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The contribution of public communication on the good governance process: The case of public institutions in Morocco

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Abstract

Good governance includes all the rules and collective processes by which the actors concerned participate in the decision-making and realization of public actions. Public communication with a strategic and well-structured vision of information exchange is part of this perspective. Despite the fact that studies have been devoted to the relationship between public communication and good governance in public institutions, few empirical studies have explained the nature of this relationship. As part of the new public management, public institutions in Morocco have moved towards a whole new way of managing through reforms and implementation of the good governance approach.

The purpose of our qualitative study is to highlight the importance of public communication in the process of good governance, as well as to clarify the different components of public communication in order to understand its contribution to the process of good governance. The interviewees were managers and officials of various positions within public institutions operating in different sectors of activity. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted and subjected to a thematic content analysis. The results identify the main elements that determine public communication: public service values, free access to information, digitization, interactivity, personal skills and behaviors, ethics and transparency. Especially since each component is taken into account both theoretically and empirically in the process of good governance, takes place in Moroccan institutions more and more.

Thereby, this research provides valuable implications about the potential role of public communication in contributing to transparency, clarity in decision-making, ethical behavior, the rule of law, and strengthening the public interest in public institutions in Morocco.

Keywords: Public communication, good governance, public institutions, new public

management, transparency.

JEL Classification: D73, D83, H83, M00

Paper type: Empirical research

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1. Introduction

The new terminology of public action is visibly based on public management tools: monitoring by objectives, management by results, project-based work, performance indicators, and good governance practices. This study is part of the new public management approach (Aktouf, 1992; Dickinson, 2016; Gnan et al., 2013; Huet, 2016; Pesqueux, 2006; Vartola et al., 2010; ZAMPICCOLI, 2011) which includes all of the actions in a public organization that respond to specific procedures and must achieve objectives with planning, control, and results-based management.

Broadly, good governance concerns all the rules and collective processes, formalized or not, by which the actors concerned participate in the decision and realization of public actions (Andrews, 2008; Ansell & Torfing, 2016; Anttiroiko et al., 2011; Assens & Lemeur, 2016; Aucoin, 1990; Charreaux, 2011; Foley et al., 2018; Grindle, 2007; Gross & Źróbek, 2015; Khouya & Benabdelhadi, 2020; Klusáček, 2018; Lacroix & St-Arnaud, 2012). These rules and processes, as well as the decisions that result from them, are the outcome of a constant exchange and discussion between the various actors involved. In this work, we focus on public communication, considered to be the main component of good governance. Indeed, the development of results-based management can raise questions about the essence of public service, which is based primarily on the general interest, and good governance (Bessieres, 2010).

At this level, the reforms undertaken over the last few decades in public institutions in Morocco raise questions about the role of public communication in this good governance process. Public communication in Morocco has been progressively strengthened over the last few decades, taking an increasingly prominent place in the institution. The Good Management Pact developed by the government of Morocco is an example of this. Indeed, this Pact places public communication at the center of the administration's action. It specifies that communication will henceforth be an important springboard for the action of public services.

Firstly, we will focus on the theoretical foundations of public communication. Specifically, we will explore the components of public communication in the context of good governance in public institutions. The second part will be consecrated to the methodological side of our research. Finally, we will analyze and discuss the results obtained.

2. Literature review

2.1 Theoretical background on public communication

Public communication refers to the institutional communication of public organizations. Therefore, it reflects a specific field of organizational communication, which is public organizations, and seems to be similar to it (Bessieres, 2018). Its conceptualization is largely based on the pioneer works of Pierre Zemor, one of the founders of Public Communication, who considers it as formal communication that tends to promote the exchange and sharing of public utility information (Zemor, 1996), as well as the maintenance of social connections, and for which public institutions are mainly responsible (Lemaire & Zemor, 2008).

Furthermore, public communication in public institutions can be defined as all the activities of public institutions and organizations aimed at transmitting and exchanging information with the main purpose of presenting and explaining public decisions and actions, promoting their legitimacy, defending the results obtained and the recognized values and helping to maintain social links (Boucherville, 1998; Cobut, 2011; Pasquier, 2017). The theoretical development of public communication is generally presented as a response to an imperative of publicity in a Kantian sense of disseminating information about issues of general interest, and of proximity, or even transparency on the part of public institutions (Ollivier-Yaniv, 2014).

Referring to a definition that aims to summarize the principal empirical research conducted from an organizational and managerial perspective, Sauvé (2008) consider the public communication as a democratic requirement and an imperative of good governance (Sauvé, 2008). As a reminder, we mention the contribution of Zemor (1996) who considers the open access to public information as a principal component of public communication. More precisely, the public service is determined by the relationship of the institution with the public, in particular the free access of the citizen, not only to the public places, therefore signaling, reception, consideration, but also to the public information (Zemor, 1996).

Therefore, public communication managers manage communication services and service providers (e.g. communication agencies). They define communication plans and actions: public and press relations, websites, institutional magazines, posters, brochures, events, etc. Their widespread use in public organizations is quite recent, during the 1990s (Bessieres, 2010).

2.2 Public Communication and Good Governance

It is commonly known that public communication takes on different forms linked to the missions of public institutions to make information available to the public, to establish relations and dialogue in order to provide an expected and precise service, to present the services offered and the projects carried out, to make the institutions themselves known, and finally to carry out information campaigns and communication actions of general interest (Zemor, 2008). This is an integral part of the process of good governance (Zamoum, 2014).

Theoretically, good governance is presented as a new model for exercising authority in a society, which implies an orientation of collective participation in public management, and a vision of a unique rule of law (Aguilera & Cuervo-Cazurra, 2004; Asaduzzaman & Virtanen, 2016; Bovaird & Loeffler, 2004; Chen & Man, 2020; Huet & Neiter, 2016; Kaufmann et al., 2009; Letourneau, 2009). According to several studies, the process of good governance aims to make the leaders of public institutions more aware of the shadow forces behind the used means of communication in order to develop both effective and rational public communication (Jarren, 2007a; Pløger, 2001).

Nowadays, public communication must be transparent and citizen-oriented and not be reduced to sending out simple messages in the service of good news (Megard, 2017). However, like good governance itself, it must be attentive to the voice of citizens, not only to look at the opinion but also and above all to organize the ways and means to respond to their needs in terms of structuring projects and useful information. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defines public communication as "a culture of governance that promotes the principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and stakeholder participation, in the service of democracy and inclusive growth" (OECD, 2021).

In practice, the relationship between public communication and good governance in the public area, has been examined by numerous researchers (e.g, Gardère & Bessieres, 2017; Jarren, 2007b; Zamoum, 2014). They have affirmed that the two concepts are intrinsically related, especially since they are founded on the fundamentals of clarity of the decision-making process and transparency, as well as the right of access to information.

The main purpose of the research is to determine the components of public communication and identify its main contributions in the process of good governance. This study will provide new insights to public communication specialists in management sciences and also to managers of public institutions about the effective utilization of this tool, and to invest in its different modes to achieve good governance. In this way, and based on the literature review, the following research questions will be answered:

RQ1: What are the components that determine public communication?

RQ2: In which ways are transparency and ethics both determinants of public communication and principles of good governance?

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RQ3: How does public communication contribute to achieve the good governance in public institutions in Morocco?

3. Methodology

The methodological approach adapted to our problematic is a qualitative approach. The purpose of a qualitative study is to understand in depth the perceptions of the different concepts and how they relate to each other, not to measure them (Giannelloni & Vernette, 2019). Furthermore, this work follows an inductive methodological reasoning, which is a bottom-up approach that proceeds from the specific to the general, and provides inputs from the field studied (Thietard, 2014). We consider that this method is the most appropriate, since the objective of our study is to understand how public communication contributes to good governance. This objective, which is exploratory in scope, focuses on the context of public institutions in Morocco and explains the perceptions of managers of these institutions.

3.1 Sampling and Investigation Instrument

Sample selection is not just a simple step in a research study (Thietard, 2014). To conduct this step, we have opted for the semi-structured interviews, which is the major and most used category of qualitative data collection techniques. It also allows for maximum interaction and discussion regarding the topics of the interview (Gavard-Perret et al., 2008; Grawitz, 2000; Lancaster, 2005; Roche, 2007; Thietard, 2014). In fact, the constitution of a qualitative sample requires genuine rigor and must be precise in that it must meet predetermined selection criteria (Keegan, 2009).

In this way, we have interviewed managers from public institutions about general questions related to public communication, in order to understand their perception on the subject. But also on more detailed points about the determining elements of the public communication in the good governance process, its different forms and on how compatible and adequate it is with the quality of the services provided by their institution. These interviews focused on the public communication of public institutions since the adoption of good governance and the implementation of its mechanisms.

Interview Post occupied Gender Seniority Sector **Interview** duration Professor Higher education Female 13 1h50 Agriculture and rural 2 8 1h Department head Female development 3 Investment Male 13 50min Chief executive officer 2 4 Water and electricity 1h15 Male Communication manager 5 Department head Higher education Male 15 1h20 Female 3 1h15 6 Food Safety Communication manager 7 Department head Investment Male 10 1h 9 1h30 8 Professor Higher education Female Department head 9 Investment Male 1 1h30 10 Higher education Female 11 2h Professor

Table 1: Characteristics of the sample

Source: Author's processing

3.2 Data collection and analysis

All of the semi-structured interviews were conducted individually, after making an appointment in advance to discuss the subject of our research. The contact with the persons was conducted by sending a letter requesting an interview, in which we have introduced the general framework of this study, as well as a presentation of the authors and their scientific background. Subsequently, the interviews were conducted face-to-face, and each interview lasted an average of one and a half hour.

After conducting ten interviews with a diverse sample of respondents with different profiles, genders, sectors of activity, and years of seniority in their institutions (Table 1), we found that the interviews are mutually complementary and that the latter did not allow us to obtain new information that had not been concluded during the first interviews. We had therefore reached semantic saturation (Romelaer, 2005). The next step was to transcribe the different interviews in order to start the thematic content analysis. Indeed, thematic content analysis is a technique that relies on the principle of repeating units of discourse analysis (words, similar expressions or meanings, sentences, paragraphs) reveals the interests, concerns of the interviewees (Thietard, 2014). At this stage, all interviews were coded, i.e., all fragments of speech belonging to the same category, subcategory or meaning block were grouped together. We carried out this step using Nvivo software to develop an analysis grid that allowed us to extract our main results.

4. Results

4.1 Values of public service

In the practice of public communication, the values of public service are well taken into consideration. These values are mainly based on the general interest, whose legitimacy is opposed to personal wishes and opportunistic behavior and particular interests (Box, 2015; Megard, 2017). This requires respect for the rule of law and the principles of equality (Morrell & Harrington-Buhay, 2012).

Nevertheless, Andersen et al. (2013) provided an overview of characteristics of public service. Of all the constituent elements that could be found, they highlight integrity and capability in general interest perspective as the most essential values of public service. In total, interviewees 1, 5 and 8 testified that in their institutions the public service provided is mainly focused on the general interest as a crucial value. This can be explained by the sector in which they operate. "Public communication is not distinguished from other types of communication by techniques and languages, i.e., from advertising to marketing, from the written word to audiovisual, including media and non-media, as well as digital in all its forms, but by its objectives and issues. Those of the general interest, of public service and of good governance." (Interviewee 1). This refers in fact to what Megard (2017) and Box (2015) calls responsibility toward citizenusers, which includes all interests, values or objectives that are shared by all members of a society, and that are good for them all.

4.2 Open Access Information

As a result, all managers of public institutions interviewees consider open access to information as a component of public communication. In this regard, interviewee 3 said: "The administrative practices mystify the public service regarding the citizen-user who doesn't know what he is actually entitled to. Consequently, our first mission is to highlight the elements which he is entitled to, to be able to make him aware, and then to communicate to him the public information and ensure its free access". Indeed, citizens are of equal value in rights and aspirations to all public activities (Demers, 2008). By extension, they have the right of access to information which is granted by the supreme law of the country which is the constitution.

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Interviewee 2 mentioned that this right allows following the news and the progress of the projects carried out by the public institutions, especially through the classic portal represented by their official website, "It must be admitted that very few citizens assimilate the information they are entitled to access, the public institution aware of this does not keep the citizen in this state of ignorance. How? by informing and training him, it proceeds rather by announcements of projects taken out of one does not know from where, which are never really or durably effective" (Interviewee2).

4.3 Digitalization

In addition to open access information, all the interviewees agree that it is necessary to capture the benefits of digital technology in favor of public communication. According to interviewee 9, "Digital technologies have made communication easier than ever, we must seize this opportunity and evolve to be in direct contact with citizen-users. And to achieve this goal, it is necessary to improve the accessibility of digital interfaces, content and messages and make them accessible to all". In the same directive, Interviewee 8 explained that: "Public communication is inseparable from the context in which it takes place. There have been major transformations in the information ecosystem that have disrupted traditional methods of communication. We have moved beyond word-of-mouth communication to stories, reals, publications, visual and virtual content creation...etc. This is the place where we need to work to get closer to the citizens, this is the way for open access information!".

<u>Janowski & Durkiewicz (2018)</u>, <u>Durkin et al. (2018)</u>, <u>Maisonneuve (2010)</u> and Lerouge et al. (2023) also found similar results in their research which indicates that public communication relies primarily on ensuring access to information, and this through the various forms of communication and information dissemination, principally the digital ones.

"Moreover, the evolution of the digital world and the different media modalities have given new dynamism to public communication and opened up unprecedented perspectives of application and interaction. I would like to mention social networks, which are now a very powerful interactive channel between the institution and the citizens. A citizen can ask for useful information to his service by commenting or sending a private message, without necessarily using the platforms of the official website or physically moving to get a simple information." (Interviewee4). Based on our results, we conclude that digitalization is a key factor for open access to information and a pioneer component of public communication. Therefore, the adoption of virtual platforms and social networks allows institutions to be in permanent and regular contact with citizens-users, but also with all those whose information would be useful.

4.4 Interactivity of Communication

For the majority of the interviewees (interviewees n°1,2,3,7 and 8) interactivity is not optional but rather required for public communication. This point is supported by the fact that it is imperative to understand the needs of users before communicating information to them. In this regard, interviewee 7 said: "I specify that communicating and informing are two different things. Informing is only one ingredient of public communication." By mentioning interactive communication, interviewee 3 also highlighted its importance in understanding the needs, as well as the closeness granted between the institution and the citizen. "Communication, especially in public institutions, is conditioned by interaction. It is necessary to listen to the needs of citizens to offer them a public service that responds to their own needs." (Interviewee1) This results corroborates with the claims of Elif (2020), Yeon (2005) and Durkin et al. (2018), for whom interactive communication means transmitting and receiving information in a clear manner and actively communicating with others in a way that is effective and consistent with the institution's purpose.

4.5 Personal Skills and Behaviors

Public communication does not neglect the classic rules imposed on public employees in their professional attitudes, including their skills and behaviors. Based on our findings, we conclude that ensuring free access to information cannot be achieved without accompanying employees and managers of public institutions in this direction. It is necessary for employees to develop their personal skills and orient their behaviors towards transparent public communication. Interviewee 3, explained that: "According to the law that came into effect in 2019 concerning access to information, Moroccan public institutions are now required to proactively disseminate their data, using all possible means of publication. In this context, the Ministry of Economy, Finance and Administration Reform of Morocco has issued a circular in 2020 encouraging administrations, both at the central and deconcentrated levels, to comply with the legal framework. As a result, training sessions were held for institutions developed by the lead ministries about a practical guidelines related to the application of the law, in order to help employees better understand the rights and remedies of citizens for open access to information, and to strengthen the skills required for proactive data dissemination...".

This corroborates with the claims of Zemor (1996) concerning the respect of competences, decisions and orders that given in their personal behavior and affect the image of the institution when exercising responsibilities (Tsetsura & Vergara, 2021; Zemor, 1996). Consequently, personal skills and behaviors required neutrality towards political involvement or personal convictions for achieving good public communication in Moroccan public institutions.

4.6 Ethics and Transparency

In our findings, transparency is important for successful public communication in public institutions, as a catalyst for good governance. Interviewee 6 said: "To improve the level of transparency, the managers use the public communication as a consistent way to increase the visibility of the institution's activities, results, and achievements". Moreover, the ethics of communication is often assessed by several authors in the context of media practice. Interviewee 10 confided that "It is obvious that ethics is an imperative, an essential factor for exercising public function. It is one of the principles of good governance, as it is the main driving factor of public communication, not only for managers and employees but also for the public institution as a homogeneous structure.". Thus, public communication, which constitutes only a part of the communication practiced in the public place, cannot be satisfied with satisfying the requirements, which are unfortunately very approximate, that the press and more generally the media assign to themselves (Zemor, 1996), whatever the nature of the information supports, governed for the most part by the rules of the public sector in the respect of the principles of governance such as transparency, and ethics in itself. «Ethics should be at the core of public communication in order to ensure the responsibility to inform and accomplish this public service mission towards citizens." (Interviewee5).

Previous work has suggested that ethics and transparency are key to conducting public communication (Asdourian, 2015; Catellani & Crucifix, 2015; Ruppel & Harrington, 2000; Zamoum, 2014). This finding is reinforced by our results which indicate that in public communication, ethics and transparency are required elements within public institutions.

4.7 Public Communication as a Condition of Good Governance

All interviewees agree that public communication through its various components in public is a condition and requirement of good governance. "Public communication constitutes a mechanism for good governance, especially since it allows free access to public information and the right to know. Therefore, the presence of institutions in the media has become a support and an unavoidable ally that pushes institutions to adopt a public communication strategy, which I perceive as a condition for good governance" (Interviwee8). In the same way, other

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interviewees mentioned the fact that the quality of public communication has an influence on the evolution of the implementation of good governance and insists on the effect of transparency in the management of information and the enhancement of the institution's image. He said: "I believe that the components or determinants of public communication are considered indispensable to good governance. It should be noted that in practice, there is an association between transparency and good governance essentially from the point of view of information management and the disclosure of information relating to the organization's image." (Interviwee4).

These assertions corroborate the work of <u>Jarren (2007)</u> and Kemayou (2012), who finds that one of the stakes of public communication is precisely to maintain the social relationship and the living-together, from an open access public information sharing perspective in the process of good governance. Nevertheless, public information is supposed to give meaning to public action, to the effect of the participation of citizens-users, convinced of their common purposes, in the collective life. In this regard, interviewee 7 said: "Sharing information between public institutions and citizens and the dialogue that follows are essential components of good governance in the public field, and play a crucial role in improving public communication and public action." Regardless of the number of years of service or the sector of activity in which the interviewees exercise their functions, the importance of public communication is crucial, even indispensable, to good governance.

5. Discussion: The contribution of public communication on good governance of Moroccan public institutions

Our findings revealed that good governance is intrinsically associated to the principles of transparency and communication ethics, especially in public institutions where serving the public interest is the main driver of performance. A general pragmatics, like Habermas, consists in the discourse mode itself, as deployed in public communication, whether the dialogue is based on the sincerity, comprehensibility, legitimacy and truthfulness of the arguments (Hoch, 1996). Broadly, the public communication is performed as a condition of governance (Gardère & Bessieres, 2017; Jarren, 2007b; Zamoum, 2014). This philosophy of good governance has ruled the organizational scene of public institutions and has anticipated the emergence of a culture of ethics and transparency (Asdourian, 2015; Catellani & Crucifix, 2015; Ruppel & Harrington, 2000; Zamoum, 2014), open access information (Demers, 2008; Pasquier, 2017), behavior and adequate personal skills in the media field (Pasquier, 2017; Tsetsura & Vergara, 2021; Zemor, 2008), general interest and the values of public service (Andersen et al., 2013; Box, 2015; Megard, 2017; Morrell & Harrington-Buhay, 2012), and interactivity (Durkin et al., 2018; Elif, 2020; Yeon, 2005).

Moreover, the digitalization is also a component of public communication (Janowski & Durkiewicz, 2018; Lerouge et al., 2023). The findings of our thematic content analysis reveal that the potentialities allowed by technical evolution come close to a vision borrowed from a certain technological determinism according to a classic framework of categorization of analysts' discourses on technological innovations. In such a perspective, it would be necessary to overcome the logic of unidirectional communication, in order to better take into consideration, the development of social media practices generating new and more horizontal ways of communication (Durkin et al., 2018). The purpose is to build a community on social networks such as Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, or even Tiktok to be in permanent contact with all the citizens, but also with potential partners.

It is clear that despite the studies conducted in this direction, the literature remains insufficient to explain deeply the various relationship between public communication and good governance,

especially in Morocco. Our qualitative study was conducted to resolve this insufficiency and brought results that stipulate that every component of public communication is crucial in the process of good governance to implement its principles and practices (figure 1). In its latest report about governance in Morocco, the OECD has highlighted the role that public communication has in addressing the gap in trust that existed between the institution and the citizen. The reasons are that innovations such as digital communication channels, massive data analytics and behavioral science insights have given public institutions an unprecedented arsenal to increase the reach and impact of their messages and to encourage positive behavior, but also to listen to citizens and understand their needs and expectations. This fact is proved by the findings of performed qualitative study.

In summary, public communication is understood as a crucial function of public institutions to provide information, to listen and to respond to the needs of citizens and to ensure transparency required for the purpose of good governance.

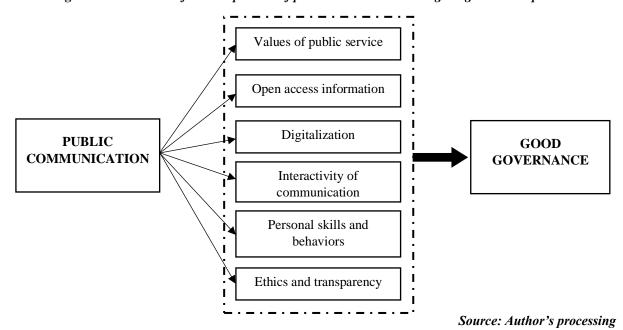


Figure 1: Framework of the components of public communication in good governance process

6. Conclusion

Over the past few decades, many researchers have argued that public communication is one of the best organizational allies of good governance. The purpose of this research is to explore the different components of public communication and to understand how it contributes to the good governance process in public institutions in Morocco. Accordingly, the main components determining public communication are the values of public service, open access information, digitalization, interactivity, personal skills and behaviors, ethics and transparency.

These research findings provide significant theoretical and practical implications for public institutions in Morocco. Theoretically, public communication as a whole, i.e., taking into account all its components, is an indispensable condition for good governance. As long as the institution builds honest, transparent and ethically correct social exchange relationships. Empirically, for managers and leaders of public institutions in different sectors, this research entail knowledge that enables them to better understand the key factors for the effectiveness of public communication in their organization. Furthermore, this research provides valuable insights to the scientific community about the potential contribution of public communication

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to ensuring transparency, clarity in decision-making, the rule of law, and the enhancement of general interest against opportunistic behavior.

Going forward, the ethics of public communication requires a deeper reflection on what is good or bad in the very conception of the professions of information and relationship with the public, and on the relationships between form and content, therefore between media, modalities and content, between tools and attitudes, consequently on a certain way of being, whereas good governance constitutes rather a discipline on the way of managing public action.

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