

DO ELECTIONS INFLUENCE HOW CITY HALLS COMMUNICATE ON SOCIAL NETWORKS? ROMANIAN EXAMPLE

Dorin Spoaller and Nicolae Urs¹

DOI: 10.24989/ocg.v341.34

Abstract

Online communication, and especially messages transmitted through social networks, are now an essential tool for local public institutions. The current pandemic increased the reliance of citizens on messages posted online by their representatives and public servants.

Our interest in this research is to see if, in election times, their messages differ somehow from the usual pattern. This is interesting for us because, in the case of Romania, the local elected representatives are in most cases the best electoral agents of the political parties.

In Romania mayors are elected, and are some of the most visible political figures, both at local and at national level. We are interested to see how local elections influence the social media activity of the institutions they nominally lead. For this, we have analyzed the official Facebook pages of city halls around Romania, with mayors that took part in elections and mayors who did not, from all relevant political parties.

Keywords: social media, local sector, Romania

1. Introduction

To say that the internet changed the way in which we communicate would be an understatement. This is true for interpersonal communication (we see each other on zoom, we send birthday cards on Instagram, we make fool of ourselves on TikTok). Online communications fills more and more of our social interaction space and this trend is now supercharged by the current pandemic.

Public institutions and politicians have not escaped this colonization of the digital space. Increasingly, information is first released online, public services are created or modified following a "digital first" doctrine, citizens expect round the clock updates or service availability, and politicians crave the direct connection with voters offered by the different internet platforms, that eschews the sometimes bothersome mediation by traditional media organizations (newspapers, TV channels).

Election campaigns follow the same pattern. Maybe the first time that social media played a central role in a high profile election race was during the 2008 Presidential election in the United States. Barack Obama employed these new tools and, with the help of an organized grassroots movement, showed to the world what social networks could achieve, besides bombarding us with cat videos.

¹ College of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, BBU, Cluj-Napoca, 71 Traian Moşoiu Street, Cluj-Napoca, , spoaller@fspac.ro, urs@fspac.ro

Obama's example was soon followed all around the world, with politicians and political parties using digital tools to reach their intended audience, with varying degrees of success. Of course, the tools used in that campaign are now much more refined and the number of social media users and level of activity on social networks is very different from 2008.

Romania is no different in this regard. The internet and social media are part of the election toolbox for a decade, and more and more financial resources are reserved for this purpose, as opposed to traditional media and old-school in-person campaigning. For the last Romanian parliamentary election, in 2020, the parties have spent around 33 million euro, a 400% increase over the previous elections in 2016 (the number does not include the sums spent at local level, for which there is no definitive tally). Of these, around 12 million € were spent on online advertising, and almost 7 million € on traditional media (mainly TV channels and newspapers). This is a reversal from previous campaigns, when TV was king, and it is more surprising still when we think that 2020 was a pandemic year, with citizens more inclined to stay in their homes and watch television; most commentators expected TV to stay king of the pack.

Also in 2020, Romania had another round of elections, for mayors, local and county councils. They were loosely coordinated by parties from a central level, but local organizations had a lot of latitude on the way in which they conducted the local campaign. As such, we were curious to see if incumbent mayors (which usually also control the local party apparatus) will use for political campaigning the social media accounts of their city halls, which, by definition, should avoid electioneering.

2. Literature review

It is already a cliché to say that the Internet changed the way in which public institutions communicate. The reality is that, at first, public authorities used on their new websites the same communication paradigm as for the other channels (TV, print, outdoor). They colonized the new medium fast enough, but they saw their newly created websites as little more than digital billboards.

Web 2.0 (the social web) changed that. The concept describes a world wide web that is dominated by platforms that use the power of the masses to create, curate or distribute content at scale. In the case of public institutions, the rationale for embracing this new web iteration is threefold: the public sector is responsible for, if not leading, keeping up with the society. The society is changing, driven by technological development. If the social institution do not embrace this change, they face reputational risks. Secondly, the results of public institutions are increasingly visible and are judged not only by what they do, but also by what people think of what they do. Perception is now as important as facts. Thirdly, the web 2.0 applications have the potential to greatly improve the service offered by the public sector and generate more efficient way of doing things inside institutions.

Among the tools that web 2.0 offers, social networks are among the most visible and widely used by both citizens and organizations [15]. The differences in the digital architecture frameworks, data collection tools, ad targeting possibilities, and content types available for different social networks mean that messages are different (even if they are based on the same original footage or text) [3].

Hisham et al. find that there are a number of factors that influence social media adoption in public organizations. These pressures come from the inside (organizational pressure), form comparison

with other institutions (environmental pressures) and the process of adoption is influenced by the technology availability and compatibility with the organization (see Figure 1) [7].

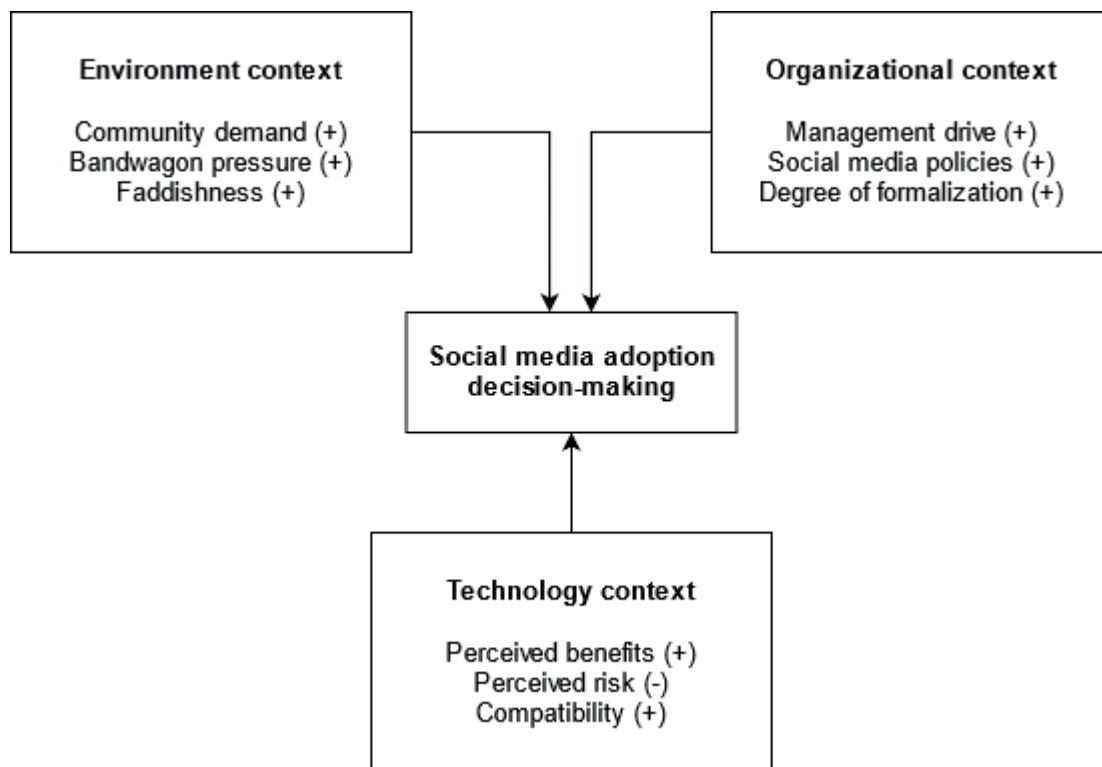


Figure 7: Social media adoption factors. Taken from Hisham et al.

Using social networks comes with problems for public institutions. They do not have control over the platform; there have been some initiatives to create social networks for content distribution by government agencies, but they did not have much success [10]. Disinformation can spread rapidly; during crises, they do not have time to formulate a response. On the other hand, it is where the users are. If they want to be part of the conversation, it is imperative to be there or cede the battlefield to other actors.

Social networks are not neutral channels for transmitting information. They act as an intermediary, that have a determinant – and secretive – say in which messages reach individual users [12]. Because the institutions do not control this platform, the goals of governmental organizations that use them can clash with the goals of the networks themselves. This is evident in the current pandemic: fake news about vaccine are more viral than scientific information, and the networks have been slow to reign in the disinformation partially because more engagement means more revenue for them. There are risks that public sector organizations face when using social networks. Are they trustworthy enough to be used for civic engagement, for example, when organizations have so little control over the way in which their messages reach the intended audience? Are social networks, in a way, privatizing a public space, becoming, in a way an Antigora? [11]. Thirdly, the medium-term interest of the two actors diverge: while governments try to increase public value, social networks' goal is to increase shareholder value [12].

Social media can act not only in support of political actors, but, increasingly, we see them as political actors. Decision taken by these social networks, with little oversight, can influence electoral campaigns: are political ads allowed or not? If yes, are they labeled as such or not? Are

demonstrably false assertions allowed to stay on the platform or not? Who decides, what are the rules? What is the weight (which loosely equates with how many people can see the content) of partisan messages? These questions and many other will only grow in importance, as more and more people take their media diet mainly from online and social media sources [4].

Adopting social media in the public sector was a slow process. Sometimes it was deliberate, based on a coherent plan. Sometimes it was the result of a pilot process of sorts [13]. Other times it was the result of politicians seeing the power of social media during election campaigns and continuing to use it after winning elections. This happened in Romania in a number of cases, when elected mayors continue to use their campaign accounts as semi-official pages for the city halls they lead.

There is a temptation to use, as a tool in an electoral battle, the official social media accounts of the institutions they lead. These pages usually have more followers than a campaign account. This is also because, in Romania, as in other countries, elections are increasingly fought online, and the current pandemic only boosted this trend. During elections campaigns, the communication rhythm is accelerating, and having a beefy online presence is seen as essential, even for mayoral races in small cities.

Although social media is not the principal reason for winning or losing an election (as it is sometimes presented), its use in elections is on an upward trend [2]. Politicians use different social media tools (for example twitter and Facebook) for different purposes that derive from the idiosyncrasies of those platforms. Twitter is used mainly for "masspersonal" communication (Wu, S., Hofman, J. M), and not for conversations with their supporters. These discussions take place between supporters or, more seldom, between devotees and critics. Facebook, on the other hand, is more often used for direct communication, for organizing and mobilizing the supporters, helped by the more sophisticated targeting tools that Facebook offers [16].

Political actors have gradually increased the resources devoted to social media in their overall strategy, helped by the increasingly granular tools for message targeting offered by the big social platforms. One example is the Brexit Campaign, in which the Leave campaign has used social networks to reach users with arguably better skill and focus than the Remain supporters [9].

Using social networks can also increase funding for political campaigns. Studies show that opening social media accounts correlates with an increase in donations, especially for new politicians [14].

Social networks also leads to a more pronounced personalization of politics. Former president Donald Trump, Benjamin Netanyahu, Emmanuel Macron, are all examples of the benefits that expert social media use can bring to gifted politicians. In Romania too, political figures can build an army of followers that amplify the politician's message at no cost. This is helped by the fact that, on social media, the virality of a message is more important than its truth or production values. This virality depends on the reaction of the supporters. If they are a tightly bound group that acts in concert, they can greatly intensify a message, even if they are a minority.

Social media is usually seen as the domain of up-and-coming politicians, used to a digital world and leveraging their knowledge to bypass the retrograde establishment. That view is contradicted by established politicians all around the world, who learned how to use the new shiny tools of our digital era and employ them for their electoral goals (Benjamin Netanyahu is a case in point) [8]. Despite the often touted idea that social media is a space more suited to left-leaning politicians, both

anecdotal evidence (Donald Trump in United States, Narendra Modi in India, for example) and academic research dismantle this myth [6].

Experimental work, admittedly in simplified settings, showed the power of social networks in influencing electoral choices. Even if in the real world these influences will be necessarily less powerful, there is no denying that social media can be used to influence voters [1]. Research shows that social media campaigning has a small but measurable effect in winning votes. It also shows that, in the case of Twitter, at least, the best approach is using the Twitter account as a megaphone, and not for interactive campaigning (discussion, answering to questions, retweeting). This result is at the moment contrary to common sense and some specialists (which says that these tools are important in fostering connections between candidates and voters) and the topic requires more study, but a tentatively reason may be that those interactive tools baked in the social network page are necessarily small scale, and as such, cannot influence the result in any significant way [5].

3. Research

The main goal of this research was to establish a connection, if any, between the social media activity of public institutions, i.e. town hall official Facebook pages, and the local election campaign of September 2020, Romania. Our goals were: to identify any change in the number of posts the account published during the campaign; to identify any change in the content of the posts the account published during the campaign; to identify any change in the way the content was engaged with by the consumers; to see if the participation in the electoral race of the incumbent mayor had an effect on the overall activity or the engagement rate.

The social media platform chosen for this research was Facebook. The reasoning behind this is strongly connected with the online consumption behavior of the Romanian people and how they perceive Facebook as the unofficial communication channel for public and private institutions. This, in turn, forces these institutions to allocate specific resources to this platform. Also, as of February 2021 there are over 10.5 million Facebook accounts in Romania (according to its own advertising platform), with 12 million possible targeted accounts (around 1.5 million are multiple and/or fake accounts). This makes Facebook the second largest social media platform in Romania, surpassed only by Youtube (total accounts), but surpassing Youtube in terms of DAU (daily active users). Given the limited capabilities of Youtube and the diverse target audience found on Facebook, most public and private institutions chose the latter for their online communication.

To achieve the goal of this research, we analyzed 321 town and city hall accounts spread over the entire territory of Romania. We split the accounts into three categories: accounts that belonged to cities with under 40.000 citizens; accounts that belonged to cities with between 40.000 and 100.000 citizens and accounts that belonged to cities with over 100.000 citizens. We set up objective filtering criteria in order to retain only those accounts that could yield relevant results. The criteria were: 1. Only use town hall accounts that were official ones and tied to the public institution. 2. Only use town hall accounts that had at least 30 posts over the course of the analyzed time period. By applying the filters, we were left with 39 town hall accounts to analyze, as follows: 10 accounts for the below 40.000 category, 16 accounts for the between 40.000 and 100.000 category and 13 accounts for the over 100.000 category.

In order to observe a change, if any, in the online behavior of these accounts we needed to compare two different time periods in the activity of the public institutions. Thus, we decided to analyze the last 2 months before the election campaign and to compare the results with the 1-month period of

the election campaign. We analyzed content posted between the 27th of June and 27th of August and compared it with the content posted between the 28th of August and 26th of September. The election was held on the 27th of September 2020.

The data crawling, mining and extracting was done by using the online analytics platform SocialInsider (socialinsider.io). Once the data was received, we proceeded to manually analyze it using Microsoft Excel and Apple Numbers, and to visualize it using Tableau.

4. Findings

Due to the filters implemented we were left with a total of 4094 published posts to analyze. The distribution of these posts was directly proportional to the size of the city category, with the smaller cities having the smaller dataset available to analyze, whilst the larger cities having the largest dataset.

The following chart shows the number of published posts on the three different account types.

<40.000 citizens	40.000-100.000 citizens	>100.000 citizens
475 posts	1193 posts	2426 posts
11.4% of total posts	29.1% of total posts	59.2% of total posts

Given the total amount of published content, we were able to analyze the “before and during campaign” content in order to establish if the accounts had any change in the posting pattern. We found that all of the three categories had a larger than the accepted average change in account activity during the month of the election campaign.

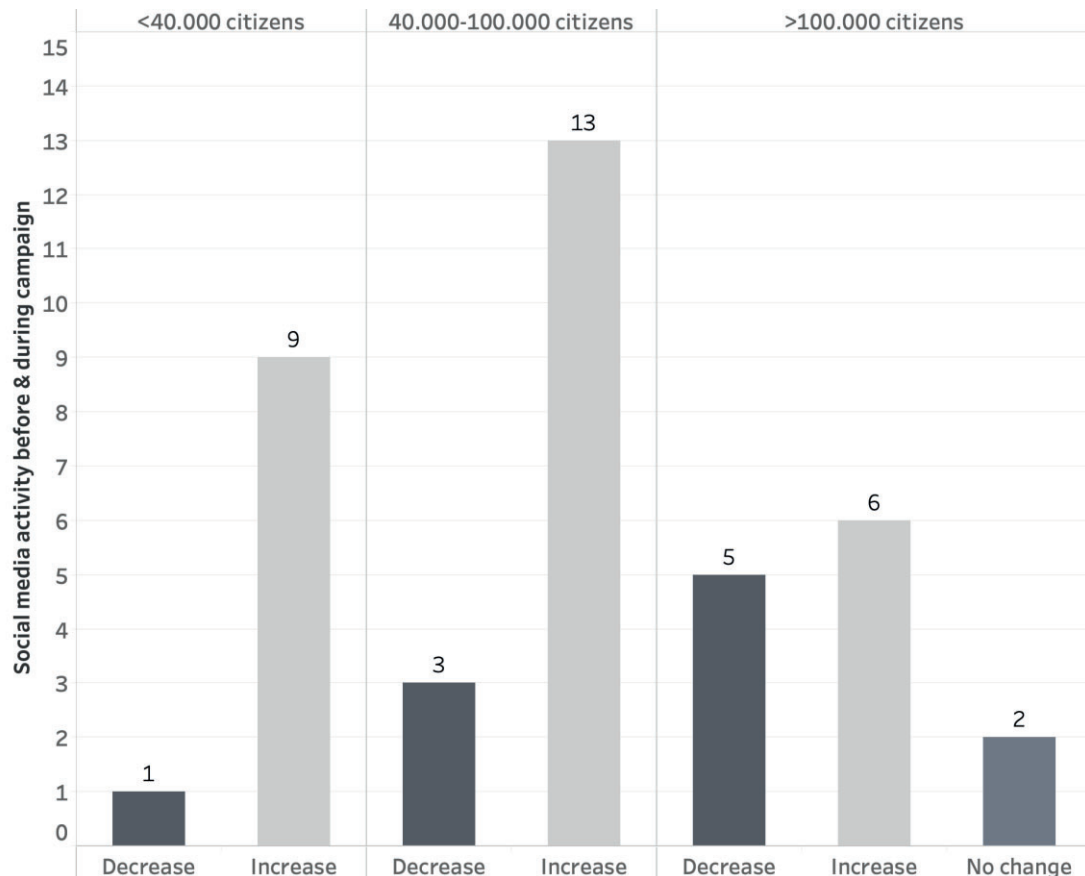


Figure 2: Social media activity from before & during the election campaign

The success of a Facebook business account is strongly related to its AER (Average Engagement Rate). This is a metric composed of 4 different items: the number of reactions, the number of comments, the number of shares and the number of clicks. All of them relative to the total number of people following the said page. There is a general consensus within the online marketing research community that an AER of 0.5 is decent, whilst a score of 1 is considered good.

Despite having the lowest number of posts, the CAT1 (category 1, <40,000 citizens) cities tend to have the highest individual AER out of the accounts analyzed, with some CAT3 (category 3, >100,000 citizens) cities having a low AER.

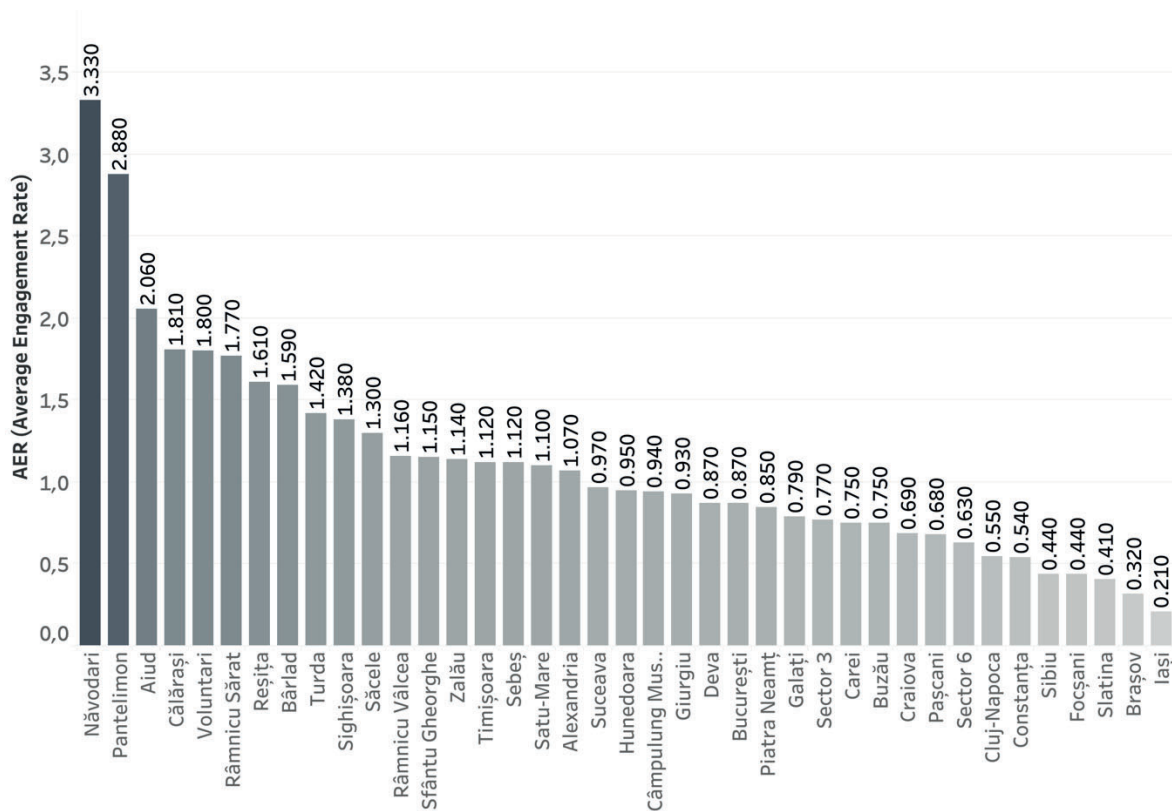


Figure 3: Average Engagement Rate (AER) for the last 90 days before Election Day.

For the overall period of 90 days analyzed more than 12% of account received a rate lower than decent, 41% received a rate between decent and good, and 47% received a rate higher than good. However, the AER doesn't take into account the fact that Facebooks reach algorithm doesn't generate linear result, but more of a downwards curve, proportional to the number of followers that a page has. The more the followers, the lower the reach. The lower the reach, the lower the AER.

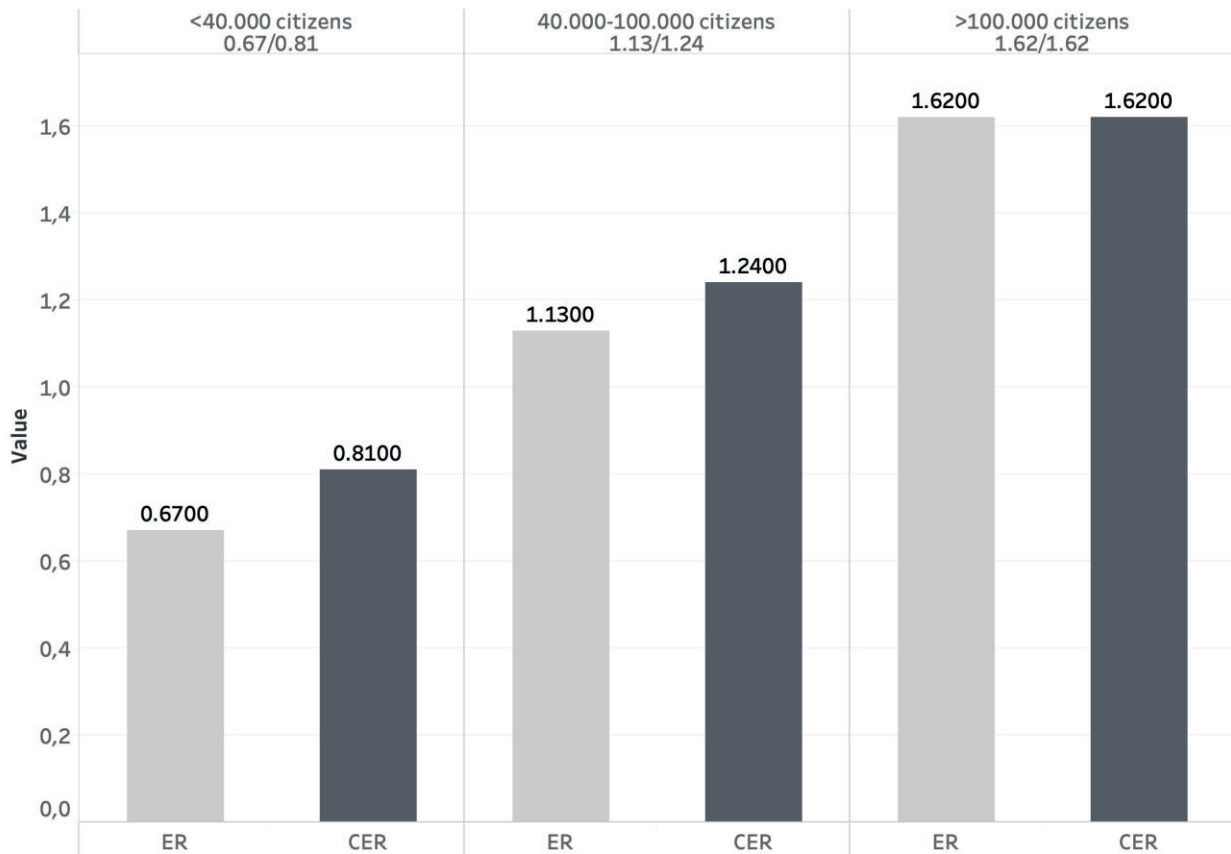


Figure 4: Engagement Rate (ER) and Compensated Engagement Rate (CER)

Researchers have tried compensating this metric by taking into account the way Facebooks algorithm works, eliminating the penalty “awarded” to successful accounts. This compensating metric is marked as CES (Compensated Engagement Score) in our research.

Even with the CES applied, there is a clear pattern in how the consumers engage with the content depending on the site of the city. CAT1 cities have the lowest average, CAT3 cities have the highest average. The cause of this behavior is to be studied at a later date.

In order to establish if the business institutional accounts had any change in the CES during the election campaign compared to the previous 2 months before the campaign, we analyzed the ΔCES for these two periods. We calculated ΔCES as $CES2 - CES1$, where $CES2$ is the compensated engagement score from the 1-month period of the election campaign and $CES1$ as the 2 months prior. The results showed that almost 60% of the cities had seen a decrease in CES during the 1-month period of the election campaign compared to the 2 months period before. This is indicative of a lack of interest of the consumer in regard to the content being published in the campaign. It can be interpreted as a disconnect between what the consumers are expecting to receive and what the decision makers behind the strategy of the social media account are offering.

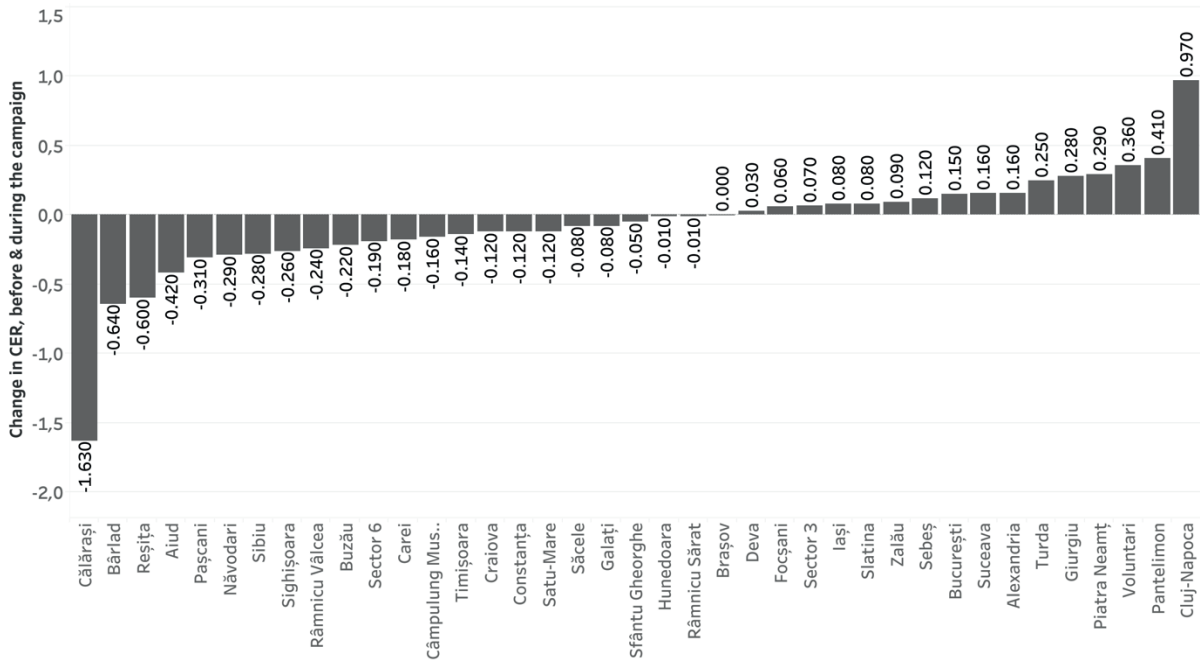


Figure 5: Change in CES, before and during the campaign

Out of the 39 accounts analyzed, 19 had changes in mayorships and in 20 cases the incumbent won the election. In some cases where the incumbent won the election, he did so for a different political party than the one he was initially elected for.

For the 9 city accounts that had a decrease of social media activity (Δ SMA) during the election campaign, 7 (78%) ended up electing the same mayors after Election Day (Δ m). For the 28 cities that had an increase in social media activity, 12 (42%) ended up with the same mayors after the election. There were two recorded cases of accounts that had no changes between the before and during stage of the campaign. In their cases the results were split, 50%-50%, with one changing the mayor and the other one voting for the incumbent.

It is worth mentioning that out of the 39 accounts analyzed, all 39 had incumbent mayors. In all of the 39 cases the seated mayor ran for reelection. This is why our research didn't focus on comparing the "pre campaign" with the "during campaign" period, but rather the results generated after the Election Day.

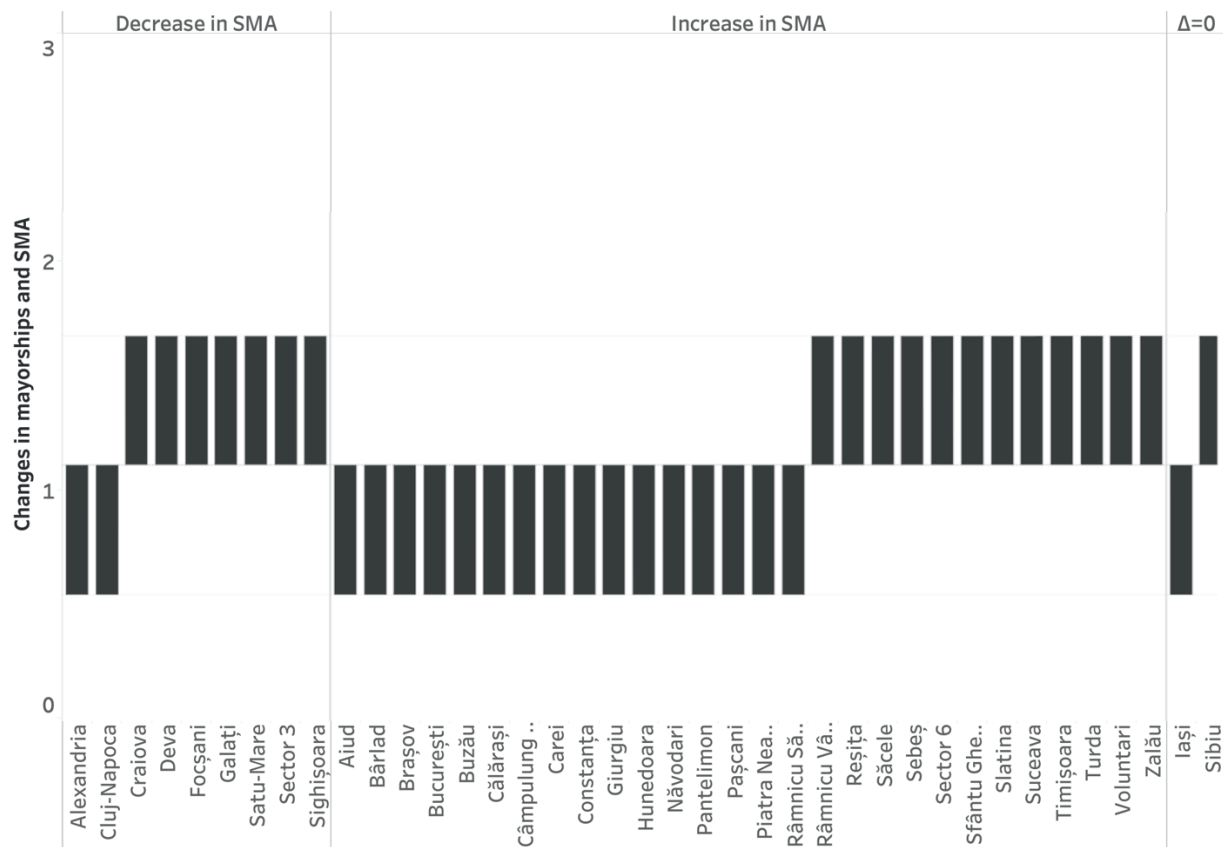


Figure 6: Changes in mayorships and social media activity, before and during campaign.

We also calculated the Reaction Score for each of the account, however the resulting data had a Standard Deviation $sd < 0.09$ and it was considered irrelevant towards the purposes of this research.

5. Conclusions

Facebook is a must have social media platform. It is not only recommended, but necessary for public institutions to have a presence on it. It can generate the highest organic reach out of all of the communication channels available to a public institution in Romania at the moment and it has the most diverse audience possible. These, however, shouldn't be the only arguments in favor of using it as an official or unofficial channel. Given the fact that it is a bi-directional communication channel, thus allowing real-time feedback, it is necessary for a public institution to follow a set of self-imposed rules and/or a strategy in regard to what is being communicated, when, how and how much.

Our research wanted to analyze this communication from the public institutions' perspective, but at the same time from the consumers perspective. We set out with three main goals: to identify any change in the number of posts the account published during the campaign; to identify any change in the content of the posts the account published during the campaign; to identify any change in the way the content was engaged with by the consumer. Two of these goals are independent from each other, whilst the third one can be drawn from the other two.

We found that some of the public institutions analyzed communicate more during the election campaign period. This is indicative of an artificial increase in activity, based solely on the perceived interest generated by the campaign. We also found out that the targeted audience is highly involved

in engaging with the content that the public institutions publish on Facebook. This, however, changes during the campaign, either because it is not interested in the campaign *per-se*, or because the content published during the campaign is irrelevant towards their needs. Another independent result was that of the higher engagement rate of the higher tier category. CAT3 cities (largest cities) had a higher CES than CAT2 (medium sized cities), which in turn has a higher CES than CAT1 (small sized cities). This is indicative of a wider range of topics published by larger city accounts, which increases the potential for targeting the right people interested. Which, in turn, increases the probability of that persons' engagement with the content. And, at the end of the analysis we discovered that there is a higher chance of re-election for an incumbent if the social media activity during the campaign stays the same or even decreases than if you increase it artificially (maybe because they were heavily favorites to win anyway). A clearer correlation and/or causation should be determined.

The entirety of this paper is a one-sided, limited view of online behaviors from both the creators of content (public institutions) and the consumers of content (the people). A more comprehensive analysis, planned in a future article, will try to answer the questions raised by our research. However, as a first step in determining if there is potential for relevant data analysis in the online medium, we believe that it allows us to foresee certain behavioral changes in the future of online and or social media institutional communication.

6. References

- [1] AULETTA, V., FERRAIOLI, D. and SAVARESE, V., "Manipulating an election in social networks through link addition". *J Ambient Intell Human Comput* 11, 2020: 4073–4088.
- [2] BEARFIELD, D. A., and DUBNICK, M. J., (Eds.). "Encyclopedia of Public Administration and Public Policy", Third Edition (3rd ed.), 2015, CRC Press.
- [3] BOSSETTA, M., "The Digital Architectures of Social Media: Comparing Political Campaigning on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat in the 2016 U.S. Election". *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 95(2), 2018:471-496.
- [4] BOSSETTA, M., "Scandalous Design: How Social Media Platforms' Responses to Scandal Impacts Campaigns and Elections". *Social Media + Society*, 2020: 1-4.
- [5] BRIGHT, J., HALE, S., GANESH, B., BULOVSKY, A., MARGETTS, H. and HOWARD, P., "Does Campaigning on Social Media Make a Difference? Evidence From Candidate Use of Twitter During the 2015 and 2017 U.K. Elections". *Communication Research*, 47(7), 2020: 988-1009.
- [6] BRUNS, A. and MOON, B., "Social Media in Australian Federal Elections: Comparing the 2013 and 2016 Campaigns". *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 95(2), 2018:425-448.
- [7] HISHAM, SHARIF M., TROSHANI, I., and DAVIDSON, R., "Public Sector Adoption of Social Media". *Journal of Computer Information Systems*, 55:4, 2015: 53-61.

-
- [8] KATZ, Y., "Israel's Social Media Elections". *Open Journal of Political Science*, 8, 2018: 525-535.
- [9] KUDO, H., "Exit/Entry, Voice/Noise, and Loyalty/Apathy in the Era of Social Media: Impact of Social Media to Public Sector". *Central and Eastern European EDem and EGov Days*, 338 (July), 2020: 417-29.
- [10] LANDEMORE, H., "Inclusive Constitution-Making: The Icelandic Experiment". *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 2015: 166-191.
- [11] LANIER, J., "The Gory Antigora: Illusions of Capitalism and Computers". *Internet Liberation: Alive or Dead?* The Cato Institute. Available at <http://www.cato-unbound.org/2006/01/09/jaron-lanier/the-gory-antigora/>. Retrieved on February 13th, 2021.
- [12] MAULTASCH DE OLIVEIRA, GUSTAVO, H., "The Paradox of Social Media: Risks for the Public Sector", at Conference: *Public Administration Theory Network (PATNET Conference)* At: San Francisco, CA, USA, 2013..
- [13] MERGEL, I. and BRETSCHNEIDER, S. I., "A Three-Stage Adoption Process for Social Media Use in Government." *Public Administration Review*, 2013: 390-400.
- [14] PETROVA, M., SEN, A. and YILDIRIM, P., "Social Media and Political Contributions: The Impact of New Technology on Political Competition". *Management Science*, 2020: pre-print.
- [15] SERRAT, O., "Social Media and the Public Sector". *Knowledge Solutions*, Springer, Singapore, 2015.
- [16] STIER, S., BLEIER, A., LIETZ, H. and STROHMAIER, M., "Election Campaigning on Social Media: Politicians, Audiences, and the Mediation of Political Communication on Facebook and Twitter". *Political Communication*, 35:1, 2018: 50-74.
- [17] WU, S., HOFMAN, J. M., MASON, W. A. and WATTS, D. J., "Who says what to whom on Twitter". *Proceedings of the 20th International Conference on World Wide Web*, 2011:705-714, NewYork, NY: ACM.