Although it is difficult to measure the transparency of governmental institutions, both the "Corruption Perceptions Index" of Transparency International (TI, 2004) and the "Budget Transparency Index" of International Budget Project show these differences (IBP, 2003) (see Table 4).

In principle, it could be assumed that development of an Information Society on a local level is not enough to promote an advanced portal development in those cases in which offline transparency is lower than online transparency. However, correlation between e-transparency and e-government development indicators (UNDP, 2005) is not significant ($r = 0.29, s = 0.25$). Thus, it can be confirmed that, even in countries with higher offline transparency levels, a mere presence in the Internet does not guarantee that citizens will have transparent and accessible information allowing them to participate pro-actively in formal structures and within democratic boundaries. That is, that the Internet does not necessarily promote a free flow of, and access to, public decisions and actions. Even though the web can potentially
Table 4. Online vs. offline transparency (Source: International Budget Project, 2003; International Transparency, 2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Online Transparency</th>
<th>Offline Transparency (IT)</th>
<th>Offline Transparency (IBP)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>México</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolivia</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraguay</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panamá</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uruguay</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

expand and accelerate information exchanges between government and civil society, so far, this possibility has not increased transparency and participation in government issues.

On the other hand, in those cases in which online institutional presence is more transparent than the real one, the irrelevance of e-government development in transparency levels reached, may indicate that these initiatives could have come from isolated projects made by computer technicians or professionals from the press and communication sectors rather than from governments’ efforts to enhance management and relationships with citizens. In this sense, web communication would be product of an ability to manipulate the setting in order to fulfill requirements of globalized communication—exceeding, in many cases, indexes of real transparency about government, as is the case in Mexico.

This observation also contradicts the hypothesis of the ideology of information, according to which a change in technologies means a change in social relationships: the existence of a good portal in the Internet does not necessarily mean a more transparent institution. On the contrary, just as the idea of hybridization in online communication implies, traditional social patterns or dynamics coexist with orders and devices of the globalization process; in this case, regarding the production of discursive practices in the Internet (see Graph 3).

**SYMBOLIC DIMENSION OF STATE COMMUNICATION**

Analysis of the functional dimension of sites reveals that, far from being inevitably neutral and transforming, online communication can be interpreted as a political action tool which may be used to stimulate transparency virtues. It also reveals that, for the time being, and in opposition to, the thesis of the ideology of information, the Internet has not excelled as a tool for promoting political change. Nevertheless, can this form of communication be free from every cultural determination?

When observing the sites, we can say that they have a common, generalized format, and a series of common elements. In their home
Graph 3. Online transparency vs. offline transparency

pages, for example, a series of common elements can be identified. Among them: URL address, a left navigation bar, a top header of the site, a central content body, and—in some cases—a right content bar. On the other hand, colors tend to be similar (light blue, white, red, blue), showing lack of textures—except in the case of Uruguay. Fonts also tend to be similar (arial, verdana), just like the basic navigation logos. In general, although there are technical conditions typical of the environment, it can be said that there is a basic, globalized pattern in these kinds of discursive practices.

However, inside this homogeneous format, there are specific cultural anchors that localize discourses; value systems that organize site details and elements which have particular meanings. This mediation does not impede transparency—in the sense of access to information—it superimposes a layer of locally codified meanings on the discourse that embeds the meaning in a geographical way and weakens the idea of transparent communication—in the sense of homogeneity and globality—of universal understanding. This mediation can be analyzed through the symbolic dimension of sites. That is, through meanings of the system’s elements and their relation with mental guidelines and models which guide the organization of information. For that purpose, semiotic thought is a potential tool of analysis.

For Semiotics, message senders are restricted and subject to historical and cultural conditions and, in consequence, their messages are structured in semantic codes, or in fields which integrate and make up all their parts, both regarding the use of certain cultural units (meanings) and their possible position combinations or values. Departing from the text up to its creation conditions, Semiotics compares textual surfaces in search for discursive disparities that make production properties and conditions of each text visible, revealing their identities (Becerra, n.d.; Eco, 1968; Verón, 2004).

For the purposes of this work, two groups of variables can be taken into account as a guide for comparing such disparities. Firstly, those corresponding to the historical, political and contextual characteristics of each society. As Joaquin Brunner (1988) states, the whole national community has a communicative pattern which, through symbolic universes, organizes interpretations, grants the identity principle, and at the same time expresses each community’s historical, political and cultural experience (Brunner, 1988). These characteristics, cannot be left aside as they make the case unique. They must be integrated into the analysis for a better understanding of online communication.
Secondly, those cultural variables that explain differences between nations, and shape—among others—values constituted around the political system and power relationships within society. For that, I suggest taking the dimensions proposed by Dutch anthropologist Geert Hofstede (1999). In “Culture and Organizations: The mental software”, Hofstede suggested 4 cultural categories which allow visualization—by means of ideal types—of the axis of mental structures and models articulating the way in which individuals shape social thought; particularly: beliefs, mental ideas about, and representations of, social and political order and the place citizens occupy in it.

Although this model has provoked many comments and debates (Søndergaard, n.d; McSweeney, 2002), its main virtue is that, from an interpretative point of view, its categories allow the discovery of different subjectivities as regards power relationships and their permanence in online discourses. Moreover, it is one of the few cultural studies about Latin American countries with updated, comparative and available data. And it is probably the only model of this type with precedents in web studies - Simon (1999), Sighn (2000), Markus and Gould (2000), Zahedi, van Pelt and Song (2001), Dormann and Chisalita (2002), Zahir, Doping and Hunter (2002), and Pavlou and Chai (2002), among others.

From these groups of variables, I suggest exploring the main page of the Mexican presidential portal—the most advanced one in the region. I specifically suggest looking for traces or evidence of local political culture through comparison with other regional portals; i.e. the political frame which mediates online communication. Departing from the assumption that sites are part of a globally legitimated political and communicative paradigm, I will analyze both the presence of elements typical of national historical political situation and experience, and the presence of meanings embedded in local political culture.

**MEXICAN PRESIDENTIAL PORTAL**

In general, in the top header of sites, a pattern common to all cases can be observed: a closed semantic balance, made up of an image that displays the meaning determined by the text. These images are visual stereotypes culturally associated with the “Presidency" semantic field, such as: the national flag or coat of arms and the presidential office or palace. However, apart from these general characteristics, very noteworthy peculiarities can be observed in the Mexican site (see Appendix).

The image of a flag that flutters and exceeds the limits of the navigation bar itself stands out in this site. On the left can be observed the federal government logo introduced during the process of state modernization. In the middle, in a space destined to an event schedule, is the Red Cross emblem in commemoration of its international day.

From a semiotic perspective, it can be said that the peculiarity of this composition is that the text reading “Presidency of the Republic” refers not only to the image of a government but also to the image of a nation (represented by the flag), appealing to a very concrete historical-political experience. In Mexican culture, ritual references continuously maintain and recreate nationalism (Alonso and Rodríguez, 1990). The flag in particular is a strong symbol that transmits identity through the historical union of the nation (González Chávez, 2004). This nationalism also generates another basic cultural feature - anti-imperialism in all its forms. In México, the process of forging a national identity did not stop during the course of the 19th century but instead it kept on updating (Rojas, 2003).

The noteworthy presence of the flag in the composition of the top bar denotes, in this sense, the existence of a strong nationalism inside and outside the country, re-affirming the nation to both itself and to neighboring countries. However, it is neither isolating nor excluding, as is demonstrated by the space left in the top bar and dedicated to the celebration of international
days: in this specific instance, publishing the Red Cross logo for its anniversary.

Another possible connotative turn of this composition refers to tensions between Region-Nation and Region-State couples (Alonso and Rodriguez, 1990). Unlike the case of Chile (with a coat of arms and the presidential palace), for example, we can observe a predominance of the idea of the nation (represented by the flag) over the idea of the State and its political organization (represented by the federal government’s logo). This has an even stronger nature than the State institutions, represented in a smaller size logo and central location.

Like Argentina, Mexico is a federal State. But unlike the former, there are no symbolic references to territory or local government powers. That is because, although the government in power has tried identifying the State with the nation, the country’s consolidation and modernization implied a higher power concentration in federal government exacerbating regional feelings, causing fractures and the rejection of the State’s capital. Thus, the symbolic appeal to national unity and international strength is based on the region-nation notion, as way to present the region-State notion based on it. This has a real, homogeneous and unified identity of a less controversial nature than the one based on society’s bonds and political organization (Alonso and Rodriguez, 1990; Merino, 2003).

As regards the central body of contents, President Vicente Fox’s portrait is especially noticeable. Although photographs of this kind can also be found - among others - in Chilean and Argentine sites, this case is even more notable: the President is alone in front of a microphone, formally dressed, with a serious and calm look, his eyes fixed on a distant point, apparently assuming the responsibility of his job in the presence of public opinion.

From a contextual point of view, this image agrees with efforts made by the President near the end of his administration and July 2006 presidential elections. Although during political campaign for his candidature Vicente Fox Quesada fought against the solemn political stereotype as he tried to present a cheerful and self-confident personality (González, 2002), the 2006 electoral struggle forced him to account for and make public the results of his administration. Furthermore, he had to provide positive results in order to strengthen his political party’s position during the electoral dispute.

A second connotation: -of a historical rather than a contextual nature - refers to power centralization typical of the Mexican political system. The fundamental standard of the Mexican political system is presidential centralization; a central symbol of Mexican political culture is the Presidency of the Republic as the center of political power, from which all of the people’s benefits or the lack thereof, emanates. (Alonso and Rodriguez, 1990:357).

This characteristic of Mexican political culture is also evident if the dimension and location of the image are related to the other photographs published on the page. Unlike the case of Chile, for example, the only photographs published—besides the President’s—are those of five Government employees responsible for government projects. These are considerably smaller and located situated on site’s second page, on the left content bar. The prominence of the President is also backed by the left navigation bar. The three first links of this bar refer to the President, followed by the Cabinet and First Lady. The remaining links refer to news about government action (“Good News” and “Approach to change”), the government palace (“Los Pinos”), Mexico and citizen services.

These observations refer to a cultural characteristic of Mexican society, which, of all the Latin American countries, has the highest degree of hierarchical distance. Just as Hofstede defines it, “hierarchical distance” is the extent to which members of a society expect and accept that power is unequally distributed (Hofstede, 1999). In his ideal type, countries with high hierarchical distance are characterized by the fact that, in them, hierarchy reflects inequality between people, centralization is common, and the leader’s power prevails over institutions (Hofstede, 1999).
Mexico in particular has a hierarchical society similar to a caste-system, in which the patriarchal family exerts control over its members. These primary institutions—the basis of sociability and social control—are politically translated into a State and a political culture associated to a corporate, vertical, authoritarian and very presidential system (Alonso and Rodríguez, 1990). Therefore, in Mexico there is a complex articulation between a democratic political system based on individualism and an image of society as an organic whole, made up of segments interrelated in a hierarchical way (Adler Lomitz, 1994:295).

As Zahedi, van Pelt, and Song (2001) explain, it is expected that sites of societies characterized by high levels of hierarchical distance tend to present references associated with authority, power and expertise values. Therefore, in the symbolic aspect, they become indicators of importance: 1) social or moral emphasis and its symbols, 2) emphasis on expertise or authority by official’s or experts’ logos, illustrations or certificates, and 3) prominence of social roles according to the importance given to citizens, leaders or officials (Markus and Gould, 2000).

These aspects are evident in the Mexican site as seen in different elements. Firstly, they can be seen in the emphasis on national symbols in the top bar—the only case of this kind among the sites analyzed. They are also evident in the fact that this is the only site which publishes an official recognition for its services (third page); in the overexposure of the President’s portrait with regard to its size and location, compared to the officials’ portraits, and in relation to its location in the order established by the left navigation bar.

Finally, regarding the right navigation bar of the site, it can be seen that there are two particular characteristics that are consistent with other Mexican cultural characteristics. The first one is that there is a predominance of references to the achievements and statistics of Government action in the site. The links “Where are we and where do we go” (accompanied by a statistical graphic showing growth), “8 Big achievements of democracy” (with an image which highlights number 8), “The good news” (with a check mark of approval), “Talking of results” (with photographs of officials responsible for different programs), and “The best rated” (with best rated Government actions), denote the importance attributed to material success and progress, economic success and performance. The second characteristic is that the three images published do not refer to people but to actions referring to prisons, work and security.

And that is because—unlike the case of Chile, for example—images in this part of the site do not connote the importance of people but rather of governmental politics in areas of; security, work and housing—possibly the most important part of the public agenda. As happens in other sites, the right content bar reinforces connotations of the site’s central field. However, in this case the difference lies in the fact that the values reaffirmed here do not correspond to the ones of a female-orientated society (as is the case with Chile) but of a male-orientated one. Along with Venezuela and Argentina, Mexico is one of the most male-orientated countries of Latin America (Hofstede, 1999).

According to Hofstede, dominant values in masculine societies are material success and progress, and great importance is given to money and material objects. Their ideal is performance and they give maximum priority to the maintenance of economic development. (Hofstede, 1999). As Zahedi, van Pelt, and Song (2001) explain in terms of web communication design, websites of a masculine society (as opposed to a feminine one) will transmit values associated with success, strength and personal reassurance.

**CONCLUSION**

This work deals with government communication on the Internet from a perspective that corrects dissociation between State and Society, revealing the political-cultural structures connecting them. Through comparative analysis of systems of meaning, it is possible to see the role of culture as mediation in a medium that boasts of being transparent.
Results obtained confirm that online communication cannot be understood exclusively from a technological perspective, since political, social and cultural conditions define intercourses and their aesthetics, symbolic and linguistic characteristics. However, at the same time as they enable the communication process, such conditions also veil aspired transparency.

Although the Internet is a revolutionary tool, it does not represent a radical change in society, political culture or the State, in the sense that it does not imply, in itself, either harmony or reciprocity and does not establish a realm of symmetric and transparent relationships. On the contrary, like any mass media, Internet adapts to power relationships and struggles, and to appropriations of meaning. From a political viewpoint, it is not possible to hope for a more translucent communication.

In a context where the material foundations of democracies are being developed on the basis of communication, knowledge and information, this assertion highlights the role of culture in politics as seen in the struggles and in the appropriations of meaning. It is also worth noticing the need for in-depth studies of the characteristics of virtual communication as well as the possibilities of articulating tensions between homogenization and heterogeneity into equations which are beneficial in terms of identity and power.

It is illusory to conceive of cyberspace as an entity generating by itself modern democratic communications, being as it is a symbolic field where identities struggle and are redefined. Firstly, the insertion of the Internet neither produces nor changes the existing contents, but it certainly modifies the ways to access it. Nowadays, thanks to the web, many more people can access the government information. However, informative richness should be searched for, not only with this technological tool, but also in citizen’s and institution’s ways of using such information.

Furthermore, far from being symmetric and transparent, online political communication is crossed by complex symbolic plots derived from the hybridization of a common political paradigm and representations produced in local cultures. Internet allows faster and, in some cases, more direct communication. However, that feature is never a synonym for transparency—in the sense of the absence of value determinations. Online communication is filled with values.

REFRENCES


ENDNOTE

This article is an abstract from a postgraduate’s thesis. The original version dwells in depth on the subject, analyzes other practical examples and brings up detailed information on the research process’ methodology. This version is available online at http://www.mariafrick.com.ar

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