

QUANTITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS OF COMMUNICATION PATTERNS ON FACEBOOK: A CASE STUDY OF THE CROATIAN GOVERNMENT

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ABSTRACT *In the process of involving citizens more deeply in the democratic process, Facebook is becoming an increasingly important tool for governments in policy making. Facebook has the potential to increase political participation, but many governments fail to use it in the right way, because they just share information online and do not engage with their followers/citizens. This paper shows how the Croatian government is using Facebook and the communication patterns resulting from their work. The quantitative analysis of 20,546 posts and 52,311 comments show that communication is one way, rather than interactive. Government users do not follow the 90-9-1- rule of thumb for social networks.*

KEY WORDS

SOCIAL MEDIA, FACEBOOK, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, E-GOVERNMENT, COMMUNICATION PATTERNS

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INTRODUCTION

Social media has rapidly changed everyday life. These new platforms enable individuals, businesses, organizations, governments and the whole of civil society to engage and interact. Using Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and other social media people can share information in real-time and together organize social demonstrations, mobilize different actions, bring down governments, or boost political campaigns and contribute to presidential wins.

“As the communications landscape gets denser, more complex, and more participatory, the networked population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action” (Srivastava, 2013). On the other hand, governments worldwide use social media in order to spread awareness of its political plans and other policies, to enable two-way communication with their citizens and establish quality, long-term relationships. They strive to be more transparent, innovative and participatory (Whitehouse.gov, 2013). Governmental use of social media has become common practice over the last few years.

Mark Schaefer (2011) defined five ways social media today is transforming governments. Besides transparency, the humanization of government, crisis-management and real-time responses, there is a strong aspiration towards citizen engagement.

Studies showed that citizens who engage with government online have a more positive view of government. Promoting close online engagement creates better decisions by capturing local knowledge, increases capacity of society to understand complexity of problems and increases public support by legitimizing the solutions (ibid.).

The use of social media by government, or Government 2.0, is seen as a low-cost way to increase citizen participation, transparency, accountability, and service delivery in the public sector. However, the impact of these tools depends on a variety of factors, including the quality of content, specific local government practices, and citizen response. (Moore, 2013: 1)

It is a fact that the usage of social media does not assure engagement with citizens. There are many cases where governments even fail right now in using social media, because they still use it as a tool for one-way communication.

The aim of this paper is to explain how the Croatian government uses its official Facebook page as a new communication platform in order to engage with its citizens. Government use of social media in Croatia is a new practice, so it is important to see what communication model dominates, how often, how successful and what type of information do they deliver to the public. Following the introduction, the paper is organized into four main sections. The first one presents the characteristics of Facebook, with the emphasis on Facebook Pages. The second part describes new communication patterns that evolved in past years and how the Government should use the full potential of this social media. The third part presents the methodology used to examine the research questions and also summarizes the results. In the end, the fourth section discusses the findings and presents the potential limitations of this study.

FACEBOOK AS A COMMUNICATION CHANNEL

Facebook is “a social utility that helps people communicate with the people they know, and it is used by people to share comments, opinions, photos, and videos with their friends, family, acquaintances and colleagues. Facebook’s platform enables people to share information through their social graph, the digital map of people’s real-world connections.” (CIPR, 2012: 61).

Facebook Pages, as defined on their official website, help businesses, organizations and brands share their stories and connect with people. They can be customized by adding apps, posting stories, hosting events and more. Posting regularly provides better engagement and grows their audience. Pages look very similar to personal timelines, but they have different tools for connecting people with various brands, organizations, NGO’s, celebrities, shows etc.

Word of mouth is an effective marketing scheme offline, and it works online too. When a Facebook member surfs to a Page — by searching, browsing, or following a link he finds on another Facebook member’s profile — and likes what he sees, he clicks the Page’s “Like” button, then Facebook lists the Page on his profile and news of his fan status appears in his friends’ News Feeds (Vander Veer, 2011: 175).

Admins that manage pages can use available insights to the page that will help them understand how people interact with the page, what do they like, what is not interesting etc. There are some limited insights available to analyze how fans interact with the content shared on the Page. The types of data available are: a) basic demographics of Fans (age, gender, geographical networks); b) fans’ behavior (how many active users, interactions over time, which posts created the most interactions); c) reach and interaction (the number of post views, the number of people talking about the Page, impressions per post etc.) (CIPR, 2012: 63).

Each page has different posts and therefore engagement is different for each page. But, according to official website of Facebook Help Center¹ people respond very well to following types of posts: *facebook offers* (posting discounts and promotions is a good way to get the attention of new and existing customers), *photos and videos* (bright, colorful images depicting human interaction are particularly successful) and *questions* (asking questions encourages interaction and tells people their opinions matter). Besides these types of posts, admins can create different events, polls, sponsored stories etc.

The number of likes a Page has is often considered a measure of the overall success of a Page, with more likes associated with higher value and legitimacy. However, evaluating a Page based on its total number of likes is a superficial measure that does not provide information about engagement, popular content or what users are saying. (Moore, 2013: 2)

Facebook and all other social media can quickly generate many fans or enemies for a company. Thus, managers/admins must be able to operationalize their response rapidly – regardless of whether it is

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/help/281592001947683/> (03.07.2013).

reactive or proactive. Reactive capabilities are especially important. Social media is 24x7 public channels. There are no 'hours of business'. Facebook never "closes". At all times, companies must be prepared to identify emerging problems that could billow into something bigger. (Smith et al., 2011: 84)

COMMUNICATION PATTERNS AND FACEBOOK

Social media changed communication trends in a way that today we are witnessing new communication patterns online.

Communication patterns are shifting from point-to-point, two-way conversations to many-to-many, group communications and collaboration. There is also a shift in communication control (transition from provider-controlled environments to open Internet platform service providers with greater opportunities for user participation). (Van den Dam, Nelson, Lozinski, 2010: 6)

The personal becomes conversational, people share content (links, videos, photos etc.) and collaborate. Communication is now "highly participatory and highly social" and it is a fact that "social web is having a tremendous cultural impact on the broader society" (Davidson, 2011: 1).

Some earlier studies of Facebook usages among students have shown that students who used Facebook intensively the more they noticed "they were integrated into their university community and the more confident they were in their ability to secure support from distant high school and hometown relationships." (Manago et al., 2012: 370) Based on this finding it can be assumed that a somewhat similar discovery can be applied to citizen – government relationships. Being a part of a large online community with the possibility to participate in the decision-making processes puts citizens in a proactive role, gives them a sense of affiliation, importance and empowers the relationships they have with government, not just online, but also in the offline world. Young voters are living in an era of completely new communication trends and governments need to learn and understand new communication patterns and customize their own. Being transparent, participatory, cooperative honest, and continuously active are just some of the presumptions for having quality online government communication.

Governments on Facebook

Using websites and social media has become a common way for governments to provide information to their citizens. In 2009, the US issued an Open Government Directive (in the Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government); a document that prescribed specific actions that should be implemented in order to fulfill the Government's principles of transparency, participation, and collaboration. These principles

form the cornerstone of an open government. Transparency promotes accountability by providing the public with information about what the Government is doing. Participation allows members of the public to contribute ideas and expertise so that their government can make policies with the benefit of information that is widely dispersed in society. Collaboration improves the effectiveness of Government by encouraging partnerships and cooperation within the Federal Government, across levels of government, and between the Government and private institutions. (Whitehouse.gov, 2009)

Government information is no longer a static entity preserved in archives, a new era of government information management may foster web-based public collaboration and participation in government work, a development that could fundamentally change the way the government conducts its business. (Davidson, 2011: 2)

Civic engagement, or public participation, focuses on ensuring citizen and stakeholder awareness of and involvement in civic priority-setting, decision making, program development, and service delivery. (Fergusson et al., 2012: 10)

The International Association for Public Participation set a special spectrum of public participation levels that go from informing to empowering citizens. Everything begins from,

providing the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions (informing), gets to consulting, involving (working directly with the public to ensure that their concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered), collaboration (to partner with the public in each aspect of the decision) and in the end finishes with empowerment (final decision-making is in the hands of public). (IAP2, 2007)

Based on the above, our hypothesis is that Croatian Government, as a part of their e-government strategy, uses one way communication and fails in its use of the most popular online tool (Facebook) for informing and empowering citizens.

Using the communicative metrics for Facebook and the hypothesis we construed the following research questions:

RQ1: Is the content published on the Facebook Fan Page by the Croatian government aimed at a facilitating two-way communication with citizens?

RQ2: Does the Croatian government take into account patterns of citizens' behavior / activities when publishing content on its Facebook Fan Page.

RQ3: Do the citizens sufficiently engage on the Croatian government's Facebook Fan Page?

RQ4: Does the Croatian government communicate with citizens on its Facebook Fan Page directly and how do they do it?

METHOD

The collected data was analyzed using a qualitative content analysis. The data was collected with web scraping software Nvivo 10 and it was collected from February 20th to April 23rd 2013. During that period we managed to collect 20,546 posts and 52,311 comments that were published on the Facebook page of the Croatian government. The total number of other people posting on the Government's page was of 8,490 (post authors) and commenting 15,688 (comment authors).

This study analyzed the Facebook page of the Croatian government that was available for public view in order to determine how many fans the Government had, what

information was communicated on the page, what communication patterns and routines were used, the use of photos and videos, the level of engagement and whether the site generated feedback (McCorkindale, 2010).

The units of the analysis were posts and comments with their descriptive data (time and date of publishing, author and type of post).

The content analysis consisted of these categories: type of post, time of post, time of the comment, number of likes and number of comments.

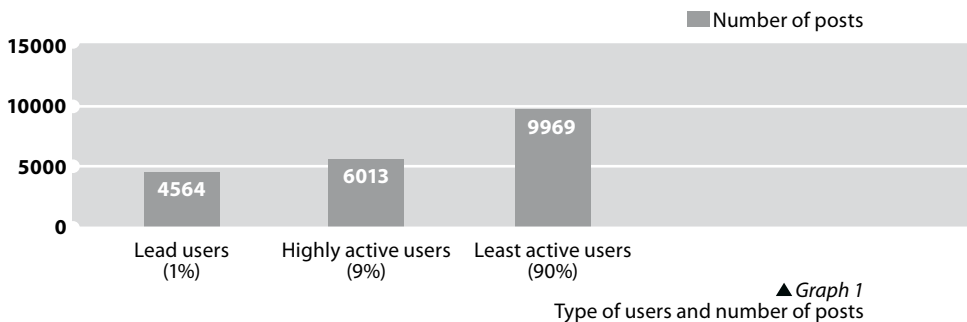
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Jakob Nielsen in 2006 set a new informal rule in online communities.

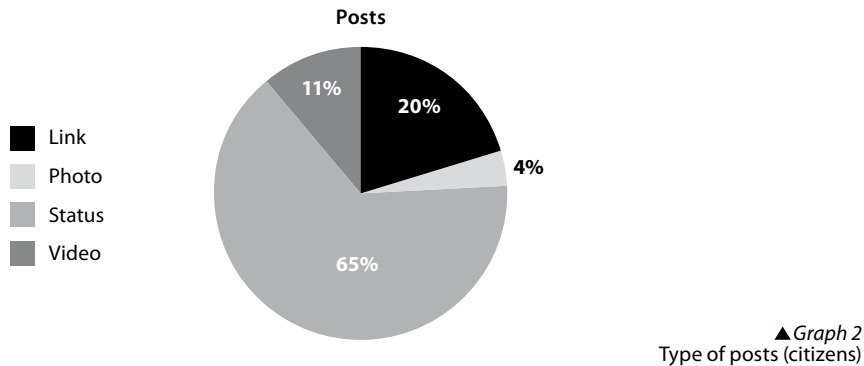
He studied the phenomenon of participation inequalities in large online communities. He proposed the so-called 90-9-1 rule for user participation, which is widely accepted among researchers today: 90% of users never contribute, 9% of users contribute from time to time, but other priorities dominate their time, and 1% of users participate a lot and account for most contributions. (Beck, 2007:48)

The rule 90-9-1 (or participation inequality) was not confirmed in this case, because the Croatian government in this period had 49% least active users, 29% highly active ones and 22% of those who were defined as lead users. Opposite to Twitter (Bruns, 2012), we found that the least active users did not remain silent. Some researchers suggest that contributors to online communities are often motivated with a three key senses "efficacy – a sense that they are a part of community and have an effect on environment or an impact on a group; anticipated reciprocity whereby users contribute if they believe they'll benefit in return; and finally increased reputation and recognition online." (Freyne et al., 2009: 85)

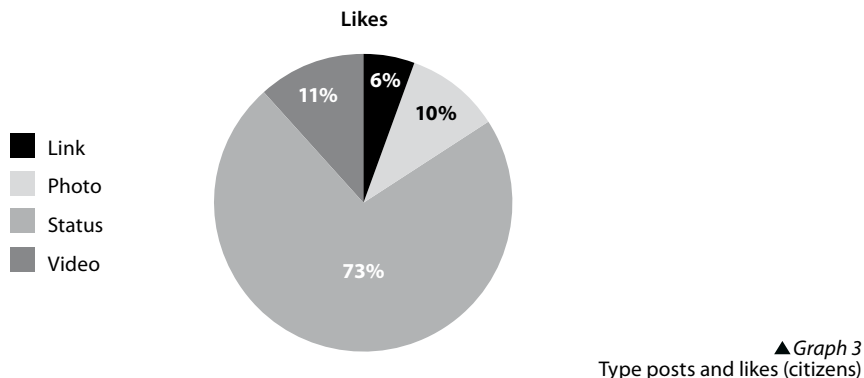
Since the lead users - contributors and those who participate occasionally represent more than 50% of all Facebook users in the case of the Croatian government, it could be concluded that they contribute for at least one of the above reasons we mentioned. Therefore the Croatian government can use its Facebook page for strengthening its position if it finds a good communication pattern for building relationship with those citizens who are online contributors.



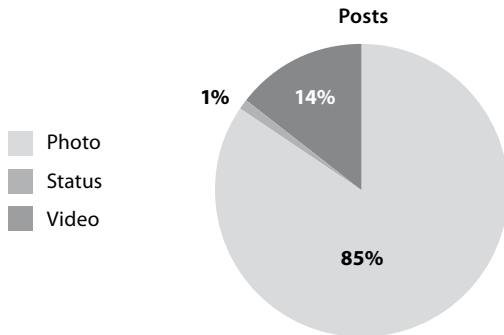
Among them, the top post author had 275 posts during this period, and the Government itself had 84 posts. Regarding the type post, we found that 65% of all published posts were status updates (Graph 2) which also had the most likes, because research shown that 73% off all likes on the Government’s page went for status updates (Graph 3). The second most common posts were links to different websites, 20%, but they were not in balance with the number of likes, since the second most “liked” type of post was video update (in 11% cases).



On the Croatian government’s page during the research period there were 2,235 videos published (11% of all posts) and 801 photos (only 4%). Posted photos had more than 20,000 likes (10%) and posted links had 6% of all likes.

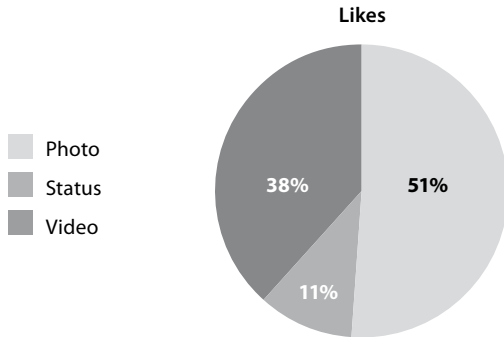


There is a big difference in comparison with types of posts published only by the Croatian government. 85% of all posts published were photos (photos of the Prime Minister, other politicians in the Government, different political/cultural/educational events, actions etc.) They published 12 videos and only one status update during the research period.



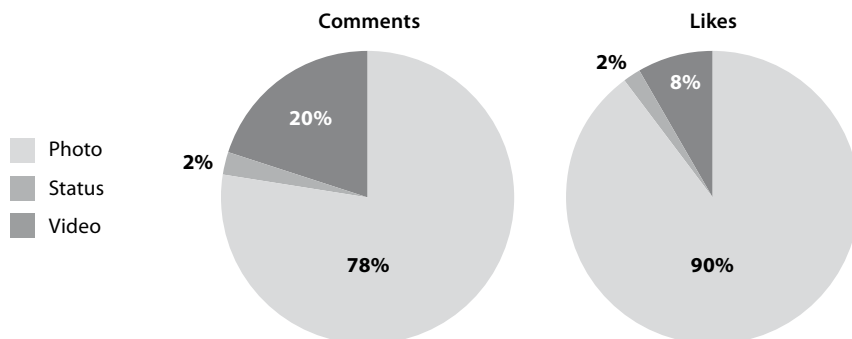
▲ *Graph 4*
Type of Government's posts

On the other hand, the number of Government's likes on published photos is more than 2,000 (to be exact 2,262 likes; 51%), 38% likes on video posts, an 11% of likes goes to status posts. It is evident that communication in this case is in one direction. Unfortunately, the Croatian government uses Facebook only as a tool for informing citizens/followers and just sharing information without engaging in a dialogue.



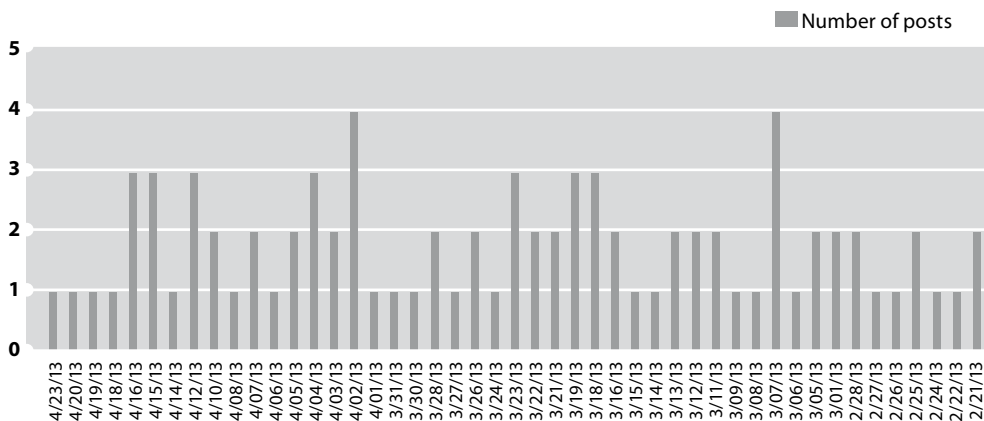
▲ *Graph 5*
Likes vs. types of Government's posts

Concerning the comments and likes towards posts that the Government published, it is obvious that citizens want to express their opinion and the number of comments on only one status update reached up to 484 comments (2% of total number of comments), there were 3,990 comments on videos, creating a 20% share of all comments, and there were 15,617 comments (78%) on posted photos. The most "liked" content were photos (18,701 likes, 90% of total "likes"), and then in only 8% videos and one status update had 2% of all likes.



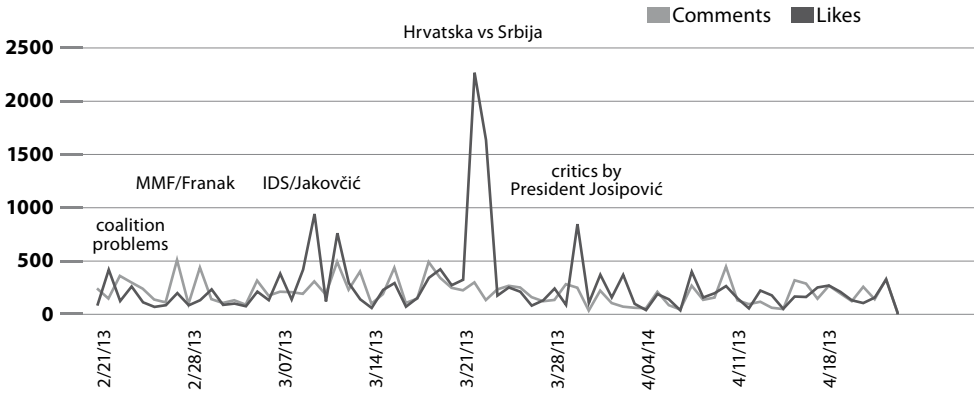
▲ Graph 6
Comments and likes on the Government's posts

Graph 7 shows how many posts the Government had during the research period. We found that the Government's communication was not regular or consistent, and there were even days when the Government was not active. An inactive Facebook page sends a signal that Government does not care about any kind of problems or good suggestions their citizens post. The fact is that incoherent communication and online presence is not good for building quality and long-term relationship with people who *liked* the page. There was even a gap of three days that saw no Facebook activity. If you want to achieve a good online presence that could lead you to empowering your position in the "real world" than you need to maintain it and communicate with your audience on daily, or better to say hourly – basis.



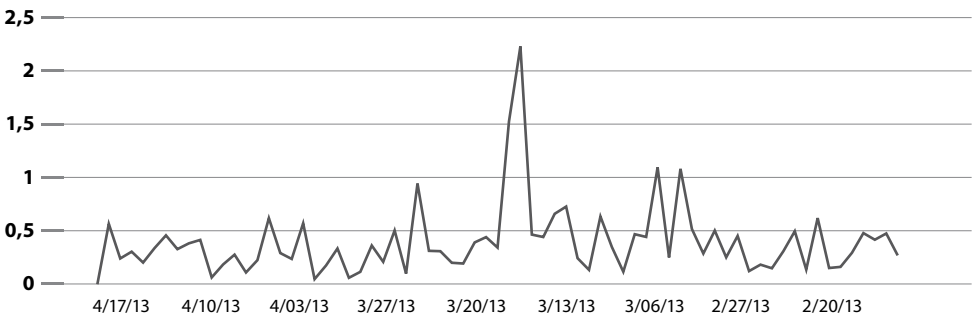
▲ Graph 7
Number of posts per day

This study shows the number of comments and likes rises when the situation in politics, the economy, social welfare, etc., changes or when there is some kind of public event. So, in this case Croatian government's most "liked" post was the one referring to a football match between Croatia and Serbia. Other commented and "liked" posts were about the financial crisis (International Monetary Fund), coalition problems, criticism of the Croatian President Ivo Josipović etc.



▲ Graph 8
Comments and likes during important events

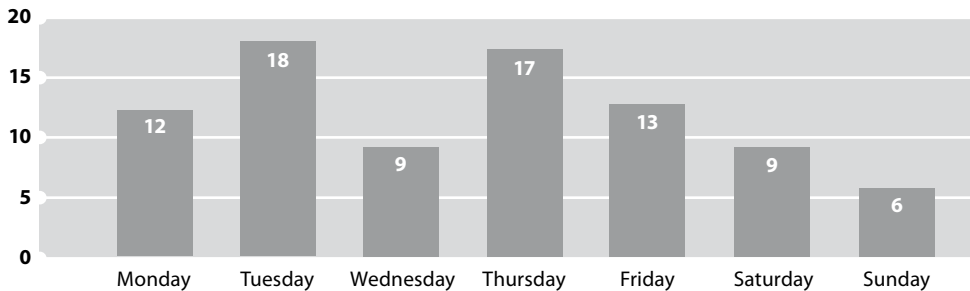
The usual explanation of a good engagement rate is that anything above the 1% engagement rate is good, 0.5-0.99% is average and if it is below 0.5% that means that posted messages should be changed in a way to gain more attention and fulfill the expectations of your followers. According to SocialBakers (2012) Croatian government's Facebook page should have an engagement rate of 0.16% (because it has between 100 and 200 thousand fans). This study shows that the engagement rate in this case is better than we expected, because on some days the engagement rate is more than 2%, but the average rate is somewhere around 0,5%.



▲ Graph 9
Engagement rate

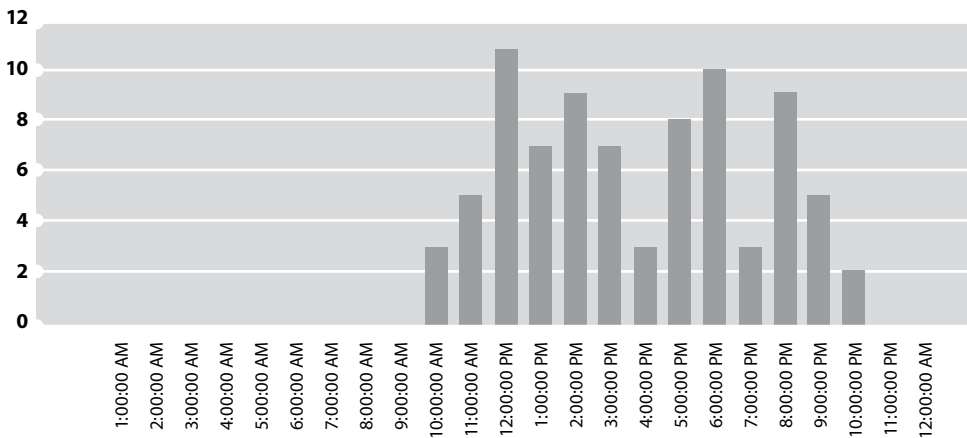
This can be explained with fact that the Government's Facebook Page is seen as a Habermans' public sphere.

Although studies showed that posting on Wednesdays increases the fan engagement rate (Miller, 2012), and that "on Wednesdays fan engagement rate is 8% above average and to improve engagement it is best to publish on Wednesdays and Sundays" (Bullas, 2012), Graph 10 shows that the Croatian government did not follow that rule. Results show that only 12% (9 posts) were published on Wednesday, and the most posts were published on Tuesday (25% of all posts).



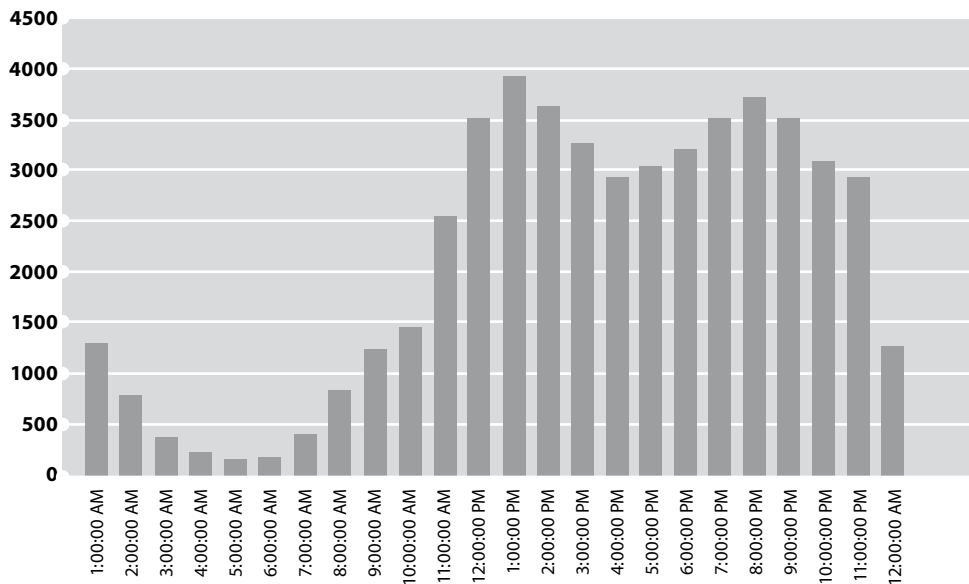
▲ Graph 10
Government's posts per weekday

Posts published between 8 pm and 7 am will receive 14% higher interaction than the posts between 8 am and 7 pm. The interaction rate for weekend posts is 14.5% higher than weekday posts, yet only 14% of posts are published on weekends. (Sebastian, 2013) The government was active online between 10 am and 10 pm and the majority of all posts were published around 12 am and 6 pm, as Graph 11 shows.



▲ Graph 11
Government's posts and time of day

Graph 12 shows that fans commented actively during the whole day, and the fact, which can be alerted to those who administer the Page, is that there were lots of comments in periods when nobody managed it (for example, after 10 pm). Also, we noticed that commenting is connected with other side activities (Government).



▲ Graph 12
Number of comments and time of day

The EdgeRank (2012) results showed that the average post lifetime for a page is 3 hours and 7 minutes. Our study found that average post lifetime for posts published by all users is 1 hour and 33 minutes, and those that were published by the Croatian government was a little more than 2 hours.

Table 1. Life-span of the post

Life of the post	All users	Croatian Government
Min	00:00:06	00:00:10
Max	21:59:48	14:43:22
Average	01:33:04	02:02:08

The majority of all comments, 69% were posted by men (48,990), and 31% (21,920) by women. The Croatian government itself was the top commenter with 2,198 comments (the commenter with the second most number of comments had less than a thousand

comments). But, if you put that number in relation with all the comments, then that is only 4% of all comments in that period. Other users combined had more than 50 thousand comments (96%). It is not surprising that the most commented post were those posted by the Government.

Concerning direct communication using @ to tag other users in status updates, there were 109 mentions (@), but none directed to the Croatian government. 76 Government comments contained different e-mail addresses (referring to the ministries and agencies) and more than 800 comments contained Hypertext Transfer Protocol (http address).

CONCLUSION

Based on above data and discussion we can conclude that our hypothesis is confirmed. The Croatian government uses the Facebook for one way communication and not in the way that brands use Facebook – to engage and to inform. Also, opposite to their Twitter presence (Twiplomacy.com, 2013), the Government fails in the production of the content (messages) for its citizens. This is especially problematic because Croatian citizens are very active and engaged on Facebook and they see the Government's Facebook Page as a public sphere.

It is a fact that social media influence and transform today's governments and it is necessary for them to accommodate to these new trends. Facebook is just one of the many communication platforms that gives opportunity to governments to share information and get feedback from many people, in a short time, and for free. On the other hand citizens get directly involved, contribute and participate. All of this is possible only when governments (or better to say - people in charge for social media communication) understand the importance of using new media in the right way. Besides the simple sharing of information (or simple posting photos in the case of the Croatian government) they need to start a dialogue with their fans. They need to gain attention, and later on trust, in order to ensure they will have the citizens' support. This is only possible when you have two-way communication that will include the production of content that will be informative, educational and even sometimes entertaining. Of course, being active and present online most of the time is crucial.

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KVANTITATIVNA ANALIZA SADRŽAJA KOMUNIKACIJSKIH OBRAZACA NA FACEBOOKU: STUDIJA SLUČAJA VLADE REPUBLIKE HRVATSKE

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SAŽETAK *U razdoblju sve intenzivnijeg uključivanja građana u demokratske procese Facebook postaje sve važniji alat političara, točnije vlada, u političkom odlučivanju. Facebook može osnažiti političku participaciju, no mnoge ga vlade ne koriste na ispravan način, već samo objavljuju informacije online i ne povezuju se sa svojim građanima, u ovom slučaju – fanovima. Ovaj rad prikazuje način na koji Vlada Republike Hrvatske koristi Facebook te komunikacijske obrasce koji proizlaze iz djelovanja Vlade. Iz kvantitativne analize 20 546 objava (posts) i 52 311 komentara proizlazi da Vlada RH isključivo koristi jednosmjerni model komuniciranja. Istraživanjem je utvrđeno da se u ovom specifičnom slučaju nije potvrdilo uobičajeno pravilo 90-9-1 kojim se internetska publika svrstava u određene kategorije prema svojoj online participaciji.*

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

DRUŠTVENE MREŽE, FACEBOOK, POLITIČKA PARTICIPACIJA, E-VLADA, KOMUNIKACIJSKI OBRASCI

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