THE PRESENCE OF THE ROMANIAN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract: Social media has transformed the way people around the world communicate, and its use in different sectors of social life has steadily grown. Considering the success it enjoys among the general public, it is very likely to be used also in local public administration. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, blogs and many others have begun to be used as tools for communicating with citizens, with the aim of increasing the degree of information and interaction, on one hand, and, on the other, of making the act of governance more transparent. The present study intends to provide an assessment of the ways in which local government institutions use social media to communicate their actions.

Keywords: social media, communication, public administration, Facebook

1. Introduction

Although originally the transmission of information via the Internet was unidirectional, starting with the middle of the last decade, the emphasis has increasingly fallen on user collaboration and the creation of social networks. These have mainly revolutionized private sector communication and their use in various sectors of social life has steadily increased. Moreover, today, due to the increasing need of informing and interacting with citizens, they are used also in the public domain (Burcea and Hârțescu, 2014.). In recent years, Facebook has consolidated its social network position in Romania, a fact revealed by demographic data from 2016 indicating more than 9 million users, whereas Twitter registered only 300,000 accounts, out of which only 1 of 11 is active monthly. Instagram had about 420,000 users in June 2016.

Regarding the adoption of social media in public sector communication, Mergel and Bretschneider present it as a three-stage process. First, new technologies or applications are experienced by public institutions at an informal level. Then, as the degree of use increases, organizations introduce rules and procedures, aiming to diminish informal communication. Finally, they establish clear rules and procedures on how communication is made. The type of content approved, the creation of separate departments and well-established attributions lead to the integration of the new technologies, which are no longer seen as novelty, into the technology mix used by institutions (Mergel and Bretschneider, 2013).

In Romania, the Internet usage in 2014 was 47.7%. Out of these citizens, 67% (or 36.3% of the total population) regularly access social networks. In the newspaper *Capital* dated October 11, 2016, ANCOM (National Authority for Management and Regulation in Communications) reports that the degree of mobile Internet coverage reached 95% in mid-2016. Broadband mobile Internet reached

14.8 million connections, respectively 75% coverage per 100 inhabitants, i.e. up to 10 percentage points more than in June 2015. Mobile broadband subscriptions represent 65% of all connections, i.e. an annual growth of more than 28%, while prepaid calling connections decreased by 3%, reaching 5.2 million. Average monthly traffic for each connection has almost doubled since the first semester of 2015, from 0.33 GB to 0.63 GB, according to the latest statistic data regarding the electronic communications market in Romania, published by ANCOM.

A relatively high adoption of social media in public administration has been highlighted by two studies in this field carried out in Romania. Urs (2016) assessed the Facebook accounts of Romanian Town Halls.

> "Eight of them (17%) were not present on Facebook at the time of the study, five published less than five posts in the observed period. 19 Town Halls (40%) have published more than 100 posts in 454 days (574 on average). The pages with the highest number of followers are those presented by the Town Halls; on average, the analyzed Facebook pages had 15,260 followers" (Jukić and Merlak 2016).

Another research in the Romanian environment was carried out by Nicolescu and Mirica (2015), who evaluated the use of Facebook at the National Institute of Statistics in Romania.

> "They have identified several benefits of social media use in the field of official statistics, such as: increasing statistical literacy, increasing the popularity of statistics, presenting statistical agencies as attractive employers and improving the image of statistical organizations" (Jukić and Merlak 2016).

Based on the data gathered, the present study aims to bring to the fore the presence of the central public administration, respectively of the Romanian ministries, on the social media, since "the means of social communication represent an effective means for the government to improve citizens' confidence in the government by improving their perception of government transparency" (Song and Lee 2016).

2. Methodological Aspects

The objectives of the research focus on the following aspects:
- Analysis of the presence of the ministries (Central Public Administration) in the online environment
- Identification of the main communication platforms used by the Central Public Administration in the online environment
- Analysis of the mode of communication of each ministry in the current Government in the online environment.

2.1. Methodology

The survey was conducted between January and March 2017, and included only the ministries that subscribed their Facebook page to facebrands.ro. Facebrands.ro is a service that allows social networking owners to monitor the evolution of the page, build the profile of virtual visitors and anticipate their needs and preferences. The service records the number of likes per each page and sets rankings for different page categories, highlighting both increases and decreases in the number of likes received during a given timeframe. In this case, the category followed on facebrands.ro, the one

in which the 24 ministries were registered, was that belonging to State Institutions, which at the time of the study had 111 records. It is worth mentioning that only 11 out of the 24 ministries have registered their official page on facebrands.ro.

The study combines quantitative and qualitative methods, this paradigmatic approach being increasingly used in researches on complex issues, such as institutional analysis, administration-citizen relation, community development, etc.

The use of the quantitative method has been operationalized by collecting data belonging to each ministry present on the online environment regarding:

- the existence of its own site,
- the currentness and accuracy of data,
- the existence of links to social networking sites on the web page,
- the existence of a Facebook page,
- the place occupied in the facebrands.ro ranking (only for the ministries that subscribed to facebrands.ro),
- the social platforms that the ministries use to inform and interact with citizens,
- the accessibility, types of posts, number of posts, and
- the number of followers.

The qualitative interpretation focused on the attractiveness, fluency and coherence of the information displayed by each ministry.

3. Results

In order to obtain a broad view on the situation of the presence of the ministries in the online environment and their use of social platforms to depict their activity and, at the same time, to communicate and inform the citizens, a ranking has been made according to their visibility in the online environment. The main criterion was the number of followers on the Facebook platform. The table includes also information about the social media platforms they use in communicating public information, the number of posts between January-March 2017 and the number of posts with multimedia content displayed on their official site.

MINISTRY		Rank occupied on facebrands.ro/ no. of followers	Facebook / no. of posts (January - March 2017)	Number of posts with multimedia content
Ministry of National Defence		Rank 1/ 306.450 followers	316	146
Ministry of Internal Affairs		Rank 3/ 119.772 followers	207	42
Ministry of Tourism		Rank 13/ 46.912 followers	300	16
Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development		Rank 20/ 33.702 followers	125	1
Ministry of Foreign Affairs		Rank 23/ 26.954 followers	64	0

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Ministry of Environment		Rank 38/ 12.312 followers	37	5
Ministry of Public Consultation and Social Dialogue		Rank 39/ 12.148 followers	200	15
Ministry of Regional Development, Public Administration and European Funds		Rank 40 / 11.693 followers	150	15
Ministry of Youth and Sports		Rank 44/ 11.334 followers	75	5
Ministry of Transport		Rank 47/ 10.904 followers	110	6
Ministry of Public Finance		Rank 49/ 9.713 followers	60	0

Table 1. Ministries' visibility in the online environment

The content proposed by the ministries to their followers on their web pages and the ways they interact with them differ from one ministry to another. The most important aspects are described below, as follows:

a) The Ministry of National Defence uses predominantly pictures and videos to keep its followers up to date with its activities. The site is well-structured, presents useful information for the population and contains a section dedicated to media activity (press releases, communication team, etc.). At the bottom of the page, it provides useful links to other internal or external institutions and shows some icons that link to the other social platforms used, i.e. Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. On Facebook, the Ministry of National Defence has a constant increase in the number of likes due to constant informative posts (about 4-5 posts/day). It posts videos from events or military exercises and, at the same time, greetings for different occasions, etc. The ministry's staff neither posted polls nor responded to the comments on the page during the analyzed interval. On Twitter, it has constant posts on the latest news in the field of national defense. The posts on Twitter are different from those on Facebook - Twitter only posts in relation to news, visits, etc. Twitter does not show a significant number of posts likes, 3-10 likes/post, while, on YouTube, the institution has no activity for almost a year.

b) The Ministry of Internal Affairs has a site that is well-organized into categories, in which both the ministry and its communication team are described. It presents the latest news about the ministry's activities (visits, decisions, events, etc.) and also the links to the other social platforms used (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram). On Facebook, the number of followers is rising, the posts are informative and offer the public the opportunity to get to know the members of the ministry, and also the activities they are carrying on. During the period analyzed, the ministry did not post polls and did not respond to the comments on the page. On Twitter, it has approximately similar posts to those on Facebook; but it does not post with the same

frequency as on Facebook. The number of liked posts is low (about 2 likes/post), they do not receive comments, but, every posting has a link to the website. On the YouTube channel, the registered activity is of 1-4 posts/week; the videos present the minister's participation in various public events, meetings and press statements. The ministry has 481 subscribers to its channel (30-140 views/video). The Instagram page differs by the type of existing posts, as it focuses on the transmission of significant images from the activities performed, or from various anniversary moments, etc. The photos have many likes (thousands of them) and even comments. The number of posts is 3-4 times/week.

c) The Ministry of Tourism has a well-organized site, but, unlike the previous ministries, it focuses on images instead of texts. This may expose it to the risk of not being very visually attractive from the point of view of aesthetics. The site has several icons that directly link to other platforms used. However, placing them at the end of the page is not a good strategy. Moreover, the icons are not arranged, appearing disordered (see Palmer 2002, Stoian 2015 on web page layout and multimodality). Not all the platforms used have a link on the site; Instagram and Twitter are missing.

On Facebook, there are about 3-4 posts/day, regarding events organized throughout the country, aimed at promoting Romania. The number of followers is growing due to constant posting. The posts have an increased visibility, with over 150 likes/post, dozens of comments and about 15-30 redistributions. The ministry did not post polls in the period analyzed, but, depending on the subject, it provided 1-2 answers to the comments on the page. Posts on Twitter are not as constant as on Facebook and have as topic the promotion of various cities in Romania. Each post is accompanied by at least one hashtag containing keywords. On the YouTube channel, the ministry did not post at all since it was taken over by the new team. Its Instagram page was closed, whereas on Google+, it did not have any activity during the observation period.

d) The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development has a well-organized website with a content rich in information and many significant photos of its activities and organized events. The site contains a link only to the Facebook platform. The Facebook page presents different public information, as well as laws, projects and changes. Each post provides a link to the site. The ministry neither posted polls nor responded to the comments on the page during the range of time analyzed.

e) The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' site is well-structured, the information is organized into categories, being easier to identify. The latest news are in the middle of the page, and messages of major importance are posted at the bottom of the page (such as the areas to be avoided due to certain dangers). At the bottom-right of the page, there are links to other social platforms, which indicate the latest posts on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr. On Facebook, the number of likes received by the page is, also in this case, rising. The posts are constant and include useful information, such as sessions, events, competitions, international days, etc. The variety of content attracts the number of followers. During the analyzed period, the ministry did not post polls and did not respond to the comments on the page. On Twitter, the posts are constant, about 1-2 posts each day, relatively the same as those on Facebook, and they focus on information. On YouTube, videos are posted about once/twice a week,

with maximum 100 views/video, which contain press releases on various topics. On Flickr, the ministry presents images from various events, meetings from numerous visits, sessions, etc. The number of followers in this case is relatively low.

f) The Ministry of Environment has a well-structured website, providing the appropriate information for the public. The site also presents different actions on environmental issues and details of the various measures taken in this area. There are no links to social platforms, but there are useful links to other ministries, placed at the bottom of the page. The Facebook page of the ministry contains information on new regulations, visits and press releases. Information is not posted very constantly – once a day, or even once every two to three days. The number of likes has been increasing; however, this growth did not exceed 50 followers during the observed period. The number of likes is up to 100/post. During the time span focused, there were observed no polls nor answers to comments on this page.

g) The Ministry of Public Consultation and Social Dialogue has a website well-structured into categories, in which news, press releases, but also a range of useful documents are presented. The site provides the public with the opportunity to participate in online debates launched by the institution. There are no direct links to other social platforms or links to other institutions. On the Facebook page, posts are constant, daily and well centered on the topic. They include photos of official meetings, sessions, etc. Citizens are constantly invited to dialogue, strategy aiming at showing the ministry's transparency. Generally, the ministry responds to the citizens' comments. The posts from Facebook are in full agreement with the "News" section of the website.

h) The Ministry of Regional Development, Public Administration and European Funds has a site that is organized into categories and presents the latest news in its central part, being easy to visualize. In addition, it offers the possibility of signing petitions online. At the bottom of the page, there are four icons that link to other social platforms used to inform and communicate with citizens. The posts on its Facebook page are daily; sometimes posting happens twice a day and provides information on official visits, decisions, regulations, etc. They do not receive an increased number of likes - about 20 likes/post, nor do they have many distributions - about 10-12 distributions. On Twitter, posts are similar to those on Facebook, because they are synchronized, each post is accompanied by a significant photo for the subject presented. On Twitter, there is also a direct link to the website. Although the ministry has a channel on YouTube, there was no activity recorded during the monitoring period. The same was observed for Flickr, there exists an account, but nothing was posted while monitored.

i) The Ministry of Youth and Sports owns a site organized into categories, providing useful information to the public. Information on competitions, sports Olympics, etc. is also presented on the site. It includes even a short poll question. The ministry's website has absolutely no link to other platforms used. The posts on Facebook are accompanied by photos and, even, by a link to the website. They present competitions, sports Olympics, official visits, press releases, or various press articles focusing on Romanian sport. The institution does not respond to the comments made on the page, but has published a poll.

j) The Ministry of Transport uses the most numerous communication platforms in the online environment. The site is well-organized into categories and includes icons that link directly to the other platforms used, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Pinterest, Flickr, and Google+. The posts on Facebook are informative and have a

maximum of 130 likes. The institution does not respond to comments. On Twitter, posts are synchronized with those on Facebook, but do not have a high number of likes. On YouTube, no activity was recorded during the monitoring period. On Instagram, images from various events are displayed, but the posts are not daily and do not have a high number of likes. Although the ministry has an account on Pinterest, it does not have followers. On Flickr, the images are the same as on Instagram, but there is no significant activity recorded, having just one follower. On Google+, no activity has been recorded in the last month and the ministry has only 20 followers.

k) The Ministry of Public Finance has a site that is well-organized into categories, the information being ordered according to its importance. The most important categories are visible, easy to identify in the central parts of the page. The site presents press releases, public information, as well as helpful links for those interested. Although there are references to two platforms used - Facebook and Twitter - they cannot be accessed directly from the site. Posts on Facebook are informative and constant - once a day. The number of likes on Facebook is rising, but this growth is low. On Twitter, posts are synchronized with those on Facebook; they contain only text and no photos. There are no responses to postings, comments or likes.

4. Conclusions

The social network by means of which ministries choose to inform and communicate with citizens is Facebook, a platform that is found in all the analyzed situations. In most cases, messages are not adapted to the characteristics of this social network, which is primarily based on interaction. Communication is unidirectional, the representatives of the institutions do not respond to the comments left by the visitors of the page, which leads to a rather small number of followers of the official pages of the ministries. The use of social platforms alternative to the Facebook network is rather limited and is done either by taking information from this platform or by using inconsistently other networks that are not so popular among users. To conclude, it seems that the Romanian ministries use social media as just another website where official information, press releases, official announcements, etc. are placed. They are still at a first stage in their use of modern means of institutional communication. In most of the cases studied, the way of interacting with citizens should be improved by exploiting the potential offered by social networks. This would ensure a better transparency of governance, better information and communication with citizens and citizens' greater involvement in the decision-making process of representative public authorities.

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