



Characteristics of Communication through Online Social Networks in Central Public Institutions in Romania

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Abstract: *This paper examines how central public institutions in Romania use social media to communicate with citizens. The study investigates how these institutions use Facebook to engage with their target audiences and what factors influence the number of followers they have. The research methodology involves examining the activity of the Facebook pages of these institutions. The findings reveal significant differences in fan engagement across different pages. Moreover, post types and frequency do not have a high impact on page growth compared to the number of shares. The results highlight that although there is a communication plan in place by the central public administration in Romania, there is no uniform communication across the ministries.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication is one of the most important aspects that facilitate the smooth functioning of society and the interactions that take place in this sphere. According to Ihlen and Heath (2018, p. 3), organizations need to communicate to be able to convey their messages and values to their stakeholders. The last decades have been challenging for organizations as they have faced a dynamic environment characterized by specialization of work, outsourcing of various processes, globalization, and more. Technology has been an area of accelerated expansion that organizations have had to keep pace with. Social networks have a positive impact on the work of public institutions, with benefits such as increased citizen engagement (Kleinhans et al., 2015), transparent communication and streamlined communication processes.

2. PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS AND SOCIAL MEDIA ADAPTATION

Urs (2015, p. 127) states, “The need to use social media is also related to the obvious fact that by not participating in the discussion, public institutions would lose the possibility of setting or influencing the public agenda and would have to play the role of <<firefighter>> all the time, trying to extinguish the flames of controversies after they have turned into fires”. Society tends to move quickly and accept the benefits that social media offers in this regard, and public institutions cannot be left behind. An institution’s online presence allows it to keep abreast of what citizens think about it, giving it the ability to easily and quickly debunk false information that denigrates the organization. According to Karakiza (2015, p. 385), these technologies can reshape the old public sector model because they offer many opportunities that: increase government transparency and trust in government. By adopting these tools, governments can get closer to

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their followers by creating close connections that facilitate the dissemination of information. These social technologies have made it easier for government organizations to fulfill their mission. What is the difference between public and private sector communication?

Public sector organizations are first and foremost a legitimate power that cannot function properly without respect for democracy (or force in the case of totalitarian regimes). Moreover, these public sector organizations operate on a case-by-case basis at the national, regional or local level. They include both politically elected individuals (e.g., mayors, local councilors, ministers, etc.) and appointed officials and volunteers. Although the public sector is becoming increasingly similar to the private sector, there are still certain characteristics that set it apart.

First, decisions are much harder to make in public organizations than in private organizations. This is due to the multitude of procedures and processes that must be followed in order to make a decision. All decisions in public institutions follow a long and laborious path before they are made. This makes the decision-making process very difficult and delays the smooth running of things. [Bjornholt and Houlberg Salomonsen \(2015, p. 513\)](#) found that public institutions argue with and through the political environment, which affects resources, time, staff, and goals. Since the political environment is constantly changing and institutions are directly linked to this environment, they must adapt and act accordingly. This entanglement in the political environment can create uncertainty and various disruptions in the information and public relations work that an institution undertakes.

Second, the often intangible nature of the services provided by the public sector makes it difficult to analyze the impact and success of the final product. For this reason, citizens often have the impression that these institutions are not well-sized and that the resources used by some of them are far too large. According to [Falco and Kleihans \(2018, p. 1\)](#), social media is increasingly used to communicate and transmit information to followers. However, government interaction on social platforms requires a different approach than traditional communication through press releases, official addresses, etc. With the help of social platforms, government institutions can increase citizens' trust in the institution by forming opinions that are shared by citizens, thus increasing the impact of messages sent by citizens through these tools. According to [Mergel and Bretschneider \(2013\)](#), as with other information and communication technologies, which were initially designed for personal and commercial use, three stages are required.

In the first phase, called experimentation and intrapreneurship, these technologies are used by members of the organization for personal purposes, without any work activity. This also applies to social media tools, as these platforms are initially used by individuals for non-business purposes. The second phase, called chaos ordering, is an intermediate phase of the process in which parts of the technologies offered by the new platforms are selected and tested by different actors in the organization in order to be implemented within the organization. Even if the intrapreneurs who have tested the functionalities for their own purposes have found various easy uses for them, the risks to which information and data are exposed by using these functionalities must also be considered. In this respect, the organization would have to go through some processes to implement and standardize these functionalities. The last stage, the third stage, called institutionalization, is when the use of this procedure makes no difference, regardless of who uses it in the organization. However, this aspect is overestimated, because in the case of custom in practice, there is a constant implementation of new elements and their testing. The only novelty at this stage is that the organization has established standards, rules and procedures to control the process and has allocated various resources to carry out these activities.

The principles of the Open Government Partnership - participation, collaboration, and transparency - are the foundation for these changes, and as Schnell (2020, p. 1609) reports, the combination of technology, with all its benefits, and open government is a mix that has the potential to strengthen the exercise of civil rights and liberties.

According to Criado and Villodre (2020, p. 255), the potential for communication and interaction offered by social media has attracted the interest of the academic community in the impact of Web 2.0 in public administration in recent years. In light of this, more emphasis should be placed on online communication by institutions to facilitate all interactions that citizens have with government agencies. Bertot et al. (2010, p. 266) found that the opportunities arising from the implementation of social media tools by public administrations are: engagement, direct participation and co-productivity. In addition, when communication becomes two-way, citizens are encouraged to become more active in government processes and public policies, increasing their activity and taking an active role in transforming public services.

3. COMMUNICATION IN ROMANIAN GOVERNMENTAL INSTITUTIONS

Urs (2022) notes that for Romania, a high presence on Facebook (Briciu & Briciu, 2021) has been identified, as it is the most used social network among public institutions. In terms of the total number of active users of online social networks in Romania, it amounts to 13.3 million people or 69.7% of the population. Of these, according to the same study, 9.9 million are Facebook users. Briciu and Văcaru (2021, p. 301) stated that the management of public content, on the Internet, is becoming a specific activity for both communication specialists and HR.

Badea (2014, p. 70) stated that “public opinion has the opportunity to have its say, this mode of communication is also an opportunity to reach the target audience more easily”. Thus, it can be considered that the use of social networks at this level is an opportunity to reach out to citizens and ask for their opinions to achieve different public policies and more. Even if the above-mentioned study shows that the overwhelming majority of the Romanian population belongs to the category of social media users, over time, various limitations have also been identified, resulting from hesitant users who do not know how to use social media, and whether it is the uncertainty of the users or the reluctance of the organizational environment to adapt, all these aspects represent an obstacle to the modernization of the way of communicating with citizens.

According to Zeru (2021, p. 214), the relationship between citizens and authorities is changing thanks to technological progress, an aspect that also influences government communication, these communication channels need to be thought through and planned in detail because the success of government communication depends on the quality of the relationship between organizations and their audiences.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND STATISTICAL DATA

This research aims to identify and measure the impact of online communication by central public institutions in Romania on target audiences. This study answers the following questions: (1) How do public institutions in the Romanian central apparatus use the social network Facebook to communicate and maintain a relationship with citizen-followers? (2) How engaged are citizen-followers with the Facebook pages of the Romanian central administration? (3) What factors influence the number of followers of central public institutions in Romania?

The research methodology includes two types of research, analyzing the activity of the Facebook pages of the institutions included in the study: Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of National Defense, Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Energy, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Ministry of Environment, Water and Forests, Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration, Ministry of Investment and European Projects, Ministry of Labor and Social Solidarity, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Tourism, Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digitization, Ministry of Family, Youth and Equal Opportunities, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Sport and the Government of Romania.

The research was conducted using the research design developed by [Bonsón and Ratkai \(2013\)](#) and presented in Table 1, as well as an inferential analysis based on a regression model.

Table 1. Metrics for Stakeholder Engagement

Popularity	P1	Number of posts liked/total posts	Percentage of posts that have been liked
	P2	Total likes/total number of posts	Average number of likes per post
	P3	$(P2/\text{number of fans}) \times 1,000$	Average number of likes per post per 1,000 fans
Commitment	C1	Number of posts commented/total posts	Percentage of posts that have been commented
	C2	Total comments/total number of posts	Average number of comments per post
	C3	$(C2/\text{number of fans}) \times 1,000$	Average number of comments per post per 1,000 fans
Virality	V1	Number of posts shared/total posts	Percentage of posts that have been shared
	V2	Total shares/total number of posts	Average number of shares per post
	V3	$(V2/\text{number of fans}) \times 1,000$	Average number of shares per post per 1,000 fans
Engagement	E	$P3+C3+V3$	Stakeholder engagement index

Source: [Bonsón and Ratkai, 2013](#)

The period for which the analysis was conducted is 90 days, from October 14, 2022, to January 11, 2023.

In terms of activity and number of fans recorded on the Facebook social platform pages of the analyzed institutions, the following values were identified, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Level of activity and number of fans of the public institutions analyzed

	Activity	Number of fans
Mean	134.62	154,657.14
Median	128.00	46,000
Minimum	14	4,300
Maximum	283	954,000
Standard Deviation	83.058	248,823.913

Source: Own calculations

As far as the number of fans is concerned, an average of 154,657 fans was recorded for this variable. However, at the sample level, high heterogeneity was found, with the institutions included in the study having between 4,300 and 954,000 fans. This may be because some public institutions have a lower profile among their followers, which may be related to the field in which the ministry is active, or to the evolution of the government's composition, which has been characterized by an unstable number of ministries, some of which were created later.

Table 3 presents four indicators used to measure the level of interaction/ engagement that public institutions have with citizens through their pages on the social platform Facebook.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of main variables

	Level of popularity (P3)	Level of commitment (C3)	Level of virality (V3)	Engagement (P3+C3+V3)
Mean	2.4803	0.5589	0.4663	3.2610
Median	0.9336	0.1704	0.2461	1.4600
Minimum	0.2222	0.0125	0.0187	0.2610
Maximum	21.3140	5.2842	2.6980	26.5058
Std Deviation	4.5830	1.2010	0.7182	5.7329

Source: Own calculations

As can be seen in Table 3, there is a significant difference between the mean of the popularity level (2.4803) and the mean of the commitment level (0.5589) and the virality level (0.4663). The value of the standard deviation again confirms the lack of homogeneity of the subjects included in the research. The values recorded for the variables measuring the level of stakeholder engagement confirm those previously confirmed regarding the heterogeneity present among the institutions analyzed in terms of the relationship with citizens, with a mean of 3.2610, a median of 1.46 and a high standard deviation of a value of 5.7329.

Regarding the correlation of these engagement variables with the activity of the analyzed pages, according to Table 4, there were no significant correlations, the indicators having values in the range (-0.315 and +0.001). These results indicate that there is no significant relationship between page activity and the level of citizen engagement. Thus, increasing the number of posts is not necessary to increase the level of engagement that citizen-followers have with page activity.

Table 4. Correlation coefficients of the variables

	Activity
P3	-0.273
C3	0.001
V3	-0.315
I	-0.288

Source: Own calculations

Moreover, to identify a possible correlation between the number of fans and different variables present in the functioning of these dedicated pages on Facebook social networks, the authors conducted an inferential analysis consisting of a simple linear regression.

At the same time, in the researchers' attempt to identify a possible correlation between the number of fans that a page of one of the public institutions of the Romanian central government has, the analysis also includes an inferential analysis carried out using a regression model. First, Table 5 presents the main descriptive statistics of the variables used, in terms of mean, mean square deviation, minimum and maximum.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of main variables

Name of the variable	No. of observations	Mean	Std error	Minimum	Maximum
Number of fans	21	191480.4	289919.1	289	954,000
P2	21	257.2543	623.7176	6.33	2615.66
C2	21	42.16402	102.5555	0.94149	459.875
V2	21	36.20901	68.65795	0.72781	272.625
I	21	3.256794	5.73283	0.26058	26.5058
Number of posts	21	134.619	83.0581	14	283
Number of links	21	44.004,14	111.648,8	641	417,441
Facebook Check Status	21	0.952381	0.2182179	0	1

Source: Own calculations

As can be seen in Table 5, an analysis was made of the data that these Facebook pages presented at the time of this study, between October 14, 2022 and January 11, 2023. In terms of the subjects analyzed, the page with the highest number of Facebook followers is the page of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. To study this phenomenon, the following table has been prepared, which shows the correlation coefficient that the descriptive and independent variables have. From this table, as expected, the variables have values in the range [-1, +1], an aspect that confirms a low correlation between the variables, giving us additional certainty regarding the use of these variables in performing the regression.

Table 6. Correlation coefficients of the explanatory variables in the regression model

	No. of fans	P2	C2	V2	I	No. of posts	No. of likes	Facebook Check Status
No. of fans	1							
P2	0.7331	1						
C2	0.6972	0.9573	1					
V2	0.7659	0.9640	0.9311	1				
I	-0.1598	0.0043	-0.0223	-0.0219	1			
No. of posts	0.3212	0.1900	0.0928	0.1448	-0.2878	1		
No. of likes	0.6889	0.9148	0.7847	0.8991	-0.0242	0.3626	1	
Facebook Check Status	0.1479	0.0608	0.0702	0.0821	-0.9292	0.2610	0.828	1

Source: Own calculations

In this analysis, presented in Table 6, the authors aimed to find out whether the activity of a ministry has an impact on the engagement and connection that citizens pursue with the work of their ministry.

Table 7. Reporting regression model results

Explanatory variable	Regression coefficient	Standard deviation
Average number of likes per post	555.5844***	646.8446
Average number of comments per post	-2675.121***	2756.141
Average number of distributions per post	5444.38***	2851.059
Stakeholder Engagement Index	-23510.37***	22491.03
Number of posts	1025.589***	695.557
Number of likes	-2.352725***	1.980935
Facebook Check Status	-528604.4***	576221.7
The constant	509679.2***	628467

Source: Own calculations

From Table 7 we can see that as the number of likes a post receives increases, there is a tendency for the number of fans to increase. This can be explained by the reaction, of whatever type so that the user marks that he has seen this post and that he likes it, or that it triggers different feelings depending on the reaction he applies to the post. At the same time, according to this study, an increased number of comments on a post, leads to a decrease in the number of fans, probably because these comments are often not always positive.

As for the increase in the average number of shares that a post receives, this leads to an increase in the number of fans of the pages analyzed, which is not particularly surprising, since increasing the number of shares that a post receives, certainly reaches a greater number of people, friends on Facebook. According to the data, the increase in the average number of shares per post is a highly significant variable, because if this variable increases by one point, the number of fans is expected to increase by 5444.38*** (1% significance level).

The Stakeholder Engagement Index is a variable showing how engaged citizen followers are with the page and is composed of the activity they have with the page and their interaction with it. Thus, according to the study, as the engagement index increases, the number of fans decreases. This index is composed of the variables presented above, coded V3, P3 and C3, variables that process the data of all the pages to compare these indicators, these variables are reported on a number of 1,000 fans, so that the data can be compared without differences between pages.

As for the number of posts, this has a positive impact in terms of the number of fans, because by increasing the number of posts, the page increases its notoriety and appears more often in the feed, becoming visible and through these appearances, it has the opportunity to attract new citizen-fans to their community.

Similarly, in the case of the total number of likes, a negative influence can be identified, although small compared to the other regression coefficients. This shows that an ideal that the page of these institutions should have, is not to increase the number of likes, but to make content that makes people distribute it to reach more people and thus increase the number of hits and subscriptions that a page has.

As for the Facebook Check Status variable, it is different from the others, as it is a dummy variable. In this research, the variable measures whether a page has that tick that Facebook gives to official pages or not. As can be seen, this variable has a regression coefficient of 528604.4***(1% significance level), which shows the importance that this value has for a page and the number of fans that page has. If the page does not receive this verification from the online social network, the number of followers is substantially lower according to the data in the study.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Several aspects of the research were found and are explained below.

Firstly, even though they operate within the same government, all the institutions analysed, being ministries or the government institution itself, show high heterogeneity in terms of the number of fans and the number of posts. This occurred as a result of a different engagement in terms of the communication that these central institutions make with citizen-followers through the online social platform analyzed (Facebook), with a large discrepancy in followers (minimum number of 4,300 followers and maximum number of 954,000 followers), representing approximately 222 times more followers for the most followed ministry compared to the ministry with the lowest number of followers.

Secondly, in terms of popularity, level of engagement, level of virality and finally, the stakeholder engagement level index, these values present a novelty for this research, as the highest stakeholder engagement index (26.51) is recorded by the Ministry of Family, Youth and Equal Opportunities, a ministry that distinguished by having the lowest number of followers on the social platform (4,300). Thus, these values show that in the case of this ministry, even if there is not a high number of followers forming the community around it, the quality that they have greatly increased the level of engagement for this ministry. Specific tests were also carried out to determine the level of correlation between these variables mentioned above (popularity, level of engagement, level of virality and index of level of engagement) and the activity that a page has, as they are not correlated.

Third, to find a possible link between the number of fans and the different variables that ensure the proper functioning of these Facebook pages, a simple linear regression was performed. In order to be sure that this regression model is correct, the correlation between the variables included in the study was checked; there are seven of them (average number of likes/posts, average number of comments per post, average number of shares per post, stakeholder engagement level index, number of posts, number of likes, Facebook Check Status), and as a result values in the range [-1, 1] were obtained, which eliminates the possible existence of a correlation between the independent variables. After performing regression, the authors found that, of the variables included in the study, the highest impact had the average number of shares per post which showed a regression coefficient of 5444.38, a result that proves that the shares a Facebook page receives are a relevant factor for their growth. At the opposite pole is the dummy variable on Facebook Check Status, which has a value of -528,604.4. Thus, in the study, pages that are not verified by Facebook tend to have a lower number of followers.

6. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future research can use these tools to analyze other areas of communication, such as County Councils, Town Halls, and other websites. In this study, these tools were used to analyze the interaction, engagement and factors influencing the activity and proper functioning of these sites.

Due to the location of the institutions analyzed, i.e. in the Romanian capital Bucharest, it was not possible to make a comparison based on the areas of origin of these institutions, as could be done for the other types of public institutions mentioned above.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper used inferential analysis to analyze the pages that these institutions have on the social platform Facebook. The results of the analysis showed that as the number of shares of posts increased, an increase in the number of followers was observed. [Oviedo-García et al. \(2014\)](#) stated that the action of sharing requires more effort, which causes the post to appear on each individual's page, thus creating an association between the post and the individual that is seen by everyone in the individual's friend list.

Although there is a communication plan for the central public administration in Romania, there is no unified communication among the ministries ([Zeru et al., 2023](#)) that make up the Romanian government. The reasons for this are different areas of activity, different audiences, and even poor communication between departments. These factors represent barriers that have a strong impact on the effectiveness of communication and beyond ([Briciu et al., 2020](#)). Therefore, it is necessary to optimize and reduce the impact of political and human factors.

To achieve more effective communication through social networks, it is necessary to correctly identify the target audience that the institution has. It is also necessary to develop a communication strategy with clear objectives that meet the needs that the institution has, and finally, it is necessary to produce relevant content for these audiences, which are different from institution to institution, so homogenization and uniformity among these institutions is impossible.

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