MUNICIPALITY WEBSITES AS A COMMUNICATION CHANNEL IN THE CENTRAL BOHEMIA REGION

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Abstract. E-government represents a relatively new but booming concept in the Czech Republic. The investigation of communication channels in public administration is very important in the case of the Czech Republic considering its disintegrated nature of settlements (the number of municipalities has increased by half since the Velvet Revolution in 1989). There are 6,249 municipalities in the Czech Republic, which is quite a high number for a country with ten **million** inhabitants. The research shows that the introduction of ICTs significantly enhances the access of citizens to information, not only in bigger cities but also in numerous rural communities. This is, however, namely the case of information relating directly to the activities of local administration bodies and to public services. As for information on competing political entities and their programmes, election campaigns, on civic associations and interest groups activities, we only find random and isolates pieces of information that cannot be used to make a coherent picture of the local political process. This paper focuses on municipality websites in the Central Bohemia Region that is characterized not only by the disintegrated nature of settlements but also by processes of suburbanization and metropolization.
Key words: Public administration, local government, websites, civic participation

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present the municipality websites as a means of communication between regional governments and citizens. The paper is based on data gathered in the cities and non-city municipalities of the Central Bohemian Region. Differences in the size of municipalities and their development potentials, characteristic for the entire Czech Republic, are enlarged even more in the case of this region due to the closeness to the capital city and processes of suburbanization and metropolization. From the three levels of e-government - information, communication and transaction - we leave aside the transaction level, which is still a rather marginal issue. The paper thus focuses on information and communication services that are provided by the municipality websites. In the area of information services, these are primarily magisterial bulletin boards and the availability of documents, particularly those relating to development projects. In communications services, these are discussion forums within which citizens can express themselves with regard to the current problems of the development of municipalities. The paper further focuses on unofficial municipality websites and above-standard information or services provided by the municipal websites.

Information

In the Czech Republic, each municipality, as a local government unit, is legally obligated to keep magisterial bulletin boards. As of January 1, 2006, Act 500/2004 Coll. - Administrative Procedure came into effect, which imposes that access must be also granted to magisterial bulletin

boards by remote means (internet). The contents of physical and electronic magisterial bulletin boards must be consistent, and all documents which are to be disclosed by law must be posted both on the classical (physical) and on the internet bulletin board.

Although the obligation to keep electronic magisterial bulletin boards has been in effect for several years, the fulfilment of this obligation has been delayed in many municipalities of Central Bohemia. Today, however, we seldom encounter in the Central Bohemia region municipality websites in which there is no magisterial electronic bulletin board. However, another question we must ask is what sort of form a magisterial electronic bulletin board has. The archives reveal many aspects of magisterial electronic records, which vary widely in scale. From the archives of magisterial electronic bulletin board, it can also be easily traced in which year an electronic bulletin board was in fact launched. For example, the town of Rakovník, home to about 15 thousand inhabitants, has on its bulletin board documents only as old as 2008, and it should be noted that there are a number of documents missing from the board for 2008 (budget, minutes of council meetings and other important documents that were certainly publicized on the physical bulletin board). For 2009, the electronic bulletin board does not even have any documents (Rakovník, 2011). On the contrary, a good example is the town of Jesenice (2,000 inhabitants), which on its website publishes documents from 2001 (Jesenice, 2011), or Nové Strašecí (5,000 inhabitants), whose board is very well structured and "filled" with documents (Nové Strašecí, 2011).

The nature of the documents that municipalities publish on their boards tends to be various. It depends on the decision of the municipality if it leaves the board for purely official business, such as announcements, minutes from council meetings, etc., or uses the boards as a space for publication of additional information that might serve the citizens. On the boards of major cities are available rather purely official documents, and often in small villages we find on the boards everything that the village wants to tell its citizens because it is the easiest communication channel for managing a municipality. The municipality of Kounov (500 inhabitants) placed on its board things such as timetables and information about holidays of the general practitioner (Kounov, 2011). It's hard to imagine that information of a similar nature would be published by a district town - in small communities, however, such information is useful and publishing them on the site of the municipality suggests that the site is "alive".

It is desirable when publishing a large number of documents on the bulletin board to classify them into specific categories. Some municipalities even offer on their boards a search feature according to words or a specific date. Surprisingly, this can also be found in some small rural communities such as Ratměřice (200 inhabitants), whose website was appraised during the

Golden Crest Competition. Otherwise, however, the rule applies that the more people the municipality has the more formal the electronic bulletin board is (Ratměřice, 2011).

Another important aspect of information services is the availability of documents and information about development projects. If a municipality has some development documents prepared, it would be desirable to allow the citizens of the municipality to become acquainted with them. These include, for example, the municipality development strategy or territorial plan. Likewise, it is desirable that the municipality publishes on its website information on development projects. A municipality project presented online certainly has a better chance of being noticed by businessmen, and of its possible support by such businessmen.

Municipalities in the Central Bohemian Region most often publicize their territorial plans. This is particularly important because of new construction, which necessitates frequent changes to the territorial plan. If we compare the availability of development documents in the municipalities of Rakovník, we can conclude that only one-fourth of municipalities have available on their websites a development document - most often a territorial plan. These documents are often poorly located within the electronic bulletin board. Other municipalities have chosen a more appropriate way through a direct link in the main menu which bears either the direct name of a specific document, or it is simply called "important documents" or "documents". A good example of this is the Senomaty township (1,000 inhabitants), on whose website the strategic documents are easily and clearly available (Senomaty, 2011). The territorial plan and development strategy are found under the link "Development of the Township". In this section, people can read about the development projects and grants. The low number of municipalities that publish strategic documents on their websites undoubtedly relates to the fact that many municipalities, especially smaller ones, do not have such documents prepared.

Communication (discussion forums)

Whilst the information level of e-government is a unidirectional flow of information, the communication level assumes a two-way flow of information - a dialog mode. Here, the basic tool is the e-registry. Its operations include the duties required by law for municipalities, but there are still municipalities on whose websites the e-registry has not yet been activated or does not work as it should. In small municipalities, the e-registry sends inquiries to the municipal authority. The disadvantage of this method of communication is that the inquiries sent to the municipal authority, or the responses to it, are not available to other residents of the municipality.

A far more advanced form of a dialogue between citizens and regional governments are discussion forums or open guest books. However, if a municipality decides to establish a discussion forum on its website, it generally means that there will be greater demands on the operation of the website. Therefore, only a small portion of Central Bohemian municipalities operate forums on their websites - usually these are larger cities. Of the 26 municipalities with extended powers located in the Central Bohemian Region, only three municipalities run a full discussion forum on their websites, and another four municipalities display on their websites only selected questions and answers. A very sophisticated forum can be found on the Český Brod website (Český Brod, 2011). Queries are sorted into several sections, and each section into several topics, with the largest number of topics found in the "Questions for Representatives" section. The dating of queries shows that the forum is very much used by the citizens. An easier option in terms of site management is public disclosure of questions together with the answers of responsible competent persons. The city of Příbram has this service on its website (Příbram, 2011). Individual queries are sorted by the regions to which they relate, and according to the time when the query was entered. It also applies in this case that citizens have great interest in asking questions.

The websites of small rural communities mostly do not have question and answer sections available, and discussion forum are not very common either. Rare exceptions include the municipality of Branov, which, with its less than 200 inhabitants, is one of the smallest municipalities of the Rakovník district, and yet allows citizens to discuss on its website local affairs (Branov, 2011). In addition to Branov, of the 82 municipalities of the Rakovník district, only citizens of the district have this option (however, discussion forums are offered by some unofficial community websites - see below).

A far more widespread form of asserting the views of citizens in local public affairs are polls. Polls can be found quite commonly on municipality websites, regardless of the size of municipality. For representatives of municipalities, this is quite an easy way for them to learn about the views of citizens. The weakness of polls is their lack of representativeness, as virtually anyone who visits the municipality's website has the ability to vote. On the other hand, through interestingly worded questions, polls can contribute to the activation of public life in the municipality, attract people to attend cultural events or alert citizens and others persons of news. Many municipalities have recognized this and regularly offer new polls on their websites. Other municipalities do not use polls or offer only one poll regarding the appearance of the site ("how do you like our new website?").

Unofficial municipality websites

On the internet, one can encounter websites which at first glance look like the pages of a municipality, but are in fact operated by someone else. These unofficial municipality websites often have a very similar address to the official municipality website. Such sites are often established by the citizens of the municipality through municipal clubs and associations, or by local entrepreneurs. Such sites are used for various purposes. If something is missing for citizens of municipalities on the official website, it usually can be found on the unofficial websites. Examples include the already aforementioned discussions forums. On its official website, the Lubná municipality (950 inhabitants) does not offer the possibility of any discussions. However, according to its founders, the unofficial municipality website (Lubná, 2011) is conceived as a "portal that brings the ideas and commentary of the citizens of Lubná on topics that concern us."

It is typical for unofficial municipality websites that they are created by municipality associations to provide citizens with detailed information on the activities of the association. This website is then linked to the official website, and in essence, it can be said that it complements it. This can be characterized, for example by the Kozojedy municipality (Kozojedy, 2011) in which a cultural association acts and whose website informs its citizens in detail about cultural events in the municipality and surrounding area (Cultural Association Kozojedy, 2011). Both websites are connected to each other through links. Another example is the city of Slaný. The unofficial websites of the city are focused on tourism, culture and leisure activities [18], and there is also a discussion forum available which is not on the official Slaný website (Slaný, 2011). Even in this case, both websites are connected to each other through links.

Another unofficial type of website presents something of a "contra-web" or "opposition website" that has been established by citizens who want to express dissatisfaction with the local government's activities and events in the municipality. The authors of these websites usually have their own political ambitions. The unofficial website of the municipality of Rynholec was established by the Rynholec Association (civic association) (Rynholec Association, 2010). These websites mainly address the issues related to the environment and ecology. In the discussion forum, the citizens of Rynholec quite critically reflect on the specific steps of the municipality management. This site also serves as a space for publicizing the electoral program of the associations of independent candidates.

Above-standard information or services

If a municipality website is well cared for, many municipalities must also address the question of what would be required to make the site even better. Many municipalities publish on their websites above-standard information or allow their citizens to utilize services that are not common in other municipalities. However, it is not easy to identify specific groups of users - they can be, for example, Prague commuters, countrymen, potential investors, tourists or youth homes, medical facilities, interest groups, local football club, etc.

When considering which innovations would improve the municipality's website, municipalities should look primarily to the needs of their citizens, and also to what other services resulting from the activities of the authority would make sense for the municipality. From the perspective of the authority, it appears useful to arrange a visit to the authority office via the internet. Residents of the town of Černošice have this service available on the municipality website, and the municipality succeeded with this in the Golden Crest competition as the best online service (Černošice, 2011).

Another interactive service can be found on the website of Vestec u Prahy (Vestec, 2011). This service is called MMS defects, and it is a service where citizens send an MMS message to the municipality with suggestions that relate to any messes within the community. Messes captured by a mobile telephone are then shown on the website along with the date when the place was cleaned up and how it looks now.

Citizens of Chrášťany (Rakovník district) have above-standard information available to them. The municipality has gradually been publicising a chronicle on its website (Chrášťany, 2011). The reactions of citizens to the online chronicle are positive, as well as to the virtual tour of the municipality.

It is ideal when the citizens themselves come up with the ideas on how to improve the site. The leadership of municipalities should clarify and discuss with citizens what the page should serve for based on the local conditions. The site should indeed help the citizens, but it can also aid the authority as well. A situation where the site is swamped with useless information or improperly set services should, however, be avoided. What is important for one person may be useless to others, so one person should not make the decision about the information on the site without consulting others. Few communities publish a fairly important piece of information on their websites – the coefficient for calculating property taxes.

Conclusion

1. Use of modern information technologies in communication between regional autonomies and citizens in the Czech Republic has two distinctive characteristics. Above all, it is the accelerating of the entire process; whilst around the year 2000, municipal websites were still rather exclusive affairs, during a single decade, the number of websites increased significantly, as well as the volume of information and services they mediate. As research of the municipalities of the Central Bohemian Region showed, today, the use of this communication channel in public administration is becoming commonplace, and it is something on which citizens and local government bodies increasingly rely. However, research also shows that despite the rapid development of electronic communication, profound differences remain between individual municipalities. This is the result of residential structure and suburbanization, but it is also evident here, however, that the creation of an information society cannot be a one-way process and much depends on the specific local conditions and initiative from below. This is especially important in smaller towns and rural communities, as they lack the strong organizational structures and apparatuses of large cities.

2. The second characteristic feature is the tendency to standardize the use of the internet in public administration at the local level. Shortly after 2000, the creation of municipal websites was to a certain extent a spontaneous process. Legislative steps relating to obligatory publication of data, e-registries and electronic bulletin boards, etc., contributed to certain standardization in this area. Research into the municipalities of the Central Bohemian Region also showed that despite the above mentioned standardization tendencies there remains considerable space for initiative and the use of specific conditions. Compared with earlier studies, which, however, did not focus exclusively on Central Bohemian municipalities, it seems that a certain inhibition is occurring in the use of discussion forums and other forms of dialogue. If this tendency is confirmed, the explanation will probably be found partly in the growing technical demands, and also within the competition of rapidly expanding social networking sites on the internet.

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