

THE SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE OF ROMANIA'S MAIN MUNICIPALITIES

Codrin TEIU

Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of
Iasi
Iasi, Romania
codrin.teiu@gmail.com

Abstract: *The present paper is analysing the measure in which several municipalities from Romania are using social media networks to reach out to their constituents and inviting them to have a collaborative talk on local public administration. The way people are communicating has changed in the last years due to the mainstream use of social media. Municipalities are adapting and start using social media in order to engage citizens with messages because of the high number of users of these networks. One of the most popular such network is Facebook and we are going to concentrate our attention on the presence of municipalities in this network. Municipalities engaging citizens on social media brings additional transparency to governance while increasing the degree of interaction and information.*

Keywords: *social media in municipalities, public administration, Facebook*

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INTRODUCTION

The transmission of information over the Internet used to be unidirectional in most cases. This means that users would be provided information primarily via web pages with none or little ways of interacting with that content. Recent internet statistics are showing that in February 2019 there were 10.4 million Facebook users in Romania, which accounts for more than half the population, with the largest group of 2.7 million being aged 25 to 34 (NapoleonCat, 2019). Social media is offering municipalities the opportunity to create an agora where to meet with its constituents and engage in open dialogue but this proves to be a difficult task for most municipalities from reasons pertaining to both parties. Romania has a high Internet connectivity with over 5 million landline connections and 12 million 4g connections (Ancom, 2020) at a total population of over 19 million. This high connectivity makes Internet a desirable means of communications, as it is widespread in the public. Adding the context of the high usage of Facebook in Romania makes Facebook the social media of choice through which municipalities could connect with citizens.

Social media has been defined in multiple ways and we believe one of the most accepted definitions has been provided by the European Commission stating that social media refers to the use of online and mobile technologies in order to transform

communication into dialogue while being able to take many forms like forums, blogs, wiki's, podcasts, photos and videos or online surveys (European Commission, 2012).

The adoption of social media by the public sector is a gradual process that is highly dependent on whether a specific set of rules were established for social media communication (Mergel & Bretschneider, 2013). While initially municipalities would interact with social media at an informal level they will start establishing a set of rules and procedures in order to make communication formal and compartmentalized across the departments they have are given permission to interact via the social media page. The most usual channel for municipalities to post online information is via websites in a static manner. The technological advancement in website building started to offer features like building forums or online forms and questionnaires but there is the problem of the citizen getting to them and registering, while on social media the citizens are already registered in the network. The hierarchical structure of public administration and fixed reporting structures with predefined operating procedures has been an impediment for the widespread use of social media in municipalities.

The online presence of municipalities in a collaborative manner which can support debating ideas, feedback on projects or holding a bi-directional conversation with citizens can be accomplished in two ways: develop an in-house collaborative portal or use an existing social media network. Each of them comes with a series of advantages and disadvantages. For the in-house developed solution there is the advantage of the municipality to set the platform rules and have total control, but the downside is that a limited number of citizens would register in the platform. The benefit of trying to create an agora in a social network is that many citizens from the city already have an account in that platform, that they are usually highly active in the social network and they could easily become members of follow the municipality's online page, but this comes with the disadvantage of the municipality not being able to set the platform's rules.

The need for a defined set of rules and advice for municipalities engaging citizens on social media was addressed in a series of projects where the national agency of public workers was involved (Burcea & Hârțescu, 2014). The result of such projects provided guidance to local administration in starting their social media activity in the good spirit of communication and transparency. This guidebook also takes note of the lack of resources and the restrictive legislative framework in which data protection comes on top for reasons not to use social media in public administration. Another project focused on preparing the national e-administration system in Romania by offering public administration employees training in using social media and other software suited for public administration (E-Administratie, 2014). Communication strategies for public administration in Romania are address in a long-term digital diplomacy project, which promotes the integration of social media in public institutions (Digital Diplomacy, 2020).

Goal achievement via social media was analyzed by Clarke (2011) who devised a series of governing principles for the use of social media in public administration: open information, open feedback, open innovation and open conversation. Open information is about the municipality providing information on public services in ways that are easy to find and use, open feedback states that the public should have the opportunity for a fair say about the public services, open conversation would support online consultation and collaboration and lastly open innovation addresses the changing expectations and brings concepts into practice.

Previous studies on Romanian municipalities addressed the social media usage of two small province town halls from a number of posts perspective (Urs, 2015) while another looked at the way the National Institute of Statistics uses Facebook (Nicolescu & Mirică, 2015). The National Institute of Statistic has developed internally a strategy for online communication using social media tools starting in 2014, being one of Romania's top institutions with notable social media presence.

This present study aims to present the presence of local public administration on Facebook for Romania's top five municipalities while putting the numbers into context with the number of citizens living in the respective cities.

METHODOLOGY

When choosing the social network we looked at the most used networks in Romania and Facebook has the most users (NapoleonCat.com, 2019). With close to 10 million user accounts from Romania, Facebook is the undisputed leader of social network use in Romania. The second network is a professional one, LinkedIn, which has close to 2 million users. Still, the number of users was not the most relevant as we had to choose the network where municipalities are present too and in this case Facebook is still the network in which we find official pages for the biggest municipalities.

In this case study, we decided to analyze the Facebook activity of the ten biggest municipalities in Romania: Bucharest, Iasi, Timisoara, Cluj-Napoca, Constanta, Craiova, Galati, Brasov, Ploiesti and Oradea. The case study was conducted in June 2020.

Most of the data was obtained directly from the Facebook page of the municipality while in some cases we used additional data from facebrands.ro which is a enrollement based service for social media monitoring and also a software tool called FacePager(Facepager, 2020) which is a tool that is able to extract public Facebook information. Both qualitative and quantitative methods are being used to analyze the data. The use of the quantitative method has been used by collecting data on each municipality regarding the number of citizens, the existance of its own social media page and the correctness and accuracy of data, the existance of a municipalite website that links to the social media page of the municipality, the number of social media followers and the total number of likes, the number of check-ins of citizens on the municipalities page. The number of citizens is the population of the city, the number of followers is the number of Facebook user accounts who are following the municipalities page, the number of likes is the total number of likes the municipality received for its posts, the number of check-ins is the number of times citizens used geographical tagging to place themselves at the location of the city hall and the people talking about the page metric is the number of people sharing stories or posts of the municipalities page, mentioning the page, posting on the page wall or asnwering a posted question.

Amongst the specific objectives of this paper we mention the intent to support the use of social media as a means of communication between citizens and municipalities, to provide a measure of the reach the social media pages of municipalies have amongst its citizens and to increase awarenes over the importance of collaborative engagement between municipalities and citizens.

RESULTS

From the city sample, we see that Bucharest stands out regarding the total population number. By far, Bucharest is the biggest city in the country and is about six times bigger than the second city. With a population of over 2 million it has only 24k followers on Facebook which means about 1.1% of the city’s populations is following or liking posts on the page, while just 0.015% of the population have checked in at the city hall and 0.005% are talking about the city hall. These are quite small numbers when reporting to the total number of residents.

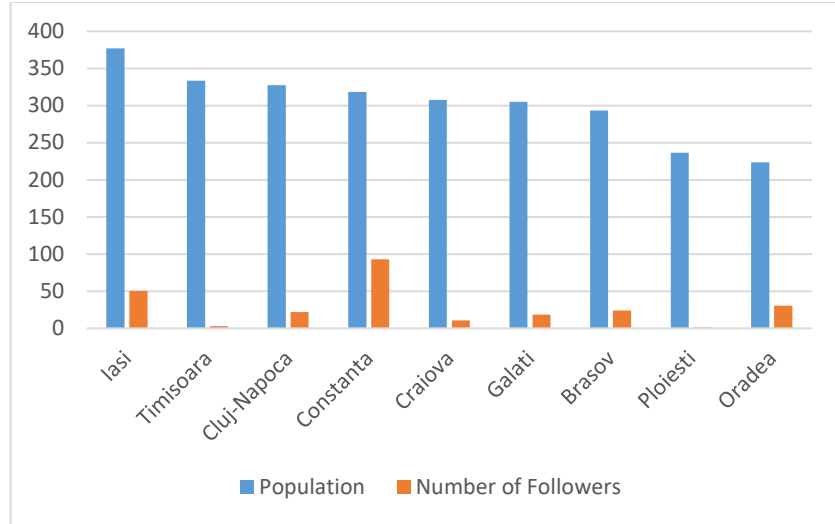
Table 1 Social media stats of municipalities

City Hall	Population	Number of Followers	Number of likes	Number of check-ins	People talking about the page
Bucharest	2.134.075	24.539	22.539	3.152	1.129
Iasi	377.132	50.442	45.495	8.797	2.240
Timisoara	333.587	2.956	2.999	204	106
Cluj-Napoca	327.563	21.811	19.695	2.128	947
Constanta	318.371	93.015	79.823	980	19.338
Craiova	307.638	10.802	10.191	3.284	-
Galati	305.177	18.596	17.778	482	658
Brasov	293.291	23.891	22.688	8.537	1.366
Ploiesti	236.649	1.071	976	-	15
Oradea	223.465	30.453	27.976	6.421	5.596

Source: data collection

There are a few cities that stand out when looking at the number of likes reported to the population size and they are Iasi, Constanta and Oradea. Iasi has about a number of followers which is almost 15% of the city’s size, Constanta is by far the best with a little over 30% and Oradea falling just short of 30%. We can see that Constanta, which is a highly touristic city, has the most followers out of all the cities, which may partially be because of its touristic potential and many users from different region of the country might follow the city halls page. Oradea is a city known for smart city innovations and the use of digitalization in public administration, thus is no surprise that its social media stats are above average.

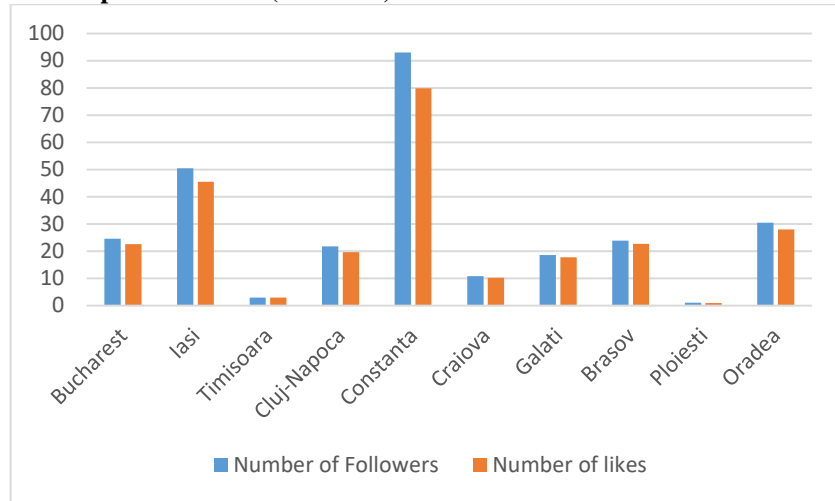
Figure 1 Population reported to number of followers (thousands)



The page with the most likes is also the page of the municipality of Constanta with close to 80k likes followed at a distance by Iasi with 45k and a few other cities in the 20k range. The number of check-ins shows the popularity of the page amongst citizens and their willingness to share with their network the fact that they are visiting the city hall. The most popular city halls are Iasi and Brasov with over 8k check-ins followed by Oradea with 6k and Craiova with 3k.

The number of people talking about the page shows the viral potential of the page. If the page posts or stories are being shared, they have the chance of being seen by a large network of people. By far the most popular page is the page of the municipality of Constanta, which has close to 20k such instances of shared content, followed by Oradea with over 5k while the other municipalities fall way behind.

Figure 2. Followers reported to likes (thousand)



Overall, we see great disparities amongst the social media activities or Romanian municipalities. We see better results for touristic cities and cities with good digitalization initiatives while other cities are falling short in social media presence and reach. Overall, we believe this is the result of the lack of a centralized process.

CONCLUSIONS

The results showed us a high presence of the main municipalities from Romania in Facebook social media pages as all of them had a page. We see great relative discrepancies between the numbers of followers some pages have reported to the number of citizens living in the city. As Bucharest is the largest city in number of people, it does not have a number of followers to match the average of the other cities. Although over 20k followers is not a bad number amongst our case study group, when reporting that to the population it falls amongst the last.

There is good social media gain in capitalizing on a city's strengths, like tourism in the case of Constanta. The touristic aspect of the city can be leveraged to incite users to talk online about the city or share posts from its page, while strong digitalization initiatives like in Oradea are lifting up even the social media presence aspect of digitalization.

There is room for great progress for the municipalities in this area as posts from the pages range over a variety of categories, from landscapes around the city to city council meeting to street cleaning schedules, which in most cases are posted as they happen. A clear social media strategy should be defined by the municipalities to include specific topics that the municipality engages citizens over social media. On the social aspect, none of the pages had a dedicated survey section where to gauge public opinion.

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