

DIGITALIZING ALBANIAN GOVERNMENT - ROLE OF INTERNET IN MANAGING GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION

DIGITALIZACIJA ALBANSKE VLADE – ULOGA INTERNETA U UPRAVLJANJU VLADINOM KOMUNIKACIJOM

Eva Londo

University of Tirana, Tirana, Albania
Sveučilište u Tirani, Tirana, Albanija

Abstract

Internet has been widely used as a new effective way of political communication. It has been extensively incorporated in the government to generate public feedback as a subset of two way communication between citizens/businesses and the government. The so called e-Government is a process or a mechanism that can increase transparency and decrease corruption. The e-government services need to be strongly underpinned by citizen trust and government transparency. This paper will explore the use of internet by the Albanian government, methods and tactics that it employs to maximize its benefits as a two way communication process. It will examine the state of the internet in Albania and the way e-government is developing in line to European standards. Moreover, the paper will elaborate on the ways that digitalization of public information is influencing people's involvement in the decision - making processes of the government or even in discussing important governmental policies.

Abstract

Internet se često služi kao nov, učinkovit način političke komunikacije. Intenzivno se ugrađuje kao dio vladine komunikacije da bi se dobila povratna informacija od javnosti, te da bi se uvela dvosmjerna komunikacija građani/poduzetništvo i vlada. Takozvana e-vlada je proces ili mehanizam koji može povećati transparentnost i smanjiti korupciju. Ovaj rad istražiti će upotrebu interneta albanske vlade, metode i taktike koje se koriste da bi se maksimizirale koristi dvosmjernog komunikacijskog procesa. Ispitati će se stanje interneta u Albaniji i način na koji se razvija e-vlada uzimajući u obzir europske standarde. U radu će se objasniti kako digitalizacija javnih informacija utječe na uključivanje ljudi u proces odlučivanja – kod vlade ali i uključivanja u diskusije o važnim vladinim odlukama.

The evolution of government digital communication

As the people are becoming more demanding of their government, communication is put in the spotlight as a mean of allowing the interaction between the two. Communication methods of the government are evolving from a passive to a more interactive and inclusive process where everyone is the actor, the governed and the governors. As the need for information is surging, the urge to communicate these needs fast, timely and accurately is putting forward the use of technological means that have the readiness to provide information in just a blink of an eye. It may sound too easy however, the process of enabling technological communication is a long, technical and challenging process.

Although, the techniques that public relations employ to communicate the institution or organization to the public intend to involve a two way communication, internet has created new dimensions for PR. It has opened up new channels of communication between governments and the public/businesses that are fast, although challenging.

This new technological tool of public relations, that is constantly evolving and making news from "the end of the world" to spread globally, has brought important world events so close to everybody, events such as: world cup, burial of Michael Jackson, the marriage of the royal british couple (hit records ever per internet views), the inaugural of Barack Obama. Well, when mentioning Obama, it automatically links to internet, because,

justifiably he is considered to be the President of the Internet, eventually. He revolutionarised political communication and is still maximising the benefits of internet in the way he governs the country.

Internet in Albania is a new form of communication of the government with its citizens. The use of internet in the private sector has been and still remains 'a big hit'. As a tool of public relation, it enables communication either as an interactive method or as a participatory method.

From 2000, when the first government webpages were created, internet has been a challenge for the Albanian government, a challenge that intended to bring Albania closer to the rest of the community it was living, the European Community.

"Albania in the age of internet" was one of the electoral promises of the Democratic Party in 2005. It was the foreword of the ambitious goal of the democratic government elected in 2005 to get Albania to the EU. Thus, this promise would not only serve as an electoral promise to attract the targeted group of voters, but would also be a goal that would carry out the historical dream for Albanian, the EU integration. Since the electoral promise in 2005 things related to this mean of communication has changed, first evidencing a raise in the number of users, PC, internet hosts, penetration etc (see appendix for statistical information on internet development in Albania).

At the beginning of 2007 the Albanian government signed an agreement for strategic partnership with the American company, Microsoft. The partnership, between the Government and Microsoft intended to provide schools with 6 thousand computers, provided that the government would respect ownership rights by purchasing Microsoft programs /1/. Since this partnership, despite the criticism and skepticism that it encountered, it has been witnessed a big and significant rise in the number of internet users, which would urge for more professional and interactive webpages for organization, both public and private. As the online publics are rising, webpages should be more than informative spaces. They should adopt their visual appearance and content to the rising needs of this demanding changing market, putting the public at the focus of their operation, therefore creating the so called digital public and digital consciousness.

Although the agreement with Microsoft lasted for a short period of time, it contributed to boost internet use (Chart 4 shows the rapid rise in internet users since 2005). Catching with the trend and evaluating the modernization and implementation of IT, as a chance for rapid and qualified development, in 2007 Albania signed the Electronic South Eastern

Europe Agreement. This was a common agenda for the countries of Southeast Europe, signed in the framework of action Plan of European Union 2010 for the information societies, as a common goal of all EU countries. The commitments set in this agreement even though challenging were a huge step toward the integration of the country to EU. Considering the poor state of the IT &C, a lot should be done, but first prioritize the main aspects of intervention which were; infrastructure, electronic government and public services, education and knowledge (digital literacy), and legal framework. The digital Albania initiative, was signed and (is still being) implemented in the framework of EU integration, the main goal of the government. While in 2010 Albania got a step forward to EU integration with the candidature status to EU along with the liberalization of visa, its full membership to EU requires a lot of work and accomplishments, where e-government is one of these.

As a starting point, the government has created the webpage for digital Albania (E-Albania), which is a facilitated way of navigating through all the governmental institutions and agencies. In the webpage are listed all ministries and agencies (altogether 26), as well as procedures, services and activities of the government and other information classified for different social groups, citizens, businesses, government and visitors. E-Albania is an informative webpage that provides links to the governmental webpages or informs online publics about procedures related to e-government. The creation of the GOVNET, project has ensured that all ministries, department dhe agencies are linked through a high speed optical fiber to process internet.

For the purposes of the digital initiative, as a regulatory body of the whole process, the government has created the Ministry for Innovation and Information Technology and Communication, whose mission is to coordinate and evaluate the obligations of all responsible actors involved in the process. The National Agency on Information society, which operates under the auspicious of the Ministry has a central role in developing, monitoring and implementing the Intersectorial Strategy on Information Technology, based on the national strategy on IT&C approved by the government on April 2003. The strategy adapts and complements individual steps and principles for the development of information society from the perspective of digital inclusion. By addressing the issues of digital integration for all citizens, along with eGovernment issues across public administration, opportunities open up to mitigate the impacts of these problems on society and accommodate the growing requirements among

citizens who expect the state to improve their quality of life.

In the meantime, government is encouraging projects with the international community, donors, non-governmental organization etc that contribute to digital literacy, such as internet training courses for young people, donations of computers, and other investments.

Digital government legislation

However, in a society with no digital culture (or a very recent digital culture), and some other historical, political and social factors, involving internet in the government may raise doubts about privacy and security, therefore making its users skeptical about using it and benefiting from the effect of this medium. Concerns also rise by the level of cybercrime; invasive procedures that have concerned the whole world recently, with hackers interfering even in e-pages of governments such as in the UK or Croatia. In order to protect its webpages from this kind of invasive crime Albanian government has taken same official and legal measures such as:

- *The compilation of a legal framework against kibernetik crime (Penal Code)*
- *The establishment of the office of the Commisioner for Data Protection (functioning since 2008)*
- *The organization of a sensibilisation campaign for internet security in schools, families, different institutions, private companies, IT companies etc.*
- *The setting up of rules for TV programs that are applicable online. /2/*

Evidently, the measures taken to protect e-government, intend to ensure the continuation of the communication process as a safe, reliable, practical, fast and easy method to inform the publics and exchange information with them.

Also, Albania has made progress in the process of approximating its legislation and policies to the *acquis communautaire* as following:

1. New Law on "Personal Data Protection" (No. 9887, date 10. 03. 2008), was adopted in conformity with 95/46/EC directive;
2. Law on Electronic Signature (No. 9880, date 25. 02.2008) was adopted in conformity with EU experiences(99/93/EC directive);
3. Some ammendement in the Law No. 7895 date 27.1.1995 "Penal Code of Republic of Albania" are approved during 2008 is in conformity with Cybercrime Convetion
4. New law on electronic communications No 9918 was approved on 19th May 2008 by the Parliament. This law is in conformity with EU directives (2002 package).

5. New law on electronic commerce was approved on 11th of May 2009

The development stages of e-government in Albania

Although in the first stages, important steps have been made to improve the electronic communication of the government with all the citizens. The ministries and public agencies' webpages can be an efficient massmedium to convey and distribute information, or messages that can serve to different publics and can not be interpreted by someone other than the organization itself. On the other hand, it is a transactive two-way communication that facilitates procedures for all actors involved in the process, thus stimulating the public feedback mechanism as a subset of two-way interactions between citizens/businesses and governments that are channeled to a direct point of contact, and might be both internally and externally traceable.

Most governments realize the potential for e-government initiatives to disseminate information, improve service delivery, increase transparency, decrease corruption, and widen democratic participation. e-Government initiatives can be categorized as internal, which are government to government (G2G) and government to employee (G2E), or external, which are government to business (G2B) and government to citizen (G2C). e-Government transforms the governments' external relationships, whether G2B or G2C, by enabling citizens to directly receive government services from anywhere in the world without making personal visits or going through bureaucratic procedures. Interactions with the government can either be one-way, from government to citizen/business, or two-way, which allows citizen/business to communicate to government. See figure 1

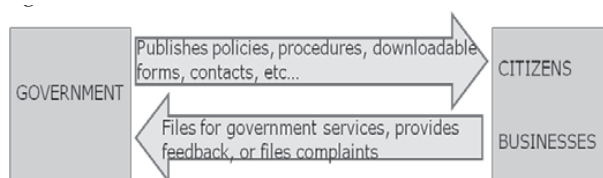


Figure 1: The communication process between government and citizens/business

Most e-government initiatives that deal with external relations begin with a web presence and evolve into a platform for transactions of government services to take place. Two-way interactions between the citizen/business and government can actually occur from the very beginning with a mere web presence. For example,

a website that publishes government policies on registering a business can contain the email or other contact information of the civil servant in charge. This enables the citizen to initiate a two-way interaction by emailing or calling the person. Online government transactions of course, are two-way interactions where the government first offers the service, the citizen provides relevant information, and the government completes the service.

As shown in the graphs below the communication process of eGovernment services in Albania has evolved from the passive model of just distributing information on the web, to downloading templates for different services and lastly to direct services delivered online. (see also, chart that explicates the eGovernment transformation process).

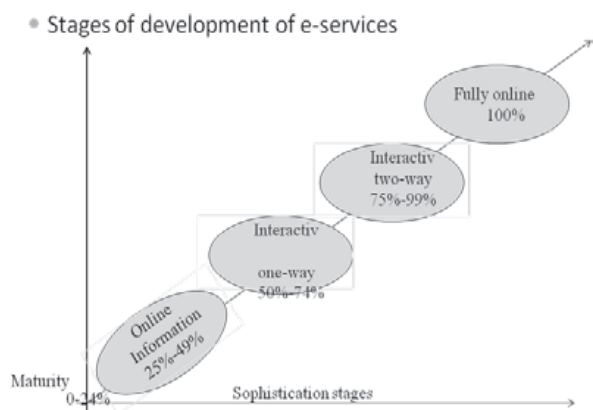


Chart 1: The development stages of e-services

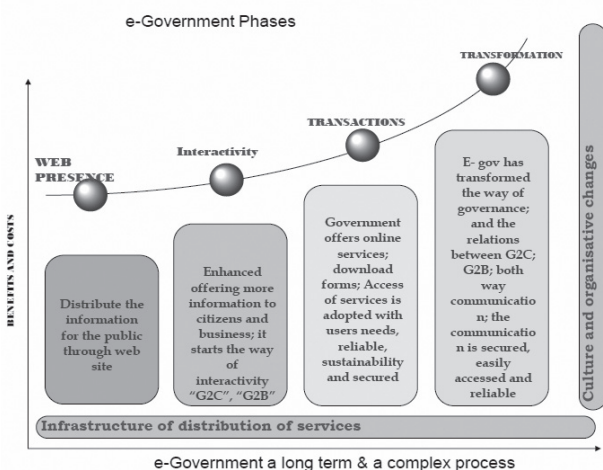


Chart 2: E-government transformation process

As a medium in itself eGovernment can offer information strictly related to the government such as political events, projects, visits, press releases, departmental organization or any other relevant information that might be of public interest. Today, a webpage of a ministry can offer the citizen

information on job vacancies, how to address a complaint, how to apply online, or even find the electoral center to vote, etc. Therefore, from the commodity of their house the citizen can have the kind of information needed from the government while avoiding queues and beaurocracies if they were to go there in person.

On the other hands, businesses can use web pages to apply online for public tenders, or pay taxes, download application forms, e.g. in registering a new business, or in declaring good at the custom, etc. In fact businesses are more willing and enthusiastic about the developments that e-government is implementing, because of the time and money saving benefits

According to the study by IDRA (Institute for Development Research and Alternatives) published in 2007, 83% of businesses are ready to receive information on procurement from the webpage of the Agency of Public Procurement, and 82 % are ready to receive the information about taxes online. Apparently, businesses are showing willingness and readiness to deliver online services by the government (as illustrated in the chart below).

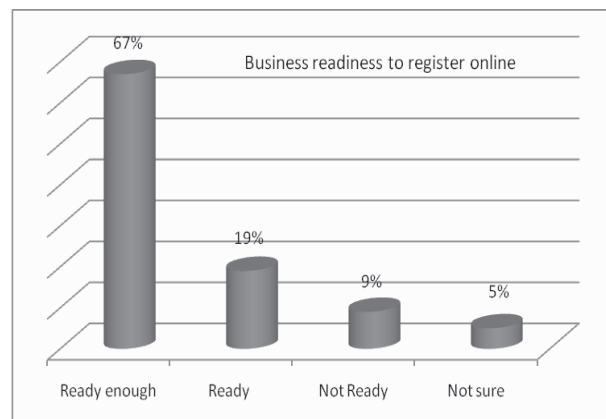


Chart 3: Business readiness to register online

The table below shows the services that citizens and businesses can benefit from e-government.

Public services for citizens (G2C)	Public services for business (G2B)
Taxes on income	Staff' social insurance
Job searches and applications	Taxes for corporations
Social security	VAT
Personal Documents (driving license, passport)	Business registration (e-business)
Car registration	Statistical data
Aplication for construction license	Custom Declaration

Police denouncement	Environmental licenses
Public libraries	Public procurement
certificates	Public finances
Register for university (e-Education)	
Change of address	Online trading (e-trade)
e-Health)	
e-Culture	

Table 1: Services offered by e-government

While e-government is in process of transformation of e-government aiming to get all services online, below are some new more services, on which is still working to get online:

- Treasury System – Computerized System for Public Finances, financed by WB
- NCR – for business registration
- E - taxes – modernization of tax system
- HRMS – HR Management system, DoPA
- E-Custom – ASYCUDA, modern data processing system
- Health System Modernization – Financed by WB
- ALUIZNI – Legalization and Urbanization of Informal Areas/Buildings
- E-Justice – Penalty Declaration
- E-Albania
- Civil Registry – Digitizing of hand-written records
- Addressing System – In progress
- ID Card & Biometric Passports
- PKI & CA – In progress with Ministry of Interior
- National Business Licensing Center & National Planning Registry
- Future Development of GovNet – (GoA)

The values internet is adding to e-government

The use of internet in the government through e-government increases the process of transparency, putting pressure on government structure to act and govern by rules and norms set by citizens who constantly expect to always learn the truth, eventually, and be involved. Trust is transforming the license to operate for government (and business). The interactive, participatory involvement of the citizens in the decision-making processes of the government empowers the public with a mean to monitor and control its government, therefore increasing trust among citizens. In order to perform, eGovernment services need to be strongly underpinned by citizen trust and government transparency. Investment in infrastructure and eGovernment-service development are essential, but services provided are not going to be used and investment will be hard to justify unless a government manages to create transparency and

trust. All government webpages have online links where citizens can write and address concerns, complaints, information. When this information is addressed to a webmaster and the citizens is not sure whether he/she should be expecting for an answer, his trust on e-government start to fade. And when he does not get an answer, then he will not try it any more, putting doubts of efficiency for e-government. On some cases, the webpages publicise telephone number that are never accessible, therefore leading to mistrust that interactivity is really functioning. While preparing for this study I send an e-mail to the Ministry of Tourism, requiring some information on e-tourism (to an unspecified contact) and did not get a response. Despite this, in the webpage the ministry has a separate window requesting online visitors to evaluate the webpage through an online questionnaire. Therefore this gives the impressions that the process is in constant improvement and for this the ministry is calling for the citizen's online experience. Surprisingly, in the same responsiveness test about public concerns addressed to some ministries, I did not get an answer to my e-mail sent to the National Agency for Information Technology that coordinates the whole process. While some other ministries are more responsive to public requirements, such as the Prime Minister office.

In fact, online communication requires focal points from different ministries, clearly defined policies on how to address the information, and internal accountability, in order to respond to the citizens accurately and timely. If this is achieved, it will contribute to public trust and transparency on the government. Despite some lapses that may be noticed in the online communication, it is certain that the challenge with the e-government links to the way different actors get involved, interact and communicate with each other in an attempt to contribute to the development of effective political process. Essentially, e-government has to do mostly with the way contemporary communication is applied in the government not only to give information about public services and procedures of the government and to facilitate these processes in the favor of both parties, (government and the citizens), but also to consider public's opinion in the decision-making processes. Public involvement in eGovernment deployments is critical because it help transform citizen to government relationships by holding governments accountable. If implemented well, e-government enables all citizens, enterprises and organizations to carry out their business with government more easily, more quickly and at a lower cost and also without the physical presence of the person.

On the part of the government, the transformation of all its operations through the introduction and usage of innovative ICT tools contribute to:

- Fight corruption in daily work practices
- Improve the transparency of Government's work
- Increase and improve the citizen-centered services

For example, the effects of online services are tangible and have significantly increased the state budget. For e.g in the custom points 99 % of all transactions is processed online from registering the products to payment, and all custom points are linked to the central system operated by the General Directorate of Customs. This has decreased considerably the phenomena of corruption, the gangrene of the government, highly present in this sector.

The achievement reached until now in disseminating and communicating online information has contributed positively in increasing government performance and transparency. For the progress done in e-government, in May 2010, Albanian was appreciated by UN about its contribution in improving transparency, responsibility and readiness (reagushmerise) in the public sector. Albanian Agency for Public Service was ranked second among countries in European and North American countries, for developing the platform on procurement fully. Albania is the first country in the world to have developed the procurement system fully online.

Internet is not only adding values to government performance alone, but it is giving values to the society as well. Embracing digital Albania's initiative, the government is serving the goal for digital literacy, as part of the universal digital literacy. Every child today must be digitally literate by the time he or she leaves high school as a way to combat and compete in the changing market where internet plays an important role. Internet as a tool can help community development, and this can be achieved by enabling internet access to all rural communities and to all social classes.

Alongside the benefits, though, it must be recognised that e-transparency also brings costs (of technology, of implementation, of staff time, of training, etc.). In a conversation with the Public Relations director at the Prime Minister office, Gjovalin Prenga, he admitted that online communication has risen the amount of online complaint and the efforts that he and the staff are putting to address them online. According to him "the staff is not adequately trained to manage online communication, therefore we have problems in coordinating and addressing this information".

The use of digital communication in the government, in fact, has increased the work load for

all the communication staff. In a inspection, taken for the purposes of this research, at the communications departments at the Prime Minister's office (Office for Communication, Department of IT, and that of PR composed in total a staff of 16 people) the electronic government has increased the number of visitors that take information online by around 30 %. On the other hand, most of interviewed staff do not admit to have a reduction in work load, but consider online communication as a more interactive way for testing the efficiency of their work. For example, the PR department, only recently receives online complaints, and this new procedure needs a rapid coordination with the responsible department or ministries and then a careful and explanatory response. The IT department, also, accept the work load that the e-government has added, which is more evident by the lack of staff in this department. It may be difficult for the 2 staff members at IT department to process the amount of information addressed to the government. Apparently, the electronic governing has put pressure on people who work with it because they have to be alert all the time to coordinate communication and upload timely relevant information. On the other hand it is evident that measures had to be taken in training staff, and increasing the number of qualified staff.

Engaging people to political policies of the government through internet

Information technologies and communication are finding open avenues to all countries, because the internet is widely used as an effective way to link the publics with its government. It also ensures active participation of the publics in the decision-making processes of the government. The government is a key actor to guarantee that public is constantly stimulated, and the outcome of that stimulation is reflected in the debate on different policies or other decisions, made by the government. It is its responsibility to ensure that citizens are involved in public debates, be it directly or through technology. Hence, internet is an important tool in the hands of the government, and if used properly it can increase government performance, much faster than other tools.

It is challenging to communicate in a new, unexplored space, such as internet, where both parties, the government and the citizens, are hesitant and biased to take maximum advantage of the benefits of the internet. Whilst e-Government has extended the scope of understanding; from as being centered around the operations of government, to including citizen engagement and participation in governance. In other words, the citizen should

feel that the government takes in consideration his opinion in the governing process. Therefore, if a citizen sends an information, a concern, or a complaint to the government, it is actually being processed and the citizens should know that. This kind of interaction unleashes e-government's true potential to change the way governments interact with citizens and businesses by giving anyone, regardless of race, class, religion, or gender, the opportunity to interact directly with government officials. It is an important tool, among others, to ensure that government officials are there to actually serve the people.

All ministries and agencies publicise online contacts of staff allowing citizens to address their information, complaints or grievances to the relevant person, as part of the government service. Although the progress of the problem is not traceable. On the other hand, the response may be delayed because of the difficulties that staff may face in addressing the complaint to the relevant ministry and in coordinating the response.

Today, all government, Ministries and its agencies, have their own facilities accessible to all publics, from one way information to participatory methods of involvement. However problems occur in the way webpages are processes. E-governement can maximise its efficiency if all website element are performing at an adequate level. Critical content that can contribute to a site's perception as adequate and functional must first be found and accessed before it can be evaluated by citizens to determine what type of information is available on a given site and whether or not it is enough. Without good functionality, navigation, and search mechanism a website may remain unnoticed.

Therefore the webpage should be designed in an easy way to serve the citizens with the proper and relevant information about the pertinent institution. To facilitate the navigation process in the webpage, the government is aiming to standardize all ministries' webpage.

The communication offices manage the content of the webpages, although information is not constantly and daily updated, sometimes lacking consistency and accuracy. Most ministries' webpage contain introductory information such as structure, legislation, press notices, job vacancies, and some offer some more interactive information such as online forms for specific governmental procedures, and in very rare cases surveys or polls enabling publics to give opinions on different issues. A very recent and the only illustration to this is the public poll that the parliament opened online allowing the citizens to give their vote for the winning project of the new parliament building, among 12

competing international projects. Weeks later one of the 12 competing projects won, in a process that did not show the transparency that it evoked. The projects were also evaluated by a commission of professional, (engineers, architects etc), but how the public vote influenced their decision has not been revealed. However, interestingly, two months after the decision was made until the time this research was being prepared, the poll was still online on the webpage of the parliament under the flashing spot "New", still encouraging people to vote for the winning project. However, as a communication tool, this was an effective communicative way, which incited public participation and also monitored the impact of the internet, although there are no official statistics for that.

Polls of any other kind have rarely been a way to involve the people in the governing process. If any ministry has employed such methods it was more to test people's perception once the decision had been made rather than allowing the public to participate. E.g a recent poll online in the webpage of the Ministry of Integration asks citizens whether "the fulfillment of the obligation for visa liberalization is taking Albania one step forward to EU integration?" It looks like the government is just affirming the process in an attempt to gain support about the way they are governing and to earn political credits and merits. Since December 2010, when the poll question was posted online, the total voting for more than 5 months is ironically low (2212 responses). However, this kind of survey intends to search and analyze how public evaluates decisions taken, especially when they are of such paramount interest and importance, achievement that can be later used for political gain.

Is internet addressing all publics?

Using next generation technologies in the government, such as the internet, would help to reach some specific targeted audience. In fact, every citizen above the age of 18, who are mature enough to decide by whom they want to be governed, is the potential public of the government. It is this category that should consider themselves as active factors to receive the benefits of any initiative, especially when they have been released as electoral promises. In this logic, the youngster should be urging the government to make maximum use of internet, not only as a way to project itself to the public, but to spread the service geographically so that all youths benefit from the process. The youngsters are the most probable internet users, who bond perfectly with the "digital generation" era, However, their interest for government and

political news is very low. However, according to the demoscopic Institute Forsa, - "even those people who surf the internet rarely give this media an important attention". Internet is especially much more decisive during electoral campaign, and it is evaluated by the same institute that without the internet politician wouldn't have any chance to win. As mentioned above, e-government categorizes their publics as citizens, government, businesses and visitors, and further segmentation is done by program (e-education, e-health, e-procurement), etc.

Is internet used as a digital communication or just a marketing tool?

When Barack Obama was campaigning for president, he knew the value of connecting with people on their turf. As in public relation, successful communication critically considers the power of people and their attitude. Therefore it is important to know who they are, where they are, where they spend their time, not just feet in the street, but actually online, how they spend their time. In politics for example it is important to identify if the public a candidate want to approach is member of a specific social community, so that he/she build the presence where they feel most comfortable.

Political parties or candidates should acknowledge the internet or the social web, as methods to reach out easier to possible voters. According to David Pluffe in his book "Audacity to win", Obama's internet community was composed of 13 million people that can be compared as having " his own television network, only better, because they communicated directly with no filter to what would amount to about 20 percent of the total number of votes he would need to win" /3/. While Obama's way of using internet tools were changing the way political campaigns were managed, it is important to mention that no one had 1M fans on Facebook or 50K followers in Twitter. It was the biggest digital community until then. For Obama, internet did not just work out to gain public support, especially among those who were politically disappointed, but it housed his victory.

The presence of this digital community becomes evident in the White House webpage where the public actively interact and participate in decision making through links where all social group' members (Facebook, Twitter etc) give opinions, or participate in different surveys, thus revolutionizing government's e-communication and creating an organizational culture that values all tools of communication. Continuing this revolutionary online process in 2009 President Barack Obama's White House released the buzz-

phrase 'Transparency and Open Government', an ambitious and sweeping objective to transform government departments and agencies into entities that reflect the democratic ideals of openness, democratic participation, and collaboration.

Internet in the Albanian government is being used as a political marketing tool to bring values to communication. But it is just being 'used'. It is not a community. It is just a tool to effectively communicate with the public. And it can not be a community for as long as Albanian users still consider internet an intimidating place, in terms of technology, privacy, information etc.

Despite this, internet has been generously used during the latest local elections. The candidates used internet to gain support, and to pre-test their candidacy for mayors of the capital, Tirana. The democrat candidate was interactively involved with his digital community, mostly young people, by writing to them occasionally and only once he communicated with them directly via video, receiving questions and answering them for almost an hour. His digital community had 65, 000 followers, while his competitor (the socialist candidate) had 41, 000 followers.

But, as it was expected, the internet would predict the winner, it did not happen. The loss of the democrat candidate, by only 10 votes, showed that the new technology has not been fully understood. In general the loss of the democrat candidate, who did an exceptional campaign, in term of political marketing, concludes that its tools, including internet, are not influential in Albania. However, a lot of political, social and historical factors are associated with the little impact of internet and other political marketing tools in the voters' decision.

Conclusions

Communication is changing. As power shifts from institutions to communities of individuals, the opportunity for effective communication and public relations has never been greater. Organizations, both public and private increasingly appreciate the value of earning a reputation through actions and upholding with their responsibilities through building relationships and sustaining engagement both online and offline.

Online communication goes beyond geographical boundaries of its physical environment. Immediacy is everywhere. Once the information goes online, it goes global. The role of internet in all spheres of life is becoming paramount and most people could call it a new environment that would change the definition of public relation. In fact, since internet came about, people started

to hide behind computers, becoming faceless and developing relations mostly online. Although, this can also be reflected in organizations, both public and private, it can hardly substitute the broad diversity of methods for public participation. Especially in Albania this is more evident, where the mentality shaped by the social, political and historical environments, may accept these global trends, but cannot allow them take advantage over the physical interaction.

It is vital to encourage the involvement of citizens in governance and their active participation in the public administration's decision-making processes by applying ICT in eDemocracy services (e.g. discussion forums and Internet groups on public affairs, live streaming or records of public sessions – webcasting, acquisition of feedback via electronic forms, electronic submission of petitions, electronic election, provision of free access to electronic registers and databases).

Although online communication and information sharing has been considerably valued by the government, whether this tool is a persuasive metrics may be questionable for reasons already mentioned. There is still the idea that people have to go to websites, and that their use is highly technical, therefore they cannot be a private space; while the content of is most misinformation than information, which spreads fears of being manipulated. This fear, mostly related to historical,

social and political events rather than adaptation difficulties, requires governmental strategies to counter inclinations to “lock down” access and free flow of data and information at precisely the time when more transparency and conversation with citizens is needed. Moreover, the government should attempt to create the balance point between increased accessibility and knowledge-sharing - and the new reality of transparency. In itself, enabling citizens-wide access to online information can be evaluated as a catalyst to synchronizing and integrating governmental departments in the new demanding European marketplace, which is requiring a European-wide standardization of procedures linked to government performance. In this logic, internet has been identified as a metrics that proves the value of communications and information-sharing in a rapid time and across diverse cultures.

Considering the measures taken in the frame of the eSEE program (electronic South Easter program) Albania has made outstanding steps listing it 86th among 182 countries observed while in 2005 it was listed 115, promising a rapid grow. And while some future developments for e-government might sound ambitious, there might be a demand to show that internet transformation calls for society transformation. Soon, it may be needed to have Albanian citizens vote online, or have votes counted online or watch major events in mobile phones etc.

References

- 1/ http://www.bbc.co.uk/albanian/regionalnews/2007/01/070131_microsoft_tirana.shtml
- 2/ <http://www.akshi.gov.al/?crd=136>
- 3/ Pluffer, David, (2009), Audicity to win, The Inside Story and Lessons of Barack Obama's Historic Victory, Viking Adult, USA

Literature

1. Balz, Dan; Johnson, Haynes, (2009), The battle for America 2008, Penguin Group, USA
2. Davies, Philip John; Newman, Bruce, (2006), Winning elections with political marketing, the Haworth Press, USA
3. Londo, Eva, (2001), Public Information, the future for Albania, MA Dissertation thesis
4. Londo, Eva, (2009), Dinamika ne ndryshimin e marketimit politik ne Shqiperi ne dekadene fundit (Dynamics of marketing politics in Albania during the last decade), study presented in the international conference on the status and perspective of political communication in the Albanian society
5. Leary, Brent; Bullock, David (2008) Barack Obama's social media lessons for business with interactive online companion, Simply Stefanie's, USA
6. Zguri, Rrapo (2009), Perdorimi I internetit ne komunikimin politik (Internet use in political communication), study presented in the international conference on the status and perspective of political communication in the Albanian society

Webliography

- All ministries and agencies webpages
<http://www.keshilliministrave.al/>
<http://www.e-albania.al/>
<http://www.akshi.gov.al/>
<http://www.epractice.eu/en/document/288351>
http://www.dsdc.gov.al/dsdc/Dialogu_Qeveri_Donatore_52_1.php
http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/egovernment/index_en.htm \ http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/information_society/124226j_en.htm
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/al.html>

Reports

- Progress- report 2008 – the national strategy for development and integration
Intersectorial strategy of Information Technology and Communication
National Strategy on Science, Technology and Inovation 2009-2015
Government-donor dialog - Informativ bulletin, July, August 2010, Botimi nr. 41
Putting the citizens in the focus of policy-making. Global perspectives and best practices (2008), Institute for Democracy and Mediation

Appendix 1

The evolution of Internet in Albania

In 2000, when PR was still in its infant steps of application in Albania, internet had just started to operate. It looks like public relations and internet are developing in Albania hand by hand. Public relations is becoming one of most successful strategies in all sector of life and this mutual way of communication between the organization or institution and the society or the individual (as a part of it) looks like a common revolution of interest. Adding to this the use of internet, the interest becomes more an urge for interactive, rapid communication.

Internet, as a new technology, and a hi-tech way of interaction has entered the Albanian market a bit later than some other activities included within the discipline of PR (the end of the '90-ies). While PR and some of its activities were evident right after the big political change in Albania, which was associated with the establishment of party pluralism, the rise of the free market, the development of real journalism (rather than propaganda), the privatization and interdependence of many of the media (allowing the free flow of information). Fragments of activities of public relations practices started to appear first in the government, by employing the first spokespersons in 1991. Ministries opened up vacancies for spokespeople, who were only performing one way communication to the public, mostly sounding as press agents (the first model of PR performance), propagating government achievements. Also, as soon as the communication started to feel the changes, the first advertising agencies opened in 1990 mostly dealing with design, media bying and later advertisement production. Also the private sector hired people to perform some PR duties. But, the country was lacking proper knowledge, education and people to give PR their fully role and to put it to the service of the democracy itself. In the PR field, things started to change significantly by year 2000, with the establishment of the first local PR agencies, which later in the decade brought some big agencies operating in the country. Together with the evolution of public relation is developing the various number of techniques it employes to increase of reputation and mutual understanding of the organization and the public. Internet is an important tool of PR, that has evolved the last decade.

As shown in statistics available for Albania, in 2000 internet users were very low, 0,1 % of pululation (2,500 users) were using internet and the number of them was raising very slowly until

the great promise of the "digital era", made by the government in 2005. The box below show some statistical data important for internet evolution in Albania.

The table below shows the evolution of the internet users in Albania.

Chart 4: The evolution of internet in Albania

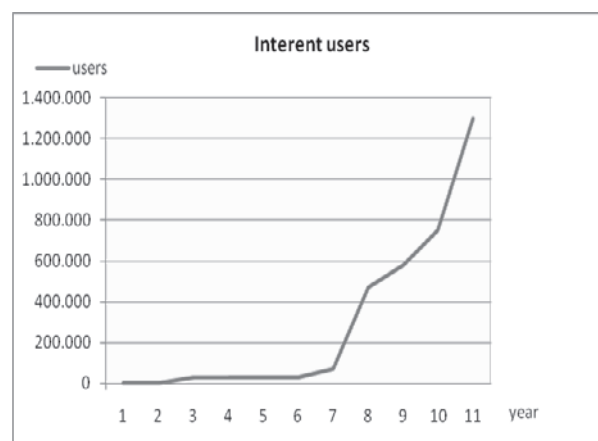


Table 2: the evolution of internet per population

YEAR	Users	Population	% Pop.
2000	2,500	3,083,300	0.1 %
2002	30,000	3,084,586	1.0 %
2006	75,000	3,087,159	2.4 %
2007	471,200	3,087,159	15.3 %
2008	580,000	3,619,778	16.0 %
2009	750,000	3,639,453	20.6 %
2010	1,300,000	2,986,952	43.5 %