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### **The role of web technologies in public consultation practices: some empirical evidence from the Italian spending review**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

With the exacerbation of the austerity context, public administrations are increasingly dealing with the problem of financial sustainability and issues of budget cuts and spending reviews have attracted a wide academic interest to date (Lapsley and Midwinter, 2010, 2010; Agasisti et al., 2015; Arena and Arnaboldi, 2013). The major difficulties associated with budget cuts and spending reviews are represented by the identification of which public services to reduce and the amount of budget cuts (Agasisti et al., 2015). In this respect, the technical difficulties that are obviously associated to this process are accompanied and amplified by the need of dealing with the harsh reactions of citizens on which these cuts impinge. To this aim, both academics and public administrators have started to look at public consultation approaches as a possible mean to legitimate the choices made in connection to budget cuts. Public consultation, indeed, is based on the idea to involve the general public in decisions about the selection of areas and amount of budget cuts (Chun and Cho, 2015; Heald and Hodges, 2015; Stamati et al., 2015). Through public consultation practices, citizens could be involved in the spending review process and could provide their opinion and suggestions in relevant issues such as which services to reduce or amount of savings, finally increasing transparency about budget cuts and enhancing the involvement of citizens in public life.

This phenomenon has been somehow accelerated by the rapid expansion of web technologies, with reference to both web 1.0 and web 2.0, which implies the use of the internet to involve the general public either online or offline (O'Reilly, 2005). In this respect, there has been some evidence about the adoption of web technologies, and in particular social media technologies, during the spending review processes that occurred in France and in the UK in recent years (Agostino et al., forthcoming). Although studies about public consultation are recurrent (e.g. Norris and Reddick, 2013; Heald and Hodges, 2015) as well as investigations about the pervasive impact of web technologies in public administrations activities (e.g. Mergel and Bretschneider, 2013; Agostino and Arnaboldi, 2015), little is known about the potential contribution of these web technologies to public consultation activities aimed at reducing public expenditures. This gap has provided the rationale for this research.

This study aims to explore the role of web technologies in supporting public consultation in this specific context. This objective is articulated around two main research questions. How are web technologies used by governments during the public consultation process? What are the results associated with the usage of web technologies to consult the public?

By answering to these research questions we aim to contribute to the state of the art literature in two ways. First, the literature has provided an array of approaches, ranging from focus groups and surveys to open panels and citizen advisory committees (Rowe and Frewer, 2000), which have been adopted to support public consultation. However, these approaches endorse traditional face-to-face tools that

do not rely on web-based technologies. On the other hand, more general studies on web technologies in public administrations (e.g. Mergel and Bretschneider, 2013; Agostino and Arnaboldi, 2015; Moss et al., 2015) do not focus on the issue of public consultation exercises in the setting of the spending review. By addressing the use of web technologies in the public consultation process we aim to bridge these two streams of literature. Second, we aim to pose particular attention to the way in which this process is deployed and the related results– i.e. understanding the involved resources in managing and using web technologies for public consultation, together with problems and opportunities emerged during the usage and the output of the public consultation process in terms of level of participation achieved and impact of the consultation on the final public spending decision. The rest of the paper is structured as follows. First extant literature on public consultation will be discussed, with particular attention to the role of web technologies in enhancing the consultation; then, the methodology clarifies the approach to data collection and data analysis, and details the specific setting of the spending review. The result section analyses in a comparative way two experiences of spending review carried out in Italy, which supports a broader discussion, in the last section, about the role of web technologies in public consultation processes aimed at reducing public expenditures.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

This section aims to outline the state of the art literature concerning the issue of public consultation, addressing its purpose, process, results (Shipley and Utz, 2012), and enucleating the role of web technologies in connection to public consultation. Public consultation is generally defined as the citizen involvement in decision making processes of public administration (Thomas, 1995; Bishop and Davis, 2002; Irvin and Stansbury, 2004). It is a long standing concept connected with the idea to improve democracy through a direct participation of citizens (Roberts, 2004), and it is still at the cornerstone of several debates in public administration and policy making literature given the increasingly adoption of public consultation practices by governments in US as well as in Europe and East countries (e.g. Agostino et al., 2016; Gera, 2016; Jun and Bryer, 2016). Advocates of public consultation highlight its benefits with the recognition that “with citizen participation, formulated policies might be more realistically grounded in citizen preferences, the public might become more sympathetic evaluators of the tough decisions that government administrators have to make, and the improved support from the public might create a less divisive, combative populace to govern and regulate” (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004: 55).

## ***2.1 Purpose of public consultation***

As far as the purpose of public consultation is concerned, extant literature has identified a variety of intents, which range from legitimation of public decisions to transparency or propositions of new ideas. For example, the study by Walters et al. (2000) underlined five different purposes of public consultation that comprise the discovery of new definitions, alternatives or criteria; the education of the public about the proposed alternative; the measurement of public opinion about the available options; the persuasion of the public toward an alternative; and the legitimation of government decisions. In a similar vein, Roberts (2004) identified the following purposes: developmental, educative, therapeutic, legitimating, protective, instrumental and realistic. These variety of mechanisms have been ascribed to two main purposes, namely legitimation of government action and improve the quality of decision making (Catt and Murphy, 2003).

## ***2.2 Public consultation process***

The second investigated area is represented by the process through which public consultation is enacted. It has been recognized as a crucial aspect since depending on how the process is designed and managed, different and conflicting results can be achieved (Shiple and Utz, 2012). In particular, the investigated issue related to public consultation process concern communication practices, leadership styles, and tools and mechanisms for citizens' involvement.

Communication refers to the approach through which citizens are involved in the decision making process. A proper communication of the purposes of the public consultation is considered crucial to ensure a committed involvement by the general public, otherwise citizens will develop their own purpose and expectation from participation running the risk to arrive at dissatisfaction with the process (Kweit and Kweit, 1981).

Leadership is instead connected to the issue of resource management during public consultation practices. In this respect, interpersonal skills were found playing a relevant role for the success of public consultation experiences. The study by King et al. (1998) underlined that the choice of the adequate tool to involve the public is not enough, but also leadership skills, listening and team building competences are required.

Mechanisms and tools for citizens' involvement have been also explored with several authors underlying a plethora of instruments to involve the public such as focus group, public debates, discussion forums, public meetings, research panels, surveys, telepolling, white papers, newsletter (Rowe and Frewer, 2000; Konisky and Beierle, 2001; Catt and Murphy, 2003; Steward 2007). This plethora of tools have been distinguished into three main categories depending on the level of interactivity they support, either one way or two ways (Rowe and Frewer, 2005). In particular, when

the message is conveyed from the public administration to the public, these mechanisms enter the cluster of public communication; when the message is conveyed from the public to the sponsor, these mechanisms are called public consultation, while when the message is exchanged between the two parties and a dialogue seems to be established, then these tools have been classified under the label of public participation. While the earlier instruments adopted for citizens' involvement, such as surveys or opinion panels, were mainly one way tools, in recent years the potentialities of two ways tools that rely on web 2.0 technologies have been highlighted (e.g. Mergel and Bretschneider, 2013).

### ***2.3 Public consultation results***

The third investigated area concerns the results of public consultation, which have been articulated in two levels, distinguishing between the output of the public consultation and the outcome. The output refers to the ability to involve the general public and it has been acknowledged being strictly connected to how the previous process have been designed and implemented (Bishop and Davis, 2002). The outcome instead refers to the impact of the public consultation to the decision making process. The major benefit of a public consultation process lies in the possibility to achieve better informed policy decisions (Thomas, 1995). A widely debated issue related to the outcome and output of public consultation is related to the evaluation of this activity and several authors have proposed a variety of approaches and techniques to understand whether public consultation has delivered the initial intended purposes (e.g. Irvin and Stansbury, 2004; Shipley and Utz, 2012). Evaluation criteria are diverse and comprise, among the others, fairness, competence, sustainability, long-term planning, efficiency or effectiveness (Rowe and Frewer, 2000; Stagl, 2006; Shipley and Utz, 2012):

### ***2.4 Web technologies in public consultation***

In recent years, several public administration studies have addressed to the role of web technologies to enhance citizens involvement, hence connected to the second dimension of the process to manage public participation. Citizens today have a constant internet access and through the internet they continuously provide information, which can inform better policy decision or public administrative processes. The adoption of web-based technologies to involve the public is known with different labels such as e-participation, e-voting or more generally e-government (Layne and Lee, 2001; Gritzalis, 2002; Smith and Dalakiouridou, 2009). These terms all share the notion to use the web to interact with citizens, but vary with reference to the purpose for which the web technology is used. For example, e-participation refers to the involvement of citizens at a general level in public life through the use of the information and communication technology (Smith and Dalakiouridou, 2009); e-voting concerns the electronic voting with citizens using internet to signal their politic preferences

(Gritzalis, 2002), while e-government is a more general term related to the “government’s use of technology, particularly web-based Internet applications to enhance the access to and delivery of government information and service to citizens, business partners, employees, other agencies, and government entities” (Layne and Lee, 2001, p.123). Studies about the role of web technologies in these practices of citizen engagement are flourishing given the increasingly diffusion of the web, with reference to both web 1.0 and web 2.0 technologies. While the former is related to off-line and asynchronous tools, the latter is concerned real time and interactive technologies (Berners-Lee et al., 1994; O’Reilly, 2005).

In this paper, we address the role of web technologies to involve citizens with reference to another application field: the spending review. The spending review is a public intervention aimed at reducing the expenses of an organization (Agasisti et al., 2015). It can be considered as a budget revision since it is concerned with the central theme of evaluating analytically the expenses in order to reduce the public spending. This reduction can be achieved by selecting purposefully the priority areas and reducing the others or by cutting in a linear way all the public expenditures. The academic attention devoted to the spending review has been rather limited, although the general theme of cutback management has received greater attention in recent years (e.g. Bozeman, 2010; Pollitt, 2010) especially in countries suffering for the financial crisis, such as Italy, Greece, France or UK. A central aspect of the spending review is represented by citizens’ acceptance about the decision derived from the spending review process and therefore some authors have highlighted the importance to involve citizens in this process (Agostino et al., forthcoming). Specifically, citizens are called to provide their opinion about areas of budget cuts and amount of savings. When focusing on the issue of public consultation in the spending review, however, the literature is almost silent. An exception is the paper by Agostino et al. (forthcoming), that investigates the role of social media in spending reviews occurred in France, UK and Italy. Although the study provides early evidence on the extent to which social media contribute to the spending review, it mainly neglects the process of use of the technologies. Given this context, this study aims to explore the role of web technologies in supporting public consultation in this specific context of the spending review.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

From a methodological perspective, we adopted a case study approach. In particular, we explored the Italian experience of two Spending Review (SR) processes, which took place in 2012 and 2013-2014. The Italian setting can be particularly interesting in relation to the research objective, since Italy is one of the countries that has been most challenged at the European level in connection to the problem

of financial sustainability. Within this context, the two selected cases concern recent spending review programmes, and therefore can be compared in terms of the development level of public consultation approaches.

Data were collected between 2012 and 2014, exploiting multiple sources (Yin, 2003): twelve semi-structured interviews with key informants involved in both the spending review processes, official documents and presentations, web and social media pages, confidential reports usually not available to the public. Moreover, the regulatory impact assessment documents (“*relazione illustrativa*” and “*relazione tecnica*”) of each normative decree related to the spending reviews have been analytically examined in order to identify insights of the consultation processes. Finally, it was also possible to attend some meetings of the working groups and engage in informal conversation with them.

Data were analysed based on within-case and cross-case analyses (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). First, we analysed each individual SR process. Based on the interviews and archival material we drew a timeline of the SR review processes and how public consultation took place. The contents of the transcripts of the interviews and the archival materials were analysed and emergent themes were highlighted relating to the elements of the framework: motivation for using public consultation, public consultation approaches, uses and results. Once we had completed the within-case analysis, we conducted a cross-case analysis using replication logic. We compared evidence across different cases, in order to identify divergences and convergences concerning motivations, approaches and results. We searched for distinct patterns and for plausible explanations of the observed differences, trying to discriminate between contingencies and more general regularities (Eisenhardt, 1989). We constructed comparative tables to identify discriminating variables that could explain similarities and differences in the pattern analysed.

#### **4. RESULTS**

Both the spending review cases analysed in this paper (SR 2012 and SR 2013-14) were developed relying on public consultation processes with the general aim to involve citizens in the spending review process. While the main objective of a spending review clearly stands in the restoration of public finances by identifying possible cuts and savings, the public consultation processes activated within these spending reviews had different purposes in turn reflected in a different role of technology during the public consultation process and different results. The following sections describes the two experiences distinguishing between: purpose, process and results of the public consultation.

#### **4.1 Purpose of the public consultation**

##### *SR2012: legitimisation of budget cuts*

The consultation process introduced within the spending review in 2012 was not the first experience of public engagement for the Italian government. Indeed, the consultation was part of a wider process of open government (called “*Dialogo con il cittadino*” – *Dialogue with citizens*) that the Prime Minister Office was carrying out in order to develop a more effective and direct communication with the public. The consultation associated with the spending review basically consisted in an open and wide process, supported by web technology, through which each citizen could send proposals, ideas, suggestions or even criticisms concerning the spending review itself. The consultation started on April 2012 and lasted one month.

The reasons behind the choice of the central government to undertake this consultation practice were clearly outlined during the interviews. Interestingly, it emerged that the main objective of the consultation was not the obtainment of information and suggestions from the whole public, but rather a process of communication with citizens. The government introduced a citizens’ consultation process with an objective of “legitimisation” and “accountability”: informing people on the process of spending review was the government strategy to obtain public approval and communicate transparency towards results.

Int\_3: “Our goal was the obtainment of a real engagement with citizens, especially in terms of communication. We aimed at communicating a message”.

Int\_2: “The government tried to obtain an idea of what citizens lived every day. (...) We had a problem of transposition of the citizen’s needs and desires”.

Int\_3: “The Prime Minister tried to spread the idea of being close with citizens’ problems”.

This communication had the specific objective of creating a sort of feeling with people in order to enhance transparency on the whole process of spending review. Moreover, the communication served also to an end of external accountability.

Int\_1: “We aimed at demonstrating the full convergence of our action with the people’s needs”.

Surprisingly, the legitimisation was not directed toward the public opinion and citizens, but rather to the internal resistance of the public organisations that government was experiencing.

Int\_3: “The consultation was done to overcome the internal resistance of ministers and other high bureaucrats. (...) Indeed, our idea was to give them the idea of having with us the large consensus of people in support of the spending review”.

#### *SR 2013-14: Collection of information for the decision-making process*

The public consultation process implemented in the SR 2013-2014, was a broad citizens’ engagement practice, consisting in an on-line session where people could post suggestions on the way to direct cuts and savings. The process of consultation lasted about six months, from January to June 2014. In this case, the consultation had the clear aim of obtaining information and real suggestions on possible interventions of spending reduction. The central government performed a public consultation process literally to obtain data and information from citizens’, relevant for the spending review process, and more specifically, to direct the way savings and cuts were planned.

Int\_10: “We really believe in the collection of information from public (...) We seriously used this tool, not superficially as an exercise of facade”.

Int\_9: “The objective is to obtain suggestions from citizens on how addressing cuts on public spending. Therefore, we can conclude that the consultation aims at collecting information to be uses for cutting the public spending”.

It is interesting to observe how the special commissary for the spending review (Int\_8) openly denies an objective of legitimisation connected to the consultation, which characterised the previous spending review of 2012.

Int\_8: “Our objective was not legitimisation, even because the spending review now is a common term that people know and accept. Rather, the consultation was a way for obtaining ideas”.

## **4.2 The public consultation process**

### *SR 2012: Web technology to support the process*

In the first case examined (SR 2012), the internal staff of the Prime Minister’s Office managed the whole consultation process through a web technology that mainly consisted of an ad-hoc website where citizens could provide their suggestions. The first phase of the process was the collection of suggestions from citizens. Each citizen could freely access to a dedicated public consultation page within the government website in order to send one or more suggestions. All the suggestions were automatically collected in a unique folder. The second phase was the preliminary reading of the suggestions and their separation in categories. The staff of the Prime Minister manually made this

action. The categories were related to general themes: health, defence, education, *etc.* During this phase, also a big removal of the spam emails took place. On average, the 30% of daily suggestions were spam. The third phase of the process concerned the full reading of the suggestions. Every day each member of the staff dedicated to the consultation process printed and read hundreds of suggestions, in order to organise them in sub-categories. At the end of each day, a synthetic document reporting the number of suggestions received was transmitted to the manager responsible of the process that every two weeks informed the Prime Minister, the special commissary and the media about the evolution of the consultation process.

In terms of resources, the consultation process had not a proper budget and only ten officials were exclusively dedicated at the process. They responded to the manager that was in direct contact with his director of area (the head of the Press Office) and the Prime Minister. The consultation was managed entirely on line through a dedicated webpage within the central government website. Specifically, a software was developed to allow citizens to provide their comments. The citizen, by connecting to the government webpage, could send the suggestion using a pre-ordinate format that required some data (name, surname and e-mail contact) and gave the possibility to write a message in a blank space with a limit of ten thousand characters. After that, the software collected the suggestions in a unique folder, without splitting them in categories. Then each official had to personally download the e-mails from the server and organize them in thematic clusters.

Int\_2: “Every two or three days we went at the fourth floor [*Edit.* Where the software was located] to materially download the new suggestions received with our personal USB, and then we printed the messages”.

The web technology used was simple and accessible to every citizen with an internet connection. However, it posed some problems during the management of the public consultation. Many of these problems were directly related to the structure of the web technology, which worked similarly to a mail service. Indeed, the officials lost a lot of time in separating the suggestions in categories and sub-categories. This work, instead, could be easily automatically realised by a further developed web technology.

Int\_2: “Certainly, we could make better a lot of things such as, for instance, the issue of splitting the suggestions in different topics. (...) Apart the difficulty of reading and separating the e-mails, the real issue was the definition of different categories. This was done manually by us, as the work was going on”.

Moreover, even a more detailed collection of information from the respondents could be set up through the help of an ad hoc software.

Int\_2: "The director asked for some details about the locations of the respondents. Each citizen provided this information, but the system didn't automatically provide data. Therefore, we had to manually calculate the number of suggestions of each Italian region".

Interestingly, in spite of these technical problems, the resolution approach by the government was an increasing of the workforce rather than an investment on another web technology, as for instance the use of a more technological software device in order to automatize some operations.

Int\_3: "We recruited more staff in order to manage the enormous amount of daily mails".

These problems with the web technology brought about also some organizational issues, mainly connected to the unclear organisational structure of the consultation process. Indeed, even if apparently an inter-ministerial committee (composed by the Prime Minister, the special commissary and other ministers) was created and headed the whole spending review process, the special commissary and the minister of economy were the real leaders of the spending review (as clearly emerged from many interviews). Within this scenario, the public consultation process was totally driven by the Prime Minister's Office, without any connection with the two leaders of the spending review.

#### *SR 2013-14: Web technology to support the process*

In the second case examined, the SR 2013-14, the staff of the special commissary managed the whole consultation process. Unlike the previous spending review, all the aspects of this process were entirely under the supervision of the special commissary.

The process consisted of a wide public consultation as in the previous case, but a different web technology tools was adopted. Rather than a dedicated web page within the central government website, an ad hoc software was developed to specifically support the spending review. This web technology still worked in an asynchronous way and allow each citizen to insert his/her opinion. Differently from the SR 2012, the technology forced a citizen, while sending his suggestion, to insert some relevant information concerning himself/herself and the specific topic of the suggestion. In this way, the software could automatically split the suggestions received in different areas of reference. This structure of the technology facilitated the further phase of analysis of the received suggestions. Each member of the staff working on the public consultation process had a proper account through which entering the software device for reading the suggestions. The members of the staff were also assigned to a specific topic (the so called working groups – health, defence, education, *etc.*), so that the activity of reviewing was organised around macro themes. After this phase of analysis, each

working group had the task of identifying proposals of spending reduction by trying inspiration from the suggestions received through the web technology. The special commissary for the spending review never took place at the consultation process, nor received information regarding its evolution. The resources involved in the consultation process were quite scarce. The consultation had not a proper budget, and only two people of the staff of the special commissary (that was composed by 14 people) directly worked at the design, implementation and management the consultation. Instead all the members of the internal working groups (about 10 people of the commissary's staff and other 15 external experts) actively participated at the analysis of the proposals received through the web technology). A central resource that strongly supported the public consultation process was represented by the web technology developed. Indeed, through the use of the software device the respondents provided helpful information that were automatically collected and organized in themes of suggestions.

Int\_10: “Through the use of the system the citizen auto-selected the path of his specific suggestion”.

Int\_9: “From the beginning we had the idea to insert within the process a sort of auto-selection directly made by citizens. We perfectly knew that the management of suggestions was a crucial challenge”.

Int\_10: “In this way the application [*Edit.* the software device] makes more manageable the process of consultation”.

the structure, functioning and role of the web technology was defined by observing the difficulties of the public consultation process of the SR 2012.

Int\_10: “Examining the Monti’s consultation [*Edit.* The consultation of the spending review 2012] we observed that they were not able to manage the process of collection and examination of the e-mails”.

The active role of the web technology permitted to avoid some technical and operational problems. However, as clearly outlined in many interviews, a technical problem of web-index rating still was present. Indeed, during the period of consultation, and especially in the first months, it was very difficult entering into the website of the consultation through normal browsers such as Google or Yahoo. This happened because few people were in practice informed of the launch of the public consultation and the website had a low web-index rating thus resulting very difficult to find out.

Int\_10: “We have a problem of low indexing on Google. Therefore, the web site doesn't compare in the first references if you search it. The index depends on the number of times people search for the website on the internet”.

Int\_9: “There was a sort of problem of web rating. In other words, our site [*Edit.* The special commissary’s website

[www.revisionedellaspesa.gov.it](http://www.revisionedellaspesa.gov.it)] was impossible to be detected on the internet through browsers. The browsers rank the website according to the number of searches people made on that specific website. Therefore, because people didn't know us nobody searched us and our ranking stayed low. We became aware of this problem because (...) after the launch of the public consultation, we continued receiving a lot of postal mails. We were wondering why people didn't use the website. (...) When we recognised this problem we acted by manually making a lot of searching of the website on the internet in order to increase the rating”.

The scarce knowledge by people regarding the existence of the website can be easily ascribable to the scarce communication and advertising made on the activation of the consultation. Interestingly, this was a specific strategy.

Int\_9: “The special commissary didn't advertise the public consultation, and this is the reason why nobody knows aware of the presence of an on-line consultation on the spending review”.

Int\_8: “We didn't make some advertising and diffusion of the presence of the consultation's website because we didn't want to receive thousands of mails as was for Monti [*Edit. The consultation of the spending review 2012*]. It would have been an ungovernable process. (...) Another reason is a statistical matter. In my opinion having one thousand suggestions or ninety thousand suggestions is the same thing. Indeed, at level of sample, you have the identical types of suggestions even with a sample of one thousand e-mails. The ideas are more or less the same”.

### **4.3 The results of the public consultation**

#### *SR 2012: High participation with low incidence on public decisions*

Looking at the first experience of spending review (SR 2012), in terms of number of suggestions received, the process of consultation was a success. Indeed, in only one month of consultation, over 100.000 citizens sent suggestions to the government through the web technology.

Int\_3: “In the first days we received an enormous number of suggestions. In those days the average was of hundreds of messages per hour”.

On the other hand, however, the real outcomes achieved by the consultation are less clear, especially in terms of effective use of the received citizens' suggestions. There is a controversial evidence of the actual incidence of the citizen's suggestions on the final proposals of spending reduction delivered by the government. The majority of interviewees affirmed that the degree of incidence was minimal, even because only a part (about the 70%) of the suggestions have been really read.

Int\_2: “I'm not able to estimate the number of suggestions that have become real interventions (...) However, my opinion is that in this terms the consultation has obtained scarce results”.

Int\_3: “On the thousands of suggestions that every week arrived, I delivered to the special commissary only 10/20 ideas a week. (...) But this was because our purpose was to give a coloured profile to a technical operation such as the spending review. Therefore, for us it wasn't being a matter if any suggestion wouldn't have been part of the final proposals of spending reduction”.

Nevertheless, some respondents (especially those closed to the special commissary) affirmed that the citizens' suggestions were helpful in providing ideas on the areas and sectors on which applying cuts. Therefore, the impression is that only a small part of the suggestions was really analysed and delivered to the special commissary. This sample, even if limited in number, actually had an impact on the definition of the interventions.

#### *SR 2013-14: Low participation with high influence on public decisions*

The second case of spending review (SR 2013-14) obtained modest results in terms of number of suggestions received.

Int\_8: “Up to now the most relevant problem is the small number of suggestions arrived”.

In six months of public consultation, less than 500 suggestions were received. According to the people interviewed this fact is explainable by the scarce effort in publicity and advertising made by the government itself.

Int\_9: “We defined a strategy, in which I personally trust, of delegating all the practices of advertising concerning the consultation at action of the special commissary. Indeed, in his conferences and official speeches he had the responsibility of promoting our consultative action. We were scared of being immersed by an enormous amount of mails, as in the Monti's experience”.

Unlike the case of the SR2012, during this spending review the real impact of the consultation on the final interventions has been modest. The special commissary stresses the view that the suggestions served to better identify the specific areas on which directing the savings.

Int\_8: “I used the whole of suggestions received as perspective tool for selecting the general areas on which applying efficiency savings”.

The the suggestions have been utilised even as ideas for specific interventions.

Int\_8: “For instance the idea of the 'Open Siopé' [*Edit.* An on-line software in which costs of Italian local administrations are openly provided] that we introduced within the decree n.66/2014 came out thanks to a specific

suggestion done by a major of a small town of the north of Italy”.

However, differently from the view of the special commissary, other people firmly point out the ineffectiveness of the consultation process.

Int\_9: “The results are unsatisfactory because the impact of the consultation in the final interventions [*Edit*. The interventions of spending reduction contained in the decree n. 66/2014] is very scarce. My opinion is that this depends by two factors. First of all, we received few suggestions. The number is small. Secondly, even the average quality of the suggestions is very poor. The most current topics are populist themes, such as the costs of the service cars or the high salaries of politicians”.

A summary of the two experiences of spending review is provided in table 1.

	SR 2012	SR 2013-14
<i>Purpose of public consultation</i>	Legitimization and accountability	Collection of information for the decision-making process
<i>Public consultation process</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On-line consultation through the adoption of a web technology unable to organise and analyse the suggestions received</li> <li>• Several efforts to communicate with citizens and public opinion,</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On-line consultation through the adoption of a web technology able to collect, organise and analyse the suggestions received across different topics</li> <li>• Limited communication and advertising efforts</li> </ul>
<i>Public consultation results</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High participation from public (over 100.000 suggestions)</li> <li>• Low incidence of the public consultation on the final spending review decisions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low participation from public (less than 500 suggestions)</li> <li>• Modest incidence of the public consultation on the final spending review decisions; however, the suggestions received were limited in number</li> </ul>

Table 1: Comparison between the public consultation of SR 2012 and SR 2013-14

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The empirical analysis revealed two different types of spending reviews, each of them associated with a different articulation of the consultation process in terms of purposes, process, results and use of web technology. The first spending review endorsed web technology mainly in terms of a traditional email service intended to collect suggestions from citizens about services object of budget cuts. This technology was employed mainly with a legitimation intention to gain consensus over a set of decisions about public services, mainly already top-down defined. Although this legitimation intention and the simplicity of the technology employed to consult the public, the consultation process

was far than straightforward: suggestions received were not clustered by the system into predefined categories, but all of them were printed, read and then assigned to a specific category. This required a further hiring of personnel rather than an improvement of the technology. Surprisingly, however, thousands of suggestions were received by citizens who desired to provide their opinion. Although this significant participation, these proposals found a low counterbalance in the final spending review decisions.

The second spending review endorsed a similar web technology, but which allowed to collect, organize and analysed the citizens' suggestion about a wide variety of topics. This tool was introduced with the intent to obtain suggestions from the public about budget cuts to be used in practice to support decisions about the public spending. However, the technology for public consultation was scantily promoted by the government. This was a voluntary decision by the government to reduce the amount of citizens' opinions in order to avoid the managerial problems associated with information overload arisen during the previous spending review. This second experience therefore resulted in a few comments received, but which found a partial use in the final spending review decision.

The comparison between the public consultation process associated with the two spending review experiences supported a more general discussion about the role of web technology in public consultation.

The first contribution is related to importance to align the purpose of the public consultation and its process when in charge of selecting the most appropriate technology to involve the public. Web technology can contribute to aid the public consultation practices, but in order to achieve the intended results, the managerial process does matter. This insight was visible in the two experiences of public consultation: although the simplicity of the web technology adopted in the first experience of spending review, and its associated problems with the management of the received suggestions, it resulted into a wide participation of the general public. On the contrary, the second type of technology, although improved from the previous from a technical perspective, was associated to a scant participation of the general public. This insight suggests that the management of the public consultation process does matter; technology can aid, but it cannot drive the public consultation process. Although the general recognition that web technology is characterized by a potential greater participation of the general public to consultation practices (e.g. Evans-Cowley, J., and Hollander, 2010), we found that it is not the technology itself the determinants of public consultation results, but the associated managerial process of the public consultation.

The second contribution is related to the role of web technology in connection with the results (output and outcome) of the consultation process. We found that a greater participation of the general public to the consultation process is not necessarily associated with a significant impact on the final decision

about the spending review. This was visible from the comparison between the two experiences of public consultation: the former was characterised by a high involvement of the public with a limited impact on the amount and areas of savings; the latter instead, although associated with modest results in terms of opinions received by citizens, implies higher impact of these opinions on the final spending review decisions. This result, not only confirms the recognition that output and outcomes of the public consultation are separated and not directly connected, but it also underlines that web technology can foster the output of the public consultation, by stimulating a higher participation, but its contribution to the final outcome is limited.

The third contribution is related to the specific requirements associated with the adoption of web technologies during the public consultation. Several studies to date underlined the benefits associated with the adoption of web technologies in public consultation initiatives (e.g. Culver and Howe, 2004). This study identifies also the drawbacks and complexities behind the adoption of web technologies. Specifically, problems were found in connection to information management in terms of data storage and data analysis during the entire public consultation

This study therefore enlarges the current array of potential problems, by adding the requirements associated with data storage and data analysis, which were not required when public consultation activities were mainly face-to-face.

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