

## DIGITAL LAW

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### **The Costs of Digitalization. Social Media adaptation challenges within Public Administration Development<sup>1</sup>**

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#### **Abstract**

*This research aims to analyze the extent and the ways in which Romanian public administration institutions are currently using social media, involving citizens in active collaboration within society. It also explores the main issues that need to be considered when implementing an e-Government strategy. Our paper aims to shed a light not only on the scarce literature on the field, but also the particularities of this research provides empirical references, analyzes opportunities and challenges for more effective e-Government processes and to provide better public services. In the same time, there are highlighted the main issues that local public institutions need to take into account when managing the transition to operations in a social media environment. In doing so, we explore how experts and public servants in Romania acknowledge the importance of social media and new tendencies, how they refer to the tools they use and the way they approach stakeholders and citizens. With the help of semi-structured interviews with practitioners in Romania, we aim to structure a frame of looking at the new tendencies in Public Administration Development, with a particular focus on new technology and social media in e-Government.*

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K23.K40

### **Introduction**

User preferences change very quickly, and those who adapt the most well these changes will capture a larger share of the most valuable resource a users: time. The public administration is trying to adapt to these new trends and use the new communication and collaboration paradigms that are used in this moment online, and it does so in several ways.

One of the methods is to build your own collaborative platforms as a space meeting between governors and governors, in which ideas can be debated, can be commented on projects and a permanent discussion can take place between citizens and representatives or officials - we can take as an example the consultations for the new constitution of Iceland<sup>2</sup>. The advantage of these platforms is that the rules can be set by those who administer it, and control is maintained by the respective public institution.

The main disadvantage would be the reluctance of users to participate in a social network or collaborative that has a limited number of users and whose goals are not necessarily perceived as attractive. The main barriers do not belong to technology, but rather administrative, cultural or organizational. Authorizes bureaucracy is not automatically transferred to an official account of a public institution on a social network, but it must be built and maintained over time<sup>3</sup>. Of also, the rules of the game are no longer set by public institutions, but are the rules that community.

Despite all these obstacles, the public administration has a responsibility to communicate actions, to explain the reasons and to use the means by which the one can reach easier for citizens. The use of social media does not replace other means of communication (newspapers, television, radio, call center, official publications, static web pages), but it adds to the multichannel system through which the public sector communicates.

The need to use social media is also related to the obvious fact that not participating under discussion, public institutions would lose the ability to set or influence the agenda and should always play the role of "firefighter", trying to put out the flames controversies after they turned into fires. This communication through the social media environment is part of e-government, which is

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<sup>2</sup> Hélène Landemore - Inclusive Constitution-Making: The Icelandic Experiment, The journal of Political Philosophy, Volume 23, Number 2, 2015, pp. 166-191

<sup>3</sup> McNutt, K., „Public Engagement in the Web 2.0 Era: Social Collaborative Technologies in a Public Sector Context”, 2014, Canadian Public Administration, vol. 57, nr. 1, pp. 49-70.

becoming more and more common seen not only as providing services, but also as providing ways to get involved and collaboration. The definition of social networks (or social media) depends on the point of view from which phenomenon is analyzed. Relevant in the context of this paper are the following definitions and explanations:

"Social media refers to the use of online and mobile technologies to turn communication into dialogue and can take many forms, including online forums, blogs, wikis, podcasts, photos, videos or online assessments. Most used by such social networks are Facebook, Twitter and YouTube"<sup>4</sup>.

"Social media is a set of technologies and communication channels that are used to facilitate the creation of a huge community and allow its members to collaborate productive. The six concepts that end social networks are: participatory, collective, transparent, independent, persistent and emerging. These features combined differentiates social media from other forms of communication"<sup>5</sup>.

"Social networks reflect the rapid development of participatory internet (or web 2.0), with the exponential proliferation of wikis or blogs. Tools and modes of action of the participatory web can help improve public policy and increase the level of online services by enriching interactions between government institutions and other societal actors and by strengthening internal information management."<sup>6</sup>.

### **Methods or procedures**

The method used for this research is represented by semi-structured interviews applied on interviews with practitioners in Romania in Public Administration Development, with a particular focus on new technology and social media in e-Government. The semi-structured interviews took place during 5<sup>th</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> of November 2021. All the participants on this study reported to have relevant studies regarding the Public Administration as well as diplomas/certificates that justify the fact that they took part in trainings relevant to their professional domain. None of the respondents on this study were involved in a communication strategy at the time they participated on this study, but managed a reputational communication strategy involving their institution in the past months. The respondents had between 10-15 years of experience in the Public Administration Development field, studies and trainings specific to their sector and reported to have represented mainly institutions from the Public Administration sector.

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<sup>4</sup> European Commission, Journalists and Social Media, Eurobarometer Qualitative Studies, 2012, p. 103.

<sup>5</sup> Bradley, P., „A New Definition of Social Media”, 2010, [Online] available at [http://blogs.gartner.com/anthony\\_bradley/2010/01/07/a-new-definition-of-social-media/](http://blogs.gartner.com/anthony_bradley/2010/01/07/a-new-definition-of-social-media/), access at 15th november 2021.

<sup>6</sup> OECD, „Focus on Citizens, Public Engagement for Better Policy and Services”, 2009, [Online] available at <http://www10.iadb.org/intal/intalcdi/pe/2009/03785.pdf>, access at 15th november 2021

Between other PR activities (press relations, social media management, event management, branding) all the respondents reported to have been implied in the management process of at least one reputational Public Administration Development involving one of the institutions whom they represented.

An important aspect to take into account consideration is represented by legal requirements for government institutions that claim to be respected when using social networks online. Particular problems that arise in the way frequently related to:

- official record keeping;
- confidentiality;
- accessibility;
- intellectual property.

A major challenge for institutions government is the approach to the ways of avoiding social media risks. Avoidance and possible risk management - for example image damage to his reputation security - is a primary concern for government institutions.

## **Results**

Related to social media potential in e-Government, it can be materialized by: more open political processes, including and participatory; support for groups marginalized and hard to reach; opportunities for the young; dynamic and efficient provision of public services; providing services medical assistance and facilitation of services Employment. Given that online social networks facilitates participation, it is appropriate to explore the possibilities for supporting two special groups: people marginalized in society and younger people. They are certainly the largest target groups impact for many government institutions in the current context.

Online social networks can play a role important in empowering people who faces risks of exclusion in political and economic processes in societies modern. In fact, OSN could have the potential to alleviate one of the difficulties of government institutions, which are still faces low absorption rates for digital government services on channels conventional online.

Online social networks have the potential to increase operational capabilities and capacity reaction of government institutions in ways where e-Government did not successful. By providing opportunities over time real for e-participation and feedback, networks Online social media is starting to blur the boundaries between policy development and service delivery. They give the country new tools to leads, experiments, evaluates and redesigns services before them. This can do that the government to react more quickly to the needs citizens. At the same time, some activities social media raises issues of confidentiality and trustworthiness address of government institutions.

Few common points of view can be observed by analysing the responses to the semi-structured interviews, as they can be considered specific to the Romanian social standards that qualify Romanian people as slightly conservative. In this aspect, even though the utility of social media in public administration cannot be denied, there is a fear for change. In a very bureaucratic system, many of the interviewed employees prefer to follow the known procedure and believe that a wider usage of social media may bring unwanted changes in their professional activity.

Another concern regards potential security leaks, as social media networks are very popular and have a diversity of users. Some of them may try to breach system security or spread false information about a certain public institution, an activity or a general interest. Malware and cloned pages are also things that are taken into consideration regarding the possibility of using social media for official purposes by the public administration system.

However, some of the persons that were interviewed considered that social media can be used in creative ways in what regards their professional work. Information can be delivered easily to the public, as well as working procedures and needed documents, thus making it easier to address a public service as a citizen or private entity.

Having a social media profile and/or a page leads a public institution to international exposure, an aspect that can result in access to similar institutions from different countries and to implementing best practices in communication, through social media.

The majority of the respondents agreed that exposing a public institution to social media must be done in a planned way, having both a horizontal and a vertical approach, that allows the page and/or profile to grow in visibility and to be accessed and/ or followed by as many beneficiaries as possible. A communication and dissemination strategy that includes social media exposure is thus needed for each of the public institution or even public service that is part of the public administration system. Social media experts should be used as opposite to training in-house employees, since only experts can implement the best instruments for an efficient, long-term communication.

As a general view, respondents are willing to embrace the usage of social media in their activity but only if this leads to a more efficient relation with the public and only in a partial way, as they are still reluctant to changes that may affect their classical procedure.

## **Discussion**

Social networks are also beginning to be used by public institutions in Romania. At this time, the rules according to this new means of connecting with citizens

should be used are not so good in the target. Symptomatic for this problem are the frequent cases in which the dialogue between state institutions (for example the Presidency and Government) often take place through messages on social networks and not in the normal institutional framework. Also, often the accounts of public institutions on social networks they are used only as another web page in which they are placed announcements and press releases, losing the very attributes that make them different: interactivity, community, involvement.

In one of their article, Mergel and Bretschneider theorize social media adoption in public sector communication as a three-step process. Thus, that would follow paradigm followed by other information and communication technologies, originally intended for individual and commercial use. In the first phase, public institutions experimentally informally with these new technologies or applications, sometimes outside within the framework of agreed communication policies.

In the second phase, as the degree of as usage increases, organizations begin to understand the need for rules and procedures for the use of new technologies (in this case social networks), to put things in order in the inevitable slightly chaotic landscape of informal communication. Finally, rules and procedures communication, the type of content approved, the creation of separate departments and well-established responsibilities make the new technologies integrated into the technological mix used by institutions and no longer seen as a novelty<sup>7</sup>.

In Romania, despite isolated efforts towards formalization and regulation the way in which the public administration uses social media, the use of social networks by public institutions is still scarce<sup>8</sup>. This paper on the communication of public institutions from Romania, through social networks, is extended to the entire country. In order to put in context what is happening in this field in Romania, we will call in continued with some statistics provided by Eurostat and the National Institute of Statistics.

Thus, share of households with access to the Internet at home was 80.8% in 2021, up 2.6% from the previous year, according to data from the National Institute of Statistics among the citizens. Of these, 67% (or 36.3% of the total population) access social networks on a regular basis. As for the interest in the services of e-government, 58.6% of internet users say they have interacted online in one way or another, with central or local public administration institutions: they visited the website of such an information institution, downloaded forms, accessed online services etc.

In the territory, the internet connection was more widespread among households in the Bucharest-Ilfov region (over eight out of nine households have

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<sup>7</sup> Mergel, I. și Bretschneider, S.I., „A Three-Stage Adoption Process for Social Media Use in Government”, 2013, *Public Administration Review*, vol. 73, nr. 3, pp. 390-400.

<sup>8</sup> Burcea, C. și Hârțescu, I, *Manual de utilizare a social media în administrația publică*, Granturile SEE, 2014.

access to the Internet at home), followed by the West (84.3%) and North-West (84.0%) regions. The lowest shares are registered by the South-East (76.2%), South-Muntenia (77.1%) and South-West Oltenia (77.4%) regions. The types of connection used to access the Internet at home are 81.7% mobile broadband connections, followed by fixed broadband connections (73.7%). The share of people using the internet decreases with age. Thus, the share of people using the Internet in the 16-34 age group was 98.4%, while for the 55-74 age group it reached only 70.5%.

Regarding the degree of preparation of the Romanian public administration, referring to e-government, Romania is constantly one of the last places in all of them 5 dimensions measured by the European Commission (connectivity, human capital, use Internet, digital technology integration, digital services). In addition to this gap, another problem facing most countries in The European Union has a relatively low level of use of existing services. Interaction with citizens through social media could have like adjacent benefit and increased interest in online interaction with the public sector.

Government institutions must identify how social media can support its transparency and characteristics participation in e-government. After identification of both opportunities and positive recommendations can be made including suggestions for improving policies current communication as well as policies for specific media channels, with recommendations on how to use them. There are many cases in which institutions use social media to consult, to provide information and services or to more efficiently manage the flows of thing. Only in a few cases do the institutions have adopted social media in a way that actually transforms the processes of elaboration of policies, decision-making or delivery of services.

### **Conclusion**

This paper can be classified as "proof-of-concept". This research main aim was to establish the correct methodological steps for starting a more comprehensively, at the level of public institutions across the country. During The analysis revealed the idea of a semantic analysis of the messages transmitted through the environment of social networks by the Romanian public sector and their comparison with those disseminated through other mass communication channels.

The usage of social media in public administration may bring multiple advantages, as it eases the communication between the public institution or service and the public. Official information can be easily transferred to the public, as social media networks offer a wide range of possibilities to reach the beneficiaries. Data can be send in an interactive form or using images or tutorials, so that the desired outcome be achieved.

Using social media, we believe that public administration can become a more popular area, both for potential employees as well as the public. As the users preferences change rapidly, the public administration must keep up with the newest tendencies, so that ideas may be exchanged at the highest level of public and decisional life. For example, the debate over the constitutional changes in Iceland, that was held online<sup>9</sup> (Nicolae Urs, 2015).

An effective usage of social media should lead to verifications on which of the main social networks are more efficient for a certain kind of communication, like Facebook, Instagram or Twitter, as each of these have a specific way of transmitting information – trough long posts, short posts with or without photo or video content. Giving the impact of social media, we believe that a particular focus on new technology should be made in e-Government.

Social media can cover some of the common digital domain, provided that the limits involved should be taken into account suitable. The relative ease of reaching individual users help institutions to adapt to the needs of the government individual communities and potentially even reduce the cost of providing services. Collaboration through social media it can also trigger growth productivity in the field of public procurement, especially in the area of IT, services and solutions.

The provision of healthcare is changing dramatically under the influence of the Internet and associated technologies. Searching for information Medical Internet has become an activity standard. Online social networks are places popular for healthcare information exchanges. New treatment opportunities and support, such as remote applications benefit from the rapid spread on the networks online social services through mobile sails.

Government institutions should set clear goals or at least to formulate the expectations they have regarding use of online social networks. This thing it may also include exploring what they have done other institutions under similar conditions. Objectives can be adapted along the way, including feedback received from employees and users of services.

At the same time, it is important to define yourself responsibilities for using social media at government level. Especially when it comes to conflicts that need a clear response or information flows in during a crisis, it must be clear if ministries or agencies address this conflict through their authority or if there is a functional governance mechanism.

Also, they need to be addressed access and use of challenges to do social media an effective network that reaches certain parts of the population. Today, the levels low education and income are factors of blockade for social assimilation in many countries. This limits the potential for inclusion the use of these channels to encourage participation in or improvement of the supply of public services.

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<sup>9</sup> Nicolae Urs – „The usage of social media in public administration in Romania. Pilot study”, U.B.B., Revista Transilvana de Stiinte Administrative, nr. 1/2015, p. 124 – 132.



Moreover, the fact that many young people are active users of social media, no means that online social networks represent a way of e-Government institutions to a it reaches those young people. Current statistics indicate an extremely low level of interest from young people for the use of social media in view discussing political or civic issues on the Internet.

Despite the many changes caused social media, traditional power networks and the known political realities are still limiting the real influence of community efforts on government actions. Social media helps to channel diffuse opinions and creating critical mass to place problems on the agenda of decision makers. At the same time, governments remain hierarchical organizations that favor the activity of traditional intermediaries, such as be the halls of business and trade unions (which obviously know how to use social media). There is, also a lack of ability to absorb, of to deal with and respond to diffuse requests taken from social media. Take it together, these factors make many workflows of governments to conflict with the structure "Flattened" and immediate information of on the Internet.

Understanding the influencing factors use of social media and measurement of effects social media as a source of innovation in e-Government it is very important for increasing the quality the processes by which the public administration provides services to citizens and the environment business. It is also important for increasing citizens' trust in the policies promoted and the activities carried out by public administrations.

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