

# SOCIAL MEDIA: A TOOL FOR CITIZENS' ENGAGEMENT AND E-PARTICIPATION IN BUCHAREST

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## Abstract

With the proliferation of information and communication technologies, have found significant potential for transformation of their public participation and the way they interact with the government. Concepts like e-participation and e-government became fruitful areas of practice, policy making and theoretical explorations. The objective of this exploratory research is to inquire into how social media was employed by Bucharest municipality for communication and citizens engagement, and how it consequently shapes e-participation. The methodology employed content analysis of the Bucharest City Hall (Primăria Municipiului București - PMB) Facebook page (posts and their comments sections) in the months of May and June 2023. The content analysis used a citizens' engagement index adapted for this research from the works of previous scholars to explore metrics such as popularity, commitment and virality. The type of content and media employed in social media (SM) posts were also analysed, as well as the PMB's tactics and strategies of communication towards citizens. One of the key findings indicated a one-way communication from the municipality towards citizens. The commitment metrics showed that, when it comes to a more intense e-participation (eg. comments), citizens have low engagement with social media content of PMB. However, when they do engage in this type of participation, they do it from a rather adversarial type of participation. In respect to the types of content used on the PMB's Facebook page, the paper concluded that the most often distributed ones were: cultural activities & sports and public works & town planning. The most widely posted type of media on the Facebook page of PMB were photos.

**Keywords:** adversarial participation, citizen engagement, e-participation, social media.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The way in which the development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) transformed the lives of citizens, government activity and the interaction between the two has been an important and growing area of academic and policy makers interest in the past three decades. The democratic process itself has been significantly altered by the implementation of e-government, while e-participation has become a key area of development in the changing environment. Moreover, with the ongoing expansion of social media (SM) platforms in the daily aspects of people's lives, these tools increasingly became an

integral part of the civic and political life of citizens. Consequently, governments and public administration institutions acknowledged this development and started using SM platforms in growing numbers for engaging citizens, from informational purposes to citizens' involvement in decision making.

It can also be argued that the ultimate and all-encompassing goal for SM adoption and usage is to increase transparency, collaboration and participation. This research explores the subject of SM as a public administration tool for citizens' engagement and e-participation. Due to the vast roots of the concepts, the research is grounded on scientific literature concerning social media adoption and implementation, citizen engagement and e-participation, but also larger concepts like public participation, e-government and transparency.

The selection of the Facebook platform is justified by the fact that it appears as the preferred public administration SM tool. Data shows that Facebook is the most popular SM platform in Romania with 12 344 900 users in July 2023, accounting for 64.8% of its entire population, a balanced gender distribution (52% female and 48% male) and with the largest age group being represented by people aged 25 to 34 (2 600 000) (NapoleonCat, 2023). Other data indicated a peak number of users in March 2022: 13.03 million users (Statista, 2023a). In the same time period, the same source provided the following figures for Instagram: 5 766 600 users, 55.2% female and 44.8% male, and the largest age group people of ages between 18 to 24 (1 811 100). Statista (2023b) puts the number of Instagram users in Romania at around 5.9 million in March 2023. The number of Facebook users in Romania peaked in March 2022 at 13.03 million users, marking an increase of nearly 500 thousand accounts compared to the previous month (Statista, 2023a). According to the E-Participation Index (EPI) data, Romania has seen an increase since the data from 2012 (rank 109) and 2014 (rank 71) (Lironi, 2016, 12).

TABEL 1 - EPI INDEX ROMANIA

Survey Year	Country Name	E-Government Rank	E-Government Index	E-Participation Index	Online Service Index	Human Capital Index	Telecommunication Infrastructure Index
2022	Romania	57	0.7619	0.625	0.6814	0.809	0.7954

Source: UN EPI Index (2022)

It must also be noted that the Romanian legal framework protects the citizens' right to free access to public interest information through the Law number 544/2001 and also Law number 52/2003 regarding the decisional transparency in public administration. The constant update of the websites of public institutions or dedicated online platforms are covered in the legislation as mandatory elements for ensuring transparency, citizens' access to public information and their participation to consultation and decision making.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

An exploration into the subject of social media as a public administration tool for citizens' engagement and e-participation cannot evade related theoretical roots such as those concerning social media adoption and implementation, citizen engagement and e-participation as they are inextricably linked to the larger concepts of public participation, e-government and transparency. Several of the key related theoretical and empirical works that informed this research are therefore presented in this chapter.

### 2.1. *From public participation to e-participation*

Firstly, it must be highlighted that even for recent phenomena such as the impact of ICTs on the relationship between citizens and the government, there is a line of theoretical dialogue with previous research on public participation. Authors such as Kleinhans, Van Ham & Evans-Cowley (2015), Williamson and Parolin (2013), Lielpēters (2021) among others, bridge the recent research with knowledge that can already be considered classic public participation and planning theory. Several current works on SM use and development reference authors and concepts like Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation, collaborative public participation or consensus seeking participation (Healey et al 2008, Innes 2004), adversarial or agonistic participation (Mouffe 1999, Munthe-Kaas 2015), or more recent research like Nabatchi & Leighninger's (2015) typology of thick, thin and conventional participation. The discussion between public participation tendencies as collaborative or adversarial has been explored in a research (Voinea, Profiroiu & Profiroiu, 2022) that brought to light the fact that SM were a key tool for the establishment of citizens in civic groups, for their consequent communication, organization, and mobilization, and also an instrument to pressure the authorities' decision making process. It can therefore be argued that conventional participation and e-participation are not exclusionary or divided by clear cut edges. Regarding the collaborative aspects of participation, an earlier literature review on the topic of e-participation (Sanford and Rose, 2007) showed that similar research is usually centred on liberal, collaborative forms of participation, formed by "consensual community building", where deliberation is seen as springing from rational argumentation. (2007, 416). The authors further argue that, mediated by ICTs, e-participation "involves the extension and transformation of participation in societal democratic and consultative processes" (Sanford and Rose, 2007, 406).

Research done in the past decade tackled the phenomenon of e-participation and SM in countries all over the world, from those with a long democratic history to those with developing democracies. Through a systematic review on journals published between 2000-2016, Alcaide-Muñoz et al found that the main countries studied were USA and EU countries, while less attention was given to developing countries, even though the authors agree that in the latter case these insights could become more useful by better

equipping local democratic initiatives with tools that bolster their efforts. (2018, 19). As an overall consideration, the authors concluded that in the studies they analysed e-participation appears as an interdisciplinary and fragmented field of knowledge, while at the same time drawing attention to the mechanisms through which social media promotes bidirectional interaction between common citizen and government, which they see as underexplored in literature (Alcaide-Muñoz et al 2018, 8).

Lironi considers e-participation as an important dimension of e-government, but in terms of definition, it lacks an all-inclusive one that can encompass the large array of initiatives, like "the use of ICT by a government to enhance openness and transparency by the provision of information online, or the use of ICT by citizens to participate, collaborate or/and deliberate in a decision-making process" (2016, 12). A concise definition of e-participation posits it as "citizens' involvement in governance through the means of ICTs" (Roman, 2013, 28). Androniceanu and Georgescu's article offers a definition of the concept understood as a process "that enhances and deepens political participation and allows citizens to interact with each other, as well as with their elected representatives and civil servants using information and communication technologies" (2022, 12). Another definition of e-participation was formulated by Aichholzer and Rose who understand it as "the use of digital tools for political participation in the wider sense includes a wide variety of formally institutionalised mechanisms, as well as informal expressions of civic engagement" (2020, 93). They also propose three main functions for the concept: monitoring (e-information and e-deliberation); agenda setting (e-campaigning and e-petitions); decision-making: (e-consultation, e-participatory budgeting, e-voting) (Aichholzer and Rose, 2020).

In regards to a conceptual framework for the concept of e-participation, the United Nations developed one that is structured around the three dimensions of E-information "Enabling participation by providing citizens with public information and access to information without or upon demand; E-consultation: Engaging citizens in contributions to and deliberation on public policies and services; E-decision-making: Empowering citizens through co-design of policy option and co-production of service components and delivery modalities" (United Nations).

This framework also entailed the development of an e-participation Index (EPI). At EU level, Lironi (2016) identified three e-participation tools: the European Citizens' Initiative, online EU public consultations and petitions to the European Parliament. Furthermore, at the same level, she selected other ways through which e-participation can be developed, such as EU-funded projects, crowd sourcing platforms developed by DG CONNECT, as well as e-participation initiatives spearheaded by individual MEPs (Lironi, 2016). Androniceanu and Georgescu (2022) analysed the ability of EU states to support e-participation and aimed to identify the particularities of EU countries in this respect. The authors consider that e-participation is "a more recent form of manifestation of e-democracy" (Androniceanu and Georgescu,

2022, 9) that was made more relevant by the COVID-19 pandemic and also benefited from social media's impact on the physical and digital democratic processes.

Steinbach, Sieweke and Süßa's systematic literature review on e-participation suggests that barriers within public administrations are often to blame for the failure of e-participation initiatives, as administrations rarely overcome the technological and organisational challenges posed by such initiatives. (2019, 61). At the same time, they stressed that research in this realm can be considered fragmented and multi-disciplinary, drawing on disciplines as diverse as: "public administration, organization studies, communication and media studies, political science, and information systems research" (2019, 62). Another key finding was that research focused either on the top level of e-participation initiatives, such as examining the external context of public administrations, or on their middle level, when looking at adoption, implementation and other organisational minutia (Steinbach, Sieweke and Süßa, 2019, 1).

During a similar period of time, when the concept and practice of e-participation were emerging, Sæbø, Rose, and Flak (2008) used conventional literature review techniques to assess the theoretical contributions to the concept. The authors define e-participation as involving "the extension and transformation of participation in societal democratic and consultative processes mediated by information and communication technologies (ICT), primarily the Internet" (2008, 400). They also argued that citizens are at the centre of the process, with the purpose of e-participation being to make it easier for citizens to take part in digital governance. (Sæbø, Rose, and Flak, 2008, 402).

Linders (2012) proposed a model of e-participation that can help gain insight into the changing relationship between citizens and the government, with focus on the coproduction types facilitated by ICT, in an overall context where SM gain more popularity among both actors. The author's typology is divided into the following: 1) "Citizen-Sourcing" (Citizen-to-Government). C2G revolves around Service Design (Consultation and Ideation), Service Delivery and Execution (Crowdsourcing and Co-Delivery) and Service Monitoring (Citizen Reporting); 2) "Government as a Platform" (Government to Citizen). G2C deals with Service Design (Informing & Nudging), Service Delivery and Execution (Ecosystem Embedding) and Service Monitoring (Open Book Government); 3) "Do It Yourself Government" (Citizen to Citizen). C2C centers around Service Design (Self-Organization), Service Execution and Delivery (Self-Service) and Service Monitoring (Self-Monitoring) (Linders, 2012). In similar lines to Linders' (2012) typology, Bonsón, Royo and Ratkai (2015) emphasize the role of Facebook between G2C and C2G in the following depiction (Figure 1).



FIGURE 1 - THE ROLE OF FACEBOOK ON G2C AND C2G COMMUNICATION (BONSÓN, ROYO AND RATKAI, 2014A, 3)

Le Blanc (2020) has a reserved view on the development of e-participation. Despite the significant spread of e-participation platforms since the 2000s, he considers it is hard to assess how it translates into large-scale, meaningful citizen participation. (Le Blanc, 2020). He further argues that “beyond reasons related to technology access and digital skills, factors such as lack of understanding of citizens’ motivations to participate and the reluctance of public institutions to genuinely share agenda setting and decision-making power seem to play an important role in the observed limited progress” (Le Blanc, 2020).

A related term for e-participation that is found in the scientific literature is digital participation. Lielpēters (2021) explored what activities and improvements public institutions could develop so that they can employ digital participation to foster participation in Latvia. The author used content analysis on Facebook pages of ministries in order to assess citizens’ attitudes towards digital participation. The results of the research showed that the digital communication in public institutions is mostly one-way communication, only rarely establishing two-way communication, and even more seldom observing entries about participation opportunities (Lielpēters, 2021).

## 2.2. Government, transparency, provision of information and trust in government

The scientific literature on the interrelations between e-government, transparency, citizen engagement, trust in government, and ICTs is a vast one therefore only several key works are referenced in this chapter. As a starting point, we can rely on the concise definition given by Le Blanc to the concept of e-government as “the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) for the provision of public services” (2020, 6). For Taylor and Lips (2008), the term “has come to capture and de-limit in toto what might be termed the agenda for government in the age of the Internet” (139). However, they contend that the informational aspects are pre-eminent, not the electronic ones, stressing the need for an understanding of the body politic “that emerges from researching the informational relationships that exist along the digitised pathways of e-government within an information polity” (Taylor and Lips, 2008, 150).



Even before the significant spread of SM platforms, authors like Welch, Hinnant and Moon (2005) explored the interrelation between Internet use, citizen satisfaction with e-government, and citizen trust in government. They argued that the use of government websites is positively associated with e-government satisfaction. In closer relation to SM platforms and what it differentiates them from other e-government services, Mergel (2016, 2013b) raised the issue that they are developed by third parties, a fact that can bring challenges and potential risks, but also a higher degree of interactivity among other research pertaining to e-government and e-participation, Nica et al (2014) inquired into the effectiveness of the SM implementation at local government level, e-participation models and the challenges of e-government.

A large corpus of research that explores SM and citizen engagement tackle transparency, alongside participation, collaboration or trust in the government as the main benefits and purposes of SM adoption and implementation. According to Mergel, the main purpose of SM is to deliver more frequent and transparent information as a way to boost trust in government actions. (2016, 2). Research from the United States indicate that SM are considered to increase transparency of the government, participation and collaboration (Mergel, 2013b). In a more general overview of transparency, Szabo et al (2016) argue that government transparency depends on the management and quality of information disclosed by the government. However, pertaining to the relationship between transparency and trust in government the authors have a more reluctant viewpoint, noting the thin support found in empirical literature on this topic. They consider that the effects of transparency are wildly different, depending on the nature of the publicly communicated information. (Szabo et al, 2016, 81). Drawn from the findings of their systematic literature review, Alcaide-Muñoz et al offer a more positive stance, that “previous research (Porumbescu, 2016; Bonsón et al., 2015; Warren et al., 2014) highlighted that social media and Web 2.0 tools increase governmental transparency, which is essential for increasing democratic participation and trust. In this way, the citizenry can be informed about decision making, demanding information and monitoring public managers, and fighting corruption issues (Ellison & Hardey, 2014; Edwards et al., 2013)” (2018, 16).

The authors also concluded that although there are clear benefits regarding the use of SM to increase citizens' trust in the government, the public managers should also be aware of potential risks, for example being subjected to hostile behaviours of users, security and privacy risks, or the inadequate qualification of employees in charge of social networks management and communication. Other authors looked into the role of social media in the basic areas of e-government, and how government entities are employing social media for informational flows, interaction with citizens as well as the creation and provision of innovative services (Criado, Sandoval-Almazán & Gil-García, 2013)

An empirical research done in Pakistan showed that a government agency's “provision of quality information on social media was significantly related to perceived transparency, trust in agency, perceived

responsiveness, and citizens' online political participation" (Arshad and Khurram, 2020,1). The authors further showed that this perceived transparency helped mediate the relationship between the provision of updated and relevant information and users' trust in the institution. Furthermore, another finding was that the more active the agency was on SM media platforms, the more responsive they appeared to their followers (Arshad and Khurram, 2020, 12).

### **2.3. Social media adoption and citizen engagement**

The umbrella term of social media appears to require no further definition; however, it is necessary to present at least one attempt of defining it. According to Zheng and Zheng (2014), in practice,

"social media serves as a catchall phrase for a conglomeration of web-based technologies and services such as blogs, microblogs (i.e., Twitter), social sharing services (e.g., YouTube, Flickr, StumbleUpon, Last.fm), text messaging, discussion forums, collaborative editing tools (e.g., wikis), virtual worlds (e.g., Second Life), and social networking services (e.g. Facebook, MySpace)" (2014, 1).

Mergel defined social media tools as allowing users to create their own online profile and enables them to participate in user-generated content, crowdsourcing, and online collaboration. (2012, 12). Since the initial stages of SM emergence and expansion, a large segment of citizens, as well as academics, discussed about the opportunities brought by ICTs on government and citizen interaction. In this line, Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes (2010) argue that "the combination of e-government, social media, Web-enabled technologies, mobile technologies, transparency policy initiatives, and citizen desire for open and transparent government are fomenting a new age of opportunity that has the potential to create open, transparent, efficient, effective, and user-centered ICT-enabled services" (2010, 268).

Mergel (2016) contended that the adoption of SM platforms changes the existing organizational technology paradigm of institutions in the public sector.

Much of the research that addressed how the government employed SM focused on social media adoption stages (Zumofen, Mabillard, and Pasquier, 2022; Zumofen, Mabillard, and Pasquier, 2023; Criado, Sandoval-Almazán & Gil-García, 2013; Mergel, 2016; Mergel and Bretschneider, 2013). Zumofen, Mabillard, and Pasquier (2022) analysed the SM adoption in Swiss cities and how active adoption of SM can be measured in public institutions, proposing themselves a new measurement model. In a qualitative research on US departments, Mergel (2013b) assessed how SM was employed by SM directors to enhance transparency, participation and collaboration. For each of the three dimensions, the author identified corresponding goals to engage the SM platforms: the main goal of transparency is representation of the agencies, the main objective for participation is citizen engagement, and pertaining to collaboration, the goal was "a higher level of engagement in a reciprocated relationship by allowing the



audiences to directly engage with government content and co-create government innovations" (Mergel, 2013b, 331). In another qualitative research, Mergel (2013a) explored the same three governmental tactics for SM adoption: (1) representation corresponding to a "push strategy", (2) engagement ("pull strategy"), and (3) networking and "mingling" ("networking" tactic). As a general conclusion, the author indicated that the adoption of SM is centered around informational purposes.

Mergel and Bretschneider proposed a three stages model for how ICTs become routinized and standardized following their initial adoption by government agencies. (2013, 391). According to the authors the stages are: 1) Intrepreneurship and Experimentation; 2) Constructive Chaos; 3) Institutionalization. Furthermore, applying this model to the specific case of SM, they further detailed it as Stage 1: Decentralized, Informal Early Experimentation by Social Media Mavericks; Stage 2: Coordinated Chaos: Making the Business Case for Social Media; Stage 3: Institutionalization and Consolidation of Behaviour and Norms (Mergel and Bretschneider, 2013). Mergel (2016) focused on the institutionalization stage of the SM adoption model developed by Mergel and Bretschneider (2013) and concluded that because SM innovation happens outside of the control of the government, public institutions need constant strategic alignment and routinization that can lead to the institutionalization of new technologies.

In the same area of analysis regarding SM adoption, Mabillard and Zumofen looked into the adoption patterns of several SM platforms (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram) in Belgium municipalities, leading them to conclude that there is "a large heterogeneity of practices depending on location, size, and existing presence on social media accounts" (2022, 5).

#### **2.4. One-way and two-way communication**

In their systematic literature review, Alcaide-Muñoz et al observed that "the development of Web 2.0 tools has been a crucial influence in the transformation of an Internet from a passive one-way communication, into an interactive two-way communication system (Mergel, 2016)" (2018, 16). However, empirical research brought evidence that the two-way communication should be viewed with reservation. Following Mergel's (2013b) framework of social media transparency, participation, and collaboration, Zavattaro, French and Mohanty (2015) used sentiment analysis on the Twitter accounts of U.S. local government agencies to explore if the sentiment or tone of communication can influence citizen participation. The authors concluded that a succesfull social media plan is not limited to the presence of positive engagement, with social media managers prone to employ activities that spur participation. (2015, 333). Another research showed that the governmental agencies are more likely to use a one-way communication, or push strategy, on Twitter, according to Mergel (2013b). A similar finding was identified by DePaula and Dincelli (2016) following a content analysis research on the SM pages of municipal-level

departments of 16 cities in the U.S. The authors concluded that most content was defined by a one-way push communication. In a study that inquired into citizens' perceptions regarding municipalities' e-participation initiatives through Facebook, Alarabiat, Soares and Estevez (2020) found that users in Jordan uphold a positive attitude towards these initiatives, but showed a modest intention to participate in them. The authors recommend municipalities to enhance two-way communication with citizens. Other authors also warned that in practice: "real two-way communication and networking between residents, governments and policy-makers through social media is still scarce" (Kleinhans, Van Ham & Evans-Cowley, 2015, 241).

Zumofen, Mabillard and Pasquier's (2023) analysis of the success, impact and performance of SM in several Central and Eastern European countries found that the governments "seem to be locked into the one-way communication and "supply side" paradigm where citizens are not conscious producers or creators of information, data, ideas solutions and decisions" (2013, 233). They also contend that although SM can be a good tool for citizen engagement, there is little evidence that citizens are involved in interactive participation on these platforms with local authorities. They propose an integrated model of government-citizen relationships on SM inspired by Mergel (2013b, 2016). The authors also identified the following phases and corresponding tactics and strategies (Figure 2): dissemination, interaction phase and transaction phase (Zumofen, Mabillard and Pasquier, 2023).

Phases	Missions	Tactics	Information directions	Strategies	Communication flows
<b>1. Dissemination</b>	Transparency Inclusiveness	Push	One-way symmetric	Representation	One-to-many
<b>2. Interaction</b>	Participation Deliberation	Pull	Two-way asymmetric	Engagement	One-to-one
<b>3. Transaction</b>	Collaboration Coproduction	Networking	Two-way symmetric	Mingling	Many-to-many

FIGURE 2 - SOCIAL MEDIA GOVERNMENT-CITIZEN RELATIONSHIP PHASES MODEL  
Source: Zumofen, Mabillard and Pasquier, 2023, 240.

Research that tackles the digitalization of public administration also bring valuable insight into the tendency towards adoption of a one-way or two-way communication. In this respect, Profiroiu, Negoita and Costea define the digitalization of public administration as a "vertical and horizontal integration of digital infrastructure and connectivity that allows a two-way interaction between authorities on the one hand, and citizens and the business environment on the other" (2023, 4). However, they further argue that increased investment in digitalization should be put to work towards fostering better informed citizens and broadening access to digital public services in the EU member states which are still at the initial stage

- that of one-way communication from public authorities towards (Boughzala et al., 2015)" (Profiroiu, Negoită and Costea, 2023, 13).

Williamson and Parolin (2013) proposed a longitudinal comparison of the types of web-based communication employed by a local government in Australia, with a focus on the impact of the new technologies on consensus building and deliberative frameworks of planning theory. The authors concluded that "local government is familiar with monologue communication; however, the implementation level of more interactive tools that act in feedback, responsive dialogue and mutual discourse communication modes remains lower" (Williamson and Parolin, 2013, 560).

In similar lines, a content analysis on Chinese microblogging accounts (Zheng and Zheng, 2014) showed as well that the majority of content was aimed at self-promotion, rather than service delivery. Zheng and Zheng (2014) looked at the innovation in the public sector through a content analysis on Chinese government microblogging accounts, with focus on information and interaction.

## **2.5. Defining citizen engagement in a social media environment**

The last section of the literature review gives a brief outline on definitions of citizen engagement in the changing environment shaped by social media. In regards to a broader definition, Siebers, Gradus, and Grotens (2019) developed a research grounded on the assumption that citizen engagement is integral to the democratic process, in particular in local governments. For the authors, citizen engagement is seen as an umbrella term, concerning different approaches for the same aspect, for example: "public participation, public engagement, stakeholder involvement, co-creation, political participation, civic engagement, deliberative democracy or participatory democracy" (2019, 2). Based on the literature they consulted, they adhere to a synthetic view in which, citizen engagement is seen as a process and as a form of direct involvement in the going-ons of governance on the part of the citizen, with participants becoming involved in public domain task and services. (Siebers, Gradus, and Grotens, 2019, 2). However, they warn that the concept is complex, lacks a clear definition and has many manifestations in practice. Adler and Goggin also contend that there is no clear consensus regarding the meaning of the term. (2005, 237). They understand civic engagement, a term that is sometimes used interchangeably with citizen engagement, as referring "to the ways in which citizens participate in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future" (Adler and Goggin, 2005, 236).

As authors of one of the first research regarding the impact of media and content types on citizen engagement on social media, Bonsón, Royo and Ratkai contributed to expanding the literature that emphasized G2C relationships and the way both citizens and governments make use of SM tools, (2014a, 2) and aimed to measure the impact of Facebook use by Western European local governments on

stakeholders' engagement. Other relevant contributions that must be noted on the subject are: Bonsón, Perea and Bednárová's (2019) research that analysed the use of Twitter by local governments to engage citizens and Perea, Bonsón and Bednárová's (2021) study that focused on the Instagram use by the municipalities. Faber (2022) proposed a cross-platform assessment of citizen engagement with local authorities in Netherlands and argued that "areas where local governments exert more policy discretion could produce higher levels of citizen engagement, as citizens could feel empowered to engage with municipalities, as they could personally persuade decision makers" (2022, 974). For the author, policy discretion is seen as "a contextual driver of online citizen engagement" (Faber, 2022, 974). Cegarra-Navarro, Garcia-Perez, and Moreno-Cegarra (2014) explored the effect technology knowledge (t-knowledge) has on improving citizen engagement and the degree in which Technology Acceptance Model can facilitate t-knowledge in e-government services offered by City Halls, concluding that t-knowledge is a key determinant in fostering citizen engagement. Following a survey regarding the impact of SM on shaping civic engagement initiatives, Warren, Sulaiman and Jaafar indicated that citizens' propensity for trust was increased by the use of SM for civic engagement, producing more trusting evaluations of institutions (2014, 2). Silva et al's research in Portuguese municipalities' activity on SM concluded that their Facebook pages are part of the toolkit for promoting political engagement, with activity used as a barometer for pro-active citizen involvement (2019, 1). Among the key determinants associated with higher local government's use of SM, the authors identified: the size and wealth of the municipalities, higher electoral competition in local elections and higher commitment to transparency. Skoric et al's meta-analytic study of empirical research concluded that "social media use generally has a positive relationship with engagement and its three sub-categories, that is, social capital, civic engagement, and political participation" (2016, 1), as well as small-to-medium size positive relationships between the three aforementioned citizen engagement indicators and expressive, informational, and relational uses of SM.

### 3. METHODS

This exploratory research employed content analysis with the objective to analyse the specificities of e-participation and how SM can facilitate communication and citizen engagement on the SM pages of public administration. The sample of analysis consisted of the Facebook page of the Municipality of Bucharest (Primăria Municipiului București - PMB).

#### 3.1. Research questions

1. How is PMB using Facebook as a communication and citizen engagement tool?
2. What type of content and media is preferred by PMB in their communication on Facebook?

3. What type of content and media gathers the most engagement from the citizens on its Facebook page?
4. Is the e-participation on SM leaning towards adversarial or collaborative participation?

### 3.2. Sampling

As this is an exploratory research that examined both Facebook posts and comments to those posts, the period of time the sample was extracted from was a rather limited one. Two months of posts were selected (June and July 2023) from the Facebook page of PMB, totalling 165 posts, alongside all their comments (2335, out of which 2291 were analysed as part of them were not visible) and reactions (12148).

We selected Facebook as it is the most used SM platform by public authorities in their relationship with the citizens (Table 1). Furthermore, as Lielpēters (2021) also argued for Latvia, Facebook allows more space for two-way communication and for content creation, compared to other SM platforms. It also hosts the most diverse type of content, compared to Instagram, which is mainly used for visual content with limited usability of links, Twitter (current X) which is used for short text content, or TikTok, with its focus on video content. Other research showed that Facebook gathers the highest degree of citizen engagement compared to other SM, both in absolute numbers, and corrected for awareness among the population of the municipalities analysed (Faber, 2022). The same conclusions can be drawn at regional level as well, as showed by Zumofen, Mabillard and Pasquier's (2023) research on SM use in Central and Eastern European countries that indicated Facebook as significantly the most used platform by public institutions. It should also be mentioned that on the website of PMB the only SM for which there was a link available was Facebook.

TABLE 2 - BUCHAREST CITY HALL AND THE SIX SECTORS SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE

Institution	Facebook	Instagram	Twitter	TikTok
PMB	41k	1.1k	108	1.8k
Sector 1	13k	592	72	-
Sector 2	15k	127	3	-
Sector 3	31k	900	-	16
Sector 4	10k	-	-	3.5k
Sector 5	101k	-	-	106
Sector 6	36k	1.2k	-	-

Source: Data collected by the authors (August 2023)

The content analysis methodology used in this research drew mainly upon the research design and methods developed by Bonsón, Royo and Ratkai (2014a) for the analysis of the Facebook posts on the pages of governments in the first 15 EU countries.

Media type was categorised into five groups: video, link, photo, text, mixed. The text category included posts with no other media. The video category contained live and embedded videos. As Bonsón, Royo and Ratkai (2014a) also decided, the links that re-directing to a video content were considered as links. Where there was a list of links but also a supporting photo, the post was considered link. The posts where the focus was the text and the photo (one or maximum two) appeared to have been used only for graphic support were considered mixed (text with graphic support).

The content type of the Facebook posts was also analysed and split into 15 categories following an amended list of Bonsón, Royo and Ratkai (2014a), after citizen participation and attention to the citizen categories were mixed together as they were initially defined in the original classification of Martí, Royo, and Acerete (2012). Therefore, the list of content types is the following: (1) public works and town planning, (2) environment, (3) citizen participation and attention to the citizen, (4) social services, (5) citizen protection and security, (6) public transport, (7) employment and training schemes, (8) health, (9) education, (10) cultural activities and sports, (11) housing, (12) governance issues, (13) financial reporting, (13) marketing/city promotion/tourism, and (15) others.

TABLE 3. ADAPTED CITIZENS' ENGAGEMENT METRICS

<b>Popularity</b>	P1	Number of posts reactions/total posts	Percentage of posts that have been reacted to
	P2	Total reactions/total number of posts	Average number of reactions per post
	P3	$(P2/\text{number of fans}) \times 1000$	Average number of reactions per post per 1000 fans
	P4	Number of negative reactions/total reactions	Percentage of negative reactions
	P5	Number of positive reactions/total reactions	Percentage of positive reactions
<b>Commitment</b>	C1	Number of posts commented/total posts	Percentage of posts that have been commented
	C2	Total comments/total posts	Average number of comments per post
	C3	$(C2/\text{number of fans}) \times 1000$	Average number of comments per post per 1000 fans
	C4	Number of negative comments/total comments	Percentage of negative comments
	C5	Number of positive comments/total comments	Percentage of positive comments
<b>Virality</b>	V1	Number of posts shared/total posts	Percentage of posts that have been shared
	V2	Total shares/total posts	Average number of shares per post
	V3	$(V2/\text{number of fans}) \times 1000$	Average number of shares per post per 1000 fans
<b>Engagement</b>	E	$P3 + C3 + V3$	Stakeholder (citizen) engagement index



### 3.3. *Measurement of citizens' engagement*

Bonsón, Royo and Ratkai's (2014a) metrics were adapted for the measurement of citizens' engagement with the Facebook page of PMB. For this aim, the number of comments, shares, negative, positive and total reactions were collected. Using the same measurement model of the aforementioned authors, the three main metrics of popularity (P3), Commitment (C3) and Virality (V3) helped to calculate the aggregated index of engagement (E) (Table 3). Four more metrics (P4, P5, C4, C5) were introduced in order to adapt them to the changes of the Facebook platform that added other reactions such as heart, care, wow, angry, haha, sad, besides likes. For simplification purposes, the reactions were divided into two categories: negative (angry, haha) and positive (likes, heart, care, wow) reactions. The sad likes were excluded due to the very low number (18 out of 12148) of reactions.

### 3.4. *Comments analysis*

The comments were categorized regarding the evaluation of the attitude towards the current municipal administration (positive, negative, neutral). It must be noted that if the comment contained evaluations of previous mayors or administrations, this did not impact the categorization of the comment, as only the perspective on the current administration, mayor or personnel were taken into account. Also, the comments that ignited conflicts (eg. insults) between users but had no direct reference to the administration, mayor or municipality personnel were considered neutral. As citizens' comments can relay mixed attitudes toward the Bucharest City Hall compared to the administration of individual sectors, only the attitude towards PMB was taken into account.

## 4. MAIN RESULTS, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

### 4.1. *Shaping e-participation through PMB social media tactics*

The results of the content analysis on the Facebook posts of Bucharest City Hall indicate a general limited level of interactivity between the public authority and citizens. The frequency of government to citizen communication is at 2.7 posts/day, with less than five days in two months with no communication. It can therefore be argued that the overwhelming majority of the posts reveal a one-way communication or push strategy, with the main tactic being that of representation of the City Hall and its initiatives. This finding is in line with previous research that explored these topics (Zumofen, Mabillard and Pasquier, 2023; Mergel, 2013b; DePaula and Dincelli, 2016; Lielpēters (2021). The most obvious absence in the interaction between the municipality and citizens on social media is the lack of response from the municipality in the comments section, even when citizens ask neutral questions about specific issues. Like Arshad and

Khurram (2020) observed for developing countries, the use of SM by PMB is mainly for informational stages. Consequently, all these aspects shape the e-participation of citizens.

According to the UN e-participation framework, the analysis of the Facebook posts of PMB revealed an overwhelming majority of e-information content (97.5%), with only 2.4% that could be considered as belonging to the e-consultation category.

#### 4.2. Type of content

The type of content that was found in the highest number on the Facebook page of PMB was citizen participation & attention to the citizen (24.24%). However, the data is distorted due to the high number of live video transmissions from the City Hall commissions in this category, amounting to 18.78% of total posts. If these are taken out, the percentage of other posts that fall into this category is of only 5.45%. Therefore, cultural activities & sports and public works & town planning can be considered the types of content most often found on the Facebook page of PMB. Another mention should be made regarding the category other, where the vast majority of posts relate to animal adoption programs. Bonsón., Royo and Ratkai's research (2014a) also found that cultural activities, sports and marketing are the most posted contents by Western European local governments, although the authors mention that they do not seem to be the most relevant for citizens.

TABEL 4 - TYPE OF CONTENT OF PMB FACEBOOK POSTS

Type of content	Number of posts	Percentage of total
citizen participation & attention to the citizen	40	24.24
cultural activities and sports	38	23.03
public works & town planning	31	18.79
others	19	11.52
public transport	11	6.67
health	6	3.64
education	6	3.64
marketing/city promotion/tourism	5	3.03
environment	4	2.42
citizen protection & security	3	1.82
social services	1	0.61
financial reporting	1	0.61
employment & training schemes	0	0.00
housing	0	0.00
governance issues	0	0.00

#### 4.3. *Type of media*

The most widely posted type of media on the Facebook page of PMB were photos. This finding is similar to other municipalities communication on SM as found in previous research. For example, on the local governments' Facebook pages analysed by Bonsón., Royo and Ratkai (2014a) in Western Europe the most used were links and photos.

TABEL 5. TYPE OF MEDIA OF PMB FACEBOOK POSTS

Type of media	Number of posts	Percentage of total
Photo	67	40.6%
Mixed (text with graphic support)	44	26.6%
Video	40	24.2%
Link	8	4.8%
Text	6	3.6%

#### 4.4. *Citizen engagement metrics of the Facebook page of Bucharest City Hall*

The Popularity metrics of PMB Facebook page revealed a high percentage of posts that citizens engage with (P1), representing the vast majority of the content. The average number of reactions (P2) per post is a rather low one related to the number of fans/followers (P3) and even more so to the size of the administrative unit's population. However, at the level of positive and negative interactions with the posts, there is an unexpected high percentage of positive reactions that would indicate a collaborative participation. However, it must be noted that these reactions can be considered low intensity interactions between citizen and government.

The Commitment metrics show that when it comes to a more interactive citizen engagement/higher intensity participation, citizens only engage with 10.9% of the posts. When citizens are more interactive, which is the case of comments compared to interactions, their input is a rather negative one which can make us conclude that a main driver of engagement with the municipality page is adversarial participation. The difference between C4 and P4 is relevant in this respect. A direction of research that can be followed is if the intensity of engagement (higher interactivity) is correlated with negative attitudes towards the government.

The Virality metrics indicate a higher percentage of shared posts compared to commented ones, but lower than the percentage of posts that citizens reacted to. These findings are similar with previous research from other contexts, even those that took place a decade ago. According to Bonsón, Royo and Ratkai, "the most popular way of interaction is liking a post, followed by sharing it and lastly commenting on it, which is consistent with the relative easiness of each type of interaction" (2014a, 7). This may explain why Popularity and Virality metrics are higher than Commitment.

TABLE 6 - CITIZENS' ENGAGEMENT MEASUREMENT FOR PMB FACEBOOK PAGE

<b>Popularity</b>	P1	99%	Percentage of posts that have been reacted to
	P2	73.62	Average number of reactions per post
	P3	1.80	Average number of reactions per post per 1000 fans
	P4	3.29 %	Percentage of negative reactions
	P5	96.56%	Percentage of positive reactions
<b>Commitment</b>	C1	10.90%	Percentage of posts that have been commented
	C2	14.15	Average number of comments per post
	C3	0.35	Average number of comments per post per 1000 fans
	C4	43.55 %	Percentage of negative comments
	C5	10.19 %	Percentage of positive comments
<b>Virality</b>	V1	73.40%	Percentage of posts that have been shared
	V2	10.90	Average number of shares per post
	V3	0.27	Average number of shares per post per 1000 fans
<b>Engagement</b>	E	2.41	Stakeholder (citizen) engagement index

The aggregated index of citizens' engagement with the PMB Facebook page can be compared to indexes from other municipalities calculated in previous research. If we compare it with Bonsón, Royo and Ratkai's (2014a) findings (Table 6), Bucharest municipality has a very low index of engagement, especially since the research was realized almost one decade later.

TABLE 6 - CITIZENS' ENGAGEMENT BY PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION STYLE

	<b>Fans</b>	<b>Popularity</b>	<b>Commitment</b>	<b>Virality</b>	<b>Engagement</b>
Anglo-Saxon	825	5.3803	2.01107	1.3538	8.7448
Nordic	2045	12.5128	1.3613	1.0761	14.9502
Germanic	182,932	4.8526	0.3478	0.5878	5.7882
Southern European	95,792	8.7757	0.99331	4.4607	14.1695
Total	66,093	8.6696	1.1216	2.3551	12.1464
Kruskal-Wallis test		44.192	59.873	178.554	36.205
Asymptotic significance		0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000

Source: Bonsón, Royo and Ratkai (2014a, 6).

#### 4.5. Comment analysis

Out of the total of 2291 comments that could be viewed on the Facebook page, only 10.38% were positive comments, while the negative and neutral percentages were very similar: 44.39% negative comments and 45.22% neutral comments. It must be noted that the data can be biased towards neutral comments as many of the comments that made negative or positive references previous administrations, mayors, or City Hall personnel, but comments where no clear evaluation could be established for current administration were also considered as neutral. Furthermore, the evaluation might have been altered by the limitation of the medium, as when it was not clear if a comment was sarcastic or ironic, it was

considered as neutral. Regarding the evaluation of negative comments for each content type, it can be argued that the two most posted types of content (citizen participation & attention to the citizen and cultural activities & sports) gathered the highest percentages of negative comments. The lowest percentage of negative comments in the category other can also be explained by the specific topic that dominated the category (animal adoption). On the other side, health and education categories gathered the highest percentage of positive comments. This can also further be explained by the qualitative content analysis on these categories that indicated the majority of Facebook posts could be deemed as uncontroversial topics and mainly positive achievements on the side of the City Hall.

TABEL 7 - TYPE OF CONTENT &amp; PERCENTAGE OF NEGATIVE COMMENTS

Type of content	Percentage of Negative comments	Percentage of Neutral comments	Percentage of Positive comments
citizen participation & attention to the citizen	55.45	32.08	12.46
cultural activities & sports	55.17	37.93	6.89
public works and town planning	40.88	49.52	9.59
others	35.13	52.70	12.16
public transport	48.77	43.50	7.71
health	46.37	33.33	20.28
education	43.58	38.46	17.94
marketing/city promotion/tourism	51.08	38.04	10.86
environment	38	50	12
citizen protection and security	54.83	38.70	6.45
social services*			
Financial* reporting			
employment & training schemes*	-	-	-
housing	-	-	-
governance issues	-	-	-

\*Excluded as only one post in this content type

The highest percentage of negative comments per type media were identified in the case of video posts. This can be explained by the fact that the majority of video content were live stream videos from City Hall meetings and citizens can personalize public administration by conflating the institution with its representatives. Alternatively link media content attracted the least percentage of negative posts and the highest of positive among all media types.

TABEL 8 - TYPE OF MEDIA &amp; PERCENTAGE OF NEGATIVE COMMENTS

Type of media	Percentage of Negative comments	Percentage of Neutral comments	Percentage of Positive comments
Photo	43.98	46.82	9.18
Mixed (text with graphic support)	40.59	49.52	9.87
Video	57.04	27.18	15.77
Link	34.21	44.73	21.05
Text	38.88	61.11	

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

A first finding of this exploratory research indicates a one-way communication (push strategy) from the Bucharest City Hall towards the citizens. PMB's main tactic is that of the representation of the institution and its initiatives, with low interactivity with citizens, especially in the comments section of their Facebook posts. The research adapted an existing citizens' engagement measurement index to account for changes in the social media platform. Part of this measurement model, the Commitment metrics showed that, when it comes to a more intense e-participation, like commenting on Facebook content, citizens have low engagement with social media content of PMB. However, when they do engage in this type of participation, they do it from a rather adversarial type of participation. A future research could explore if the intensity of engagement (higher interactivity) is correlated with negative attitudes towards the government.

In respect to the types of content on the Facebook page of PMB, the paper concluded that the most often distributed ones were: cultural activities & sports and public works & town planning. The most widely posted type of media on the Facebook page of PMB were photos. New research could also look into which type of content and media foster the highest levels of citizen engagement.

Lastly, future research could try to overcome several of the current limitations, for example to expand the sample of the analysis or offer a comparative perspective to other Romanian municipalities or regional ones.

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