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Informing citizens, building trust and promoting discussion

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Abstract

Where information is cheap, attention becomes expensive. In today's society, information is increasingly at hand. Today, via Internet, anyone has access to it. In the online environment, news channels are flooded with updates – most of them being takeovers of official Web sites of the institutions involved. Their huge numbers and increased dynamics demolish any attempt to build confidence in the government source. A few decades ago, the citizen had television as the main source of information. Soon after the number of TV channels has increased, was observed a decrease regarding the television consumer's confidence in the information provided this way. Before that, the newspaper and the radio went through similar stages. Today Internet is facing it. This paper proposes the realization of a conceptual framework for online delivery of information from the public environment to the citizens, businesses and other government institutions – as part of a success model regarding the public administration's communication with the environment it addresses to.

Keywords: web platform, new media, information delivery channel

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1. Introduction

With approximately 1.5 billion Facebook accounts, 1.3 billion YouTube users, 700 million Twitter accounts, 200 million Instagram accounts and so on, we can say that citizens' participation in the world's events has never been easier as it is today. Moreover, 46.4% of the planet's population uses the services that the Internet offers to its users (Internet World Stats, 2016). Thanks to the explosion of technology, what we knew about the involvement of citizens in political and social life is changing. We have to rethink what this means, and Media and Information Literacy (MIL) can help us rethink this whole framework.

Nowadays we can speak of two parallel systems that work alike and whose importance is comparable. While there is a real-life framework of citizens' action against political and social events, there is also a virtual one where they engage in an equal measure. In this context, what should be done is to build a bridge between the real world and digital one. Media and Information Literacy can help build this bridge.

Policies promoted by UNESCO specifically refer to the use of MIL to increase citizens' abilities to interact with the electronic world. According to the New London Group, „If it were possible to define generally the mission of education [in all sciences, even though we refer here mostly on the IT&C education], it could be said that its fundamental purpose is to ensure that students [citizens] benefit from learning in ways that allow them to participate fully in public, community and economic life” (New London Group, 1996). This is what MIL means – a vision for an engaging civic education movement.

2. Background

Investigating further the UNESCO's concerns towards the development of Media and Information Literacy, we find that this model of curricular development is considering the extensive use of all the components that define the information society of today (milunesco.org, 2016). In this article we refer in particular to: Media Literacy, Media Education, News Literacy, Digital Literacy, and Information Literacy. We see the concept of literacy repeating itself obsessively. What does it mean? In this context, being literate means having the ability to read and write digital content. If we are to push the definition further, we can say that a literate person is one who understands and can pass on information in digital format.

Today, information literally floats around us in the form of radio waves transmitted by the multitude of wireless equipment placed in the most unusual places. More than a billion Web sites and approximately 3.3 billion users change a number of over 80 billion e-mails daily. 1.5 million new articles on various blogs are written daily (internetlivestats.com, 2016). Google reports 1.7 billion daily searches and YouTube over 3.7 billion videos viewed daily. Globally, daily Internet traffic exceeds a EiB (10246, exbibyte – one billion GB). Reducing these statistics at European level, we still run into very large numbers, Europe representing approximately 20% of the totals figures expressed above. The multitude of this information induces a generalized confusion among users, which in turn, generates a lack of trust (Turcotte et al., 2015). Increasingly more users reject the information that does not come from reliable sources, therefore not clicking on the respective links.

At the moment, in Romania there are 320 cities and, according to the study „E-Government in Romanian municipalities” (Vrabie, 2016), no official Web site of a city hall resembles to another – starting with the URL and ending with the manner of displaying information. A closer look at the background statistics reveals a very wide range on which the results of the study mentioned are spread. Cities with a very good score in chapters such as <<Transparency>> have obtained low scores at <<Electronic documents management>> or <<Generalities>> – this last section helped analyzing elements of layout and content. If we are to refer to the ten biggest cities in Romania by the number of inhabitants, we will see that the dispersion of scores (calculated by both Variation – VAR and Standard Deviation – SD(σ)) has different values for each class of analysis and also for each city analyzed (Table 1).

Table 1. Scores obtained by the biggest ten cities in Romania in the study „E-Government in Romanian

	Locality	Position in top	Population	Final score	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	VAR	SD(σ)
1	Bucharest	16	1883425	3.55	4.75	3.50	2.50	3.50	3.50	0.42	0.65
2	Cluj-Napoca	18	324576	3.50	5.00	2.50	2.50	3.50	4.00	0.75	0.87
3	Timisoara	3	319279	3.73	4.75	3.50	4.17	3.25	3.00	0.34	0.58
4	Iasi	24	290422	3.42	4.25	2.50	3.33	4.00	3.00	0.34	0.59
5	Constanta	105	283872	2.63	4.25	1.50	1.67	2.75	3.00	0.83	0.91
6	Craiova	45	269506	3.13	5.00	3.00	1.67	2.00	4.00	1.28	1.13
7	Brasov	19	253200	3.48	4.25	3.50	1.67	3.00	5.00	1.07	1.03
8	Galati	75	249432	2.80	3.50	2.50	2.50	2.50	3.00	0.13	0.37
9	Ploiesti	73	209945	2.83	3.75	2.00	1.67	3.25	3.50	0.58	0.76
10	Oradea	1	196367	4.33	4.25	4.50	4.17	3.75	5.00	0.14	0.38
	VAR			0.23	0.23	0.69	0.90	0.33	0.56		
	SD(σ)			1.00	1.28	1.02	1.02	0.98	1.15		

C1 = Transparency, C2 = E-Doc, C3 = Communication, C4 = Useful content, C5 = Generalities. Source: „E-Government in Romanian municipalities 2016”

From our studies, no country in the region is any different. Harmonization of public administration’s interests with those of the citizen is for now only a topic of discussion. Each public institution wants its presence on the Web to be unique in all aspects, and this is natural given the very large differences between institutions; it is enough to think that a city is unlike any other (some are leaning towards tourism development, others have a large industrial component etc.) and we can more easily understand the uniqueness character supported by them. This character, however, produce a generalized confusion among citizens. They get lost in the Internet’s thickets when they have to find certain information and thus are tempted to return to the traditional manner of communication with the public administration’s offices, such as telephone, or even worse, to physically go on the institution’s headquarters. Thus actions might shake concepts such as e-government and/or open government.

The President of USA – Barack Obama, at the opening of Open Government Partnership Meeting in New York, September 24, 2014, highlighted the role of OG in the citizen-state relationship. If in 2011 the Open Government partnership was signed by the United States along with seven other nations, in 2015 the number of signatories has increased, as shown in Figure 1, reaching 69 states (Open Government Partnership, 2016). This concept, relatively new, clearly relies on technology: „When citizens demand progress, governments need to be able to respond. And in a new millennium, flush with technology that allows us to connect with a tweet or text, citizens rightly demand more responsiveness, more openness [...]” (The White House, 2014). Continuing his speech, President Obama talked about the fact that there have been conducted over 2000 commitments – which are designed to facilitate the interaction between governments and over two billion citizens to whom they are addressed.

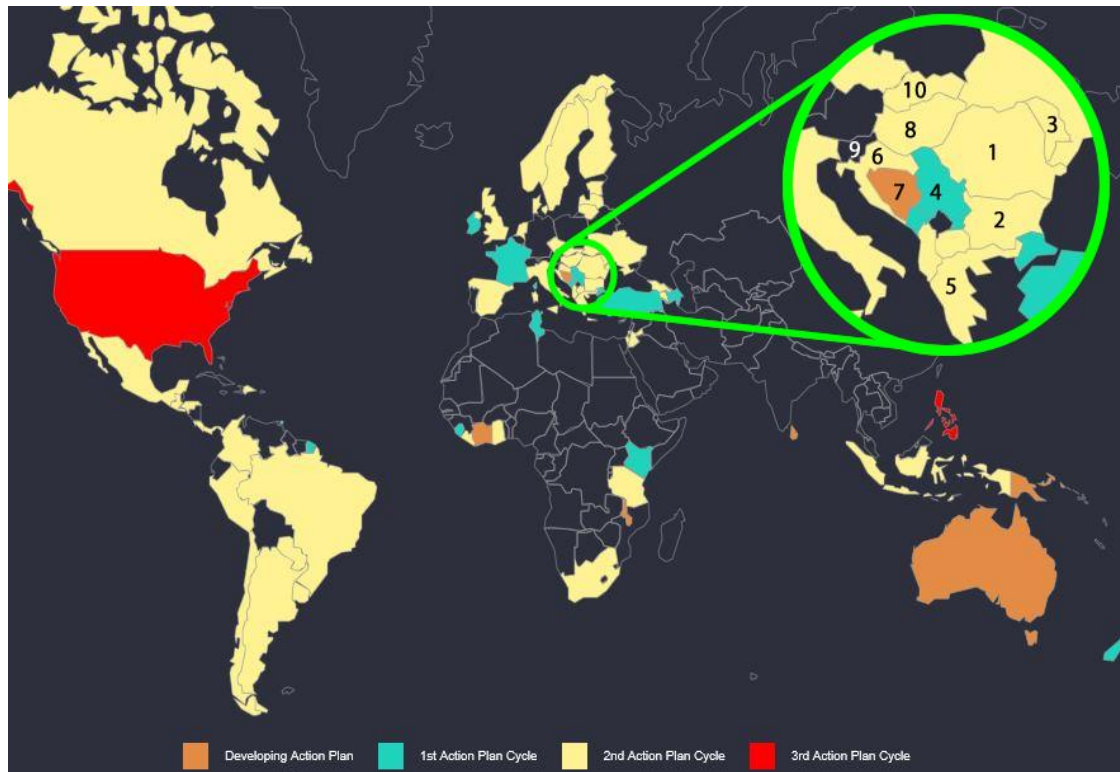


Figure 1. Open Government. Partnership. Source: <http://www.opengovpartnership.org/>

3. Methodology

The methodological approach in achieving this article has considered both a documentary research and one empirical. The first one is having, as the analysis unit, the national action plans regarding Open Government through MIL, of the countries we have considered in this study, and the second one was focused on collecting views on developing the conceptual framework for delivery of online information presented by this research.

Thus, we have started our study by individually accessing the action plans for the period 2014-2016 of ten countries in South-East Europe (1 - Romania, 2 - Bulgaria, 3 - Republic of Moldova, 4 - Serbia, 5 - Greece, 6 - Croatia, 7 - Bosnia, 8 - Hungary, 9 - Slovenia and 10 - Slovakia – as on the map above) in order to study which are their interests in the area of Open Government's development. Unfortunately, Slovenia and Bosnia do not have such documents, and for Serbia they are only in Serbian language (Open Government Partnership, 2016). Most of those action plans represent, as stated in the Romanian National Action Plan, a „product of the government's collaboration with the civil society and re-affirming the commitments to the five OGP grand challenges: improving public services, increasing public integrity, more effectively managing public resources, creating safer communities and increasing corporate accountability” (Romanian National Action Plan, 2014).

Same period in which we studied the documents mentioned, was drafted a questionnaire, aimed to measure the level of Media and Information Literacy elements used in relation to Open Government. It was sent for filling in to all the National Commissions of UNESCO from the ten countries mentioned above. The written request addressed to all the UNESCO Commissions was that these questionnaires should be directed also towards the Ministry of Public Administration (or similar) in their countries, and also towards the Ministry of Technology and Communications and to a representative of the Civil Society.

The questionnaire was also published on the Internet with the purpose to collect information on the same issue from citizens in order to have an image from both public services providers,

and the population – consumer of those services. There were a total number of 77 well completed and statistically accepted questionnaires.

We must add here that for all the respondents, both official representatives of the countries mentioned, and representatives of the population, have been ensured the confidentiality of the given answers.

4. Preliminary data

The importance given to the action plans developed before starting this study is due to the possibility to visualize and analyse national projects developed in order to increase the level of governments' openness.

Without being subjective by any means, we found the project called „Increasing the Quality and Quantity of Published Open Data”, developed by the Chancellery of the Prime-Minister in Romania, as being a first step and perhaps the most important of those studied by us in regard to bringing all information into a single portal. In October 2013, the national gateway data.gov.ro was launched ahead of the planned 2014 deadline. The platform represents the central access point for open data collected from the public administration. The Chancellery of the Prime-Minister will intensify its efforts to promote the importance of open data publishing, particularly within public administration (Romanian National Action Plan, 2012).

Of the countries considered, Bulgaria also takes pride in enhancing the good practices relating to access of information. Through this, it aims to ensure the correct enforcement of the Access to Public Information Act by setting uniform parameters for the timely development and publication of information by the administration (Bulgaria National Action Plan, 2014).

Further on, by studying the action plans we found that all the countries mentioned – and that have the initiatives published on the Internet – have developed policies in order to collect information in one place. Greece, through its portal opengov.gr, is trying to ensure open-deliberation for participatory rule making (Greek National Action Plan, 2012). In Croatia, a pilot project of a system for personal user access to public administration was launched, in which it will be possible for every citizen to have access to their personal information via the Internet system, which will also be a part of the gov.hr system. Additionally, a pilot project was launched for releasing public sector information, aimed at improving the accessibility of public sector data in one place (Croatia National Action Plan, 2014). In Slovakia a Web portal was developed with the aim to collect all information about structural Funds, EEA Financial Mechanism, Norwegian Financial Mechanism, Swiss Financial Mechanism and other Ministry grant mechanisms which constitute significant resources of public finances used by local government bodies, business persons, and non-governmental organizations (Slovak National Republic Action Plan, 2012). After taking office in 2010, the Hungarian Government immediately started the preparations of launching a new single governmental Website. The www.kormany.hu contains all data of public interest about all ministries, provides a forum to inspect and comment on draft legislations under preparation, and also gives information on major governmental measures (Hungary National Action Plan, 2013).

Table 2. Picture of actions taken for developing Open-Government in the region's countries

Indicators	Romania	Bulgaria	Republic of Moldova	Serbia	Greece	Croatia	Bosnia	Hungary	Slovenia	Slovakia
Enhancing Transparency and Administrative Efficiency	Yes		Yes	NA	Yes	Yes	NA	Yes	NA	Yes
Increasing The Quality and Quantity of Published Open Data	Yes		Yes	NA	Yes		NA		NA	Yes
Human Resource Training and Development	Yes			NA			NA		NA	
Effective Management of The Public Resources		Yes		NA		Yes	NA	Yes	NA	Yes
Improving Corporate Responsibility and Accountability		Yes		NA			NA	Yes	NA	
Ensure Transparency of The Governance at The Local Level	Yes		Yes	NA	Yes	Yes	NA	Yes	NA	Yes
Encourage Participatory Decision Making Through E-Communication Platforms			Yes	NA		Yes	NA		NA	Yes
Open E-Deliberation and Recruitment				NA	Yes	Yes	NA		NA	Yes

Source: National Action Plans available on <http://www.opengovpartnership.org/>

From the table above we can see the initiatives of the region's countries in terms of Open-Government development. Clearly, as we are already used by studying Romania case, Open-Government initiatives have been developed at local levels without them being necessarily reported to a national entity, which means that the situation is actually much better. But for a greater visibility and also for increasing operability, these initiatives must be brought under the same light – only this way they can unitary serve the citizen and the administration.

Further, by analysing the results of the questionnaire, we can see that 63 of the respondents (82%) choose online methods of obtaining information from the public environment – 35 (46%) accessing online newspapers and 28 (36%) directly from the Web sites of the public institutions, while only 14 (18%) choose traditional methods such watching the news on TV.

The question „What is your opinion related to the development of a unique channel for delivering information from the public authorities to citizens and to the business sector (for example a Web portal built to gather, via RSS, all the news released by the public authorities)?”,

whose responses were situated on the Likert scale (with values between 1 - strongly disagree and 5 - strongly agree), received a total of 49 strongly agree responses (64% of the total), 7 agree (9%), 14 neutral (18%), 0 disagree and 7 (9%) strongly disagree. Only by those answers we can say that the public is willing to have everything in one place.

4.1 Statement of Limitation

It must be mentioned here that this survey was completed only by Internet users. However this does not represent an obstacle in the analysis because the solution we proposed – namely a unique channel for information transmission over the Internet, is addressed only to its users. The 14 respondents who answered with „Yes” to the question “Does TV represent the main channel of information for you?” probably use the Internet only for correspondence – such as e-mail, and less for obtaining information from public environment.

4.2 Explanations

Citizens’ interest in accessing a unique portal – as it emerges from the answers given (almost three quarters of the respondents agreed with this), is given by the multitude of information and its spreading number of channels that exist nowadays. We can take as an example the library of the British Museum, which is definitely valuable, useful and accessible. However, what chance a book has to be known publicly only because it is there? If it is desired, it may be requested; but to be desired, it should be known. No one can wander through the library. Today, the Internet is clearly a source of information infinitely richer than any library in the world (perhaps even richer than all the world’s libraries combined). If we refer only to The English edition of Wikipedia, it has grown to 5.119.872 articles, equivalent to over 2000 print volumes of the Encyclopaedia Britannica. Including all language editions, Wikipedia has over 38 million articles, equivalent to over 15.000 print volumes (Wikipedia, 2016). This makes searching and, implicitly, retrieving relevant information about a subject much more difficult, too much information can, paradoxically, create an impression of vacuum.

Governments’ interest, as it results from studying the action plans, is in bringing under the same umbrella all official information. This is our hypothesis in this study. Although the information discussed is filtered by interest – for projects already implemented at a national level, the question that arises is the following: „Why should not all information be placed in a single portal, divided, in its turn, into relevant categories, such as news, events, initiatives etc.?”

Today, ignoring social platforms rivals with ignoring the impact of mobile technologies 20 years ago or the Internet’s value 25 years ago. Companies whose name needs no advertising anymore (Microsoft, Oracle, Coca-Cola) are present on Facebook with official profiles because they have realized that the consumers are to be found there. In commercials for McDonalds the official site of the company does not appear anymore, namely www.mcdonalds.com, but [/mcdonalds](https://www.facebook.com/mcdonalds). This means that Facebook gathers under same umbrella information from the ecosystem in which users live.

Romanian national initiatives developed for increasing transparency and reducing corruption, such as seap.ro, ecomunitate.ro, e-guvernare.ro and others alike, denote the same interest, namely data collection in one single Web portal (each of those mentioned share same interest for their users). Information and, perhaps most of all, easy access to it, represents today’s capital. Why should not be created just one single portal (similar to some extent to those mentioned) but who can gather public information under a single Web address? If such an initiative will be supported by law, public institutions should install on their Web sites RSS modules for delivering information to the public. The portal that would manage this data would have the role of a gateway both for citizens and businesses and perhaps even for other public institutions.

5. Conclusion

The period since 2010 has seen enormous changes both in technology and the way in which it is used.

Let's think about what a man can do with a pencil and a sheet of paper. Further on, let's imagine what a man can do with a typewriter, and then with a PC. Today, the PC I'm talking about is connected to the Internet. One of the first slogans of Bill Gates was that the Microsoft goal is to provide everyone IAYF – Information At Your Fingertips (Gates, 1995). Although Mr. Gates was clearly a visionary, he probably did not foresee where the technology will get twenty years after his first book was published. Even more, we do not believe that he foresaw the explosive growth of information available on the Internet today. According to a study of IBM (Dixon, 2015), the total quantity of information produced by mankind so far is doubling itself every 30 hours. Obviously, not all of this information is published and/or available on the Internet, but even so, this study can help us understand the proportions to which it has arrived.

In such an ocean, it is very difficult to navigate to the target set. Therefore we need clear routes. We believe it is absolutely necessary to build a single channel to centralize all information produced by the public sector with the aim to inform citizens and the business environment. The advantages of such a channel, as identified by us after interviews and the questionnaire applied, were the following:

- It will provide a more efficient process of communication between the parties involved;
- It will give an unbiased information to the population;
- It will reduce confusion and waste of time with searching for information both at local and at central level;
- It will provide more transparency.

Of course some disadvantages were identified as well:

- If it is not mandatory by law, some sources may not be included;
- Being the only information channel, it might be used in such ways in which citizens might be manipulated.

Our study took into account, as we mentioned in the methodology section, only ten countries from the South-eastern Europe. This self-imposed limitation was given by the short time we had for its realization. The intention for the future is to support a pilot project in Romania and then, through an extension of the study and through partnerships with organizations from countries in Western Europe (universities, research centres, NGOs), to propose as a solution a channel like this one for informing citizens.

This portal will be the gateway of the public administration at any level, and will be structured as follows:

1. Section for citizens
 2. Section for businesses
 3. Section for state institutions
-
- 1.1. Information and news for local administrations
 - 1.2. Information and news for central administration etc.
- etc.
- 1.1.1. Information and news about territorial school inspectorates

- 1.1.2. Information and news about cities and communes
 - 1.1.3. Information and news about public order and citizens safety
 - 1.1.4. Information and news about medical units
- etc.

For obvious reasons we do not develop here the entire map of the proposed portal. Thanks to the latest Web programming languages such as HTML5, ASP, PHP etc., the graphical interface allows even to the users less familiarized with digital technologies to easily navigate.

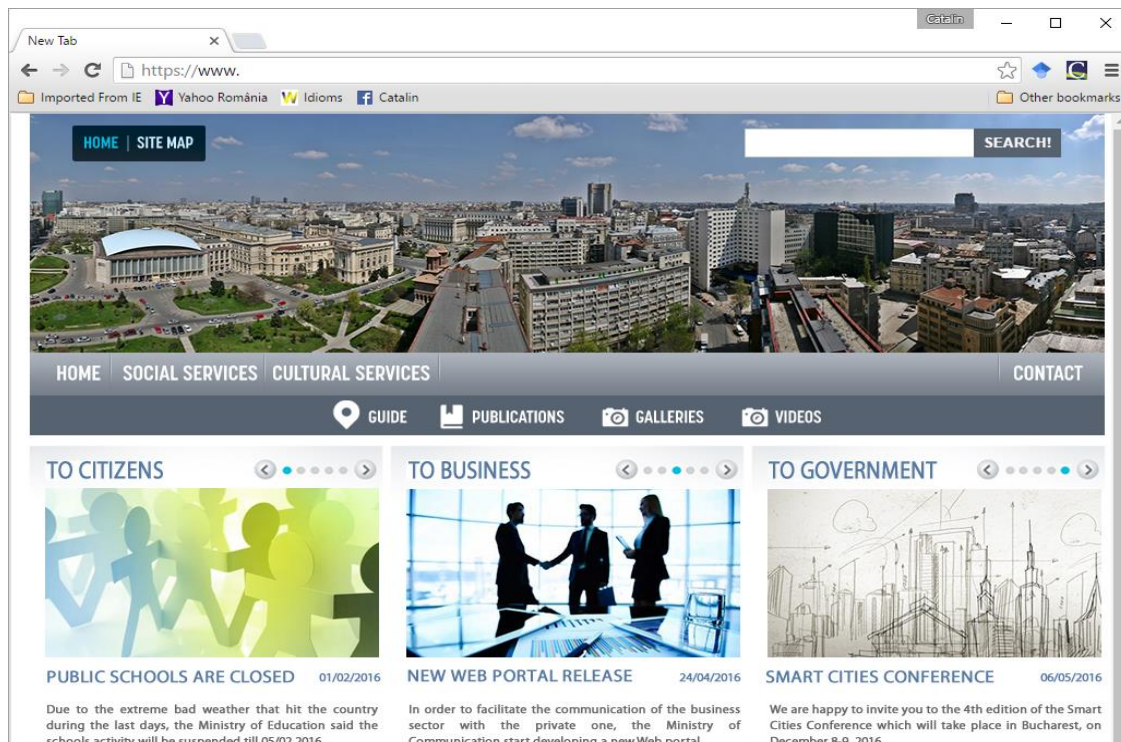


Figure 2. Proposed Web portal design

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