

The Social Networking for eGovernment: An initial assessment of Web 2.0 tools used by the Kosovo Central Government

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Abstract

The social media have introduced new methods for communication and are providing new opportunities for users to engage in community participation as powerful tools for citizen inclusion in government processes and trust towards eGovernment services. The question raised is to what extent the central government institutions (CGIs) understand the functions and roles of ICT and how they should be utilized for both strengthening the public administration institution they represent and for building relationship with stakeholders and citizens, which will allow the emergence of the second generation of e-participation. This paper analyses the status and provides an initial assessment of eGovernment implementation at central level in the context of usage of social media (SM). The insights emerging from the review of 28 CGIs show a gradually increased use of social networking tools and indicate several differences and similarities in the use of Web 2.0 between different CGIs. Implications and importance of findings are discussed.

1 Introduction

The continuously growing pressures and expectations from the citizens to the public administration, aiming for governance with a modern approach for an efficient and effective administration, are resulting with a changed understanding of governance and e-governance by government institutions. With the growth of internet use, the increased connected citizens are demanding that governments are more transparent and deliver services more rapidly and efficiently. The challenge remains for governments to appropriately accommodate these requests.

According to Bonsón et al. [Bon12], the main benefits that SM offer to public sector entities are the enhancement of transparency and citizen participation. SM refers to a set of online tools that are designed for and centered around social interaction [Ber12]. With their millions of users worldwide, the social media have introduced new methods for communication and are providing new opportunities for users to engage in community participation as powerful tools for citizen inclusion in government processes and trust towards eGovernment services. Their use is increasingly seen as a potential turning point with a developing change in the role of users and represents a crucial development in the use of ICT in eGovernment.

Despite growing discussions that SM technologies have the potential to enhance citizen engagement, there remains a weak body of evidence on its adoption and usage [Bon14]. The question is how much more needs to be done before the government institutions can fully utilize the capabilities provided through the new tools and applications. SM technologies are now regularly employed by the majority of internet users such as in the U.S., where among young users, the use of these tools is high, such as 87% of 18-29 year olds or 71% of all internet users are regularly using SM [Dug14].

Despite enormous value, there is also limited research at Kosovo level on the extent to which the CGIs are actually using SM to inform and engage publics. Based on the lack of measurement of online interactions between government and citizens, this paper aims to provide an insight to the Kosovo government usage of the main SM sites and to provide an overview of key benefits that governments can achieve from utilizing the potential of social media and enhancing the on-line presence on SM networks for effective communication between the CGIs and citizens and promotion of participatory decision making.

2 Background

The e-participation and citizen engagement is encouraged by the sophistication stage six of digital

governance and citizen inclusion [Bud12]. Through the involvement of the public the governments ensure that citizens have a direct voice in public decisions. The political willingness, an adequate technological infrastructure and an overall client oriented development strategy remain the most critical factors for implementation of e-governance projects [Rex12]. For identifying the requirements and addressing the problems of citizens as well as for designing new public policies and services, a proper involvement of citizens throughout the decision making process is required. Many governments are increasing their efforts for enabling an increased participation of citizens in policy design and implementation decision making process for getting new ideas and feedback, which would provide a better understanding and recognition of needs. However, we continuously witness cases where the agencies or carriers of public institutions choose to exclude or minimize to its formal aspect the citizens participation, claiming among others citizen participation is expensive and time consuming.

The 2013 survey on the state of use and penetration of internet in Kosovo [Faz13] has shown that internet users constitute 76% of total Kosovo population with age above 10 years, while two-thirds of them regularly use SM platforms. This study also showed that 73%, 7% and 43% of internet users regularly use the social and media-sharing network services of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube respectively.

3 Social media in public administration

The web 2.0 technologies refer to a collection of SM through which individuals are actively participating in creating, organizing, editing, combining, sharing, commenting are rating web content as well as forming a social media through interacting and linking to each other. Using SM for political discussion may enhance the relationship between citizens and their governments and provide a platform for the process by which public concerns, needs and values are incorporated into governmental and corporate decision making [Tam07].

It is evident that the public participation through electronic media may considerably benefit from the increased usage of internet by citizens and other stakeholders. The social media can be directly used by the government to provide the means for the empowerment of citizens to participate actively in the decision-making process of government administration, which would actively engage the citizens, it would generate the acceptance and ownership of the

governmental decisions and their results and would build trust among citizens and government administration. For example the SM channels could be used for grassroots mobilization and exchange of ideas and information, by providing the information directly to the citizens. This will decrease the further disengagement of citizens while it would offer the possibility for encouraging more active participation in debate and decision-making.

One of the greatest challenges for governments in using the possibilities of SM is the change of behavior of government structures and government officials. The government needs to understand the benefits of SM and to enable its officials the use of SM in their daily work. The governmental officials need to be prepared and trained in working in this environment, as there is a big risk for the government in not being involved in the use of the benefits of SM respectively in losing the opportunities for real engagement, innovation, change and transparency.

While one group of researchers argue that media applications or other online tools are radically transforming the practices of government around the globe, the other group argues that, while social media does substantially expand the possible modes and methods of gov-citizen interactions, high levels of social media activity on the part of governments have, as of yet, resulted in minimal effects on the outcomes of public service [Hon12]. A study conducted by Bonson et al. found that many governments have realized the opportunities that SM represent and by making their news available through SM, they can considerably increase their audience reach at very low cost [Bon12]. The government public administrators are engaging SM similar to their active use of e-government and e-democracy platforms [Bry11]. The study conducted by Graham and Avery of the use of SM by governments and their perceptions of SM use by their citizens, which involved government officials across the United States, showed that the SM are relatively underutilized, with about a 70% overall usage rate with Facebook and Twitter as most commonly used SM, while the perceptions of general officials whether or not the citizens expected them to use SM did not predict use [Gra13].

It is assumed that the most used SM tools by the public administration are those with more utilization in the society. In 2014 Facebook had over 1 billion active users worldwide, which is the equivalent of around 15% of the world's population [Mar13]. Twitter's more than 288 million active users emit more than half a

billion Twitter messages (“tweets”) per day by December 2014 [Twi14b]. In 2012 there were 700 department agencies and initiatives of the US government with 3,000 Facebook pages, 1,000 Twitter accounts and 700 YouTube channels [Mer13b]. In comparison, in 2011 there were 698 U.S. department agencies and initiatives with 2956 Facebook pages, 1016 Twitter accounts and 695 YouTube channels to promote their online content to their citizens [Mer12]. The expected achievements to be accomplished with the use of SM include openness, transparency, citizen participation, policy effectiveness, cost savings, good governance and public employee and citizen satisfaction [Cri13], [Bai10], [Hrd10]. The third dimension relates to the main features, theories framing the usage of social media in government and methods applied to its investigation.

4 Research method

For analyzing the usage of social media applications in local government context, it must first be examined whether and which communication platforms are used by governments, whether functional government accounts exist on the web, to what extent are they used, particularly if compared to personal campaign accounts of government key officials, and whether they reach a large audience. For this reason this research is focused explicitly on SM platforms, which are examined in light of the research questions formulated as follows: (1) "Which are the main SM platforms that are used by CGIs?" (2) "Do governments frequently publish SM contents and is there a development trend?" (3) "To what extent do the SM users show their interest for the government accounts on SM platforms?" and (4) "To what extent do the key officials of CGIs use the SM for personal campaign purposes compared to its official use?".

This study is based on the inductive and explorative research approach, aiming at identifying important factors that may help understanding the challenges related to the usage of social media for e-government project implementation. A short literature review has been conducted to explore how such tools correspond to e-participation tools. The basis for research have been the CGIs in Kosovo. The web-based research has proven to be the most appropriate means to collect the inputs needed to benchmark and rate the eGovernment supply-side [Jae10]. In order to get the results related to the use of social networks, it was first determined whether the Web 2.0 tools were used, followed then by

their frequency. For determining the development trends, the sites were observed in two different periods of time.

The data used for the purpose of this paper was gathered through an online research from websites and SM networks of main central governmental institutions, through logging on to the current SM sites of all CGIs and conducted a detailed analysis of utilization their utilization. The population in this study comprised 28 CGIs, representing all ministries and selected central agencies. The sites selected are based on the number of internet users [Int13], herewith this explorative research focuses at the organizational dynamics of the process while considering only the new ICTs that are available to individuals through normal market mechanisms [Mer13c] and most commonly used social network services, namely Facebook (social network services) and Twitter (micro-blogging service). The study has also included Youtube (video sharing services), as one of the three most commonly used social network service globally.

In the absence of a perfect measure, SM popularity of government accounts will be illustrated using proxy variables for the number of “followers” or “likes” on Twitter or Facebook, respectively. This measure points towards the interest of the wider population and organizations in the content provided by government institutions on SM. To enable for international comparisons, the absolute numbers will be also divided by the size of the respective population. In addition, a harmonized measure for “tweets”, respectively the diffusion of content by the CGIs is also illustrated. This measure indicates the degree of activity respectively the content emitted by government institutions.

Each platform was visited for determining whether there is a valid social networking account, which was validated, while taking note on the number of friends and followers of Facebook accounts, the number of tweets and followers of Twitter accounts and the number of uploads, subscribers and views of YouTube accounts. In case the website did not provide any link to the social media sites, the search engines of social media sites were used to determine if there were active SM accounts of respective institutions. For additional comparison, same data was gathered from personal SM accounts of actual key officials of respective public institutions. The information was collected during the months of April and October 2014.

5 Analysis and Results

In this section we will introduce the main finding and observations and use of SM tools and applications by Kosovo CGIs. Initially we will show the general trend of SM implementation in 2014 and will focus specifically on the evaluation of the use of Facebook and Twitter, the most adopted Web 2.0 applications. In addition, in view of the results of the survey [Faz13], which shows that 43% of internet users regularly use the media-sharing network services of YouTube, a supplementary review of YouTube usage is performed.

Table 1: Social Networking Usage Results - CGIs

ORG	Organization (M. - Ministry)	First/Second Assessment		
		FB	TW	YT
OPM	Office of Prime minister		Y/Y	Y/Y
PARLM	Parliament			
PRSD	President		Y/Y	
MPA	M. of Public Administration			
MLGA	M. of Local Government			
MEST	M. of Education, Science &			
MAFRD	M. of Agriculture	Y/Y	Y/Y	N/Y
MD	M. of Diaspora	N/Y		
MJ	M. of Justice	Y/Y	Y/Y	
MF	M. of Finance	Y/Y		
MED	M. for Economic Development	Y/Y	N/Y	
MEI	M. for European Integration	Y/Y	Y/Y	Y/Y
MKSF	M. for Kosovo Security Forces	Y/Y	Y/Y	
MCR	M. for Communities and			
MCYS	M. of Culture, Youth and Sports	Y/Y	Y/Y	Y/Y
MESP	M. of Environment & Spatial Pl.	Y/Y	Y/Y	
MLSW	M. of Labor and Social Welfare			
MI	M. of Infrastructure	Y/Y		
MIA	M. of Interior	Y/Y	N/Y	
MFA	M. of Foreign Affairs	Y/Y	Y/Y	Y/Y
MTI	M. of Trade and Industry	Y/Y	Y/Y	Y/Y
MH	M. of Health			
OG	Official Gazette	Y/Y		
ASK	Agency of Statistics	Y/Y	Y/Y	
AKP	Kosovo Property Agency			
KPA	Kosovo Privatization Agency			
KCA	Kosovo Cadastral Agency	N/Y		
TAK	Tax Administration of Kosovo	Y/Y		
	Total first/second assessment	15/17	11/13	5/6
	Total % first/second	54/61	39/46	18/21

It is being emphasized that many institutions did not use any of Web 2.0 tools, and if so, it was mainly the

Facebook followed to some extent by Twitter. The CGIs have not shown any diversity in the use of tools, and this research has reflected that the main interest in this type of communication is the provision of news to citizens. For the purposes of this research, the table outlined below shows the monitored governmental institution with an indication, if the specific institution is present or not on the three SM networks during the two observations.

The results shown in the table above outline that 61% of CGIs are present at Facebook SM network service, 46% are utilizing the services of the micro-blogging network Twitter while only 21% are present in the YouTube media-sharing network. The second observation conducted in October revealed that four additional institutions started using new SM networks. During the observation period, the number of institutions that have neither accounts with Facebook nor with Twitter decreased slightly from 29% to 25%.

5.1 Twitter Analysis

As mentioned above, only 13 out of 28 CGIs have a presence in Twitter. These figures are also similar with the presence on individual basis of key officials of the same institutions. The account that is followed by most other Twitter users is the Twitter account of the President, which is followed by 8,664 users, followed by the account of MFA, followed by 7,142 users. The active Twitter accounts of other 11 active CGIs are followed by an average of 255 users. The following table outlines the minimum, maximum, average and total amount for both cases, the CGIs and personal campaign accounts of key officials of same institutions:

Table 2: Followed parameters for Twitter accounts

Twitter account	Min	Max	Average	Total	Total as share of population
<i>CGI - official</i>					
Followed	11	8,664	1,432	18,616	1.00 %
Following	0	1,551	268	3,481	0.02 %
Tweets	49	4,217	621	8,074	
<i>CGI - personal campaign sites of key officials</i>					
Followed	19	17,300	4,677	56,129	3.03 %
Following	4	747	278	3,341	0.02 %
Tweets	0	5,460	1,015	12,175	

The interaction is the most important feature in the use of this service. The analysis is showing that the average tweets per account is 621. A remarkable observation is that the average tweets at personal campaign sites of key officials of these institutions is significantly above the average number of tweets made at the official institutional account, such as an average of 1,015 tweets at personal campaign sites of key officials at CGIs.

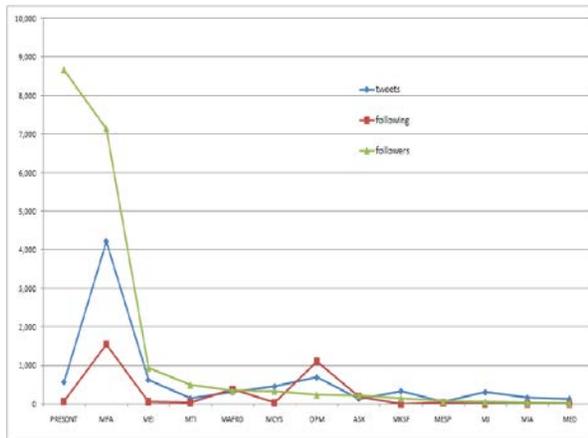


Figure 1: The number of tweets vs. number of followers for the 13 CGIs with active Twitter accounts

The two observations were used to determine the development trend of Twitter account usage. The figure 3 outlines the changes in users' follower over the six-months period. The figure 4 outlines the total tweets produced during the same period.

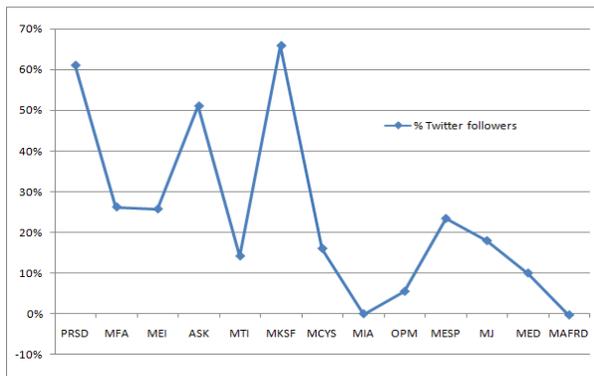


Figure 2: The changes in users' follower counts of CGIs with active Twitter accounts over a six-months period (in %)

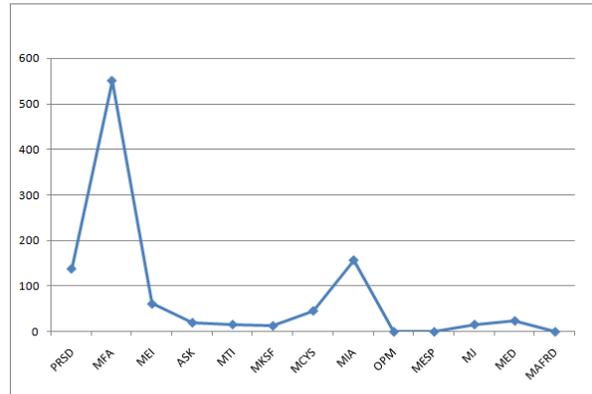


Figure 3: Number of tweets produced by CGIs with active Twitter accounts over a six-months period

The figures 3 and 4 show that there we cannot make a direct relation between the number of tweets and new followers. Except in the case if office of President and the MFA, it is difficult to prove the correlation between the user's tweet volume and the increase trend of follower count. The 13 institutions which have active Twitter accounts have produced in average 37 tweets each, compared to the average of 44 tweets each produced over the same period through their personal campaign user accounts. The figure 5 shows the count of tweets produced over the study period through personal campaign accounts.

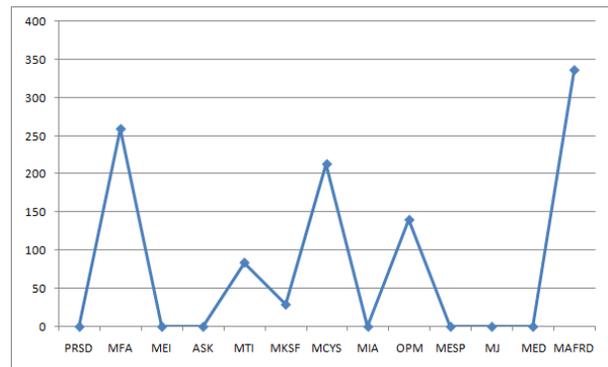


Figure 4: The total count of tweets produced by key officials of CGIs via their personal campaign accounts

5.2 Facebook Analysis

Facebook maintains two types of accounts, profile accounts that relate to personal accounts, and pages that are used to market a business, service group,

organization or politician. This study has analyzed the public Facebook pages set by CGIs. In addition, for comparison purposes, the public pages opened by key officials of same institutions were also analyzed. Each Facebook page has a network of users, who have shown interest in the content by pressing the 'Like' and/or 'Follow' button.

Table 3: Followed parameters for Facebook accounts

Facebook pages	Min	Max	Average	Total	Total as share of population
<i>CGI - official</i>					
Likes	0	25,548	3,292	92,163	4.98 %
<i>CGI - personal campaign site of key official</i>					
Likes	0	273,910	20,811	582,711	31.50 %

Facebook remains definitely the social networking with the largest presence at central level. Seventeen out of 28 CGIs or 61% have a presence in Facebook. The most notable account at the central level is that of the MKSF with 25,548 users. The table 3 is outlining the minimum, maximum, average and total number of 'likes' of CGIs as well as personal campaign accounts of key officials of same institutions.

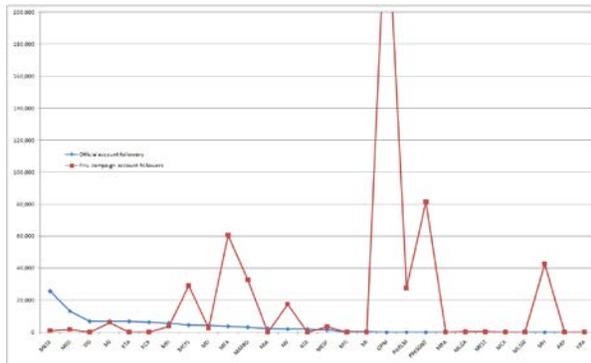


Figure 5: Number of 'likes' of official pages of Kosovo CGIs compared to personal pages of key officials of same institutions

The figure 3 outlines the number of 'likes' on official Facebook accounts of Kosovo institutions (shown in blue) compared to 'likes' on personal campaign pages of key officials of same institutions (shown in red). It is

shown that out of 17 active CGIs on Facebook, 8 key officials are considerably more active in their personal campaign accounts compared to their activity and number of followers of the official accounts of their institutions.

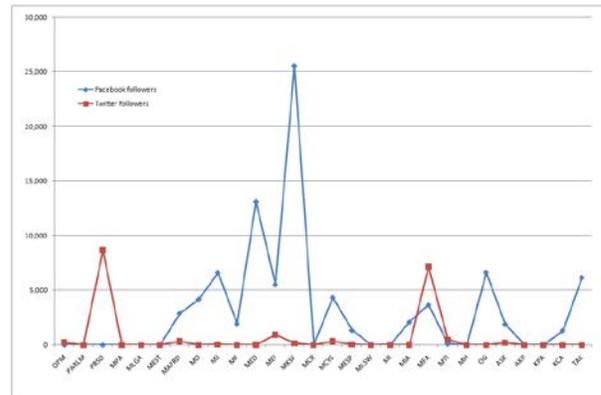


Figure 6: Graph showing a comparison between number of followers of public institutions on Facebook (blue line) and Twitter (red line)

The figure 4 shows a visual comparison of the total number of followers on official Facebook (shown in blue) and Twitter (shown in red) accounts of Kosovo CGIs. With the exception of the office of the President and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the majority of institutions has a considerable larger number of followers on Facebook compared to Twitter. This is a direct result of Facebook popularity since 73.3% of Internet users use the Facebook service meaning that 43.6% of Kosovo's total population uses the Facebook service.

5.3 Youtube Analysis

The presence of the CGIs at YouTube video sharing network remains low. Only six out of 28 CGIs or 21% have a presence in YouTube with a total of only 39 uploaded video CGIs. The channel with most uploaded videos at the central level is the Ministry of Culture with 13 uploads. The table 4 outlines the minimum, maximum, average and total number of uploaded videos of CGIs as well as of personal campaign accounts of key officials of same institutions.

Table 4: Number of uploaded videos on YouTube

YouTube video sharing network	Min	Max	Average	Total
<i>CGI - official</i>				
Videos	1	13	6	39
<i>CGI - personal campaign sites of key official</i>				
Videos	82	82	82	82

6 Discussion

The introduction of SM presents many opportunities for all types of organizations to communicate in interactive and immediate ways. Numerous studies have recognized how SM can add specific value to public institutions in promoting dialogic, transparent contact with their citizens [Gra13], [Azy12], [Bry11]. There are many governmental institutions that have enthusiastically jumped onto the SM cart without realizing that running a personal political campaign is different to running government, where the vision for technology must be still regulated through legislation, regulations and other administrative instructions, while the technology remains a process enabler and not a solution [Azy12]. It is evident that the SM has raised new issues for implementation for government officials.

Despite the initial perceptions that SM are heavily underutilized by CGIs, the figures from this analysis of usage of social media show converging views that the key officials are continuously demonstrating an increased understanding on the importance and utilization of the SM across their public functions and personal political campaigning. However, it has been noted that the clear priorities on the sides of public officials remain on utilizing the personal campaigning social networking sites in parallel with their official institutional sites, which to a certain extent were used more intensively than their public official accounts. Political leaders are more popular on SM than the institutions they represent. On Facebook the average CGI leader counts at least six times more "likes" on his personal campaign site than in the average institutional account for the government institution he or she represents. In comparison, the average popularity of government leaders from 98 countries compared to popularity of government institutions they represent is

at least four times higher [Twi14]. Political leaders are capable to gather measurable returns on use of SM that lead to more support or votes [Mic14]. In contrast, the CGIs are still focused on the options of using SM mainly for providing public information. There is also no dedicated strategy or plan for institutional use of SM, which would leverage SM for more advanced purposes and use its potential for building the confidence between the government and citizens.

The fact that 61% of all country government institutions are present on social media, is overall encouraging. Considering the current general usage figures of SM networks in Kosovo [Faz13] [Int13], showing an estimated internet penetration of 76% among the 1.85 million population, there is still a large potential for a rapid substantial strengthening of e-participation component of eGovernment, which would not only cover the public consultations processes, but moreover it could strengthen the cooperation G2C at central level as well as could significantly increase the institutional transparency towards citizens thus building on the missing trust of citizens towards governmental institutions. The data gathered so far shows that the government institutions have started to make efforts to increase the utilization of social media for interaction with citizens. On the other hand the results also show that two-fifth of public institutions is not using any SM for interaction with citizens, which requires further consideration.

The results shown in this study illustrate a general progress in the implementation of Web 2.0. Facebook remains the largest SM tool used by CGI to communicate with citizens, mainly through one way announcements, such as particular event information, which support the creation of more informed citizenry but does not necessarily build on the dialogue and the transparency. The posting of one way announcements is certainly easier and less engaging than more dialogic, participatory posts and forums. That level of investment is likely more feasible for officials with limited resources but is not adequate in utilizing SM to meet core democratic objectives [Gra13]. While the majority, specifically 61% of CGIs show active presence in Facebook, the number of CGIs that are present in Twitter of 46% is also encouraging, while the Youtube presence remains low with 21%. For comparison, the 2012 census in U.S. has shown that 700 federal departments, agencies and initiatives had a stock of around 3,000 Facebook pages, 1,000 Twitter accounts and 700 YouTube channels [Mer13b] which

include specific public service areas that are better recognized by the public.

This study has also shown that the application of SM by the government is not being understood as a tool for open, inclusive and participatory policy processes and as a tool for building the mutual trust between the government and citizens. The key officials of CGIs have begun to use the SM tool to share information, send personal messages and share their location, political activities, and personal messages and this study has confirmed that the importance of self-promotion and political campaigning of government officials is still dominating over the transparent, participative, and citizen-oriented provision of public services. The insights from this study show that the government is mainly using the SM channels to provide information in an one-way interaction mode, where the citizens simply view and or comment the government posts. As emphasized by Mergel, this means of interaction leaves out large portions of the possibilities SM applications provide that can help government understand deeper levels of engagement. The asking of citizens to submit their ideas and comments highlights the potential for bi-directional citizen participation and this content is actively pulled in through crowdsourcing [Mer13a]. This would demonstrate a higher level of engagement and willingness of citizens to constructively work with the content, to add their own ideas and create insights that go beyond the one-way postings by government officials themselves [Hal12]. In addition, whether or not citizens actually participate online, social media features may communicate the message that government is more responsive, open, and democratic by allowing citizens to express their views if they wish [Hib02], even if the participation is more likely to occur when individuals are dissatisfied.

The Web 2.0 tools offer many possibilities for transforming the relationship between citizens and public institutions, but their utilization requires a clear vision and a development of a digital implementation strategy.

7 Conclusion

This paper presented the usage of web 2.0 tools in Kosovo in the CGI context. The analysis was conducted in the following different axes: usage of SM platforms; availability of functional government SM accounts; extent of their use compared to personal campaign sites of government key officials; and

corresponding interest of audience. In general, the analysis has been reasonably comprehensive withstanding the fact that this research covered fully the SM accounts of CGIs. It was expected that the results will show that CGIs are taking advantage of internet ubiquity and are shifting their main focus from traditional media in favor of web 2.0 tools for communication, promotion and participation.

The study has confirmed the continuous growing interest of citizens for the government accounts on SM platforms and has confirmed a potential obstacle, that the importance of self-promotion and political campaigning of officials is still dominating over the transparent, participative, and citizen-oriented provision of public services. In specific terms, two third of CGIs have either institutional key officials that are much more active in their personal campaign accounts and have much more followers compared to the activity and number of followers of the official accounts of their institutions, or are not present in SM.

The insights emerging from this review may guide researchers in their continued monitoring of SM application by government institutions, and for supporting the ingress of public administration in SM as a new political instrument. Further research should be made in order to determine the most relevant factors that would improve the success of eGovernment in relation to the change of administrative processes as well as the establishment of appropriate communication channels through SM platforms, without replacing the existing communication forms within the administration, aiming for increased dialogue between citizens and the government, which would generate a sense of responsibility, transparency and assurance.

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