Social Networks in politics and administration

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Abstract:
Recognized as a tool with significant implications in the social order, social networks represent the electronic interface for the exchange of information on topics and common interests between governments and citizens. **The purpose** of this article is to analyze how social networks contribute to political and administrative processes through the diversity of roles with functional potential in the sphere of citizen mobilization and involvement. **The objective** is to investigate how social networks facilitate interaction and involvement between politics, administration and citizens, how public organizations use these tools and for what purposes. The applied **methodology** is summarized in the literature review, and to support our claims regarding the importance of social networks in political and administrative processes, we present official statistical data. We **conclude** with the need to address issues such as intergovernmental relations, the influence of social networks and the role of citizens, without neglecting the associated risks.

Keywords: *e-government, social networks, e-interface, e-participation, employment.*

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Electronic Government and Social Networks in Politics and Administration

In the digital age, similar to the emergence of other technological innovations in the past, society is attracted by the prospect of a radical transformation: it can transcend time, space and politics.

Considered as a public network that provides global population access to various communication services, the Internet mediates facilities such as the World Wide Web and the transmission of e-mail, news, entertainment and data files, regardless of the device used. The availability of data and information across multiple delivery channels, ensuring broad coverage in a language that citizens agree on, are functional conditions and objectives of e-government in ensuring transparent systems and services that citizens use and can had confidence (Carbo & Williams, 2004).

As indicators of the degree of penetration and influence of social networks in various communities and geographical regions, we will use statistics to highlight the connection between e-government, social networks as an electronic interface between citizens and administration. We will also highlight changes in user preferences and analyze the ways in which they interact with political and administrative content through engagement and e-participation. We will present potential risks such as the spread of misinformation, political manipulation on social platforms, as well as the possible vulnerabilities of democratic processes to external influences and nefarious practices on social networks.

Statistics of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU, 2023), indicate about 5.4 billion people (67% of the world's population) who use the Internet, 1.7 billion more than in 2018, when the number of users was 3, 7 billion ie 45% of the world's population. A graphical representation of the ITU for 2023 is shown below (Fig.1):
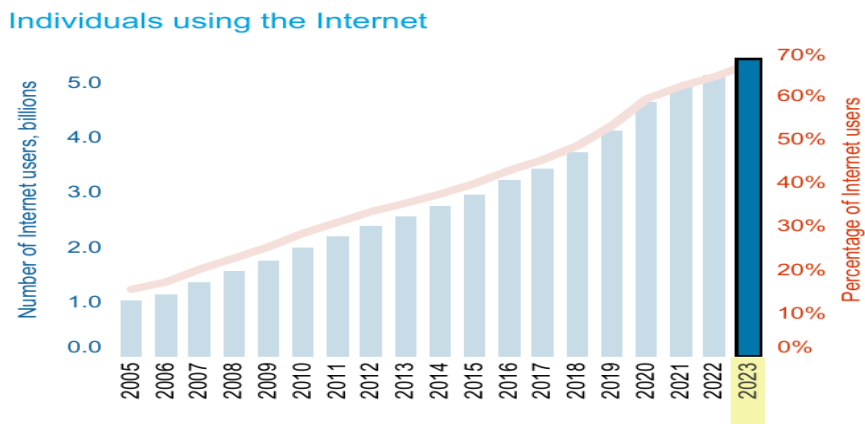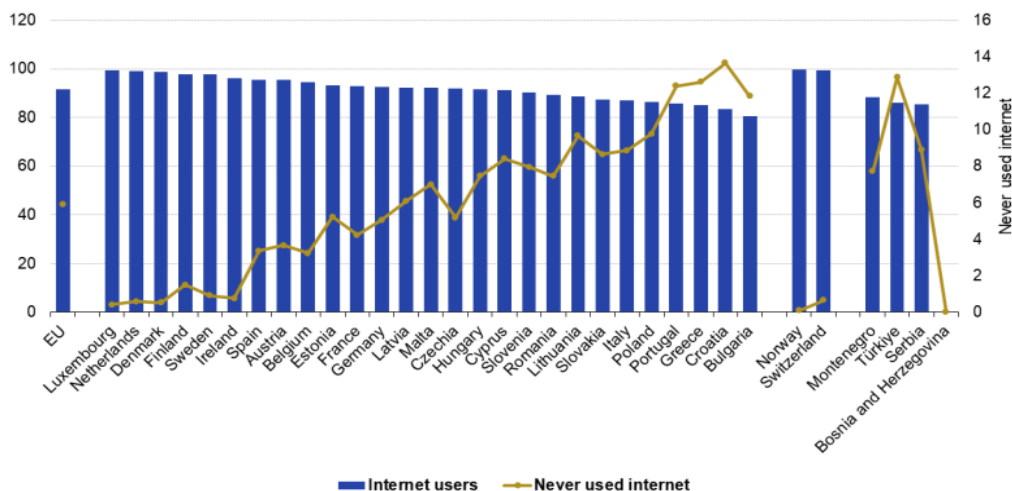

Fig. 1. People using the Internet (ITU, 2023)

As access to the Internet expands, it directly contributes to the increase in the use of social networks and the increase of the population's involvement in these online

environments. The number of social media users has increased significantly as the population has become familiar with the social media platforms they use to communicate, share information and interact with others, with social media exerting an increasing influence on daily life.

Source: isoc_ci_ifp_iu

eurostat

Fig. 2. Internet users and non-users, 2023

There is, however, a significant part of the global population, namely 2.6 billion people who do not benefit from this facility (ITU, 2023). At the level of the European Union (Fig. 2) only 59% of the population participates, and countries such as Denmark with 91%, Cyprus (83%) and Hungary (81%) have an active population in the use of the Internet, followed by France (44%), Germany (49%) and Italy (53%) with lower participation weights [Eurostat, 2024].

The use of Web 2.0 technologies influences the self-expression and participation of citizens in government activities (Bødker & Zander, 2015), and e-participation involves the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to support the communication and interaction of individuals with other people, communities, public authorities and government in general (Scott, Delone & Golden, 2011).

Largely dependent on the share of Internet users, the use of social networks (and social media in general) in public and government organizations is analyzed by authors who see social networks as a powerful tool in opening up and increasing citizen participation (Nica, Popescu, Nicolaescu & Constantin, 2014).

**Social networks, administration - citizens electronic interface**

The concept of social networks represents a broader perspective and its nature, with an emphasis on the connections between people and the interpersonal relationships that bind them, referring to social networks in their classical sense in which individuals

interact and connect with others forming networks of "people (friends, acquaintances, colleagues) connected by interpersonal relationships" (Webster-Merriam, 2015).

In politics and administration social networks are understood as specific Web 2.0 technological tools that are used to encourage engagement with citizens (García, Criado, Téllez, 2017). We are therefore talking about the functional aspect and their role. Social platforms facilitate interaction and engagement between politicians, administration and citizens, ensuring an improvement in the provision of "public electronic service" that includes most of the concepts used to designate electronic interfaces between governments and citizens (Lindgren, 2013).

Seen as a true digital channel of communication, governments can use social media to promote transparency, accountability and civic engagement, thus strengthening their trust and legitimacy in the perception of citizens. It is shown that any political content posted on social networks can attract citizens' attention and involve them if the topics are meaningful and of interest to them (Bonsón, Royo & Ratkai, 2015).

Worldwide, social media platforms are used by more than two-thirds of internet users (Fig.3), placing the Facebook platform in user preferences.
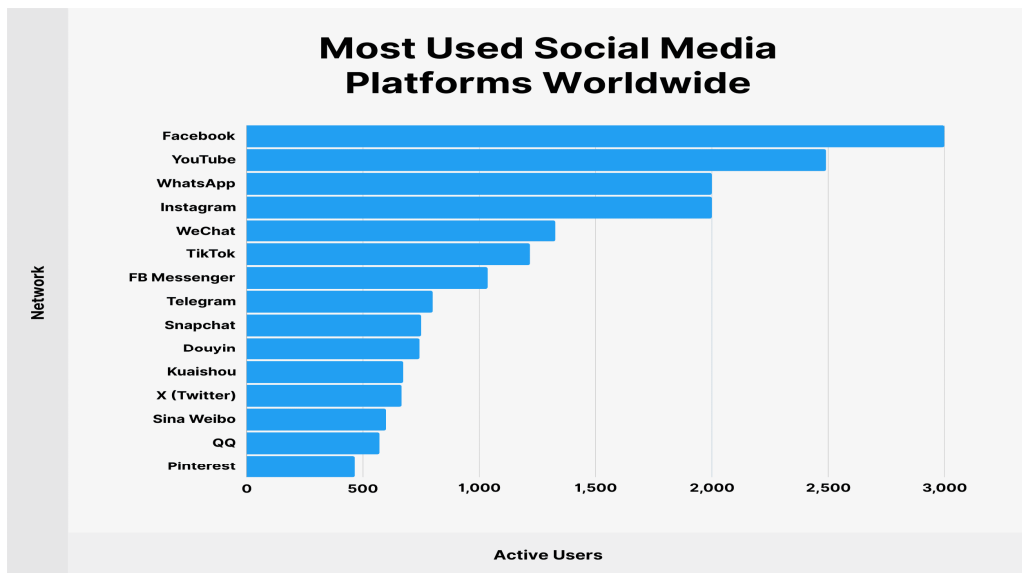
Fig. 3. The most used social media platforms worldwide in 2023; Source: Statista, 2023

With 1.98 billion daily active users in 2022, the Facebook platform registers an increase of approximately 54 million compared to 2021 (Ahlgren, 2023), and in 2023, Facebook registers approximately three billion monthly active users, thus remaining the most used network online social network in the world. The increasing trend of the number of users of the Facebook platform is supported by data that shows that in the second quarter of 2017 it exceeded two billion active users, and in the first month of 2022 it reaches almost 330 million users with the main audience base in India and the United States with approximately 179 million users. A statistically remarkable popularity of the platform is also recorded in Indonesia and Brazil (Dixon, 2024).

Trends in the use of social networks in politics and administration

Virtual meetings through social networks are beginning to be seen as a method of engaging and maintaining this online involvement of citizens (Okura & Kaigo, 2016), there is a growing interest in using their potential and in administration to improve the quality of government services and to enable greater citizen involvement (Goncalves, Liu, Xiao, Chaudhry, Hosio & Kostakos, 2015).

Slovenia is among the countries that analyzed the use of Facebook in state administration organizations, based on 16 indicators measuring usage, engagement, multi-channel features and multimedia content. The results of the analysis of the 112 administrations showed that few of them had established their presence on Facebook, and for most organizations the need for improvements was found (Mitaľ, 2020).

What role do social networks play in mobilizing and involving citizens in political and administrative processes?

The benefits of existing and emerging information and communication technology, including social networks that facilitate the administration's involvement of citizens in the decision-making process, are recognized (Alzouma, 2015). The better the government and citizens understand the benefits of involvement, the more responsible governance and economic development will be achieved (Mejabi & Fabgule, 2013). Citizen involvement is seen as important not only for the visibility and election of the candidate if we refer to political actions, but also for debating his policies with citizens (Missingham, 2011). Some researchers believe that Internet-related resources play a key role in explaining political and social engagement among Internet users, and that there is a positive relationship between levels of e-government development and citizen engagement in citizen consultation and petitions (Vicente & Novo, 2014). Relevant results in the field of e-government indicate a steady increase in the predominance of social networks among citizens (Chui, Manyika, Bughin, Dobbs, Roxburgh, Sarrazin, Sands & Westergren, 2012). Government institutions are also increasingly experimenting with social technology to communicate with citizens (Goncalves, et.al., 2015).

The role of social networks from promoting government transparency to enhancing interaction between citizens, other relevant parties and public administrators (Mossberger, Wu & Crawford, 2013), can impact the adoption and implementation of e-government (Cotterill & King, 2007). The literature examines how various functions of government promote civil society, engagement on Facebook pages, and how dysfunctions in government operations unintentionally discourage engagement (Dwivedi, Rana, Tajvidi, Lal, Sahu & Gupta, 2017). From e-participation with reference to social networks (Alarabiat, Soares & Estevez, 2016), to government transparency (Boudjelida, Mellouli & Lee, 2016), its accountability (Bertot, Jaeger & Grimes, 2012) and the use of Web 2.0 technologies in e-governance (Dixon, 2010), we find in the literature demonstrated the remarkable ability of social media as a network of social interactions to connect an extensive and diverse population generating increasing active participation, greater commitment from local and national administration, rapid communication and more effective with citizens.

Influences of the use of social networks in politics and administration

In politics and administration, there is not a great desire to exploit the potential of social networks (including social media), even though statistically social networks are among the most powerful tools with implications in the social order. From a marketing

tool for involving users in the development of new products and services, the use of social networks in the exchange of information on common topics and interests can have predictable potential both in politics and in administration.

Many of the current challenges from economic pressures, social tensions, global competition and low public trust, increasingly complex and interdependent public objectives that governments can no longer afford to tackle alone, lead both politicians and administrations to admit that must work through networks of state and non-state actors to organize existing resources, knowledge and capacities in the pursuit of public objectives.

This new paradigm relies on e-governance to network politics, administration and citizens. And last but not least, it facilitates the provision of services to citizens. However, looking at recent statistics (Figure 4) we see that only 18% of internet users requested official documents or certificates online in 2023 from public authorities.

Request official documents or certificates (last 12 months)

Source: isoc_ciegi_ac   eurostat
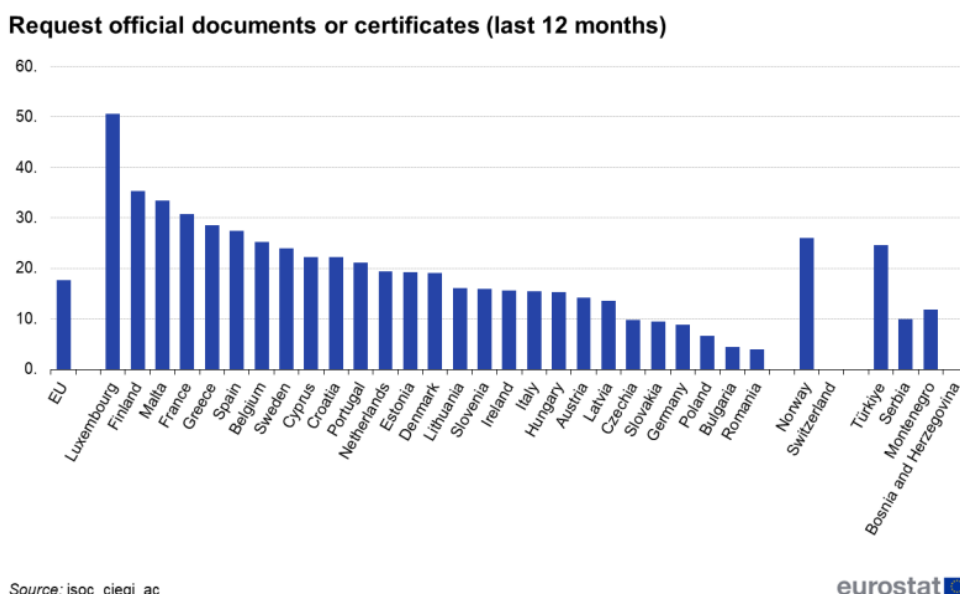
*Fig.* **4.** Requests for official documents or certificates (last 12 months), 2023

Empirical data on the use of social networks in administration is scarce compared to data on the use of social networks by citizens and public institutions. Two surveys in this area, one conducted by the United Nations (UN) and the other by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), show that 61% of UN member states used social networks for electronic consultations. However, the level of uptake within a specific country has not been researched to know for example, how many public organizations use social media specifically and for what purposes?

In 2023, only 54% of internet users in the EU have interacted with public authorities in order to obtain information related to various rights such as for example the right to pension, the institution's operating schedule, health, etc. Observing the data below (Fig. 5), we see that Finland and Denmark stand out for the share of Internet users who have interacted with public authorities at 92%, followed by the Netherlands with 84%, and the

lowest share was reported in Romania where only 14% of internet users have interacted with public authorities.

Interaction with public authorities (last 12 months)
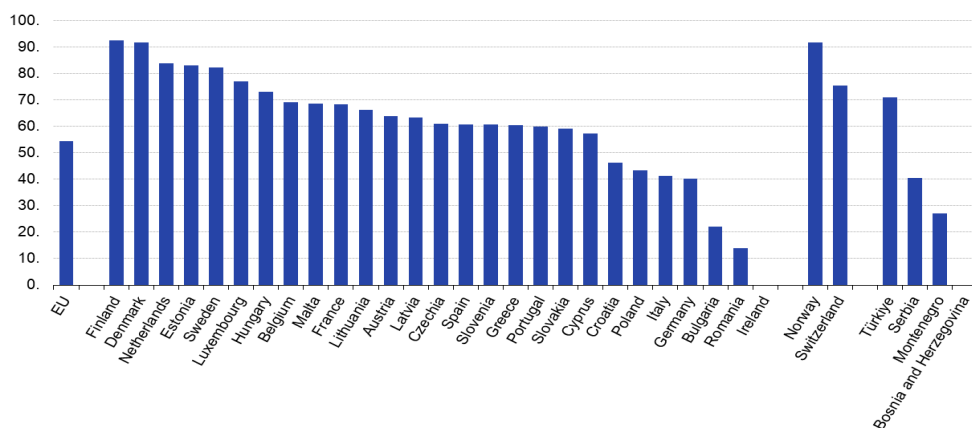
Source: isoc_ciegi_ac

eurostat

Fig **5**: Interaction with public authorities (last 12 months), 2023;

Poor interaction is hardly a new concern. An OECD report "Government at a Glance, 2015" compared the administrations of 34 member states in various areas, including the use of social networks in executive government institutions as early as 2015 (OECD, 2015). The survey analyzed the use of two social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) in the most important institutions of the executive power (president, prime minister or government as a whole). The results, based on 25 responses (24 from OECD member states and one from Colombia, a partner state), showed that only a minority (28%) of governments in the OECD area adopted a strategy for the use of social networks (Mikcoleit, 2015). The number of users participating in these networks undoubtedly represents an additional communication channel with important potential in the interaction of governments with citizens, but research does not reveal the level of acceptance in certain countries.

How can social networks facilitate interaction and engagement between politics, administration and citizens?

Although some research contested or significantly minimized the impact of the use of information systems in governments (Norris & Kraemer, 1996), currently we can speak of an increasing impact directly proportional to the use of information technologies in administration. Technological innovations as the engine of radical changes in society influence the orientation towards new and dynamic ways of interacting, accessing information and connecting with others through the use of online tools.

Looking at some data by region (Table 1), regarding online involvement in development processes in Europe, Asia, Africa, America and the 14 countries in the Pacific Ocean, we observe variations in the use of online consultation and deliberation tools. Although they are data from 2018, we consider a brief analysis necessary:

Table **1**. Number of countries using online engagement tools in 2018 by region (Petrosyan, 2023).

Characteristic	Portal with social networking tools	Portal with e-tools for public consultation/ deliberation	Recent use of online consultation/ deliberation tools for development	No online engagement tools/activities available
Europe	42	39	40	0
Asia	42	35	40	1
Africa	46	24	46	2
Americas	35	32	34	0
Oceania	12	5	12	0

1. *Presence of online engagement tools*: Europe and Asia have a high presence of portals with social media tools (42% and 42%) and electronic tools for public consultation/deliberation (39% and 35% respectively). Africa also with 46% portals with social media tools and 24% electronic tools for public consultation/deliberation. America compared to Europe and Asia, with 35% portals with social networking tools and 32% electronic tools for public consultation/deliberation, has a slightly lower presence. The 14 Pacific Islands region has the lowest presence of online engagement tools among the regions analyzed.

2. *Recent use of online consultation / deliberation tools*: Africa stands out with 46% recent use of online consultation / deliberation tools for development. Asia closely follows Africa with 40% use of online consultation / deliberation tools. In Europe we have significant use of these instruments, respectively 40%. In the Americas we have a lower level of use compared to the other regions, this is highlighted by 34% use of online consultation/deliberation tools. In the region of the 14 countries of the Pacific Islands we observe the lowest percentage of recent use of online consultation / deliberation tools among the listed regions, at only 12%.

3. *Comparison between regions*: Africa has a strong presence of online engagement tools and a high percentage of recent use of online consultation / deliberation tools, which may indicate proactive openness in using digital tools for development. Europe and Asia with similar levels of presence of online engagement tools, are overtaken by Africa in recent use of online consultation / deliberation tools. Compared to the other regions, America ranks last in both the presence of online engagement tools and the recent use of online consultation/deliberation tools. The results indicate variation in the adoption and use of online engagement tools for development across these regions, with Africa scoring higher on recent use, followed by Asia and Europe, while the Americas and Pacific Island countries show lower levels of engagement.

Although we have touched upon the involvement of users of online tools, we consider these aspects relevant and generally valid. Extrapolating to politics and administration, we can anticipate, based on statistics, developments and trends, taking into account of course other variables and factors that could exert influence.

The limits of social networks (in the political process)

The e-government literature refers to the limitations of the contribution of information and communication technology with influences on supporting governments in providing information and services (Heeks, 1999; Heeks, 2001), on different priorities in setting government strategies (Torres, Pina & Acerete, 2005), and of the lack of in-depth analyzes of the political nature of the e-government development processes. A deeper recognition of complex political and institutional environments is often suggested.

Simultaneously with the remarkable opportunities for encouraging citizen participation that social networks offer, it is necessary to pay attention to the possibilities of influencing access and virtual interaction and how to influence the results of citizen engagement in these spaces (Hercheui, 2011a). Social networks are systems developed and owned by third parties whose interests are to grow and maintain their user base in a competitive business environment and where Facebook for example "was just valued at ~$103 billion (Facebook's IPO prospectus) in a final private market transaction prior to the IPO" (Blodget, 2012).

There is a risk of the formation of new types of censorship and surveillance (Mosco, 2004) and new digital political struggles (Johnston, Lorana & Gusfield, 1993). Internet interactions can become tools of citizen surveillance and control in specific environments where institutions are perceived to be omnipresent in an authoritarian way (Castells, 2001). Contrary to the view that sites are open spaces for democratic debate, there are instances where governments have called for groups or images to be banned or messages to be deleted (Halliday, 2011b), or to block access to social networking sites for a variety of reasons. An example of this is Britain's response to the riots in August 2011, when social media was believed to be the medium for riots to take place and the UK Prime Minister announced to Parliament that the government intended to ask for a temporary blocking of access to the networks social (Halliday, 2011a). Another example is that of the Chinese government that has banned most "western"social media sites; the example of Pakistan which banned the Facebook platform for a few days in 2010, only to return in 2011 with a High Court order to permanently block access to Facebook. The petitioner claimed that Islamic values are being abrogated in the name of freedom of information, affecting the faith of millions of Muslims (The Express Tribune, 2011).

The latest signals about the privacy risks of owned social media platforms come from the Dutch Data Protection Authority (DPA) which advises the Dutch Ministry of the Interior not to rely on Facebook pages to communicate with citizens unless it has an "idea clear about how Facebook uses the personal data of people who visit government pages" (Browne, 2024).

Research directions of social networks in policy and administration

A better understanding of the challenges but also of the specific alternatives that citizens and governments may have when transforming traditional ways of governance and governance based on current technologies. The need to explore potential conflict and cooperation in intergovernmental information exchanges, analyze the causes that lead to the failure of e-government projects, and study virtual interactivity between citizens and government feedback systems (Scholl, 2002).

Studies to explore and explain the processes and patterns of participation in e-government projects by testing claims against empirical data. Research to facilitate understanding of e-government processes and policy (Aldrich, et.al., 2002). Field

research to analyze the real needs, the problems for which e-government is the solution, the need for government reform and administrative control, and actions aimed at aspects of administrative behavior (Goodsell, 1997).

Conclusions

E-governance is not just limited to the use of existing and emerging technologies in government policies. Old and new concerns in politics and administration, from intergovernmental relations, influences of e-government, the role of social media in the development of e-government, and the appropriate roles of citizens in the development of e-government, to the ways in which politicians and public institutions use social media platforms to to communicate with citizens and to manage the relationship with them. Despite the remarkable opportunities that social networks offer in encouraging citizen participation and facilitating communication between governments and citizens, there are risks associated with the privacy of personal data. A careful and responsible approach is required in the use of social media platforms for the official communication of governments with citizens, rigorous assessment of how these platforms manage users' personal data to ensure compliance with data protection rules and their privacy.

Authors' Contribution:
The authors contributed equally to this work

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