POLICY
BRIEF

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The art of being digitally meaningful:
local governments' activity on social media

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HIGHLIGHTS

1. Social media usage and activity is inscribed in broader e-Government strategies. There is added value of social media usage for citizens' engagement in the pursuance of democratic principles and in the process of (re)gaining trust in public institutions.

2. The activity of local governments in social media allows for better, more efficient, and personalized service delivery and closer proximity with constituents. It can be explained by different factors.

3. The **methodological approach** used social media data from Portuguese municipalities which have a Facebook account. Results are presented from a within-case analysis.

4. **Population size and purchase power of citizens are key to explain** the variation in the activity of local governments on social media.

5. **Recommendations to local governments' activity on social media** should be read in the light of context-specific situations, considering cost effectiveness, available resources, and short-term application.

1. Introduction

This study aims to present the determinants of local governments' social media usage by exploring the impact of institutional, political, and social incentives on their levels of activity on official Facebook accounts. It focuses on a within-case analysis of Portuguese local governments.

1.1. Social media as important instruments for citizens' engagement and vehicles to foster institutional trust

Institutional trust: in November 2016, 41% of Portuguese citizens revealed trust in local and regional authorities, remaining below the 47% European average.

This result is part of a larger trend indicating that citizens' trust in institutions and representative government has been on the decline due to a multiplicity of factors. Digital media are new avenues for participation and means to cultivate this apparent decline in trust.

Communication via social media: while part of e-Government strategies, social media help circumvent local governments' limited resources and improve their relationships with citizens. Although the power of social media to increase citizen engagement and offline political participation requires continuous analysis and empirical verification, research shows that efforts in this regard are valuable.

2. Incentives for local government's social media usage

 Institutional incentives: the economic and administrative capacity of local governments influences their presence on Facebook.

 Political incentives: local political competition and positioning in the political spectrum shed light on the levels of government activity on social media.

 Social incentives: the size and the purchasing power of the municipal population as indicators of critical mass influence social media activity of local governments.

Figure 1: Institutional, political and social incentives for local governments' activity on social media.

3. Methodology

A total of 55 781 Facebook posts were collected from 290 municipalities during a three-month period in 2016. Additional economic and socio-demographic data for the analysis was gathered from the Portuguese Census Bureau (*Instituto Nacional de Estatística*). Research results derive from an empirical analysis using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression.

4. Evidence from the research

4.1. The Portuguese case

- Only 14 out of the 308 municipalities are absent from Facebook.
- Municipalities are active since 2009, with a considerable increase between 2010 to 2014.
- On average, Portuguese local governments made roughly two posts per day.
- Some municipalities made extensive use of Facebook to communicate with their citizens.
- Citizens 'like' and 'share' more than comment on municipalities' Facebook posts.
- Medium and large size municipalities tend to be more active on Facebook.
- In contrast, interaction with citizens tends to be higher in the smallest municipalities.

- Mayoral alternation in local government (due to forced open-seats) does not seem to generate higher activity on social media.
- Levels of citizen engagement tend to be significantly higher in municipalities where a new political party/mayor runs the office.

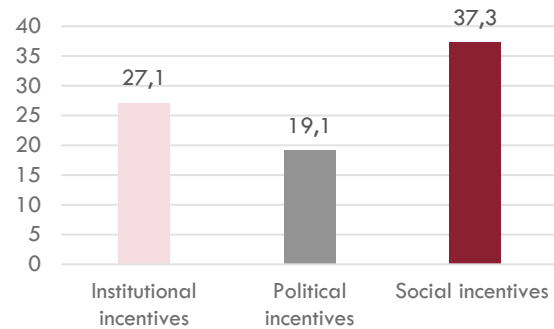### 4.2. The incentives for local governments' activity on social media

Figure 2: Relevance of incentives for local governments' activity on social media.

Socio-demographic variables explain 37% of the variation encountered in Facebook usage by local governments. Municipal population size and citizens' purchase power are particularly relevant to predict higher levels of usage.

Institutional features are also determinant, especially in terms of financial and administrative capacity, as well as a commitment to transparency.

Political incentives are less significant to explain the variation of local governments' activity on Facebook, representing about 19% of the overall relevance of incentives.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Internal organisation and communication

The development of online communication strategies that include social media presence and activity, and a clear definition of participants, roles and tasks.

Coordination of social media strategies with all stakeholders involved in the communication strategy and marketing plan of the municipality. If appropriate, the nomination of a social media pivot inside the institution, who shall provide guidance to the team and particularly to staff dealing with social media.

Promotion of (in-house) specialised sessions dedicated to the dissemination and sharing of information and ideas of local governments' usage and activity on social media.

Set up informal knowledge sharing sessions to allow workers to learn from each other about being actively and meaningfully present online and to raise awareness about opportunities, risks and challenges.

Benchmark other success cases taking advantage of territorial proximity and mutual interests.

5.2. Capacity-building and training

Training initiatives, informal knowledge sharing sessions and capacity-building actions aiming at improving communication via social media as a stepping stone for citizens' engagement with public issues and their trust in local government.

5.3. Monitoring and assessment

Early assessment of institutional capacity and citizen needs and interests contributes to successful social media strategies. Besides, internal introspective and longitudinal reflection and discussion on leadership profiles and styles help to shape meaningful and efficient communication in the digital sphere.

Promotion of regular reporting and performance assessment.

Definition of objectives to be met, as well as development and consolidation of KPI's to facilitate monitoring and assessment.

FURTHER READING

- Additional documents and reports that Silva, P., Tavares, A.F., Silva, T. & Lameiras, M. (2019) The good, the bad and the ugly: Three faces of social media usage by local governments. *Government Information Quarterly*, 36(3), pp. 469-479. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2019.05.006

- Silva, T., Tavares, A. & Lameiras, M. (2019) 'Trendy' Cities: Exploring the Adoption of Different Types of Social Media by Portuguese Municipalities. *11th IFIP WG 8.5 International Conference on Electronic Participation (ePart 2019)*, San Benedetto Del Tronto, pp. 26-34. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27397-2

- Lameiras, M., Silva, T. & Tavares, A. (2018) An Empirical Analysis of Social Media Usage by Local Governments in Portugal. *Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on Theory and Practice of Electronic Governance (ICEGOV2018)*. https://doi.org/10.1145/3209415.3209503