

Digital Divides in Local Democracy: Size, Resources, and Facebook Adoption in Czech Municipalities

Michael Haman , Milan Školník , and Michal Lošťák 

Department of Humanities, Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, Czech Republic

Correspondence: Michael Haman (haman@pef.czu.cz)

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Abstract

This study examines how organizational capacity and environmental pressures shape social media adoption in local government. Using a mixed-methods approach, we analyze Facebook adoption patterns across 6,254 Czech municipalities by scanning their official websites for Facebook links, a questionnaire survey ($N = 330$), and thematic analysis of posts from municipalities with extended powers. Results reveal a strong relationship between municipal size and Facebook adoption, with rates ranging from 14.1% in the smallest municipalities (fewer than 200 inhabitants) to 88.6% in the largest (10,000+). Primary adoption motivations include communication speed, ensuring citizen awareness, and meeting public expectations for a modern online presence, while resource constraints and fear of negativity constitute major barriers. Thematic analysis reveals dominance of practical information and community event promotion over dialogic engagement. The findings demonstrate how resource limitations create a digital divide in local government communication, with smaller municipalities facing structural barriers to social media adoption. This research contributes to understanding technology diffusion dynamics in fragmented administrative systems and the gap between social media’s dialogic potential and actual government communication practices.

Keywords

citizen engagement; communication barriers; Czech Republic; Facebook; government communication; local government; small municipalities; social media; technology adoption

1. Introduction

Social media represents a major trend with the potential for innovation in how public administrations communicate and operate (Criado et al., 2013). In an era where platforms such as Facebook and X (previously Twitter) are permeating the daily lives of an increasing proportion of the population,

understanding their role and using them effectively becomes not only an opportunity but a necessity for local governments. These tools offer new, often cost-effective channels for rapid information dissemination, increasing transparency of government actions (Bertot et al., 2010), self-presentation, and even citizen engagement in the design and delivery of public services (Sobaci, 2016).

To offer a nuanced understanding of social media adoption and utilization within local government, our approach leverages two complementary theoretical lenses that provide complementary explanatory power: Everett Rogers' (1962) diffusion of innovations (DOI) theory and the technology–organization–environment (TOE) framework (Tornatzky et al., 1990). TOE groups the factors that shape technology uptake into three domains: technological characteristics (e.g., relative advantage), organizational capacity (e.g., size, staff, budget), and environmental pressures (e.g., citizen expectations, competitive norms). Using TOE alongside DOI lets us separate what municipalities can do from what their external context demands.

DOI serves as a primary lens for understanding organizational decision making—including both internal capacities and external social networks through which information flows—that influences innovation adoption. It accounts for adoption decisions driven by an organization's internal characteristics, such as its organizational capacity (e.g., available resources, internal expertise, organizational size) and the perceived attributes of the innovation itself (e.g., relative advantage, complexity, compatibility, trialability, observability). The TOE “environment” dimension complements DOI by highlighting external legitimacy expectations that operate beyond pure efficiency.

Our analytical focus, driven by the interplay of organizational capacity (informed by DOI) and environmental pressures (the TOE framework) in shaping communication strategies, leads to our study's central question: How do organizational capacity and environmental pressures shape social media adoption and communication strategies within a large and highly fragmented local government system?

This study aims to answer this question by addressing gaps in the literature. As the scholarly conversation on social media in public administration continues to evolve (e.g., Ahn & Jong, 2024; Criado & Villodre, 2023; DePaula et al., 2018; Mabillard et al., 2024), the practice of social media use by small municipalities, especially in the post-communist context, remains under-researched. Even when research does examine this sector, such as the work of Pawlicz and Kubicki (2017) on Polish municipalities, it is typically based on a sample rather than the complete population. To fill this void, our study provides comprehensive empirical data by analyzing the entire population of all 6,254 Czech municipalities. Furthermore, to address the documented gap between municipal communication efforts and citizen expectations (Criado & Villodre, 2023), we methodologically combine this large-scale mapping with mixed-methods research, including a survey and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), to link stated motivations with actual practice.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1. *The Rise of Social Media in Public Administration*

Social media are seen as tools with the potential to transform the relationship between citizens and government (Mossberger et al., 2013), promote openness and transparency, and even contribute to the fight against corruption (Bertot et al., 2010). Local governments, which are closest to citizens and where

participation has traditionally been strongest (Mossberger et al., 2013), are not left out of this trend and are implementing innovative internet technologies (Sobaci, 2016). For them, a social media presence can become a symbol of modernity, responsiveness, and political legitimacy, especially in times of crisis (Bonsón et al., 2016).

2.2. Adoption and Diffusion of Social Media by Local Governments

Social media use has become widespread among local governments, with Facebook established as a commonplace tool among major Western European municipalities (Bonsón et al., 2016) and American cities showing similar adoption patterns (Reddick & Norris, 2013). Facebook and X are among the most commonly adopted platforms (Mossberger et al., 2013), with Facebook often preferred (Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018; Yavetz & Aharony, 2020). However, adoption is not uniform and is influenced by a number of factors. Key ones include the size of the local government, its type and form, the region, previous experience with e-government, the existence of an IT department (Reddick & Norris, 2013), but also socio-economic indicators such as revenues, expenditures, fiscal capacity, or characteristics of the municipal leadership (Prokopyev et al., 2024), which suggests that organizational behavior is often shaped by the need to acquire and manage critical resources from the environment. This view is further developed by the socio-technical model, according to which the use of technology is not simply a matter of availability, but the result of a complex interaction between technology, the tasks to be performed, and the broader organizational context including precisely resources, capabilities, and innovative culture (Oliveira & Welch, 2013). This framework is particularly useful in explaining why resource-constrained municipalities face structural barriers to social media adoption. Some studies suggest that despite the high diffusion of technology, its strategic incorporation and development may still be at an early stage (Criado & Rojas-Martín, 2016) and in the early stages of learning (Svirak et al., 2023).

First, DOI theory provides a powerful lens for explaining the ability of municipalities to adopt social media. According to DOI, organizational characteristics, such as size, budget, and staffing, are key predictors of an organization's capacity to innovate (Rogers, 1962). This understanding of organizational capacity is strongly supported by empirical evidence. Studies highlighting the importance of organizational size and the presence of dedicated IT departments (Reddick & Norris, 2013), as well as overall fiscal capacity (Prokopyev et al., 2024), illustrate how these resources provide the necessary foundation for municipalities to evaluate, adopt, and effectively implement new technologies like social media. This theoretical and empirical basis enables the formulation of a specific, testable hypothesis about the relationship between municipal resources and technology adoption. We therefore hypothesize:

Larger municipalities, possessing higher organizational capacity, will exhibit a greater likelihood of adopting Facebook for official communication.

Within TOE, environmental forces include stakeholder expectations, inter-municipal competition, and prevailing communication norms. We therefore expect some municipalities to adopt Facebook not only for its functional benefits but also because a social-media presence has become a taken-for-granted feature of modern local government.

While our primary focus is on Facebook adoption as a key indicator of social media engagement, understanding the broader digital landscape is crucial. Therefore, to comprehensively map municipal digital communication efforts, we ask:

RQ1: Beyond Facebook, what other social media or digital communication platforms are used by Czech municipalities?

2.3. Communication Strategy and Content on Social Media

Although social media inherently enables two-way communication and dialogue, the dominant strategy of local governments across different countries appears to be one-way dissemination of information (“push” strategy; Baltz, 2023; Mossberger et al., 2013; Reddick & Norris, 2013) often aligning more with informational or asymmetrical public relations models (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) than with the normative ideals of symmetrical, dialogic communication (Kent & Taylor, 2002). This approach is sometimes referred to as “Web 1.5,” suggesting limited use of the interactive possibilities of Web 2.0 (Reddick & Norris, 2013). Local governments often prioritize visual content (images, videos), use paid advertising to increase reach (Yavetz & Aharony, 2020), and content can include official information and promotion (e.g., cultural events, marketing [Bonsón et al., 2015]), city branding (Sevin, 2016), as well as everyday, mundane issues (Baltz, 2023). Some research identifies the strategic use of social media for political purposes and legitimacy building where the topics of posts correlate with the spending priorities of the municipality (Ravenda et al., 2022). Communication is often subject to scrutiny to manage risks (Evans et al., 2018). This whole range of communication activities, from the provision of information to marketing activities to strategic legitimacy building, is summarized in a comprehensive typology of government communication proposed by DePaula et al. (2018). It distinguishes between communication serving democratic goals (e.g., information) and communication aimed at symbolic and self-representational exchanges, which include image building, marketing, and symbolic acts of community empowerment (DePaula et al., 2018). This framework thus provides a useful tool for analyzing the diverse content that local governments produce on social media.

To understand the practical application of these communication strategies, we ask the following:

RQ2: What are the dominant themes and characteristics of communication content on the official Facebook pages of municipalities with extended powers (MEPs) in the Czech Republic?

2.4. Citizen Engagement and Participation

Strengthening citizen engagement and participation is one of the goals of the use of social media by local governments (Ellison & Hardey, 2014; Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018). Social media are seen as channels for e-participation (Alarabiat, 2016) and dialogue building (Mossberger et al., 2013). Research shows that certain types of content, especially those related to core competencies of local government and local politics, have a greater potential to elicit citizen reactions and comments (Paiva Dias, 2022). Factors such as local government activity on the platform, interactivity, and the overall mood of the communication also influence the level of engagement (Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018; Svirak & Urbánek, 2023).

Despite these potentials, however, empirical data show significant differences in engagement levels among different media and content types and institutional contexts (Bonsón et al., 2015). Despite the large number of fans or followers, active citizen participation in the form of comments or sharing is often limited (Bonsón et al., 2016), with municipalities using Facebook mainly for ex-ante informing and calling for participation in decision-making being very limited (Svidroňová et al., 2018). Dialogue is sometimes redirected outside official platforms (Baltz, 2023) and there can be a mismatch between what local governments communicate and what citizens actually expect or prefer (Bonsón et al., 2015; Criado & Villodre, 2023). The use of social media can also positively influence citizens' trust in institutions (Warren et al., 2014).

2.5. Challenges, Barriers, and Institutionalization

Despite the diffusion of social media, local governments face a number of challenges in using it effectively, which are mainly organizational and strategic barriers. One significant challenge is that initial actions and strategies for social media promotion have either not been clearly defined or have been inadequately implemented (Criado & Rojas-Martín, 2016), security concerns, unfavorable organizational culture, lack of evaluation and monitoring systems, and unclear governance framework (Criado & Villodre, 2022). Concerns over security, potential negativity, and loss of control often reflect underlying issues of risk perception (Slovic, 2000), where the perceived hazards of open digital communication can act as significant deterrents for public administrators. Administrators may experience skepticism or uncertainty towards social media and technology, highlighting the need for training (Svirak et al., 2023) as well as higher degrees of formalized knowledge sharing for social media use in bureaucratic environments (Mergel, 2013b). Measuring the real impact of social media activities is often inadequate (Mergel, 2013a). The consequence of these barriers and uncertainty is often only partial institutionalization of social media. Rather than becoming a tool for transformation, they are often seen as merely complementing existing, established communication channels and reinforcing existing media strategies rather than replacing them (Djerf-Pierre & Pierre, 2016).

The process of "institutionalization," i.e., the full integration of social media into the normal functioning of the office, is often incomplete (Criado & Villodre, 2022). Research has identified different organizational models for this process, ranging from centralized to distributed, which vary in their degree of formalization, experimentation, and control (Faber, 2023). Overcoming these barriers and successful institutionalization are key to realizing the full potential of social media in local government.

To explore the motivations and barriers that shape adoption patterns, we formulate our final research questions:

RQ3: What are the main stated reasons why Czech municipalities use social media?

RQ4: What are the main declared reasons why some Czech municipalities do not use social media?

2.6. Specifics of the Czech Context in The Existing Research

To place our study in a broader national context, it is important to mention the high level of digitization in the country. As of the beginning of 2024, internet penetration in the Czech Republic was 92.8% and 76.7% of the population used social media (Kemp, 2024). Facebook, the primary focus of this research, maintained

a significant position with an advertising reach of 4.70 million users, underlining its relevance as a key communication channel for reaching the general public (Kemp, 2024). Research on the use of social media by local governments in the Czech Republic, although still relatively limited (Špaček, 2018), has already yielded several relevant findings that provide context for this study. This confirms the strong dominance of the Facebook platform which is used by regional authorities (Špaček, 2018), regional cities (Hrůzová & Hrůza, 2021; Svobodová, 2017), and MEPs (Svirak & Urbánek, 2023). Consistent with international trends, studies in the Czech environment show that Facebook serves primarily as a one-way information channel (Špaček, 2018) with very limited calls for citizen participation in decision-making; a similar trend is suggested by a study from Slovakia (Svidroňová et al., 2018). Research focusing on MEPs has identified municipal activity, level of interactivity, and communication sentiment as key factors influencing citizen engagement, with larger municipalities dominating activity on social media (Svirak & Urbánek, 2023). A qualitative study of smaller and medium-sized Czech municipalities (Svirak et al., 2023) suggests that many of these municipalities are in the early stages of learning, do not fully understand the potential of social media, and may approach it with skepticism or feel confused about optimal strategies for use.

3. Methodology

In this study, we use a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative data collected simultaneously which allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study—the use of social media by Czech municipalities. The quantitative data (Facebook presence mapping, closed-ended questions in the questionnaire) provide an overview of the extent and patterns of use, while the qualitative data (open-ended questions in the questionnaire, thematic analysis) offer deeper insights into the motivations, strategies, and content of communication. The data are analyzed separately and then the findings are compared and integrated in the discussion section for a fuller interpretation.

3.1. Facebook Adoption Mapping (Proxy Method)

Answering RQ1 required a two-step process. First, to assess the nationwide level of Facebook adoption, we analyzed the full population of all 6,254 Czech municipalities. We then examined whether adoption varies with municipal size. Due to the large number of municipalities, we used a proxy method to determine the presence of an official Facebook page. For each municipality, the URLs of official websites were first obtained, primarily through the Wikidata database and Wikipedia, whose reliability and comprehensiveness for identifying and baseline characteristics of Czech politics have been previously verified in other research (Haman et al., 2024).

Municipal websites were systematically searched for official Facebook page links using automated detection with validation filters (see Supplementary File for technical details). The population was also obtained from the Czech Statistical Office (Czech Statistical Office, 2024). The second phase of the process had a dual purpose: to validate the reliability of our automated proxy method and to select a purposive sample for in-depth thematic analysis (described in detail in Section 3.3). For this purpose, we used a purposive sampling strategy. We deliberately selected the complete sub-population of “MEPs.” In the Czech administrative system, a MEP is a municipality that, in addition to its self-government tasks, carries out a broad bundle of delegated state-administration competences for a surrounding cluster of smaller municipalities. Because of these extra (“extended”) powers, MEPs function as the main administrative

centers below the regional tier (*kraje*). In total there are 205 such municipalities, with the capital city of Prague constituting an entity with special status.

3.2. Questionnaire Survey

To answer RQ2 and RQ3, more detailed and direct data was needed from municipal leaders themselves on their use of social media. Data were collected through a broader survey conducted as part of a larger research project, Akademický Most (Academic Bridge) (<https://akademickymost.cz>), aimed at fostering collaboration between municipalities and academic researchers. This initiative is a component of the EU-funded BETTER Life project. Although the full survey included questions on other topics, the section on social media was designed specifically by the authors of this article to address the research questions presented here (see Supplementary File for detailed questionnaire design).

The questionnaire was distributed electronically on 1 March 2025. All municipalities in the Czech Republic were selected as the target population. The email addresses were primarily obtained from the CzechPOINT portal but other sources, such as Wikipedia or a search engine, were also used to find the actual email contact and the questionnaire was sent to the official email address of the registry of each municipality or to the found suitable contact. Of all the municipalities contacted, 330 chose to participate in the social media survey, which is 5.3% of all municipalities in the country. The survey sample exhibited significant non-response bias favoring larger municipalities, which should be considered when interpreting questionnaire findings for RQ3 and RQ4 (see Supplementary File).

3.3. Thematic Analysis of Facebook Communication

In order to complement the questionnaire data with insights into actual communication practices and to answer RQ2, we conducted a thematic analysis of posts on the official Facebook pages of the municipalities with the extended powers. We first downloaded every post published in January 2025 by the 198 MEPs that maintain an official Facebook page (7,251 posts). We then drew a stratified random sample of up to five posts per municipality ($N = 960$). The themes were generated inductively. Authors coded the posts to identify key patterns and then met to compare their findings, discuss discrepancies, and agree on a final set of themes. The Facepager software (Jünger & Keyling, 2019) was used for data collection which enables automated downloading of publicly available data from Facebook pages.

4. Results

In this section, we present the main findings of our research, structured according to the individual research questions. We combine data from Facebook presence mapping, questionnaire survey, and thematic analysis.

4.1. Extent of Use of Facebook and Other Social Media by Czech Municipalities

Our proxy method of mapping the presence of Facebook links on the official websites of Czech municipalities revealed a significant dependence of the adoption rate on the size of the municipality. As shown in Table 1, the overall rate of detected Facebook link presence across all municipalities is 35.2%. However, this average hides substantial differences between size categories.

Table 1. Facebook page link prevalence on Czech municipal websites by population.

Population category	Total municipalities (N)	With Facebook link	Without Facebook link	Facebook Link prevalence (%)
<200	1,350	190	1,160	14.1%
200–499	1,998	546	1,452	27.3%
500–999	1,374	530	844	38.6%
1,000–1,999	806	401	405	49.8%
2,000–4,999	448	290	158	64.7%
5,000–9,999	146	127	19	87%
10,000+	132	117	15	88.6%
Total	6,254	2,201	4,053	35.2%

Analysis of data from mapping the presence of links to official Facebook pages on the websites of Czech municipalities reveals a strong and positive relationship between the size of the municipality and the prevalence of these links, which is used here as a proxy indicator for Facebook adoption (see Table 1 and Figure 1). The table shows a clear trend: The link prevalence rate increases dramatically with increasing municipality size. The data reveal a strong positive relationship between municipality size and Facebook adoption, ranging from 14.1% in the smallest to 88.6% in the largest municipalities (Table 1).

Since a proxy method (web link detection) was used to detect the presence of Facebook, which may slightly underestimate the true situation (some municipalities using Facebook may not have a web link), it is important to statistically verify the strength and consistency of the observed relationship across the dataset. For this purpose, a Chi-squared test of independence was performed. Test results confirmed a highly statistically significant association between the size category of a municipality and the presence of a Facebook link on its website ($\chi^2(6, N = 6,254) = 908.40, p < 0.001$). Such a strong statistical result, obtained on the basis of data from all municipalities analyzed, gives us high confidence, despite the potential limitations of the proxy method, that the observed trend of a dramatic increase in prevalence with municipality size is not random but reflects a real and systematic association. It suggests that the size of the municipality, likely linked to available resources and communication needs, is a key differentiating factor for municipalities in their visible engagement with the Facebook platform.

This result is particularly relevant in the context of the Czech municipal structure. Although more than half of the Czech municipalities (53.5%) fall into the categories below 500 inhabitants, their Facebook link prevalence rates are very low (14.1% and 27.4%). On the contrary, a relatively small number of the largest municipalities (category 10,000+, constituting only 2.1% of all municipalities but representing more than half of the Czech population) show an almost universal presence of Facebook links, indicating a significant concentration of this form of digital communication in larger municipalities. Figure 1 visualizes the Table 1 data, with results suggesting a pattern that reflects fundamental urban dynamics: Larger municipalities cannot rely on personal contact and require mass communication channels. Thus, the gradient represents not just resource differences but a qualitative shift in how communities communicate.

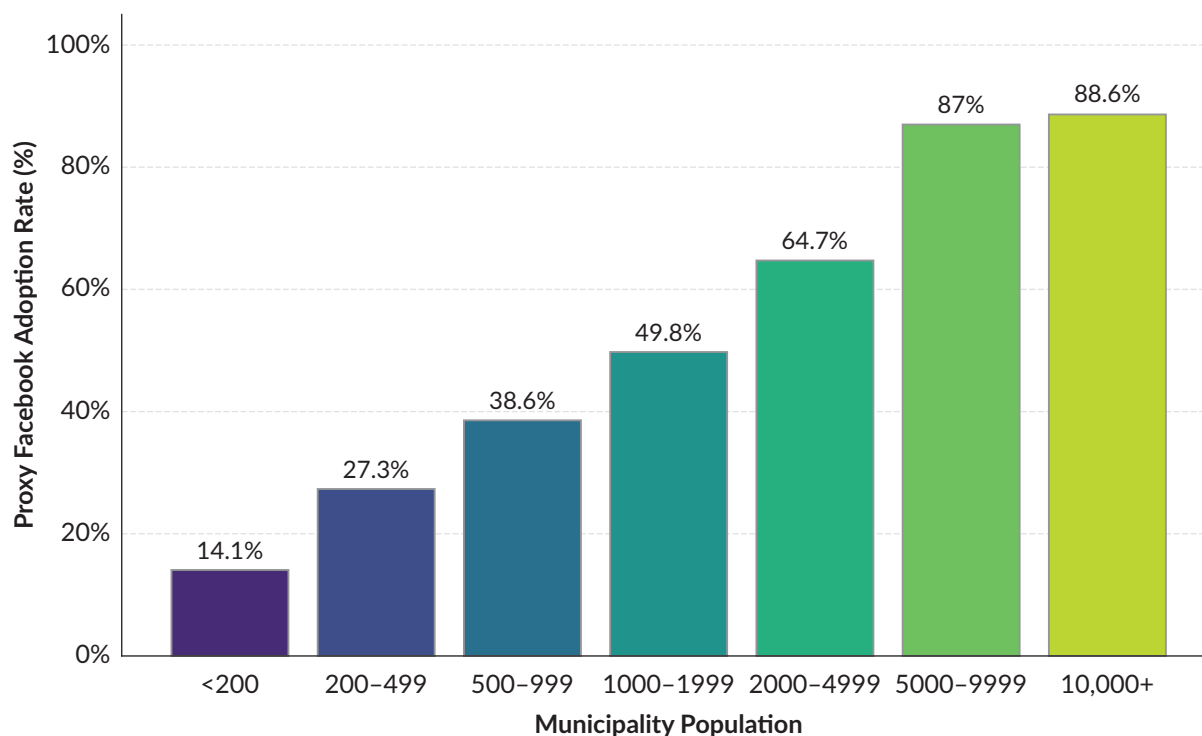


Figure 1. Prevalence of Facebook page links (proxy adoption rate) by municipality population category (%).

These findings on the dominance of Facebook as a platform are further supported by data from our survey (see Table 2). The survey provided a closer look at the range of digital platforms that municipalities actively use for communication. Of the 330 respondents, 243 (or 73.6%) indicated that their municipality uses at least some form of social media or similar digital communication platform. A detailed overview of the use of each platform is shown in Table 2, which presents both absolute numbers and percentages relative to all respondents ($N = 330$) and to the subset of municipalities active on these platforms ($n = 243$).

Table 2. Social media platform usage by municipalities (survey; $N = 330$).

Platform	N	Share of all respondents (%)	Share of municipalities using social media (%)
Facebook	232	70.3%	95.5%
WhatsApp	82	24.8%	33.7%
Instagram	61	18.5%	25.1%
YouTube	41	12.4%	16.9%
X	3	0.9%	1.2%
LinkedIn	3	0.9%	1.2%
Telegram	0	0%	0%
TikTok	0	0%	0%
Others	28	8.5%	11.5%

The results clearly confirm Facebook's dominance. This platform is used by 70.3% of all respondents, which represents the vast majority (95.5%) of those municipalities that are active on social media or similar platforms. This is followed by WhatsApp (used by 24.8% of all respondents or 33.7% of active municipalities)

and Instagram (18.5% of all respondents or 25.1% of active ones). Other global platforms such as YouTube, X, LinkedIn, or TikTok play a significantly smaller role in the communication of Czech municipalities according to our sample. The “other” category is interesting, chosen by 8.5% of all respondents (11.5% of active municipalities).

The analysis of these “other” communication platforms used revealed especially frequent mention of specialized tools designed for communication between local governments and citizens. Platforms such as Munipolis and V Obraze (meaning “In the Picture”) were dominantly mentioned, along with other similar locally developed applications like Úřad v mobilu (“Office in Mobile”) and Appsisto. These systems, typically combining a mobile app with email or SMS, are primarily used to efficiently distribute official information, notifications, and warnings to registered citizens. Less frequently mentioned was Facebook Messenger for direct communication.

The fact that municipal officials refer to these tools in the context of a social media inquiry is noteworthy. It suggests either a broader perception of the term “social media” to include any digital communication channels with citizens or it reflects a priority for municipalities to seek efficient and controlled ways to distribute information. However, it is important to point out that in a strict definition of social media that emphasizes user-generated content, relationship networking, and multi-directional communication in an open space, most of the platforms mentioned do not meet the criteria of social media. Rather, they are modern tools for direct, often one-way, digital information and specific forms of e-government that complement or are alternatives to traditional social networks.

4.2. Declared Reasons for Using and Not Using Social Media

An open-ended question in the questionnaire provided rich insight into the motivations of communities that have chosen to actively use social media. From the survey, 156 respondents provided answers detailing their reasons in response to this open-ended question. Analysis of the 156 open-ended responses, which included a coding and categorization process, revealed five main categories of reasons, which are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Declared reasons for municipalities’ use of social media.

Main reasons	Description
Faster and more efficient communication	Respondents stressed that social media allows for the instantaneous delivery of information, which is particularly crucial for urgent messages (e.g., accidents, alerts). They perceived it as the fastest way to reach citizens, saving time and administrative burden associated with other channels (e.g., print, radio). For example: “The fastest way to inform citizens about events in the municipality,” “things get to the citizens immediately.”
Ensuring awareness and wide reach	The main declared aim was to inform as many citizens as possible about what is happening in the municipality. Social media was seen as a tool to extend the reach of traditional channels (websites, newsletters) and to reach specific groups that do not follow other channels, especially the younger generation. For example: “We can reach and inform a larger number of citizens this way,” “wide reach, especially for the young.”

Table 3. (Cont.) Declared reasons for municipalities' use of social media.

Main reasons	Description
Supporting community life and promoting the municipality	A frequent theme was the desire to promote cultural and sporting events organized by the municipality or associations. Social media was used to share positive news, photos from events, and to strengthen local identity and pride. The aim was also to show that the municipality is alive and to present it in a good light externally. For example: "Promotion of events in the municipality, promotion of the municipality itself," "sharing photos from cultural events...makes the cultural life of the municipality visible."
Enabling interaction and feedback	Some respondents mentioned the potential for closer contact with citizens, the ability to respond quickly to inquiries, and to receive valuable feedback and suggestions. For example: "Finding out feedback, opinions," "we are closer to the citizens."
Responding to modern trends and expectations	The pragmatic justification that the use of social media is now a necessity, a standard, and a response to social trends and the digital age was quite often heard. Municipalities have introduced them because citizens expect it. For example: "Because it is expected," "the times demand it."

The analysis shows that the main drivers for social media adoption are pragmatic reasons related to efficiency and outreach. Speed and the ability to reach a wide audience, including specific demographic groups, are seen as key benefits. Promoting community life and municipal self-presentation is also an important consideration. The aspect of two-way communication and feedback is mentioned but seems to be less of a priority than the information and promotion function. Finally, there is the factor of a certain "social pressure" and the perception of social media as a necessary part of modern communication. This pragmatic justification illustrates an environmental legitimacy pressure in TOE: Officials perceive that a modern municipality is simply expected to maintain a social-media presence.

Just as important as understanding the motivations for use is analyzing the barriers that prevent some communities from adopting social media. From the survey respondents, 39 provided answers detailing their reasons for non-use in response to the relevant open-ended question. Analysis of the 39 open-ended responses from municipalities that do not use social media, which included a coding and categorization process, revealed four main categories of reasons (Table 4).

Thus, the dominant barriers are a lack of resources (time, personnel) and strong fears of negative aspects of online communication (conflicts, criticism). Especially in smaller municipalities, there is also a belief in the sufficiency of traditional communication channels and sometimes skepticism about the real need or benefit of social media for their specific context. These results correlate strongly with the finding of lower Facebook adoption rates in smaller municipalities (Table 1).

Table 4. Declared reasons for municipalities' non-use of social media.

Main reasons	Description
Limited resources and capacity	A frequently cited reason was the lack of time and staff capacity to manage the profiles. Respondents reported that they do not have anyone to manage them at the required level of quality and consistency. Financial demands (e.g., for graphics, advertising) and a feeling that resources should be allocated to more important tasks and the basic running of the municipality were also frequently mentioned. Social media management was perceived as an extra burden. For example: "Capacity-wise, there is no person here who would manage the medium," "no one was found who would manage it," "we need to solve more substantial topics," "we struggle to find time to manage the municipality well," and "another time sink."
Concerns about negativity and risks	A very strong theme was the fear of negative comments, hate, and insults. Respondents expressed concerns about uncontrolled discussions, spreading misinformation, and having to constantly resolve conflicts. The anonymity of the online environment was perceived as problematic. The risk of damaging the reputation of the municipality or the representatives themselves was often perceived as too high. For example: "React to various hates," "due to sparking discussion under the post, which you can never control, spreading misinformation," "because it is misleading, manipulative," "anonymity of discussion participants...gives an opportunity for personal frustrations to vent," and "their benefit is lower than the possible risks."
Sufficiency of existing channels and preference for personal contact	Many respondents (especially from smaller municipalities) stated that the existing communication channels—municipal radio, bulletin board, website, newsletter, email—were fully sufficient for their needs. They stressed the value and preference for personal contact with citizens, which they considered more effective and transparent than online communication. For example: "For the need for information, it is sufficient to regularly update the municipal website," "we have a website and phones. Plus the local radio," "personal contact between people is irreplaceable," and "if citizens need to resolve something, a personal visit to the municipal leadership is a more suitable form."
Low perceived relevance and need	Some respondents expressed skepticism about the real benefits of social media for their community. They argued the small size of the municipality, the lack of relevant news to share frequently, or the age structure of the population who, in their opinion, do not use or are not interested in social media. The use of social media was sometimes perceived as an unnecessary fashion. For example: "We see no benefit," "small municipality, 100 inhabitants," "lack of news to maintain a live environment," "most inhabitants are older and don't know how to use technology," "not needed," and "it seems redundant to me."

4.3. Dominant Themes and Characteristics of Facebook Communication

A thematic analysis of 960 randomly selected posts from MEPs from January 2025 revealed what these administratively stronger municipalities communicate about on Facebook. We identified six main themes which are detailed in Table 5.

The analysis shows that the communication of the MEPs on Facebook is quite diverse in terms of topics, but practical information (Topics 1, 3, 6) and promotion of local events and community life (Topic 4) dominate. Information on the development and maintenance of the town (Topic 2) also forms a significant part of

Table 5. Themes and sub-themes in Facebook communication of Czech MEPs.

Topics	Subthemes (specific examples of typical content)
1. Practical information and services for citizens	<p>Information on local fees (waste collections, dogs), payment deadlines</p> <p>Details on waste management (collection schedule, recycling sorting, collection yards, composters)</p> <p>Information on municipal services (social services, rentals, lost and found)</p> <p>Job opening announcements for positions at the city hall</p>
2. City development and maintenance	<p>Information on ongoing and planned investments, reconstruction (repairs of pavements, roads, buildings, public spaces)</p> <p>Showcase of new projects (construction of parks, playgrounds, bike paths)</p> <p>Reports on routine maintenance of city property (tree maintenance)</p> <p>Green and environmental care (tree planting, cleanup events)</p>
3. Traffic and traffic restrictions	<p>Update on road closures and detours due to repairs or events</p> <p>Announcements on changes in public transport timetables, relocation of bus stops</p> <p>Information on parking (new parking spaces, changes in rules)</p> <p>Updates on traffic construction affecting traffic flow</p>
4. Community life and events	<p>Invitations to cultural events (concerts, theatres, exhibitions)</p> <p>Information about sporting events (matches of local clubs, tournaments, cross-country races)</p> <p>Promotion of events for families and leisure (children's events, workshops)</p> <p>Reminder of traditional events (carnival, welcoming of new citizens/babies)</p>
5. Building relationships with citizens and the presentation of the city	<p>General greetings and holiday wishes (New Year)</p> <p>Expressions of gratitude (e.g., for attending an event, for sorting waste)</p> <p>Presentation of the city's identity (historical photos, points of interest, symbols of the city)</p> <p>Information about opportunities for citizen involvement (participatory budgeting, public hearings, surveys)</p> <p>Updates on cooperation with partner cities or organizations</p> <p>Sharing the successes of the city or its citizens (awards, sporting achievements)</p>
6. Official information and safety alerts	<p>Official announcements from the city hall (changes in office hours, budget information, new ordinances)</p> <p>Links to other information sources (websites, mobile apps, newsletters)</p> <p>Safety information (weather alerts, crime prevention, police and fire information)</p> <p>Notifications of planned outages (water, electricity) or emergencies</p>

communication, which often also serves a PR function, as it presents the activity and achievements of the municipal leadership. Posts explicitly focused on relationship building and dialogue (part of Topic 5, e.g., calls for discussion, responses to comments) were also present in our random sample, while elements such as greetings or thank you notes were present. Overall, it seems that the communication of the MEPs on Facebook primarily fulfills an informative and promotional function aimed at ensuring that citizens are informed about practical matters and events in the municipality.

These empirical findings resonate strongly with the typology of government communication proposed by DePaula et al. (2018). While Topics 1, 2, 3, and 6 clearly fall into the category of "information provision,"

Topics 4 and 5—i.e., community life and relationship building—are textbook examples of the categories of “symbolic acts” and “favorable presentation” (DePaula et al., 2018). This suggests that a substantial part of the communication of Czech municipalities on Facebook is not only focused on fulfilling an informational obligation but also on image building and strengthening community identity.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to provide a comprehensive analysis of the use of social media by Czech municipalities in the unique context of the highly fragmented structure of local government in the country. Using a mixed research design—combining a large-scale proxy mapping of Facebook presence, a nationwide survey, and a focused thematic analysis of the communication of MEPs—we sought to understand the extent of adoption, the motivations and barriers influencing usage and the nature of communication practices on the dominant Facebook platform. The findings offer important insights into the dynamics of local government communication in the digital age and have implications for theory, practice, and democratic engagement.

Addressing our hypothesis, our findings offer confirmation of the role of municipal size in social media adoption. The significant gradient in the proxy of Facebook adoption rate, rising from only 14.1% in the smallest municipalities (<200 inhabitants) to almost 90% in the largest (10,000+ inhabitants), strongly supports the thesis of DOI theory particularly its emphasis on how an organization’s internal characteristics and resources (Rogers, 1962) enable the adoption of innovations, aligning also with broader socio-technical models emphasizing the role of organizational context (Oliveira & Welch, 2013). This pattern reveals how Wirth’s (1938) fundamental insight about size as a key urban characteristic manifests in the digital age. Our findings, supported by recent research from Belgium (Mabillard et al., 2024), demonstrate that size now also determines digital communication capacity. This creates a new layer of urban–rural differentiation, raising critical questions about the future of small municipalities in an era where digital presence increasingly shapes democratic participation.

These findings let us place Czech municipalities, in broad strokes, on Rogers’ diffusion curve (1962). The largest cities ($\geq 10,000$ residents), which moved onto Facebook earliest and now show almost universal coverage, occupy the leading “innovator/early-adopter” edge. Most medium-sized towns (about 2,000–10,000 residents) sit in the broad majority segment, taking up the tool once its usefulness and peer expectations became clear. The very small municipalities, especially those below 500 inhabitants, form the tail of the distribution and will supply most of the late-majority and eventual laggard cohort. Their hesitation is not simply resistance to change: with skeletal staffs, tight budgets, and still-effective offline channels such as village notice boards, spending scarce capacity on social media can look imprudent.

Our findings regarding platform choice (RQ1) reveal the clear dominance of Facebook, a result consistent with many international contexts (Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018; Yavetz & Aharony, 2020). However, the noticeable presence of WhatsApp (used by more than a third of municipalities active on social media) and the frequent mention of specialized municipal communication platforms such as Munipolis in the “other” category (discussion of Table 2) suggest a more nuanced environment. WhatsApp arguably serves the needs of direct, perhaps internal or close group communication, while the popularity of tools such as Munipolis points to a perceived need for municipalities to have controlled, efficient, one-way or targeted channels for information dissemination, distinct from the open and potentially less controllable environment of

mainstream social media. This highlights the potential divergence between platforms designed for broad social media and those tailored to specifically deliver information from government to citizens, even if municipal actors sometimes conceptually merge them.

In addressing RQ2 concerning communication content, our findings reveal a clear predominance of informational and promotional objectives over dialogical ones. Municipalities primarily use social media to achieve speed and efficiency in communication to ensure that citizens are widely informed and to promote community life and events (Table 3). This corresponds closely with the public information model of public relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) which emphasizes the dissemination of objective (or organizationally framed) information. The significant presence of content related to the development and maintenance of the city and the promotion of events (Table 5) also includes elements of public relations and a potentially asymmetrical PR model with the aim of building a positive image and showcasing the achievements of the municipality. While the potential for interaction and feedback was mentioned by some questionnaire respondents (Table 3), thematic analysis of MEPs' Facebook posts (Table 5) showed limited evidence of content explicitly designed to promote discussion or co-creation, suggesting that the dialogic potential of social media (Kent & Taylor, 2002) remains largely untapped in practice.

RQ3 and RQ4 sought to understand the key motivations and barriers shaping social media use and the results provide essential context for both adoption patterns and communication styles. Resource constraints directly explain low adoption among smaller communities. Fear of "negative comments," uncontrolled discussions, and reputational damage represent a strong psychological and organizational barrier. This resonates with theories of risk perception (Slovic, 2000) where the perceived negative consequences of online interaction (conflict resolution burden, public criticism) outweigh the perceived benefits for many municipal actors. This fear likely contributes to a preference for safer, one-way communication styles and hinders the adoption of more open, dialogic approaches, consistent with findings on organizational tendencies toward control in uncertain online environments (Baltz, 2023; Evans et al., 2018). Beyond resource constraints, our qualitative evidence highlights the TOE "environment" dimension. Many officials referred to a diffuse legitimacy pressure ("the times demand it," "citizens expect it") that pushes them online even when direct functional gains are modest.

A comparison of the stated objectives (RQ3) with the observed communication content of the MEPs (RQ2) reveals both congruence and tension. The strong emphasis on information delivery and event promotion is reflected in the dominant content themes. However, the stated goal of enabling interaction and feedback appears less translated into practice, as content rarely includes explicit calls for discussion or engagement. This gap may stem from the aforementioned resource constraints (managing interaction is time-consuming) or the pervasive fear of negativity, leading to a default setting to a safer, broadcast style of communication. Moreover, the perceived risks associated with negativity (RQ4) seem to actively shape the type of communication in which municipalities engage, favoring controlled dissemination of information over potentially contentious dialogue. This reveals the central "democratic dilemma" of modern local government. On the one hand, platforms like Facebook create public expectations of greater transparency and citizen engagement. On the other, however, the very openness of these platforms combined with limited municipal resources and fears of negativity push local governments towards a controlled, one-way flow of information, leaving the dialogic potential of social media largely untapped.

As elaborated in the methodology and confirmed by the results of the questionnaire regarding barriers (RQ4), effective social media management requires significant resources—dedicated staff time, specific digital communication skills, funding for potential promotion or tools, and strategic oversight. Larger municipalities inherently have better access to these resources, allowing them to adopt and maintain a visible presence on platforms like Facebook. In contrast, the smallest municipalities, often operating with minimal staff and budget, face significant constraints, making social media management a perceived luxury rather than a basic necessity. This reveals an institutional digital divide within the Czech local government system where a lack of resources structurally limits the capacity of a huge number of smaller municipalities to engage through these widespread digital channels. This goes beyond mere technological access and points to underlying inequalities in administrative capacity.

This institutional digital divide affects not only the presence of municipalities on social media but also the type of content they produce. Fear of negativity and lack of capacity to moderate complex online discussions, key barriers for smaller municipalities (RQ4), logically lead to a preference for controlled communication. The result is often symbolic adoption—digital presence is introduced to meet demands for legitimacy, but the communication strategy itself remains conservative and unidirectional to minimize risk. Moreover, this preference suggests path dependency: smaller municipalities may continue using their established communication channels (bulletin boards, local radio, personal contacts) that have served them adequately for decades. This is consistent with findings that much of government use of social media is not devoted to democratic dialogue but to symbolic acts and self-presentation—activities designed to build a positive image in a low-risk environment (DePaula et al., 2018). Thus, the “luxury” of social media management is not just having a profile but having the resources to move beyond safe, one-way messaging.

This institutional digital divide extends beyond administrative capacity to democratic advocacy itself. Without social media presence, smaller municipalities face systematic disadvantages in mobilizing citizens, building coalitions, and gaining visibility in policy debates including those concerning their own future through potential amalgamation. This represents a digital manifestation of classical modernization patterns: While traditional oral communication networks served rural communities adequately for local governance, contemporary political advocacy increasingly requires digital platforms to reach audiences and influence policy. The concentration of social media adoption in larger municipalities thus reinforces urban-rural power asymmetries, creating a self-perpetuating cycle where digital capability determines political voice, a pattern likely extending across Europe’s fragmented local government systems.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This study, although comprehensive, has several limitations that should be mentioned. First, the proxy method for mapping Facebook presence, while validated, likely slightly underestimates true prevalence and cannot capture the level of activity or engagement on the identified pages. Second, the questionnaire survey, although national, achieved a response rate of only 5.3%, raising concerns about potential non-response bias. It is possible that municipalities with a greater interest in or activity on social media were more likely to respond which may have biased findings on motivations and use of platforms towards a more positive picture than exists across all municipalities. Third, the thematic analysis, while providing depth, was limited to the MEPs and a single month (January 2025). Findings related to communication content and style may not be fully generalizable to smaller municipalities or applicable to times of crisis or elections. In addition,

sampling only five posts per MEP may not have captured the full spectrum of their communication. Fourth and finally, the study focused exclusively on the perspective of the municipalities (senders) and lacked data on citizens' perceptions or quantitative engagement metrics (such as likes, comments, or shares), which are key indicators of the true impact of communication and an important direction for future research.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides a multifaceted analysis of social media use by Czech municipalities revealing an environment strongly shaped by differences in size and resources. While larger municipalities have generally adopted Facebook, primarily for information dissemination and promotion, often balancing public service with PR objectives, smaller municipalities lag significantly behind, constrained by a lack of capacity and concerns about online negativity. Facebook dominates the social media sphere but specialized municipal communication tools also play a noticeable role, underscoring the focus on controlled information delivery. Overall, the potential of social media to promote genuine dialogue and participation remains largely untapped. Addressing the institutional digital divide and equipping municipalities, especially smaller ones, with the necessary resources, skills, and strategic leadership to navigate the complexities of online communication is a key challenge for strengthening local governance and democratic engagement in the Czech Republic's digital future.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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About the Authors



Michael Haman is an assistant professor in the Department of Humanities at the Czech University of Life Sciences Prague. His research focuses on political communication on social media, Czech local politics, and the societal impacts of AI.



Milan Školník is an assistant professor in the Department of Humanities at the Czech University of Life Sciences Prague. His work examines political communication, corruption, and how AI and social media shape politics.



Michal Lošťák is a professor and the head of the Department of Humanities at the Czech University of Life Sciences Prague. His research focuses on rural sociology and on regional and rural development.