Impact, Utilization and Applications of Digital Media for Government in Rural Settings.
A Comparative US-Romania Research

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Abstract

Interaction between citizens and government has traditionally taken place in community settings, government meetings, special town hall meetings, written correspondence in letters, emails, or texts, or via a phone call to a government representative. With digital media, citizens can instantly interact with the government. The mobile component of digital media will continue to be important in this interaction. This research operates with the assumption that digital media expresses a paradigmatic shift regarding how to govern and how to communicate. Digital media clearly is transforming the way governments think, plan, and carry out their policies but more importantly, how they communicate public policy. Our research intends to understand how local government institutions in rural settings use digital media and other communication channels to communicate with their citizens. The research employs a comparative perspective by investigating rural communities from the US and Romania. This was achieved by undertaking a content analysis of local government's websites and social media platforms, as well as collecting primary data through interviews with representatives of local government, to assess the ways they use digital media, traditional media, and other communication tools, and whether they viewed them as effective strategies.

Keywords: civic engagement, political participation, digital media, rural, comparative research.

1. Introduction

How and why citizens, citizen groups, citizen journalists, governments, and government officials utilize digital media for communication and information is one of the most challenging issues of the 21st century democracies. The COVID-19 pandemic and its communication implications have further confirmed this assumption.

Interaction between citizens and government has traditionally taken place in community settings, government meetings, special town hall meetings, written correspondence in letters, emails, or texts, or via a phone call to a government representative. With digital media, citizens can instantly interact with the government. The mobile component of digital media will continue to be important in this interaction. This research operates with the assumption that digital media expresses a paradigmatic shift regarding how to govern and how to communicate. Digital media clearly is transforming the way governments think, plan, and carry out their policies, but more importantly, how they communicate public policy. Establishing a two-way channel for citizens to communicate their feedback is neither an easy nor a straightforward task, and brings a host of challenges. However, these challenges are less about technology, but more about if and how local government representatives and their constituencies accept this transition toward new communication channels.

Government agencies, and local governments, in particular, have been slower adopters of digital media for communication and engagement. Through increased platforms for engagement, governments increase their transparency by allowing citizens access to information and opportunities to share their own feedback. Digital media can potentially generate significant opportunities by being inexpensive and omnipresent. By helping gather public feedback, ideas, creativity, etc., and feeding these back into the policy-making process, local governments can be helped to effectively use digital media to rejuvenate direct democracy.

The burden is not only on the local government side to increase engagement. Studies (Krah and Mertens, 2020) seem to suggest that citizen involvement is often very limited, and usually occurs only when a decision has had a direct and immediate impact on some members of the community.

Most often, research focuses on urban communities while rural communities, outside of metropolitan areas are ignored. It is questionable if findings from urban communities

apply to rural ones and if models developed for cities and towns can be successfully replicated in rural settings. Moreover, there is little comparative research carried out at the international level.

Considering these observations, our research intends to understand how local government institutions in rural settings use digital media and other communication channels to communicate with their citizens. The research employs a comparative perspective by investigating rural communities from the US and Romania. This was achieved by undertaking a content analysis of local government's websites and social media platforms, as well as collecting primary data through interviews with representatives of local government to assess the ways they use digital media, traditional media, and other communication tools, and whether they viewed them as effective strategies.

2. Literature review

Civic engagement and political participation are terms that are widely used in political science literature and public discourse alike; both concepts seem to currently include a wide variety of individual and collective actions, which sometimes overlap each other. This makes conceptual clarity difficult to achieve. This section endeavors to present multiple definitions of both concepts and to address possible overlaps.

2.1. Civic engagement

There is no single, widely agreed-upon meaning for the term civic engagement (Gibson, 2000, p. 17). The activities usually included under civic engagement cover a broad spectrum. Adler and Goggin (2005, pp. 238–239) identify four specific types of activities associated with civic engagement: 'a) Civic engagement as community service; b) Civic engagement as collective action; c) Civic engagement as political involvement; and d) Civic engagement as social change'.

Besides these somewhat narrower definitions, Adler and Goggin (2005) point to Michael Della Carpini as someone who defines civic engagement to include activities ranging from voluntary work and organizational involvement to electoral participation. This definition is broader than the specific emphases discussed above. The authors' own definition is also broad, describing civic engagement as 'ways in which citizens participate in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future' (p. 236).

Quite interestingly, Putnam, one of the best-known scholars in this field, did not define civic engagement but its opposite term, civic disengagement. According to Putnam (2000, p. 185) 'civic disengagement appears to be an equal opportunity affliction. The sharp, steady declines in club meetings, visits with friends, committee service, church attendance, philanthropic generosity, card games, and electoral turnout have hit virtually all sectors of American society over the last several decades and in roughly equal measure'. He includes in his definition informal social activities (visits with friends, card games) as well as formal activities (committee service, community, and political

participation). Putnam placed more emphasis on the importance of social capital for vital and well-functioning democratic societies. For him, as argued by Ekman and Amnå (2012, p. 284), his focus was more on 'engagement' than on the 'civic' or the 'political'. According to Berger (2009), Putnam was somewhat unclear about what was declining since 'civic engagement' was a bit of everything. Berger uses the term 'conceptual stretching' to describe this situation.

Adler and Goggin (2005), in an effort to bring conceptual clarity to the field, propose that we think about the term as a continuum, spanning from the private sphere to the formal or public sphere. Civic engagement thus ranges from individual action to collective action.

Civic participation has been frequently defined and analyzed by researchers in the last half of the 20th century. Verba, Nie and Kim (1978) described four types of participation: voting, campaigning, communal activity, and particularized contacting.

Teorell, Torcal and Montero (2007) listed five forms of participation: voting, party activity, consumer activities, contacts, and protests.

Friedrich (2011) analyzed participation in democratic society and suggested a model based on three types of participation: pluralistic participation, associative participation, and deliberative participation.

Gil de Zuniga, Jung and Valenzuela (2012) assessed three types of participation: civic engagement, offline political participation, and online political participation. According to them, civic engagement aims to solve community issues, while political participation—both online and offline—focuses on government decisions. Talo and Mannarini (2015) identified four types of participation, which include formal political participation, activism, civic participation, and disengagement. Gibson and Cantijoch (2013) showed the differences between the public who is active online, as compared to those who are engaged in offline participation.

Dalton (2000, 2008) and Norris (2002, 2007) emphasized the inequalities in the degree of participation that had been produced by online access and use. Gil de Zuniga and Valenzuela (2011), examined the impact of online social networks and media on offline participation. Such studies and surveys of online users have suggested that online communication leads to increased civic participation, at least by stimulating more visits to political sites, especially among younger viewers (Kruikemeier *et al.*, 2013; Emmer, Wolling and Vowe, 2012). Graham and Dutton (2014) summarized a series of studies that document the role of the Internet in citizens' behavior in consolidated democracies, while Newman, Dutton and Blank (2014) showed evidence of the impact of social media in the process of news production and selection.

Most of these papers have analyzed these phenomena based on national samples. However, Nah and Yamamoto (2017) discussed the role of the Internet – in terms of impact on civic participation—at a local level, using the study of networks generated by local narratives that they called ICSN—'integrated connectedness to a storytelling network'. They found evidence that local civic engagement is stimulated by communication via Internet and mobile devices.

2.2. Political participation

The involvement of citizens in the political process is considered by many political scientists as the core of a healthy democratic system (Verba, Scholzman and Brady, 1995). Moreover, vibrant democracies are nowadays characterized by a continuous expansion of the available forms of participation, which currently cover activities such as protesting or advocacy via the Internet, street parties, support for fair trade and fair labor, gardening guerillas, etc. (van Deth, 2016).

Understanding of how political participation is defined has evolved with a variety of changes in society and government starting with the mid-twentieth century, including increase in the importance of government and politics plays in the everyday life of citizens; the blurred distinctions between private and public spheres; a more educated and competent public; and the availability of political information, mainly in the context of Internet and ICTs (van Deth, 2016). First and foremost, around the 1940s and 1950s, seminal works focused on forms of political participation understood as voting, campaigning, and party membership (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee, 1954; Brady, 1998). For a long time, voting was perceived as the main way for a citizen to have a voice in the political system, and voting turnout has been described as the most used measure of citizen participation in the US (Ekman and Amnå, 2012, p. 285). Starting with the 1960s, political participation included not just voting but also contacts between citizens and government officials (Campbell *et al.*, 1960). Slowly, the repertoire of activities grew, including communal activities and a more diverse range of direct contact between citizens, public officials, and politicians (Verba and Nie, 1972). The 1970s brought about a different type of political participation, in the form of dissent, disapproval, rejection, and protests against what was considered the formal establishment (Barnes and Kaase, 1979; Inglehart, 1990). Consequently, actions directed against all political, societal, media, or economic actors (or elites) could be analyzed as political participation (Teorell, Torcal and Montero, 2007, pp. 335–336; Norris, 2002, p. 193). The 1980s and 1990s marked an even further expansion of political participation. In the context of strained public budgets, activities by citizens especially at the local community level (civic activities, volunteering, and social engagement through associations) were regarded as forms of political participation. In this context demarcation lines between public and private became very blurred—government action was starting to be replaced by citizens' action (Diller, 2001). Perhaps a final stage in the expansion of the term political participation is represented by the inclusion of individual non-political activities or actions, which nonetheless have a political purpose—for example boycotts or blogs on environmental issues (van Deth, 2016). This spread of individualized actions requires no coordinating organization and has been made possible by Internet-based technologies. It is interesting that some authors note in this context that people are using the Internet as a mode of participation in itself—and not just a modern way to mobilize participants (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013).

Numerous definitions of political participation exist in the literature. They range from very narrow, reflecting the initial emphasis on electoral behavior to all encompassing.

Pertaining to the former category is the definition by Verba and Nie (1972, p. 2). According to them, political participation includes 'those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take'. The latter category of definitions is probably the best illustrated by Arnstein (1969, p. 216) who defines political participation as 'a categorical term for citizen power'. Another approach in the literature is to offer typologies of what is included under political participation. Teorell, Torcal and Montero (2007) suggest perhaps the most extensive typology encompasses five dimensions: 'electoral participation; consumer participation; party activity; protest activity; and contacting organizations, politicians, or civil servants'. Ekman and Amnå (2012, pp. 287–288) add another layer to Teorell, Torcal and Montero's typology, by referring to latent participation, described as 'the kind of engagement that may be regarded 'pre-political' or on 'standby'. This notion of latency is based on the simple observation that citizens do a lot of things that may not be directly or unequivocally classified as political participation, but at the same time could be of great significance for future political activities of a more conventional type'.

Perhaps an even better solution for conceptual clarity is to provide common elements that describe this broad set of activities under political participation. Van Deth (2016, p. 3) outlines four such elements: a) it is an activity (or action); b) it is voluntary and not ordered by a ruling class or obliged under some law; c) it refers to activities of people in their role as nonprofessionals or amateurs; d) it concerns government, politics, or the state in a broad sense; it is neither restricted to specific phases (such as parliamentary decision-making processes or executing laws) nor to specific levels or areas (such as national elections or contacts with party officials).

Depending on what one labels political participation is crucial for the assessment of the quality of democracy at all levels. If definitions of political participation are narrow and restricted only to voting behavior, then the conclusion is rather pessimistic. If other forms of political participation are included in the definition of this concept, then perhaps we can argue that democracy is doing better than ever.

2.3. Toward a new classification

Ekman and Amnå (2012) are perhaps the authors who strive the most to link civic engagement with political participation in their model. The two concepts are bridged via one term discussed earlier which is latent participation. Civic engagement, in their view, is quite similar to latent participation. They include various ways in which people engage in society: 'they discuss politics, follow political issues, write to editors, donate money, and recycle for environmental reasons. People do voluntary work to help others. People get organized to solve local problems or to improve conditions for certain groups in society' (p. 292). The authors clearly state that 'such civil actions we refer to are of course manifest (observable) behavior as well, but 'latent' in relation to specific political parliamentary and extra-parliamentary actions' (p. 292).

2.4. Local public administration
   as a facilitator of participation and engagement

The previous section outlines different ways and types of participation and engagement by citizens. The emphasis in this paper is citizens' participation as it relates to the sphere of local government. However, latent types of participation will not be completely overlooked, as they might represent pre-participation efforts. Literature on political participation suggests that participation is central to healthy democracies, underlying its inherent positive role. However, it is not enough, as Thomas (1995) indicates, to simply recognize that under contemporary political and economic conditions, we can no longer exclude the public from public decision-making. Contextual factors embedded in the global, national, regional, and local contexts may either hinder or encourage citizens' participation. In this section, we examine the role of local public administration as a facilitator of participation and engagement. We also examine the extent of a perceived shift in the government and public administration's role as facilitators for citizens.

The fact that significant public participation in government requires a targeted effort is well illustrated by the following quote by King, Feltey and Susel (1998): 'Although many public administrators view close relationships with the citizens as both necessary and desirable most of them do not actively seek public involvement. If they do seek it, they do not use public input in making administrative decisions and believe that greater citizen participation increases inefficiencies, delays, and red tape'. This clearly points toward a 'tension that exists between the public's right to greater involvement and the prerogative of public officials to act as administrative decision-makers' (Kettering Foundation, 1989, p. 12).

Vigoda (2002) argues that—in order for significant public participation to take place – we need to reshape how citizen-public administration interaction is currently conceptualized. He claims that we need to move away from the responsiveness paradigm toward collaboration and partnership. The responsiveness paradigm is rooted in New Public Management (NPM) and other similar approaches, which claim that citizens should be treated as clients by public administration (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992; Hays and Kearney, 1997; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2000; Chi, 1999). As argued by Weikart (2001), 'the ideas behind NPM are not new and NPM builds on a long history of using business practices in government and reflects a resurgence of old ideas about the form and functions of government' (p. 362). Though responsive governments may seem like a good idea, Vigoda (2002) criticizes this approach as the sole interaction between citizens and public administration. He claims that the responsiveness paradigm promotes 'a unidirectional pattern of relationships where citizens are covertly encouraged to remain passive clients of government' (p. 528). Vigoda puts forward a proposal that implies that public administration assumes multiple roles at the same time. This allows him to integrate another paradigm focused on collaboration (John *et al*., 1994; Nalbandian, 1999; Grubbs, 2000; Thompson, Tancredi and Kisil, 2000). Collaboration, according to Vigoda (2002), takes numerous forms—'negotiation, participation, cooperation, free and unlimited flow of information, innovation, agreements based on compromises and mutual understanding and

a more equitable distribution and redistribution of power and resources' (p. 529). Such an approach is bi-dimensional or multi-dimensional and encourages public administration to 'take a step forward, going beyond elementary exchange relationships and responsiveness to demands' (p. 535). Vigoda (2002, p. 531) conceptualizes the interaction between public administration and citizens along a continuum. It integrates the various roles citizens, public administration, and government play in modern societies. The continuum allows cooperation to build on top of responsiveness, thus the metaphor of public administration as a 'lady wearing two different, but interconnected hats' proposed by the cited author.

The literature on governance provides us with perhaps the most important reconceptualization of the citizen-public administration relationship, thus making governance the watchword for the next millennium in a variety of fields connected to public affairs and public administration. Scholars of governance identify horizontal networks of public, private, and non-profit organizations as the new structures of governance. They stand in stark contrast to the hierarchical organizations characterizing traditional bureaucracies (Kooiman, 1993; Rhodes, 1997). Other authors claim that 'there is another face of the new governance, one that involves the citizenry—the tool makers and tool users—and the processes through which they participate in the work of government' (Bingham, Nabatchi and O'Leary, 2005, p. 547).

Salamon (2002, p. vii) defines new governance as a framework recognizing 'the collaborative nature of modern efforts to meet human needs, the widespread use of tools of action that engage complex networks of public and private actors, and the resulting need for a different style of public management, and a different type of public sector, emphasizing collaboration and enablement rather than hierarchy and control'.

From a practical standpoint, new governance requires public managers to master a variety of skills and tools. Kettl (2002) specifically refers to the need for improved skills in negotiation and coordination. Public administrators need to be able to manage complex networks, rely more on interpersonal and inter-organizational processes, use information technology and performance management effectively, provide transparency, provide channels for citizens to participate, and supply bottom-up accountability to the public (Kettl, 2002; Bingham, Nabatchi and O'Leary, 2005, p. 548).

Identifying barriers to authentic public participation as well as possible strategies to overcome them is highly relevant. King, Feltey and Susel (1998) distinguish three types of barriers encountered in practice. They are: realities of daily life, administrative systems and processes, and participation techniques. The latter two are perhaps more relevant considering the current research. Very often, participation is hampered by realities of daily life such as transportation, time constraints, family structure, the number of family members in the labor force, childcare, and economic disadvantages (p. 322). Very important considering our research in rural areas is that administrators and citizens alike referred to the demise of the neighborhood as an organizing and socializing system (p. 322). In general, the disappearance of tight-knit communities and isolation are perceived as barriers to participation. From this standpoint, rural communities, to the extent that they retain some features of close-knit communities, may have an advantage when it comes to public

participation. The second set of barriers identified by King, Feltey and Susel (1998) refers to those inherent in administrative processes themselves. Communication is included under administrative processes and was viewed by subjects in the cited research as problematic. Citizens especially viewed communication as 'flowing one way – from the administrative professionals to the citizens'. Therefore, they argued that 'information is usually managed, controlled, and manipulated, limiting their capacity to participate' (p. 322). A final set of barriers identified by King, Feltey and Susel (1998) refers to the techniques used in participation. There is a significant body of literature on techniques that do not work. Public hearings are described by the cited authors as extremely ineffective. Other participation methods include citizens' panels and advisory councils as well as surveys. The former poses the problem of biases in composition (Verba *et al*., 1993) while the latter does not allow for citizens-government interaction (Kathlene and Martin, 1991).

2.5. Communication tools and processes used by local public administration to engage with citizens

Among the processes involved in citizens-government cooperation/partnership described above, especially in the framework of governance, communication plays an important role. On one hand, the tools chosen by governments for communicating with citizens can either hamper or encourage authentic participation. On the other hand, the moment communication is initiated by governments makes the difference between simply informing citizens about public issues and getting them engaged in the framing of the issue itself. This section explores issues pertaining to communication tools and processes as part of the agenda of governments to stimulate public participation, with a focus on stressing the role of social media as well as other interactive tools.

Mossberger, Wu and Crawford (2013) argue that in the past few years, social media has changed local e-government in the US. This is mainly because new communication tools such as social media have the potential to improve interactions with citizens through dialogue and greater transparency (Bertot, Jaeger and Grimes, 2012). Numerous authors believe that this is especially true at the local level where there are traditions of citizen participation (Berry, Portney and Thomson, 1993; Oakerson, 1999). This optimism is however questionable in light of some studies, which found that municipal websites are not very effective at advancing online citizen participation—only 11% of the studied websites allowed for any form of citizen feedback (Holzer *et al*., 2008). Previous efforts to shape public participation with Internet tools did not meet expectations. Based on some studies, it can be argued that there has been little success with prior social media tools, such as online discussion forums, chat, and online surveys (Phang and Kankanhalli, 2008; Roeder *et al*., 2005; Stern, Gudes and Svoray, 2009).

2.6. How are social media in government defined?

The best way to think about social media in government is as a 'group of technologies that allow public agencies to foster engagement with citizens and other organizations using the philosophy of Web 2.0' (Criado, Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia, 2013, p. 320).

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) also emphasize the idea that social media builds on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0. Tim O'Reilly coined the term Web 2.0 in 2005 to distinguish internet technologies that feature the generation of content by user, participation-enabling structures, collective intelligence, and scalability (O'Reilly, 2005). Examples of Web 2.0 relevant for citizen participation include wikis, blogs, open data portals, and tools for crowdsourcing and ranking ideas (Criado, Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia, 2013; Chun *et al.*, 2010). Mossberger, Wu and Crawford (2013) distinguish social networks from other social media. They argue that 'social networks fall under the umbrella of social media and are defined by several characteristics, including creation of a public profile within a defined system, the ability to connect with others, and user-generated content' (p. 352).

What truly sets social media apart from other forms of communication used in the past by governments is its ability to promote two-way or even multi-actor deliberation (Mossberger, Wu and Crawford, 2013; Gutmann and Thompson, 2004). Or, in the words of Effing, van Hillegersberg and Huibers (2011), 'participation seems to be the key concept that explains differences between 'old' media and 'new' social media, although basic tools for interaction such as chat and forum were available in the early days of the World Wide Web' (p. 28).

Effing, van Hillegersberg and Huibers (2011, p. 29) propose an evolution model of social media, where different types of media and their evolution over time are connected with levels of citizen participation and engagement. The vertical axis in the model is participation. It consists of e-Enabling (providing access of information to members, citizens, users), e-Engagement (citizens are consulted regarding certain projects), and e-Empowering (dialogue and interaction with citizens, members, and users). The horizontal axis in the model is time. As observed from this model, intervals in the model are not precisely defined but gradual.

2.7. Understanding the process of government-citizen communication via social media

Criado, Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia (2013, pp. 320–321) argue that current research in the area of social media use in government refers to three specific dimensions: tools, goals, and topics. These three dimensions can, in our opinion, be used to also understand practical choices governments have to make in this area.

Social media tools include all instruments and applications used by public sector organizations. Some examples, as described by Criado, Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia (2013, p. 320) include 'social networking (e.g., Facebook), microblogging (e.g., Twitter), multimedia sharing (e.g., YouTube), virtual worlds (e.g., Second Life), mashups and open data (e.g., Data.gov), questioning tools (e.g., Quora), crowdsourcing (e.g., Mechanical Turk), collaboration tools (e.g., Peer-to-Patent and Wiki Government), tagging (e.g., Digg), and content syndication (e.g., RSS)'. Given this large variety of tools available, it is important to try to determine which tools are used the most by governments. Previous research conducted in the US, European Union, and Mexico (Bonson *et al.*, 2012; Snead,

2013; Sandoval-Almazan *et al*., 2011, p. 320) all point out that governments use what the population uses. In other words, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flicker, LinkedIn, etc. are the most widespread (Criado, Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia, 2013, p. 320).

In terms of preference for specific tools by local government, findings from previous studies need to be interpreted with some caution. A study from 2011, based on a large sample of 75 large US cities, found that '87% of the analyzed cities used Twitter, in comparison with 25% two years before. Facebook was also used by 87%, with an even larger increase from 13% in 2009. YouTube links appeared for 75% of major US cities, up from 16% in 2009' (Mossberger, Wu and Crawford, 2013, p. 354). More recent data are needed in order to draw a definitive conclusion. Meijer and Thaens (2010), based on empirical research of three police departments, argue that a combination of contextual and path-dependency factors accounts for differences in the emerging social media strategies of the three studied organizations.

It is important for public agencies using social media to set clear goals regarding what they want to achieve. Openness, transparency, cost savings, policy effectiveness, citizen participation, citizen satisfaction, and trust, etc. are all goals outlined in the literature (Bailey and Singleton, 2010). Setting clear goals is important because they guide the strategy a public organization uses to communicate with citizens and its stakeholders through social media. Mergel (2013) claims that there are three broad strategies governments use: representation, engagement, and networking. Organizations pursuing a representation strategy will be mostly interested in getting their message out to their public. They might be motivated by greater transparency and openness; however, it is a uni-dimensional communication, and no engagement with the citizens is sought after or desired. Engagement strategies mean the government actively seeks feedback from citizens (requests them to share stories or rank suggestions/proposals) and sometimes they may even respond to comments from the public. Public organizations that use this strategy view themselves as agenda setters for discussions; however, they are interested at a minimum in receiving feedback from the public on the issues they put up for discussion. Networking strategies imply that governments launch topics for discussion (without framing a policy issue from the start), set basic rules for dialogue, and contribute to the debate but from the position of stakeholders among other stakeholders.

The topics dimension from the standpoint of research includes items addressed in academic research, ranging from 'theories framing the usage of social media in government; methods applied to its investigation; policy domains of implementation; levels of government; and the country or region of reference' (Criado, Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia, 2013, p. 324). At least two issues are relevant from the perspective of our research. First, the level of government where social media is used and the type of community (rural versus urban, level of education, unemployment, etc.) may play a part in the effectiveness of communication and engagement. Second, policy domains better suited for different strategies in terms of social media use (providing merely information as opposed to engagement) are also worth exploring based on past empirical research.

Similar to other policy fields, one big question for researchers and practitioners alike is how we measure the impact of social media use by government organizations. To date, we have studies including the perceived impacts of social media. These impacts include 'openness of public bureaucracies to the public, collaboration with other agencies in the policy process, citizens' participation in political decisions, the maximization of resources for the operations performed, and faster, more user-friendly dissemination of information' (Criado, Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia, 2013, p. 324). The literature falls short in providing empirical information about these perceived effects, based on explicit measurements of the perceived benefits.

2.8. Participation/engagement and use of social media in rural areas and small towns – Is there something different?

Our empirical research investigates comparatively local rural communities from Georgia, US, and Romania. In light of this, we were interested in determining if there is any evidence in the literature to support that the size of the community, as well as rural or urban character, influences in some way political participation and the use of social media by local governments to communicate with their constituencies.

In the social media literature, there are prior studies that indicate that larger local governments are more likely to be at the forefront regarding the adoption of digital government innovations and to have more sophisticated websites (Ho, 2002; Moon, 2002). A study focused specifically on small and medium-sized local governments in the US (with a population between 25,000 and 250,000 residents) (Feeney, Welch and Haller, 2011) found that over half of them have adopted social networks. The survey administrators in this study also argued that they considered information technology as an important tool for civic engagement and transparency. More recent studies are needed because use of social media in government is highly dynamic. Understanding differences between rural and urban communities, or communities with different socio-demographic characteristics in general, in the area of public participation and use of social media by local governments, requires that we consider at least two aspects: digital divide and demand.

In the literature, there is a discussion about the concept of digital divide. This implies that political participation is not equally represented across different demographic groups. Certain people are more interested (Effing *et al*., 2011, p. 27). According to past studies, 'the politically active on the web are well-educated males with relatively high income and even relatively high age. But the younger they are, the more they post and participate' (Effing *et al*., 2011, p. 27; Hibberd, 2003; Wei and Yan, 2010). This issue of the digital divide is highly relevant from the perspective of differences between rural and urban communities (Donnermeyer and Hollifield, 2003). Sylvester and McGlynn (2010) found that where one lives plays a key role in levels of access to broadband technology and that individuals with better home Internet are more likely to contact government officials in various ways.

In addition to the digital divide, we also need to discuss the demand side of social media – this includes the motivation of users to interact with public agencies. The analysis

of social media users is currently limited but growing (Reddick and Turner, 2012). In the future, governments will have to define segments of users, or their individual features, and also delineate the specific network profile surrounding their organization, or a specific policy area they tackle in their activity (Criado, Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia, 2013, p. 324).

One final issue discussed in this section refers to existing studies on the level of political participation in rural communities. Turcotte (2005) examined the greater sociability of rural and small-town residents. In terms of social isolation, results from past studies are mixed. According to Putnam (2000), residents of large urban metropolitan areas are more likely to be socially isolated or to see friends less often than those living in rural communities. Other authors (Beggs, Haines and Hurlbert, 1996; Palisi, 1983; Fischer, 1982) found that, at least in the US, social isolation does not vary across the rural-urban gradient. However, differences seem to exist in terms of the types of social networks that individuals form. The social networks of individuals living in urban places include a lower proportion of kin and neighbors and a greater proportion of friends and acquaintances (Wilson, 1993; Beggs, Haines and Hurlbert, 1996). The opposite applies to residents of more rural areas. In light of our research, the most significant differences are those regarding political participation. Oliver (2000) found 'people in larger cities are much less likely to contact officials, attend community or organizational meetings, or vote in local elections. Lower civic participation is attributable partly to differences in social relations and psychological orientation between residents of larger and smaller places. People in big cities are less likely to be recruited for political activity by neighbors and are less interested in local affairs (p. 361)'.

3. Research design

For this research, we employed a qualitative research approach, which consisted primarily of semi-structured interviews with elected officials in the state of Georgia, US and in the North-Western region of Romania. In addition, we carried out an assessment of the websites and apps of the researched communities. The main goal for assessing these websites was to determine if the interviewees' perception of these tools matched the reality. We mainly looked for types of information displayed, whether they are up to date, how user friendly the websites are, if they allow only for unidimensional communication, etc. The researchers selected two rural counties in the state of Georgia, US with relatively similar characteristics. They are in non-metropolitan areas and predominantly rural. We knew from our previous work and from the extensive literature review which confirmed our hypothesis, that there are very few case studies of how communication via new media between local administrators and citizens can be designed and improved to contribute to the well-being of the community in such areas. Studies of the midterm and long-term impact of this process on healthy public debate and civic engagement are also missing. In Romania, we selected 14 rural communes outside metropolitan areas from 4 counties, located in the North-Western region of Romania. In Romania, counties are a lot bigger

in terms of population than in the US and have significantly fewer responsibilities which would determine county elected officials to interact and engage with their constituencies. The interviews in the two US counties from Georgia were carried out in the spring of 2019 (12 interviews with county commissioners) while the interviews in Romania were carried out in the summer of 2019 (6 interviews with local councilors and mayors) and in the spring/summer of 2023 (22 interviews with local councilors and mayors).

4. Main findings

4.1. Civic engagement

During the interviews, the county commissioners in the US as well as the local councilors and mayors in Romania were first asked to give their own definitions of civic engagement. Many of the responses in both jurisdictions included being present at community events and engaging in government and school activities. In the case of the Romanian councilors and mayors, many of them emphasized taking part in cultural activities organized throughout the year in their communities. 'Taking it upon oneself to understand what is happening in the community by being inquisitive' was a definition offered by a US commissioner. To achieve that, another commissioner stated, 'How connected are the people of the community with those that lead their government and operate within their government'. Some examples provided by another commissioner were coming to the meetings, reaching out on social media, calling, texting, or emailing to voice opinions or provide suggestions to help better the community. Volunteering for the community and becoming involved with various organizations, for example, the church, was another definition of good civic engagement. Several local councilors from the Romanian communes mentioned that helping disadvantaged groups and families, especially those in poverty or those belonging to ethnic minorities such as Rroma, counts as civic engagement. When asked how to measure civic engagement, most of the interviewees in both locations described counting the number of people coming to public meetings or who send texts, make phone calls, or send emails to them directly.

After defining civic engagement in their own terms, the interviewees were given three categories of civic engagement to best define their community: intense civic engagement, where local government and many citizens constantly communicate about issues, exchange information, and participate; moderate civic engagement, where citizens and local government communicate about some specific issues and citizens express their opinions; and low civic engagement, where few citizens, and only when there are issues that directly relate to them, communicate with the local government. All the elected officials in both jurisdictions stated that the level of civic engagement in their county is low or moderate. Some interviewees believe that a smaller community makes it easier for everyone to be involved in local issues, while others believe that many constituents in their small towns and rural communes do not care enough to get involved. Several Romanian mayors argued that people tend to get involved only when things are going wrong, and the community is not headed

in the direction they desire. However, they all agreed that increasing civic engagement and communication with constituents would contribute to better local government.

4.2. Communication with constituents

Most of the US commissioners spend around 50-60 percent of their weekly hours as commissioners communicating with constituents, while a new commissioner said he only spends about 15 percent but expects the number to grow quickly. The average time spent on commissioner duties is 9 hours per week on top of full-time jobs. The commissioners each have preferred methods of communication. The level of comfort with technology ranges from using social media as a tool to strictly talking with constituents in person. The situation is rather similar in Romania, with most local councilors claiming to spend approximately half of their weekly hours communicating with citizens. The total number of weekly hours on top of full-time jobs in Romania ranges from 2 to 40 hours with an average of 10 hours per week. For Romania, a distinction needs to be made between mayors who hold this position as a full-time job in most cases and local councilors who have a situation like their US peers.

The most widely accepted forms of communication by the elected officials in both jurisdictions are talking on the phone or talking in person at constituents' houses, churches, homeowners' association meetings, civic club meetings, schools, and restaurants, and driving constituents to various sites. A couple of the US commissioners try to solely talk in person by meeting with people in their homes and leaving a note if they are not there. In Romania, some mayors and local councilors have argued that older people or those coming from disadvantaged backgrounds cannot be reached via phone or other form of communication that involves technology. In these cases, direct contact most likely in church or at the village supermarket represents the preferred manner for interaction.

Most of the US commissioners try not to use social media to communicate with citizens because they believe it leads to negativity or false information. This was not mentioned by their Romanian counterparts. A couple of commissioners have adapted to new media including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and personal websites. These commissioners would be willing to share information about meetings or other concerns over Facebook and Twitter. Some understand that younger generations expect newer forms of communication, but they are hesitant to adapt. Most agree that the county website is a good way to provide information, while some do not know if websites are good tools for receiving feedback. In the Romanian communes, some elected officials use their personal Facebook accounts to communicate with their constituencies. They admit that in this way sometimes personal communication gets mixed with the institutional one. Mayors have more communication channels at their disposal and state that the official Facebook pages of the communities are used together with the website. Many of the mayors argued that they were aware that websites provided the needed information but not in the most user-friendly way. The predominant argument for not using technology more often is that most of their constituencies are rather old and/or come from poor and uneducated backgrounds which are not conducive to the use of technology.

The US commissioners do not use email as often as talking on the phone. Some consider themselves as being bad at using email and do not check it often. However, they all have their emails publicly available. One commissioner believes that sending mass emails would create negative side effects and would prefer to wait for people to ask questions first rather than provide information. Most commissioners would be willing to use mass emails as a tool if it were more easily accessible. Only one of the commissioners has a database intentionally created to store phone numbers and email addresses. Other commissioners have contacts stored but have not compiled them into a database. In the Romanian communes, most local councilors and mayors have emails that are publicly available. However, these emails are not used consistently and daily. Mayors are more prone to checking them on a regular basis or they have admin personnel who do this for them. They claim however that they prefer to be contacted via phone. In three communities, the mayors have databases with phone numbers of their constituencies but acknowledge that they used them to contact citizens only during election and/or pre-election periods.

Some US commissioners see value in the local news media and stated that older constituents still rely on newspapers for information. One believes that most people who vote still read the newspaper. However, none of the commissioners actively use the newspaper to convey information, minus a couple of advertisements during campaigns. Some believe that newspaper communication causes tremendous blowback. None of the commissioners use the local radio to share information, but some said they listened to it. All agreed that sending newsletters is too expensive and most appeared to think of newsletters as printed and mailed documents instead of digital items. However, using owned forms of communication like blogs does not spark interest among most of the commissioners, although some see the benefits of blogs. In the Romanian communes from the sample, there are currently no newspapers or local radio stations available. Some newspapers from the neighboring cities/towns would be willing to include information about public projects relevant to those communities but only very few elected officials declared they use this venue. When they do use it, this is mostly in cases when transparency regulations require that certain information be published in a local newspaper. Some mayors argued that they print and post significant amounts of public information at their headquarters but acknowledged that in most cases this is just to comply with transparency and FOIA requirements because their constituencies seldom inform themselves from this source.

The elected officials in both jurisdictions had diverse viewpoints on the effectiveness of town hall meetings. One US commissioner strives to host a town hall once a quarter and would rather do this than send out a mass email every week. Town hall meetings are viewed by other US commissioners as an ineffective form of engaging with constituents and they would rather use mass emails. In the Romanian communities, public meetings are viewed as the preferred venue for communicating with the citizens. Some mayors argue that it is becoming increasingly difficult to make people participate unless they are affected directly. Others have pointed out that newcomers in the rural communities are less likely to show up for these meetings.

Across the board, in both jurisdictions, communication with constituents is seen as a way to be transparent by sharing access to information and resources. All the interviewees are passionate about their communities and want to represent their constituents through communication. There is a slight difference between US and Romanian elected officials. The US ones all feel as though they do a good job of communicating with constituents who hold different viewpoints. However, they all agree that their constituents most likely do not feel satisfied with the level of communication between constituents and the local government. In Romania, the majority of the interviewees claim that they need to do a better job in the future but claim that they do not have a lot of incentives from the citizens as the demand for transparency is rather low.

4.3. Ideas to increase communication and civic engagement

Each interviewee in both jurisdictions provided ideas to increase communication and civic engagement among their respective constituents. One goal held by a couple of the US commissioners is to host more town hall meetings with set time for constituents to discuss concerns or ideas. However, these commissioners would prefer constituents to send their topics ahead of time to increase the effectiveness of the conversation, allowing time to research and get in touch with proper contacts. With commissioners focused on policy, budgets, and governance, accessing the professional staff from the county is essential to answer questions quickly during town halls. Another commissioner believes that town hall attendance would be more impactful if constituents were informed about the discussions, the history behind decisions, and the bullet points of actions that the commissioners want to take ahead of time in order to increase public participation. Then, if the constituents do not agree with the information presented, they can call, email, or come to the public meeting.

A couple of US commissioners raised the idea of instilling a greater sense of pride in the county through shared community experiences like annual homecoming parades, fixing old buildings to foster a new sense of community, building civic centers, developing new recreational spaces, or increasing economic development. This idea was shared also by a couple of Romanian mayors who mentioned the importance of place-based approaches such as creating local brands. Another US commissioner recommended encouraging younger people to involve themselves in local government to bring fresh ideas and modernize communication. This idea occurred in several interviews with Romanian local councilors, however, they expressed doubt that the youngsters in their communities would be interested in contributing to this. They argued that young people who are currently in their communities are either students (not living there on a permanent basis) or families who commute to neighboring cities and towns for jobs and do not have their roots in those communities. To increase the ease of communication, some US interviewees recommended mass emails or mass texts. Others want the county websites to be more usable and easier to understand for the citizens.

While some ideas are similar in both jurisdictions, several Romanian interviewees (mayors especially) pointed out that they would like the legal framework to be more flexible with respect to how local authorities fulfill their transparency obligations. The law

currently requires both urban and rural communities to use exactly the same tools for engaging with the citizens. Our interviewees felt that some of the strategies prescribed by law are not realistic in light of the characteristics of rural communities and their populations.

4.4. Feedback from constituents

The amount of constituent feedback varies among the US commissioners. Some wish their constituents would give more feedback, while others feel content with the amount of feedback they receive. However, they all agree that there is room for improvement and consider feedback a priority.

A couple of the commissioners own businesses within their districts and receive large amounts of feedback during their full-time jobs. Other forms of feedback come from in-person, email, phone calls, letters, through other staff members, or local newspapers in editorial sections. A small number of commissioners use social media to receive feedback, but they still consider emails and phone calls to be better forms of communication. The commissioners believe their constituents know how to give feedback. Also, the commissioners prefer to hear feedback from people who provide their names and addresses, instead of anonymous communication, to confirm they are constituents.

There is a rather significant difference between the US commissioners and their Romanian counterparts. Several of the interviewees claimed that though they welcome feedback, this is not so important to them especially when technical matters are concerned. Mayors especially perceive themselves as 'experts' in community development and claim that often citizens do not understand complex issues. This attitude is especially predominant among those who have been in office for more than two terms.

While feedback is a priority among US interviewees and always welcome among all subjects in both jurisdictions, some believe it creates challenges since small groups of people may become the 'loud' minority through newspaper articles and social media posts. Some of the commissioners stated that negative feedback is more likely to be voiced than positive feedback, which makes it difficult to form representative opinions. It can also become a draining task since constituents might not voice their opinions until after a decision has been made.

4.5. Websites as a tool

The situation is quite different in the two researched counties from the US. County 1 maintains its county website through posting meeting agendas, minutes, bid opportunities, public notices, upcoming events, and job postings. The website does not provide a forum for engagement with the citizens other than one directional communication from the government to the citizens. Several commissioners said that local government websites are ineffective at advancing online citizen participation. These commissioners mentioned that the website is not effective as is, describing it as 'antiquated', 'embarrassing', and 'dated' due to 13-year-old information and an unorganized structure. A lack of resources makes it difficult to hire a full-time IT director to manage the website and its underlying infrastructure. Some still believe the website is a great tool since everyone has access to it, even on

their phones. One commissioner directs people to the website first if they have questions and many view it as a preferred way to be transparent and open by posting agendas, topics, and discussions. Another is unsure if websites are a method of engagement for constituents. The names, phone numbers, and emails of the commissioners and staff are listed on the website.

Commissioners in county 2 think the county website contains relevant information, has easy access to different county divisions, and is user-friendly. This county has a full-time public information officer (PIO) and commissioners can request new information be added to the website through the PIO. The recent PIO hire was deemed necessary by the commissioners since they saw new generations of constituents wanting to communicate differently. The commissioners also invested in a new website platform recently. Monthly board meeting updates are on the website, but one commissioner believes these updates are too infrequent. Many agree that the website helps constituents feel more engaged since they have greater transparency for viewing meeting agendas and documents in advance. A couple of the commissioners have their own personal websites created for campaigns but they admit they do not actively monitor or update their sites after they are elected. One commissioner has a business website that allows constituents to submit feedback.

The Romanian sample includes more communities, but they all share the same feature when it comes to their websites—they include one directional communication from the government to the citizens. This feature does not seem to be connected to how old or new is the website. At least four websites have been redone/updated in the last two years, but they still do not provide two-way communication. Mayors tend to perceive websites as useful with respect to communicating all the information required by various laws. Local councilors are more critical of the existing websites and usually describe them with the same words as their American counterparts—'antiquated', 'embarrassing', and 'dated'. What they would want to see are more user-friendly formats that provide citizens with the needed info easily. Most communities have a person who is responsible with the website, but only in two communities that person is an IT and/or communication expert. In most cases, an employee from the city hall will take care of the website, among other things. The most problematic thing appears to be according to the interviewees the outdated information.

4.6. Social media as a tool

A common belief and experience among the US commissioners is negative rants or false information that worsens dialogue, and anonymity that hinders transparency. This is especially felt on Facebook and Twitter. Many commissioners also believe that the minority opinion can be blasted the most, causing a 'snowball effect'. This reflects the digital divide theory that states that opinions are not being equally represented across demographic groups since some people use social media more than others. Elected officials from Romania emphasize that they created Facebook accounts and pursue this type of communication only in response to demand from younger and more sophisticated/educated constituencies. One mayor explained that in his community Facebook became a

channel of communication once more young families and business owners moved into the community.

Most of the interviewees in both jurisdictions have personal Facebook accounts as well as their own commissioner Facebook accounts (in the US), which were created first for election campaigns. Romanian local councilors only have personal Facebook accounts while the mayors/city hall have institutional ones. However, most in both jurisdictions do not actively use Facebook currently to disseminate information. The interviewees engage in what the literature has defined as the representation strategy: being motivated by transparency and openness but not seeking engagement with the citizens through social media. They would rather use Facebook to guide people to resources and then continue the conversation over the phone, email, or in person. Others do not use Facebook in their daily routines and are nervous that constituents would become upset over slow responses from them. Some use Facebook to promote community events or post resources such as open job positions. These elected officials do not post opinions or political activities out of fear of scrutiny.

Some US commissioners monitor social media, including Facebook and Twitter, to research events and other departmental activity in the county. One of the participating counties has a Facebook page because they recognize that citizens do not use the local news or newspapers as a resource as often, but the commissioners are not heavily involved with the Facebook page. Another would be willing to use Twitter or Facebook in place of a newsletter. Adapting to social media to reach different generations is stated by one commissioner as important but he is not willing to adapt due to not being in office much longer.

Among the Romanian elected officials, there is no mention of other social media besides Facebook. Several declared that social media should be regarded as a secondary venue for communication, perhaps for urgent matters (contamination of water supply for example) or for announcing community events but not as the main venue.

4.7. Lack of resources

The interviewees in both jurisdictions vastly believe that more communication creates better local government, but also that the local government needs more resources to improve communication. The same perception seems to exist not just in the less developed and poor communities but rather in all of them. Especially the interviewed Romanian mayors perceive good quality communication as something expensive and some even argued that they are reluctant to spend more on communication as it would be perceived as a waste of resources. One US commissioner's experience is that spending more time on communication leaves less time for more important issues. Another commissioner decided against hiring a full-time public information officer because of the small county budget; it was viewed as a choice between hiring a full-time PIO or another county position he saw as more critical. One of the counties has many roads that need to be repaved, and the commissioners described spending a decent amount of time discussing this with constituents. Without enough money in the budget to repave the roads and address those concerns, investing in better communication is not perceived as a county priority.

Another sparse resource for elected officials in both jurisdictions is time. The US commissioners and the Romanian local councilors have full-time jobs outside of their average of 9-10 hours per week as commissioners/councilors. The two chairmen are the only commissioners who serve full-time. In the Romanian sample, the mayors also serve full-time. While some elected officials in both jurisdictions would appreciate more feedback, tools like mass emails raised concerns that they may cause too many responses. Greater citizen participation, such as increased email communication from citizens, can cause inefficiencies and delays, which would be difficult for small local governments with limited staff. Limited time also prevents the interviewees from creating personal websites or improving civic engagement through town hall meetings.

4.8. Information gathering

The participating elected officials in both jurisdictions gather information to make decisions from various sources. The US commissioners and the Romanian mayors talk to a variety of constituents depending on the issue and some even have lists of different constituents that they visit to receive information. Some of the US commissioners seek out advice and information from friends while others try to keep the two separate. In the Romanian communes, both mayors and local councilors mentioned that they sometimes discuss with colleagues/peers from the local branches of the political parties they belong to. These types of conversations are highly valued according to our interviewees.

In the US, another commonly used source is other county staff, other commissioners, other county chairmen, department heads, or full-time employees as they are believed to have informed opinions. Some of the commissioners actively seek out advice from the county attorney while others only do so when necessary. For more specialized information, some of the commissioners reach out to university or state specialists. In Romania, the elected officials, especially mayors claimed that for specialized advice they go to an organization called the Associations of Communes from Romania, an NGO established based on the cooperation of interested local communities. The Romanian elected officials do not see local universities as a source of expertise, they rather prefer to seek advice from private consultants.

The US commissioners also gather information from self-research. The state's Association of County Commissioners (ACCG), a nonprofit legislative organization, is a helpful resource to guide decision-making. Some commissioners listen to the local radio, read the local newspaper's opinion columns, or monitor social media for federal and local issues.

5. Conclusions

Our study examined how local governments and elected officials in rural settings from Georgia, the US and the North-Western Region of Romania engage with their constituencies through the use of traditional and digital media. Our findings, though based on a small sample, seem to suggest that public communication in rural settings is rather similar,

irrespective of the country in which they are located. The studied communities seem to share both barriers and opportunities in terms of how local governments can use communication to engage with their constituencies.

What our study has shown is that, as personal digital media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and the like) expands globally, local government officials still often lack the imagination, know-how, organizational flexibility, and entrepreneurial mindset to make proper use of it. Digital media tools are easy to use, but civil servants and government officials need education and training to develop dialogue and interaction skills that help them to more effectively utilize these tools for the benefit of their constituencies and for making their communities competitive economically and socially. This is especially true for rural and non-metropolitan communities, which—at the same time—are covered less by traditional media.

There is a dichotomy between the public officials' desires and the use of new communications technology. On the one hand, they recognize the need, importance, and desire for more citizen communications for civic engagement. On the other, they say they already spend a lot of time on phone, in-person, and text communications with citizens. They spend so much that they can't see how spending extra time and effort to explore ways to improve communication and make it more efficient would result in them spending less time on it on a weekly basis. A global solution for their government that could allow them to disseminate information quickly, efficiently, and cost-effectively is needed. The elected officials are open to that possibility if it does not increase their time commitments or provide only negative feedback loops for them.

Traditional media is no longer an exhaustive provider for those citizens who now frequently find news in their feeds on social media platforms. Even though the opportunities that digital media can generate are significant, government agencies, and local governments in particular, have been slower adopters of digital media for communication and engagement. The burden is not only on the local government side to increase engagement. The findings in the selected communities where we conducted our research showed that citizen involvement is often very limited, and usually occurred only when a decision had direct and immediate impact on some members of the community. Many public meetings had an audience of less than ten citizens, and the online feedback came most of the time from the same people, giving few constructive suggestions and mostly negative messages or even personal attacks on the commissioners. With the changing employment patterns and changing desire for community engagement, citizens may not see their current options for engagement with elected officials as the best match for them. Time for attending a public meeting in person finds itself in competition with cooking dinner, finishing homework, and commuting home from work. Having to search a county website for the information on an agenda item requires the citizen to monitor the site daily on a frequent basis for updates. Governments using digital media, on the other hand, may use their digital tools to push information on upcoming agenda items to larger groups of constituents as a means of educating and collecting information.

We identified many similarities in the communities that we examined from the two jurisdictions. Among them, a great variability in the local elected officials' ability and willingness to use digital media to communicate with their constituencies. While a few of the elected officials had a social media presence and frequently directed citizens to access the local authorities' websites to exchange information with the citizens, most elected officials still favored person-to-person emails, texts, or telephone calls for communication. Most of the interviewees stated that communication with citizens was an important part of their work. They also noted that citizen communication was time consuming and not always efficient. There was a general agreement among the elected officials in both jurisdictions that citizens' engagement in their communities was overall low and increased when an issue or a county policy had a direct impact on them and their families. Also, the local government elected officials feared that social media in their county was used by a relatively limited number of people, described as a vocal minority, to create a false sense of people's attitudes and objectives.

Our case study has several limitations. It has been conducted in only a limited number of local communities from two jurisdictions and for a limited period of time. It is focused almost entirely on the local elected officials' communication, their attitudes and behavior, and perceptions of citizen engagement. The study did not include a survey of citizens to assess their perception of the government-citizen communication and engagement. However, we believe that our model suggests that we can increase citizen engagement with the government by changing how government officials and the government communicate. By increasing the use of visual elements such as video to demonstrate policy or community issues government officials can create new mechanisms for communicating with citizens that allow for an item to be more than a written agenda item posted on a website. If elected officials, PIOs, and other public administrators increase their production of digital media including video postings, more citizens can engage with content and develop connections for future community engagement.

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