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E-Government and e-Participation: City Web Sites – the Case of Croatia

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Summary

Relying on the Kang and Gearhart study about the content-specific relationship between citizens' use of city web sites and civic engagement, this study examines the relationship between specific content categories on city Web sites and civic engagement in Croatia. Building upon Kang and Gearhart's theoretical arguments about motivational communication theories, web site functions, and civic engagement in a new technology context (e.g., Coleman, Lieber, Mendelson, 2008; Jeffres and Lin, 2006; Norris, 2003), this study examined the role of the city web sites in e-participation by surveying citizen users of city web sites. A web based volunteer survey was conducted in 33 Croatian cities, with more than 600 citizens participating. Furthermore, building on Norris's concept of democratic divide we have content analyzed the web sites of cities that participated in the online survey. The results of content analysis of the city web sites indicate that there is democratic divide (Norris, 2001) in Croatian local government. Secondly, the comparison of the findings obtained by the public opinion web based survey with the results of the content analysis study supports Scott's (2006) findings about city web sites' potential for citizens' civic engagement. Thirdly, the results support Kang and Gearhart's findings which exhibit a clear indication that city web sites can actively promote civic engagement among citizens. In other words, this study demonstrates that citizens are willing to engage online if the government provides them with an adequate platform.

Key words: e-participation, civic engagement, e-government, city web sites, direct democracy, democratic divide

Introduction

Due to the rapid rise of information and communication technologies (ICTs), governments are more and more willing to provide the public with online delivery of services and programs. The way citizens are using technology has changed. Governments have had to adopt new modes of behavior as well; they had to do what the business and civil sector had already been doing for a long time: bring services and programs online. Moreover, they were expected to use the potential of the internet to reinforce the public sphere and engage citizens. Today it is hard to imagine a government that did not bring at least some of the services and programs online, which does not have at least a web site. Bearing in mind that a web site is seen as a local portal for community services (Ho, 2002), a space for information services and interconnectivity with citizens (Musso, Weare, & Hale, 2000), a platform for citizens' engagement, it is argued that via these web sites, citizens often have a public commitment to, knowledge of, and interest in issues, places, and social networks that enable public decisions and actions (Bowles & Gintis, 2000; Jeffres & Lin, 2006). Furthermore, experts find that cities and towns are usually moving faster in e-government service delivery than their national counterparts. The explanation is that local governments are closer to their citizens in terms of services needed.

Kang and Gearhart building upon theoretical arguments of motivational communication theories, web site functions, and civic engagement in a new technology context (e.g., Coleman, Lieber, Mendelson, & Kurpius, 2008; Jeffres & Lin, 2006; Norris, 2003) in their study assessed the role of city web sites engendering civic engagement by surveying citizen users of city web sites. Their findings suggest that surveillance; practical services and direct democracy features function as important conditions for citizens' e-participation (Kang and Gearhart, 2010). They came to the conclusion that city web sites can improve e-participation. Furthermore, relying on the Schumpeterian framework, Norris finds that parliamentary web sites should serve two primary functions that reflect the liberal notion of parliament in representative democracy: the top down channel that stands for providing the public with information, and a bottom up channel of communication from the public to the elected members.

Building on these findings we want to examine is there a democratic divide in Croatia. Secondly we look at the relationship between specific content categories on city web sites and civic engagement in Croatia. Moreover, content analyzing the city web sites, we want to see what features does a specific city web site have and which of those features are most often used. While Kang and Gearhart were looking only at the citizens' dimension, in our study we will make a comparison of the findings obtained by the public opinion web based survey and the results of the web sites content analysis.

In the first chapter we bring the arguments of authors who see the internet as a medium for broader political participation. Moreover, we support the idea that on-line technologies can serve as platform for reconnecting citizens and the

government. Secondly we discuss the role of city web sites as mass communicators. Hereby we rely on Jeffres and Lin's (2006) theory that city web sites should include mass communication functions: surveillance, coordination of activities, socialization, and entertainment to fulfill the goals of civic engagement. After this theoretical part, in the second chapter we bring our research design, the last chapter deals with results and discussion. The conclusion summarizes the core findings and gives ideas for further research.

Theoretical part

Stephen Coleman noted that the democratic deficit is facing many governments and that two key questions arise from that: "How to make the political process more participatory; and how can public engagement in policies that affect everyday life become more deliberative?" (Coleman 2003). Hence, Coleman believes that the new ICTs could contribute to a renewed faith in the government bodies through the creation of a more transparent, interactive government engaged in wide dialogue with an interactive citizenry. Substantial literature speculates that the Internet could strengthen civic engagement and political activism, especially for many groups currently marginalized from mainstream politics (Norris, 2000). Norris summarizes: "...the Internet offers to reconnect people to the political process by helping people become more informed citizens, by helping representatives become more responsive to citizens, and by engaging more people in public policy debates (2000: 3)." In this context Norris talks about the democratic divide defining it as divisions between those able to use the internet for enhancing their political participation and influence (Norris, 2001). Norris argues that parliamentary web sites should function in a way to provide comprehensive information about their activities and interactive communications to encourage public feedback if they are to fulfill their democratic function (Norris, 2000).

Relying on the Schumpeterian framework, Norris finds that parliamentary web sites can provide the public with necessary information about legislative procedures and activities, allowing greater transparency and promoting the accountability of elected members to their constituents (2000: 6). Furthermore, parliamentary web sites can also provide additional 'bottom up' channels of communication for citizens seeking to contact elected representatives, via email, online discussion groups, straw polls or other feedback mechanisms like comments pages, which advocates of direct democracy regard as important mechanisms of public deliberation and participation (ibid).

Direct democracy theory posits that democracy works best when citizens are directly involved in policy debates, decisions, and actions (Barber, 1984; Coleman & Gotze, 2003). Authors who believe the internet is a new remedy for disengaged citizens, believe that web sites can serve as platform for engaging citizens in policy making (Hague & Loader, 1999). Norris (2003) and Scott (2006) suggest that possible indicators of direct democracy in city Web sites are all in-

dicators from representative theory and pluralist theory, online issue discussion forums, e-consultations, voluntary service opportunities, and virtual meetings. However, direct democracy also requires government policies and programs that reflect the collective knowledge and commitment of citizens (Norris, 2003). Hence, it is argued that successful civic engagement largely depends on effective public communication between a city and the citizens via various communicative means ranging from meetings to city web sites. Furthermore, Hale et al. (1999), stress that the web sites can be a relevant channel for citizens' civic involvement including citizen discussion on and participation in city improvement activities. Secondly, a city web site is an arena for e-democracy (Hague & Loader, 1999). In other words, city web sites can act as a civic mobilizer, encouraging citizens' involvement, and having an impact on city government improvement and city development (Musso et al., 2000). City web sites provide citizens with information about public and political affairs and elections, which can amplify citizens' interest in political behaviors (Kang and Gearhart, 2010).

As we can see, authors find that city web sites have the potential to provide citizens with a platform for civic engagement. However little was done to investigate the connection between specified city web site content and civic engagement. Yet, Kang and Gearhart, working in motivational communication theories framework, tried to answer this question. They bring an example of the uses and gratification theory, which explains why people use media overall (McQuail, 1985). Shah (1998) found that television viewing resulted in civic engagement depending on the programs the audience watched. Even though overall television viewing reduced civic engagement, viewing of social drama facilitated civic engagement. However, viewing science fiction did not predict civic engagement. Relying on these findings, Kang and Gearhart found in their study specific indicators contributing to civic engagement: information about city services, coordination of activities and direct democracy features rather than surveillance functions are likely to induce civic involvement, secondly, interactive services including access to city meeting agendas, administrative services, online forums, and prompt feedback lead to citizens' active participation in political development (2010: 458). To sum up, the authors find that "city web sites offering quality of life, cultural aspects, and citizen input opportunities have potential to encourage citizens' participation in city development (ibid)."

City web sites and civic engagement are discussed also in the role of e-government as a mass communicator. Jeffres and Lin argue that city web sites should include mass communication functions: surveillance, coordination of activities, socialization, and entertainment to fulfill the goals of civic engagement, wherein they can play the roles of surveillance by providing information about city service programs, budget, or annual reports, by offering connection with city government they provide coordination function, providing news about the city, arts and cultures, recreation and entertainment, information about civic organizations and tourism, neighborhood, health, and links to local media they

can fulfill socialization and entertainment functions. Performing these functions, city web sites play many of the same functions as mass media web sites, what makes them mass communicators. Jeffres and Lin (2006) address that a city web site performing mass communication functions, where citizens can find virtual networks for information and participation can provide citizens with the arena for civic engagement.

Research design

As we have discussed, little is known about the relationships between citizens' city web site use and civic engagement. Therefore, the current study posits the following two research questions.

RQ1: Is there democratic divide in Croatian local government?

RQ2: Which content categories of city web sites are more often used by citizens?

To answer our first question we conducted a content analysis of available city web sites. We analyzed 31 city web sites for 26 items. Since there are 110 cities in Croatia in total; the number of 31 cities participating in the survey was relevant. We included in the analysis all the cities members of the City Association that also had publicized a link on our web survey. Among the examined 26 items, in the literature, six of them are defined as features for e-democracy. According to Kang and Gearhart, these are: discussion forums, online voting, application forms about volunteering, online consultation, online opportunities for citizen involvement in policy making, online opportunities for citizens' virtual meetings, feedback link for contacting mayor online and city council reps. Additionally, in this group of variables we have included and link on official profiles on social networks, because it is argued that social networks can increase e-engagement, especially among younger population. An inter coder reliability test was conducted on 10 web sites and reached high score at 0.99

Secondly we conducted a voluntary web based survey. Participants in our study were citizen users of city web sites in Croatia. The data was collected by conducting a web-based survey publicized on more than 30 city web sites which are members of the City Association. Web masters of the city web sites were asked to post the survey link to their web sites, and were sent two follow-up e-mails to remind them of the survey link. The survey was conducted from June 1 to July 1, 2011. A total of 33 cities out of 105 in the City Association posted the link, a 34% participation rate. Citizen respondents were asked to provide their city name in the survey, and the results reported citizens from a total of 33 different cities participated in the survey. The number of citizen participation varied from 1 at minimum, to 226 at maximum per city. Once participants agreed to participate in the survey, they could continue the survey. The online survey questionnaire consisted of questions representing three democratic theories (representative, pluralist, and direct democracy) and the mass communication functions (surveillance, coordination, entertainment, and socialization) in a Web

technology context, civic engagement, media use, demographics, and political orientation (Kang and Gearhart, 2010). The survey was programmed to allow only one completion per respondent. The total number of participants during the 1 month period was 681. After eliminating respondent dropouts, final sample consisted of 541 participants. Bagozzi, Dholakia, and Pearo (2007) contend that the nature and extent of response bias for this kind of web survey are unknown. Nonetheless, as the number of citizen participants is large and they represent many cities, this convenience sample was deemed relevant for answering the research questions posed. The result support Johnson et al.'s findings that web users for public affairs or government information are likely to be males, older than 30 and highly educated, politically left oriented and interested in politics (Johnson et al., 2008).

Considering the services and information available in city web sites, this study employed measures of civic involvement and political behaviors to measure civic engagement (Kim, 2007; Moy et al., 2005). Civic involvement items included a total of five items, and political behaviors measured responses to five questions asking their participation in political activities in their community. Citizens' use of city web sites was gleaned from previous studies about city web site content. Relying on Kang and Gearhart's research, representative features such as a connection to the mayor, pluralist features such as links to local civic organizations, direct democracy items such as online forums, and mass communication features such as surveillance, entertainment information, and other overlapped features with democratic theory were used to measure city web site content categories for civic engagement. Citizens were asked, how often, in the past 12 months, they used a variety of content in their city web site representing democratic theory and mass communication functions.

Control Variables. For control purposes, the survey measured demographics, political orientation, and media use variables. Demographic variables included gender, age, education and income. Citizen respondents were also asked about their general interest in politics and political ideology. Media use was evaluated as the degree of each medium use (television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and the Web).

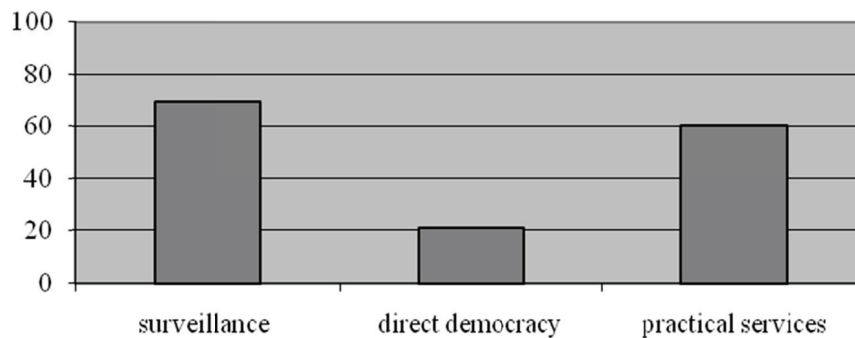
Results and discussion

Our first RQ asked if there is a democratic divide in Croatian local government. Content analyzing web sites of 33 Croatian cities we found that there is democratic divide in Croatia. Accordingly, among 26 examined features, we coded 7 of them for direct democracy; online consultations, virtual meetings, discussion forums, feedback links, social networks, online voting, and online opportunities for civic involvement in policy making. Findings reveal that 13 cities have only one of these categories, and in most cases that category is „feedback link to contact the Mayor or public officials“, while rest of the cities have two or three categories, excluding the city of Rijeka, which has five categories and the city

of Split which does not have any. As Graph 1 demonstrates, the direct democracy function is not fulfilled and the potential of the internet as platform for engaging citizens online in policy making remains unfilled. However, the analysis reveals that the city of Rijeka is a definite leader in Croatia when it comes to engaging citizens online. If we compare these findings with the number of participants in our survey, we are free to suggest that a city web site can serve as platform for engaging citizens online. Moreover, the findings from the web based survey, which will be discussed in the next paragraph, demonstrate that citizens of the city of Rijeka in more than 50 percent of examined cases use direct democracy categories on the city web site, as well as other web features. On the other hand it is surprising to find that Croatia's second biggest city Split does not have any of the categories that serve for direct democracy.

Graph 1, demonstrates that other web functions, surveillance and practical services are well fulfilled. This brings us to conclude that local governments in Croatia still see city web sites as platform for the "top down approach". Particularly, as the analysis reveals, they provide citizens with information about social services, they bring reports from each city council and they have uploaded budgets (surveillance). Secondly, on more than 60 percent examined cities one will find tourist information, news stories, information about transport, city history, information about zones and city inspections etc. (practical services), which means that local governments still see web sites in the function of a mass communicator.

Graph 1: City web functions



Second RQ was supposed to answer which categories of city web sites are more often used, from which point we could see which categories stand for civic engagement. Analyzing answers, the results reveal that citizens are willing to participate online and use available services. 76 percent of participants answered that they visit the city web site often or very often. For instance, participants used online voting once or more in 33 percent of cases, and content analysis showed that 39 percent of examined cities had online voting. We have looked

for example which cities have forums about city issues and compared that with the use of that item. The results demonstrate that participants in our survey use city forums in a great measure, for instance, the citizens of Rijeka used the forum once or more in 64 percent of cases, citizens of Velika Gorica in 88 percent, of Zadar in 75 percent, Vukovar 71 etc. We have similar findings when looking at online voting. The content analysis demonstrates that each examined city has news stories about the city, and 86 percent of participants in the survey answered they had visited this category on the web site once or more. All the city web sites in the survey have the category of city history which has been visited once or more by 84 percent of citizens.

An example that supports these findings is the city of Rijeka. The city of Rijeka had all 26 items that we were looking at. Accordingly, more than 220 citizens of Rijeka participated in this survey. In-depth analysis demonstrates that among these citizens more than 50 percent of them used the items on the web site which are related to direct democracy.

Conclusion

Building on the notion that city web sites should serve as platform for a top down approach, as well as for a bottom up approach, and that different features of a public web site promote civic engagement, by content analyzing city web sites and looking at the results from a web based public opinion survey, this paper developed several assumptions. First, conducting content analysis of city web sites, we argued that there is democratic divide in Croatian local government. We believed that local governments in Croatia still see a web site as a panel on which they will put all information and documents available for the public, but will not provide citizens with platforms for engaging in policy making. In other words, as Norris (2000) formulates it, they maintain only top down approach, from the government to the public, but they miss the approach from the public to government, they miss to give the citizens an opportunity to see what they think and how they feel about certain issues. The results support our assumption. Direct democracy features are utilized only up to 21 percent (Graph 1), while other functions of city web sites are reached at higher level, above 60 percent, for surveillance and practical services.

Secondly, we have conducted a voluntary web based survey. We asked the citizens about their civic involvement, political behavior, and, for our study the most important, questions related to the civic use of city web sites. We asked them how often they used certain categories on city web sites. We wanted to see if there are any categories for which we could say that they are positively associated with civic involvement. Coleman and colleagues for instance found that the use of tax information and connection with city officials in the web site was associated positively with an attitude toward civic engagement (2008). However, our study did not reveal any significant findings at this point. The fre-

quency test demonstrates that we cannot isolate any category for which we could say that it improves citizens' engagement.

Finally, we argued that citizens are willing to engage in the decision making process if the platform for that is available. Comparison of the results from the content analysis and the web based survey supports this notion, which is best demonstrated with the example of the city of Rijeka. The city of Rijeka fulfilled direct democracy and mass communication functions of a city web site in a great measure. And not just that, citizens recognized that. From the results of the web based survey we can see that they use those items often. Furthermore, it is relevant to mention that more than 70 percent among 224 participants from Rijeka feel they are a part of the city.

To sum up, new media and internet have changed the ways in which individuals interact and communicate with each other. In return, we got citizens who are expecting more from governments in the way of technological solutions and platforms for engaging them.

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