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## Government Internet-based Communication in Times of COVID-19: the Perspective of University Students from Slovakia and Ukraine

Olha Harmatiy <sup>a, \*</sup>, Zoriana Haladzhun <sup>a</sup>, Olena Makarchuk <sup>a</sup>, Peter Kravčák <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Lviv Polytechnic National University, Ukraine

<sup>b</sup> Catholic University in Ružomberok, Slovak Republic

### Abstract

Nowadays, governments recognize the importance of communicating with citizens, especially communication online – given the high popularity of the Internet and modern technical achievements. For the authorities, the Internet expands opportunities to explain and promote their programs and decisions, to establish and maintain dialogue with the public, especially with young people as the most active and promising part of it. For citizens, Internet-based communication is a powerful tool for studying government activities and understanding the public influence on decision-making processes. Its importance is particularly acute in crises, such as the global COVID-19 pandemic, as government responsibility grows up, complexity of communication tasks rises, and demands, inquiries, and scrutiny from the public increase. The results of the survey of university students from Slovakia and Ukraine confirm the need in government information at crisis time. According to the study, local government official websites and local government social media sites are prior sources of information and news during the coronavirus outbreak. The obtained data provide implications for a better understanding of how young audiences perceive government online communication during the crisis in light of increasing Internet usage on the one hand, and public demand for open, accessible, and transparent government on the other hand.

**Keywords:** communication, media, government communication, online, Internet, media literacy, COVID-19.

### 1. Introduction

Communication between government and the public is an integral part of ensuring citizen participation in the discussion and development of government policy, guaranteeing the right to information, developing civil society, strengthening democracy. Scholars identify government “as an institution that communicates” (Canel, Sanders, 2010: 7), indicate that communication is an important function of government organizations (Vos, 2006: 250), and emphasize that governments must communicate with citizens in a clear, organized, and coherent fashion (Amadeo, 2016: 155).

Moreover, the demand for government communication and information from the authorities has grown rapidly and has become even more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Scholars agree that whenever there is an outbreak, people tend to turn to the media for information, and the media should act as a bridge for people in need to reach health officials and the local government for their problems (Anwar et al., 2020).

\* Corresponding author

E-mail addresses: [olha.v.harmatiy@lpnu.ua](mailto:olha.v.harmatiy@lpnu.ua) (O.V. Harmatiy)

Researchers argue that the most important interactions between citizens and government happen at the local level (Sandoval Almazan, Gil-Garcia, 2012: 72). In fact, local government is closest to the people, many cases can be resolved on the spot, and local government agencies are an important link in decision-making processes about important public affairs. Online communication becomes an indispensable part of the local government current communication activities. As W.L. Bennett (Bennett, 2012: 128) mentions, the emergence of the Internet seems to be leading to a new mode of citizenship, especially among youth. The Internet has a serious impact on government communication: it creates new resources, new forms of organization and directions of communication activities; helps to expand the horizons of information support for the public and to boost the audience.

All this requires studying the government Internet-based communication and understanding its capabilities. Such a particular aspect of government communication online as its perception by the population is very important. This area of inquiry has so far been under-explored and therefore needs more research efforts to be focused on it.

## 2. Materials and methods

Against this background, the article tries to concentrate on studying how young people perceive the online communication of local governments and how they consume government information during COVID-19. To achieve the goal, the survey method was chosen. We believe this method is optimal for understanding and clarifying opinions, viewpoints, people's attitudes to certain events, phenomena, processes, etc. Additionally, online survey is logistically easier to handle for both the researcher and the respondent, and is convenient and cost-effective (Given, 2008: 846-847). As P. Lavrakas emphasizes, survey research is used to gather information, generate knowledge, and help make decisions (Lavrakas, 2008).

We seek to understand the attitude of young people to government communication, because by researching youth, we identify prospects, including future ways and features of communication between governments and citizens. Therefore, "the youth tends to gain substantial attention in academic research" (Waheed, 2019: 58). Additionally, this cohort is particularly relevant to the present purposes of the study of Internet-based communication, as it has been widely observed that "the usage of the Internet has become inevitable in this day and age" (Waheed, 2019: 57) and many young people have an affinity for communicating online. As J. Östman (Östman, 2012: 1004) states, in contrast to a substantial share of adults, the Internet has always been integrated in youth repertoire of everyday-life media use.

In this study, stratified random sampling was used. The survey involved students of two higher education institutions from two countries – Catholic University in Ružomberok (Slovakia) and Lviv Polytechnic National University (Ukraine). Totally, 232 people answered the questionnaire – 120 Ukrainians and 112 Slovaks. Surveyees of both genders were almost equally represented: 51 % of men and 49 % of women were among Slovak students, and 52 % of women and 48 % of men were among the Ukrainian respondents. As to the age range of participants, the youngest respondent was 18, and the oldest was 25.

The survey was conducted online using Google Forms. The questionnaire consisted of close-ended and mixed questions, and socio-demographic questions (about age and gender). The survey itself was made in September-October 2020. Invitations to take the survey and link to the questionnaire were included in university newsletters, as well as sent to students on their corporate emails. Participation in the survey was exclusively voluntary.

Besides the survey, such methods as relevant data collection, review of the scientific literature, analysis and synthesis, comparison, and generalization were used. Materials of the research are academic books, articles, conference presentations, and online documents, which are mostly latest, authored by scholars from all around the world.

## 3. Discussion

Although government communication is pervasive and has an impact on every aspect of public life, scholars (Horsley et al., 2010: 269) note that "there is minimal theory-driven research in this critical area of communication". Besides, most papers are devoted to researching communication at the central level. In comparison, the study of local government communication is given less attention by scientists (Graham, 2014: 364). Consequently, the study of government communication is too elitist and central government-oriented (Akhmad, 2020: 102).

However, recently there has been a growing scientific interest in the topic of government communication. In particular, the academic literature highlights how government officials use the Internet and social media to communicate with the public. Scholars (Agerdal-Hjerminde, Valentini, 2015; Amadeo, 2016; Graham, Avery, 2013; Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018; Russmann et al., 2020) state that social media are highly regarded as a beneficial communication tool for local governments. Despite the fact that social networks, as media researchers (Levitskaya, Fedorov, 2020: 71) emphasize, are becoming sources of various kinds of fakes, today many local governments have adopted social platforms as part of their communication strategy.

It is important to underline that trust in local government is traditionally greater than in government at other levels. For instance, according to opinion polls, the level of trust in local authorities in Ukrainian society is higher than in the national level. Experts explain this, firstly, by the closer ties between government members and local residents, and secondly, by the fact that the government activity and the results of it are better seen at the local level (Association..., 2020). Similarly, a public opinion poll in Slovak Republic (AKO, 2021) showed that more than 80 % of respondents are satisfied with the work and communication of local governments in the pandemic of coronavirus disease. These results give reason to think that in Slovakia citizens feel that local government is close to their problems. This strengthens the people's trust in local government bodies. Such findings indicate: "people trust what they know – what is familiar to them" (Paglinawan, 2020: 78).

In times of crisis, economic, political, social upheavals and changes, such as the COVID-19 outbreak, effective and clear government communication is indispensable for informing and updating residents. During this period, it is particularly important for the governments to increase communication activity and give relevant and accurate information to target audiences, thus helping to minimize communication noise and to maximize desired effective and coordinated actions.

Studies (Bickham et al., 2020; Palen et al., 2010) confirm that people rely on official sources during a crisis. Again, people trust the local authorities more. Scientists (Bickham, Francis, 2021: 195-197) revealed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the USA's local and state government officials were deemed most trustworthy, compared to federal government representatives. The results also suggested that people trusted information received from the government about public health issues, and the majority relied on governments for pertinent information.

Researchers also noted the important role of government communication in other crisis periods, such as during previous outbreaks due to other pandemic crises – Middle-East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), which preceded the current COVID-19. For example, Lee (Lee, 2009: 74) demonstrated how the Hong Kong government's crisis communication lost public trust during the SARS epidemic in 2003. Then local citizens and the media accused it of being "impotent" in handling the crisis. Another study (Kang et al., 2018: 202) examining the role of citizens' perception of government communication during 2015 South Korean MERS outbreak showed that distrust in government and high uncertainty were significantly mitigated by citizens' perceptions of government efforts for dialogic communication in the crisis.

Therefore, informing citizens about the services provided by government agencies, disseminating information on how to respond to the crisis and the changes becomes a good way to ensure quality communication in crisis conditions. Today, governments are increasingly abandoning the vision of information providers. Actually, the government communication activity is not only to inform, but also to have feedback, to conduct a dialogue, "to exchange information and knowledge between different social actors and government entities and to enable participation in collective decision-making efforts" (Sandoval-Almazan, Gil-Garcia, 2012: 72). The Internet provides a platform for cultivating government openness, direct informing of citizens, dialogue and cooperation. Due to this, government online communication has significant democratic potential, as it promotes transparency of government, creates a forum for feedback and discussion, and expands the range of consumers of government information.

What is more, during COVID-19 pandemic, governments influence public knowledge regarding health education. The pivotal roles that they can play through their communication with the public are promoting physical and psychological health measures and ensuring resilience in people (Anwar et al., 2020). Most importantly, government communication is aimed at managing infodemics. The term 'infodemic' as an abbreviation of 'information epidemic' was first used by D.J. Rothkopf (Rothkopf, 2003) when he wrote about SARS. By infodemic he meant "a few facts,

mixed with fear, speculation and rumour, amplified and relayed swiftly worldwide by modern information technologies, have affected national and international economies, politics and even security...”.

Likewise, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020b) announced the infodemic, noting that the coronavirus disease outbreak and response “has been accompanied by a massive ‘infodemic’ – an over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it”. Undoubtedly, this trend is damaging for people, as it can lead to misleading or even dangerous behaviour, harm their physical and mental health, increase anxiety and worry, cause depression, encourage xenophobia and hate, thus reducing the effectiveness of measures to combat the pandemic.

The paradox is that during the COVID-19 pandemic, web-based technologies are widely used to inform people, ensure their safety, and support communication. Simultaneously, the same technologies enable and reinforce infodemics. In today's digital world, mixed messages, mis- and disinformation overflow the information sphere. WHO (WHO, 2020c) states that in order to tackle the infodemic, governments need to act transparently and consensually to build trust with the public. Effective infodemic management assumes that confrontation of misinformation is carried out at all levels including individual, community, society, government, and “communities and individuals are empowered to be resilient against misinformation, and have the skills and self-efficacy to recognize low-quality information and enact healthy behaviours” (WHO, 2020a).

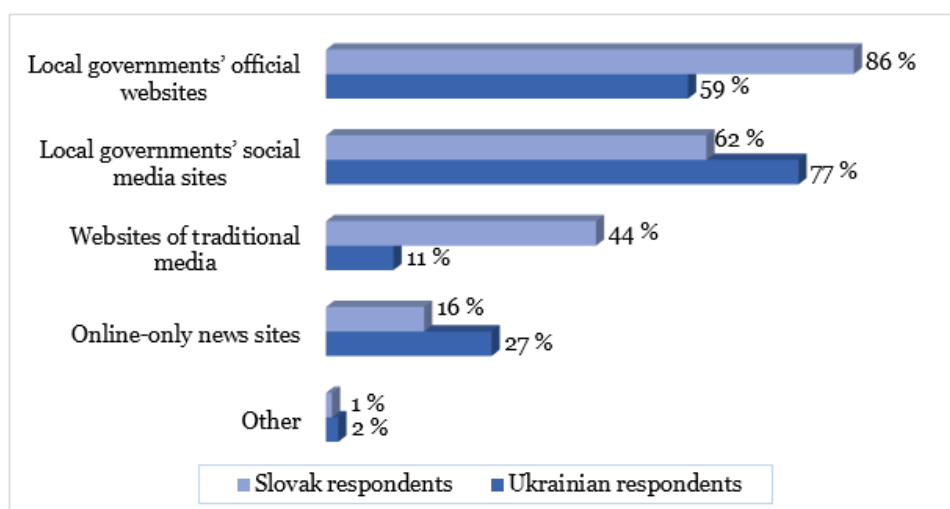
In light of this, the authorities are obliged to make efforts to fight against the COVID-19 infodemic, including through effective government communications and bringing to people understandable, clear, unambiguous, localized evidence-based information.

## 2. Results

The survey data reveal that an overwhelming majority (98 % of Slovak and 96 % of Ukrainian respondents) agree that local governments must communicate with citizens. In other words, young people from different countries spoke in favour of the importance of government communication, they hold views that the authorities must inform, explain, discuss, and dialogue with residents.

Similarly, most respondents stated that they were interested in the activities of local authorities. The differences between Slovak and Ukrainian university students were insignificant: Slovaks are very interested (36 %), partly interested (62 %), not interested (2 %); Ukrainians are very interested (27 %), partly interested (70 %), not interested (3 %).

In addition, the answers to the following question were almost unanimous. The majority of respondents consider information about the activities of the governments of the city or village in which they live to be personally necessary – this was reported by 86 % of Slovaks and 79 % of Ukrainians. Besides, 13 % of Slovaks and 19 % of Ukrainians need such information partly, and 1 % of Slovak and 2 % of Ukrainian participants do not care.



**Fig. 1.** Respondents' preferences for receiving local government information online

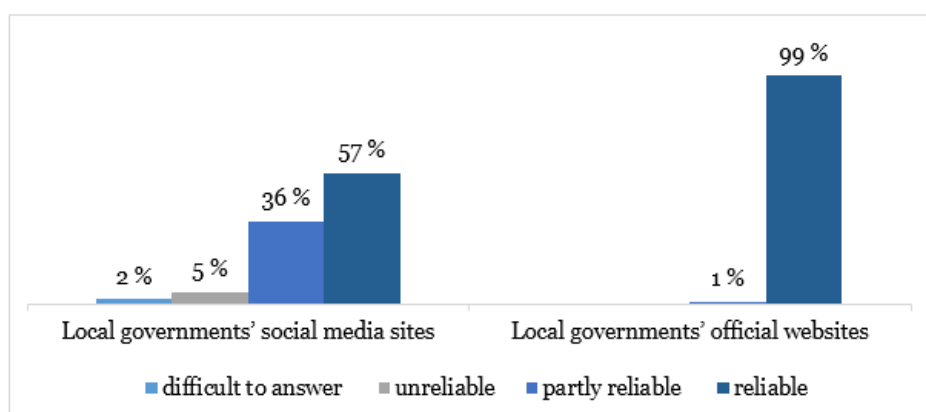
In contrast, responses regarding media preferences showed differences. The majority of Slovak respondents report receiving most of their information from the government organizations through local governments' websites (86 %). Ukrainians most often use social media for this purpose (77 %). Next, the priorities are as follows. Slovak students rely on local governments' social media (62 %), websites of traditional media (44 %), and online-only news sites (16 %). Ukrainians turn to government websites (59 %), online-only news sites (27 %), and websites of traditional media (11 %) to obtain government information. The survey participants are least likely to receive information from email or text messages (1-2 %). Respondents could select multiple answers for this question (Fig. 1).

Noticeably, there are conflicting findings of media use for government information. According to the survey results, young Slovaks tend to access government websites, while young Ukrainians are more likely to use government social media sites. Nevertheless, both government official websites and government sites on social platforms are priority information sources for youth in the COVID-19 period.

It should be noted that the obtained data are partly similar to the conclusions of other studies, and partially contradict them.

According to the sociological service Democratic Initiatives Foundation (DIF, 2020), the choice of information sources is influenced by the respondents' age; in particular, almost 70 % of Ukrainians aged 18-29 prefer social networks. For comparison: according to a Focus polling agency survey (Struhárik, 2020), most Slovaks turn to traditional media during coronavirus crisis, and students do not trust social networks. Nonetheless, it is common to see that consuming news and information on social platforms is becoming the norm for younger generations worldwide, and they use more social networks for news than their older peers (Statista, 2021a, 2021b). Despite the fact that many social media users around the world report about their lack of trust to social platforms either as media sources or as a way to get news, they continue to access such networks daily to keep up to date with news and current affairs (Watson, 2020). Obviously, the greatest potential of social media is to facilitate the way of obtaining information, regardless of whether it is true or false.

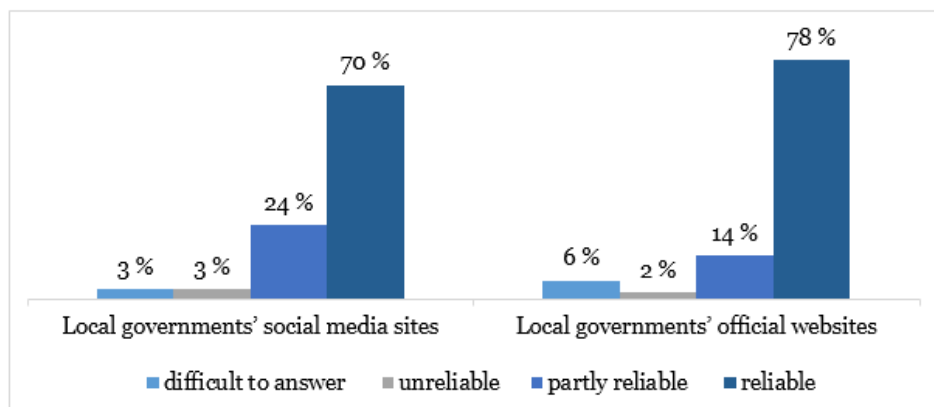
However, as our survey shows, the situation related to government information is different. It is believed by Slovak respondents that local governments' websites are sources of reliable information during the COVID-19 – almost all survey participants from Slovakia (99 %) mentioned it. Conversely, Slovaks view local governments' posts on social media to a lesser extent as sources of reliable information. However, the level of trust in them is still high: 57 % said they consider them reliable, 36 % – partly reliable; and only 5 % consider them unreliable (for the rest it was difficult to answer this question) (Figure 2).



**Fig. 2.** Slovak respondents' reliability perception of local governments' official websites and local governments' social media sites

In turn, most Ukrainian students view both local governments' official websites and social media sites as reliable sources. Actually, 78 % of Ukrainians consider official websites as reliable, 14 % – as partly reliable, 2 % – as unreliable, and 6 % could not answer. Comparatively, 70 % of students from Ukraine consider local governments' social platforms as reliable, 24 % – as partly reliable, 3 % do not trust them, and 3 % did not answer the question (Figure 3).

The above is in line with the study (Eger et al., 2020: 73), which shows that university students from four countries (Slovakia, Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary) usually do not trust social media, however, they tend to trust certain pages they like. Therefore, we are inclined to believe that local governments' sites on social media are among the sources that young people trust. Indeed, social media is not a source in itself. The source is the account, page of the organization or group, etc. on social platforms, and the post that the person or organization makes there.



**Fig. 3.** Ukrainian respondents' reliability perception of local governments' official websites and local governments' social media sites

We share the conclusions of the above-mentioned authors (Eger et al., 2020: 85), that people with higher levels of education (it is assumed that students are such people) are able to better distinguish between real and fake news than the general population and know better what they can expect from the certain sources of information. Moreover, other study (Harmatiy, Kravčák, 2021: 141) shows that Slovak and Ukrainian journalists consider local government's social media as a reliable source of information. This reinforces the idea that people with the knowledge and know-how of media, such as journalists, rely on social platforms and utilize them well.

Another feature of the social media use is that young people love interaction. Web-tools, openness and dialogic nature of social platforms provide such an opportunity, allow expressing opinions, and promote citizen participant. Scientists (Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018: 29) admit that social media are becoming a major channel of online interactive participation, and this is an opportunity for local governments to enhance citizen engagement in political and social affairs. Additionally, social media helps governments study audience reaction. The feedback function, which is implemented through visitors' comments and remarks, allows carrying out the slice of public opinion. Therefore, it is important for the authorities to provide young people with this channel of communication. In this regard, M. Graham and E.J. Avery (Graham, Avery, 2013: 15) conclude that local governments must incorporate social media into their communication in a meaningful way.

Simultaneously, researchers (Sýkorová, Fedorko, 2011: 115) warn that the value of social media should not be overestimated and note that the phenomenon of social platforms "keeps developing, but its significance is often over-rated". Nevertheless, social media is a modern technology, and if local governments work with it professionally, it helps to develop online communications.

The communication of the government of their city/village was assessed by Ukrainians as good (46 %), satisfactory (34 %), excellent (16 %), and for 4 % it was difficult to answer. The Slovak audience evaluated local government communication higher: as good (64 %), excellent (21 %), satisfactory (12 %), and 3 % of surveyees failed to respond. The answers to this question may indicate an attempt by local governments to cover issues objectively and to support effective communication practices in the COVID-19 period. Officials are increasingly realizing that government communication is strategically important and should be conducted professionally. At the same time, respondents' views provide room for improvement of local governments' Internet-based communication in both countries.

Importantly, Slovak and Ukrainian survey participants highly evaluate their knowledge and skills to interact effectively with local government resources on the Internet. Almost all students reported that their knowledge and skills were sufficient for this, and no one considered them

insufficient. It should be noted that government communication is complex and balances between political marketing and the aim “to inform citizens and promote bidirectional communication” (Goncalves, Santos, 2017: 165). Moreover, government Internet resources may contain presentation and PR content, as well as one-sided and beneficial for the authorities interpretation of events and processes. Therefore, citizens should be media literate and possess critical thinking to consume the government information posted online. Today, media literacy and digital competence have become the key skills for people. The development of information and communication technologies requires skilful, responsible and safe use of them.

Hence, as the survey results show, most young Slovaks and Ukrainians believe that local government must communicate with the population, and they rely on government information in COVID-19 period. The findings suggest that university students highly evaluate the reliability of government information, and they consider both local government official websites and local government social media sites as the priority sources. It is worth mentioning that students rated themselves as those having good skills and knowledge in order to consume government information online.

### 3. Conclusion

The coronavirus crisis has confirmed the viability of government communication and the public demand for reliable information. The results and discussion reinforce the idea that, thanks to governments’ digital visibility and activity, citizens are given additional opportunities to obtain government information. With this in mind, the authorities need to develop their communication capacity, establish effective and consistent online contacts with the public, especially at the grass root level and especially in times of crisis. It is extremely important for governments to establish, develop and maintain communication with young people as an important target audience.

Based on the study’s findings, the following conclusions and recommendations were made.

First, it is important for government agencies to adapt their communication processes both to the appropriate context and to the preferences of young citizens, to build such communication relationships that largely meet the needs of young people. Governments need to reach their audience on the various platforms on which it is located, including social media, and provide quality, substantial and diverse information on locally and timely relevant topics. It is important for governments to constantly understand how their communication actually achieves key democratic goals.

Second, governments need to build feedback, not to neglect an open communication environment on online platforms, and take into consideration the reaction and comments of citizens. People have the opportunity to send messages, to point out possible shortcomings, to offer ideas and express their views. For the authorities, this is an opportunity to learn about the public agenda, and to help in solving problems. Thus, the government ceases to be impersonal and abstract, and is perceived by citizens as one to whom you can write a message, express an opinion, and to ask questions. This strengthens the citizens’ trust in local government.

Third, given the importance of communication, governments should work professionally for communicating their messages. In fact, usually local government bodies, unlike national organizations, do not have full-fledged press teams, press services or social media teams. Therefore, it would be good if local governments had teams of professional public information and communication officers to communicate on a professional basis.

Ultimately, on online platforms, governments should not only inform residents, but also educate. This applies to the youth audience in the first place. Digital media helps protect against misinformation. Because of the rapid spread of rumours and fakes during crises, and due to the high demand for timely and trustworthy information about COVID-19, government platforms are a top source among Internet users seeking credible information and wanting to verify the facts set out on other resources.

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