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Communication tools with residents in Polish municipalities with cohabitation (term of office 2014–2018)¹

Abstract: The paper describes the tools for communication with residents used by municipalities. The basis for paper preparation was qualitative (extended interviews) and quantitative (a question chosen from a questionnaire) research conducted within a selected group of municipalities with cohabitation during the term of office between 2014 and 2018. The aim of the paper is to determine whether and what kind of tools for communication with residents are applied by municipal authorities. How effective are these tools? Does cohabitation type: conflict or peaceful, influence the channel through which residents acquire information? What impact will the changes introduced in 2018 in self-government law (the goal was, among others, to broaden the transparency of self-government work) have on the methods of communication with residents used by the authorities?

Key words: municipality, cohabitation, communication tools, internet

Introduction

Analysing the results of research into cohabitation² phenomenon in Polish municipalities, one can discern the communication tools used by self-government. Their use depends on many factors, such as the skills of municipal clerks, needs, execution methods of information policy in a municipality, and, what is most important, it has to be compatible with the law. On 11th January 2018 amendments were introduced to the law of self-government. Their main goal was to increase transparency of self-government

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² This phenomenon means that the executive does not have the majority in the municipal council, i.e. the majority of councillors come from another political camp than the mayor. Cohabitation can be either peaceful or conflict. In the former situation the executive is on amicable terms with councillors and tries to form a favourable coalition in the council. In the latter case the municipal authorities cannot reach an agreement during their term of office and the work atmosphere can be described as hostile. See: Sidor, Kuć-Czajkowska, Wasil 2017, p. 7–9.

work by, among others, sharing council voting records online, making broadcasting of council sessions obligatory, publishing interpellations and responses to interpellations submitted by councillors. With that in mind, it is worth asking the question how residents were informed about the work of the authorities and municipal matters in the term of office 2014–2018 (before the introduction of new laws). What kind of tools for communication with residents municipal authorities use? How effective are these tools? Does a cohabitation type, conflict or peaceful, influence the channel through which residents gain information? What impact will the changes introduced in 2018 in self-government law have on the methods of communication with residents used by the authorities?

There are a few tools for conveying information to residents (information policy). Given the scope of this paper, the author focused on three such tools, namely: sharing council sessions online, using the social media, specifically Facebook, for informing residents and publishing a bulletin/newspaper including information about municipal work.

The basis for the paper was quantitative (extended interviews) and qualitative (a question chosen from a questionnaire) research. Postal survey was conducted between October 2015 and April 2016 in municipalities from six provinces (voivodeships): Lubelskie, Lubuskie, Łódzkie, Opolskie, Świętokrzyskie and Warmińsko-Mazurskie. The questionnaire was sent to councillors and mayors, where cohabitation was repeated in 2010 and 2014, and where it occurred for the first time in the 2014 elections (see Sidor, Kuć-Czajkowska, Wasil, 2017). Altogether, 1467 surveys were obtained. The research concentrated on relations between representatives of the authorities, while the information about communication tools was a spin-off. This paper analyses one survey question which concerned the practice of recording and sharing council sessions online via e.g. YouTube.

A broader view on the matter was taken through extended interviews. They were conducted between May 2016 and March 2017 in 20 municipalities³ in the abovementioned voivodeships. Considering 74 interviews, where the interviewees were representatives of municipal authorities,⁴ residents and journalists, the mode of communication with residents can be described. What kind of tools do municipal authorities use? Information on municipal websites, their profiles in social networks (Facebook) and the Public Information Bulletin (BIP) was verified to complete the answer. The importance was put on the issue whether there is a correlation between a kind of cohabitation (conflict or peaceful) and authorities using tools for communication with residents.

The titular issue was described and examined in many aspects, i.a.: information policy (Braman, 2011), right to public information (Pierzchała, Woźniak, 2010; Bernaczyk, 2014), public relations within a self-government unit (Adamus-Matuszyńska, Austen, 2011), public-law regulations of electronic administration (Matusiak, 2016), civic dialogue with ICT tools (Sienkiewicz, Sidor, 2014), marketing tools of self-government units (Szromnik, 2007; Kuć-Czajkowska, Muszyńska, 2016) and electronic democracy on the local level (Porębski, 2012).

³ The researched municipalities were: Żagań, Łódź, Ozorków, Olsztyn, Opole, Kielce, Zamość, Nowa Sól, Kowiesy, Grunwald, Skoroszyce, Gowarczów, Sawin, Wschowa, Sulejów, Korsze, Gorzów Śląski, Ujazd, Koprzywnica, Poniatowa.

⁴ Usually they were: a municipal council chairman, a mayor, and, in the case of mayor's absence, a deputy mayor.

Communication Tools in the Era of the Internet

Local government units are obligated by the law to publish information about public matters. They can also adopt optional internet solutions. The method and number of the used tools depend on the size and kind of a municipality, as well as addressees of unit's information policy. Therefore, communication tools in self-government units can be divided into primary, such as the Public Information Bulletin, and secondary, such as the social media (Adamus-Matuszyńska, Austen, 2011, p. 162–172).

To characterize tools for communication with residents in self-government units, one has to be familiar with the legal basis, namely Article 61 paragraph 2 of the Polish Constitution of 1997. As the legislative body ensured, "The right to obtain information includes access to documents and to meetings of the collegiate bodies of public administration elected in general elections, which also entails sound and picture recording." The constitutional norm was further specified for municipalities in the Act on Municipal Self-Government (Article 11): work of administrative bodies is disclosed to the public, which can be subject to limitation only by the laws.⁵ Civic rights to obtaining information, access to documents, sessions and board meetings were also emphasized (Muszyński, 2017).

Apart from the Constitution and the Act on Municipal Self-Government of 1990, the access to public information on the municipal level results from the Act on the Access to Public Information of 2001. A basic (primary) tool for communication with residents, according to the law, is the Public Information Bulletin, where (in the examined term of office of 2014–2018) self-government units were obligated to publish minutes of meetings of self-government collegiate bodies, resolutions, including these about the budget, and to inform about the structure of the office, trends in current policies, dates of council meetings etc.

Meetings of collegiate bodies (as the next tool for publishing information about the work of local authorities) are public and open for residents. Therefore, everyone who is willing can observe and register (record) their course. In one of its verdicts the Chief Administrative Court stated that the resolution of a municipal council which forbids image recording of council meetings breaches the constitutional rule of public administration transparency. The right to access municipality council sessions and board meetings should be interpreted in a broad sense, so not only in the context of presence but also recording. In a municipality where this is forbidden, civic rights to obtaining information about the work of administrative bodies are infringed. It should be added that the basic source of information is minutes, while audio-visual or ICT records are an additional form. Nonetheless, the latter can entail the risk of disclosing classified information (Fleszer, 2010, p. 128–129).

During the internet era⁶ communication has evolved and previous one-way message has been replaced by two-way message with the use of secondary communication tools.

⁵ The restrictions result from various secretcies, over 40 in the Polish legal system: enterprise, fiscal, bank, trade, statistical, public tendering, personal data etc. (Zacharko, Wartenberg-Kempka, 2010, p. 293).

⁶ The internet as a new medium makes communication non-linear and two-way, as opposed to the old media: print, radio, film, television, where communication is linear and one-way. The distinctiveness of the internet is also visible in its global character and personalization, which is possible by

The latter can be conducted between the office and residents or come in the form of individual actions of local politicians towards the electorate. After J. Garlicki (2010, p. 26) one can quote the definition of R. Perloff, who described political communication as a process, between political leaders, the media and residents, of exchanging information about matters which occur in the public sphere. M. Juza (2016, p. 27–29) points out that before, by the means of the mass media, there was a politic discourse between authorities and residents. Authorities and the media were controlling the discourse and, as a result, controlling residents. Upon the emergence of the internet, each citizen, who had previously been a mere recipient of a political debate, got a right to join it.

Communication, which is inextricably linked to public relations or market surveys, seems to be Americanised. Applying marketing strategies blurs the line between informative and entertaining political message (Jaworowicz, 2016, p. 65–66). Big self-government units employ PR tools to build a positive image of a city, town or region, which is supposed to attract tourists and/or investors (Adamus-Matuszyńska, Austen, 2011, p. 162–168). The social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter, prove very useful. However, there can be a problem with the websites and profiles which are called “official.” Their moderators may be other people than office or self-government employees, which leads to mistakes about who the author of the published information is (Faracik-Nowak, 2013, p. 26–27).

Politicians, including self-government representatives, also use the social media individually, thus running a permanent election campaign. This may cause some problems, such as communication disorder, lack of information and promotion strategies or affectation of the messages aimed at the recipients. Often the goal is not to convince people to the ideas in the programme, but to question the reliability of the opponent (Juza, 2016, p. 37, 42). Political supporters, regardless of their subject-related know-how, may follow a negative campaign. Therefore, a side effect of social media application is a wave of aggression and hateful communication resulting from the conviction of online anonymity. The internet creates a culture of “incongruity” (Kołodziej, 2016, p. 480). The peak of social media activity is the period before elections, which is especially true for big self-government units. It is also high in municipalities with conflict cohabitation.

According to the research led by J. M. Zając in 2010, the internet gives many qualitative possibilities of communication with the electorate, however Polish politicians exploit this method to a limited extent. In the self-government elections of 2010 city presidential candidates were top searches in Google (this website is visited the most often in Poland). Moreover, as research shows, there was no information in Google searches about a certain group of candidates, especially for municipal councils and mayors. Analysing the self-government online campaign of 2010, the research authors stated that using the internet and social media did not have an impact on the Polish political stage at that time. Even among the city presidential candidates visible online it is difficult to find a case where the online campaign significantly influenced election results (Zając,

its adjustment to the needs and habits of the user (Jaworowicz, 2016, p. 25). Moreover, the potential of the internet as a space for social engagement and different socio-political initiatives is vast. Thanks to that, it can serve an unlimited number of users and reach many recipients (Kancik-Kołtun, 2017, p. 103).

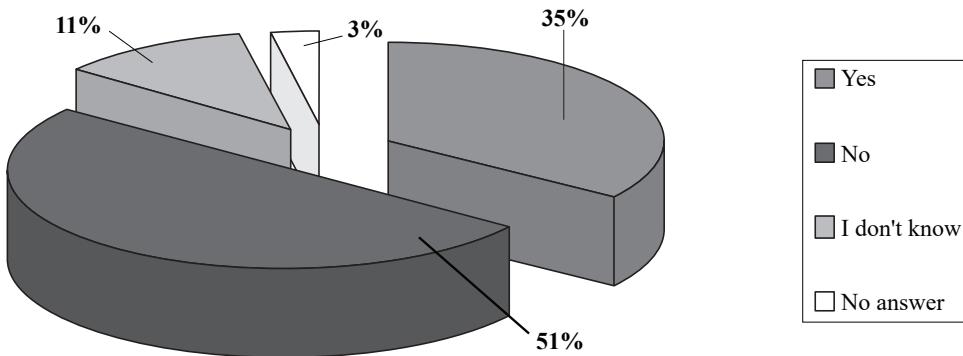
Batorski, 2011, p. 5–6, 10). An example of the fact that the internet is not yet the main tool for communication with the electorate is Lublin where among 328 candidates for the Lublin City Council in 2014 only 66 had their private profiles, and 26 of those candidates posted information about their participation in the election. 30 candidates had public Facebook profiles, five had Twitter accounts and three ran a blog. Within the group of 31 candidates who were elected to the City Council, seven ran their campaign online, in the social media (Adamik-Szysiak, Łukasik-Turecka, Romaniszewska, 2016, p. 123).

An effective use of communication tools boosts openness and transparency around the work of local authorities, raises development potential of the unit and strengthens relations by building the basis for social trust and civic participation (Kalisiaak-Mędelaska, Marks-Krzyszowska, 2016, p. 158). Self-governments accomplish this informative task in many different ways. It is worth investigating these methods in the municipalities researched in respect of cohabitation.

**Communication Tools Applied in the Researched Municipalities.
Recording and sharing council sessions**

Nowadays communication takes advantage of online opportunities. In the survey respondents were asked a question whether their municipality employs the practice of recording and sharing council sessions online, for example on YouTube.⁷ The answers varied in each unit and sometimes it was difficult to unambiguously determine if the practice of recording and sharing council sessions online actually existed in a given municipality. The question was complex and respondents from the same municipalities answered differently, confirming or negating the recording and sharing being a practice. A group of people who answered the question affirmatively associated recording with minutes preparation. It is interesting that there were notes made next to the answer specifying what the respondents had in mind when answering. Graph 1 shows the responses.

Graph 1. The practice of recording and online sharing of council sessions



Source: Own survey.

⁷ More on the subject of the most popular video-sharing website not only in Poland but worldwide: Jaworowicz, 2016, p. 49.

Graph 1 shows that 35% of the respondents confirm the practice of recording and online sharing of sessions. Some respondents completed their answer with notes: “recorded but not shared” (U25A), “private company does that” (U41A), “partially, fragments praising the mayor” (U28A), “shared on a newspaper forum, but only fragments” (U21A). When the answer was negative, which was in the case of over a half of the respondents, some notes in a similar tone were also found: “recorded a few times (initiated by groups not supporting the mayor), posted online, mostly about controversial issues” (L71A), “only in the obligatory form” (Ł85B), “even though the opposition raised the issue many times” (Ł46B). The quoted fragments confirm that in some municipalities the new media are not exploited for the purpose of informing residents, but for political rivalry between administrative bodies. What is more, there is a clear need in some local communities for the online broadcasting of sessions and it can be, according to one of the respondents, “online initiative of the residents” (I28H), or as put by another one, “done only for the last 3 months, after being strongly requested by (new) councillors” (Ł80C).

Some answers indicate wide openness of administrative bodies towards reporting on their work via the new media, such as “the internet and cable TV” (W28A). This accessibility is not always the result of using the internet, but also of willingness to reach residents. Two respondents wrote: “Every session is recorded, but not for YouTube. Sessions are always open, residents can come. Guests are also invited, depending on the subject: for example from the district council, sometimes entrepreneurs or even residents” (L111B), “Phonic sessions are recorded and the recordings are disclosed to everyone interested” (Ł79E).

Answers which suggest that the respondents have no idea whether the sessions are recorded (11%) are really thought-provoking. Possibly, it does not matter to them and they stay indifferent. It is, however, disturbing that there are municipalities where minutes from council sessions are not disclosed: “the minutes are not even available in the Public Information Bulletin” (S43A). If it is problematic to access such documents, self-government work is not transparent and laws on access to public information in Poland are violated.

It should be emphasised that in three out of twenty municipalities where extended interviews were conducted minutes from council sessions are not disclosed. Not sharing minutes and obstructing access to these documents are two separate issues, nevertheless it should be a standard that minutes are obligatorily published in the Public Information Bulletin and on a municipal website.

Table 1

Practice of recording and sparing council sessions in the researched municipalities

Municipality name and type	Cohabitation kind	Method of producing the recording and making it publicly available
1	2	3
Kielce UM	Peaceful	Sessions are recorded (sound) for minutes purposes The office runs internet television
Łódź UM	Peaceful	Sessions are shared online for listening during meetings of the municipality council
Olsztyn UM	Peaceful with limited trust	Sessions are shared online for listening

1	2	3
Opole UM	Peaceful	No information about recording, many links describing sessions
Ozorków UM	Peaceful	Sessions are recorded (sound) for minutes purposes
Zamość UM	Conflict	Sessions are recorded by local television networks
Żagań UM	Peaceful	Sessions are recorded and shared online, however the recording cannot be played back
Gorzów Śląski URM	Initially conflict, peaceful after a year	No information No minutes online
Koprzywnica URM	Conflict	Sessions are recorded (sound) for minutes purposes
Korsze URM	Conflict	Sessions are recorded by the office, no sharing
Poniatowa URM	Peaceful	Sessions are recorded (sound) for minutes purposes
Sulejów URM	Conflict	Sessions are recorded (sound) for minutes purposes
Ujazd URM	Peaceful	Minutes and resolutions are shared online
Wschowa URM	Conflict	Sessions were recorded and broadcasted until 2014, the office did not renew the contract
Gowarczów RM	Conflict	Sessions are recorded (sound) for minutes purposes
Grunwald RM	Conflict	Session were recorded for minutes purposes and by the chairman. Since 2017 they have been broadcasted on YouTube
Kowiesy RM	Peaceful	Sessions are recorded (sound) for minutes purposes
Nowa Sól RM	Peaceful	No information; no minutes online
Sawin RM	Conflict	Sessions are recorded (sound) for minutes purposes; no minutes online
Skoroszyce RM	Initially conflict, peaceful after a year	Sessions are recorded (sound) for minutes purposes

Municipality: UM – urban, URM – urban-rural, RM – rural.

Source: Own elaboration based on: 74 extended interviews conducted in municipalities in 2016–2017, official websites of municipalities and the Public Information Bulletin.

The analysis of the data from Table 1 leads to the conclusion that recording sound for the purpose of writing minutes is a dominant method of council session recording. In some municipalities with conflict cohabitation recording sound or also image was difficult due to the conflict. For example in Korsze municipality sessions were recorded with “mayor’s cameras,” yet the recording was not disclosed. In Wschowa municipality a company hired by the authorities had recorded sessions until December 2014. The office however did not renew the contract with the private entrepreneur, explaining its decision by the necessity to save money. Another reason was accusations of promoting the previous mayor for public money. In Grunwald municipality the office and council chairman recorded sessions separately, which was a sign of untrustworthiness and high intensity of the conflict. Żagań municipality provided also an interesting example, because its sessions are recorded and shared on a municipality’s website, but it is impossible to retrace the details of the meetings, according to a respondent. This means that, on the one hand, the municipality seemingly fulfils the obligation of informing residents by sharing the files. On the other hand, they do not care about technical aspects and residents being able to play back the recordings.

Only two of the researched municipalities (Table 1) provided online broadcasting (Łódź, Olsztyn), three uploaded files for watching (Kielce, Żagań, Grunwald) and in one

(Zamość) local television network prepares recordings. Online communication is not widespread.

Interestingly enough, representatives of the authorities have different opinions about the advantages and disadvantages of recording and broadcasting sessions online. These opinions come from municipalities with both conflict and peaceful cohabitation. Arguments for are the following:

“I aim at having sessions recorded for the simple reason that we have ambiguities in minutes and people claim they haven’t said something or there is no written record and they demand one.” (U1w),

“Watching the behaviour of the councillors during this term of office you come to the conclusion that that sessions should be recorded and we considered it indeed. We would have a thorough record then and know who said what, how they said it and what the answer or information was.” (O1w)

Arguments against usually boil down to location difficulties:

“Why we don’t record? We have no big conference room of our own as such and we wouldn’t be able to accommodate all councillors. Our meetings are usually held in rural halls and they all have different acoustics or sound.” (U1w)

In this case respondents from self-governments show willingness to record, yet technical issues and location troubles cause a problem. Opponents of recording and broadcasting give another significant reason, namely that such recordings can be used for political aims: “There was an idea during the previous term of office to record sessions for their own political aims, but that did not work.” (Ł3w)

In another researched municipality a respondent noticed both positive and negative aspects of broadcasting council sessions, claiming that, on the one hand, “This is a mistake, as all of them should be recorded. We have a few recorded sessions and we will distribute them to residents [...]. It should be done better.” (Ł1w). On the other hand, the interviewee also sees drawbacks:

“When there are a lot of people watching the session, councillors try to show off and prove how much they defend their fellow residents. They ask the same questions many times. They try to promote themselves and that is not good.” (Ł1w)

These concerns may be valid, since a respondent from another municipality said:

“The flow of the sessions changed a little when TV networks started broadcasting. Before, at this point councillors hardly spoke, but now, when they can show themselves in the media, it has become the longest point of the agenda. Residents have an opportunity to see what the council is working on. However, some media do not show this part when resolutions are voted on, only the part with free motions, arguments, discussions, conflicts.” (L3u-1)

The presence of cameras may also cause unintended negative consequences. As one of authority representatives suspects:

“This may be the case that councillors are intimidated by the cameras and recording. We have councillors who do not speak at all. If we had cameras, it might be even worse. We do have journalists coming to the sessions but what they write afterwards is not true.” (L2u-2)

The aforementioned problems can multiply as a result of the obligation introduced for the term of office for councils elected in 2018 to record and share council sessions in the Public Information Bulletin, on a municipal website or in another customary way (more on the subject in the last part of this paper).

It is worth exploring the question whether the possibility of watching or listening to online sessions increases the number of people interested in such matters. According to the majority of respondents, residents are active when something has an impact on them or when they protest against something, such as the shutting down of a school, ecological matters, local landscape development or a controversial debate subject. In other situations they do not really get involved, which changes before elections. One of residents noticed:

“There is the Public Information Bulletin and we also have a Facebook profile. The profile is fresh and run by our deputy mayor. We had none before. It is an official profile but there is also one run by a local resident who shares information, photos and event descriptions. [Residents] do not attend meetings because they work and cannot go home to watch it on YouTube or play it at work.” (O2o)

Entities which can influence improvement of communication tools implementation in a municipality are non-government organizations. One of the respondents confirms:

“Council sessions [...] have been recorded since not so long ago thanks to non-government organizations. These are only sound recordings. Also thanks to NGOs, minutes are made and disclosed to residents. The minutes are shared on the office’s website [...], published in the Public Information Bulletin, again thanks to NGOs. Previously minutes were taken, but not published in the Public Information Bulletin. One had to submit a motion to obtain public information. Theoretically, all the information can be found on the office’s website [...]. It is not so easy, though. Even if you know what you are looking for, you need a good knowledge of the website. However, it is possible to find some information. We are striving for putting more information in the Public Information Bulletin, and for it to be more transparent. When it comes to different forms of contact with the community, such as announcing office hours, the office [...] uses the local media: newspapers, radio, press. There is more information of one kind and less of another kind. Some information is put in the corner of the page, some is spread all over the page. That depends on how much attention the office [...] puts to a matter. We have a social consultation platform. At the beginning many people were interested in it, there were many posts from residents [...], they were active, many were watching the issues online. For a few years the platform has been almost dead. From time to time one or two people visit it, announce themselves, however the office [...] does not care to reach residents, they do not promote it.” (W3o-1)

Another respondent, an NGO representative, adds, “There are no camcorders, while there should be, because some people, in the internet era, even in such a poor municipality, could take advantage of it.” (W1o) Non-government organizations are indeed interested in obtaining as much information about self-government work as possible. Thus, they strive for applying transparency and reporting to residents on the work of self-government.

It should be mentioned that administrative bodies give their residents opportunities to act, for example during assemblies when there is a time for free motions, at the so-called

“civic quarter” during a session, or when representatives of administrative bodies have office hours. One of the respondents stated:

“The mayor has one day for meetings with residents. There is usually a big queue. When I was active in some associations during the previous term of office, I had no problem meeting the mayor on this day, unless he had a meeting planned. Now I think I would have a problem.” (Ł1u-3)

Openness of self-government authorities will result in engaging local communities. Residents can turn to the authorities both with a problem and an idea.

Using the Social Media

The importance of the social media raises. Despite appearances, Facebook, Twitter or Instagram are not only used for entertainment. They can be applied as a tool for communication with residents, thanks to the possibility of a dialogue with the recipient, especially because they shorten the distance. Facebook plays an influential role – it can be used for creating the identity of a self-government unit (more on the subject: Morawiec, Gamoń, 2016, p. 293–305). Facebook enables direct, mutual contacts. Only five of the researched municipalities had no Facebook profile (Table 2). A respondent explained their not having a profile by saying that “it is because of the age of the people working there [at the office].” (S2w)

Table 2

Using Facebook as a tool for communication with residents

Municipality name and type	Cohabitation kind	Facebook profile yes/no
Kielce UM	Peaceful	yes
Łódź UM	Peaceful	yes
Olsztyn UM	Peaceful with limited trust	yes
Opole UM	Peaceful	yes
Ozorków UM	Peaceful	no
Zamość UM	Conflict	There is a profile for Zamość the Open Fortress (city project about cultural heritage)
Żagań UM	Peaceful	yes
Gorzów Śląski URM	Initially conflict, peaceful after a year	yes
Koprzywnica URM	Conflict	no
Korsze URM	Conflict	yes
Poniatowa URM	Peaceful	yes
Sulejów URM	Conflict	yes
Ujazd URM	Peaceful	yes
Wschowa URM	Conflict	no
Gowarczów RM	Conflict	yes
Grunwald RM	Conflict	no
Kowiesy RM	Peaceful	no
Nowa Sól RM	Peaceful	yes
Sawin RM	Conflict	yes
Skoroszyce RM	Initially conflict, peaceful after a year	yes – there is a video showing a summary of the office work in 2016

Municipality: UM – urban, URM – urban-rural, RM – rural.

Source: Own elaboration based on: 74 extended interview conducted in the municipalities in 2016–2017, official websites of the municipalities and the Public Information Bulletin.

Every researched municipality “existed on Facebook,” but not all of the profiles were established and run by office employees or self-government representatives. Another problem in the context of the social media might be that there are too many profiles for one municipality, which makes the message difficult to read and incoherent. This is when their role as a tool for communication with residents is unfulfilled. What is more, self-government members, according to A. Panuszko (2012), do not treat Facebook like a channel of communication with residents, but like a one-way tool for self-promotion. The social media used in such a manner do not fulfil their two-way function and are seen by self-government members as a message carrier, not a forum where discussions happen. According to an interviewed head official:

“Far be it from me to go on Twitter or Facebook and boast that I have bought some new shoes or went to my aunt’s name’s day party etc. I don’t like it and I am not prepared for it. When I work with a computer, I look for information that I need and I tend to steer clear of all this gossiping. Someone may write that they don’t like me or something bad about me, which is of course not true, and I would unnecessarily get anxious, I wouldn’t be able to sleep because I would wonder what people think of me.” (O3w)

To prove that this can also be an effective tool engaging residents, for example for elections (sometimes those who are less interested), one of the respondents said:

“They [the municipality] run a profile on Facebook where he [the mayor] informs residents. Young people have a very good and positive attitude. It is a big change and I think that this is the reason why he [the mayor] won the elections. Young people supported him, because they voted, which they don’t do so often. Here is where the social media, these modern media, had a strong influence.” (Ł1u-2)

Facebook can be a tool for communication with residents used by local authorities. It has to be remembered, however, that despite a growth in the number of internet users in Poland (according to the data of the General Statistical Office in 2017, 81.9% of households had internet access⁸), not everyone uses this medium. Among the main reasons for not having internet access there were the following two: not needing the internet and not being able to use it. In rural and urban-rural municipalities, especially where older people prevail, using this tool for conveying information to residents will be ineffective. In such a case applying bulletins or other paper information tools would be a better solution.

Municipal Bulletin as a Traditional Tool for Communication with Residents

There are no differences between conflict and peaceful cohabitation when it comes to Facebook profiles. There are however significant differences when it comes to bulletins and newspapers which are issued by municipal units. The popularity of issuing

⁸ Comparing to 2016 the percentage was higher by 1.5 percentage point and by 7.1 comparing to 2014 (*Spoleczeństwo informacyjne w Polsce [Information society in Poland]*, GUS [General Statistical Office], 2017, p. 4–5). For comparison, what proves the dynamic of internet development is the fact that 5% of the world population used it in 2000, 42% in 2014, 46% in 2017 and in 2018 there was a 7% growth which brought the statistics to 53% (Jaworowicz, 2016, p. 15; *The Next Web*, 2018).

a bulletin or a newspaper by municipal offices is high. This means that the “old media” have not been superseded by the internet. Among the 20 researched municipalities 10 issued (or co-funded) newspapers. In this group 7 municipalities had conflict cohabitation (Table 3).

Table 3

Informing residents about the work of municipal administrative bodies by issuing a bulletin/newspaper

Municipality name and type	Cohabitation kind	Issuing/Not issuing a bulletin/newspaper by the municipal office
Kielce UM	Peaceful	not issued
Łódź UM	Peaceful	not issued
Olsztyn UM	Peaceful with limited trust	not issued
Opole UM	Peaceful	no information
Ozorków UM	Peaceful	issued
Zamość UM	Conflict	issued
Żagań UM	Peaceful	not issued
Gorzów Śląski URM	Initially conflict, peaceful after a year	no information
Koprzywnica URM	Conflict	issued
Korsze URM	Conflict	issued
Poniatowa URM	Peaceful	not issued
Sulejów URM	Conflict	co-issued by the municipal office
Ujazd URM	Peaceful	not issued
Wschowa URM	Conflict	not issued by the office but by a municipal unit
Gowarczów RM	Conflict	issued by the municipality (also online)
Grunwald RM	Conflict	not issued
Kowiesy RM	Peaceful	issued by the office
Nowa Sól RM	Peaceful	issued by the office (also online)
Sawin RM	Conflict	issued
Skoroszyce RM	Initially conflict, peaceful after a year	issued (also online)

Municipality: UM – urban, URM – urban-rural, RM – rural.

Source: Own elaboration based on: 74 extended interview conducted in the municipalities in 2016–2017, official websites of the municipalities and the Public Information Bulletin.

S. Michalczyk emphasizes that a free local press with the ability to provide true and honest critique can contribute to decreasing nepotism or corruption. It also positively influences relations between administrative bodies and residents (Adamik-Szysiak, Łukasik-Turecka, Romiszewska, 2016, p. 118). Nonetheless, it is difficult to imagine that a local newspaper funded by the municipality wrote about nepotism in the office. In such situations mayors are often accused, as shown by the analysis of the extended interviews, of the newspaper no longer being a tool for conveying information but of becoming a medium for promoting the mayor or fighting the opposition.

In one of the researched municipalities a functioning magazine was replaced by another one, yet the message did not change and it kept promoting the mayor with his deputy, at the same time blocking councillors from posting articles. According to a respondent:

“[The name of the newspaper], which was issued here, was a publication promoting the mayor. I have always had the impression that it is a continuous election campaign of the head official. The current administration gave up issuing [...], but they founded a new newspaper [...] and it is no different than [the name of the newspaper]. I also remember that councillors of the previous term of office requested to have at least three pages for their articles, and there were sixteen altogether. They wanted even just one page or half a page to post information about their work, what they interpellate, what they ask about, what kind of enactments they propose, however they were refused. They have tried again recently, but have been refused again. As a result, promotion considers only: the mayor, they deputy and their work. Other than that, they do not run any information activity.” (U1o)

The research shows another accusation, which is that under false pretences of reaching to all residents, especially the elderly, a newspaper is actually issued to promote the executive body and there is no money for other work:

“I opposed that because they thought that since the elderly do not use the internet, or computers for that matter, they should have a newspaper. I am not against that, yet for one thing, there is no money for [other purposes] and they spend it on the newspaper, and for another, there is the mayor in all the photos in the newspaper, I have counted eleven or twelve of them. No mentioning of councillors’ achievements, even small ones when we have organized something, had fun or that children were happy. Nothing is also written about rural leaders and they do a lot.” (S2u-2)

A similar situation is in another researched municipality:

“Honestly speaking, he uses the newspaper to boast about his achievements. This is what it is. It is no information about council work, but the work of the office, [the name of the executive body] and that environment.” (L3U-3)

Interestingly enough, in the case of the last municipality the office issues a bulletin which is not treated as a local newspaper but as a newsletter.

In municipalities with conflict cohabitation a bulletin, newsletter or local newspaper will always be prone to the risk of accusation that they promote the executive body. One of the respondents says, “I deplore that until today we have no municipal newspaper. We had one when I was a councillor 30 years ago. It was in a form of a magazine and was very popular.” (O3w). With time the municipality resigned from issuing the paper, because, as the respondent states, “I was afraid that I would be accused of running a campaign and issuing a local newspaper for public money.” (O3w)

At the same time it should be noticed that when a conflict between administrative bodies intensifies, it is difficult to be objective in giving an account of its course and to restrain from discrediting the other side. Korsze municipality can be an example of a very intensive conflict. In the local newspaper called *Twoja Gmina Korsze* [*Your Korsze Municipality*] issued by Korsze Municipality there is an article with the title directly relating to the conflict: *Podnieśli ręce na burmistrza* [*They Attacked the Mayor*]. There is another one with a very suggestive title: *Kogo tak naprawdę reprezentują radni?* [*Who are the councillors really representing?*] (2016, p. 3). The subheading alone, “Shocking analysis of the elections,” is puzzling since the newspaper was issued in 2016 and the elections took place in 2014. The article suggests that the councillors (mostly in opposition to the mayor) are not highly legitimate within society because they got a low

percentage of votes in the elections and they “claim rights to decide about the fate of the whole municipality.” It is hard not to get the impression that they are being discredited in the eyes of the readers.

To sum up this section, a quote from one of the respondents may be an interesting information on how issuing a local newspaper can be justified: “Ombudsman’s recommendations are not to issue local newspapers because these are not objective.” (W1w)

On the municipality level the local media are still an important communication tool. According to A. Przybylska (2010, p. 59–60), their specificity is that they can vanquish the boundary of being one-way. The message is inasmuch about socio-political events important to the recipient. The interested party can partially verify the information within the municipality. Przybylska claims that the local media can shorten the distance between a self-government and a local community by communicating in a down-to-earth and not emotional way, simultaneously contributing to public and not individual benefit. It should be emphasised that in the local press there can be and there is information about a conflict, however a substantial communication tool is not the local press, but a bulletin issued by the municipality, which reports on the conflict. It seems that such bulletins do not do away with a one-way message but that they even enhance it not only between authorities and residents, but also between administrative bodies. Communication in the case of municipalities with conflict cohabitations is monopolized by the executive body and municipal clerks subordinated to them. For the voice of the other side to be heard, councillors should apply modern communication forms more willingly, including the social media. They cannot reach everybody this way, however they can at least get through to a group of residents, especially younger ones.

Aiming at Transparency – What Responsibilities the Law Introduced in 2018 Assigns

The new solutions for improving transparency and civil engagement in the process of functioning and control of administrative bodies etc., introduced by the act of January 2018 (the Act of the 11th January 2018 on Changing Several Acts for the Purpose of Increasing Civil Engagement...), are causes for consideration how the amendments to self-government law will influence communication with residents. It is worth starting with a presentation of the solutions which mayors and councillors of the term of office started in 2018 will be obligated to apply. First of all, there is a duty to broadcast and record, both in sound and image, council meetings. The recordings have to be shared in the Public Information Bulletin, on the office’s website and in another customarily chosen way. Second of all, the mayor becomes responsible for disclosing councillors’ interpellations and answers. The content of interpellations and councillors’ inquiries, as well as answers given by the mayor or a representative chosen by them, have to be published on the website of the Public Information Bulletin, municipality’s website or in another way customary for the municipality. Third of all, open ballots during council sessions are supposed to be conducted with tools enabling compilation of name lists with votes contributed by councillors, which should be immediately published in the Public Information Bulletin, on a municipality’s website and in another customary way.

Except for the abovementioned responsibilities connected with informing residents online, the introduced law broadens the possibility of residents actively taking part in council sessions by participating in the debate about the report on the status of the municipality presented every year by the mayor. A citizen who would like to share their opinion has to indicate it to the council chairman and try to find endorsement by collecting at least 20 signatures in municipalities with up to 20 thousand residents or 50 signatures in municipalities with over 20 thousand residents (more on the subject: the Act of the 11th January 2018 on Changing Several Acts for the Purpose of Increasing Civil Engagement...). The research made for the purpose of this paper shows that relations between authorities and residents are more often direct and less formal. Therefore, it is arguable whether there is a need for such a formal and obligatory method and whether it can prove itself in rural municipalities.

It is difficult to unmistakably state if the legal provisions introduced by the act of 11th January 2018 will, comparing to the practices applied in Polish self-governments, “really contribute to granting wider participation of local communities in the work of self-government administrative organs” (Print no. 2001. MP bill on changing some acts... Justification, 2018). Self-government members have different opinions on the subject, regardless whether they stem from conflict or peaceful cohabitation. On the one hand, they serve (with benefits for residents) the purpose of transparency of self-government work and broaden social control. On the other hand, was it necessary to force such invasive communication tools on municipalities, even in the context of high transparency? Some respondents also had doubts about broadcasting which were quoted in the paper. In some municipalities, especially rural, such requirements can be confronted with the reality and “crushed” by technical issues. The Marshall Office of Pomerania Voivodeship also listed these problems in a written opinion for the bill which was passed in 2018, “Purchase and assembly of hardware funded by the self-government itself can affect realisation of other important tasks. This requirement seems difficult or even impossible to fulfil by poorer municipalities” (To print no. 2001, Marshall Office of Pomerania Voivodeship... 2018).

An overall assessment of the examined solutions will be possible when they have been applied for some time. The legislator assumed that the internet as a tool plays a significant role in communication between residents and municipal administrative bodies. For one thing, broadcasting and recording council sessions can be a good solution in municipalities with conflict cohabitation, where residents themselves can verify the work of administrative bodies. For another, the changes proposed bear the risk of ridicule of self-governments and their members. Especially during a discussion about the report on a municipality status. Councillors have the right to take the floor without limits during a discussion. It can be imagined how long such a session would take and how many pointless speeches there would be for the sake of showing off or stating someone’s presence.

Summary

Online communication is an important, but not the most important tool for communication with the electorate – residents. Reasons for that are complex. First of all, the habits of

some citizen groups are shaped by the traditional media, which makes the electronic media insignificant for them. Second of all, political content is not dominant on websites. Third of all, internet users are very diverse groups and not a homogenous community (Jaworowicz, 2016, p. 83). Fourth of all, an important factor is also civic interest and engagement in municipal issues as well as demand for such information. It was proven that residents become engaged when the issue is directly connected to them or their surroundings, for example changes in landscape development. Non-government organizations play an important role in assuring the transparency of self-government work. In some municipalities it was NGOs that sought to share council session minutes or at least audio recordings. Moreover, their representatives had impact on solving or emphasizing an existing conflict between municipal administrative bodies (more on the subject: Sidor, Kuć-Czajkowska, Wasil, 2018; see also: the situation in Wydminy municipality, Kuć-Czajkowska, Sidor, Wasil, 2017, p. 30–46). What is more, the size and type of a municipality determine the method of using communication tools. Big cities run a planned and controlled information policy by employing spokespeople, PR and territorial marketing specialists. Thus, they adopt a wider range of communication tools, especially online tools. The addressees in this case are not only residents but also tourists or investors.

Information policy and application of tools for communication between local authorities and residents are fulfilled intuitively, without analysing needs (for example surveys among residents about preferred methods for conveying information). Communication tools application boils down to solutions required by the law (the Act on Public Information Access) or popular methods like the social media, accessible by a narrow, interested group of recipients (Kalisiak-Mędelska, Marks-Krzyszowska, 2016). Depending on a cohabitation type, conflict or peaceful, communication is different. According to the interviewees (partially survey respondents), communication tools are used unilaterally by the executive organ. Even if it is not an instrument for fighting the opposition, there is a risk of such tools being used for promoting oneself. Nonetheless, in the era of the internet, every voice can be heard and oppositional councillors can reach residents via the social media. What is more, the internet did not fully replace traditional communication forms, such as notice boards, conveying information by rural leaders or district council chairmen, and most of all local bulletins.

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Narzędzia komunikacji z mieszkańcami w polskich gminach z koabitacją (kadencja 2014-2018)

Streszczenie

W artykule scharakteryzowano wykorzystywane przez gminy narzędzia komunikowania z mieszkańcami. Podstawą do przygotowania artykułu były badania jakościowe (wywiady pogłębione) i ilo-

ściowe (wybrane pytanie z kwestionariusza ankiety) przeprowadzone w wyodrębnionej grupie gmin z koabitacją w kadencji 2014–2018. Celem artykułu jest wskazanie czy i jakiego rodzaju narzędzia komunikowania z mieszkańcami stosują władze gminy? Jaka jest skuteczność tych narzędzi? Czy rodzaj koabitacji: konfliktowa vs. pokojowa ma wpływ na sposób informowania mieszkańców? Jak wprowadzone w styczniu 2018 zmiany w prawie samorządowym (których celem było m.in. zwiększenie transparentności funkcjonowania władz samorządowych) wpłyną na sposób komunikowania się władz z mieszkańcami?

Kluczowe słowo: gmina, koabitacja, narzędzia komunikowania, Internet

