Internet as a Tool for Local Government Communication with the Local Community – Selected Aspects

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Abstract. The article discusses the use of the internet and, in particular, websites and social media for the communication of the local government (city) with the local community. The content and relations between the interlocutors are very important in communication. Currently, the citizen is no longer barely a passive recipient of information shared on the Internet, but actively participates in virtual life. Cities should not be limited to presenting only messages, but to conduct mutual communication. The main goal of the article is to assess the use of the internet for local government communication, and above all, to analyze official websites of selected voivodship cities according to specified criteria (among others, information availability, interactivity and transparency were tested) as well as their profiles in social media. The analysis shows that the websites of selected cities are at an increasingly higher level. Cities use their websites mainly for informational and promotional purposes. It can also be noted that cities are increasingly deciding to diversify messages in various social media depending on, among others, the profile of their users or communicated content. Effective use of social media by local governments is to contribute, above all, to creating the desired image and improving the quality of communication, especially with groups that are difficult to reach via traditional media. Currently, the profiles of self-governments in social media serve primarily image-building activities, encouraging participation in events or social consultations. Literature analysis, internet sources, comparative analysis, WAES and case analysis were used as a research method.

Keywords: Internet, Local Government, Communication, Local Community, Social Media, Website.

1   Introduction

The rapid development of various means of communication has contributed to the fact that information has become a valuable and wanted good. The Internet allows you to widely spread information about your offer, regardless of geographic and temporal barriers, giving them a global dimension. The rapid growth of Internet users means that the flow of information on the network also increases. It is important to care about the quality of information provided by websites. The Internet allows for quick response to events taking place in the environment of a given entity without any delays, it enables

continuous, interrupted flow of information. It is therefore treated as one of the basic and perspective ways of communication between local government offices and its community. Local government websites should offer not only basic information that can be found in the obligatory Public Information Bulletin, but also data enabling the user, among others gaining knowledge about the advantages of a given commune, the prospects for its development, encouraging to visit it or invest in it, allowing to feel a common bond, the atmosphere of a given place or to facilitate certain activities. The websites of the offices of local government units are primarily of a communication, promotional and optional nature, while the Public Information Bulletins created by virtue of law are primarily obligatory and fulfill informative functions related to the presentation of the scope of activities and competences of self-government bodies. Local governments, in addition to their websites, are trying to increasingly use other forms of communication with their recipients via the Internet. Social media are becoming very important forms of communication, gathering people interested in the relevant subject. Currently, the profiles of self-governments in social media primarily serve image-related activities that encourage participation in social events or consultations.

The article discusses the use of the Internet, especially websites and social media, to connect local council (city) with the local community. The main goal of the article is to evaluate the use of the Internet for local government communication, and above all, to analyze the official websites of selected cities according to specific criteria and as their profiles in social media. Effective use of social media by local governments is to contribute above all to creating the desired image and improving the quality of communication, especially with groups that are difficult to reach through traditional media. The article uses literature analysis, internet sources, comparative analysis, WAES and profile analysis in social media.

2   The Importance of the Internet in Local Government Communication

The Internet creates a new quality of marketing communication enabling the collection, storage, processing, presentation and transmission of information between the sender and the potential recipient of the message [4]. The feature of the Internet is interactivity, which can be specified in two levels [9]: interaction with the medium (the user, in order to receive the selected information, must actively participate in the communication process, e.g. click on the selected place) and social interaction (interaction between people, sharing opinions, interests). As an interactive medium, it enables quick response to the expectations and needs of recipients, allows feedback [17]. This is the basic and the most important feature that distinguishes the global network from other media. The Internet can be described by five words, 5C: communication, commerce, convenience, community and content. An important feature of the Internet is the immediate transmission of information, without any delay, immediately after their occurrence, regardless of the time of day or year, 24 hours a day. Four forms of

information flow using the Internet can be distinguished, which complement each other [7]:

- allocation – where the information simultaneously propagates from the center to many peripheral recipients; the sender has a privileged position here defining the time and place of communication; the message is unidirectional, with no possibility of feedback, e.g. mailing;
- conversation – units interact directly with each other, omitting the possible center and intermediaries; independently select partners and the time, place and topic of communication; internet forums are an example here, where internet users exchange information, discuss it;
- consultation – the participant looks for information in an information center, e.g. on a website; via e-mail, communicator contacts the representative of the entity to clarify doubts or obtain information; the recipient chooses the time, place and subject of communication;
- registration – the reverse of consultations; the center "demands" information from the recipient (not always with his consent or awareness); is used to create registers, databases, etc.

The Internet allows local governments to personalize the content and better identify customers, so you can better match the offer to their needs. The benefits include accuracy, speed, enhanced communication, increased productivity, and acquisition of skills and knowledge [3]. A popular way of obtaining information is cookies or registration forms in which users provide their data. Estimating the size of information resources on the Internet is almost impossible, some even think that if there is something on the web, it probably does not exist. Despite the undoubted advantages, the Internet also has disadvantages or barriers to its use. An important threat is, among others lack of full security of using the network services, lack of data protection, computer viruses, piracy, impersonating other people, which contributes to the low level of Internet trust. An unfavorable phenomenon, which is also the advantage of the Internet, is the freedom of speech and access to a vast content. The Internet user feels anonymous because the network does not require real data. Internet spamming is also an obstacle to Internet communication. Local government must deal with the rapid growth of technology and the increasing complexity of running a locality without ignoring the pressing issues facing the communities they represent.

Information technology has made it easier for local governments to provide information to their citizens and to handle information, communication, and other important management concerns [12]. Local government administrators must understand the power of technology and acquire the necessary knowledge and skills [5]. Website (World Wide Web) is a kind of information service for which the medium is the Internet. It can consist of many thematic collections, grouped by, e.g., time (past, present, future), space (issues related to the entire structure of the entity, regional branches, etc.), events, markets and other key words to facilitate and improve information management [22]. The essential components of an effective website include, above all, content, community and commerce. The most important thing here is the content, the usefulness of the content from the point of view of the website visitor

and their timeliness. Services outside of static content often have a news section and the ability to log in and remember recipients' preferences in order to tailor the content to individual preferences. Added value can be created by interactive elements, such as the possibility of sending e-cards, organizing contests, games, sharing places where users can conduct real-time discussions, forums, offer films, posters, sound files related to a given place / entity. Please note that the website is not a website. A page is just a document displayed in the user's browser. The website may contain hundreds of pages. WWW is often wrongly identified with the entire Internet, in fact it is only one of its most popular services. D.C. Arnott and S. Bridgewate distinguished three categories of websites in terms of marketing functions [2]:

- information sites whose main task is one-way communication,
- support sites that help you create and maintain relationships:
- transaction websites that enable comprehensive information exchange and individualized transactions.

In territorial self-government units, depending on the level of communication between the office and the recipients as well as the type and complexity of services provided, four basic levels of website development were distinguished: information (dissemination), one-way interaction (electronic forms sharing), two-way interaction (handling forms and their authorization) and transaction (applies to all activities necessary to resolve an official matter electronically). The goal of the e-Europe initiative, implemented by the European Union, is to create an online administration, which allows improving the efficiency of local government administration in the provision of services, simplifying the handling of official matters, as well as obtaining information about them. In the EU, the concept of eGovernement is primarily antonym of bureaucratic functioning of public administration.

Virtual communities are also very important in online communication, which for their members are a source of information, sense of belonging and social identity. Probably the author of the first definition of these communities was Howard Rheingold, who described them as a group with two important features: emotional involvement of participants and a sufficiently long time of action [18]. P. Wallace [21] divides virtual groups according to the type of contacts between their participants. On the one hand, these are groups consisting of people who know each other personally, for whom the virtual environment is only a communication platform in the breaks between personal meetings. On the other hand, there are groups whose members have met in the virtual world and only want to communicate in this way. In the middle there are groups whose members have met in the world of the Internet because of, for example, common interests, meeting also in reality. Most often such a virtual place consists of: a discussion forum, a chat, a calendar of events, an e-newsletter, and other elements thanks to which users with common interests or traits may have mutual contacts. Social media create a new communication channel that enables a constant presence of a given entity in the network, promoting the image, taking a position on important issues, dispelling doubts, etc. The breakthrough moment of their development is 2006, when Wikipedia and MySpace reached the peak of popularity, YouTube service appeared, there was also a significant increase in interest in Facebook created in 2004 [1]. Many

reports point to the continuous development of social media. Social media are highly regarded as a beneficial communication tool for local governments. Four primary themes is: dialogue promotion, engagement, unconstrained, and barriers. The first three themes focus on the opportunities that social media provide the local governments to communicate with citizens and the fourth theme presents the challenges faced by local governments that utilize social media [see: 8]. Social media are usually associated primarily with social networking sites and blogs, in fact they cover more forms. You can meet different classifications of social media. One of the more known divisions is authored by A.M. Kaplan and M. Haenlein, who used two dimensions: the level of self-presentation and the degree of disclosure (self) and the level of social presence that the given medium allows (Fig. 1).

		Social presence/media richness	
	low	medium	high
Self presentation /self disclosure — high	blogs	social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, Twitter)	virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life)
Self presentation /self disclosure — low	collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia)	content communities (e.g. YouTube)	virtual game worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft)

Fig. 1. Classification of social media [11].

It can be seen that many of these media operate on several levels of social interaction, i.e., they should fall into several categories at the same time. For example, Twitter is not just a microblog platform, it also serves to exchange broadly understood information. YouTube is a great tool for both informing and providing entertainment. Margo [14] asserted that social media takes its importance from its characteristics that include: participation, collaboration, empowerment, and time. Klischewski [13] argue that social media needs to maintain the relationship between citizens and their government; this needs self-discipline to effectively and consciously use such media in a free and open way. Local governments can create a community around their region, a place. Having such a community emotionally connected with a given region is a significant opportunity. Users of social media usually share interesting content, important and fun content. Internet users look for knowledge, information and opinions on topics that interest them. Some of them comment, evaluate or speak on forums. The purpose of using these media by self-governments may be to increase awareness or recognition of the region's brand, although it is often shaping opinions on a given topic and providing information about events. Attracting a certain number of users is one thing and keeping them at home is the second: members can exchange opinions, give new ideas, and provide a lot of information. The virtual community provides valuable information about the needs and problems of community members. Everyone in the group has free access to creating and receiving content. The contents are spread by social interaction and are constantly available. Once created, the content can be processed, edited, aggregated or quoted indefinitely. Local governments disseminate

the information to the public and thus information become available to all; this enables citizens to participate and collaborate with each other [16].

3   Website Analysis and Use of Social Media in Selected Cities

To ensure high quality of communication through websites, they should be periodically evaluated. The scope of the evaluation must refer primarily to the content of the presented information, their legibility, relevance, ease of navigation (navigation), transparency of the website and usefulness of information for the user. One of the easiest ways to evaluate websites is to answer five key questions [19]: Who (who?) Is the creator of the site? What's the (what?) Site? When (when?) The site was created? Where does where the information on the site come from? and why (why?) should you use this site? One of the most formalized forms and known website rating systems is the Internet-Based Website Evaluation System (WAES) developed by the Cyberspace Policy Research Group, and the initiator of the work was the University of Arizona. The strictly defined simple criteria are divided into two categories: transparency and interactivity/availability. Over 20 attributes are checked in each category. The first one determines the effort taken by the office to make the information available to the citizen through the website, and the second one for the user's ease of obtaining information published on the website [15]. The WAES method is carried out using a binary method. It is determined whether a given attribute exists (value "1") or not ("0").

Random official sites of Polish cities were selected for the study, the population of which amounted to at least 100,000 (there were 39 of them as per 1.01.2018), created by municipal offices. The proportional selection was used depending on the number of inhabitants, broken down by GUS statistics [10] 1 city over 1 million inhabitants (Warszawa), 1 from the range of 500,000 to 999,999 (Łódź), 2 from 200,000 to 499,999 (Częstochowa and Bydgoszcz) and 3 from 100,000 to 199,999 (Bytom, Olsztyn, Opole). Domain names are easy to remember and usually consist of the abbreviation www, the name of the city and the extension of pl, sometimes eu. When the user wants to be sure that he has reached the official website of the city he title should contain words such as "city hall" or "official." The results of conducted analysis according to the criterion of "transparency" are presented in Table 1, while referring to the category of "interactivity" in Table 2. It should be emphasized that a lot of information was on the BIP – Public Information Bulletin website of the given office, while some inquiries opened additional websites, especially those related to tourism.

Table 1. Evaluation of selected cities` websites in the category of "transparency".

Evaluation criteria	Warszawa	Łódź	Bydgoszcze	Częstochowa	Bytom	Opole	Olsztyn
A clear page layout has been provided indicating that the office is the owner of the website content	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
The date of the last update of the site was posted, which indicates its current updating	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
The postal address of the office is provided	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Postal addresses or telephone numbers for office employees have been provided	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
The e-mail address of the person responsible for the technical service of the website/service (webmaster) is included	1	1	1	1	1	0	1
An e-mail address has been placed for at least several employees of the office, to organizational units	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
The structure of the office is shown in a graphical form	1	1	0	0	1	0	0
Documents describing the rules of the office's functioning are included	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
The related addresses/links of other offices closely related to the given office are provided	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
There are other related non-governmental addresses of information sources	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
All downloadable or printable publications for free	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
A breakdown of the content depending on the recipient (e.g. resident, tourist, investor) is provided, which allows them to be personalized	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Information on the administrative work of the office (including opening hours, commune authorities) has been provided	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Basic information is provided, such as emergency telephones, pharmacies on duty, health care information	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
A city map, maps of the region are provided	1	1	0	1	1	1	1
A schedule of public transport/links to the relevant site is provided	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
The sum of points	**15**	**15**	**13**	**14**	**15**	**13**	**14**

It can be seen that in the category of "transparency" almost all offices received the highest grade – the highest grade received the office in Warszawa, Bytom and Łódź (15 points out of 16 possible). The results were similar. As for the criteria of "interactivity", here the offices fared less favorably – the best was the office in Warszawa, Opole and Olsztyn (14 points out of 17 possible) and the worst in Łódź and Częstochowa (12 points out of 17 possible).

Table 2. Evaluation of selected cities` websites in the category of "interactivity".

Evaluation criteria	Warszawa	Łódź	Bydgoszcze	Częstochowa	Bytom	Opole	Olsztyn
Searching of archived bulletins, regulations, regulations and requirements was made possible	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
The office does not use information gathering techniques, such as cookies, to collect information about visitors	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
An e-mail link was added to the highest official at the office	0	1	1	1	1	1	1
The thematic topics related to the online service (interactive elements), such as huts, mailing lists, are included	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Contact with interested people via social networks was made possible	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
A link to subunits/cells inside the office is provided	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Any forms required to submit forms to download are provided	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
It was possible to fill and send at least several online forms	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Access to the site in a language other than Polish was allowed (at least one)	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Access to the site was allowed in at least three languages other than Polish	1	0	0	0	0	1	1
There are also facilities for using the site for people with disabilities, for example, poorly seeing, deaf and mute	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
A sitemap has been provided as additional navigation	1	0	1	1	1	1	1
An e-mail newsletter/newsletter order was enabled	0	0	0	0	1	1	1
An internal search engine has been placed	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
A catalog of services/cases is provided with an explanation of how and where they can be arranged	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
An electronic inbox has been placed	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Frequently asked questions have been posted	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
The sum of points	**14**	**12**	**13**	**12**	**13**	**14**	**14**

It can be noticed that generally in the area of the analyzed criteria, the examined offices achieved very high scores, obtaining 26–29 points out of 33 possible. The best position was obtained by the office in Warsaw, and the office in Bydgoszcz and Częstochowa was weaker among the analyzed cities. It should be emphasized that the differences resulted mainly from sharing information in other languages than Polish, and the possibility of ordering a newsletter, placing a graphical form of the office structure or answering frequently asked questions. Mostly, information for residents was only in Polish, while for tourists or investors there was an option in another language, mainly English For example, on the Olsztyn website, although there was information about the

use of other languages, unfortunately only some of the content was translated. The tourism page was in four foreign languages: English, French, German and Russian.

The office's website should be interactive, and integration of all office databases should take place. For this reason, it is worth to include electronic forms to be downloaded in order to improve the communication process with its recipients. It can be seen that among the analyzed offices, everyone made certain forms available. Some of them could be filled in online and sent, but most often it was done via the ePUAP platform, to which one had to log in first. All sites used the cookies option, although it should be emphasized that the users were informed about the possibility of their exclusion.

Few offices made it possible to order a (e-)newsletter. All office interactions with clients also focused on social networks, such as FB, Instagram, and Twitter. Chats or other discussion forms were mostly active only during the designated periods e.g. in public consultation. It could at any time turn to the office through various contact forms or by e-mail. However, the criterion of interactivity is not fully implemented by the websites being researched, which serve rather informational and promotional functions. The interactive element on the website was, for example, a virtual walk around the city (Olsztyn) or an interactive internet service of the spatial information infrastructure (Bytom). Some pages were not very legible, due to the chosen arrangement of tabs or colors. Often there was a division into relevant sections, depending on which recipients were targeted, e.g. residents, investors; there was a division depending on the given case. Facilities for disabled people primarily referred to contrast and font changes. It could not find information about updating your site, although you could see that information is being transmitted as much as possible.

Apart from creating your own communities around a given commune, the presence of local governments on popular portals, such as Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter, is no longer surprising. Self-governments have different approaches to handling social media. Some create new posts, others appoint coordinators. Social networks enable differentiation of content depending on the group of recipients. The popularity of new portals, the development of mobile devices (including the increase in the popularity of smartphones) and the reduction of Internet costs should translate into communication activities undertaken by local governments. Local governments are trying to be in many social networks, not only on popular Facebook, especially because these websites are different. Google+ differs from FB primarily in that it is more intimate; Twitter offers writing and tracking posts not only from friends but also from famous people; Instagram – a service that allows you to take advantage of the camera's advantages and show what you are doing at the moment, or Pinterest – a virtual cork board to which the surfer can attach whatever you want: from stimulating quotes and articles, through photos and drawings, to music and movies. Most often Twitter, Facebook, NK or Google+ serve local governments to establish relationships mainly with residents, and YouTube, Pinterest and Flickr – to present values, events, using for this purpose multimedia materials (films, photos). The problem in communication through social media is sometimes the excess of messages sent by the local government to its recipients or the treatment of this type of media as a website. The main types of materials published by local governments are: information on important events (eg

sports events, concerts), news from the city life (e.g. traffic problems), announcements of cultural and entertainment events, links to other websites, trivia about the city, competitions, surveys and multimedia materials. It is also very important to make portals more attractive by enabling users to interact. Local governments encourage by suggesting participation in competitions, publishing photos sent by fans, encouraging them to share their experience, photos, voting for the most beautiful flowered balcony, etc.

Table 3 contains information on the possession of an official account of analyzed cities in the social networks indicated by them and the number of likes and tweets, as well as the number of followers and posts.

Table 3. Presence of selected capitals (official accounts) on social networks (as at 28/11/2018).

City	Facebook		Twitter		Instagram	
	Number of followers	Number of likes	Number of followers	Number of tweets	Number of followers	Number of posts
Warszawa	193,728	193,647	261,900	21,400	20,000	1,036
Bytom	14,333	14,406	814	1,160	–	–
Łódź	293,571	293,828	4,635	3,609	40,400	2,673
Olsztyn	22,895	22,968	2,364	6,387	3,785	221
Opole	32,556	32,843	765	66	–	–
Bydgoszcz	101,410	102,607	2,837	3,929	9,804	258
Częstochowa	12,625	12,679	–	–	4,249	1,373

It can be seen that the most popular social networking site is FB, Twitter and Instagram. The size of the city has only a partial impact on the use of social media. The specificity of the city and the image are its image also. It is worth to appreciate unofficial profiles created most often by enthusiasts of a given place, because sometimes they enjoy greater popularity than official ones. An example of such a phenomenon is even Warsaw (the official account has over 196,663 likes, and the unofficial web site of the capital "Warsaw Unknown" 262,485). Local governments also increasingly use multimedia materials, e.g. on YouTube. The video channel is very efficient – it requires relatively little user effort, and triggers a lot of attention and interest. The city of Częstochowa, due to the nature of the recipient, also has an account on the Polish website Nk. Bytom has an account on Pinterest. According to the Sotrender report on Facebook activity from October 2018 [6], the biggest fanpages were: Łódź, Nieznana Warsaw and Kraków PL. The greatest number of storytellers involved parties: Łódź, Kraków PL and Wroclaw [Wroclove]. The best posts were seen on Łódź. On Twitter, according to Sotrender data from October 2018 [20], the number of followers is the highest for Warszawa, Wrocław and the City of Gdańsk.

4   Conclusions

It can be noticed that local governments use the Internet more and more effectively. The website provides the necessary information and virtually officially can handle

official matters. It is an appreciated tool for creating the image of a given city. It should be emphasized that the groups of recipients expect different information, and considering the official side, the local community, and mainly the inhabitants, is an important group. The analysis showed that the websites of selected cities are at an increasingly higher level. All provided information about the office's work and contact details for departments or responsible persons and enabled contact via an electronic inbox and handling of some of the online cases. Sometimes it was not possible to use online communication with the office directly from the website, and not only through social media. It is also worth considering other language versions, although it should be emphasized that in the case of information intended for tourists or investors, you can see a wider choice of language.

It can be seen that the majority of local governments use the most popular social channels (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter) - mainly for communication with residents. Social media change the rules of communication between them and their recipients. Currently, profiles serve primarily image-building activities, encouraging participation in events or social consultations. Effective use of these social media is to contribute above all to creating the desired image and improving the quality of communication, especially with groups that are difficult to reach via traditional media. It is not an easy task and it is time-consuming. Having an idea for a city image in social media should be carefully planned, because such profiles should be led by people who understand the recipients and speak their language. Social media require rapid response, and the city is a living and dynamically changing organism. Instagram and Snapchat (which is visible, among others, in the USA), as well as Twitter, are becoming more and more popular, mainly among those who care about the tracking of news. These social media are mainly selected by the youngest internet users. The most engaging content on all social media platforms (not only on YouTube) is video – also live broadcasts. This trend should be properly used.

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