



# Interactive cities? Local political online communication in Switzerland



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## ABSTRACT

Do city governments and administrations use interactive online tools in their communication? Are they eager to foster interaction with citizens via social networks and microblogs? And what kind of tools do they employ on their websites? We seek to answer these questions with a quantitative analysis of interactive political online communication implemented by city governments and administrations in Switzerland. Results show that more than 70% of all Swiss cities (N = 159) offer at least one interactive tool; about one third of the cities are active in social networks. In the French-speaking part of Switzerland more cities use social networks than in the German part, while the Italian-speaking part, Ticino, lags behind.

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## 1. Introduction

A growing number of cities and municipalities are experimenting with online platforms and social media—not only in the spirit of “zeitgeist”, but also to better meet the demands of more transparency and citizen participation, reaching out to groups with low political involvement, as teenagers and young adults. Such activities can particularly be observed on the local level, offering the opportunity to focus on local politics that are often not in the centre of political communication research (Lang, 2004).

A large variety of understandings about “interactivity” can be found in the literature (e.g. Kioussis, 2002; Stromer-Galley, 2004; Sundar, Kalyanaraman, & Brown, 2003). Our approach is based on Kruijemeier, van Noort, Vliegthart, and de Vreese (2013), who convincingly argue that the “different understandings have in common that they assume two-way communication” (p. 2), or more generally, interactivity “is the extent to which messages in a sequence relate to each other, and especially the extent to which later messages recount the relatedness of earlier messages” (Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997, no page). With the objective to avoid concepts that are too exclusive and demanding for an assessment of administrations’ aspirations to engage with citizens online (such as political participation—involving, at least, the intention of power sharing, Dahlgren, 2013), this study focused on online tools that require and/or invite two-way communication, occurring “when the send-

ing and receiving functions are performed with equal frequency by two or more persons” (Lasswell, 1948, p. 220). Go and You (2016) have pointed out that facilitating two-way symmetrical communications between an organization and its public is a defining element of social media and other online platforms. In this sense, interactive online communication means *potentially* interactive, because facilitating the tools that enable an exchange or dialogue may not be used in this way, or even not at all. Thus, interactive communication implies that two-way communication actually takes place, while interactive media only provide the necessary means for two-way communication. For this study we rely on previous research that have defined and differentiated types of interactive online media (Gibson & Ward, 2000; Macintosh, 2008; Schweitzer, 2005, 2010; Tambouris, Liotas, & Tarabanis, 2007; Van Veenstra, Janssen, & Boon, 2011). Previous studies have also underlined the potential inherent in digital media to change (even augment) the relationship between governments, organizations and the public at large, providing new and more opportunities for connecting and dialoguing (e.g. Mossberger, Wu, & Crawford, 2013; Saffer, Sommerfeldt, & Taylor, 2013; Thackeray, Neiger, Smith, & Van Wagenen, 2012).

With Sanders and Canel (2013) we understand the communication of city administrations as government communication, i.e. “the role, practice, aims and achievements of communication as it takes place in and on behalf of public institution(s) whose primary end is executive in the service of a political rationale, and that are constituted on the basis of the people’s indirect or direct consent and charged to enact their will” (p. 3). The communication of a city administration in this regard encompasses both the politically motivated communication by an elected government – the political leadership of a city’s administration – and the communication

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by the bureaucratic administrative body which has to refer to its proper public responsibilities (Jarren, 2005; Baumgartner, 2010). That being said, we will use the terms “government communication” and “administration communication” interchangeably.

Our study connects to analyses on the local level in Western democracies (such as Coleman, 2005; Coleman & Firmstone, 2014; Geissel, Kollack, & Neunecker, 2013; Hilton, 2006). We focus on cities and their efforts to engage their population in online communication, because interactive political online communication can be more often found on the local level with its more salient and tangible issues than on cantonal or national levels (Ladner & Bühlmann, 2007; Mabileau, Moyser, Parry, & Quantin, 1989), such as spatial planning, traffic development, gentrification or social cohesion and integration. In this regard, cities can be considered “laboratories” for interactive online communication (Åström & Grönlund, 2012, p. 76), particularly against the background of local direct democracy. Cities and municipalities are experimenting with different forms of consultations and dialogue (e.g. online debates about local public spending in Germanys “Bürgerhaushalten”, see Geissel et al., 2013), while federal and cantonal institutions have remained more reluctant (Baumgartner & Zogg, 2010; Peart & Ramos Diaz, 2007). One Swiss example is the City of Zurich, which had launched a three-day online deliberation process on five local policy topics in 2011 (Klinger & Russmann, 2014). However, until now there were no data available that gave an overview on interactive online communication in Swiss cities, apart from very few single case studies. Studies from other countries (e.g. Borge, Colombo, & Welp, 2009; Larsson, 2013; Mossberger et al., 2013; Saglie & Vabo, 2009) suggest that the implementation of interactive media varies with city size, in that larger cities are more apt to adopt and implement. Thus, our present study does not focus on a specific case from one or a few cities, but seeks to provide an assessment to which degree all Swiss cities have implemented interactive features in their online communication.

Against this background, the following research questions are central to our study:

RQ1: Are Swiss cities offering interactive online communication?

RQ2: What kinds of interactive tools have city governments implemented?

RQ3: Is there variation regarding the city size?

## 2. Contexts of local government communication in Switzerland

With regard to **political structures**, government and administration communication in Switzerland is mainly shaped by three aspects: (1) direct and consociational democracy, (2) subsidiarity and autonomy of cities, and (3) federalism and high diversity of local administrations.

The Swiss political system accustoms citizens to regularly practice political participation in referenda and popular initiatives (e.g. Bützer, 2007; Kriesi & Trechsel, 2008; Wagschal, 1997). As has been noted in the *Sustainable Governance Indicators Index* (2014), “Switzerland uses forms of direct democracy to a larger extent than does any other mature democracy. Direct democratic practices are intensively employed on all levels, from the local to the national” (p. 29). Similarly, formal procedures of consociational democracy actively inform stakeholders and invite their participation in decision-making processes (e.g. in formal consultation routines such as “Vernehmlassungen”). On the one hand, these specific features of the political structure could either foster interactive online communication or, on the other hand, undermine its inherent potential, because a great many formal and informal participatory mechanisms exist already offline.

Municipal autonomy and subsidiarity result in many political competences on the local level in Switzerland. Swiss cities are competent to implement interactive online communication not only in early stages of the policy cycle (Jarren, Donges & Wessler, 1996), e.g. for problem articulation or problem definition, but also for co-decision making—because Swiss cities actually can decide a large part of their political issues on the local level. Different than in other Western democracies, Swiss cities e.g. hold tax autonomy, own the right to naturalization and autonomously hold local popular referenda.

The various cantonal municipalities’ acts (“Gemeindegeseetze”) lead to a wide array of competences and organizational forms of municipalities: in some municipalities exist parliaments, in others we find recurring citizen assemblies that discuss and decide on local issues (Bützer, 2007; Ladner, 2008). In addition, there exist large differences between the structures of city administrations, resulting from historical developments and influenced by the political system and institutions (Ladner, 2013). As one result, the use of direct democratic institutions at the local level varies with the language region and the size of a municipality (Bützer, 2007).

Concerning **media structures**, the online communication of governments and administrations in Switzerland are shaped by mainly two aspects: (1) infrastructure and (2) social media savviness. With regard to online media, Switzerland provides a highly developed internet infrastructure, as 86% of households have access to high-speed internet (Bundesamt für Statistik [BFS], 2015). The Swiss population is also quite media savvy with over 85% Internet users, half of which are active in social media networks (Latzer, Just, Metreveli, & Saurwein, 2013). In international comparison, this is however a rather low number (Just, Latzer, Metreveli, & Saurwein, 2013) and below the EU (28) average (BFS, 2015). On the other hand, 71% of the Swiss population claim that they seek information from and contact with public administration online (BFS, 2015).

Switzerland consist of three language regions that (aside from the decentralized political system) also lead to regional cleavages concerning culture, attitudes or political behaviour. Even when it comes to both internet penetration and social media use, the language regions vary from each other: internet use is 10% lower, internet access of households is 5% lower in the Italian speaking part than in the German and French speaking parts (BFS, 2015). At the time of data retrieval for this study (2013), the French speaking part had 10%, the Italian speaking part 20% less mobile internet users than the German speaking part of Switzerland (this gap has become much smaller in the meantime, Latzer, Just, Metreveli, & Saurwein, 2013/2015).

RQ4: Is there variation regarding the three language regions of Switzerland?

As a third context factor, the **legal situation** influences local governments’ and administrations’ communication. Particularly administrative bodies face strict legal constraints in their communicative behaviour. This may also undermine the inherent interactive potential of online communication.

Administrations are obliged to inform the public on a very broad and general basis (Baumgartner, 2010; Saxer, 2009). On the federal level, the Swiss constitution defined public information as the state’s responsibility (art. 180). The Government and Administration Organisation Act (RVOG) of 1997 establishes that the government must communicate and maintain relations with the public. This includes monitoring issues and opinions voiced in public discussions—which can be understood as defining dialogical communication a legitimate tool of government communication (Jarren, 2005).

Although they are obliged to inform the public, governments and administrations must not emit persuasive communication (Jarren, 2005; Baumgartner, 2010; Pasquier, 2013; Saxer, 2009). The topics that administrations may cover in their communica-

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