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Getting through COVID-19 together: Understanding local governments' social media communication

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

This study provides new insights into how local governments (LGs) manage pandemic-related crisis communication with citizens on their social media (SM) profiles. We analyze over 3000 posts published on SM profiles of selected LGs in Poland to get insights on rhetorical communication strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. We document LGs as they go beyond the simple transmission of information to citizens and use SM in an engaging and educational manner. We found three types of rhetorical strategies and their resonance with the public. Our analysis suggests that LGs are likely to apply the Together communication strategy, which is the most engaging.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had multi-level impacts on citizens' lives. Their health, economic survival, and technological performance during and after the crisis are major priorities for governments. Research shows that building strong relationships with citizens during a crisis is essential (Graham et al., 2015). In an emergency or disruptive situation, communication is important for protecting and ensuring citizens' safety (Soyata et al., 2019). Moreover, the communication strategy used during a crisis affects how citizens perceive the crisis (Lauran et al., 2020). To cope with the anxiety, the community members need transparent, strategic, and reliable information about the situation's causes and about how to protect themselves (Lauran et al., 2020). However, the dynamic pace of a crisis can make it difficult for citizens to find relevant information quickly. Therefore, social media (SM) can be an effective communication tool during a crisis.

Previous research indicates that governments generally fail to use SM platforms to engage in dialog with the public, focusing instead on one-way communication and information dissemination (Trencher, 2019; Zavattaro & Sementelli, 2014). Research in this regard is also limited; thus far, only a few publications refer to the possibility of using SM as one of the tools to communicate between the city and the public in times of crisis (Dou et al., 2020; Medina & Diaz, 2016), as most research on crisis communication focus on private sector companies (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). Majority of the relevant literature discuss SM use during a crisis—by corporations and federal- and state-level governments, but less at the local level (Graham et al., 2015; Medina & Diaz, 2016). Thus, this study fills an important research gap and poses the following research question:

\textbf{(RQ)} How do local governments communicate with citizens during a pandemic?

Building on the theory of crisis communication management (Wendling et al., 2013), this study investigates the extent to which local governments (LGs) use SM to communicate during a crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided a unique opportunity to investigate such communication strategies. This study considers COVID-19 as a possible critical juncture for the development of better communication with citizens toward more participatory governance and enhanced citizen participation.

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2. Literature review

2.1. The role of social media in developing participatory governance

There is agreement among researchers that citizen participation is a prerequisite for achieving a modern city (Trencher, 2019). A citizen’s role has been extended from a passive technology and service consumer to an active contributor in terms of providing ideas (Trencher, 2019), thereby creating a synergistic relationship between the government and citizens. Citizen involvement is a new form of democratization, enabling citizens to participate in the decision-making process regarding the development of their LGs and communities. Studies have shown that active SM use by LGs improves the position of citizens in the decision-making process and contributes to greater openness, transparency, and ultimately, more effective management (Bonsón et al., 2015). SM allows receipt of feedback and thus increases stakeholders’ participation. It allows institutions, including LGs, to monitor the social debate and increase participative governance (Bonsón et al., 2015).

However, studies show that governments generally fail to use SM platforms to engage in dialogues with the public (Trencher, 2019; Zavattaro & Sementelli, 2014), focusing instead on one-way communication and information dissemination (Zavattaro & Sementelli, 2014). Bonsón et al. (2015) found that LGs resort to SM most often to share information about cultural and sporting events and marketing-related content, using mostly photos and external links. However, more recent research shows that building strong relationships with citizens during a crisis is essential (Chen et al., 2020; Graham et al., 2015).

2.2. The local government’s crisis communication management

As mentioned earlier, the fast pace of a crisis makes it difficult for citizens to find relevant information; thus, SM constitutes an effective communication tool that supports citizens and LGs. Communication here means not only informing, educating, and preventing but also making citizens aware of the threat’s scale. From a local perspective, it should be emphasized that crises often have personal implications; therefore, communication that is more direct, closer, and thus local, is crucial (Medina & Díaz, 2016). The theory of crisis communication over the last decades has established the relevant strategies, models, and frameworks (see Andrade et al., 2020; Lauran et al., 2020); however, only a few studies have reviewed them in the context of SM and the Internet (Cheng, 2018; Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Medina & Díaz, 2016).

With the use of SM, information can reach a wide community in a short time, leading to positive and negative outcomes of communication during a crisis (Andrade et al., 2020). When people are faced with unexpected and destabilizing events, they look for reliable information to provide guidance, which may be served by official government profiles on SM. However, this may also have a negative outcome, as SM enables misinformation to spread due to the lack of a regulatory mechanism for verifying information, which may exacerbate the crisis (Cheng, 2018). Thus, it is crucial for public authorities to be present within the communication because in a networked society, people engage in “mass self-communication,” which may lead to the spread of false information, “sending a signal of disinterest or disdain” (Wendling et al., 2013, p. 10).
3. Method

To answer the research question, we apply netnography (Jeacle, 2020) by incorporating data from cities’ official Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts throughout 2020. Overall, there were 25,713 posts published. COVID-19 posts were automatically distinguished based on keywords; further, 3043 posts concerning the coronavirus were analyzed.

We analyzed the data quantitatively and qualitatively, following the approach of Thick Big Data (Jemielniak, 2020). Emphasis is put on using language and communicative strategies to establish how cities inform citizens about the COVID-19 pandemic.

Each post’s context was coded and classified by team members. Then, the content and the rhetoric used by cities in SM communication were investigated. For coding, we followed Saldana’s (2013) approach, starting with open coding, which allowed the codes to reflect the content of posts. The second cycle of coding identified the relationship between the codes and created broader categories that reflected the initial codes’ characteristics. The categories were further analyzed and three meta-categories (city’s rhetorical strategies) arose.

4. Results

Mergel (2013) introduced three styles of public sector communication: push (representing formal government information), pull (showcasing stakeholders), and a networking strategy that engages the public through both tactics. Building upon Mergel’s framework, we divided cities’ communication into three types, based on the content, language, and tone of posts shared by cities:

- Business as usual (Usual),
- We are great! Just observe (Great), and
- We are in this together (Together),

Relating to Mergel’s typography, Usual strategy is similar to Mergel’s pull; Great strategy, closer to push; and Together, similar to networking. Tables 1–3 showcase the description, examples, and word cloud for each of the communication strategy.

The descriptive statistics showcase that the most popular rhetorical strategy was Together, used in more than half of all COVID-19 posts (54%); followed by Usual (28%); and Great (19%). Together was a predominant strategy across all platforms; however, its domination was especially visible on Instagram (Fig. 1).

Additionally, the results showcase that the highest engagement (like, share, and reply) was generated by the Together strategy. When looking at the average engagement produced by each strategy, the results indicate that Together strategy generated the highest average overall engagement, and separately in likes, shares, and replies (Fig. 2).

5. Discussion

The aim of the study is to understand how LGs communicate during
the crises with the public. Previous studies (Medina & Diaz, 2016) suggest that LGs are reluctant to engage in crisis communication through SM, and those who utilize SM in general use it in an unengaging manner (Bonsón et al., 2015; Trencher, 2019; Zavattaro & Sementelli, 2014).

However, it seems that the LG's involvement and engagement building on SM is changing. This study showcases that LGs put greater emphasis on community building and engaging content during a crisis, and SM were an important tool for communicating with citizens. Our study revealed that the LGs' use of SM to communicate about the crises

Table 3
We are together communication strategy.

|                  | Facebook | Twitter | Instagram | Total |
|------------------|----------|---------|-----------|-------|
| **USUAL**        | 39%      | 37%     | 37%       | 37%   |
| **GREAT**        | 48%      | 29%     | 29%       | 29%   |
| **TOGETHER**     | 36%      | 34%     | 34%       | 34%   |

Fig. 1. The use of rhetoric strategies on platforms.
Source: Authors.

Fig. 2. Average engagement.
Source: Authors.
can be divided into three rhetorical strategies. Depending on the language used, character and tone of posts, we distinguished Usual, Great, and Together strategies, which resemble Mergel's (2013) pull, push, and networking tactics of communication. This article not only article the theories of crisis communication management but also presents an important development of the works connected with LGs communication—e-participation and e-governance.

The research on how LGs communicate with the public in times of crises remains at a relatively early stage, and COVID-19 enables a natural landscape for investigating this topic on a larger-than-ever scale. This short paper contributes to extending in-depth understanding of the communication rhetorics of LGs on SM and goes beyond investigating the traffic and statistical information on SM use by LGs, as it explores the ways in which LGs communicate with citizens.

As Soyata et al. (2019) suggested during crises, effective communication is needed to protect and ensure citizens’ safety. Times of crisis also require a speedy delivery of transparent and reliable communication to citizens. SM technology provides a ready solution, where a message can be posted and passed on to various members of the network. We found that in times of crises, LGs go beyond the simple provision of information, as suggested in earlier studies (Trencher, 2019), and provide communication with which citizens are ready to engage.

This paper provides an important contribution for the practice. The case of Polish LGs can serve as an example of how LGs may build rhetoric strategies to communicate with the public in an engaging manner in times of crisis. It is also clear that the intensity of the use of a selected rhetorical strategy may be diverse for different SM types; therefore, the LGs may wish to be clearer on the type of communication in each of SM channels. This, in the end, calls for a development of a communication strategy and consolidation of the efforts by creating institutions responsible for SM communication with the citizens. This would eventually allow for better monitoring of citizen engagement with such a communication strategy. By crafting appropriate and more engaging content on SM, LGs can achieve bigger involvement of their citizens in matters important to the city, especially critical during crises.

We encourage both academics and practitioners toward a more in-depth understanding of SM use in times of crises by LG and its consequences on e-participation. Further studies should focus on whether engaging in SM content results in higher engagement from the citizens' side and be based on both quantitative and qualitative investigations.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

We declare that our manuscript has not been published previously, that it is not under consideration for publication elsewhere, that its publication is approved by all authors and tacitly or explicitly by the responsible authorities where the manuscript was carried out, and that, if accepted, it will not be published elsewhere in the same form, in English or in any other language, including electronically without the written consent of the copyright-holder.

Data availability

A summary of data is available from the author.

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