

FROM CHAOS TO COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

SOCIAL MEDIA CHALLENGES OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN HUNGARY¹

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Abstract

Local governments in Hungary are facing with challenges to adopt social media as tools for service delivery, or as tools to communicate and to integrate citizens' opinions. In this paper I would like to share some empirical findings in how municipalities are adopting social media platforms. In my research I conducted in-depth interviews with public officers from the local levels to explore local governments' communication strategy. Theorizing social media content, I can identify different aims of use, pushing information, marketing or self-presentation, pulling information, networking. I argue that most of the local authority use social media as a tool for push information and self-presentation in Hungary. I also found that most of the Hungarian municipalities have not yet gone beyond the first phase of the learning process, which is experimentation and chaos. In the absence of policies and communication professionals, most local governments cannot proactively communicate, only fire-fighting on social media platforms. The development of the communication practice of the municipalities can be achieved through the strengthening of the strategic approach and consistency, the application of communication professionals, the further training and the exchange of experiences.

Points for practitioners: I have identified the informal and formal strategic elements and good practices regarding communication strategy of local governments that I believe can be valuable and useful to other municipalities. The communicative culture of municipalities is characterized by diversity. There are no two equally communicating municipalities. Despite diversity and versatility, I am convinced that presentation and analysis of local government practices in using social media as a platform of communication can contribute to improving decision-making processes and the effectiveness of consultation with professional and non-governmental organizations.

Keywords: communication strategy, local government, social media use

1. Introductions

Communication has undergone explosive changes over the past 50 years. With the spread of electronic communication, the concept of communication has changed. (Horányi 2017) Compared to the possibility of reproduction provided by printing, electronic communication is no longer limited to sending messages to the masses, but also to share real-time messages, independent feedback and interactions of participants. The gates of new spaces that have never existed are opened. Or they existed, but only limited opportunities for engagement, or they might have completely excluded potential participants. In this expanded space, in the public, beyond the local government, other actors can also appear and ideally form their surroundings together to govern.

It is difficult to integrate new communication opportunities into the communicative culture of local governments, while these new opportunities also lead to a rethinking of relations between actors in local government (Bertot et al. 2010). To make better use of the opportunities offered by social media, municipalities need to change their communication habits. Hofmann (et al. 2013) identify three important areas of change. First of all, in the light of the new technological frameworks, it is necessary to rethink the traditionally interpreted municipal communication, according to which the municipality only provides information and services. This requires the development of a professional behavior in the virtual space. (Mergel 2013, Hofmann et al. 2013) The revision of existing guidelines and regulations is closely related to professional behavior and media use (Bertot et al. 2012, Picazo-Vela et al. 2016), which also protects privacy and data security. The use of social media is a source of uncertainty and risks for local governments, and many are perceived as passing fads. Responsible and effective use would require experience and organizational guidance. The distinction between guideline and policy is often

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confused in literature and in municipal documents. The guidelines contain clear guidance to achieve the desired goals, such as information or civic participation. So designing the guidelines is actually the formulation of standards and recommendations, primarily for the external communication of employees. (Hrdinova et al. 2010) Finally, municipalities need to learn to interpret and manage citizens' online communications and filter out useful information (Chun-Warner, 2010).

The creation of a community site does not in itself reduce the distance between the participants in governance. The municipality can use social media with a wide variety of content, and in many ways and functions. In the context of local government external communication, I will focus on democratic functions of content: ensuring transparency, participation and cooperation, as well as the symbolic and representational content in social media.

The three types of content that local governments publish in social media can be identified (Mergel 2013, DePaula 2018): push, pull and networking. Push-type content serves information and transparency. The function of pull-type content is to get to know the needs and opinions of citizens, to ask for feedback. Networking content means the actual involvement of citizens and their active participation. (DePaula–Dincelli–Harrison 2018)

The right of access to information or the obligation to provide information required by law basically encourages the creation of push-type content, but often this level is also compromised.

The pull-like content is primarily about getting information, not real interaction with the people. However, when networking content is released, we can talk about a higher level of engagement. Not only does the local government fill out a questionnaire here, but it expects feedback from the citizen, but also expects to be actively involved in the decision-making process. Multilateral, multiparticulate conversations and interactions can occur. (Mergel 2013a)

However, Landsbergen (2010) emphasizes that the emergence of social media and its presence in social media does not result in automatic changes in the democratization of governance. (Landsbergen 2010: 145) Acquiring and using social media is, in fact, an opportunity to rethink communication relations between government actors. Bennett and Manoharan (2017) have studied the guidelines for social media use by US municipalities with over 150,000 inhabitants to determine their constituent elements and to explore the role these guidelines play in ensuring social participation. One of the biggest surprises, however, was that, out of the 156 cities surveyed, only 31 cities found guidelines for using social media, while all cities were active in social media.

Most of the existing guides define social media as a means of communication between the city and its citizens, and only a few guidelines mention transparency, confidence building or social participation.

According to several authors, social media is inherently suitable for branding and marketing. (Bellström et al. 2016, Bonsón et al. 2015) DePaula, Dincelli and Harrison (2018) and Sobaci and Karkin (2013) also points out that municipalities use social media to deliver much wider content, such as self-representation and exchange of symbolic content, and marketing. In fact, the transmission of these contents can be considered as a push activity in the sense that one-sided information sharing is done by the local authorities to build their own image. DePaula et al. came to the conclusion that the social media was more suitable for self-expression, the exchange of symbolic content, and town marketing, such as collaboration or interaction.

When using social media, municipalities are forced to redefine their relationships with citizens. The operation of the social media platform represents a number of new tasks for local governments, from facilitating opinions to providing active participation opportunities (Sandoval–Gil 2012). In the new framework everything looks different. Communication and participation are different, so as the case with traditional forms of participation, such as public forums or public hearings.

Most municipalities experience communication as a burden, while budget planning has low priority for communication tasks (Hofmann et al 2013). As a result, citizens are more likely to perceive the outward communication of the municipality as propaganda (Liu–Horsley 2007, Hofmann et al 2013).

2. Methodology

Parallel to the transformation of the concept of communication, the investigation of municipal communication has also focused on new phenomena. In addition to the examination of the municipal newspaper, bulletin boards, public hearings or static websites, the operation of the municipal organization and its attitude to social media is also an empirical research area. In my empirical research with interdisciplinary approach I conducted in-depth

interviews with public officers from the local levels to explore local governments' communication strategy in Hungary from the perspective of communication professionals and public managers.

The first personal interview, which took place in January 2018 in a metropolitan district municipality, and later findings confirmed that Hungarian municipalities have a very different picture of the status of the person in charge of communication, as well as the ideas and guidelines for communication. However, it can be said that it is a challenge for municipalities to use social media and digital platforms.

Finally I have interviewed ten municipal professionals from seven settlements, with notaries, representatives, communication professionals, civil activists and mayors. The text of the interviews was recorded, and then, with content analysis, I collected the most important topics, which were parallels with the topics in the literature.

The main questions of the semi-structured interviews related to the communication strategy and communication practices of the local government, including the use of social media in the municipality. During the interviews, I also took note of other topics emerging from the questions and in the following interviews I also raised these topics. At the document level, researching and analyzing strategy is difficult because they rarely exist in written form.

In addition to getting to know the literature and conducting personal interviews, I have also reviewed the results of two research series, which support my ideas about the communication of the Hungarian local governments with correct information. One of the research series was the Monitoring of Local Government Process II (ÖFKK II – 2018)) conducted by the Ministry of Interior and is the largest research project extended to the whole country since the change of the political system. The other research series was carried out by the employees of the Corruption Research Center Budapest (CRCB 2013-2015) from 2012 until now. Since 2012, a number of data have been collected and made public in the context of the information management practices of the Hungarian municipalities. Research results of the Ministry of Interior can be considered as representative, supporting the communication deficiencies of the municipal sector with descriptive data, and the lack of institutional capacity for communication. (Budai 2017, 2018) These researches show the same results as the reports of the Corruption Research Center (CRCB) two years earlier, 2013-2015. Measuring the openness and respect for the law of Hungarian cities, it was found that information that is important for orientation and participation on the website of the cities does not typically appear.

3. Results

According to the research results of the project ÖFKK II, 39% of the 2645 respondent settlements are present on a community site, mainly on Facebook (the presence of Twitter, Instagram or other community sites is negligible). However, only half of these municipalities take citizen feedback into account because they do not consider them valuable or important. 10% of the responding municipalities do not have a website, and in addition, the updating of existing websites is often not done monthly. Many Hungarian local governments are still busy making their website usable, while the actors in the local government - thanks to technological advances - are not getting the news from the websites, but through social media.

This data is not at all surprising if we take into account that 75% of the Hungarian municipalities (2371 municipalities) have less than 2000 inhabitants. Most of these settlements have little power of governor, especially for dwarfs and small villages.

The lack of money, staff capacity and preparedness also contributes to the above negative statistics. As one of my interviewee said:

“Most of the employees in the office do not have the experience of the private sector, they only worked in the public administration. I do not see the quick response that the public expect of them today. They do everything, but they can hardly compete in the event of today over time.”

"Immediate" communication according to the responding municipalities continues to "mainly cover leaflets, billboards and posters, loudspeakers, postal letters, newspapers, retail information booklets, villagers." (Budai 2017: 8) As far as mobility is concerned, "the wind of mobility has not yet touched the municipal sphere." (Budai 2017: 9) Less than ten percent of the authorities employ a communications specialist and fewer (6.3%) municipalities have communication strategies.

Where there is no source of support for a communications specialist or agency, the staff of the office or one of the selected actors will ensure the operation of the communication channels. However, they are not able to provide instant communication as they are often challenged to select from information dumping. The use of social media

is a source of uncertainty and risks for local governments, and many are perceived as passing fads. Responsible and effective use would require experience and organizational guidance. The distinction between guideline and policy is often confused in literature, and in municipal documents. The guidelines contain clear guidance to achieve the desired goals, such as information or civic participation. So designing the guidelines is actually the formulation of standards and recommendations, primarily for the external communication of employees. (Hrdinova et al. 2010)

As one of my interviewees said:

“Today there is a smart city program in Hungary, a smart city system, and e-administration. This is also in governmental announcements. In the context of municipal offices, it's like I want to put Mari aunt in Formula 1 car. We should be very open. It would definitely help us in advance.”

Another problem is accessibility, user-friendliness. For example, the searchability that appears when designing a small number of settlements is as an aspect:

“I asked my IT colleague to make the website simple, if I wanted to find something quickly, I find it. I'm annoyed if I can't find something for the 128 times.”

The majority of interviewees reported that it is also difficult to convince councils that municipal communication is not a useless activity but a necessary part of municipal work. As one of them said:

“There is separate media communication in the big municipalities. We are a city, but even in our own, that is, the notary has been running this area. So far I have told all the mayors that one man should do this.”

While smaller or less resource-intensive municipalities are just beginning to explore the potential of social media and digital platforms, larger, richer municipalities are conducting social campaigns and community-based engagement processes with the support of these platforms. In many municipalities, someone is not in a stand-alone position, but in addition to his or her duties, one is responsible for communication or at the same time more people are working on it. There is a communication department or status within the municipal apparatus for larger, mainly urban and district self-governments. In many settlements, the subcontractor appointed by the representative body is responsible for communication, but I also found a place where communication is almost exclusively done by the mayor.

The 2014 elections were a turning point in the use of social media in several settlements in Hungary. One of the settlement leaders reported that the mayor of that time, with the help of his colleague, had set up the community site three months before the election. The obvious purpose of creating this site was to strengthen the campaign, with only photos and short news on the site. After the election, the new mayor took over the operation of the site, and he thinks he works more professionally with the involvement of an outside company.

In another settlement, the last municipal election was a turning point too. The official social media site of the local government was established on a civil initiative and, with the approval of the representative body, continues to be run by a civilian for a commission fee.

Social media can function as a kind of performative space in which local governments can create a positive image of themselves through controlled content before and after the municipal election. One of my interviewees formulated this as follows:

“The most important purpose of the usage of municipal media is to strengthen identity. This settlement is a good place to live in. Most of all, we want to connect people to ourselves. A good sense of consciousness is to make it a livable and lovable village.”

Local authorities seem to begin to understand how social media can be used in line with their usual communication style, for marketing and propaganda purposes. Marketing is not about advertising or selling products, but about making the services provided by the municipality or events organized by the municipality and other members of the community. In one of the settlements examined by me, the social media site of the settlement was affirmed by an advertising company due to the sale of municipal land plots. On social media platforms, citizens are no longer just passive consumers of information but also create content themselves. (Hofmann et al. 2013). They become initiators and participants or become processes. By channeling community opinions, the municipality can improve the quality of services

The communication practice of Budapest III. Óbuda-Békásmegyér municipality may serve as a role model for other local governments in terms of planning the details of community planning or municipal communication activities. Since 2015, more than 100 community planning events have been organized and implemented, resulting

in a minimum of 20 community planning areas. At least 4-5 community planning events took place before each area was created.

In this district, particular attention is paid to the simultaneous operation of parallel, complementary communication channels. The media on the local government's website has a separate tab for accessing printed newspaper information or the official facebook page. The communication manager mentioned among the success factors that they invested a lot of energy, time and creativity in the work:

"If we are constantly open to dialogues, it usually succeeds. There is no development that is in the interest of everyone, there is no project with 100% support, but we can reach a sensible compromise that always praises the inhabitants, the people." - he concluded.

Municipalities often use social media platforms in a similar way to static websites, even though they would be able to exchange two-way, fast and personal information. To take advantage of other features beyond the intent, expertise is also required: entries and comments must be continuously monitored and responded to within a specified time.

There are different factors that influence the usage of social media of local governments. First of all, I would notice the difficulties of changing the attitudes of municipal actors. Mainly about the reason why the use of social media by municipal employees is problematic compared to the use of traditional media and participative spaces. I'll also take into consideration the specific organizational features that hinder the use of social media, and finally I'll mention the incentives that can overcome the concerns, difficulties and organizational shortcomings of using social media.

One of the biggest challenges comes from the popularity of the usage of social media: the increasing presence and activity of citizens in social media forces municipalities to become active. Citizens expect a quick, often immediate response from an organization that is used to communicate at a different pace. The challenges of using social media are primarily related to human resource management. Understanding the culture of digital interactions is also a problem for the municipal organization. In addition, the use of digital devices by local governments is not coordinated: others are hosted by the website and others are dealing with the community site. Fragmented channels, lack of strategy.

Now I present in detail what are the incentives that can lead to the strengthening of social media usage in addition to traditional forms of communication among municipalities.

According to Hofmann et al., the use of social media for local governments is clearly beneficial for the following reasons:

- the possibility of forwarding messages almost the same time,
- marketing opportunities,
- community planning opportunities,
- direct transaction and multimedia tools.

Almost the same time transmission of information serves not only to report on upcoming events, but also the public to be informed in crisis situations. Community media platforms provide a continuous and direct connection between the municipality and the citizens. Along with the widespread use of social media usage, information acquisition habits have also changed. For example, news is now spreading much faster to a natural disaster through social media than in the era of traditional media.

Finally, it is important to mention the multimedia potential of social media: the possibility of using text, image video, linking to maintain awareness and illustrate story telling. The above options are far from being exploited at municipal level.

The above options are far from being exploited at municipal level. Social media use plays an increasingly important role in everyday activities, not only in private life, but also in the workplace. For example, everyone is trying to develop the best practices for their personality and organization, for example, to avoid misunderstandings, disputes or unnecessary attacks.

Facebook, originally designed to communicate with individuals, is now not only a private network of individuals or groups, but also a social network of private and public institutions, opening new gates towards transparency and communication with citizens. The social environment that is transformed by the social media is also the direct environment in which the municipalities work.

One of the explanations for the shortage is perhaps that the principles based on the experience gained are constantly changing with new experiences. We could also say that the guidelines for social media use can only be interpreted at present. Another explanation for the lack of written documents on social media use is that most municipalities have little experience in developing guidelines for using social media (such as moderation rules, content, frequency of entries). We can also say that the institutionalization of social media usage has not yet taken place. The lack of

experience and the reasons for it have already been described in detail among the factors that hinder the use of social media.

Most municipalities still do not have a communication specialist. For external communication, as I mentioned earlier, public service organizations consider low-prestige activity, in most local governments they are not in a stand-alone position, but in addition to their other responsibilities, they are responsible for communication. One of the prerequisites for creating guidelines is that there should be a person or staff in the municipality who is responsible for communication activities, including the operation of social media, and plays an important role in the information control process. Like the traditional news production process, external media communication through social media is a multi-step process of organizing content from content creation through content control to content publishing.

As a summary of the above, not only one person, but also a comprehensive communication strategy and common guidelines are needed. Having a communication strategy is probably not a realistic expectation for municipalities with low self-government power, but it would help their everyday work and improve the quality of services.

4. Discussion

The new tools have brought unlimited opportunities to the lives of organizations, while the lack of control over the flow of information is a problem. There is a lack of in-house preparedness, responsibilities, training opportunities, and guidelines for online communication that support the response to the dynamic development of technology.

The question is what municipalities are doing and what they can do to implement effective communication and transparent operation, while constantly facing new challenges and opportunities due to the dynamic change in the technological environment. What strategies do municipalities use to communicate and what innovative methods do they know?

What policies and strategies can be formulated for external communication by local governments, including communicating with the community in the social media? What policies might be needed to strengthen the sense of security of municipal actors? The municipal communication strategy can be much broader and can include at least three major areas. It may include a strategy for carrying out mandatory information tasks, ensuring transparency, addressing pragmatic tasks (customer relations, customer information, communication with customers), and may include policy communication guidelines. In fact, it is advisable for the strategy to include guidelines.

Like traditional communication, news in social media needs to be managed, as well as the management of this platform and the sharing of content. Beyond the interest and needs of the target audience and the editing of the media content, the social media should be well known. In fact, the interest of the target audience determines the generation of content, and the audience of different devices is not necessarily the same within a small community. The older generation prefers print media to Internet, while the younger generation is almost exclusively informed from the Internet. The goal of municipal communication is to provide information, build trust and solve common problems. The role of external communication channels may even be in a particular, prominent position, for example in crisis situations. The lack of conscious organization of communication increases the distance between the municipality and the population, can lead to distrust, disinterest, and bad public sentiment.

As the usage of social media plays an increasingly important role in everyday activities, not only in private life, but also in the workplace, it is also a matter of urgency for municipalities to create the conditions for using social media and develop guidelines to avoid conflicts resulting from incomplete communication.

Instead of ex post and very time-consuming restorative work, it is also worthwhile to think proactively about the use of communication tools and the ways of communication in municipal communication. One of the tools of proactivity and the first step in the development of a communication strategy is situation assessment. The result of the assessment of the situation is the basis for defining the values and goals on which to base the steps, tasks, and the tools needed for successful communication.

Examples of domestic practice and the results of international research on communicating with local governments can help local government workers, deputies, mayors, and civilians to start, design, develop, or rethink their own strategies.

Kabani's (2012) thoughts can serve as a model for initiating inter-institutional dialogue on social media use. According to Kabani, an organization needs to clarify a number of questions before it starts communicating in the social media space.

The following issues should therefore be clarified for congruent communication in social media:

- How familiar is the organization and the people working in the organization with social media and how often do they use social media?
- How important is the usage of social media to the goals of the organization?
- Would the organization want to engage in participatory discussions on the interface, would you like to respond to comments?
- What does the organization mean when using social media, which platforms are available?
- Who owns the social media site, whose "ownership", who created it?
- Who is responsible for managing the site?
- What are the guidelines for communal workers (civil servants, public servants) in social media?
- Are there taboo topics, that is, information that should be excluded from the social media?
- Who and how often do you monitor conversations on the site (for which many free and paid tools are available)?
- What kind of social media training can employees attend?

By discussing the above issues, the municipality can move closer to developing its strategy and policies.

Hrdinova, Helbig, and Peters (2010) define some essential constitutions of social media usage guidelines / strategies.

Making the first step is always a critical moment for local governments. As I mentioned earlier, several interviewees also reported that a community media site was created as a result of a conflict situation, but the creation and management of the site has also caused a lot of headaches. Who creates it, and who runs the community social media site? Is there someone in your existing stock who understands this or needs an increase in staff. Who creates it, and who runs the community social media site? Is there someone in your staff who understands this or needs an increase in staff?

Once you have the right person and the site works, you also need to find out what's going to be on this surface and in what style. Content creation is basically influenced by two factors, the target group and the communication tool. In addition, content management is never a one-person task, because information about the settlement needs to be collected and the information must be checked and / or approved by the institutions and before the content is published. In many cases, the process contributes to rethinking, defining and clarifying organizational competences and responsibilities.

In order to constructively manage conflicts, it is important to develop ethical guidelines for using the social media site. In addition to the guidelines for employees, the behavioral expectations of citizens should also be clarified. For employees, should it be clear what the agency expects, for example, when and for what purpose can you use social media during your working hours? It is also worthwhile to formulate guidelines on the possible relationships between (official) use of social media at the workplace and the use of personal social media, and the consequences of these two types of activity. Declaration of the behavior expected of citizens is the basis for moderation, which can be shown back in the case of conflict-generating posts.

Usually a fast, often a few minute response time of social media users is customary and expected. That is why it is worth formulating and making public the commentary guidelines on the community site.

Compliance with existing legislation, legality and security of information is the basis for office operation, which must also be borne in mind when running a social media site.

The guidelines for social media use are often written only for security reasons. For example, the New York State's Use of Social Media Guidelines specifically focus on security issues. The purpose of the guidelines set out in this document is to promote and support the use of secure social media in New York for the purpose of cooperation and transparency.

According to the document, social media has enormous power in communication, while it also carries dangers from unsuspecting, unintentional offenses to deliberate crimes.

As new technologies are constantly evolving, potential threats are also developing dynamically. The guide mentioned above also points out that professionals responsible for information and system security need to be vigilant and responsive to these challenges. While adhering to appropriate security measures, participation in social media involves the ability to manage conversations.

The use of community media by the municipality is often difficult to understand in terms of who communicates on behalf of the municipality. Often the boundaries of personal and official use are blurred, so it is worthwhile to distinguish between the personal and official social media use of municipal workers. When designing social media usage strategies, it is important to take into account the often blurred boundaries between personal and official use. Communicating on social media surfaces requires a person who is not only working in office hours, but also working outside the office hours.

Conclusion

Most of the municipalities I have examined do not have a written communication strategy, and they have no guidelines for digital communication or social media use. The investigated municipalities are distrustful of the possibilities offered by digital technology. Perhaps it is not unfounded to say that this is generally true for Hungarian municipalities. Most settlements only prefer sharing information by traditional media, primarily by the local press, while the public is actively using social media.

Social media platforms can provide an excellent platform not only for discussing and discussing information transmitted in the local press, but also for displaying new topics.

Amongst the most important institutional, organizational and social factors of social media use are the lack of resources of local governments, the dynamic change of the Internet and social media platforms, which can also be mentioned as technical deficiencies. Without strategy and guidelines, the issue of security or the handling of comments is a problem for local governments. The situation is complicated by the fact that the person in charge of communication is most often subordinated to the mayor and thus has limited power in his / her activities and is not independent.

At the moment, Hungarian municipalities are able to take advantage of the opportunities offered by social media and digital media platforms in most cases for marketing purposes. But there are good practices for public participation as well.

The development of the communication practices of the Hungarian municipalities can be achieved by strengthening the strategic approach and consistency, the application, training and exchange of communication professionals.

Application of innovative technologies will increase transparency, cooperation and support for community participation. New organisational policy needs to generate more democratic content and to adopt wider strategies. These new communicational channels have their potential to push information, to increase transparency by sharing information, and to support the chance to integrate information and citizens' opinions into the policy making process in new and creative ways.

Communication is the way to prepare for change and to accept change, and easier to manage it. One of the most important goals of the municipal communication strategy is to create and maintain trust between local government actors for cooperation.

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