Social media in Romanian public administration – case study: National Institute of Statistics

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Abstract

Social media offers great opportunities especially, considering widening transparency in public administration. Given the importance, the challenges and the complexity of social media-based communication in public administration, this paper aims to provide an analysis on the impact that social media has in official statistics communication and dissemination. Using social media as one of the key communication channels in official statistics in Romania has been implemented only since the late 2013, when the communication department has been established. Relevant conclusions and consistent recommendations for decision makers have been formulated at the end of the analysis.

JEL Classification: Z – Other Special Topics.

Introduction

Knowledge sharing in the public sector is governed by strict rules, a clear sense of hierarchy with fixed reporting structures, standard operating procedures, and laws, thus restricting the free flow of information across organizational boundaries. Most frequently used, technolgy-based, communication channels are websites which ussualy, broadcast information in a static manner, providing limited interactions between citizens and institutions. According to Mergel (2010, p.177), *social media tools are challenging this traditional "need to know" information- sharing paradigm and are increasing the degree of participation of all stakeholders in the process of creating, maintaining, sourcing, and sharing knowledge.* Thus, social media creates the opportunity for increasing transparency of governement structures, designing an environment that can reduce corruption (Bertot et.al. 2010, p. 269).

Mergel (2012, p.469) points out several examples, all indicating that social media is surely to become a trusted communication channel in the public sector: *the use of the microblogging service Twitter during the East Coast snow storms in 2010, the use of Facebook to coordinate the uprisings of what is now called the Arab Spring in 2011, and the call by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to use social media instead of phone lines to check in with friends and family during earthquakes and hurricanes in late 2011.*

Although social media offers great opportunities especially, considering widening transparency in public administration, there are many challenges that

institutions need to overcome in order to successfuly implement this new way of communication. Landsbergen (2010, p.140-142) points out that lack of organizational resources, privacy issues (protecting citizens' anonymity using Twitter or Facebook to contact an authority), records management law (status of Twitter and Facebook messages as a public record or not), security (overcoming the possibility of inserting malware into goverment evironment), dealing with accesibility standards are very important issues that public entities should deal before engaging in social media communication. Furthermore, Hoffmann (et. al. 2014, p.24) points out that social media readiness depends on technology acceptance and digital trust at employee level.

In order to achieve the goal of social media, Clarke (2011, p.7), stated several principles to govern social media:

General policy principles governing social media communication in public institututions, adapted from Clarke, P. (2011). Putting social media to use in public administration. Strasbourg: European Council., page 7

Figure 1
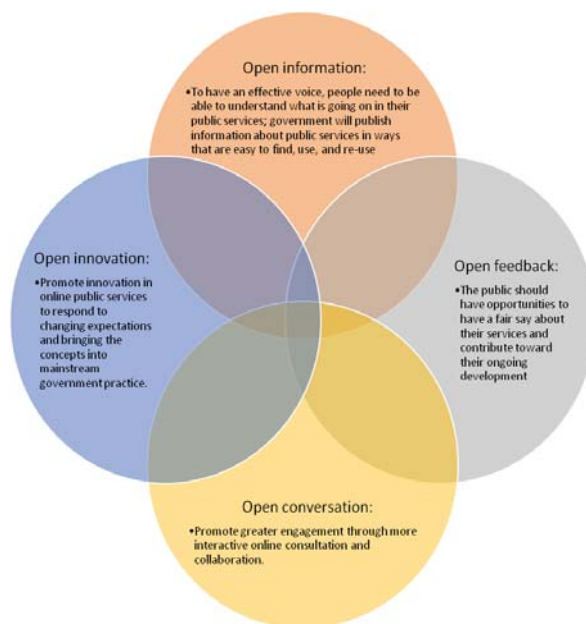
Romanian public institutions are relatively new on social media. Apostu (2014, p.8), in a guidebook for using social media instruments adressed to the romanian employees in public administration, stresses that public institutions' reluctance in using social media is mainly due to lack of professional training in this area. Also, Burcea and Hârțescu (2014, p.45), in a similar guidebook, emphasize the lack of resources and the restrictive legislative framework considering data protection as main reasons for not using social media in public administration.

In order to encourage Romanian public institutions to use social media 3 different projects were initiated, each with his own approach:

- Preparing the national e-Administration System in Romania (Pregătirea sistemului naţional de e-Administraţie în România)[1]: focuses on offering employees in public administration proffesional training in using social media as well as other specific instruments for a digitalized governance;

- Transparency and quality in public admnistration through social media (Transparenţă şi calitate în administraţia publică prin social media)[2]: realised a research report on how social media can contribute to an enhanced public engagement;

- Digital Diplomacy[3]: is a long term project that aims to promote best practices in integrating new media in public institutions' communication strategies.

National Institute of Statistics implemented a communication strategy, based on social media tools, starting with January 2014. By following the guidelines of best practice in public administration, NIS is now among top institutions in Romania with a notable presence in e-System.

Methodology

Given the importance, the challenges and the complexity of social media-based communication in public administration, this paper aims to provide an analysis on the impact that social media has in official statistics communication and dissemination. Using social media as one of the key communication channels in official statistics in Romania has been implemented only since the late 2013, when the communication department has been established.

The specific objectives of this paper are:

- To support the use of social media communication and dissemination strategies in Romanian statistics;

- To give examples of advantages obtained via social media communication in official statistics;

- To identify the main domains in official statistics communication and dissemination where social media may be successfully applied.

- To offer reliable know-how through analysis of National Institute of Statistics social media tools already implemented and their results.

In order to achieve the general and specific objectives of this paper the following methodological framework has been developed and applied:

- A SWOT analysis on the National Institute of Statistics will be conducted in order to understand the specific context where social media is employed; the SWOT analysis is developed by the authors based on observations acquired between 15 January 2014 and 1 May 2015;

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1. http://www.e-administratie.forhe.ro/obiective-si-activitati;jsessionid=2006E4FD6B1798315F0E888236 34C833 accessed 19.05.15, 10:20

2. http://www.dialogcucetatenii.ro/ accessed 19.05.15, 10:34

3. http://digitaldiplomacy.ro/despre-noi/ accessed 19.05.15, 10:35

- An analysis on the social media content provided by the NIS will be performed in order to emphasize the advantages obtained via social media communication in official statistics;
- An analysis on the specific instruments (such as infographics) in order to identify the main domains in official statistics communication and dissemination where social media may be successfully applied.

Results

Figure 2 presents the SWOT analysis of the National Institute of Statistics. Out of this analysis, several key features that directly affect communication via social media channels are:

- Employees' reticence to new: as stated in the literature review above, communication through social media can only be successful if employees easily accept technologies;
- Potential security leaks due to social media exposure: interacting with the public via social media may expose the institute to malware;
- Excessive bureaucracy and slow workflow: reduces creativity of those involved in implementing instruments used in social media communication;
- International exposure: results in implementing best practices in communication, specifically through social media;
- A new communication and dissemination strategy that includes social media exposure: legally empowers the communication experts to implement best instruments for an efficient communication.

SWOT analysis on the National Institute of Statistics

Figure 2

	helpful	harmful
internal	- Long history - Personalities of Romania founded the institute - Established rules and methods - Clear mission, known and understood by all the employees - Well organized at a national level - 42 regional offices	- Limited resources - Aged employees - Old methodologies - Slow workflow - Too much bureaucracy - Employees' reticence to new - Long time to disseminate data due to limited equipment
external	- International collaborations - Exchange programs for experience - Administration support - Legal actions for a better frame - Actions for the improvement of the institutional image and development of statistical culture - Modernization of communication and dissemination strategy - Visibility through social media	- Evolution of private statistics organizations - Lack of experts due to retirement - Not enough new employees - Growing needs in resources for software and hardware equipment - Potential security leaks due to social media exposure

Source: developed by the authors

Given the complexity of context of the Romanian National Institute of Statistics, only one social media channel is currently active, Facebook. Yet, a Youtube channel and a Google+ page were created but are not currently used due to lack of resources. Also, the institute has a Slide Share account, but presentations uploaded here are distributed via Facebook. The official Facebook page of the National Institute of Statistics was created in December 2013. It represents the page of the Central Bureau of Statistics in Bucharest, and starting from it, *14 pages* of regional bureaus of statistics (subsidiaries) from around the country have been developed, until today.
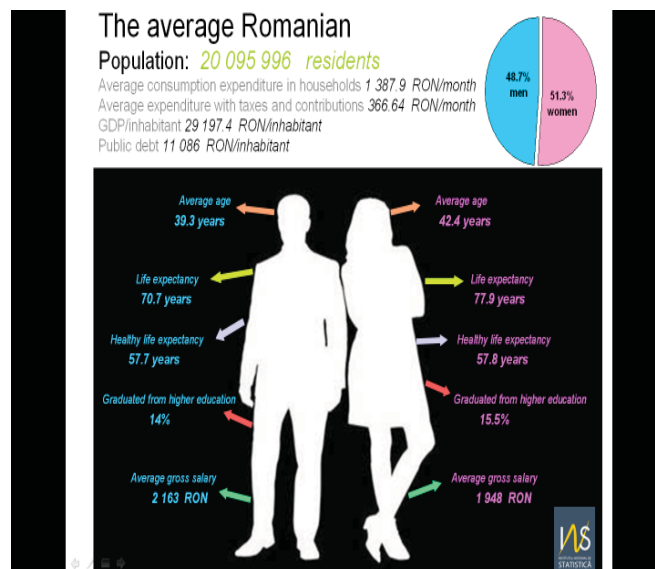
The advantages of using social media in official statistics communication are:

- Increase statistical literacy: through comprehensive infographics such as the one on transportation below; infographics are visual representations meant to give a quick meaning to complex concepts and make a perfect tool – if a picture expresses 1000 words then, an infographic expresses 1000 images?
- Enhance statistics popularity: over 2000 thousand followers, 40-50 individual visits per page per day, in the last 5 months, 382 post reaches average, the summary of 17 months membership.
- Promote statistical agencies as an attractive employer; NIS' presence in online media emphasizes the institutional interest of constant evolution and modernization, trend which demonstrates a strong possibility of career opportunity development for a young employee.
- Strengthen the image of the national provider of official statistics through the association with modern trends in data communication and dissemination.

Enhance credibility of the national institute and increase awareness in the public opinion through the presentations developed by experts working at the National Institute of Statistics, shared from Slide Share, via Facebook **.**

Infographics example

The average Romanian

Population: *20 095 996* residents

Average consumption expenditure in households *1 387.9 RON/month*
Average expenditure with taxes and contributions *366.64 RON/month*
GDP/inhabitant *29 197.4 RON/inhabitant*
Public debt *11 086 RON/inhabitant*

48.7% men
51.3% women

Average age
39.3 years

Average age
42.4 years

Life expectancy
70.7 years

Life expectancy
77.9 years

Healthy life expectancy
57.7 years

Healthy life expectancy
57.8 years

Graduated from higher education
14%

Graduated from higher education
15.5%

Average gross salary
2 163 RON

Average gross salary
1 948 RON

Source: National Institute of Statistics Official Facebook Page

Using Facebook as a main social media tool brings in extraordinary visual advantages such as infographics, as main data presentations tools. Infographics are the newest trend in official statistics, due to the strong visual impact and the opportunity to present large set of information in an easy to read manner.

Aside infographics, this social media channel offers opportunity of creating events, as well as send invitations and receive confirmations for such manifestations; picture collages or albums from these events bring statistics consumers closer to the team behind data. NIS uses also several types of visual interpretations, aside infographics, such as E-cards, book covers, and implement different themes, visually, depending on the debated subject.

Next, an analysis on these specific instruments is provided in order to identify the main domains in official statistics communication and dissemination where social media may be successfully applied.
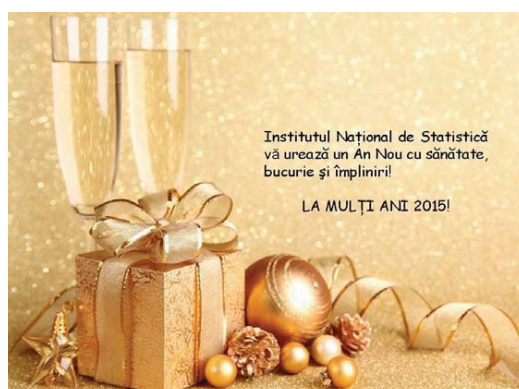
• Facebook official National Institute of Statistics Page analysis National holiday theme"Easter card" registered 36 likes
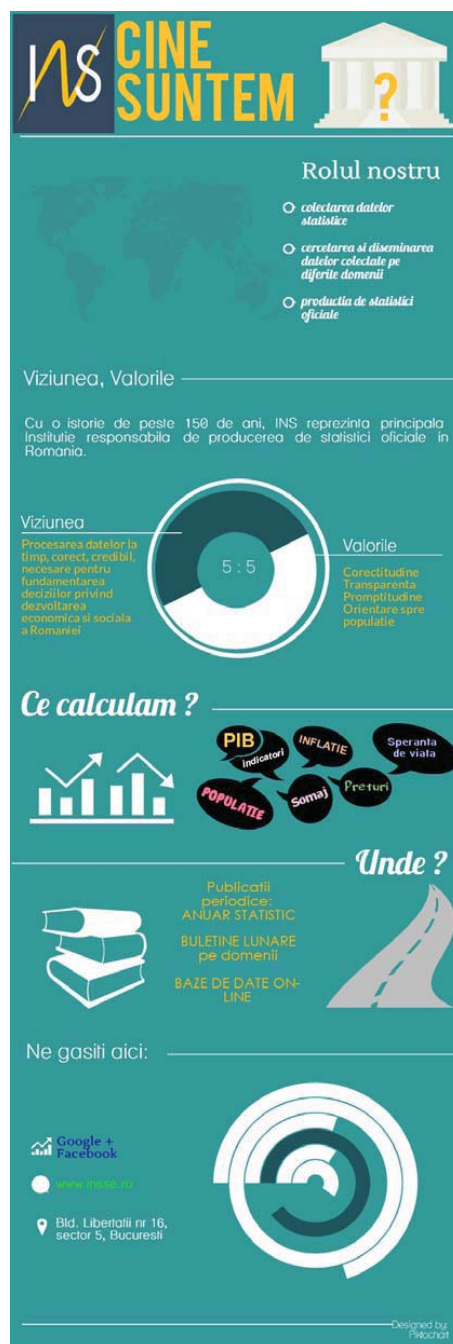

• "Women's Day" collage - 100 likes and 4 comments
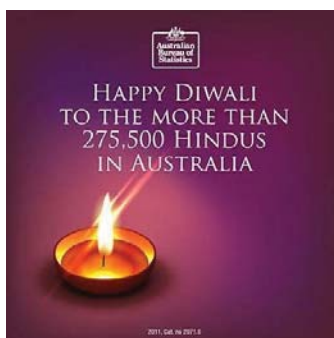

• "New Year's 2015" card had 48 likes

• "Who are we" infographic gathered 28 likes and 1 comment.

• Australian Bureau of Statistics "Happy Diwali" card with the national celebration message registered 280 likes and 20 comments.

• Congratulations card on population gathered 236 liks and 21 comments

• "Thank you" card for taking part of a survey gathered 78 likes and 7 comments.

Furthermore, we may take a closer look to the reasons behind the number of likes, comments and shares, to see in what way posting time or the theme affects the post's popularity. First, we may wonder why in the examples we chose, from the Australian

Bureau of Statistics, there are more appreciations than of NIS's infographics and collages. One explanation is the number of total followers of the Australian official page, over 17000 people, due to the fact that they have been members on Facebook longer than NIS, who has just offer 2000 followers in present. Another reason targets the hour of posting; as good practice, the most popular posts are those which appear when people benefit of the most free time, more accurately in the afternoon or first time in the morning. Lastly, popularity of post mostly depend of the theme of interest, and are entirely submitted to subjectivity.

Conclusions and recommendations

The article provided an analysis on the impact that social media has in official statistics communication and dissemination. The authors based their case study on the National Institute of Statistics in Romania. As consequence of this analysis several conclusions can be formulated:

- There are many challenges at institutional level needed to overcome in order to fully implement an efficient communication through social media;
- Using social media in official statistics has many advantages such as increasing statistical literacy, enhancing statistics popularity, promoting statistical agencies as an attractive employer, strengthening the image of the national provider of official statistics through the association with modern trends in data communication and dissemination;
- Posting time and theme highly affects popularity of these posts.

Following these conclusions, the authors recommend NIS management:

- To design and implement a rise awareness campaign among the employees about the importance of social media in promoting official statistics;
- To expand the NIS Facebook community as much as possible;
- To organize study visits to the other national institutes of statistics, more experienced in using social media;
- To closely monitor posts in order to design and implement a Facebook posting strategy.

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