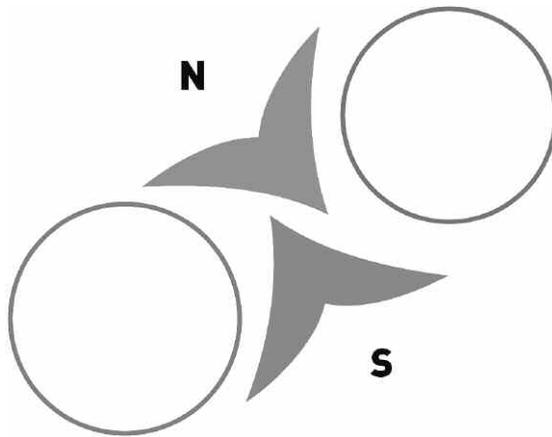


**Extended abstract**

*The development of e-Government  
in the small municipalities  
of region of Valencia (Spain):  
more mirror than glass*



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*Highlights:*

1. Population size determines how different is the development of local e-Government.
2. The help of higher-level administrations has made possible to mitigate the effects of the digital divide.
3. Less presence of transparency websites in smaller municipalities.
4. Municipal Facebook accounts more than encourage political participation show a chronicle of everyday life.
5. The identity dimension of local e-Government is displayed through Digital Social Networks (DSN)

*Abstract:* Studies on how local electronic administration is incorporated in small municipalities are very scarce. However, it is an issue of great interest due to the effects that communicative disconnection causes in rural areas affected by depopulation and ageing. Based on the total census (582) of municipalities of the Valencian Community (Spain), this article presents the results of an empirical study on the development (between 2005 and 2017) of the local e- Government in small municipalities of this region. Using the different stages and dimensions established by the studies on the evolution of e-Government (information, transaction, transparency and participation), we can observe how the latest technological developments (especially the incorporation of Digital Social Networks) have led to a decrease of the digital divide among municipalities according to population size, and greater autonomy of the smallest municipalities in the development of electronic political communication with respect to higher levels of government (provincial, regional and state). Moreover, the article explores (through a sample of extreme cases, 40) a never before addressed dimension in e-Government studies that refers to the identity and symbolic aspects that Digital Social Networks provide. At the local level, and more specifically in small municipalities, it is observed that this identity dimension is developed to a greater extent than those related to the transparency of the government or to citizen participation in local government.

*Keywords:* local e-Government, digital social networks, digital divide, rural areas, local identity, transparency.

## *Extended abstract*

### **Introduction**

Studies on how local electronic administration is incorporated in small municipalities are very scarce. However, it is a matter of great interest due to the effects that communicative disconnection causes in rural areas affected by depopulation and ageing.

This study contains one of the variables that best explain the differences in technological evolution of local governments, as is population size, and its effects in terms of the digital divide. It is, therefore, a very current and relevant study because of the progressive digital extension of politics and public administration.

The development of e-Government has been described as a succession of stages, each one characterized by the deployment of certain dimensions. These dimensions are, on the one hand, informative and transactional, oriented to the provision of services and, on the other, related to the transparency in public administration and the political participation of citizens. From a theoretical point of view, the evolution goes in the direction of an increasing political openness, progressively involving citizens in politics. From our perspective, this openness supposes not only an increase in trust, interest and knowledge of political processes, but also the deployment of a not very often studied dimension of e-Government such is identity.

### **Objectives, methodology and sources**

From this process perspective (considering the development and dimensions of e-Government) and focused on smaller municipalities of the territory under study, the research aims to: 1) describe, from a diachronic perspective, how all the municipalities that make up the Valencian Community have been incorporated into local e-Government; 2) comparatively analyze the rhythm of incorporation into the e-

Government to observe the evolution of the digital divide and the degree of dependency of higher-level administrations; and 3) explore the role that Digital Social Networks (DSN) play in deploying the identity dimension of e-Government.

The main source of data is a content analysis of the websites of all the Valencian municipalities. An analysis carried out at different times of data collection (2005, 2007, 2010, 2017) which is complemented by a larger study carried out in 2018. The main variables provide us with indicators on the status and characteristics of websites in different dimensions that correspond to the stages of the e-Government development process: information (presence of website), transaction (electronic administrative procedures), transparency (transparency website) and participation (presence and content of DSN). Regarding the 2018 extreme cases study (on the 37 smallest population size municipalities that have an account on Facebook and the three largest municipalities), the coding of Facebook posts is the product of a thematic classification following the content analysis methodology.

## **Results**

In respect of the information dimension, it is confirmed that the population size is a segmentation element of great importance when analyzing the progressive development of local e-Government. Regarding the transaction dimension (electronic administrative procedures), it is shown that thanks to the help of higher-level administrations, the implementation of these services reaches almost all municipalities. As for the transparency dimension, there is a lower presence of transparency websites in smaller municipalities of the Valencian Community, as well as a greater deficiency in terms of completeness and updating of these same websites.

Due to the insignificant presence of mechanisms for citizen participation in the electronic tools of the municipalities, we have only been able to access the participation dimension indirectly through the study of their DSN. The institutional accounts of local governments on Facebook offer a chronicle of everyday life: patronal feasts and ceremonies, births and deaths, state of the public works, training courses and employment offers. These facebook accounts also add stories and descriptions of town shops and businesses and about their merchants, as well as talk about participants in school, cultural and sports activities. A large diversity of very attractive content so that the inhabitants can recognize themselves in them.

In terms of technological competence, the easy use of the DSN, their popularity among citizens and their potential to obtain an idea of the climate of public opinion regarding issues of local interest, provide a considerable degree of autonomy to these governments for designing their communication policies. For all this, it is for what we interpret the RDS as ambivalent, in the sense that they are not oriented so much to increasing the transparency of local management or political participation, as to the involvement of the population from an identity point of view.

### ***Discussion***

Considering the contrast between a poor implementation of transparency websites and the accelerated incorporation of the DSN, with this self-contemplative nature, one could use the metaphor of considering the effect of these digital media incorporated into e-Government as something more akin to a mirror than to glass. These DSN are not so oriented to government management (although there is) or to the empowerment of the corporate image of the town hall and the personal image of those who form the government, as to portray local life.

Analysing the extension and content of the municipal accounts in the DSN opens the door to a reconceptualization of the local e-government. The reason is that the study of these accounts in their role of reducing the digital divide and their role in the amplification of the community and the territorial in the construction of local identities can put a counterpoint to the unifying cultural trends that communicative globalization is producing.

### ***Conclusions***

Using the different stages and dimensions established by the studies on the evolution of e-Government (information, transaction, transparency and participation), we can observe how the latest technological developments (especially the incorporation of DSN) have led to a decrease of the digital divide among municipalities according to population size, and greater autonomy of the smaller municipalities in the development of electronic political communication with respect to higher levels of government (provincial, regional and state).

Thus, small municipalities, in the development of e-Government, have been able to combine concrete applications, promoted and regulated by higher level administrative and political entities (websites for transactions and transparency), with the wide range of content, flexibility, popularity and easy use of DSN.

The results allow us to reflect and locate research in municipal DSN in their role in reducing the digital divide and in their role as amplifiers of the community and territory in the construction of local identities. The incorporation of the DSN into local e-Government has reduced the digital divide among municipalities of different sizes and has facilitated the deployment of a dimension never before explored, identity, which could have effects in terms of legitimacy of political action.

### ***Future research directions***

In order to consolidate the conclusions on the last phases of evolution of local e-Government, it is necessary to carry out in the future a larger study on the contents of the DSN. Exploratory studies, such as the one presented here on the contents of municipal social networks, make it possible to identify variables, processes and hypotheses that can be confirmed by studies with a larger sample size in terms of units and temporal extension and including a greater number of DSN to increase diversity. Furthermore, we consider convenient to open the research of the DSN in the e-Government in two complementary qualitative aspects: on the one hand, a systematic content analysis of citizens' comments to institutional posts according to themes and, on the other, a reception study, to analyze how the DSN are used and what possibilities of involvement in politics are perceived by citizens themselves.