

REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC AND SLOVAKIA AND COMMUNICATION WITH THE PUBLIC USING SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract: The two past decades have seen changes in communication between regional government and the public. Namely, the new Y and Z generations are skilled in ICT use and accustomed to immediate access to information using Internet. They also expect not only information but also interactive communication using ICT to be personal and tailored to their specific needs. Governments, including regional governments, have to improve the way they communicate with the public and also include social media in integral marketing communication. Some regional governments put a great deal of emphasis on their social media strategies. On the contrary, some regional governments are not yet able to use social media to communicate with the public. The results of this study show how regional governments from the Czech Republic and Slovakia use social media in 2019. The study is focused on specific aspects of Public Relations and provides ideas for how regional governments can better communicate with their target groups using social media such as Facebook and Youtube.

Keywords: Communication with the public, Facebook, regional governments, social media, YouTube

JEL Classification: M39, M38

INTRODUCTION

Many institutions still lack a strategy of how to integrate social media (SM) into their marketing communication with the public. The process of incorporating social media into traditional communication tools is not simple but SM offer institutions a new and effective way to communicate with young people (but should be used for interaction not only with young people). These days the following three factors are considered as key principles for successful communication on Internet: trust, authority and relevance not only from the SEO point of view (Clarke, 2019).

Generally, current websites of companies and other institutions offer a more dynamic and richer platform, more instant and personal communication and more informational design options for communication with the public. Effective communication via an institution's website and social media sites is regarded as a crucial determinant of an institution's ability to successfully reach their target public. The presented study is focused on regional governments' social media sites in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. We investigated how regional governments use their social media in the communication process with the public.

The Czech Republic is a landlocked country in Central Europe. The Czech Republic has been a member of Visegrad Group since 1991 (in 1993, the Czech Republic and Slovakia became independent members of the V4 group). All the V4 countries aspired to become members of the European Union and achieved this aim in 2004 (1st May) when they all became members of the EU (Visegrad Group, 2019).

In the Czech Republic, in accordance with the law on regions, a region is considered a territorial community of citizens who have the right to self-government. At the same time, a region is a public corporation with its own property that it administrates independently under the conditions stipulated by law and in accordance with its budget. Within the framework of their own creation of norms, regions issue commonly binding regional ordinances pertaining to issues within the region's independent competence. They can issue commonly binding ordinances, co-ordinate, approve and secure territorial development

programmes, approve land zoning documentation for the region's territory, establish measures to develop regional tourism, and decide on basic transportation services in the region (Assembly of European Regions, 2019).

The Czech Republic is divided into 13 regions and one capital city, Prague, thus fourteen greater territorial self-governing units of the State. According to EU statistics, these fourteen units are considered NUTS 3 regions.

The development potential of the regions of the Czech Republic and the evaluation of regional disparities is revealed by Jánský (2016), Kvičalová, Mazalová, & Široký (2014), Svobodová, Dömeová, & Jindrová (2018) and in a detailed manner by the Czech Statistical Office (2019) and OECD (2018).

Slovakia is a parliamentary representative democratic republic governed under the Constitution of 1992. In terms of territorial administration, the Slovak Republic is divided into 8 self-governing regions (corresponding to the EU's NUTS 3 level). The public administration is organised on three levels: state – region – municipality. Every level has its own elected officials, distributed responsibilities and liabilities. Regions of Slovakia are statistically divided according to EU territorial classification into four NUTS 2 level regions – the Bratislava region, Western Slovakia, Central Slovakia and Eastern Slovakia (Assembly of European Regions, 2017). These self-governing regions are also called by the Constitution "Higher Territorial Units", abbr. VÚC. The territory and borders of the self-governing regions are identical to the territory and borders of the regions before 2002. The main difference is that organs of Higher Territorial Units are self-governing, with an elected chairperson and assembly, while the organs of regions (before 2002) are appointed by the government.

Responsibilities of self-governing regions (Higher Territorial Units) since 2002 include regional roads and public transport, education (secondary, professional and vocational education), territorial planning, regional economic development, social welfare (children's homes, social policy), health (hospitals of second category and specialised services), culture, etc. (OECD, 2016).

1. REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS AND COMMUNICATION WITH THE PUBLIC ON INTERNET

Social media have revolutionized not only people's life style but also the way organizations communicate with their customers and stakeholders. It is evident that the way people in the twenty-first century communicate is significantly different from how they used to communicate in the last century (Papasolomou & Melanthiou, 2012). Social networks such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram and media such as YouTube represent some of the most common forms of socio-cultural interactions.

88 % of Czechs use Internet (Digital News Report, 2019), which means 7.9 million Czechs used the Internet at the end of 2018. 61 % of Internet users in the Czech Republic use mobile phones to search for information. The most frequently visited category in terms of content was news (NetMonitor, 2019) and the leading web portal is Seznam.cz (then iDnes.cz, Aktualne.cz, Novinky.cz). Digital News Report (2019) states that online media have continued to dominate as a source of news. According to that survey, top social media and messaging are: Facebook, YouTube, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, but the main role in this field is played by the first three social media. 80% of Czech Internet users visit social networks (Bridge, 2018).

85 % of Slovaks use Internet (Digital News Report, 2019). Also for Slovakia, the Digital News Report (2019) states that TV and online news remain the most popular sources of news in Slovakia. The leading web portals are topky.sk, actuality.sk, sme.sk and cas.sk. According to that survey, the top social media and messaging platforms are the same as in the Czech Republic: Facebook, YouTube, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, but the main role in this field is played by the first three social media.

Information about the ICT development index, Internet penetration and Internet use by individuals for selected countries is presented in Table 1 below and presents the necessary context for the conducted research.

Tab. 1: ICT development, selected ICT skills and Internet use

Country	ICT Development Index, (2017) /DESI (2019)*	Households with internet access (2018)**	Internet use by individuals in last 3 months (2018)***	Individuals using mobile devices to access the internet (2018)	Individuals who have basic or above basic overall digital skills (2017)****
Czech Rep	7.16/50	86	87	66	60
Slovakia	7.06/46.3	81	80	62	59
EU (28)	- / 52.5	89	85	69	57

Note. * The ICT Development Index is a composite index that combines 11 indicators into one benchmark measure + DESI index (2019) ** Percentage of households. Households who have internet access at home, all forms of internet use are included. *** Percentage of individuals. The population considered is aged 16 to 74. **** The basic or above basic overall digital skills represent the two highest levels of the overall digital skills indicator, which is a composite indicator based on selected activities performed by individuals aged 16-74 on the internet in the four specific areas (information, communication, problem solving, content creation). ITU (2017), Eurostat Database (2019)

It is evident that communication with the public on social media is and will be very important also for regional governments.

Current website design allows companies and other institutions not only to publish information as text but it also allows them to integrate features such as images, sound, video and animations (Cober et al. 2004; Braddy, Meade and Kroustalis, 2006). Generally, current websites of companies and other institutions offer a more dynamic and richer platform, more instant and personal communication and more informational design options for communication with the public. Effective communication via an institution's website and social media sites is regarded as a crucial determinant of an institution's ability to successfully reach their target public. The effectiveness of website and social media sites is influenced by the design of the websites and by the manner in which the information is displayed. One of the most important design factors is also the amount and type of information provided. Clear and comprehensive information about a region and regional government is important for inhabitants of the region and for visitors. Especially for social media sites it is important to communicate the right amount of real, authentic and relevant information and develop relationships and maintain two-way communication with the public.

2. METHODOLOGY

In recent years, the use of websites by government, including regional governments, to communicate with the public has been playing an important role in Public Relations (PR) practises. It is also evident that these websites and social media sites are considered as one of the key tools for interaction with the public and other stakeholders. Despite this trend, empirical research on the use of social media by regional governments is still limited. The chapter reports the findings from the survey focused on the evaluation of 14 regional governments' social media sites in 2019 in the Czech Republic and on 8 regional governments' social media sites in 2019 in Slovakia. The aim is to better understand how these institutions use social media for communicating with the public.

The study provides the answers to the following research sub-questions:

- To what extent do regional governments provide information to the public using social media sites?
- What is the level of regional governments' social media sites in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia?
- How do these institutions develop relationships and maintain communication with the public using social media?

- Are there any differences in using social media sites by regional governments?

The hypothesis below was formulated in response to research question RQ2:

Hypothesis H1: There is a positive association between the number of inhabitants / region and the level at which regional governments in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia use social media (namely Facebook and YouTube) to communicate with the public.

2.1 Research method and tool

As a research method and instrument for data gathering we used “unobtrusive measures”. Unobtrusive measures are data collection techniques that involve the use of non-reactive resources, so that information is obtained without the subject’s prior knowledge (Miller and Brewer, 2003). According to Gray (2009) unobtrusive measures can offer a flexible, creative and imaginative way of collecting data. The data were analysed and accessed using heuristic analyses which are used in internet marketing (Eger, Petryl, Kunešová, Mičík, & Peška, 2015).

Drawing from literature and surveys on corporate websites with the focus on online communication with the public (Egerová & Eger, 2017; Llopis, Gonzales, & Gasco, 2010; Williamson, Lepak, & King, 2003) 13 items broken down into 3 sections were used for evaluation of the regional governments’ social media sites in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia.

- Section one was focused on an overview of SM use by regional governments (5 items, see Table 2).
- Section two was focused on communication and interaction using Facebook and included also items such as: links to social media on regional governments’ websites, year of Facebook profile creation, number of followers, evaluation how up-to-date this SM is (4 items).
- Section three was focused on communication using YouTube and included also items such as: year of YouTube profile creation, number of subscribers, number of video views, and evaluation how up-to-date this SM is (4 items).

Key data are shown in Table 2. An additional important variable in our study is number of inhabitants / region. From this perspective, Prague is an outlier in all important measures (Table 2).

All items were rated on a dichotomous yes-no basis by two independent experts. Key websites were in accordance with the above mentioned methodology archived. Once the assessment was completed, the experts met to compare findings and reconcile discrepancies. The survey was carried out in October 2019 and follows research from 2017 conducted by Egerová and Eger (2017) that focused on a similar topic but involving private companies in automotive.

2.2 Sample

The presented study is focused on regional governments’ social media sites in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia. We investigated how regional governments use their www pages and social media in the communication process with targets groups. As we mentioned above, there are 13 regions and one capital city, Prague, (NUTS 3 regions) in the Czech Republic, and 8 regions (NUTS 3 regions) in Slovakia.

3. RESULTS

The findings in Table 2 show that Facebook is social network no 1 in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia, and it is also used by all selected institutions. In second place is YouTube, but two regions in Slovakia don’t use an official YouTube channel. For this reason, we assessed the two social media in more detail, see Table 2. Czech regional governments created their profiles on Facebook from 2010 to 2014. In Slovakia, the Prešov region created its own official Facebook profile in 2018. The results, measured by number of followers, differ greatly. We count the capital city Prague as an outlier because the influence of tourists will be high despite the fact that these pages are administered in the Czech language. Then the number of followers ranges from almost 18 thousand to 3 thousand for regional governments in the Czech Republic and from 14 to 1 thousand in Slovakia except Bratislava. All Facebook profiles of selected regional governments were up-to-date.

The findings on YouTube show bigger differences. 5 institutions in the Czech Republic did not have a logo, or the logo of YouTube on their website was incorrect. Similar to Facebook, Czech regional governments created their profiles on YouTube from 2010 to 2014. Four institutions did not reach 100 thousand views. In Slovakia, Nitra and Banská Bystrica don't use an official YouTube channel and the Košice region has been using its own channel on YouTube since 2018. The region of Žilina has an excellent result on YouTube, according to the number of videos watched.

To compare the association between the number of inhabitants of a region and the value of communication via social media Facebook and YouTube (metrics: number of followers and number of video views), Spearman's Rho as a non-parametric test was used to measure the strength of association between two selected variables. The value of r is 0.78236 and the p (2-tailed) = 0.00002. This means, by normal standards, the association between the two variables would be considered statistically significant. The effectiveness of communication on selected social media by selected regional governments from the Czech Republic and Slovakia depends on the number of inhabitants in the regions. On the other hand, hypothesis H1 was only partially confirmed because, as Table 2 shows, there are significant individual differences between the evaluated institutions. We may assume that there is probably an influence of the administration and management of communication on social media on the number of followers and engagement results on the Facebook profile or on the number of subscribers and video views on YouTube.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The usage of social media has changed the communication activities and PR of organizations. The study provides evidence from a research survey focused on social media use by regional governments in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia. It is evident that the use of social media marketing by these institutions can help them in Public Relations activities and in communication with their target groups.

Usage of social media by organizations especially is changing Public Relations (PR) as an important part of the promotional mix (Eger, Egerová, & Krystoň, 2019; Papasolomou & Melanthiou, 2012; Tajudeen, Jaafar, & Ainin, 2018). This study adds to the theoretical body of knowledge of how regional governments use social media to develop and maintain communication with the public. As can be seen, SM channels like Facebook and YouTube can have a significant effect in Public Relations if organisations actively use them. As the results also show, it is critical to implement a strategy in PR and incorporate SM in other communication channels. The findings indicate differences between the evaluated subjects in the area of social media application in practice.

Social media sites are increasingly seen as the 'big idea' to enhance and restore public trust and confidence in local and regional institutions. We are in line with Silva et al. (2019) who also state that from the local officials' perspective, the advantage of using Facebook is the practically free access to a large audience of their constituencies. This means, from our perspective, from the regional government to its public.

Social media enable local and regional governments to communicate important government information, extend government services, and garner feedback and ideas about government operations with citizens (cf. Graham, Avery, & Park, 2015). However, it is necessary to respect the specifics of communication on social media. Social media refers to a means of interaction among people (also among institutions and their stakeholders) in which they create, share, and/or exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks. Social media is about two-way conversations, community, connecting with the audience and building relationships and trust.

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Tab. 2: Regional governments in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia and selected measures about Facebook and YouTube (2019)

	Social Media					No of inhab. thousand	Facebook		YouTube		
	F	I	T	Y	Other SM		Year	Followers	Year	Subscri-bers	Number of views thousand
The Capital City of Prague	1	1	1	1	Snap Chat, Live ch.	1308	2011	66603	2010	1140	1981
Hradec Kralove region	1	1	1	1		551	2014	11145	2011	377	310
Central Bohemian region	1	0	0	1	RSS	1369	2012	11543	No info	16	No info
Pardubice region	1	0	0	0		520	2014	10953	2010	229	227
Liberec region	1	0	0	1		423	2012	7532	2013	319	181
Vysocina region (Jihlava)	1	0	1	1		509	2012	4772	2010	583	454
Usti nad Labem region	1	1	0	1	RSS	821	2014	8091	2012	181	108
South Moravian region (Brno)	1	0	0	0	RSS	1188	2012	4595	-	-	-
Karlovy Vary region	1	0	0	1		295	2010	7327	2011	45	21
Olomouc region	1	1	1	1	G+, Flickr, issuu	632	2011	5395	2011	321	199
Pilsen (Plzen) region	1	0	0	0		585	2011	3634	2014	121	39
Zlin region	1	0	0	1	RSS	583	2013	3115	2013	No info	175
South Bohemian region (Ceské B.)	1	0	0	1		642	2013	13055	2011	70	41
Moravian-Silesian region (Ostrava)	1	1	0	1		1203	2014	17750	2011	803	579
Bratislava self-governing region	1	1	1	1	Flickr	655	2010	52069	2010	173	266
Trnava self-governing region	1	1	1	1	RSS, LinkedIn	523	2012	5967	2017	50	9
Trenčín self-governing region	1	1	1	1	RSS	587	2014	5378	2012	232	214
Nitra self-governing region	1	0	1	1	RSS	678	2014	530	-	64	-
Žilina self-governing region	1	1	0	1	ISSUU, Flickr	692	2014	14284	2010	873	902
Banská Bystrica self-gov. reg.	1	1	0	0	RSS	649	2014	10506	-	-	-
Prešov self-governing region	1	0	1	1	RSS	824	2018	3720	2012	56	206
Košice self-governing region	1	0	0	1	RSS	800	2013	1835	2018	18	2

Note. F = Facebook, I = Instagram, T = Twitter, Y = YouTube