

# Analysis of the Peculiarities of the Means of E-Communication in a Public Institution, Referring to the City Hall of Hațeg

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## **Abstract**

*The main objective of the paper is to identify how public institutions in Romania, specifically the City Hall of Hațeg communicate online in order to build and consolidate identity, as well as to inform, connect and interact with citizens. The study also tries to provide clues that can influence decisions regarding the improvement of electronic communication activities through the results of the questionnaire applied to citizens for which the interaction of communication with the electronic means of the city hall taken as a studio object in this paper is necessary.*

**Keywords:** *public communication, e-communication means, public institution, citizens, sample, local public administration.*

**JEL classification:** *M21, M16, H83*

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## **1. Introduction**

Communication is, along with motivation and professional competence, the key to efficiency in an organization. All members of an organization spend most of their time communicating in one form or another, regardless of their position in the hierarchy. Since today the number of employees in services and offices exceeds that of the workers in production, there is a greater need to improve communication because greater collaboration between colleagues and hierarchical levels is needed, and teamwork has been generalized that cannot be effective without good collaboration between all team members.

Moreover, changes in technology have led to transformations in the structure and activity of organizations and, in particular, public institutions. This is why communication practices and technologies have become increasingly important for all types of organizations. In addition, the role of the manager in the organizational communication process is increased, he is the one who processes the internal and external information, and on the other hand the manager communicates this information to subordinates (he is in the position of disseminator) and to those outside the organization (he is a spokesman.)

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Public institutions carry out an important social activity, launch debates, communicate proposals, regulate the different areas of activity of economic and social life, monitor the application of legislation, gather feedback, communicate the results of the activity. Due to the large number of people whose living conditions are directly influenced by the decisions of public institutions, both local and central, public communication is one of the main components of the activity of public institutions. The context of the evolution of new technological conditions for digital communication obliges institutions to adapt to them, with the mission of being permanently connected and getting interactivity from direct receivers, without necessarily relying on classical means of communication, such as traditional media. Thus, the great challenge of public institutions offered by the context in which the Internet puts the user in the center of attention is the change and adaptation of communication strategies, in the transition from exclusive communication through press conferences and press releases, to live broadcasts and interactive posts, with thousands of appreciations, comments and distributions.

This challenge concerns, in particular, central public institutions, which have an important political component and which are regularly subject to administrative changes generated by the results of electoral processes. Central public institutions apply communication strategies through which they manifest their identity and build their public image in accordance with their role in society.

## **2. Literature review**

For researchers in the field, public communication is an indicator of government orientation, it is the expression of the state represented by ministers, it is the prime indicator of democracy, as well as that of governmental efficiency. Public communication is often evaluated or judged according to the impact it has on public opinion, the image of the institution, but also the image of the political leader appointed at the head of the institution (Cristache N. et al, 2019). In the view of Stone Zemor (2018), public communication is formal communication that tends to change and share information of public interest, aiming to maintain social ties and whose responsibility lies with public institutions. Its goals are the same as those of public bodies, namely to inform, listen (expectations, questions and public debates), to contribute to the social relationship (feeling of collective belonging, considering the citizen as an actor). The objective of assessing the concept of public communication has become dominant nowadays, although its approaches are very different. In recent literature, steps can be identified to clarify the theoretical elements or to represent this activity. It is about showing that this concept of public communication is a legitimizing factor for both its direct actors (communicators) and those who analyze it from a theoretical point of view. Thus, the definition of public communication is associated with institutional processes, as a favorable support for the public sector, as well as a university field, being able to constitute a scientific discipline. Public communication is at the same time a

component of public institutions and their functioning, supported by an increased interest from the senior management of these institutions (Gabor M.R. et al, 2019).

Public communication discourses show an anchoring in two social areas subject to tension: Politics and the media. In contemporary political and media cultures, the spectacular and performing dimensions of public discourse dominate. Both politics and the media give priority to the public interest in the name of the general interest underlying public communication. The local and national executive embody a “magic compromise” between politics and administration, and public institutional communication can be defined as a set of legitimation techniques that constitute a political public communication, this definition being consistent with the organizational reality (Schin G et al, 2023). Although institutional public communication is considered a hybrid communication, researchers prefer separation and theoretical clarification of the concepts of political communication and public communication, arguing that separation has effects on recruiting professionals and organizing communication activities. Bessieres (2009) defines the two concepts as follows: Political communication is an exchange of information between governors and governed, through structured or informal transmission channels, with the aim of achieving an agreement to pool values, within a common code shared by the two groups of actors, government and governed, and public communication, within the institutional framework, is a set of techniques applied to achieve public objectives, and may also have political significance, given that it is coordinated by the politically legitimated leader.

Vasile Tran and Irina Stănciugelu argue that the essential feature of public communication, representative for public institutions, is to act at the level of social representations and to allow a rapid change of public discourse. The authors mention four categories of effects pursued by the public communication: "(1) modernizing the functioning of administrations (this is especially the case for public relations devices or systems for presentation and transmission of information); (2) the occurrence of behavioral changes; (3) ensuring a modern image; (4) seeking citizens' adherence to a particular issue through awareness-raising actions."

A clarification in this regard is provided by Bessieres (2019): “Public communication can be considered a hybrid communication, which develops through the practice of organizations, beyond the milestones of theoretical definition. For institutions, this means making themselves known (identification) and recognized (legitimation), and at the same time strengthening the approval of their action by the publics to whom they are addressed” (p.21). Communication is, therefore, both public and political. Other authors define the concept of public communication from the point of view of its usefulness and role in achieving the objectives of public institutions (Cristache et al, 2021).

For example, Pierre Zemor (2008) defines public communication as follows: ‘Public communication is official communication aimed at exchanging and sharing information of public interest, maintaining social links and the responsibility of public institutions to their publics.’ (p. 41). Consequently, the

purposes of public communication are the same as those of public institutions, i.e. to inform, report, value, listen, and to communicate with the public. to launch questions, debates, to contribute to social relations, to contribute to the development of the sense of collective belonging, to involve the citizen, to support changes in social behavior and social organization (Zemor, 2018).

More recent papers introduce into the definition notions specific to digital communication, such as bidirectional communication, transparency or citizen involvement in decision-making.

Antonio Sandu (2019) links the aims of public communication with the debates and functioning of public institutions, considering that they are “equally oriented toward informing and valorizing public policies and obtaining feedback on citizens’ expectations, with the ultimate goal of building a consensus on issues of general interest based on public debate,” thus revealing the need for the bidirectional character of public communication and institutional communication. According to Velasquez (2020) public communication is a process that allows citizens to intervene in public affairs and in the decision-making process initiated by politicians who manage government institutions as well as other organizations. Citizens also benefit from the process of public communication, transparency and full and clear information on the work of their representative. Recently, public communication has become a managerial variable perceived as a direct factor of organizational productivity, participatory management now also encompassing the sector of public institutions and agencies.

### **3. Presentation of the e-communication means of the Hațeg City Hall**

The purpose of this research refers to the analysis of the peculiarities of the e-communication means of the Hațeg City Hall through a quantity research, using as a tool the questionnaire. The investigated sample consisted of 50 randomly selected respondents, the only condition of participation referring to their affiliation (domicile in Hațeg city).

#### ***The main objectives underlying this research are the following:***

**O1** - Analysis of the frequency of accessing the means of e-communication of the Hațeg City Hall by the citizens participating in this study. (question 4 and 8 of the questionnaire applied)

**O2** – identification of the level of satisfaction of the citizens of Hațeg on the means and means of e-communication of Hațeg City Hall. (question 5 and 9 of the questionnaire applied)

**O3** – identification of the information considered to be important to be transmitted through the e-communication means of the Hațeg City Hall (question 10 of the questionnaire applied)

**O4** – identification of methods for improving the way of e-communication between the analyzed institution and the citizens of Hațeg. (question 12 of the questionnaire applied)

***Hypothesis of the research:***

- **H1** most respondents rarely access the website or facebook page of the Hațeg City Hall (question 4 and 8 of the applied questionnaire)
- **H2** most respondents are satisfied with the means and means of e-communication of the Hațeg City Hall (question 5 and 9 of the questionnaire applied)
- **H3** most of the participants in this study believe that it would be important to send information about the city hall projects and vacancies (question 10 of the questionnaire applied)
- **H4** the majority of the citizens of Hațeg, who participated in this research, believe that the accessibility of information through the means of e-communication of the Hațeg City Hall should be improved. (question 12 of the questionnaire applied)

As mentioned above, the purpose of this study was to analyze the quality of electronic communication between the citizens of Hațeg and the local public administration.

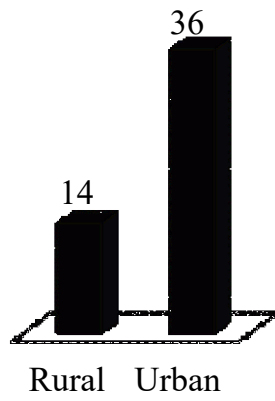
This study is applied, non-experimental, for observation and evaluation purposes, without any manipulation of the subjects or variables involved. It is a quantitative and descriptive study, which aims to collect information useful for fulfilling the purpose and to verify the aforementioned hypotheses.

From the perspective of time distribution, the research is a transversal one, presenting results of when the data was collected, at the level of the analyzed sample. The hypotheses formulated refer to the quality of the electronic communication modalities of the Hațeg City Hall and the satisfaction of the citizens regarding these e-communication processes between them and the local public administration.

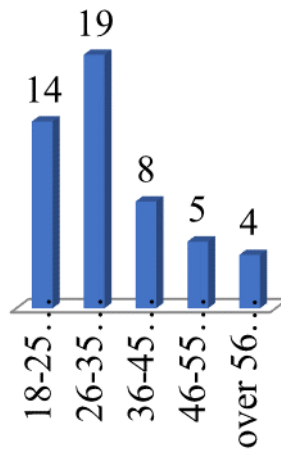
The tool used in this research was represented in the questionnaire that included 12 questions with multiple options of answer. The first three questions referred to the demographic aspects of respondents to stifle the residence environment, the age and the studies of the sample investigated. The following questions were oriented toward the methods of electronic communication between citizens and the City Hall, their quality, the satisfaction of the sample investigated regarding the means and ways of e-communication of the Hațeg City Hall and the ways of improving them. The last question gave the study participants the opportunity to indicate the aspects of how electronic communication would require some changes, in their opinion, or to make more concrete suggestions on this topic.

***Interpretation of the data obtained from the questionnaire applied***

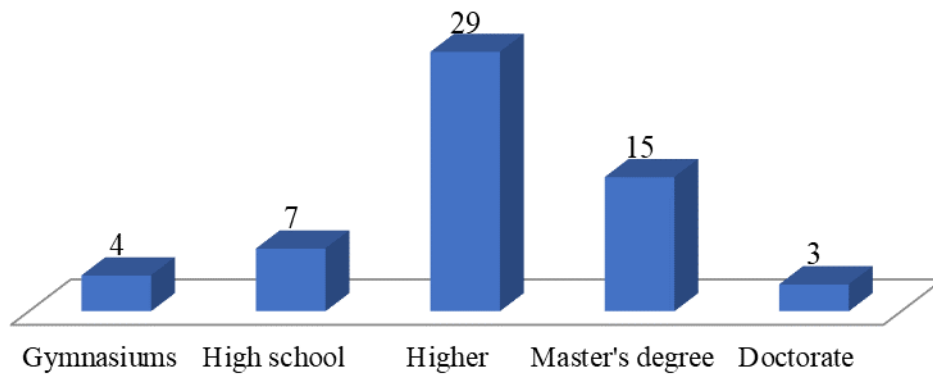
Investigated sample demographics:



**Figure 3.1 - Place of residence**



**Figure 3.2 Respondents age**

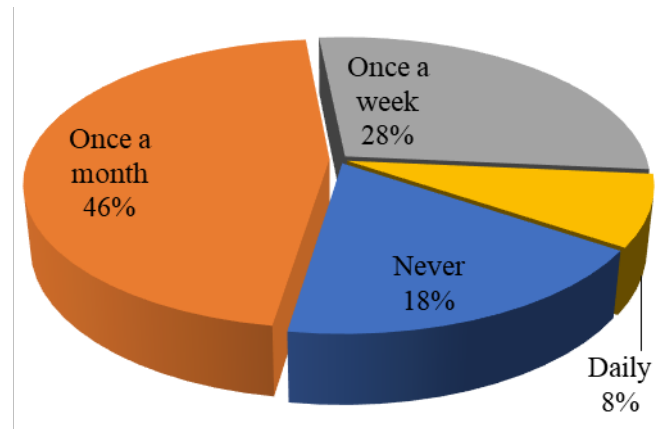


**Figure 3.3 Graduate studies**

The study program has a number of 53 people, with one of convenience. All of them agreed to participate in the study and were subject to the protection of personal data. The personal data (name, address, telephone number and e-mail address) were only reused until the end of the data collection stage, to exclude the possibility of a lot of the town for the same person. After the end of these stages, the questionnaire were identified only with a cifre code.

In connection with the electronic community, that between the citizens of Hațeg, between the 50 persons who have taken part in the study, nine have declared that they have not been visited at any time the page of the next page of the study (Figure 3.4).

This situation can have several causes. The simplest include the lack of necessary equipment (personal computer, laptop, tablet, high-performance phone), lack of knowledge and skills necessary to handle these devices and lack of interest in the respective page. As it shows, there are at least three barriers to the potential of e-government: lack of motivation, limited access and deficiencies in technical and IT knowledge. These barriers are primarily based on socio-economic characteristics, such as income, race and level of education in the population studied by the aforementioned authors.



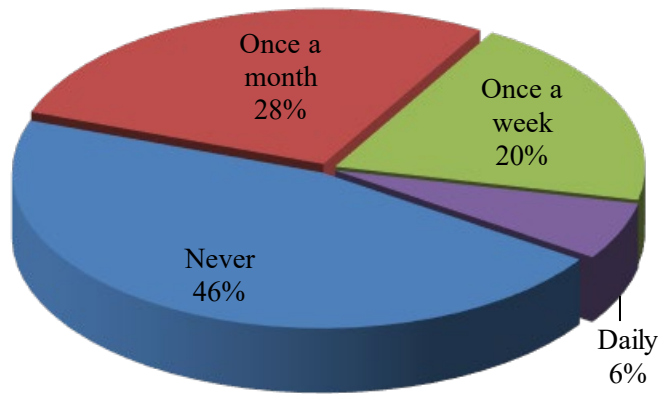
**Figure 3.4 Graphical representation of the frequency with which respondents visit the Hațeg City Hall website**

Another possible reason for the fact that the participants of this study do not visit the website of Hațeg city hall can be related to the design of the page itself, functionality, accessibility, addressability, ease of navigation and the possibilities of identifying the necessary information or possible problems of operation or IT security.

However, the low prevalence of visiting the local administration page recorded in the present study is not singular. A study carried out in the Czech Republic claims that 0,5% of public officials surveyed have never used a personal computer. What is equally unexpected is that of the 499 civil servants questioned in the previously mentioned research, 4,1% have never accessed the internet page of their own institution, 7,5% of other similar institutions and 5,8% have not never accessed the internal information system of the institution whose employees they were. However, those who visit the city's website very frequently, that is, daily, had a prevalence extremely similar to that of the present study (7,9% and 8%, Figure 3.4).

*Analyzing the graphical representation of the frequency with which the participants in this study visit the website of the Hațeg City Hall made through the figure with the number 3.4, we can observe that the hypothesis with the number 1 that was the basis of this research is partially validated.*

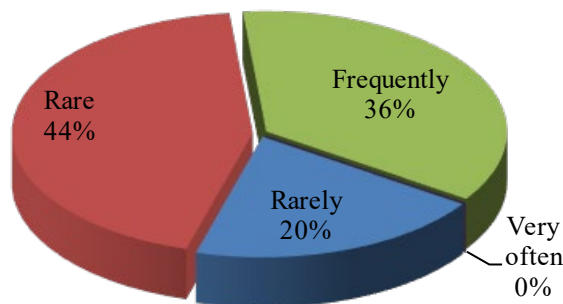




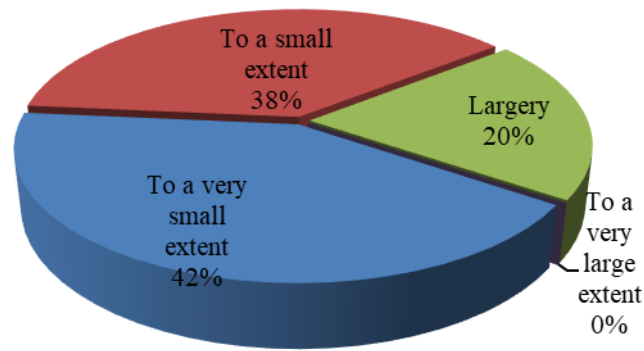
**Figure 3.5 Graphical representation of the frequency with which respondents visit the presentation page on social networks (Facebook, Instagram, etc.) of the analyzed city hall**

*By analyzing the centralized answers to question 8 of the questionnaire represented in Figure 3.5, we can say that the hypothesis with number 1 that was the basis of this research has been totally validated.*

Both in the opinion of some authors such as Sayımer (2015), and in the opinion of the United Nations (United Nations, 2018), e-Governance leads to more efficient, more transparent and service-oriented functioning of public administrations and represents a vehicle for building trust in governments. In a study conducted in the United States of America, McNeal, Hale and Dotterweich (2018) conclude in relation to citizen-initiated contact, that more educated individuals are more willing to participate in online government interactions, without significant differences related to age and sex. However, while e-Government motivates citizen-initiated contact with the government, for some (young people and women) the existing distance increases based on other factors. On the other hand, contacting the government by the citizen, regardless of the way (electronic, physical or in writing) does not seem to be associated with trust in the government.



**Figure 3.6 The frequency of online appointment at the services of the Haşeg City Hall by the persons participating in this study**

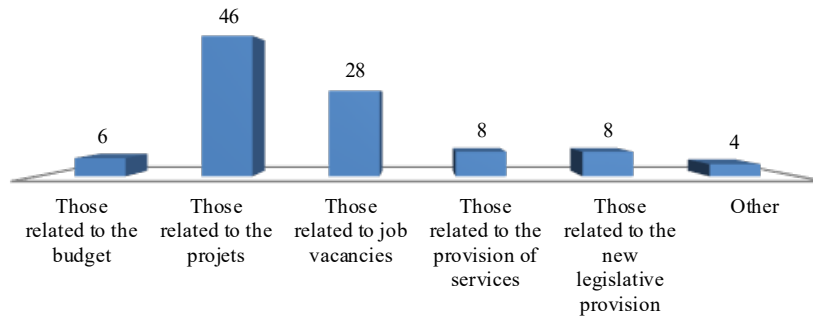


**Figure 3.7 Centralization of the answers regarding the frequency of follow-up of the projects presented on the website of the City Hall by the investigated sample**

The publication and mediatization of ongoing projects and those intended to be developed in the future by the municipalities is one of the methods of information to which electronic pages lend themselves very well. Along with the presentation on various supports in the information centers, the display on the electronic page is highly recommended by the CE materials (DG Information Society and Media, European Commission, 2016). But, to have the desired impact, this segment of the page must have a large number of views. Unfortunately, no citizen answered that they would follow these administrative projects to a very large extent (Figure 3.7), and the combined percentages of those who follow the projects to a very low and low extent exceed half of the population included in the study.

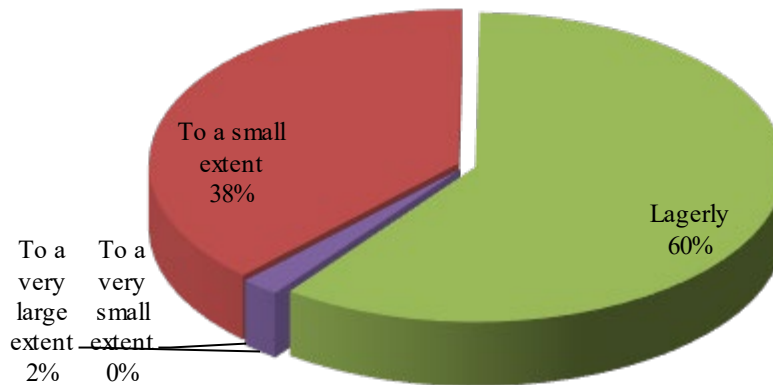
Of course, these projects and their development stages are mediated locally through street signs, mass media announcements, social media pages and the information provided by the public relations department of the analyzed town hall. Thus, most of the "ordinary" citizens of the locality can have knowledge about the projects' objectives, even without accessing electronic information. On the other hand, the majority of these sources of information do not allow two-way communication, they do not give the possibility for citizens to provide a feed-back of their personal opinion regarding the projects (perhaps with the exception of some online newspaper articles with the option of comments from readers). For this reason, the more detailed exploration of the subject in further studies could be beneficial, especially for the expansion of participatory, open governance.

The promotion of e-Government is intended to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of public relations. In addition to reducing bureaucracy, by simplifying procedures and adapting them to the possibilities offered by computer systems, the electronic platforms of public administrations are meant to stimulate participatory governance, through the involvement of citizens, not only as groups, but even as individuals.



**Figure 3.8 Centralization of answers on important information to be transmitted through the means of e-communication of the Hațeg City Hall by the investigated sample**

Analyzing the answers to question 10 of the applied questionnaire, centralized in the previous chart, we can say that the hypothesis with number 3 according to which the majority of participants in this study believe that it would be important to transmit information related to *the projects of the City Hall and the vacancies are validated*.

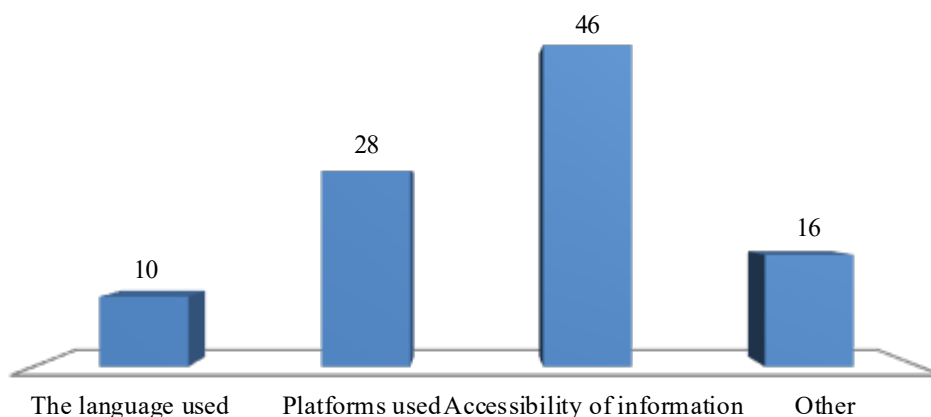


**Figure 3.9 The satisfaction of the investigated sample regarding the means and means of e-communication of the Hațeg City Hall**

In connection with the general satisfaction of their citizens, 19 declared that they are satisfied with the measure, 30 were satisfied, the country to a large extent and only one person was satisfied to a very large extent (Figure 3.9). *Analyzing the previous chart, we can say that the hypothesis number 2 that was the basis of this research is also validated.*

On the question with the number 9 of the questionnaire applied, most respondents considered that the process of e-communication between them and the local public administration represented by the Hațeg City Hall is satisfactory (36). Only 8 participants in this study believe that this way of communication would be

deficient and 6 very deficient, but no respondent declared himself fully satisfied with the electronic communication means of the analyzed city hall.



**Figure 3.10 Centralization of responses on what the investigated sample considers should be changed to the e-communication mode between the institution under review and the citizens**

According to the frequency of the answers of the investigated sample to the last question of the applied questionnaire, represented graphically in figure 3.10, we can say that the last hypothesis that was the basis of this research, according to which the majority of the citizens from the city of Hațeg, participants in this research, are in the same situation. I believe that the accessibility of information through the means of e-communication of the Hațeg City Hall should be improved, it is being validated.

#### 4. Conclusions

In public communication, identity plays an essential role and involves taking on a complex process, permanent adaptation and strategic vision. The diversification and integration of new online communication tools into the current communication practices of public institutions have thus become a necessity and even a priority within the communication departments (as evidenced by the results of the questionnaire applied in the study presented in the paper).

Building identity in the online environment is a complex, strategic process, based on permanent actions, oriented toward the engagement and participation of the public in decision making. In order to get engagement from citizens, authorities need to interact with citizens, respond to their comments, show interest in their needs, which means much more than publishing large amounts of information of uncertain utility.

Transparent public institutions generate trust and encourage citizens to engage and participate in decision-making, which is essential for creating an effective dialog with citizens. But one of the main problems that has arisen in the relationship between governments and citizens is trust, which can be intensified by promoting activities in a transparent way. That is why early provision of

information through the appropriate channels allows citizens to participate more in public policy-making. In the new conditions of digital communication, social media gives the government the opportunity to integrate citizens' information and opinions into policy-making, through innovative ways and thus increase government transparency, participation and collaboration with the public, providing citizens with information on the work of decision-makers in public institutions.

It was found that a greater commitment from citizens, generated by the new governance styles conferred by the use of social networks, will change the outlook and increase public confidence in government. It was noted that public engagement is an important part of transparency, which contributes to generating ideas and resources to support and improve decision-making. While social media represents a "paradigm shift" in public communication regarding citizens' participation, recent studies have shown that in practice, public institutions use social media as "one way information supply" and social networks are mainly used to send messages, which shows low interactivity.

Through the numerous comments recorded on the posts, Facebook can be considered a public transparency tool, through which users openly signal different positions, opinions or issues in relation to the ministry's field of activity. Following the interactivity on Facebook, we found that the highest number of likes is recorded on posts accompanied by photos and posts with emotional content. Thus, the Facebook page opens to the mayors a new way of dialog in the online environment, direct, transparent, fast to achieve some objectives related to public communication.

It also resulted that the interactivity is related to the volume of communication activity: Large number of posts - large number of interactions, but also to media content (posts with photo and video content record multiple reactions), with the type of content of the text (persuasive or emotional content records more reactions than referential content), with the impact of themes, the popularity of city halls and their tradition, with the level of concern at a given time or with the direct posting of information (not redistribution from other sources). In fact, it cannot be said that the use of Facebook guarantees interactivity. In order to get feedback on social networks, it is necessary to change the perspective on the use of the platform, in order to ensure dialog, participation and mobilization. Also, to increase interactivity, a change in the institutional perspective on the use of new communication platforms is needed, in order to create dialog, participation and mobilization.

An important observation that emerged from this paper concerns the ability of some websites and Facebook pages to achieve more than others, capturing the attention of users, differences in content, structure and graphics.

These results allow us to state that a favorable position on the visibility occupied at a given time does not guarantee its maintenance, without strategies and constant efforts. Thus, owning a website does not ensure visibility in the online environment. Integrated strategies are needed to bring users to the site or to ensure greater exposure of information on other platforms in the online environment.

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