Chapter 11
Local Web-Based Networks in Rural Municipalities: Extension, Density, and Meaning

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ABSTRACT
An analysis of networks formed by the links originating from the local authorities’ Websites and then from the successor nodes was performed for 30 municipalities in Poland. This analysis accounted for all links contained on the given local authorities’ Websites, with the links being classified into global and national (like those towards the global www services or the national ministries), regional (pointing, generally, towards the entities from the same province), local (within the municipality in question or the neighbouring municipalities), and internal (i.e. referring to various elements of the same municipality’s Website). Of primary interest in the study were the regional and local links, which potentially form networks of relevance for local development. For these local and regional links originating from the municipality Websites, the respective Websites were, in turn, investigated. For these Websites, again, the local and regional links were analysed. Such networks of depth two were established for each municipality considered. The chapter shows the results of this empirical work and draws conclusions of a broader nature, related to the significance and role of Web-based networks in the economic and social sustainability of the respective communities, especially during a crisis. The hypothesis is that networks in general facilitate survival, sustainability, and development of local communities.

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INTRODUCTION

The study here described refers, on the one hand, to the investigations conducted already for a decade at the Systems Research Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences, as reported, in particular, in Owsiński and Pielak (2011), devoted mainly to the quality, functionality and role of the Websites of local authorities, especially in rural areas. Owing to the ten-year long record of research results, it was possible to observe the dynamics of respective processes, concerning the content and functions of the local authority Websites, and to assess their relation to the socio-economic indices of respective local communities.

On the other hand, the study is rooted in the research on the socio-economic development of local communities, like, e.g., reported in Owsiński and Andrzejewski (2010). The investigations, conducted in this direction, led to several important conclusions, regarding the conditions of local growth and development. Some of these were quite well known and considered quasi-trivial, but there were also such that could be treated as surprising. One of the essential conclusions from these investigations was the emphasis on the role of (broadly conceived) culture of the local society, as the determinant of the dynamics and character of local socio-economic life (see, e.g., Owsiński et al., 2010).

The notion of culture that was supposed to intervene here encompassed such more particular notions as: attitude toward educational investment or, more generally, learning, including social learning, trust, cooperation, and also risk-taking. This led straightforwardly to the issue of networks, especially local networks, as important for the way a given community behaves and develops.

All of these aspects are not only important vis a vis the general dynamics of development or growth, as opposed to stagnation, passivity or withdrawal. They, namely, play a leading role in securing resistance of a community and its sustainability under the impact of negative impulses.

The above considerations led to the concept of analysing local Web-based networks, first in order to cognise their extension and structure, and then to identify the connection to the local development level and dynamics, if any. This study, done within the project, funded by the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education “TIROLS” No. N N516 195237 is reported here.

BACKGROUND: THE ESSENTIAL ISSUES AND OPINIONS

The area of e-government and e-administration has gained a very wide coverage nowadays. There exist numerous books, journals, Web-platforms etc., devoted to the developments, opportunities and needs with this respect. Against the background of the spread and ample functionality of e-administration in many regions of the world the primary issues moved to the domain of completeness of the Web-provided public service, provision of such service for the handicapped, etc. The latter is also associated with the efforts to bridge the “digital divide,” separating the ICT-rich from the ICT-poor. In this context, there are numerous national and international (e.g. European) initiatives, aiming at both bringing the infrastructures as well as appropriate knowledge closer to the people, and at securing effective provision of administrative services to the entire public.

These services might be classified as in Table 1, containing appropriate examples, taken from Attour-Oueslati, Dufresne, and Longhi (2007) and Attour and Longhi (2010).

Given the focus of the study here reported, of primary interest are the effective links, associated with the G to B and G to C services, exemplified in Table 1, as well as the respective feedbacks. Actually, several methodologies have been applied to evaluating e-Administration through the services implemented. On a national level, the efforts of municipalities in developing local e-Administration services can be, and often is, measured in
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