

## Chapter 14

# Writings on the City Wall: An Analysis of Popular Municipal Facebook Pages Posts

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Municipality Facebook pages are significant social media arenas for maintaining contact between representatives and their constituencies. The authors use digital tools to collect and analyze some 24,000 posts from the Facebook pages of all Israeli municipalities in a six-month period. Following a purely automatic linguistic analysis of the texts of all posts published on the pages, this study moved to a manual coding of a sample of the most popular posts in the data in order to gain insight into the character of the discourse in these arenas; the actors; the format, type, and emotionality of the contents that attract the highest levels of engagement.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Democratic thinkers have long argued that the construction of viable arenas for self-governance should start at the workplace and municipal levels (Pateman, 1970). For example, Dahl (1970) argues that the city is,

*a unit of human proportions in a world grown giant, demonic, incomprehensible; an optimal site for democracy... an association in which citizens can learn that collective benefits from cooperation and peaceful conflict are so great that rational self-interest must act as a restraint on self-destructive egoism (p. 165; see also Dahl, 1967).*

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In such environments, people are within physical proximity on a regular basis, they may repeatedly interact with other stakeholders, and it is easy to perceive the link between people's decisions and consequences on the ground. Hence, such environments lend themselves more easily than others to participatory schemes and deliberative programs (Shkabatur, 2010).

Recent years have shown a growing awareness among national, as well as municipal governments to develop new means of communication with citizens, along with a surge in the use of information and communication technologies to promote participatory democratic processes (Coleman & Gotze, 2001; Macintosh & Whyte, 2008; Manosevitch, Steinfeld & Lev-On, 2015). Perhaps, the milestone most associated with the aforementioned phenomenon, is Obama's first presidential memorandum, on his first day in office in 2009, in which he instructed federal agencies to *usher in a new era of open government*. The following key importance to him was to establish a system of transparency, public participation and collaboration. Consequently, executive departments and agencies should use innovative tools, methods and systems to cooperate among themselves, across all levels of government and with non-profit organizations, businesses and individuals in the private sector. In parallel, scholars have begun to develop theoretical models through which they could analyze and evaluate governments' e-transparency, participation and collaboration efforts (Mergel, 2013), as well as the impact of the tools, goals and topics on which they typically focus (Criado, Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2013). The current chapter is a part of this endeavor, focusing on the topics and formats that are popular in conversations involving governments and citizens, at the municipal level.

Online municipal platforms are novel and attractive arenas for citizens to ask and receive questions, express opinions and communicate with officials. An examination of the interactions between local governments and residents on Facebook is important for several reasons. First, since municipal elections may be determined by a small number of voters, mayors and local candidates may pay significant attention to residents' comments. As a result, a local Facebook page can generate significant incentives and opportunities to initiate discussions and calls to action, especially during election season. Second, participants in municipal forums discuss topics that directly affect their everyday lives (such as education, welfare, and the urban environment). Third, studies demonstrate correlations between municipal website usage and trust in local authorities (Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006).

We studied the prominent concepts and topics of interest in all of the official Israeli municipal Facebook pages from October 2012 to April 2013. The first stage of this research included an automatic linguistic analysis of the texts of all the posts and comments published on the pages during this time scale, and used digital tools to extract the most frequent words and terms in the corpus. The results enabled us to set the ground for improving the service given to citizens in various domains by the city, and understand, for the first time, the interactions between residents and municipalities on Facebook, based on automatic tools. Municipal Facebook pages have emerged from the analysis as a place of reinforcement and positive attitudes, where citizens and cities congratulate, express gratitude and support municipal and citizens' projects and initiatives. Positive terms were significantly more prominent and diverse in the texts than negative terms. The findings further indicate that the discourse tends to be personal in nature, and cities frequently encourage citizens to engage with them on Facebook, suggesting they like content posted by them and let them know what they think, and direct citizens to other online platforms. City pages were also used for public notification of events at both the municipal and national levels, such as emergency drills and wartime notifications; the latter were tied with citizens' expressions of anxiety, confusion, and sense of inability. The pages were also used for discussing issues related to the education system, and for submitting formal requests to the municipality. Finally, despite of the general positive tone, a

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