Information and citizenship: a governance perspective

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Abstract

The emergence and reconfiguration of a society that has greater means to access information – which in itself presents new features and contradictions – generates a need to debate the role of information in encouraging a more active and participatory citizenship in the management of public policies. This article discusses issues of democracy, citizenship participation, the public sphere, and how these are related to the information age and knowledge society in Latin America. Similarly, it reflects on other aspects of government, such as governance, which can enable wider and more active citizen participation. The article concludes that while inequality exists in the region in

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INVESTIGACIÓN BIBLIOTECOLÓGICA, 29 (67), September/December, 2015, México, ISSN: 0187-358X, 113-140.

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terms of availability and access to information, governance offers promising elements to build a more informed and participatory citizenship in public affairs and public policy management.

Keywords: Information; Citizenship; Public Sphere; Public Policies; Governance.

Resumen

Información y ciudadanía, una propuesta desde la gobernanza
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El surgimiento y reconfiguración de una sociedad que cuenta con mayores medios para allegarse de información, la cual tiene nuevas características así como contradicciones, genera la necesidad de debatir en torno al papel de la propia información en la construcción de una ciudadanía más activa y participativa en la gestión de políticas públicas. Tomando en consideración el contexto latinoamericano, este artículo aborda esa discusión vinculándola con otros temas como la democracia, la participación ciudadana, la esfera pública, la era de la información y la sociedad del conocimiento. De igual forma, se reflexiona sobre otros enfoques de gobierno, como el de la gobernanza, que pueden permitir que esa participación sea más amplia y activa. Las conclusiones apuntan a que si bien en la región actualmente existen desigualdades en cuanto a la disponibilidad y acceso a la información, la gobernanza ofrece elementos promisorios para la construcción de una ciudadanía más informada y participativa en los asuntos públicos y en la gestión de políticas públicas.

Palabras clave: Información; Ciudadanía; Esfera pública; Políticas públicas; Gobernanza.

1. Introduction

Despite the great strides that have been taken with regard to making information available through information and communications technology, there is still a wide swath of society that does not enjoy access to the

internet, public libraries and the deep stock of specialized literature in all fields of inquiry. The implication of this uneven accessibility of information results in a segmented citizenry, within which we can find well-informed persons equipped to participate in public matters and others who are uninformed whose participation is scarce or practically non-existent.

This excluded sector of society tends to form its opinions through the mass media, largely television, which brings to the fore the issue of the quality of information "consumed." Some researchers have warned that the mass media seeking legitimacy would try to mold people's needs and otherwise make citizens conform, thereby giving rise to a stereotyped citizenship (Giglia and Winocur, 1996; Martín-Barbero, 2001; Winocur, 2002, 2003).

Any solution to these problems is not simply stated, because in a large degree it is linked to the overall conditions of social inequality prevailing in Mexico and Latin America, and the persistence of a public sphere that does not include a large portion of the population (Fleury, 2004).

Given this scenario, the need arises to reflect deeply on the vital role played by information in the makeup of the citizenry and the possibility of implementing new models for information management such as governance, which would allow inclusion of a greater number of individuals in the processes of establishing public information policies and programs.

In view of the Latin American context, specifically Mexico, this paper aims to advance the debate surrounding the importance of information in the constitution of the citizenry, while arguing that a better informed citizen will be better able to participate in the creation of better public policy. To this end, the first section herein addresses the concept of citizenship and offers some general notions and a framework of the debate as it currently stands. The second section analyzes the link between citizenry and democracy, and discusses the important role played by information in the edification of the citizen. The third section addresses the concept of citizen participation, contextualizing it in the so-called "information age" and the "knowledge society." The fourth section analyzes the governance model as an alternative form of managing public policy, while first attempting to conceptualize the term and differentiate it from governability, before moving onto a broader discussion of implications, conclusions and proposals for further research.

The concept
of citizenship

While the aim of this paper is not to perform a detailed analysis of the concept of citizenship, it is important to provide a framework for grasping how the term has been used in recent literature. The notion of citizenship has been approached from diverse angles. These angles include viewing citizenship as an instrument of social control (Vieira, 1998); its association with the city and public spaces (Borja, 1998; Ramírez, 2003; Capron and Monnet, 2003; Espinosa, 2004); and its role within the State and improving democracy (O'Donnell, 1993). Other studies have focused on gender (Bolos, 2008; Molyneux, 2000; Aguirre, 2003); the circumstances of social inequality (Fleury, 2004); and on new forms of citizenship driven by immigration and globalization (Lechner, 2000).

Depending on cultural and historical contexts, the analysis of the concept of citizenship has assumed diverse forms and spurred an array of interpretations. The most basic of these approaches defines citizenship as the individual's right to enjoy rights (Vieira, 1998). The broader notion of citizenship in both meaning and constituent elements; however, is attributed to T.H. Marshall (1997), who analyzed the development of the concept in England,[1] concluding that citizenship is composed to the following three elements:

1. The civil element, referring to the rights needed to enjoy individual liberty, freedom of the person, freedom of expression, of thought and religion, including the freedom to hold property and the right to justice.
2. The political element, entailing the right to participate in the exercise of political power.
3. The social element, which is linked to the right to a minimum standard of living and the right to share in the social heritage and enjoy the benefits of civilization.

This breakdown has not been without criticism. Craston (1983) states that social rights are not natural rights and cannot, therefore, truly be embraced as universals. Because social conditions arise from the historical processes of each country, they should not be associated with the general con-

1   Originally published in 1949.

ception of citizenship. Turner (1990), in turn, criticizes the idea of the citizen as a passive entity subject to the decisions and action of State agencies. Finally, Roche (1987) asserts that Marshall's view does not acknowledge the processes of political action, such as revolutions that are the originators of our understanding of the concept of citizenship.

Despite these criticisms, Marshall's examination has helped deepen the debate surrounding citizenship and social class, which according to his view arise from contradicting principles, since citizenship is based on the idea of equal rights and duties, while inequality is the essence of the social class system. In light of these considerations, the concept of citizenship needs to go beyond formal acknowledgement of potential equality and capacity to enjoy rights. The concept must become a real principle of equality that entails social justice. To this end, a balance between the civil sphere, understood as individual rights, and the civic sphere, associated with the duties owed to the State, must be found.

Up to this point, one might identify a "historical" vision of the concept of citizenship that serves to dub the individual as a citizen, which thereby endows him with legally established rights in the jurisdiction of a given country and with such rights that are deemed universals, as declared in the 1948 *Declaration of Universal Human Rights.* The primary constituent elements of citizenship, however, are brought forth in debates occurring in the second half of the twentieth century. These discussions have led to the idea that rights are not enjoyed by individuals, but rather by human collectives, such as the community, nations, and ethnic groups, women, the elderly, children, adolescents, consumers –not to mention the environment itself as a sphere of rights. Some have gone as far as to propose a "fourth generation" of rights associated with bioethical issues of preserving rights and matters associated with genetic engineering (Vieira, 1998).

There have been diverse approaches to these matters that should be considered when attempting to understand the concept of citizenship in the world today. Several of these approaches are associated with new forms of social identification, problems with traditional political representation, the search for new channels of participation, ethnic conflicts, and globalization, etc. (Winocur, 2003). All of these issues exert and impact on the concept of citizenship.

To contextualize the sense of the concept of citizenship today, it is important address three of these approaches. The first is associated with the loss

of credibility in the representation once provided by traditional channels of citizen participation, such as political parties or unions. The second is associated with the advent of new identities and the struggle for acknowledgement; while the third is associated with the influence of the mass media in the construction of the citizen.

With regard to the first aspect, it has been argued that: "politics is no longer what it used to be. It once was a set of more or less structured institutions and procedures with deep ties to the community in the form of patronage and corporatism […] today the situation has changed" (Lechner, 2000: 25. Translated from Spanish). In this sense, one becomes aware of loss of centrality of politics and the axis that once ordered and articulated social life, and as the sphere in which citizens anchored their expectations and whose channels were used to fulfill that vision of social order. The social order supplied by this political structure has been undermined by functional changes in the economic, social and political spheres.

This process of de-legitimation of traditional channels of participation is also associated with the crisis in ideologies and representation in political parties and labor unions, which pushes the citizenry "to abandon institutional politics and toward alternative local instances centered on social and community interests of great diversity" (Winocur, 2003: 234. Translated from Spanish).

In conjunction with this approach, and perhaps in response to it, new groups with differentiated identities have sprung forth. Their need to be acknowledged comes in conjunction with demands focused on specific needs. Even though these identity-based movements are more prevalent in Europe and the United States, they have become increasingly visible in Latin America. These discussions have fueled debate on the concept of the citizen, as groups tend to argue for acknowledgement their rights to be different, while setting aside the notion of their equal rights as citizens.

These groups include feminists who argue that women have specific needs. But it is also necessary to learn about the interests, specific rights and forms of participation of indigenous peoples, migrants, senior citizens, disabled persons, young people and racial and sexual minorities. Many of these groups do not feel fully identified with the general citizenry and they seek to be taken into consideration as members of society from the standpoint of their differences. In other words, they demand recognition of

[…] their way of being in the world, their way of relating with others and nature, as expressed in the language they use, in the comprehensive doctrines they at times profess and the way in which the genders associate […] it seems they want to participate as a group, with its own identity, in a political community. (Peña, 2005: 100. Translated from Spanish)

Not limited to the generic idea of nationality, these discussions of the concept of citizenship approach matters of individual rights of persons and their ties to a specific community in terms of their identification with groups such as women, young people, senior citizens, disabled persons, etc.

The third element of the analysis addresses the influence of the mass media on the citizenry, in terms of both the meaning of citizenship and how it represents the citizen, because:

[…] the retreat of traditional public spaces, in conjunction with the omnipresence of television and radio in the home, have seriously affected the processes of public opinion, modalities of participation, the ways of belonging and the strategies of inclusion in the public sphere. (Winocur, 2003: 237)

It is important to gain an understanding of these new modalities of citizen participation, which are often imbued with media bias, and the danger entailed in a citizenry that bases its participation on consumer practices (García, 1995), rather than on a genuine interest in pursuing the good of the community.

In this regard, the mass media are key agents capable of addressing, discussing and emphasizing matters of public interest. On the other hand, these media are quite capable of suppressing, limiting and skewing information that is very relevant to the public agenda. This situation invites question regarding the ability of private mass media to present objective, transparent information to the public, without skewing it serve their commercial and corporate interests. In this sense, one researcher has argues:

[…] that the aims of commercial media –that which is expanding most rapidly in the world– is to generate controversy in the public square in the democracies, since the economic, corporate and sometimes political interests of these types of media influence the content they present, which can exert an effect on the quality of their performance when called upon to observe, inform and debate. (Guerrero, 2006: 13)

In conclusion, the discussion surrounding the communications media and traditional forms of citizen participation should not center on superimposing forms of citizen participation, but rather on complementary forms that allow for the construction of new forms and scenarios of participation (Martín-Barbero, 1999).

These elements allow one to see how the concept of citizenship can no longer be circumscribed to the legal dictum of "the right to enjoy rights." The conversation now includes many other factors that affect the forms and practice through which the idea of the citizen is posited. As such, the understanding of the concept takes one back to the analysis and appreciation of other elements that underpin the concept of citizenship.

Marshall and other researchers have asserted that citizenship can only achieve its fullest expression within a democratic State, in which civil, political and social rights are guaranteed for all members of society, who are, moreover, fully capable of participating in public affairs. In this regard, the question of the relationship between the citizenry and the democracy becomes relevant, because as already mentioned citizenship depends on the existence of a democratic government committed to consolidating the citizenry, while accepting the need for an independent citizenry that is sufficiently participative to ensure the democratic experiment. These elements, including the essential role of information in the construction of the citizen, shall be analyzed in the following section.

Democracy, information and citizenship

The debate surrounding governability in democracies and institutional redesign has become hung up on question of the limits of representative democracy.[2] In this sense, many have argued that to achieve broad social consensus there must be a strong link between representative democracy and participative democracy[3] that is capable building efficient public policies to serve the needs of society in the best way possible.

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2   Also known as delegative, passive or low intensity democracy.
3   In contrast to the idea of representative democracy in which one might speak of a population or civil society playing the rather limited role of legitimizer or censure of government actions through the ballot box, the participative model of democracy whose active, deliberative dynamics feature the concept of an informed citizen who proactively posits arguments in the public arena.

Latin America may well be considered one of the world's most unequal regions. As such, the matter of exclusion of a large portion of the region's inhabitants becomes very relevant. This exclusion may be based on economic, political and cultural factors that touch participation; but it is also clear that all of these factors are influenced by the degree of access to information the inhabitants enjoy. Some researchers have characterized the matter of inequality of information access through new information and communications technologies as the "digital gap"[4] (Hoffman, Novak and Schlosser, 2001; Castells, 2001; Servon, 2002; Rodríguez, 2006, among others). All of these elements erect barriers that restrict access to public affairs.

Owing to the growing importance of the concept of the *public sphere* with regard to matters of citizenship and democracy, it is worthwhile to take time to reflect on this idea, which of course stands in opposition to the *private sphere* of the home and family. The public sphere includes those things that can be seen and heard by everyone, i.e., "the public sphere, like the world in common, brings us together and nonetheless keeps us from stumbling over each other, so to speak" (Arendt, 1993: 62. Translated from Spanish). The work of Arendt (1993) posits three basic activities of humanity on Earth: the first is "Labor," associated with those tasks needed to maintain life, such as securing food and water, sleeping and resting; the second is "Work," which entails the use of materials offered up by nature to "manufacture the interminable variety of things that comprise the human artifice" (Arendt, 1993: 165. Translated from Spanish); and thirdly, the sphere of "Action," which imbues the individual with a sense of liberty and distinguishes humanity from nature. Through such action "with word and deeds we insert ourselves in the human world" (Arendt, 1993: 206. Translated from Spanish), thereby imbuing the public sphere with meaning, since this allows two essential factors for understanding the concept of citizenship to stand out in relief:

1) The possibility that all individuals may be seen and heard, and
2) The creation of a common space in which individuals reveal themselves through argument, discourse and action.

These approaches share some points with the theory of communicative action posited by Habermas (1987), which analyzes the public sphere from an understanding of society as a "system" and a "lifeworld." In terms of the

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4   This concept refers to the inequality in terms of availability and use of technologies, such as the computer, internet connection and mobile telephony, etc.

"system," Habermas stated that they are fields based on instrumental reason and associated with the State and the economy that, as capitalism evolved and modernized, wound up colonizing and dominating the "life world," which is the sphere of culture, personality and society that provide the grounding for communicative reason. This is where language and especially dialogue play key roles in the creation of consensus among individuals. In this respect Habermas states:

[…] the systemic mechanisms wind up displacing the earlier forms of social integration, including those contexts in which the coordination of action in terms of consensus have no replacement whatsoever; that is, even where what is in play is the symbolic representation of the lifeworld. Thus, the mediatization of the lifeworld adopts the form of colonization of the lifeworld. (Habermas, 1987: 276. Translated from Spanish)

Before this scenario, through the use of discourse, participation and dialogue to promote communicative action, a "reversal" of this process of colonization has been proposed. In this way, change may be possible in which:

[…] a self-regulating system, in which all events or states can be attributed a meaning by virtue of functional position, is substituted gradually by a model structured on communications theory, in which agents direct their actions as per their own interpretations of the situation. (Habermas, 1987: 168. Translated from Spanish)

In this way, Habermas understands the public sphere as directly associated with the "lifeworld" and as a place where collective decisions are made, which thereby legitimizes the democracy. Nonetheless, Habermas is aware of some problems inherent in this ideal democratic process, which seems to take into account only the virtues of current citizens, a situation that assumes all persons are equally possessed of sufficient, rightly assimilated information to ground their discourses and opinions. In regard to this issue, Marshall states that "the right to free speech has little substance. Because of lack of education, you may have nothing to say worth hearing. You are also without the media resources needed to be heard in the event you wish to say something" (1997: 316. Translated from Spanish). This situation is directly linked to the topic of information, understood as a right and in its role in making the right to free speech something real.

In the context of democracy, one may understand information as an essential element through which citizens can increase their knowledge and

thereby their capacity to take action in public affairs. Information, as such, is like a pillar in the edifice of the public hall. In the current scenario, however, we find that marginalized groups, the poor and vulnerable, are very often deprived of important, timely information to help them enjoy a better way of life. They are also quite often unaware of their rights, employment options, public health services, housing opportunities, educational options and general public policy. This is because these groups rarely participate in setting the agenda, defining strategies and allocating public funds, which are the essential functions of the public sphere.

In this sense, Fleury (2004: 142. Translated from Spanish) argues that "the construction of democracy in the region introduces the vindication of the citizenry's fifth generation right, which goes beyond civil, political, social and diffused rights, to demand a deliberative role in the creation of public policies." At this point, it is also necessary to implement actions to ensure those previously without access are provided access to information so they can aspire to better tools for participating in general public affairs and setting public policy.

Information can be understood as a right and a basic principle of democracy. As a right, great strides have been taken internationally to acknowledge the right to expression and access to information, which are fundamentally aimed at rooting democratic principles such as participation, responsibility, accountability and general transparency. As a basic principle, access to information can be understood as a fundamental instrument for increasing and improving the capacity for action of the population; because it provides the foundation for the edifice of general democratic processes and participation in the public sphere and creation of public policies.

While protection of the right to information access is fundamental (access understood as the capacity to approach information clearly, openly and opportunely), it is also important to improve information flows among the diverse agents, such as government, associations, civic organizations, interests groups and the private sector. Before this scenario, it becomes essential to create and reinforce the mechanisms and policies that allow communication and exchange of information among these agents.

Several international organizations have issued recommendations to improve the situation in these matters. Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo (2003) recommends focusing largely on four areas:

- Strengthening the legal framework that regulates and ensures information liberty and pluralism.
- Supporting and strengthening emerging networks and communications media at both the local and national level in order to facilitate plural, independent exchange of information.
- Expanding awareness of the right to access to official information and improving information supply channels.
- Generating and improving the mechanisms of communications needed by the less favored population in order to participate in policy formulation at the local and national levels.

As a right, access to information has been included in Article 19 of *Declaration of Universal Human Rights,* which states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers." Moreover, Article 6 of the *Political Constitution of the United Mexican States* states (translated from Spanish): "The expression of ideas shall not be the object of any judicial or administrative inquisition […] the right to information shall be guaranteed by the State"; and moreover, "All persons have the right to free access to plural and timely information, and to seek, receive and spread information and ideas of any kind and by any means of expression."

As can be seen, both of these articles address the right to information, its communication and the expression of ideas. Therefore, individuals can be users, conductors and producers of information. In this light, we can see that information access cannot be approached merely as a question of protecting information rights; the use and communication of information must also be promoted and protected. In this way, the expression of ideas and genuine participation of individuals in political processes and public affairs will be ensured.

The aforementioned factors give rise to the need to rebuild the public sphere within a democratic context that encourages ever broader participation. To this end, new organization, negotiation and concertation patterns must be found. This process will also require improved channels for accessing relevant and timely information. Such changes will help society get beyond optimistic slogans that tout citizen participation as an essential element for improving the social situation; and they will help reverse the trend that sees citizens exerting little or no influence in public policy. The citizen's scant participation in public affairs is the result of the generally precarious-

ness living conditions of large parts of the population who lack fundamental social resources needed to exercise participatory rights in a meaningful way. (Canto, 2008). In this light, the question of citizen participation within the knowledge society will be addressed in the following section.

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Citizen participation
in the knowledge society

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There are differences between the concept of the citizen who by prerogative enjoys rights and the citizen who actively gathers information, intervenes and participates in public affairs. In order to contextualize it within the information age and the knowledge society, the question of citizen participation deserves closer examination, especially in light of rapid technological advances in the fields of information and communications.

The concept of citizen participation has been addressed from many standpoints, which has led to diverse meanings and some difficulty in arriving at a generally accepted notion of the concept. Nonetheless, these approaches have enriched the debate surrounding the idea of citizen participation. In general terms, citizen participation can be understood as the intervention and influence of individuals in public affairs on the basis of their status as citizens and members of a given social or political community. As such, it is the social process resulting from intentional action of both individuals and groups pursuing a specific goal as a function of their interests, and social and power relationships (Velásquez and González, 2003).

Citizen participation can vary within different types of governments, the degree of democracy, institutional factors, a given society's organizational abilities and in general as a function of the relationships in place between society and government. Several researchers have stressed the importance of the relationship between society and government, picturing it as a process of interaction, communication and even differentiation that they actively pursue (Espinosa, 2004). These diverse manners of participation also influence the type of democracy and whether it flourishes of fails in the long term. The permanent link between democracy and citizen participation is stressed by O'Donnell:

> […] as a form of effective politics in a given territory, democracy is necessarily linked to the citizenry, and a true citizenry exists only within the legitimate demo-

cratic State. The universalization of citizenship is an ideal that only genuine, existing democracies, in greater or lesser degree, can rightly entertain. (1993: 74. Translated from Spanish)

Changes in the governments of the region and in our own country have pointed toward more democratic forms of participation, allowing new associative models to flourish and, as if to underline the importance of citizen participation in the consolidation of democracy, a renewal of the uses of public spaces.

Once the citizenry genuinely exercises their political rights; however, it is important to encourage additional citizen participation in other public affairs and initiatives (Prats y Catalá, 1996; Giddens, 2000; Fleury, 2004). In this way, a new kind of institutional order that is open and plural can be produced (Calderón, 1995).

Citizen participation comes in two basic flavors: the institutional and the autonomous. Institutionalized participation moves through the regulatory statutes of the legal framework and can lend legitimacy to the government, while promoting democratic culture, more effective decision making and generally improved public administration. The autonomous flavor, in turn, arises from the civil society outside of the strictures of government agencies (Ziccardi, 1998).

Moreover, participation can be configured as administrative or political. Administrative participation is depoliticized, in that it does not lead to changes in social power structures, but rather consists of a rational instrumentality that directly serves the participating parties interests. In contrast, the goal of politicized citizen participation is to exert influence in the balances of broader social power, and it is this type of participation that will receive the most attention herein, because it requires more information in order to properly frame rational arguments (Cunill, 2008).

In this regard, the concept and role of citizen participation needs to be understood within the so-called "information age" and ensuing knowledge society.[5]

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5 Along these same lines, Clark (1997) states that the knowledge society may be deemed a later stage of the civilization called the information age.

The advent of the information age is inseparable from the revolution in information and communications technologies,[6] which has exerted immeasurable impacts on the economic, social and cultural functions of nations and their interactions (Castells, 1999). Castells takes care to distinguish development based on information from that associated with agricultural and industry, when he stresses: "in the new model of information development, the source of productivity lies in knowledge producing technology, information processing and the communication of symbols" (1999: 42-43. Translated from Spanish). In the information age, therefore, we find:

> [...] that indicators of technological growth in the informatics and communications sector and its impact on the socio-national structures and deepening of the density of social relationships derived thereof reveal that a scenario hardly predictable in terms of the likely developments several decades ago is in fact here. (Bernal-Meza and Masera, 2007: 92. Translated from Spanish)

For these reasons, we can associate the information era with a development that directly impacts society. This development considerably expands the power of individuals instantly to gather, produce and share information in many forms from practically any place. It is important to keep in mind, however, that with the use of this concept "a new paradigm is posited, whose ordering principles reveal a route toward an emerging society under construction that is a product of the action of technological systems and advances in digitization processes" (Bernal-Meza and Masera, 2007: 94). This emerging society is currently being referred to by many researchers as the *knowledge society.*

Sakaiya (1995) extended the reach of the concept of the knowledge society when he stated that, apart from material satisfactions, societies would lend greater import to immaterial questions such as knowledge, and this knowledge would constitute one of the great building blocks of nations. This constituted a break from the earlier notion of development based on industrialization and growth of capital.

Drucker (1974) was one of the first researchers to cite the term knowledge society, arguing that the strength of the economy was moving away from the utilization of finance capital and natural resources, and giving way

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6   In the view of Castells (1999: 32), these new technologies are associated with "the emerging set of micro-electronics, informatics (machines and software), telecommunications/television/radio and optical electronics" in addition to "genetic engineering and the growing set of developments and applications."

to economic growth based on knowledge. Moreover, Drucker envisioned a future in which leadership was held by those with solid knowledge, what he called "knowledge professionals," while those with financial resources would be pushed to the background. Another current of thought (Hansson, 2002) points out that we already live in a knowledge society, marked by development and technological advances that have driven great growth of knowledge. More importantly, these viewpoints agree that matters of wealth, well-being and people's happiness can no longer be gauged in terms of productivity and merchandise, but must also be assessed as a function of the knowledge an individual possesses.

As it relates to globalization, information technologies emerging with the knowledge society can serve to improve the operations of business and general economic activity, while also enhancing interactions that take place between citizens and these entities. By virtue of this valuation of knowledge, the role of the citizen can stand out as the main competitive asset, beyond any simple analysis of the citizen as a human resource.

With regard to this matter, the concepts of the knowledge society and the information age have been used as if they were synonyms referring to the same thing. Each term, however, stresses specific aspects of analysis. While the term information era refers to the great expansion of information driven by information and communications technologies, such as the internet; knowledge society stresses the understanding possessed by individuals as a factor of development and wealth. The first term refers to the enormous availability of information and data, while the second is suggestive of genuinely assimilating such information and putting it to good use. This distinction is not a small matter, as pointed out by Ríos (2014: 148), who asserts: "a change in how information and knowledge are perceived in vital for understanding the paradigm shift in social development"; therefore, these concepts must not be conflated, because "the birth of the information society based on a technological revolution is merely an instrument for achieving a model of the knowledge society" (Ríos, 2014: 149. Translated from Spanish).

The debate surrounding the concepts of information age and knowledge society can be very useful when examining the concept of the citizen and citizen participation. As this is related to the internal dynamics of society itself, many studies, in fact, suggest that information and knowledge are key variables in questions regarding exploitation of natural resources, economic policy, and the production and distribution of power in modern societies (Web-

ster, 1995; Thurow, 1996). Toffler (1990) states that in contrast to natural and economic resources, knowledge does not spend, but rather tends to accrue. As stated before, however, the proper production of knowledge and information requires a democratic context in which liberty is the primary value, allowing ideas to flourish and citizens to secure the information they need. In this light, Toffler's (1990) optimism regarding the democratization of the distribution of knowledge may be deemed naïve, as he foresaw even the poor and weak having the capacity to acquire information. Today we understand, however, that, unlike Toffler's vision, access to information and associated costs continue to pose obstacles (Morales, 1990).

Once the concepts of information, citizenship, and the information age and knowledge society have been duly examined, an analysis of the problem of the low levels of citizen participation in the public policy agenda of the region can be undertaken. This problem is complicated by the fact that many of the factors discussed can be understood as both cause and effect; that is, on one hand the citizen needs information to exercise advocacy and exert positive influence in public affairs; while on the other better public policies are needed to ensure that the citizen can enjoy such access to the required information and thereby improve the quality of participative advocacy. The way out of this "catch-22" proposed herein entails the adoption of a governance model for setting and managing public policy. This model will be described in the following section.

The governance model for setting and managing public policy

It has been said that "public policy is made of words" (Majone, 1997: 2. Translated from Spanish). In this sense, whether oral or written, argumentation is basic to the process of drafting and managing policy, especially in the context of democratic governments that allow diverse agents to exercise advocacy while attempting to build consensus for concrete action. An ideal model of policy management within a democratic State would entail expression of ideas needs and concerns about shared issues. These matters would be taken up by candidates to elective office, who would propose projects and plans to address the concerns gathered in the earlier stage, allowing the voters to choose the candidate they believe will bring genuine solutions to their problems. The candidate's proposals are then implemented as public policy by the executive (Majone, 1997).

This ideal is a far cry from reality, because of the persistence of unequal access to and distribution of the kind of information required for participation through effective argumentation. This problem has two main vertices: on one hand there are groups that control and amass most of the information, both in terms of quality and quantity. These groups tend to exert influence in the setting and delivery of public policy and general administration of public affairs; while, on the other hand; broad swaths of society participate in public affairs hardly at all. This imbalance reveals just how inadequate information needs are being met, something that puts the brakes on "the expansion of the knowledge possessed by individuals and […] the intellectual development of people striving for a better station in life" (Ramírez, 2013: XV. Translated from Spanish). Consequently, it is important to consider new government models that provide for the creation of mechanisms that facilitate better distribution of information and thereby broader citizen participation in public affairs.

In this sense, the governance model, in contrast to the governability model, seems to have quite a lot to offer. Though the aims of this paper do not include a detailed discussion of the difference between the two, it may be useful to contrast several analytic perspectives in order to better grasp the concept of governance.

In the firsts place, the concept of governability moves forward in the face of the increasingly pugnacious nature of social demands by opening the public policy agenda. This model was a central feature of the government apparatuses of many countries in the 1970s (Crozier, Hungtinton and Watanuki, 1975). Moreover, the principles of the governability approach came in direct response to the need to confront repeated financial crises and economic downturns. In addition to this, the governability model served to underpin the legitimacy of the government in terms of public sector efficiency and effectiveness.

As the social welfare States began to buckle and wobble, governability began to take on a meaning to describe a government's capacity to address new challenges and social demands as these arose. In this sense, governability describes the government's capacity to set, deliver and administer public policy. Good government of this kind, in conjunction with the expansion of citizens' rights and opportunities, has lessened the risk of a return of authoritarian government, which provides additional grounds of stability for consolidation of the democratic experiment (O'Donnell, 1979; Przeworski and Wallerstein, 1988).

The concept of governability, however, has recently undergone some review as it is contrasted with its opposite, i.e., ingovernability (Coppedge, 1996), which occurs when a State is overburdened economically and cannot meaningfully address social demands. This ingovernability is also apparent in the failure to control the expansion of social services rationally and in balance with market interests (Pasquino, 2005; Mayntz, 2000). In this sense, several researchers have asserted that governability is nothing more than the conservative ideology of the crisis (Offe, 1979).

On the other hand, the concept of governance (Aguilar, 2006; Kauffman, Kraay and Zoido-Labaton, 2000; Peters, 1998; Brugué, Gomà and Subirats, 2005; Torres and Ramos, 2008, 2012; Mayntz, 2000, 2002; Scharpf, 2000, 2001; Camou, 2000; among others) has been used in several approaches, most of which converge on it as an idea entailing the performance of public processes and policy decisions through delegation of decision making faculties to a plurality of stakeholders. This model also embraces the use of mixed private and public sector approaches in order achieve horizontal consensus. The governance model seeks to achieve consensus by diminishing hierarchal distinction and the overbearing role of the State that might otherwise presume to be the only party qualified to set public policy (Torres and Ramos, 2008).

Mayntz (2000) emphasizes two new elements in the definition of governance. The first approach views it as "a new style of government distinct from the model characterized by hierarchal control, which embraces greater cooperation among stakeholders and genuine interaction with the State and non-governmental agencies within the decision-making matrix comprised of both private and public spheres" (Mayntz, 2000: 1. Translated from Spanish). The second approach sees governance as "a distinctive model for coordinating individual actions, understood as primary forms in the construction of social order" (Mayntz, 2000: 1. Translated from Spanish). With this kind of participative action, the government can work beyond its traditional limits by exploiting public participation networks and processes with the aim of enhancing its capacity to understand and anticipate problems, intervene opportunely, while optimizing actions; something that could allow it to move out of crisis management mode (Bourgon, 2010).

The matter of governance was discussed in the critical literature throughout 1970s and 1980s, where it is presented as a decentralizing trend that ex-

ploits horizontal networks comprised of public and private agencies.[7] This line of thinking provided the basis for viewing hierarchies with some disdain, while governance became the process of construction of horizontal consensus. This led to the view that institutions could be understood as horizontal decision-making networks, something that necessarily questioned the viability of centralized institutions and governmental agencies.

Under the influence of postmodern theory in the 1990s, a paradigm featuring decentralization began to take shape. One aim of this paradigm is to allow government of exploit the benefits of social networks by empowerment of stakeholders, implementation of public policy networks and promoting a culture of accountability (Peters, 1998). This trend pointed to a restructuring of the functions traditionally entrusted exclusively to the political-administrative apparatus of the State and embracing a political life featuring negotiation between public and private sector stakeholders. Several researchers have suggested that this process in fact began to blur the line between the public and private spheres (Börzel, 1998; Kenis, and Schneider, 1991; Kohler-Koch, 1996).

The following is a summary of the salient features of a model of governance:

- Ground-up construction of coordinating processes for the organizations and agencies of government.
- Clarification of proposals submitted by stakeholders advocating the implementation of public policy.
- Agreements between public, private and social sectors that include performance indicators.
- Decentralized administration and oversight.
- Culture of transparency and accountability.
- Lower transaction costs that can be measured by the degree of trust and reciprocity in the facilitation of innovations on any given spatial scale.

The central features of governance are coordination and articulation among the stakeholders within geographically defined regions with shared

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7 The term "partnership" has been used to refer to broad-based, participative initiatives involving diverse stakeholders, who employ dialogue and discourse to reach consensus and exert impact on policy, programs and actions. In this ways the parties subject to government actions take an active role in determining these actions.

social and cultural interests. In this context, in order to improve information policies, it would be necessary to involve and coordinate such agents as international agencies, public decision makers (municipal, state and federal), NGOs; information producers, broadcasters and suppliers; information users; heads of media departments, library personnel, library and information science specialists as well as many other stakeholders. In this light, governance

> […] promotes the construction and consolidation of networks, solidary exchange and associations, and is also a kind of social capital arising from the exchanges and rules built from the bottom up and the coordination of institutions from the top down, something that also serves to enhance the positive capacities of citizens. (Torres and Ramos, 2012: 104. Translated from Spanish)

Setting and implementation of public policy through a governance model would also entail the implementation of a system of formal and informal rules to set the parameters for interaction and exchanges between the public and private spheres. Accountability rules would also serve to ensure plurality of participation of stakeholders with diverse public, social and economic interests. An approach such as this can also lend greater legitimacy to government action (Aguilar, 2006; Pierre and Peters, 2000; Williamson, 1979, 1994; Mayntz, 2002; McCarney, Halfani and Rodríguez, 1998), while providing enhanced availability of and access to information that is relevant for citizens wishing to advocate in the public arena.

Final reflections

One of the objectives of this paper is to address the changes to the concept of citizenry as it moves from merely the idea of the individual, upon whom rights are deposited, to a multifaceted concept, in which individuals are actively engaged in matters of public policy. This shift is associated with democratic transformations, which argue that in order to improve democracy one must move from representative democracy, which relies on the election of representatives to public office, to a more active kind of democracy in which citizens are engaged in public affairs permanently.

For this participation to have solid grounding, citizens require information to make successful forays into the public arena founded on the quality of argument and clarity of ideas. In this sense, information is an essential element in the constitution of a more engaged, participative citizen. Nonetheless, in Latin America inequalities persist in matters of access to and use

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of information, affecting, of course, the quality of any given citizen's participation. In this way the elites who enjoy the most and best quality information are able to participate very effectively in the public policy agenda, while a broad swath of persons, unaware of their rights, do not participate meaningfully to improve their quality of life.

A governance model could go a long way to countering this situation, even in view of the complexity of the problems with information access and distribution. The strength of the governance model resides in the value it affords plurality, while ensuring a greater degree of cooperative decision making. In this model, the government is no longer the only agent capable of making decisions. Its role shifts to one of coordinator of the stakeholders who participate in the setting and delivery of public policies.

Consequently, from the standpoint posited herein, governance constitutes an element of integration of citizens with the activities of the State, especially with regard to public policy. In this way it can create unexpected, positive synergies, while fomenting the citizens' capacity to participate and improvement of information access, distribution channels and the production of information itself. Along these same lines, governance can foster the flow of information and knowledge, because it is a horizontal model of government and decision making, in which the diverse stakeholders participate in the decisions and the assessment of results. As such, it promises to be highly transparent modality of public administration.

These reflections invite several lines of inquiry with the potential of enriching the debate surrounding the nature of governance in the democratic society. These questions include: What changes have been made in the law with regard to access to public information and how have these changes impacted citizen participation? What is the role of public libraries in the formation of citizens? Are there any examples of governance at the state or municipal levels? Finally, it seems pertinent to ask: What other government or social incentives might exert a positive impact on the creation of model with the features of governance?

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