

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

## Public Relations Review



# Transparency laws and interactive public relations: An analysis of Latin American government Web sites

Eileen M. Searson\*, Melissa A. Johnson

*Department of Communication, Campus Box 8104, NC State University, Raleigh, NC 27695-8104, USA*

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 17 September 2009

Received in revised form 3 February 2010

Accepted 7 March 2010

#### Keywords:

Web site

Public relations

Transparency

Interactivity

Usability

Relationship building

Symmetric communication

Government

### ABSTRACT

A content analysis of 50 Latin American government Web sites was conducted to assess whether new transparency laws in the hemisphere impacted the interactivity, usability, technological expertise, and national symbolism manifest on the sites. Web sites were found to be generally usable but limited in interactivity. There was no difference in Web site interactivity between countries with transparency laws and those without them, but countries with laws used more visual symbols aimed at national branding. The article offers a model of Web site features for public relations practitioners interested in increasing the sophistication, usability, and interactivity of their sites in order to improve relationship building with stakeholders.

© 2010 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

The late 20th Century return to democracy in Latin America has increased transparency policies and a number of governmental communicators have new freedom of information (FOI) laws with which they must comply. The goal of this study was to investigate transparency and interactive public relations in Latin American governmental organizations' Web site communication. In a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of 50 government Web sites, we describe transparency, usability, and interactive features in order to assess the potential level of two-way symmetric communication. Second, we evaluate whether Web sites in countries with transparency laws differ from Web sites in countries without transparency laws. Third, we discuss how the symbolic identity of nations and their key governmental agencies or ministries relates to transparency, interactivity, usability, technical sophistication, and other Web site features. Lastly, we conclude with a recommended model that public relations professionals can follow to create sophisticated, usable, interactive Web sites.

### 1.1. Government transparency and information access

Public participation is essential to democracy, and participation depends on information. Thus, freedom of information and information accessibility are foundations of democracy. Information is also a barrier to corruption, which depends on secrecy. For instance, the United Nations Convention on Anti-corruption, adopted in 2005, encourages countries to improve public access to information in order to battle corruption (Banisar, 2006). Similarly, the World Bank has encouraged

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Communication, NC State University, Campus Box 8104, Raleigh, NC 27695-8104, USA. Tel.: +1 919 515 9757; fax: +1 919 515 9456.

E-mail addresses: [emsearso@ncsu.edu](mailto:emsearso@ncsu.edu) (E.M. Searson), [Melissa.Johnson@ncsu.edu](mailto:Melissa.Johnson@ncsu.edu) (M.A. Johnson).

information freedom as a means of thwarting corruption. While journalism and public communication in Latin America are not entirely free, there has been a 21st Century move towards more transparency in government information and access by citizens, and this has affected public relations practice as well as journalism. For example, although Columbia's law on access dates to 1885, its current constitution (1991) provides for a right of access to government records. In the last decade Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Panama passed transparency laws. These countries, along with Belize, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago, have also approved laws that give journalists and citizens the ability to procure government information in a timely way (Freeman, 2002; Hughes & Lawson, 2005). More recently Chile and Guatemala passed transparency and access laws in 2008 that became effective in April 2009 (Freedominfo.org, 2009; The Carter Center, 2009). Generally, freedom of information laws apply to the executive branch of government and ministries such as those that oversee health, the environment, law enforcement, military, communications, and transportation (Banisar, 2006). Transparency laws serve to bolster ethical public relations and have also improved job prospects in public relations because of the enhanced requirements for communication. For instance, Corella, del Campo, and Toledo (2009) noted that one reason for the growth of public relations in Mexico is the new freedom of expression regulation, although trade has certainly been another stimulus (Johnson, 2005; Molleda & Moreno, 2008).

Along with the aforementioned laws requiring more transparent communication and citizen access, Internet use is increasing in Latin America. Citizens and international stakeholders are using the Internet more to seek government information and governments are responding with new e-government programs (Sweeney, 2007). Although it should not completely take the place of face-to-face discussion, from a government's perspective, a web presence is also beneficial because not as much government staff time is consumed in answering basic questions about government services and procedures or conducting simple transactions. A government web presence increases citizens' convenience and reduces the workload of frontline government employees (Layne & Lee, 2001). Therefore a governmental Web site must be sophisticated so that it is sufficiently helpful and representational. This means that the sites need to be interactive, accountable, usable, and demonstrate sufficient technical expertise.

Hawkins and Hawkins' (2003) research into Latin American government Internet policies found a number of objectives including: generate Web content in the local language, provide online government services, promote the use of technologies to improve health and health care access, and promote technologies to support sustainable development and environmental projects (2003). While these goals center on serving a nation's citizens, government Web sites also reach stakeholders outside the nation. Government communication outside national borders aims to solicit external investment in the country, promote tourism, promote trade, and/or create a foundation for public diplomacy. Web sites also help to brand a nation (Fursich & Robins, 2002; Morgan & Pritchard, 2005) and a solid national brand can serve as a foundation for business and diplomatic objectives. In short, when communicating via the Internet, governments are reaching their own citizens plus international constituents. This is why our research is relevant not only to Latin American communicators, but to public relations practitioners around the world.

### 1.2. *Interactivity and two-way symmetric communication*

In addition to the pragmatic aspects of Web site communication, digital communication has been lauded by public relations theorists for its ability to foster dialog between an organization and its stakeholders. This boosts two-way symmetric communication, the normative model of public relations (e.g., Grunig & Grunig, 1992). In brief, two-way symmetric communication is defined as research-based public relations that use communication to improve understanding with key publics. The goal in symmetric communication is that organizations and publics adjust and adapt to each other for mutual benefit, rather than an organization using one-way persuasive communication merely to empower the organization and foist its goals onto its stakeholders.

Whether organizations maximize the features of Web site design has been found to make a difference in stakeholder responsiveness (Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003) and research shows it is important to feature different pages to fulfill different stakeholders' needs (Taylor & Kent, 2007). Therefore, variation in Web features can impact two-way symmetric communication. Consequently, the overall branding of the government organization and its national image can be altered depending on responsiveness to stakeholders as evidenced by levels of usability, interactivity, and technical sophistication. However, White and Raman (1999) found that organizations in their study used Web sites more for image building than relationship building, missing the opportunity to demonstrate symmetric stakeholder communication.

The diffusion of social media complicates the two-way symmetric model because social media such as Facebook or Twitter allow for multi-directional interactive communication between an organization and its stakeholders and among the members of the stakeholder group(s), without organizational intervention. For example, a university that establishes an Alumni Facebook page can be dismayed to see posts criticizing the university along with bolstering posts. Social media is discussed further in Section 3.

In summary, transparency and access to information is vital to democracy, and government Web sites play a vital role in providing citizens with information. Government public relations practitioners' use of this medium can also impact national branding and identity. Most importantly, government communicators can use Web sites for relationship building with citizens and other stakeholders beyond the nation's borders. Employing social media to foster communication among stakeholders is another strategy for consideration by government communicators. The goal of this study is to contribute practical knowledge about digital communication for use in government public relations internationally in addition to

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

**ISI**Articles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات