



E-government and e-politician as a new image of local governance – the impact of the ICT on the local democracy

Abstract

In the age of common Internet usage, we cannot imagine administration and local governance development without modern view into serving the citizens, which are looking forward for ensuring basic services and constant improvement of their quality. This some citizens' demands concerns governmental information systems. Citizens are demanding not only presentation of important for them and the city data and events, but also enabling quick and efficient way of dealing with their cases. Moreover except the administration cases they are also looking for public debate being followed at the Internet. They are more willing to raise their critical opinion on the chat room or discussion forum. In this case modern politician must be aware of this virtual public sphere power if he or she wants to come up to contemporary citizen expectations. In Poland path of e-government development was not so smooth. As findings from the previous research confirm thesis about low e-services development at the beginning and even lack of them in some regions of Poland. Now we can observe the rapid growth of ICT in Poland and its visual impact on the local democracy shaping process. We can of course discuss both sides of this impact – positive and negative. According to cases mentioned in the paper I will try to present some important digital initiatives being introduced in Poland on the level of local democracy. It is worth to present some actions which are being introduced to improve administration and information system as for example: e-commune system (being implemented in different cities in Poland – the e-commune is not only presentation of information, but it is mainly "virtual office"); regional information portals (eg. Doba etc.). It is also important to describe the improvement of communication between local politicians and their voters – e-communication, e-consultation (eg. blogs; discussion forums).

Keywords: local government; local community; commune; public sphere; ICT; local e-democracy; civic participation; local e-government.

Introduction

It is well a known fact that information is the most wanted good in the world. Access and control of the information stream determines the developing power relations. Simply put, those who have information possess a kind of power which enables them to use the ignorance of others to gain advantage over them. However, it needs to be said that information has to be true and reliable. In his discussions on information society, Kluszczyński goes even further and states that more and more frequently, power is equated with the access or control over information. According to him, this applies to almost all disciplines (Kluszczyński 2001:12). The development of the media, including the manner and speed of information transfer, contributed to an

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undeniable development of the world. The results of the discovery of print are visible even today and life without a telephone, radio or television seems almost impossible. The growing popularity of the Internet, which incorporates all features of other media, lets us speculate over its future application as well as its future role in the history of humanity. The ideas which claim that it will become a new tool of democracy and will influence its future form, seem to possess some justification. Nowadays, the one-way media, which are characteristic of mass society and include the press, radio and television, are losing with interactive, digital means of communication. New information and communication technology (ICT) may serve not only for work or entertainment, but also for building up the society. We associate with ICT such hopes as e.g. to expand the opportunities for public information about the intentions of the government or the increase participation of citizens in co-decision making about the shape of the state, which is particularly important in the face of declining interest to participate in public life. The impact of ICTs on political processes and state-citizen relation is determined by means of such concepts as tele-democracy, digital democracy, cyber-democracy, e-democracy. Regardless of the name and scope of the concept, common to these concepts is the belief that various features of new technologies – interactivity, faster mode of information, communication feedback – may, in a positive way, influence on democratic mechanisms (Białobłocki, Moroz and Nowina-Konopka 2004; Chadwick 2006; Zissis and Papadopoulou 2009; Nowina-Konopka 2009; Cindio and Schuler 2012).

E-democracy can may be regarded as application of ICT for increase participation of citizens in democratic processes, both quantified and in the form of real impact on the functioning of the public institutions exerted by individuals. Experiments on e-democracy are carried out since 70s of the XX century. During these years people reached for cable television and later for teletext. Essential, however was the spread of the Internet that enables communication 'many to many', creates the possibility to discussion and simultaneously is free from spatial and temporal constrains. This may allow for cost reduction and the participation of more people. At first, people were focused on providing information via Internet. Additional possibilities arose with the emergence of WEB 2.0. This is a special kind of sites that are characterized by interalia, lack of traditional division for creators and receivers of announcement – users may not only see the sites but they can also help developing them. An important feature of modern WEB 2.0. is large interaction between Internet users, opportunity to participate on forums, posting comments, etc. examples of sites illustrating this phenomenon are such as online encyclopaedia Wikipedia, blogs and social sites.

However, if we speak about the Internet media in the context of retardation, we have to state that there did take place a distortion of relations between two functions of the media: informative and educational. Local authorities have indeed changed. Very often, instead of an institutional authority, chosen by a group of people, we witness the creation of a new self-appointed authority – most often quoted, most often shown, or the one which most often speaks. Sometimes it is an authority of a majority or – in the news material sent by the user – of an eye witness. When it is information that prevails in journalistic materials, a direct evidence – a photo of a described event – becomes the authority. The presence of a picture is a proof that the event took place, it sanctions the event. Therefore, on the Internet, the issue of credibility of information and the forming of opinion looks different.



ICT and local public sphere – theoretical aspects

It seems that the potential of the Internet is unlimited when it comes to creating local communities, integrating them, creating space for debate, space for intervention, and grassroots journalism. The production and distribution of the materials uploaded to the Internet is not expensive, so theoretically everyone can participate in an online debate.

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If we take a closer look at this issue, we can see that although the possibilities are similar, the Polish web (despite there being no borders), does not realize its potential in the same way as, e.g. the American web.

The first opportunity which the Internet creates is the chance to create local debate forum. It is a community of people who live in the same place, go to the same institutions to take care of official matters, people to whom apply the same rules set by the authorities, people who do the shopping in the same places etc.

The Internet also allows to create new communities, the members of which may be scattered all around the world. Geographical proximity is not required. It is an 'imagined community' or a 'community without proximity', consisting of people who have never met but enter into more intimate relations in the virtual world, than in reality with the people living in the same town or house (Barney 2006). It is worth noting that in a way, traditional local media also integrate 'imagined communities' because most people living in a given region or town perceive themselves as a part of the community only in their minds and rarely enter into direct interaction with each other (Anderson 2006). Urry, deliberating on the community mobility in 'network society', noticed that Bell and Newby (1976) have identified three useful categories concerning the meaning of the community: proximity, locality, and community. These categories are also useful in the discussion of the local media, because one can identify different kinds of media used for communication by a given community.

It is worth noting that along the virtual communities, there still exist local communities which function both in the real world and online, and communities which function only in the local reality despite having the required tools and possibilities to create virtual community. There are also communities which do not have access to digital tools because they either do not feel the need to use them, or they are "digitally excluded" and have no access to the technology.

Another potential of the Internet is a possibility to fill the gap in the traditional media market. Where there is a lack of "official" information and there are too few journalists in remote places, it is possible to create communicative platform on the Internet which would be based on bottom-up initiative coming from the citizens.

It is debated, however, whether ICT is an appropriate medium to improve the democratic processes and build proper public sphere. As is often the case when a new medium is introduced, the discussion becomes polarized. In one ring corner are the so-called "neofuturists", who see the many possibilities the new medium offers the individuals both with regard to get more information and to signal preferences to the authorities. In the other corner are the "dystopians", who cling to the "face-to-face" political dialogue, and who see digitalized communication as a threat to the core values of democracy (Wilhelm 2000). But the answer is not necessarily "either/or". ICT– like other new technologies – affects the organization of politics: ICT shatters the territorial borders within which politics have primarily been organized



and it breaks away from political organization and communication based on associations, parties and meetings as public forums. A scientific description and analysis of these tendencies will provide a basis for an evaluation of the new medium and its possibilities. Tests based on involving local communities in political debates and decision making via ICT at the beginning of the twenty first century showed diversified interested from the citizens side and the researcher had different opinion about the digital public sphere at the local level (Wilhelm 2000, 2004; Hoff, Horrocks and Tops 2000, Norris 2001). The first experiences of virtual commune or city were driven from those countries which were familiar with highly advanced communication technologies (e.g.: the USA [California], the Netherlands [Amsterdam], Germany [Berlin], Denmark [Jutland], Sweden [Gothenburg]). Nowadays we can see dozens of initiatives being taken on that filed in different countries both in countries with highly developed ICT and long democratic tradition (e.g.: Norway [Modalen, Agder, Larvik, Molde]; Finland [Tampere]) and those with reborn democracy and average ICT development (e.g.: Poland [Małopolska, Lower Silesia]; the Czech Republic [Prague, Brno]). With this rapidly growing transformation of the local governance structure, the researchers show less level of scepticism about ICT being used as one of the main tools of that transformation than it had been at the beginning of that process (Orihuela and Obi 2007; Jeitziner 2009; Meier 2009). Analysing the influence of the ICT on the democracy we are able to see that new communication technologies may increase access to political decision makers and, in a broader sense, contribute to public opinion formation both on global as well as local issues. The key element is that the Internet has a low threshold: ICT makes it much easier for “ordinary people” to get through with their messages than any other medium. But when it comes to dialogue and debate on the net, the experiences are more mixed. Communication within a delimited group, for instance a political party organization, gives the best results. In contrast, large, open debate forums are more complicated. If the participants are not committed, the quality of the discussions suffers, and as a consequence the debates die out quickly. Some debates have had a more uncivilized tone than we are used to in public debates, often instigated by anonymous contributions or contributions under false name. Finally, on the negative side, right wing extremist groups have used some discussion forums to spread racist messages. The Internet’s low free speech threshold that should be a clear democratic advantage, can, unfortunately, also be a problem.

Of course, there are also many positive experiences from the net-based debate. In particular, both scope and quality are affected when citizens have a chance to become involved in specific issues, which the politicians are then forced to deal with. In these cases, the net functions as an extra channel in addition to meetings, petitions, etc. The success criterion when it will be assessed the scope of the net debate does not have to be 100 percent participation; much less will do. In comparison, only a small minority writes letters to the editor or take the floor at public meetings. Moreover, some of the participants in the net debate would never write a letter to the editor or speak out – for the simple reason that they do not subscribe to a newspaper or attend public meetings. Finally, success or failure cannot be “measured” only by the number of active participants, but must also be measured by how many people visit the websites in question and keep informed on the debate (Millard 2006; Porwol, O’Donoghue and Breslin 2012).

The feature of the Internet is the possibility of bilateral communication, which is interactive. In other words, the Internet is not only a medium of information, but it also offers a space for discussion and debate among people or entities that are



physically far apart. Because of that the Internet is becoming a good tool for democratic participation. Hence, there are very high expectations on the consequences for democracy, by the introduction of this medium (Torpe and Nielsen 2004; Hargittai and Walejko 2008; Cullen 2010).

When we look closer at the local governance across Europe we can clearly see that different ways of strengthening citizens' trust in local authorities and the creation of platforms of public dialogue are important factors that shape contemporary democracy. Local communities search for solutions that will help in realization the essential principles of community communication which are public trust and social dialogue. Both of those elements strengthen the sense of responsibility for the region what positively influences the quality of the local governance and all other institutions that create the local public sphere (Millard 2006; Lee and Kim 2012). In the 21st century, century of the digital communication reign the above needs must be realized by creating a sufficient digital communication platforms. As the digitalization process has diverse course in different cultures so it is worth to do some studies.

E-democracy relates to those uses of ICT's which provide either novel or more efficient, practicable means for citizens to exercise influence in the governing process. In other words, this term applies when ICT's are used to revolutionize the relationship between citizen and representative.

The widespread availability means in practice that those with the resources and physical ability to access the technology have the opportunity to participate. Furthermore, the Internet gives the opportunity for interactivity, a better geographical spread, more open administration and greater opportunity for civic participation. These are in any case, the expectations associated with the Internet as a technology. The Internet can provide opportunities for democratic participation, but the technical possibilities themselves do not lead to it.

Participation is one of the most important elements of democracy and is closely associated with a number of processes that link with communication and the access to social decision-making processes. These processes to a greater or lesser extent use ICT technologies and the Internet as an aid, even though they themselves are not dependent on the Internet. These technologies offer the potential for interactivity and can create new forms of democratic dialogue between the residents themselves, remote organizations and representatives of the citizens. In broad terms we can say that the policy covers the activities, which we undertake as citizens to solve problems concerning the community or group interests. Importance that Habermas (1989) attaches to public discourse as a means to achieve consensus or at least the decision taken by the majority, is the cornerstone of democracy.

This view is based on the assumption that no single person has knowledge of all the data, nor can it take into account all the consequences of the given solution or policy. The importance attributed to digital technology depends on how it defines the concept of democracy. The theories about direct democracy, discursive and competitive relationship between democracy and technology is handled in different ways (Christensen and Aars 2002; Weber 2003; Rose 2004; Grönlund and Anderson 2007; Baldersheim and Øgård 2007; Haug 2007; Dahlargen 2009).



We can come across the following types of democracy while studying theory (Christensen and Aars 2002; Held 2006; Mutz 2006; Haug 2007): 1) direct democracy: goal - the sovereignty of a nation/ the equality; basis of legitimacy - decisions of the majority; role of citizens - decision-making; the mandate of representatives – related; the most important element in the use of ICT – decisions; 2) competitive democracy: goal - individual freedom; basis of legitimacy - having to account; role of citizens – electorate; the mandate of representatives – unbound; the most important element in the use of ICT – information; 3) discursive democracy: goal – autonomy; basis of legitimacy - the public debate role of citizens - opinion-forming; the mandate of representatives – interactive; the most important element in the use of ICT – discussion.

The above-mentioned views on democracy have different implications for the use of technology in democracy. The issues on direct democracy on the Internet and the performance of democratic principles are widely discussed by the supporters. Technology is assigned the key role, it is a cornerstone of broader participation and it is said to be an opportunity to move away from the old hierarchy and the indirect representation. Development of technology has given supporters of direct democracy new arguments: the computer creates the possibility of immediate communication, so the views of individual citizens may be quickly and efficiently recorded via the Internet. Such a perspective is rather conducive for fast action and is focused on the individual. Politicians may have access to the will of the people and the only thing that should be done is to read it. Self-reliant "digital citizen" may then replace the traditional institutions of collective representation. Electronic opinion polls, a daily online voting are the main components of tomorrow's democracy (Rose 2002; Kersting and Baldersheim 2004).

Competitive model of democracy is a bit more defensive. Widespread and frequent participation of citizens in social life is not an end itself. The most important here is the competition among individual elites to win votes. The quality of democracy is reviewed every four years when during the elections the politicians are called to account. In this model of democracy information strategies differ from those of the previous model. Too much openness seems to be a problem - there is a likelihood that politicians will be more interested in promoting their own image than taking responsibility for their actions. It can therefore create conflicts. However, technology itself can be a useful tool, and the Internet can be used to provide information and gain support for the policy elites. Technology can also contribute to improving the working conditions of representatives and thus create favourable conditions for the exercise of political leadership. In addition, technology can be used to develop public services through customer surveys, or surveys of users of these services.

In the theory of communication or discursive democracy, democracy is not conceived as an aggregate of individual preferences. Here, the common denominator is associated with hope for a political discussion which would be a means to reach political agreement on contentious issues. The will of the society here is not understood as something immutable, it is created during a debate in which various arguments are confronted. Here the message is this: we need a moment to "stop" to make room for a good discussion or public debate. From the perspective of communication theory, the main idea is an active communication strategy. The key strategy is to create new space, which enables creation of unrestricted communication. Particularly important for such public sphere is the development of media, including Internet, and the strength of new technology lies precisely in this



interactive element. It allows not only the one-way communication, such as (to a large extent, do) traditional media, but thanks to digital technology, people can change from passive recipients into active participants.

The author of the paper is trying to analyse how the power of ICT is used by local community in Poland - country of reborn democracy with rapidly growing technology. The main issue of the paper is to analyse the role of ICT in the effort to develop and improve local democracy which results in creating active local public sphere. There are discussed different aspects of building digital public sphere and e-democracy in local communities. Theoretical aspects are fulfilled with the description of the ICT usage in chosen communities in Poland. For comparison, a survey has been carried out in different parts of Poland (urbanized; semi-urbanized; rural). It was analysed the case of the following regions: Lower Silesia; Podkarpacie, Łódź voivodship and the following research questions were analysed: Whether and how ICT have changed the functioning of local public sphere in Poland? Does ICT support political communication? Is ICT used as platform for local debate? Is ICT used mainly as a tool for transmitting information from the dominant one-sided communication? Does ICT support local democracy?

ICT and local democracy in Poland

The interest in ICT influence on democracy focused in many countries and of all management levels also at the local one which of course was caused by many reasons. First, the policy at the local level becomes more transparent due to e-democracy. Second, it is often easier to try out new solutions on "small", local matters. Third, there are already a number of issues, such as those related to spatial planning, where municipalities are obliged to consult with residents and such consultations can be easily and quickly carried out via the Internet. Research conducted in Polish communes² along the last decade proved that they have become more transparent due to their visibility and activity in the network (Guzik 2004; Żygulski 2004; Nowina-Konopka 2009; Biernacka-Ligieza 2010; Nowak 2011). Vast majority of them can be contacted via e-mail, most have their own websites. What is more the content and level of information provided on the municipal website, is diversified. On the pages of some municipalities, vast amounts of information is provided, while others limit themselves to publishing the address or telephone number. At the beginning many municipalities treated their websites as a hobby or fringe activity, much less important than the ordinary work of the commune. Currently communication network is becoming one of the most important for many communities and, increasingly, it becomes more professional: more municipalities actively use the Internet, and newly arrived residents are eager to use electronic solutions.³ However, it still cannot be concluded that ICT itself changed the functioning of local communities in Poland.

ICT supports more traditional, formal and representative political process. In practice, this means that it is used primarily as an information tool and is still dominated by one-way communication. When municipalities use the Internet, the most important thing for them is probably not political participation of citizens, but the services that

² 'commune' and 'municipality' are both terms used to name Polish 'gmina' (one of the level of the Polish local government system). The term 'commune' has more geographic and organization connotations and 'municipality' is rather interpreted as a more administrative term more often like 'commune administration sector'. 'Municipality' is dedicated to city/town commune.

³ Source: Customer service assessment – survey which is followed each by the Dzierżoniów commune as the part of the ISO directives evaluation process



the municipality offers. The municipality is focused here on high quality gained by the new technologies - the role of citizens is not so accentuated as "the role of co-owners" (Winswold 2007).

Municipalities are able to inform fairly well residents of democratic processes, but they are doing worse with allowing residence to have an active democratic influence through democratic municipal websites. Attempts to increase civic engagement - through discussions or direct decision-making - are rare and do not function very well. The analysis shows that Polish municipalities do not provide information about what happens next with the result of discussions and conversations on the forums. It is worth noting that in the case of Polish municipalities, conducting a public debate is extremely rare and usually occurs when discussed problems lead to serious social consequences - its implementation would be impossible without the approval of the local community. An important reason for this is probably the fact that the forums are in no way related to political decision-making process in communities and that local politicians do not engage in debate. Access to e-mail addresses of local governments, compared with the administration, is also limited. The debate on local political issues has not yet moved exclusively to the Internet or it has not been moving as quickly as it is possible.

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While analysing local electronic democracy structure in Poland it is necessary to look closer at smaller communes in different regions of the country - for that analysis there were chosen 12 communes from 3 different regions of the country: Lower Silesia (Western Poland): Wałbrzych, Świdnica, Dzierżoniów, Jaworzyna Śląska; Podkarpacie (Easteren Poland): Krosno, Sanok, Jasło, Rymanów; Łódzkie Voivodship (central Poland): Sieradz, Zduńska Wola, Łask, Żelów. We should refer not only to the presentation of the municipality as a political and administrative unit, but also as an institution and organization operating within its area.

Municipalities use the Internet primarily as a means of transmitting information from the municipality to the residents. This is not a communication space between the municipality and residents or between politicians and voters. Where the network is a communication space, it is not municipality that initiates it but local or regional newspapers with its online version or commercially owned local information services (e.g. www.doba.pl; www.walbrzysek.pl) and sometimes political parties. This offer is, however, still limited. With regard to the news website, common use of the Internet is something different from using the Internet as a channel of communication between the municipality and residents. All the municipalities covered by the survey have their own websites, most of which are extensive and comprehensive in their provision of detailed information.

This applies to all kinds of information, from driving directions to the school, through cultural events, and ending on the forms to be filled in order to get a place in kindergarten. However, still not many local communities in Poland can apply for a place in kindergarten through the Internet because they have not yet met both the safety and the technical requirements, including the protection of personal data. Security of the web based communication is still a challenge with Polish municipalities but it has been improving day by day. Municipalities that do not yet offer such a possibility are currently working on it, thus in the near future it is



expected that – according to the plan of information society development - sending applications electronically should be possible soon in most of Polish municipalities.⁴

Almost all municipalities include on their websites information about the services they offer. The more comprehensive websites (e.g. Sieradz, Wałbrzych) are complex with lots of information. You can find there everything: from the opening hours of the various public institutions such as the swimming pool and library, through information on the operation of kindergartens, the school common room, tax information, the superintendent, planning-town office, or the latest news from the community. Polish website are reminders of cultural events, meetings with artists and concerts. Residents can also read about the deadlines for applications such as for a place in kindergarten.

There is also information about training of the local sports club and the opening hours of the gyms in the municipality.

Information is quite regularly updated (especially in developed communes) and the residents who frequently visit websites of municipalities can keep-up with information about public services. They can also easily figure out where to look for more detailed information. Municipal websites also contain links to other sites including institutions and public office sites where you can ask questions on public services.

Many municipalities also publish the results of public opinion surveys carried out by public service sector (e.g. Dzierżonów commune regularly posts results of each years' customer satisfaction survey).

New technologies and local agora

Researchers still (Rose 2002; Torpe and Nielsen 2004) argue that local politicians seldom engage in the implementation of Internet solutions in the community and that community networks are presented primarily as a provider of public services. The Internet most often constitutes support for politicians - especially in election campaigns, but still it is not the most important weapon. Politicians still give priority to the press, radio and television. Attempts to combine the benefits of ICT to the traditional media message has not been very successful in some European countries (e.g.: Denmark, Norway), especially attempts to introduce an electronic platform for communication stand out as evidence. Its therefore worth considering whether the use of ICT technology strengthens either the role of government in local politics or politicians themselves? International studies seem to confirm this hypothesis and motivate it by the fact that the administration has a number of electronic tools that enable it to represent the interests of particular groups of people (Snellen 2003; Pratchett, Wingfield and Polat 2006; Dahlgren 2009).

Communes websites relate to political issues in two ways: they present what is happening on the board of the municipality, but party politics is left to political parties. The list of issues raised at meetings of the council and the municipal executive board and other committees is presented in electronic services, in order to easily find out what issues local government are currently engaged in. But only some municipalities inform, in detail about current political issues. However, municipalities

⁴ Source: The Strategy for the Development of the Information Society in Poland until 2013, MSWiA, 2008



are present in the Internet primarily as a provider of public services. The political aspect is not as omitted though, it is not ready available in many communes as the information is not posted on the main sites, therefore, to find information about the activities of municipalities, as political organizations, or information about municipal policies need to either go to the microsite, or go directly to these sites by browser, or commercial information services.

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The information services of some communes provide a list of politicians, with their phone numbers and e-mail addresses, but you cannot always find the information represented by the political parties. But in most cases politicians are only mentioned as members of the municipal executive board; getting a mentioning on this list is sometimes difficult. The website of municipalities very rarely have links to local political parties. None of the Polish municipalities analysed in this paper posted links to the local political parties websites.

Convergent for Polish services is the provision of information about what is going on at the meetings of the council, the municipal executive board and committees, although not in all municipalities is information given in the same degree of detail. There is information about the meetings and agendas of different kinds, and about decisions taken that can also be quickly learnt and accessed from the network. In this respect, small municipalities do not differ at all from the big ones: website users are informed in the same way about the resolutions of the municipality by the small communes of Jasło or Jaworzyna Śląska and the bigger communes as Sieradz or Wałbrzych. The difference is, however, in the amount of information. In addition, large communes seem to have more professional websites. Some sites include links to the source of information about provincial council and the local elections.

When we look at local parties websites, we can find information about people to contact and opportunities to establish it with representatives of the parties (here, mostly appears contact to a local party branch chairman.) But we cannot say that this information is open space for dialogue. You can make contact - by phone or via e-mail - with the President or other members of the party. Whether this will be a two way contact - between a voter and a member of the party or between the citizen and the politician - or whether it contributes to public debate on the Internet, depends on how parties treat such notifications. Unfortunately in Poland, very few local parties creates opportunities for active participation in political dialogue at the local level through the network for the residents. Only in bigger analysed cities (Wałbrzych, Sieradz, Krosno - former voivodship centre) a local political debate in the network is more visible, but it still does not constitute predominant dialogue space for the local public sphere. Few examples of separate local portals with discussion forums (e.g.: www.walbszyszek.com; www.krosno24.pl; www.doba.pl; www.sieradzanie.pl) can be indicated, where in the local political problems are discussed and Internet users take up important matters. It also seems that these forums that exist, are not used to extensively. Neither do the larger nor smaller political parties offer discussion groups or other opportunities that expand the debate on the network. In some municipalities it is the smallest local party or municipal association which offers such function (e.g. OBS). Probably, it can be explained by the fact that some parties have members who are interested in technical issues and perceive the Internet as a place for political debate, while the other parties do not have such members. Analysing sites of some municipalities from western or northern Europe countries as The Netherlands, Germany, Denmark we can find links of groups and associations working in the area. This makes it possible to orient in the activities of local NGOs. In



varying degrees, information about offers of different organizations can be found. Some of these associations have complex websites, others do not have websites at all and are only mentioned in the municipal service. Lists like these are written by the same pattern as the traditional presentation of organizations in the written information issued by local governments such as brochures describing what is happening in the district. This includes both municipality and NGOs' offers. In Eastern Europe – the case of Poland insertion of information devoted to activities of non-governmental organizations on community websites has improved, but of course it is not such a common occurrence as is the case of many other countries with highly developed democracy, which certainly adversely affects the development of an adequate level of public debate, and thus somewhat weakens the emerging local democracy in Poland.

Electronic services of municipalities provide residents with detailed and updated information, and thanks to the municipalities' websites people who have the access to the Internet can get the information they need without going to the town hall. Municipalities included in the study put more emphasis on the aspect of an information network; therefore, their websites offer people comprehensive and useful information. It is not confined to public services or cultural events in the municipality. On the web of municipalities there are also references to the municipal council resolutions undertaken or city council. Some of the municipalities, before the meeting, publish a list of matters the given institution will work on (e.g.: Dzierżoniów).

At the beginning of this century small municipalities in Poland were subjected to criticism. They were criticized for lack of professionalism and that they do not even deserve to be called web pages. This criticism even then was not justified. The smallest municipalities did not and still do not differ from the largest in terms of informing the public about services or about the meetings of the municipal council. Differences are primarily placed on the amount of information rather than on their quality, shape, or manner of communication. Large municipalities have more information to share, as such Krosno municipality website is seen to have more content than the Rymanów municipality site.

Moreover the shape, form and quality of the website design is being determined the commune budget, which, unfortunately, in the case of small municipalities is sometimes quite limited. It must be admitted that the quality of web pages in Polish municipalities in 2002, left much to be desired (especially when it comes to small municipalities). The passing decade definitely changed the image of the Polish e-community and the difference between large and small municipality in the network primarily refers to the quantity rather than quality of the information published on the website of the municipality.

A common feature of the analysed communes is primarily the fact that the Internet is used as an information channel rather than as a channel of participation. If people are to participate in political discourse, information is very important, because in contrast to public opinion polls and plebiscites, and even consultation, participation requires access to information in order to form an opinion on the subject of discussion. Active participation also requires something more: to focus on the role of the citizen. If residents have been involved in the process of policy formation, it is important to know their rights. What information do the authorities, particularly the local governments, want from the residents? To what extent can residents expect their views to be listened to and used? When can they expect feedback?



Morrison and Newman (2001) suggest that the rapprochement between the residents and politicians, relies on something other than connecting the consumer with commercial interests. Strengthening the role of the citizen is not just that residents are listened to, but also to emphasize the responsibilities and liabilities associated with being a citizen of a democratic society. But in order for residents to take part in political debate as the person informing the politicians, they must be well informed themselves. Active participation in the political debate requires a balanced, high-quality information so that participants would not only have contact with their own views but perhaps with the views of those who disagree with them. Internet provides a sketchy knowledge, and often people receive information from a limited number of sources which, in the worst case, only worsen the already existing prejudices.

The role of the municipality websites as information disseminators is very important, because in this way people receive knowledge on political matters and have a base to form an opinion on the given issue. Such a knowledge base is necessary for inhabitants to become informed citizens, capable to fully participate in the political discussion. The work that is done by the municipalities on their websites, consisting of informing the political agenda, activities and issues over which local government operates, as well as indicating the reasons for decisions taken, is therefore very important. The local parties also have their roles to be done. In this field the results were worse than in all discussed municipalities especially in case of Poland where local politicians are visible on the web only before the election and just after it. Websites of local parties or local branches of national parties in Poland are not very frequently updated and there are more likened to posters of the party than debate forums.

Information is an important basis for active participation in the political life of the commune. The Internet which is a different way than the traditional political channels, can give residents the opportunity of such participation. Yet, it is still a lot to be done in this field in municipalities in Poland. The possibilities of inviting residents to the political debate in the municipality such as in newsgroups or via the feedback and reactions to the proposals of politicians are not often used in Poland. It seems to be improved and in the last two years we have found more municipalities where we can meet some positive examples of public dialogue being followed on the Internet (e.g. Dzierżoniów commune). It is a rare practice to create the active discussion platform at the local community level. Existing websites are more like passive description of the municipality, local policy, local politicians etc. It is probably not the result of deliberately chosen strategy by the municipality and this could be explained by the fact that the Internet's potential is still not fully exploited by the municipalities. It seems that there is still some time before it will be perceived also as a forum for discussion, in which residents can participate and which will be more accessible than traditional forms of participation, such as open meetings, party, etc. In Poland the biggest municipalities have usually the most complex websites. You can find there a detailed presentation of the local administration, municipal services and the latest information useful to residents. This does not mean that smaller municipalities do not have good websites, similar in content to larger ones. It is clear however that the biggest municipalities have in their services the largest amount of information. They just have more to offer: more schools, kindergartens, more cultural events, which they can inform about and more user surveys that can be placed on the Internet. The need for information is thus the largest in the largest



municipalities, and they probably just have the most to gain from having a good website.

Guzik (2004) Biernacka-Ligięza (2010) in their studies claim that when it comes to the differences between communes in terms of Internet presence and extent of local democracy, a significant role is played by the number of inhabitants. It does not change the fact that many small municipalities have made very positive results in the study, although it is clear that the size of the municipality is important to decide whether it will come into existence in the network or not, and if so - what will be the quality of this presence. In short, small municipalities do not have a sufficient range of services to investment in the viability of electronic technology. Thus, they believe that if the electronic administration is soon to replace traditional one the extensive cooperation between municipalities is needed. It allows for a smooth transition to an electronic management system in the municipality.

For residents of communities being analysed in this paper the Internet at the beginning of this century was not a very important source of information about local issues. Only few people read the mayors and other politicians statements that appear in the network (less than 1% of Poles). Only 1% of the population of Poland was actively involved in Internet political debates⁵. Today the situation is slightly different, especially when it comes to the Internet as a source of information, which for many residents of Polish communities is precisely the most important place where they seek information relevant to them about the region (approx. 39%). However, they do not seek such information at the municipal sites but rather use the commercial information services such as: www.krosno24.pl; www.swidniczka.pl; www.doba.pl; www.walbrzyszek.pl etc. The local newspaper also remains quite important source of information about the municipality (approx. 31%)⁶. Of course, paper publications are more often accompanied by electronic editions. Today, almost every local title has its own page on the Internet.

Taking into account the opportunity to participate in political discussions on the Internet, it may not be surprising, since the possibilities of discussing politics in the network are few, they are limited and in addition very often linked to specific political parties. Since few residents are members of political parties, we cannot expect that participation in the existing newsgroups will be high.

However, it might have been expected that the number of people who have seen or read posted statements of mayors or other local politicians on the web, would be much greater. Such statements can be found not only on the municipal website and on the websites of parties, but also, and more often than in the electronic version, in newspapers (only 3% of inhabitants of Poland have become familiarized with these statements through the Internet).

It is worth to indicate that both in Poland the Internet is very important source of information about the region its culture, tourist attraction, economy but most respondents (76% of Poles)⁷ stated that the Internet is still not an important source of information about local politics. Taking into account that over 34% of Poles found that the local newspaper is an important source of information, it can be concluded

⁵ Source: Author's own research 2007

⁶ Source: Author's own research 2009

⁷ Source: Author's own research 2009



that the Internet as a source of information about local politics and as an arena to exchange views on political issues, is still in its early stages of development.

Thus, the results show that the Internet, scarcely has been used by politicians as a possible source of political information or communication. Today its popularity has increased considerably. However, it seems to be more visible on the national level, where very often the presence of politics in the network determines its success. In the case of policy at local level, where politicians are no longer anonymous and known by the voters only from the media, network is no longer an essential element of communication with the voter. This is confirmed by the analysis, which shows that the Internet is not regarded as an important source of information on local politics in any of the municipalities, and even though you can point out the differences between the areas, they are not so big. Participation in online political debate is also not popular. Such "chat rooms/discussion forums" are created by newspapers, political parties or commercial information portals and are not part of municipal information services. This is because municipalities tend to rely on information concerning the resolutions of the political or administrative regulations, and creating space for political debate is left for political parties or other entities.

Conclusions

When democracy is evolving and changing, not only ways of managing are changing but also the perception of representation. ICT is undoubtedly one of the major elements in the wave of reforms carried out in many western administration. ICT refers to strategic management and significant changes in the way the public sector works. Pressure for introducing the e-administration is on the increase. When democracy is evolving and changing, not only ways of managing are changing but also the perception of representation. ICT itself may not strongly affect citizens' attitudes toward community involvement and participation, but can be used to create conditions for a more involving, inclusive and transparent democratic culture (Klotz 2004; Chadwick 2006; Dahlgren 2009). We can observe many changes in contemporary communication systems which are an inherent part of e-administration. These may be changes in how the internal organization of the public sector works - i.e. the technology can be used to improve collaboration and integration between different levels of government and between offices. The second type is amended to increase the availability of online information about the work of public institutions and the fact that the public sector will try to arrange its activities for the benefit of the people so that the centre of activity is shifted towards self-service (Grönlund and Anderson 2007; Yates, Gulati and Tawileh 2010; Nam 2010).

Internet proved to be for majority of analysed communes mainly a tool for conveying information and providing services on the appropriate level, very rarely used as a platform for debate. It can be noticed that still important role in building local democracy and local identity continues play local newspaper (in printed and electronic version), where readers can find both information and also have the opportunity to participate in the debate however, local news sites are becoming even more popular (often commercial initiative, or additional activity of local publishers/broadcasters) and usually win with the press. Unfortunately Polish local politicians are scarcely "visible" on the Internet it is rather difficult to find information about local political parties which do not provide up-to-date information to their constituency. Poles are rather not looking for information about local politicians/politics on the Internet because they show little interest in this area of local activity they are more active in the field of sport, education or culture.



The strengthen of the two sided communication for building up the local debate seems to be an important issue for Polish municipalities especially if the aforementioned 'strong dimension of' democracy is to be further strengthened, consensus and cooperation need to be emphasized. The basis for the legitimacy is public debate, and the mandates of elected representatives are interactive or granted in consultation with those who are represented. The main role of the population is its opinion-forming ability and therefore, except information and services, the most important field of contribution in the usage of ICT should be debate.

"Internet challenges" for municipalities will not concern the information, although in this field there is probably still something to do. Small and large communities can better cooperate with each other in solving technological problems than in isolation. The biggest challenge will be to use the Internet to engage citizens in discussion about the future of the municipality - in short - to strengthen political commitment and participation. We must therefore focus not on the information, as before, but on including consultation and, above all, active participation of residents. This requires different ways of working and a much more involvement, not only from the municipal administration, but also from politicians. Technology that allows residents to participate in political debate through the Internet or expressing their opinion, e.g. on the planned construction work, is available today. It includes tools such as "chat rooms/discussion forums", where residents and politicians may participate in joint discussions, and simulation tools that can be used to show the consequences of given decisions, e.g. on expansion of the municipality, the budget or space planning.

Technology offers various possibilities and, although not all are yet fully developed, many tools can be very useful. This does not mean that we should ignore the disadvantages of new technology, or forget about the traditional forms of participation. However, it is worth noting that use of technology could contribute to the strengthening of political participation at local level. In this process it is important to take into account both the advantages and disadvantages (e.g. on the one hand, chat is not only good for teenagers, but on the other, this form of discussion can be rather chaotic).

We should also look at information in terms of authenticity, credibility and confidence, which requires its frequent updating. The uncertainty which may create anonymity in the network also in political discussions. Such problems arise and the challenge is to find solutions for them, among others through various forms of registration, which also allow for anonymity in the debate, since this can contribute to a greater sense of security. We still lack real opportunities to participate in political discussions on the Internet and the municipality should develop its offer. Such possibilities and not the Internet itself, have a chance to actively engage residents in making sense of their own political process.

Many institution and persons engage in creation tools using ICT, which can have positive impact on democratic political system. Enthusiasts of new technologies believe that thanks to them access to information can be ensured, thereby greater transparency of decision making process and decision-makers' responsibility from society. According to the optimists, new channels of communication and consultation will allow, from one hand to adapt better authorities policy to social expectations, and on the other may encourage citizens to become more involved in state affairs.



Among the main advantages of e-democracy is also access to a public hearing for the elderly and disabled people. Some see the beneficial impact of new technologies on institutions and political processes. For others, it is clear that the ICT revolution brings new solutions, but it is not a "cure" for most of the problems. The main problem for democracy in recent years was not the lack of sufficient number of channels of participation, but little interest in public affairs and public little confidence in state institutions, and these problems will not be solved by any technology. Attention is also drawn to exclude those who have not mastered the skills needed to function in the information society, or do not have access to the Internet. We also do not know to what extent the public Internet debate proves to be a substantive discussion. Regardless of the extent to which we believe in the vision of "the resurgence of Athenian democracy" and "electronic debate forum", we cannot ignore the fact that the way we communicate and the expectations of citizens, who increasingly use the Internet, are changing. To meet with interest and meet with its target, new tools, which are put in the internet users hands, must be well designed. The idea is to permit the analysis of citizens and provide them with feedback, whether and how much influence they have for the course of affairs and decisions.

To sum up, one has to conclude that the Internet can contribute to the reconstruction of local public sphere because it is a convenient way of communication. Any content can be put online and it does not require special skills. In a situation in which the local media lose their meaning, the Internet could fill the gap. It also gives an opportunity to participate in a bigger debate into which more people are engaged than would be the case with the TV or newspapers. The Internet also creates a possibility to have a debate on socio-political issues and to organize political marketing online. However, it is rarely used, especially in small towns and villages. Despite social changes, technology development, chances of participation, the analysis shows that local communities rather slowly adjust to these changes, they do not organize initiatives, and they do not fully realize the potential of the Internet.

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