

ICT and local governance — e-government in the local public sphere in Poland and Norway



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ABSTRACT: The paper takes on a comparative case assessment of e-government services at local government levels in Norway and Poland. In the Norwegian government structure, the municipality prevails as the level having the most direct contact with the citizens and businesses and is responsible for providing an array of basic services. In recent years the municipalities throughout Norway have made considerable efforts to establish and refine their on-line presence. Still, the functionality and quality of content vary greatly. In Poland, the path of e-government development has not been so smooth; as findings from previous research confirm the thesis of the initial existence of low e-services development and even the lack thereof in some regions of Poland. Now we can observe the rapid growth of ICT technologies in Poland and its visual impact in shaping the local democratisation process. The discussion captures both sides of this impact — positive and negative. According to cases mentioned above, this paper attempts to present some important digital initiatives being introduced in Poland and Norway at a local democracy level. I present ICT improvements, which are being introduced into communities. Secondly, I discuss the communication between local politicians and the community.

KEYWORDS: local government; ICT; community; democracy; information; participation



METHODOLOGY AND PAPER STRUCTURE

The paper is divided into two parts: theoretical and analytical. In the theory part different aspects of building a digital public sphere in local community are discussed and the analytical part is based on the description of ICT usage in chosen municipalities.

The paper is based on qualitative, quantitative research and websites content analysis. For comparison, a survey has been carried out in Poland and in Norway. It analysed the case of Lower Silesia; Buskerud, Akershus. This comparative study was prepared based on: 1) interviews with politicians; clerks; journalists; entrepreneurs; 2) questionnaires distributed among inhabitants; 3) research reports; 4) statistical data.

Due to the study mentioned above the following research questions were analysed: Whether and how ICT have changed the functioning of local government in Poland and Norway? Does ICT support political communication? Is ICT used as platform for local debate? Is ICT used mainly as a tool for transmitting information from the dominant one-sided communication? Does ICT support local democracy?

THE DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE — THEORY RESEARCH

ICT is undoubtedly one of the major elements in the wave of reforms carried out in many western administrations. ICT refers to strategic management and significant changes in the way the public sector works. Pressure for introducing e-administration is on the increase.

When democracy is evolving and changing, not only ways of managing are changing but also the perception of representation. ICT itself will not affect citizens' attitudes toward community involvement and participation, but can be used to create conditions for a more involving, inclusive and transparent democratic culture.

E-administration may refer to two types of institutional changes. These may be changes in how the internal organization of the public sector works — i.e. technology can be used to improve collaboration and integration between different levels of government and between offices. The second type is amended to increase the availability of online information about the work of public institutions and the fact that the public sector will try to arrange its activities for the benefit of the people so that the centre of activity is shifted towards self-service (Grönlund & Anderson, 2007).

E-democracy can be defined as a deeper and broader insight, by using information technology, in what is happening in the public sector. The main elements of electronic democracy are greater insight into politics and public administration bodies, as well as facilitating people's participation in public debates, including easier access to information and the debates themselves, which may contribute to the deepening and increasing citizens' influence on policy. In the literature on e-democracy can be seen high expectations in relation to new technologies, the structural consequences of their introduction as well as specific opportunities that technology can give. The Internet allows people to connect on the network and find information in many different sources, and also participate in many different networks. It provides a communication infrastructure, which is characterized by symmetry — we can usually send the same amount of information as we receive. In addition, it can be used remotely from anywhere.

The widespread availability means in practice that everyone who has access to the Internet has the opportunity to participate. Furthermore, the Internet gives the opportunity for interactivity, a better geographical spread, more open administration and greater opportunity for civic participation. These are in any case, expectations associated with the Internet as a technology. The reality shows that use

of these possibilities and opportunities is rather modest. The Internet can provide opportunities for democratic participation, but the technical possibilities themselves do not lead to it.

Participation is one of the most important elements of democracy and is closely associated with a number of processes that link with communication and access to social decision-making processes. These processes to a greater or lesser extent use ICT technologies and the Internet as an aid, even though they themselves are not dependent on the Internet. These technologies offer the potential for interactivity and can create new forms of democratic dialogue between the residents themselves, remote organizations and representatives of the citizens. In broad terms we can say that the policy covers the activities, which we undertake as citizens to solve problems concerning the community or group interests. The importance that Habermas (1989) attaches to public discourse as a means to achieve consensus or at least the decision taken by the majority, is the cornerstone of democracy.

This view is based on the assumption that no single person has knowledge of all the data, nor can it take into account all the consequences of the given solution or policy. The importance attributed to digital technology depends on how it defines the concept of democracy. The theories about direct democracy, discursive and competitive relationship between democracy and technology are handled in different ways (Christensen & Aars, 2002; Rose, 2004; Grönlund & Anderson, 2007; Balderheim & Øgård, 2007; Haug, 2007).

We can come across the following types of democracy while studying theory (Christensen & Aars, 2002; Held, 2006; Mutz, 2006; Haug, 2007): 1) direct democracy: goal — the sovereignty of a nation/equality; basis of legitimacy — decisions of the majority; role of citizens — decision-making; the mandate of representatives — related; the most important element in the use of ICT — decisions; 2) competitive democracy: goal — individual freedom; basis of legitimacy — calling to account; role of citizens — electorate; the mandate of representatives — unbound; the most important element in the use of ICT — information; 3) discursive democracy: goal — autonomy; basis of legitimacy — the public debate role of citizens — opinion-forming; the mandate of representatives — interactive; the most important element in the use of ICT — discussion.

The above-mentioned views on democracy have different implications for the use of technology in democracy. The issues on direct democracy on the Internet and the performance of democratic principles are widely discussed by the supporters. Technology is assigned a key role, it is a cornerstone of broader participation and it is said to be an opportunity to move away from the old hierarchy and indirect representation. Development of technology has given supporters of direct democracy new arguments: the computer creates the possibility of immediate communication, so the views of individual citizens may be quickly and efficiently recorded via the Internet. Such a perspective is very conducive for fast action and is focused on the individual. Politicians have access to the will of the people and the only thing

that should be done is to read it. The self-reliant “digital citizen” will replace the traditional institutions of collective representation. Electronic opinion polls, and daily online voting are the main components of tomorrow’s democracy (Rose, 2002; Kersting & Baldersheim, 2004).

The competitive model of democracy is a bit more defensive. Widespread and frequent participation of citizens in social life is not an end in itself. The most important thing here is the competition among individual elites to win votes. The quality of democracy is reviewed every four years when during the elections the politicians are called to account. In this model of democracy information strategies differ from those of the previous model. Too much openness seems to be a problem — there is a likelihood that politicians will be more interested in promoting their own image than taking responsibility for their actions. It can therefore create conflicts. However, technology itself can be a useful tool, and the Internet can be used to provide information and gain support for the policy elites. Technology can also contribute to improving the working conditions of representatives and thus create favourable conditions for the exercise of political leadership. In addition, technology can be used to develop public services through customer surveys, or surveys of users of these services.

In the theory of communication or discursive democracy, democracy is not conceived as an aggregate of individual preferences. Here, the common denominator is associated with hope for a political discussion which would be a means to reach political agreement on contentious issues. The will of society here is not understood as something immutable, it is created during a debate in which various arguments are confronted. Here the message is this: we need a moment to “stop”, to make room for a good discussion or public debate. From the perspective of communication theory, the main idea is an active communication strategy. The key strategy is to create new space, which enables the creation of unrestricted communication. Particularly important for such a public sphere is the development of media, including the Internet, and the strength of new technology lies precisely in this interactive element. It allows not only one-way communication, such as (to a large extent, do) traditional media, but thanks to digital technology, people can change from passive recipients into active participants. The interest in e-democracy focused, in many countries, especially in management at the local level. This has many reasons. Firstly, policy at the local level is more transparent. Secondly, it is often easier to try out new solutions on “small” local matters. Thirdly, there are already a number of issues, such as those related to spatial planning, where municipalities are obliged to consult with the residents. Such consultations can be carried out i.e. via the Internet.

Research conducted in the Norwegian and Polish communities has shown that municipalities can be contacted via the Internet (Christensen & Aars, 2002; Guzik, 2004; Baldersheim & Øgård, 2007; Winsvold, 2007; Biernacka-Ligięza, 2010). The vast majority of them can be contacted via e-mail, and most have their own websites, and the content and level of information provided on the municipal website is

diversified. On the pages of some municipalities, vast amounts of information are provided, while others limit themselves to publishing the address or telephone number. At the beginning many municipalities treated their websites as a hobby or fringe activity, much less important than the ordinary work of the commune. Currently, it is clear that the communication network is becoming one of the most important for many communities and, increasingly, it becomes more professional: more municipalities actively use the Internet, and newly arrived residents are eager to use electronic solutions. However, it still cannot be concluded that ICT itself has changed the functioning of communities, both in Poland and Norway.

ICT supports more traditional, formal and representative political processes. In practice, this means that it is used primarily as an information tool and is still dominated by one-way communication. When municipalities use the Internet, the most important thing for them is probably not the political participation of citizens, but the services that the municipality offers. The municipality is focused here on high quality gained by the new technologies — the role of citizens is not as accentuated as “the role of co-owners” (Christensen & Aars, 2002; Winsvold, 2007).

Municipalities are able to inform residents fairly well about democratic processes, but they are doing worse with allowing residents to have an active democratic influence through democratic municipal websites. Attempts to increase civic engagement — through discussions or direct decision-making — are rare and do not function very well. The analysis shows that both Norwegian and Polish municipalities do not provide information about what happens next with the result of discussions and conversations on the forums. It is worth noting that in the case of Polish municipalities, conducting a public debate is extremely rare and usually occurs when discussed problems lead to serious social consequences — its implementation would be impossible without the approval of the local community. An important reason for this is probably the fact that the forums are in no way related to political decision-making processes in communities and that local politicians do not engage in debate. Access to e-mail addresses of local governments, compared with the administration, is also limited. The debate on local political issues has not yet moved exclusively to the Internet or it has not been moving as quickly as possible.

Researchers still (Christensen & Aars, 2002; Rose, 2002; Baldersheim & Øgård, 2007; Torpe & Nielsen, 2004) argue that local politicians seldom engage in the implementation of internet solutions in the community and that community networks are presented primarily as a provider of public services. The Internet most often constitutes support for politicians — especially in election campaigns, but it is still not the most important weapon. Politicians still give priority to the press, radio and television. Attempts to combine the benefits of ICT to the traditional media message has not been very successful, especially attempts to introduce an electronic platform for communication. Modalen (project Modalen Multimedia) and Molde (project D:MO) stand out as evidence. The project introduced in Vestfold, however, turned out to be the only success. The project used communication through blogs

to link politicians to their electorate. It is therefore worth considering whether the use of ICT technology strengthens either the role of government in local politics or politicians themselves. International studies seem to confirm this hypothesis and motivate it by the fact that the administration has a number of electronic tools that enable it to represent the interests of particular groups of people (Snellen, 2003; Pratchett, Wingfield & Polat, 2006).

The feature of the Internet is the possibility of bilateral communication, which is interactive. In other words, the Internet is not only a medium of information, but it also offers a space for discussion and debate among people or entities that are physically far apart. Because of that the Internet is becoming a good tool for democratic participation. Hence, there are very high expectations for the consequences for democracy, by the introduction of this medium (Torpe & Nielsen, 2004).

When we look closer at local governance across Europe we can clearly see that different ways of strengthening citizens' trust in local authorities and the creation of platforms of public dialogue are important factors that shape contemporary democracy. Local communities search for solutions that will help in realization of the essential principles of community communication which are public trust and social dialogue. Both of those elements strengthen the sense of responsibility for the region which positively influences the quality of the local governance and all other institutions that create the local public sphere. In the 21st century, the century of the digital communication reign the above needs must be realized by creating a sufficient digital communication platform.

As the digitalization process has a diverse course in different cultures, it is worth doing some comparative study. The author of this paper is trying to analyse how the power of ICT is used by local communities in countries of different economies and democracy levels. Is there a big difference between them on this ground? Moreover, due to this study we may also raise the idea of implementing some good practice from Norway (a highly technologically developed country) into the countries of reborn democracies with rapidly growing technology, as Poland.

The countries may be very different in terms of population, language; history and culture, still there are several good reasons for comparisons. Firstly, Norwegian media corporations established themselves in Poland about two decades ago. Accordingly, Norwegian journalistic and media business practices may be expected to have influenced the public sphere in Poland and as they are mainly operating in the regional and local market their huge impact may be seen just in the local public sphere. Secondly, there is considerable labour migration and immigration from Poland to Norway, making the relationship between the two countries more multifaceted. Thirdly, over the past decade, Norwegian and Polish public spheres have been exposed to similar external driving forces such as technological change, internationalization, and concentration of media ownership as well as developments in public administration. Fourthly, both countries are subject to European regulations through inclusion in the European Economic Area (Norway) and EU (Poland).

ICT IN COMMUNES — A CASE STUDY

To answer questions mentioned above it was necessary to do the analysis of “community communication” in both countries. Below is presented a way of promoting individual municipalities on the Internet (Tables: 1, 2). For this paper three communes from each country were selected: Poland — Dzierżoniów, Wałbrzych, Jaworzyna Śląska; Norway — Asker, Drammen, Rollag).¹ We should refer not only to the presentation of the municipality as a political and administrative unit, but also as an institution and organization operating within its area. All communes described in the paper have their own websites. Lots of information can be found there, especially in the largest communes surveyed. Pages are frequently updated, and current information is constantly added. A common feature of most of them is that they contain practical messages on both the democratic process in municipalities, as well as information from the council and various committees. Above all, the information relates to specific areas of activity of the municipality. The average internet user will find there are ‘fill in the blanks’ forms, and different other forms that they need so they are saved from a physical trip to the city hall to get a form or other documents needed. The service of Polish communes websites is rather less advanced technologically and still needs some improvements both technical and legislative (e.g. proper rules for using electronic signatures; implementation of an electronic documents system).

¹ Factors taken into consideration while choosing the municipality were: commune size (more than 60,000 citizens; between 20,000 and 60,000; less than 20,000); type of commune (urban; semi-urban; rural); institutional role (the main city of the region).

Table 1. Commune on the Net — Norway

		Norway	
		Asker	Rollag
Dimension		50,858	1,500
Commune website		www.asker.kommune.no website frequently updated	www.rollag.kommune.no website frequently updated
Chosen commune activities:		information about the municipality opinion surveys of users annual reports list of all the politicians (names, phone numbers and e-mail addresses) ability to search for information ability to download documents ability to send e-mail to the mayor etc.	information about the community culture education special note to residents from outside the municipality who have cottages ability to search for information ability to download documents ability to send e-mail to the mayor
Other activities posted at the commune website		ability to establish contact with various groups and associations (through the municipality's website)	links to groups and associations active in the community and calendar of events for the region. Also, links to sports clubs, parish councils, sport schools, and many others
Political parties website		political parties have websites with lots of information and an indication how to contact politicians e.g.: http://www.hoyre.no/www/hoyre_der_du_bor/akershus/lokalforening/asker_hoyre/ http://www.frp.no/Innhold/lagWeb/Akershus/Asker_FrP/ http://www.asker.arbeiderparti.no Websites are quite frequently updated	most parties use websites of the provincial branch of the party
		information about the municipality links to other important sites (mainly tourism/ culture) list of all the politicians (names, phone numbers and e-mail addresses) annual reports references to various institutions and organizations ability to search for information ability to download documents ability to send e-mail to the mayor, etc. links to selected municipal orchestras, cinemas, theatres, churches, museums, etc.	
		political parties have their own web pages, links to them are on the website of the municipality e.g.: http://www.hoyre.no/www/Hoyre_der_du_bor/Buskerud/lokalforening/Drammen_Hoyre/ www.sentepartiet.no/drammen ; www.drammenbyliste.com ; www.buskerud.arbeiderparti.no http://www.frp.no/Innhold/lagWeb/Buskerud/Drammen_FrP/ Websites are quite frequently updated	

Chosen parties activities:	news from the region local politicians party principles for the region party policy for the region contact data (both politicians and office) social media connection to main party's web	news from the region local politicians party principles for the region party policy for the region contact data (both politicians and office) social media connection to main party's web	information about local elections party program news from the commune possibility to establish contact with politicians
Local media newspaper	<i>Asker og Bærrums Budstikke</i>	drammen Mediehus (radio, TV, newspaper): <i>Drammens Tidende</i> — main local newspaper	<i>Laagendals-posten</i>
Local media radio/tv	<i>TV Buskerud Radio The Beat Asker og Bærrum</i>	<i>Drammen Mediehus: (Radio Drammen; TV Drammen); Radio Metro; Filadelfia; Radio 7; TV Buskerud</i>	there is no local radio or TV. Information from the commune is presented in local TV and radio stations operated from Drammen.

Source: SSB; NIBR; author.

Table 2. Commune on the Net — Poland

		Poland	
		Wałbrzych	Dzierżoniów
		120,197	34,022
Dimension			Jaworzyna Śląska
Commune website	www.um.walbrzych.pl Website updated several times a week	www.dzierzoniow.pl Website updated several times a week	www.jaworzyna.net Website updated several times a week
Commune website activities	municipal information presentation of the various public services information about the repertoire of cinemas activities for children links to sites describing the local cultural offer music groups (internet service culture) and many others. ability to search for information ability to download documents ability to send e-mail to the mayor	information about the municipality and links to other important sites forms annual reports references to various institutions and organizations information about the community, tourist attractions, culture and sport activities ability to search for information ability to download documents ability to send e-mail to the mayor	information about the municipality and links to other useful sites ability to download documents
Other activities posted at the commune website	the municipality website links to many other sites — both non-governmental organizations, cultural institutions, research organizations, EU funds, public institutions, NGOs, associations and sites devoted to economy and tourism links to commercial information services e.g. www.naszwalbrzych.pl ; www.walbrzyszek.com — they are a popular source of information and a debate forum	links to selected municipal institutions (e.g. non-governmental societies) on the municipal website are links to sites describing the local cultural offers: music groups (Internet service culture), the local cultural centre and many others links to commercial information services e.g. www.doba.pl — they are a very popular source of information and a debate forum	on the website of the municipality are links to many other websites and portals — both public institutions and NGOs, associations and sites devoted to economic and cultural life
Political parties websites	www.pawelszp.webd.pl / wwws.walbrzych.pl	www.obsdzierzoniow.pl www.dzierzoniow.platforma.org	—

Political website activities	local branches of national parties PO, PiS do not have their own websites Programs and information about local politicians are placed on the website of the provincial party branch and it is rather difficult to find them or they are limited local municipal association <i>Walbrzyska Wspólnota Samorządowa</i> have their own websites where you can find list of party initiatives the websites are not frequently updated and are not linked to the municipality website	local branches of national parties PO, SLD, PiS do not have their websites only local parties or municipal associations have their own web pages but they are very rarely updated (e.g. OBS) the activity of the local politicians is seen on the party webpage just before and short after the election time there are no links to them on the website of the municipality	local branches of national parties PO, SLD, PiS do not have their websites local parties or municipal associations have no websites and are not linked to the municipality website
Local media: newspaper	<i>Tygodnik Walbrzyski Nowe Wiadomości Walbrzyskie</i>	<i>Tygodnik Dzierżoniowski Dzierżoniowski Tygodnik Powiatowy Gonicz Dzierżoniowski</i> — bulletin issued weekly by the municipality	there is no local newspaper. Information from the commune is published in <i>Gazeta Świdnicka</i> (the paper is devoted to the whole Świdnicki county) <i>Rozmaitości Jaworzynskie</i> bulletin issued monthly by the municipality
Local media: radio/tv	TV Walbrzych TV Dami Walbrzych there are no proper local radio stations in Walbrzych. There are regional or national stations which emit local information e.g. <i>Radio Wrocław; Radio Złote Przeboje</i>	TV <i>Sudecka</i> Radio <i>Sudety</i>	there is no local TV or radio station
Local information portals	www.walbrzyszek.com www.walbrzych24.pl www.walbrzych.naszemiasto.pl www.lubie.walbrzych.pl	www.doba.pl www.dzisiajdzierzoniow.pl	www.jaworzynka.info
Local information website activities	current news and events information about: region's history and culture, sport, tourist attractions etc. local politics weather forecast links to other institutions and media classified advertisements commercials forum	current news and events information about: region's history and culture, sport, tourist attractions etc. local politics weather forecast links to other institutions and media classified advertisements commercials forum	current news and events information about: region's history and culture, sport, tourist attractions etc. local politics weather forecast links to other institutions and media classified advertisements forum

Source: author.

THE POWER OF INFORMATION

In conclusion, municipalities use the Internet primarily as a means of transmitting information from the municipality to the residents (both in Poland and Norway). This is not a communication space between the municipality and residents or between politicians and voters. Where the network is a communication space, it is not the municipality that initiates it but local or regional newspapers with its online version (both in Poland and Norway) or commercially owned local information services in the case of Poland (e.g. [ww.doba.pl](http://www.doba.pl); www.walbrzyszek.pl) and political parties in the case of Norway. This offer is, however, still limited. With regard to the news website, common use of the Internet is something different from using the Internet as a channel of communication between the municipality and residents. All the municipalities covered by the survey have their own websites, most of which are extensive and comprehensive in their provision of detailed information.

This applies to all kinds of information, from driving directions to the school, through cultural events, and ending on the forms to be filled in order to get a place in the kindergarten. However, still few communities in Poland can apply for a place in the kindergarten through the Internet because they have not yet satisfied both safety and technical requirements, including the protection of personal data. Security of web based communication is still a challenge with Polish municipalities but has been improving day by day. Municipalities that do not yet offer such a possibility are currently working on it, thus in the near future it is expected that — according to the plan of information society development — sending applications electronically should be possible soon in most Polish municipalities (*Strategia rozwoju społeczeństwa informacyjnego do roku 2013*, [The Strategy for the Development of the Information Society in Poland until 2013], MSWiA, 2008).

ELECTRONIC SERVICE

Almost all municipalities include on their websites information about the services they offer. The more comprehensive websites (e.g. Drammen, Wałbrzych) are complex with lots of information. You can find everything: from the opening hours of the various public institutions such as the swimming pool and library, through information on the operation of kindergartens, the school common room, tax information, the superintendent, planning-town office, or the latest news from the community. Both on the Polish and Norwegian websites are reminders of cultural events, meetings with artists and concerts. Residents can also read about the deadlines for applications such as for a place in the kindergarten. There is also information about training of the local sports club and the opening hours of the gyms in the municipality.

Information is quite regularly updated (especially in developed communes) and the residents who frequently visit websites of municipalities can keep up with infor-

mation about public services. They can also easily work out where to look for more detailed information. Municipal websites also contain links to other sites including institutions and public office sites where you can ask questions on public services.

Many municipalities also publish the results carried out by public opinion surveys of users of public services (e.g. the Asker commune posted the results of several years of research on kindergartens, Dzierżoniów's communes regularly post results of each years' customer satisfaction survey).

LOCAL POLITICS

Commune websites relate to political issues in two ways: they present what is happening on the board of the municipality, but party politics is left to political parties. The list of issues raised at meetings of the council and the municipal executive board and other committees is presented in electronic services, in order to easily find out what issues local government is currently engaged in. Moreover, many Norwegian municipalities inform in detail about current political issues. If it comes to local politics being visible on the web, Norwegian municipality websites (e.g. Asker and Drammen) can be distinct from what one comes across in Polish municipalities. However, municipalities in both countries are present on the Internet primarily as a provider of public services. The political aspect is not omitted, though it is not readily available in many communes as the information is not posted on the main sites. Therefore, to find information about the activities of municipalities, as political organizations, or information about municipal policies one needs to either go to the microsite, or go directly to these sites by browser, or commercial information services.

The information services of most municipalities in Norway provide a list of politicians, with their phone numbers and e-mail addresses, but you cannot always find the information represented by the political parties. In the case of Polish municipalities the situation is not so obvious. Most politicians are only mentioned as members of the municipal executive board; getting a mention on this list is sometimes difficult. The website of the Norwegian municipalities often have links to local political parties. On the Polish reality scene, this is rather seldom seen. None of the Polish municipalities analyzed in this paper posted links to the local political parties' websites.

Convergent for both Polish and Norwegian services is the provision of information about what is going on at the meetings of the council, the municipal executive board and committees, although not in all municipalities is information given to the same degree of detail. There is information about meetings and agendas of different kinds, and about decisions taken that can also be quickly learnt and accessed from the network. In this respect, small municipalities do not differ at all from big ones: website users are informed in the same way about the resolutions of the municipality/city by the small communes of Rollag or Jaworzyna Śląska and the big com-

munes as Drammen or Wałbrzych. The difference is, however, in the amount of information. In addition, large municipalities seem to have more professional websites. Some sites include links to the source of information about provincial councils and the local elections.

In Norway websites of political parties are much more diverse than websites of municipalities and these differences do not need to necessarily be related to the size of the party. It is rather the possession of knowledge of web design, which is necessary to design and update a web page. In all municipalities one or more political parties has its own website, and most of the material posted on this site is plain information. This may be the presentation of major candidates and the party board, the program or its opinions on current, local political problems. Some of the parties present implemented works, and those over which they want to work in the future.

Both in Poland and Norway at most local party websites, you can find information about people to contact and opportunities to establish it with representatives of the parties (here, mostly appears contact to the local party branch chairman.) But we cannot say that this information is an open space for dialogue, especially in the case of Poland. You can make contact — by phone or via e-mail — with the President or other members of the party. Whether this will be a two way contact — between a voter and a member of the party or between the citizen and the politician — or whether it contributes to public debate on the Internet, depends on how parties treat such notifications.

In Poland, very few local parties create opportunities for active participation in political dialogue at a local level through the network for the residents. In Norway, a local political debate in the network is more visible, but it still does not constitute predominant dialogue space for the local public sphere. Few examples of separate local discussion forums (both in Polish and Norwegian municipalities) can be indicated, where local political problems are discussed and internet users take up important matters. It also seems that these forums that exist, are not used extensively. Neither do the larger nor smaller political parties offer discussion groups or other opportunities that expand the debate on the network. In some municipalities it is the smallest local party or municipal association which offers such a function (e.g. OBS). Probably, it can be explained by the fact that some parties have members who are interested in technical issues and perceive the Internet as a place for political debate, while the other parties do not have such members.

On the sites of all Norwegian municipalities surveyed we can find links of groups and associations working in the area. This makes it possible to orient the activities of local NGOs. In varying degrees, information about offers of different organizations can be found. Some of these associations have complex websites. Others do not have websites at all and are only mentioned in the municipal service. Lists like these are written in the same pattern as traditional presentation of organizations in the written information issued by local governments, such as brochures describing what is happening in the district. This includes both municipality and NGOs' offers.

In Poland insertion of information devoted to activities of non-governmental organizations on community websites has improved, but of course it is not such a common occurrence as is the case with Norway, which certainly adversely affects the development of an adequate level of public debate, and thus somewhat weakens emerging local democracy in Poland.

DIGITAL COMMUNITY — ACTIVE CITIZEN

Electronic services of municipalities provide residents with detailed and updated information, and thanks to the WWW people who have access to the Internet can get the information they need without going to the town hall. Municipalities included in the study put more emphasis on the aspect of an information network; therefore, their websites offer people comprehensive and useful information. It is not confined to public services or cultural events in the municipality. On the web of Norwegian municipalities there are also references to the municipal council resolutions undertaken or city council. Some of the municipalities, before the meeting, publish a list of matters the given institution will work on (e.g., Asker).

At the beginning of this century small municipalities in Norway were subjected to criticism. They were criticized for unprofessionalism and that they do not even deserve to be called web pages. This criticism even then was not justified. The smallest municipalities did not and still do not differ from the largest in terms of informing the public about services or about the meetings of the municipal council. Differences are primarily placed on the amount of information rather than on their quality, shape, or manner of communication. Large municipalities have more information to share, such as the Asker municipality website, which is seen to have more content than the Rollag municipality site.

The situation is somehow different in Poland, where very often the shape, form and quality of website design is determined by the commune budget, which, unfortunately, in the case of small municipalities is sometimes quite limited. It must be admitted that the quality of web pages in Polish municipalities in 2002, left much to be desired (especially when it came to small municipalities). The passing decade has definitely changed the image of the Polish e-community and, just as in Norway, the difference between large and small municipalities in the network primarily refers to the quantity rather than quality of the information published on the website of the municipality.

A common feature of the analyzed communities is primarily the fact that the Internet is used as an information channel rather than as a channel of participation. If people are to participate in political discourse, information is very important, because in contrast to public opinion polls and plebiscites, and even consultation, participation requires access to information in order to form an opinion on the subject of discussion. Active participation also requires something more: to focus on the role of the citizen. If residents have been involved in the process of policy formation,

it is important to know their rights. What information do the authorities, particularly the local governments, want from the residents? To what extent can residents expect their views to be listened to and used? When can they expect feedback?

Morrison and Newman (2001) suggest that the rapprochement between the residents and politicians relies on something other than connecting the consumer with commercial interests. Strengthening the role of the citizen is not just that residents are listened to, but also to emphasize the responsibilities and liabilities associated with being a citizen of a democratic society. But in order for residents to take part in political debate as the person informing the politicians, they must be well informed themselves. Active participation in political debate requires balanced, high-quality information so that participants would not only have contact with their own views but perhaps with the views of those who disagree with them. The Internet provides sketchy knowledge, and often people receive information from a limited number of sources which, in the worst case, only worsens already existing prejudices.

The role of municipality websites as information disseminators is very important, because in this way people receive knowledge on political matters and have a base to form an opinion on any given issue. Such a knowledge base is necessary for inhabitants to become informed citizens, capable to fully participate in political discussion. The work that is done by the communes on their websites, consisting of informing the political agenda, activities and issues over which local government operates, as well as indicating the reasons for decisions taken, is therefore very important. The local parties also have their roles to be done. In this field the results were worse than in all discussed municipalities, especially in the case of Poland, where local politicians are visible on the web only before the election and just after it. Websites of local parties or local branches of national parties in Poland are not very frequently updated and are more likened to posters of the party than debate forums.

Information is an important basis for active participation in the political life of the commune. The Internet, which is a different way than traditional political channels, can give residents the opportunity of such participation. Yet, there is still a lot to be done in this field in municipalities both in Poland and Norway. The possibilities of inviting residents to the political debate in the municipality such as in news-groups or via the feedback and reactions to the proposals of politicians are not often used in Norway and in Poland. It seems to be much better with Norwegian municipalities where we can meet some positive examples of public dialogue being followed on the net (e.g. Asker commune). In Poland it is a rare practice to create an active discussion platform at local community level. Existing websites are more like a passive description of the municipality, local policy, local politicians etc. It is probably not the result of a deliberately chosen strategy by the municipality and this could be explained by the fact that the Internet's potential is still not fully exploited by the municipalities. It seems that there is still some time before it will be perceived also as a forum for discussion, in which residents can participate and which will be more accessible than traditional forms of participation, such as open meetings, parties, etc.

In both Poland and Norway the biggest communes have usually the most complex websites. One can find a detailed presentation of the local administration, municipal services and the latest information useful to residents. This does not mean that smaller municipalities do not have good websites, similar in content to larger ones. It is clear however that the biggest municipalities have in their services the largest amount of information. They just have more to offer: more schools, kindergartens, more cultural events, which they can inform about and more user surveys that can be placed on the Internet. The need for information is thus the largest in the largest municipalities, and they probably just have the most to gain from having a good website.

Christensen & Aars (2002), Guzik (2004), Winsvold (2007), Biernacka-Ligięza (2010) in their studies of Norwegian and Polish municipalities in the network have shown that when it comes to the differences between communes in terms of internet presence and extent of local democracy, a significant role is played by the number of inhabitants. It does not change the fact that many small municipalities have made very positive results in the study, although it is clear that the size of the municipality is important in deciding whether it will come into existence in the network or not, and if so — what will be the quality of this presence. In short, small municipalities do not have a sufficient range of services to invest in the viability of electronic technology. Thus, they believe that if e-administration is soon to replace the traditional one, extensive cooperation between municipalities is needed. It allows for a smooth transition to an electronic management system in the municipality.

For residents of communities being analysed in this paper (both Polish and Norwegian) the Internet at the beginning of this century was not a very important source of information about local issues. Only a few people read the mayor's and other politicians' statements that appear in the network (about 7% of Norwegians and less than 1% of Poles). Only 3% of the population of Norway was actively involved in internet political debates and less than 1% in Poland.²

Today the situation is slightly different, especially when it comes to the Internet as a source of information, which for many residents of Polish communities is precisely the most important place where they seek information relevant to them about the region (approx. 39%). However, they do not seek such information at the municipal sites but rather use the commercial information services such as www.doba.pl; www.walbrzyszek.pl. In Norway, the local newspaper still remains the main source of information about the municipality (approx. 57%). Of course, paper publications are more often accompanied by electronic editions. Today, almost every local title has its own page on the Internet.

Taking into account the opportunity to participate in political discussions on the Internet, it may not be surprising, since the possibilities of discussing politics in the network are few. They are limited and in addition very often linked to specific

² NIBR 2004; author's own research 2004.

political parties. Since few residents are members of political parties, we cannot expect that participation in the existing newsgroups will be high.

However, it might have been expected that the number of people who have seen or read posted statements of mayors or other local politicians on the web, would be much greater. Such statements can be found not only on the municipal website and on the websites of parties, but also, and more often than in the electronic version, in newspapers. Despite this, less than 25% of the population of Norway and 3% of inhabitants of Poland have become familiarized with these statements through the Internet.

It is worth indicating that both in Poland and Norway the Internet is a very important source of information about the region, its culture, tourist attractions, the economy but most respondents (55% of Norwegians and 76% of Poles)³ stated that the Internet is still not an important source of information about local politics. Taking into account that over 61% of Norwegians and 34% of Poles found that the local newspaper is an important source of information, it can be concluded that the Internet as a source of information about local politics and as an arena to exchange views on political issues is still in its early stages of development.

Thus, the results show that the Internet has scarcely been used by politicians as a possible source of political information or communication. Today its popularity has increased considerably. However, it seems to be more visible at a national level, where very often the presence of politics in the network determines its success. In the case of policy at a local level, where politicians are no longer anonymous and known by the voters only from the media, the network is no longer an essential element of communication with the voter. This is confirmed by the analysis which shows that the Internet is not regarded as an important source of information on local politics in any of the municipalities, and even though you can point out the differences between the countries and areas, they are not so large. Participation in online political debate is also not popular. Such “chat rooms/discussion forums” are created by newspapers, political parties or commercial information portals and are not part of municipal information services. This is because municipalities tend to rely on information concerning the resolutions of the political or administrative regulations, and creating space for political debate is left for political parties or other entities.

CONCLUSION

The Internet was opened up to ordinary people at the end of the last century. Today, browsing the Web and reading e-mails is an integral part of everyday life, half of households in Poland (55%)⁴ and almost all of Norway (95%)⁵ have access to the Internet. Advances in ICT are very fast and they are often used in companies,

³ SSB 2009; author's own research 2009.

⁴ Internet world statistics 2010.

⁵ Internet world statistics 2010.

households and the public sector. It has been implemented in almost all municipalities both in Poland and Norway.

The Internet has proved to be for the majority of Polish and Norwegian municipalities mainly a tool for conveying information and providing services on the appropriate level and very rarely used as a platform for debate. In Norway, the most important role in building local democracy and local identity continues to be played by the local newspaper (in printed and electronic versions), where readers can find both information and also have the opportunity to participate in the debate. In Poland, however, local news sites are very popular (often a commercial initiative, or additional activity of local publishers/broadcasters) and usually with the press. Norwegian local politicians are much more “visible” on the Internet than their Polish counterparts, and it is much easier to find information about local political parties, which additionally provide up-to-date information on their constituency. Both Poles and Norwegians are not looking for information about local politicians/politics on the Internet. What is different is the motivation for this behaviour — Norwegians simply find this information in local newspapers, and Poles show little interest in this area.

The strengthening of two-sided communication for building up local debate seems to be an important issue both for Polish and Norwegian municipalities, especially if the aforementioned “strong dimension” of democracy is to be further strengthened, consensus and cooperation need to be emphasized. The basis for legitimacy is public debate, and the mandates of elected representatives are interactive or granted in consultation with those who are represented. The main role of the population is its opinion-forming ability and therefore, with the exception of information and services, the most important field of contribution in the usage of IT should be debate.

“Internet challenges” for municipalities will not concern information, although in this field there is probably still something to do. Small and large communities can better cooperate with each other in solving technological problems than in isolation. The biggest challenge will be to use the Internet to engage citizens in discussion about the future of the municipality — in short — to strengthen political commitment and participation. We must therefore focus not on information as before, but on including consultation and, above all, the active participation of residents. This requires different ways of working and much more involvement, not only from the municipal administration, but also from politicians. Technology that allows residents to participate in political debate through the Internet or expressing their opinion, e.g. on planned construction work, is available today. It includes tools such as — “chat rooms/discussion forums”, where residents and politicians may participate in joint discussions, and simulation tools that can be used to show the consequences of given decisions, e.g. on expansion of the municipality, budget or space planning.

Technology offers various possibilities and, although not all are yet fully developed, many tools can be very useful. This does not mean that we should ignore the disadvantages of new technology, or forget about traditional forms of participation.

However, it is worth noting that use of technology could contribute to the strengthening of political participation at local level. In this process it is important to take into account both the advantages and disadvantages (e.g. on the one hand, chat is not only good for teenagers, but on the other, this form of discussion can be rather chaotic).

We should also look at information in terms of authenticity, credibility and confidence, which requires frequent updating. Uncertainty may create anonymity in the network also in political discussions. Such problems arise and the challenge is to find solutions for them, among others, through various forms of registration, which also allows for anonymity in the debate, since this can contribute to a greater sense of security. We still lack real opportunities to participate in political discussions on the Internet and the municipality should develop its offer. Such possibilities and not the Internet itself, have a chance to actively engage residents in making sense of their own political process.

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