SOCIAL NETWORK USE IN ROMANIAN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: BIG CITIES, SMALL STEPS

UTILIZAREA REȚELELOR SOCIALE ÎN ADMINISTRAȚIA PUBLICĂ DIN ROMÂNIA. ORAȘE MARI, PAȘI MICI

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Abstract

Public institutions are more and more required to use the new communication paradigm brought by the so-called web 2.0, in which a big role is played by social networks. In this paper, we analyzed the Facebook accounts of the Romanian Counties Capital Cities, plus those of the 6 Bucharest Sectors. We have also tried to gauge the importance that these cities give to e-government, using as a proxy the number of people reserved in the organizational chart for the IT department. Our findings show that all of the cities taken into account use a Facebook account, but the new communication paradigm requested by this new media actor is not yet well understood. This could be also linked to the relatively low priority given to ICTs and to e-government development.

Keywords: social networks, e-government, Facebook, local government.

JEL CODES: D73, H1, O33, H7, Z18

Rezumat

Administrația publică este din ce în ce mai presată să înțeleagă și să utilizeze noua paradigmă de comunicare adusă de dezvoltarea așa-numitului web 2.0, în care o parte esențială e reprezentată de rețelele sociale.

În această lucrare, am analizat conturile de Facebook ale primăriilor reședințelor de județ din România, plus primăriile celor 6 sectoare ale capitalei și Primăria generală București. Am încercat de asemenea să evaluăm importanța pe care aceste orașe o acordă e-guvernării, folosind pentru asta numărul de oameni angajați in departamentele de IT din fiecare primărie.

Rezultatele ne arată că cele mai multe primării folosesc Facebook, dar noul stil de comunicare folosit de aceste rețele de socializare nu este încă în general înțeles corect. Acest lucru poate fi legat și de prioritatea scăzută acordată utilizării noilor tehnologii în toate primăriile analizate.

Cuvinte cheie: rețele sociale, e-guvernare, Facebook, administrație publică locală.

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1. INTRODUCTION

E-government services are increasingly seen, even in Romania, as part of the public institution's raison d'etre. More than half of Romanians use the internet on a regularly basis, and most of the new connections to the internet are made from mobile devices (smartphones and tablets). Being able to interact with public administration from anywhere and with ease is something that people (especially young people) expect. This is particularly evident in big cities, where over 70% of people use the internet.

This trend of demanding more and better services is intertwined with changes in media consumption patterns. More and more people use social media as one of the most important (if not the most important) source of information. Aside from that, social media sites offer something that the traditional media could not provide: easy two-way interaction and constant updating. The old media paradigm of one-to-many is blown away by hundreds of millions of users, connected through a bewilderingly complex network, many of them plugged-in round the clock.

Public administration institutions are expected to take part in this global discussion. The advantages are evident: increase unmediated contact with citizens, greater visibility for government projects, and quick response in case of emergencies. But seizing these benefits requires a paradigm shift in the way public institution communicate with the public.

In this paper, we analyzed the Facebook accounts of the Romanian Counties Capital Cities, plus those of the 6 Bucharest Sectors. We have also tried to gauge the importance that these cities give to e-government, using as a proxy the number of people reserved in the organizational chart for the IT department.

Our findings show that all of the cities taken into account use a Facebook account, but the new communication paradigm requested by this new media actor is not yet well understood. This could be also linked to the relatively low priority given to ICTs and to e-government development.

2. THE INTERNET AND THE CHANGE IN COMMUNICATION PATTERNS

At the time we write this article, more than 3.2 billion people are using the internet on a regular basis (Telecommunication Development Bureau, 2015). Of these, over 2 billion are using social media (Kemp, 2015). These numbers will surely be out of date by the time this article is published. Internet and social media user growth rate shows little signs of slowing, at least for now.

This applies to Romania, too. The number of Romanians using the internet grew to over 11 million, meaning 56.3% of the population. There are over 8 million Romanian users on Facebook (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2015).

These numbers are part of a story. It is a story of the gulf that is widening between the ways in which governments are used to communicate with the citizens and the way the increasingly connected citizens expect to get information from these institutions.

This paradigm is changing with great speed, especially after the advent of the so-called web 2.0. In the first decade and a half of internet life, the webpages created were used for little more than static display of information. The public institutions were relatively quick to colonize this new medium of information, partly because they wanted to be seen as modern and up-to-date, partly because the paradigm was little different than what they were used to. One-to-many communication was already part of the public institutions day-to-day operation.

Beginning around 2005, the internet began to rapidly change its offering. The way in which users were using the internet went through a paradigm shift. New sites, which were not based on simply displaying information, but leveraged collaboration and the creation of various types of social networks grew exponentially. These sites were very diverse in subject and purpose, but they relied on one common commodity: the users were the main providers of content (blogs, wikis, Flickr), goods (eBay), friends (Facebook), relevance (Google PageRank), feedback and reputation (eBay, TripAdvisor), storing capacity and file transfer (P2P) or connectivity and computing power (Wi-Fi sharing, fold-at-home) (Osimo, 2008). All these were reunited under the somewhat vaguely defined term of web 2.0. They changed the way we interact with the internet. If we take a look at the global top 30 most visited sites, they are either search engines or web 2.0 sites (social networks, wikis, cloud service providers, blogging platforms, or online shops).

The information mix that users put together to stay informed has changed rapidly over the last few years. More and more people get a lot or a majority of information online. Moreover, social networks, and especially Facebook and Twitter are becoming an important news source for their users (Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 2015) (in Romania Twitter is not that popular, so the go-to site remains Facebook).

3. PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION REACTION

With the user preferences changing, those that can adjust better to their habits stand to gain. The fight is for the user's attention, and as such, those that want to reach the public must adapt. Public administration

institutions are no exception. They are trying to use the new media instruments to reach their "clients": the citizens, and are doing this by using one of two methods: creating colaborative networks of their own or using the existing social sites.

The advantage of the first method is that the rules of the game can be decided by the public institution, specifically for the intended purpose. One example is the online consultations for the new Iceland Constitution (Landemore, 2015). The main disadvantage is that people are now very eager to be part of yet another social network, especially when it is organized and administrated by public institutions.

The other way in which public administration keeps in contact with the public is through the established social networks (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn). The main advantages are the number of users already involved (scale does matter in this cases) and the fact that these people already spend a lot on time, on average, on these sites and are used to comment, get involved in discussions and voice their opinion (Urs, 2015). The main problems are not linked to the number of people involved – in the majority of developed countries, more than 50% of people have Facebook accounts (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2015), not even technological, but cultural, administrative and organizational. The administrative authority of a public institution is not automatically transferred to an official Facebook account, but it must be build and maintained over time (McNutt, 2014).

Despite these obstacles, public administration institutions all over the world try to harness the power of social networks to their needs, and they do this for two main reasons: they have a duty to communicate with the public, and social networks are just a new tool (albeit with different modus operandi), and if they are not trying to set the agenda, others will do so, and they will be forced to play just a "fireman" role, always responding to crises as they appear and develop, having less influence on how a story evolves.

4. THE CASE OF ROMANIA

Romanian public institutions are just beginning to learn how to use these new tools in their interaction with the public. The rules of the game, which are different than those employed by traditional media (newspapers, press agencies, radio, and TV stations), are not well understood. We can tell this just by witnessing the arguments between institutions (for example, between the Presidency and the Prime Minister Office), which are conducted in the open, through their Facebook accounts. Another such improper use is using a social media account as the primary official communication channel. This not only excludes all those that are not part of that social network (and the majority of those that are, because the computer algorithms that govern what pieces of information a user receives are not transparent), but also

look unprofessional (if the message uses the colloquial style suited for social networks) or stiff and out of touch (if the style used is a more official-sounding one).

If we look at the categorization proposed by Mergel and Bretschneider, public administration institutions usually go through three stages in their implementation of social networks in their communication mix. In the first one, public institutions or even individual public servants experiment with the new technologies or networks, usually outside the approved communication policies. The second stage proves the need to create and agree upon rules and regulation for the use of these new communication tools, to put order into the often unruly experimentations. The third phase sees the creation of dedicated departments, the implementation of rules and clear procedures, and the fading of these communication technologies into the background noise of day-to-day operation (Mergel & Bretschneider, 2013).

According to Eurostat, 61.7% of Romanians used the internet In the last year, and 44% on Romanians use the internet to take part in social networks (of which over 41% have a Facebook account). If we look at the way the government takes advantage of the increasing number of people online, we see that only 11% of Romanians had any online interaction with public administration institutions (local or national) in the last 12 months. These lack of progress can also be linked to the fact that Romania takes one of the last places in the rankings on all 6 items quantified by the UE in e-government development (connectivity, human capital, internet use, integration of digital technology, digital public services, and R&D). Reaching out to these frequent internet users through social media could increase the use of existing online government services and spur the development of new ones.

5. METHODOLOGY

Despite some isolated efforts at educating public servants in this field, the general perception is that Romanian public administration institutions are still mostly struggling when it comes to use social media in an appropriate way. To test this perception, we have analyzed the Facebook accounts of the Romanian county seats, plus the Bucharest City Hall and the City Halls of the capital's 6 sectors. We also wanted to ascertain in a way the importance that the municipalities to the employment of ITC in the back-office. As a proxy for this, we measured the number of people employed by the ITC Department).

We chose Facebook because over 8.3 million Romanians use this social network (Facebrands.ro, 2015) and because the others social networks are not as widely used: LinkedIn, mainly used for professional networking is less suited to the bidirectional communication needed by public institutions; Twitter has no big following in Romania – around 370,000 open accounts, but only about a tenth are maintained.

The data were collected between January 1st 2014 and March 30th 2015 (454 days). We started in our analysis with 48 city halls, but in the end we gathered data only for 34 among them. The reasons for this wee manifold: some of them had no Facebook page (Brăila, Buftea, Buzău, Călărași, Focșani, Miercurea Ciuc, Satu Mare, and Vaslui), they had very few or no posts - very few meaning under 5 posts (Bistrița, Pitești, Sectorul 5, Slobozia, and Suceava), their page was created too late for our research (Zalău, in July 2015), or we could not find out the number of people in their IT Department (Drobeta Turnu Severin). We should also note that, from these 34 Facebook pages, 7 of them are not institutional, but fan pages of the mayors, used instead of a city hall page – Andrei Chiliman (Bucharest sector 1), Ciprian Prisăcaru (Târgoviște), Cristian Popescu Piedone (Sectorul 4), Emil Boc (Cluj-Napoca), Iulian Bădescu (Ploiești), Nicolae Robu (Timișoara), Robert Negoiță (Bucharest sector 3). The data were collected using the software FacePager, cleaned in Google Refine, and interpreted with the help of Microsoft Excel and Tableau Desktop.

The following categories of information were analyzed: the number of posts, the type of message, the content, number of likes, number of shares, number of comments, and total number of likes/fans of the page.

6. FINDINGS

We found that the way in which public administration institutions use their Facebook account varies widely, and the success of their interactions is also very different from one city hall to another. The next chart shows the number of posts in the 454 days for each account that had more than 100 posts in this interval (just over half of them):
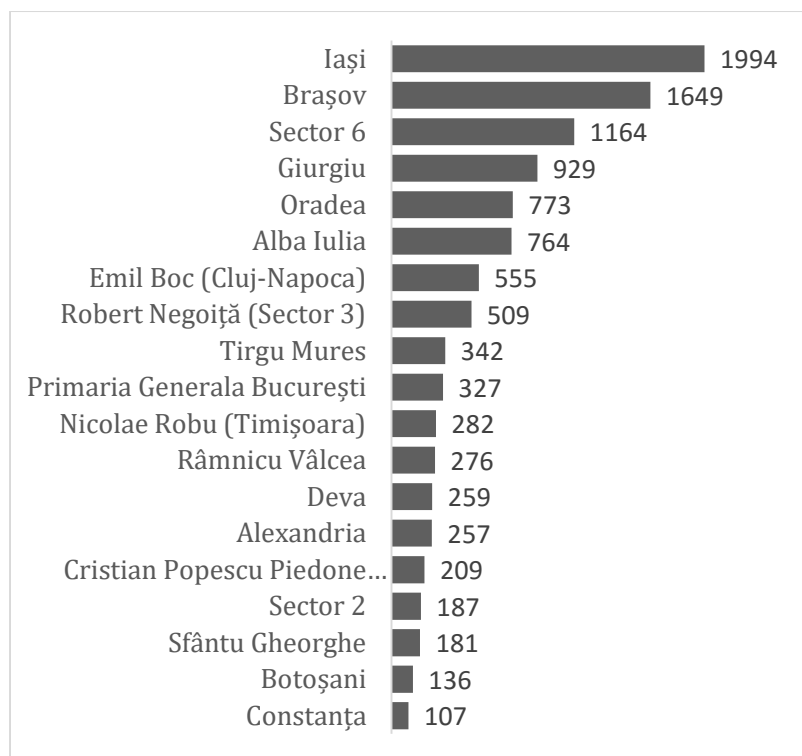
FIGURE 1 – NUMBER OF POSTS
Source: The Author

If we look at the number of likes/fans each page has, we can see that the first 4 places are all fan pages of the mayors, used as official accounts of the institutions. It seems that people on Facebook like to communicate not just with an organization, but with a person they can relate to.
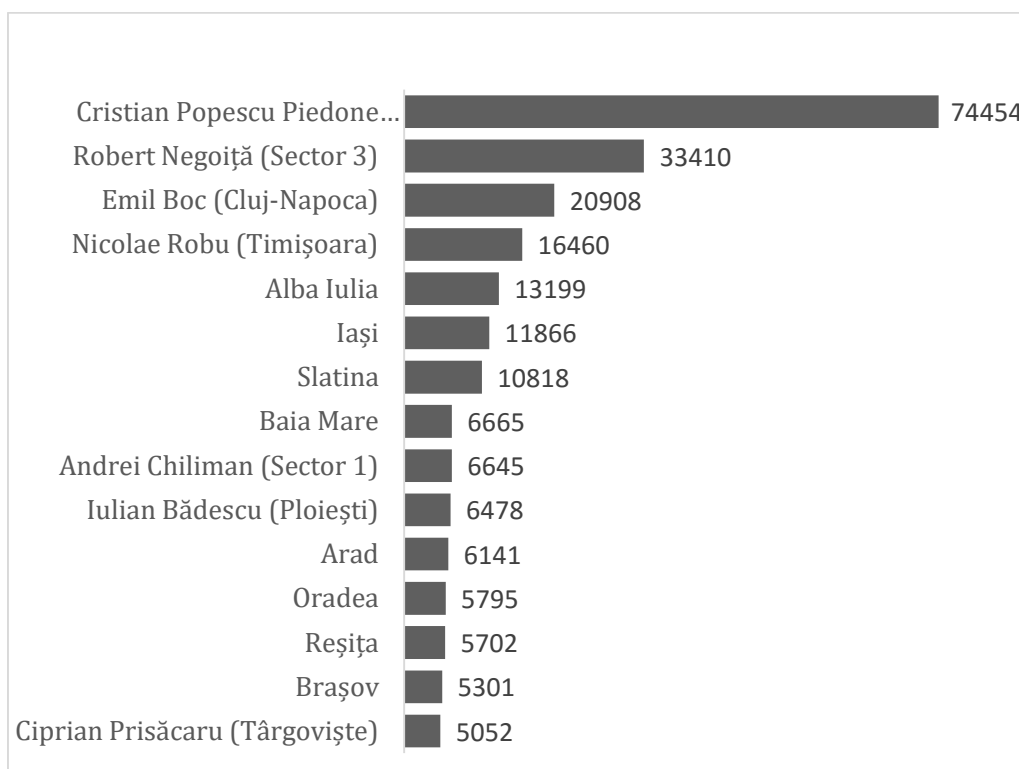
FIGURE 2 – NUMBER OF LIKES/FANS
Source: The Author

We wanted to see how successful their communication is, and, in social media, this is measured by the number of people involved in conversation, which act, in a way, as the messengers (they spread the message far and wide, to their network of friends and followers). If we look just at the number of such interactions per post (likes, comments, shares), we can see that Cristian Popescu Piedone had by far the biggest such number.

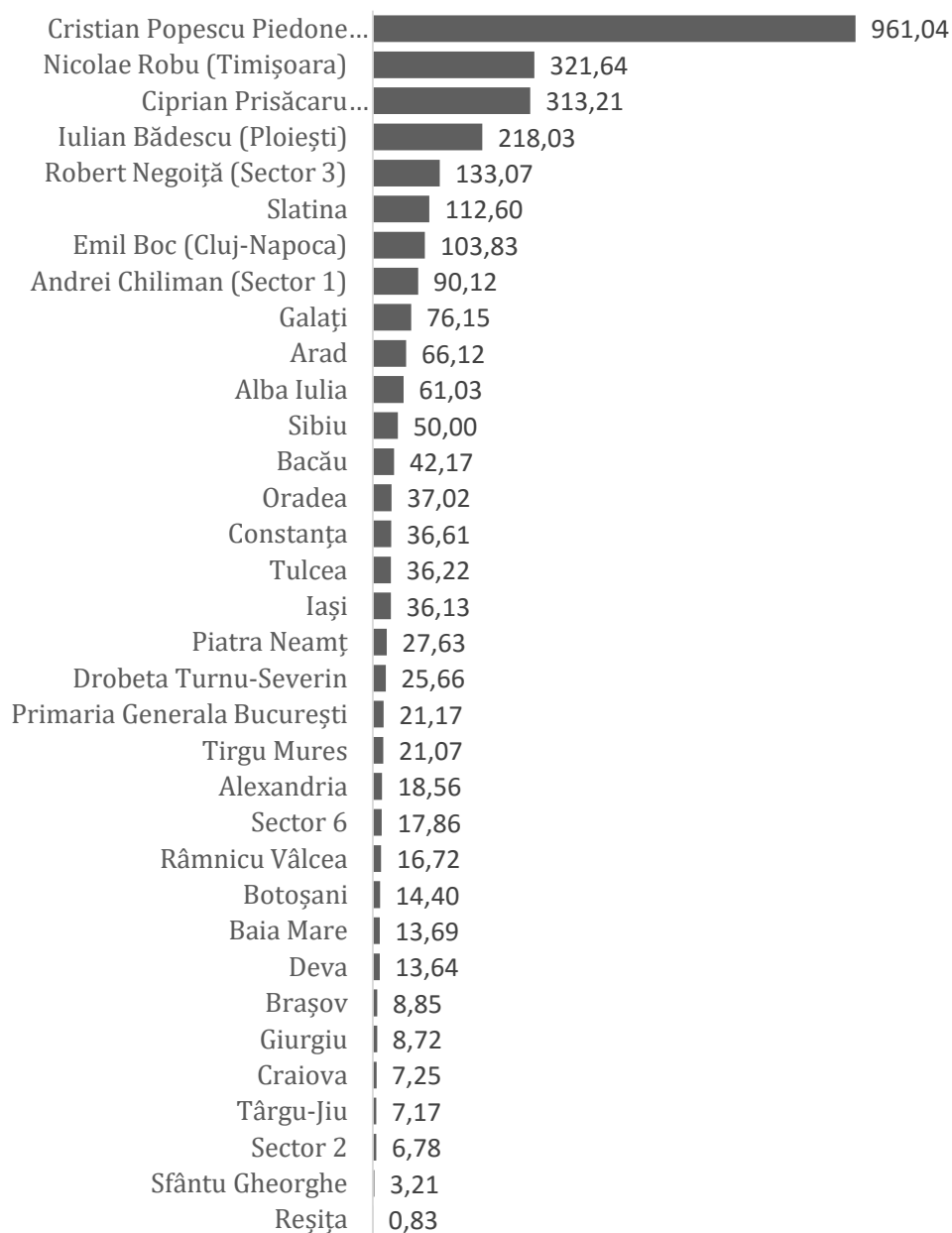|	
Cristian Popescu Piedone…	961,04
Nicolae Robu (Timişoara)	321,64
Ciprian Prisăcaru…	313,21
Iulian Bădescu (Ploieşti)	218,03
Robert Negoiţă (Sector 3)	133,07
Slatina	112,60
Emil Boc (Cluj-Napoca)	103,83
Andrei Chiliman (Sector 1)	90,12
Galaţi	76,15
Arad	66,12
Alba Iulia	61,03
Sibiu	50,00
Bacău	42,17
Oradea	37,02
Constanţa	36,61
Tulcea	36,22
Iaşi	36,13
Piatra Neamţ	27,63
Drobeta Turnu-Severin	25,66
Primaria Generala Bucureşti	21,17
Tirgu Mures	21,07
Alexandria	18,56
Sector 6	17,86
Râmnicu Vâlcea	16,72
Botoşani	14,40
Baia Mare	13,69
Deva	13,64
Braşov	8,85
Giurgiu	8,72
Craiova	7,25
Târgu-Jiu	7,17
Sector 2	6,78
Sfântu Gheorghe	3,21
Reşiţa	0,83

FIGURE 3 – INTERACTION RATE
Source: The Author

The instrument used by most researchers when studying the success of Facebook communication is the engagement rate. This is represented by the total number of interactions (Likes, Comments and Shares) per number of followers or fans. A score of 1 is generally considered a good result, one over 0.5 gets a

passing grade (Leander, 2015). We have eliminated from this ranking the pages that had a low number of posts (under 100).
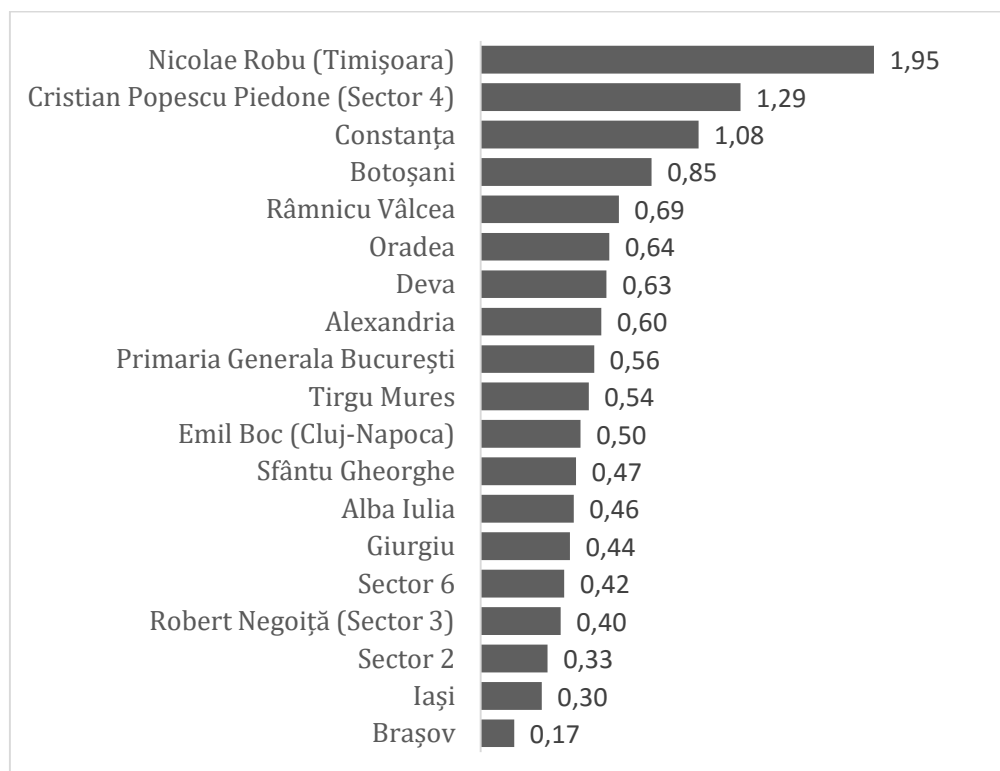

FIGURE 4 – ENGAGEMENT RATE
Source: The Author

It seems that only three pages pass the test for what is considered a good engagement rate.

There are a number of interesting numbers in our results (for example, Cristian Popescu Piedone had a very loyal following, even if he did not post that often – on average once every two days) or that Iași, despite posting on average more than 4 posts a day did not seems to find the know how to engage it's followers).

We wanted to find out how important ICTs are for these municipalities. As such, we scrutinized their organizational charts to find how many people their ICT department employs and what percentage they represent from the total number of personnel.
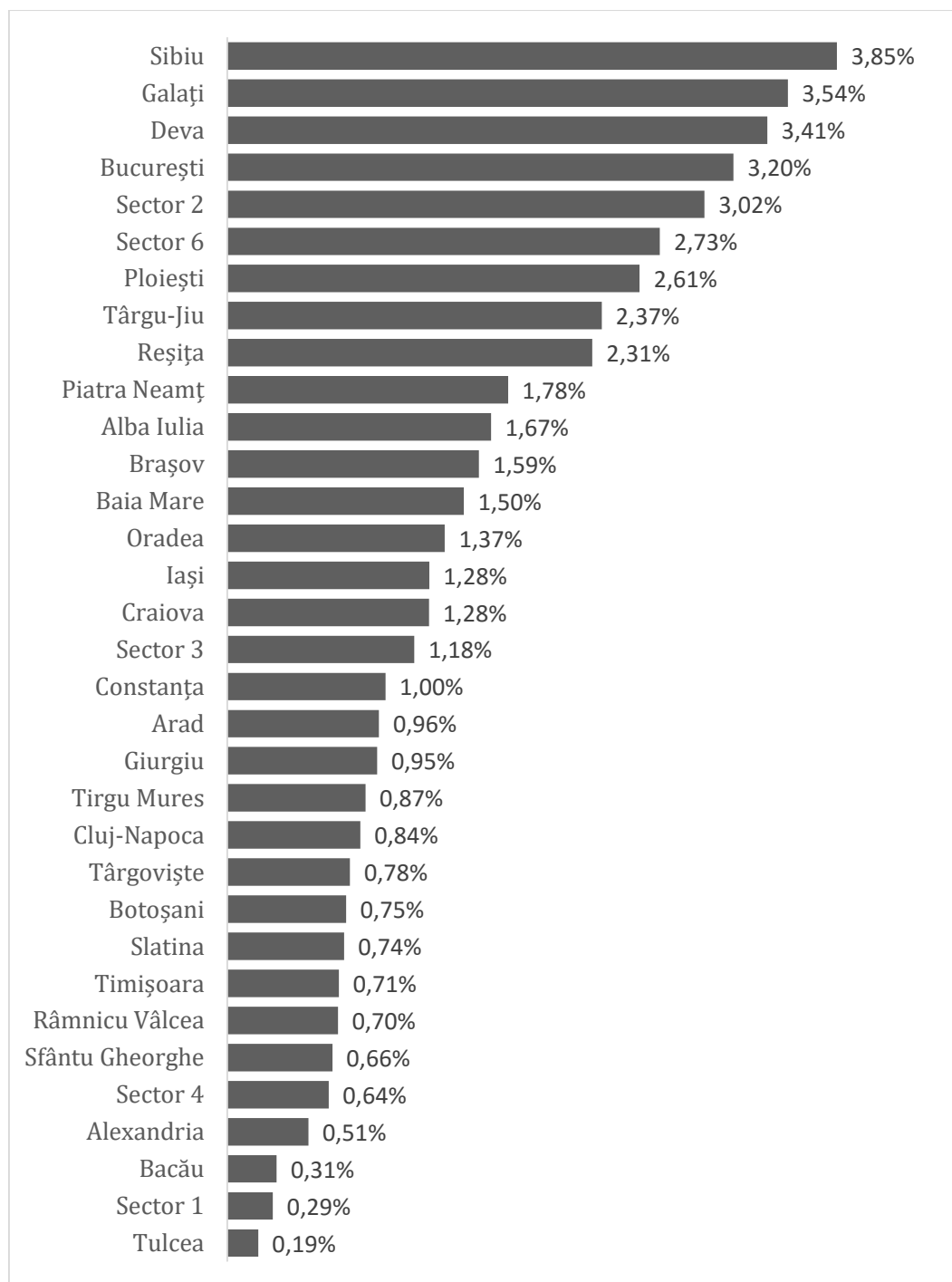
FIGURE 5 – EMPLOYEES IN ICT (%)
Source: The Author

The results varied from municipality to municipality, with the winner appearing to be Sibiu (the ICT department has, on paper, 17 staff). The problem is that, after talking with the head of this department,

we found out that only 9 of the 17 positions are occupied. The same situation can be encountered in other city halls (Cluj-Napoca has 8 people, on paper, but only 4 people are actually hired). This part of the dataset is thus flawed, but it helps in painting an even bleaker picture of the importance given to ICT in the Romanian city halls.

It seems to be no correlation between the percent of people in city halls employed by the ICT departments and the success of their Facebook presence, and the probable answer is that the Facebook account (or fan page) is usually maintained by the people in the communication department of the institution.
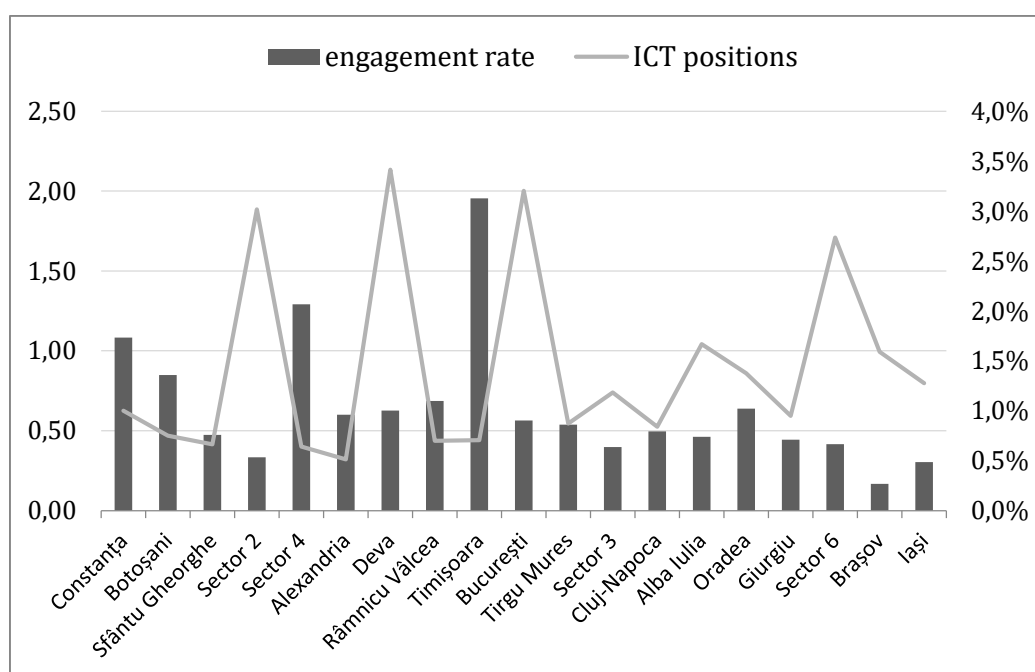

FIGURE 6 – COMPARISON BETWEEN ICT EMPLOYEES AND ENGAGEMENT RATE
Source: The Author

CONCLUSIONS

The main conclusion of this research is that the vast majority of the county seats city halls still have a lot to learn on how to take advantage of social networks to engage the citizens. The potential for real communication between public institutions and the citizens exists, but the interest for this varies a lot, depending on the city, but it is usually quite low.

If we look at the fact that the top 2 pages in the engagement ranking and the top 4 pages in interaction rate ranking are fan pages, we can come to a preliminary conclusion that Romanians like to be able to put a face on the public institution (in this case, the mayor being the face of the city hall).

Some pages were more effective than others in stoking dialogue and interactions. A semantical analysis could reveal more about the difference between the pages that were successful and those that were not. Our hypothesis (to be verified in another paper) is that official messages written in a more colloquial tone, from the citizen's perspective or with the point of view of the public taken into account, and sprinkled with a number of personal messages from the mayor is one path to creating an engaged community.

If we should place the use of Facebook in Romanian county seats official (or quasi-official) pages in the categorization offered by Mergel and Bretschneider, they would probably be at the beginning of the second stage: the public servants feel the need to have on official presence in social media, but the rules and regulation for this are not in place yet and the people in charge are not yet fully familiar with the advantages, disadvantages and idiosyncrasies of the new communication medium.

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