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Abstract

This article recognizes the potential and possibilities of digital media in COVID-19 crisis management in different democratic systems. It is the comparative analysis of information management during the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland, the United Kingdom and Italy. From the theoretical approach, the crisis management usually deals with two main models. The first one is defined as the post-reactive model, which is based on reacting to events after the first symptoms of the crisis and the communication model remains the top-down process. The second one is described as the pro-reactive model, which is based on building a dialogue space with the participatory community and it is the bottom-up communication process. In this case, the community becomes an active partner in bridging the crisis. The main goal of the proposed article is to examine the ways in which digital media influences the quality of strategic communication management in local public spaces and what type of crisis management strategy is applied to each political culture. The article discusses the pros and cons of information distributed through digital platforms by both the media and public institutions in terms of community awareness and crisis governance. The article applies a mixed method approach, which includes content analysis (media and governmental digital services),

interviews (with the authorities' members and media representatives) and social media network analysis (mainly Facebook). The analysis has been ongoing since the beginning of the pandemic in Europe (March–September 2020). The research has demonstrated that the shape and distribution of information during the pandemic were of great importance for the quality of information strategy activities. The problem was noticeable disinformation at all levels, which was the result of a lack of control over the message and the pursuit of sensation or conspiracy. It was clearly observed that without the support of crisis communication during the pandemic by the media, mainly digital platforms, it would be impossible to implement it. In all three countries, social media was the 'information management centre' in the COVID-19 era, but the activity of individual municipalities was slightly different. As far as the urbanized and semi-urbanized level is concerned, some consistency can be observed. In all three cases, communication on social media platforms was conducted very intensively and with the use of various tools (texts, statistics, instructional videos, scientific articles, infographics, etc.). All the 'organizers' of the local public sphere (presidents, mayors, journalists, service representatives) tried to keep in touch with the inhabitants.

Keywords

crisis management; local community; digital media; social media; strategic communication; information governance; participation

Information in times of global threats

The turn of the twenty-first century was a time of important change in the development of societies, occurring in parallel with intellectual development, and therefore closely linked to a dynamic technological and economic leap forward. The economy is based on information. The tools for using information are the media that enable the generation, transmission and storage of countless amounts of data and information. They facilitated a rapidly progressing process of globalization, compared to the great system of communicating vessels, where some vessels have a strong influence on others, including in areas related to security (Wnuk-Lipiński 2004).

All the activities carried out in different regions and on different continents, not only by the global powers, but also by smaller and weaker states, and even by non-state actors, have undoubtedly become global (Held at all1999; Hirst and Thompson 1996). Globalization processes also affect the security sphere. Decisions made in one part of the world today are not without consequences, and they are seemingly unrelated and not susceptible to external influences thousands of kilometres away. The global effects of decisions and actions taken locally can be seen today during the fight against various threats ranging from armed conflicts and terrorist attacks to natural disasters and epidemics.

Globalization also gives the opportunity to initiate and carry out economic processes in remote regions of the world without the need for a permanent presence in the area. Globalization also makes it possible for scientific circles to exchange information, experience and knowledge or to establish private human relations without the need for face-to-face contact (Hafez 20172007; Robertson 1998). Therefore, this concept is closely linked to another phenomenon that characterized the turn of the twenty-first century. By this we mean the information society, which has developed in the age of globalization, becoming an integral part and deriving tangible benefits from it (e.g. economic

benefits) and bearing the costs associated with global threats (e.g. exposing its health and life to diseases that spread faster than ever before, such as COVID-19, or risking becoming a victim of a terrorist attack).

For society in the twenty-first century, information is a fundamental, even strategic asset which determines human behaviour and affects all areas of human life. For this reason, access to information (increasingly available even in real-time), its possession, the ability to obtain or produce it, then the ability to transfer/send it, and above all the ability to make important life decisions based on this information, e.g. concerning finance/investment, health or safety, is fundamental. Today, information not only determines the existence of individuals or social groups but also influences the fate of countries and entire regions of the world (Seifert 2002).

The modern world can be described as interdisciplinary and multisectoral, in which information and all aspects related to it play a key role. For this reason, among other things, information has become not only a desirable commodity, considered to be of strategic importance, but also a resource requiring special protection and, at the same time, special measures to enable it to be obtained, analysed and used, often to the detriment of the original owner, such as the state, the region of its citizens and its highest and most important administrative and political institutions holding power. Providing security for their organization (state) and its members (citizens) has become their top priority in the twenty-first century. The protection of information and systems responsible for its production, transmission, storage, etc. is one of the aforementioned political priorities of the modern world. The decisions made in this regard are key to maintaining the continuity of the functioning of each state (Seifert 2002).

This has created another threat to the security of the state and its citizens in the modern, computerized world. This includes attempts to gain unauthorized access to systems that function using information, while at the same time frequently transferring it. They are intercepted (stolen) both by conventional means and by activities that are typically technical in nature and require specialist knowledge regarding the functioning of electronic, satellite and information systems. Attacks aimed at intercepting information are committed by hackers, acting on behalf of states, as well as the non-state actors mentioned above (e.g. organized crime groups, transnational corporations). Their task is to steal information or to effectively disrupt the operation of systems that use it. As a result, immeasurable damage may arise in the functioning of modern societies.

The modern globalized world is 'intertwined' with a dense network of interlinked systems, entities and individuals that form groups/organizations (formal or not) of a transnational nature. States are still the main players, although their original role has been significantly weakened, which is undoubtedly due to the emergence of new, non-state actors (e.g. transnational media corporations or organizations operating in the global communication space) in the international environment (Christiansen 2016).

Media during the crisis

The media has many functions in relation to the flow and dissemination of information. This is particularly important in the event of a crisis where mass communication is essential in order to contain the panic or negative emotions of the population, to indicate appropriate attitudes towards

the situation or to provide assistance. In this way, the great potential of the media in terms of prevention, public preparation and crisis response should be highlighted (Cabaj 2015).

Researchers indicate that a crisis is a part of a crisis situation, which means that a crisis situation involves both a period before and after a crisis. The crisis is therefore a climax, the result of successive events. Crisis situations are usually an undesirable phenomenon due to the high risk of various types of threats, such as natural hazards, caused by natural, or technical disasters, e.g. failures or catastrophes, terrorism and others (Baradyn et al. 2010). They may result in the violation or severance of social and economic ties or disturbances in public situations (Tyrała 2001). Actions aimed at minimizing damage after the cause of the crisis have ceased to exist and providing assistance to victims in the social and societal sphere is an essential part of the duties of the government and local authorities towards the local community, undertaken as part of crisis management (Sienkiewicz-Małyjurek 2015).

Crisis management is the most important element of civilian planning (Baradyn et al. 2010; Gołębiewski 2002). A crisis management system is a whole range of solutions in the field of civil protection, implemented by public authorities at all levels in cooperation with specialized organizations and institutions, in order to prevent complex and dangerous situations that pose a threat to life, health, property, the environment, infrastructure, preparation of the response system and, in the event of threats, channelling their course (response) in such a way as to ensure damage mitigation, as well as reconstruction of social structures after a disaster (Overton-de Clerk et al. 2013).

Therefore, crisis management is nothing more than the efficient management of society in a crisis situation, manifesting the influence of one entity (directing) on the other entities (directed) in a way that allows the set goal to be achieved (Boin et al. 2017). The crisis management system has changed over the years, in response to statutory regulations and legal acts. However, this is not possible without a proper flow of information between the individual elements of the system, and therefore communication is the basis for ensuring efficient crisis management (Palen 2008).

The information flow in crisis management can also be unidirectional and take the form of an order or command so that immediate action can be taken. Efficient communication depends mainly on being aware of the situation and the possibility of gathering information about the approaching changes. Only after the analysis and evaluation of the situation and identification of the symptoms of a crisis situation, is it possible to communicate with the system dealing with risk identification and defining the organization's future prospects (Nahotko 2001). An early warning system is, therefore, a tool for notifying the authorized units of an emergency and for establishing contact with the affected population, the emergency services, the authorities and the rest of the population. This makes it possible to identify people's urgent needs, as well as providing an opportunity to mitigate possible outbreaks of panic or fear (Overton-de Clerk et al. 2013).

The media forms the basis of the crisis communication system. In today's digitized reality, it is mainly digital platforms that are at the heart of this system, as they are constantly involved in collecting and communicating information about the crisis situation to the public, while at the same time ensuring its almost immediate distribution. For this reason, the representatives of the crisis management system must be prepared to answer inquisitive questions, to speak confidently and truthfully, not

focusing on their own opinions or feelings, but on the objective truth and facts. Emotional expressions and speculation must be avoided, as this behaviour can often cause exaggerated public reactions to the crisis. Both the authorities, with information about the real extent of the crisis, and the media should take into account the mood and concerns of the public about the crisis (Baradyn et al. 2010). Therefore, for reasons of security and efficiency in limiting the effects of crisis situations, it is necessary to define the role of the media in crisis management and to define the relationship between it and representatives of the authorities (Aleksandrowicz 2014). Only communication that meets the highest standards can achieve success in crisis management, conveying the gravity of the 'mission' and a realistic approach to the situation, should be based on awareness of the need to build trust with the authorities and to strive for a certain path of understanding between society and the state (Carpenter at al. 2012).

It cannot be denied that the media – regardless of the cause of the crisis – is part of it. Although they are not directly involved in the event, they are an element that needs to be taken into account and prepared to deal with reported events as part of crisis management. It is not unreasonable to say that there is no crisis without the media (Grzegorczyk 2012). A crisis situation can develop regardless of media participation, but their presence allows for more efficient communication and a rapid flow of information about the circumstances. This shows the huge role that the media plays in gathering, summarizing and highlighting the most relevant information in a form appropriate to the audience. The media can, therefore, become an ally or an enemy in crisis management, influenced by their various functions (Cabaj 2015).

The correlation function, however, manifests itself through activities consisting of commenting on and interpreting reported facts, organizing social activities and socializing society. The media is also a form of entertainment; entertainment programmes, aimed at audiences of all ages, provide relaxation and enjoyment (Goban-Klas et al. 1999). Contemporary media acts as a stimulus, introducing the recipient to a given issue. In extraordinary situations, the media is obliged to submit reliable reports, but it is confirmed that it also has a major impact on shaping the areas of interest of recipients. The participation of the media in the transmission of current news around world has led to an increase in public interest in issues that stretch beyond their immediate surroundings, as well as an increased awareness of the importance of existing problems. This indicates that the course of the crisis or conflict is largely determined by the media. The more time the media devotes to an issue and the greater the frequency of news about it, the greater the scale and impact on a wider audience (Taylor 2007).

With regard to the analysis of the structure of the crisis management system, it should be stressed that the media plays a key role. It is precisely the constant cooperation of public administration authorities at both central and regional level with the media sector that is the basis for proper and reliable communication in times of crisis. The role of the media is particularly important in the area of crisis monitoring. The media can support the crisis analysis process by engaging their resources in crisis management activities: sharing photographs and recordings made by airborne teams (e.g. helicopter crews of TV stations), conducting interviews with experts, common exposure of various aspects of local communities' safety, as well as reporting suspected negligence in this field. The situation is similar with regard to the identification and forecasting of threats, in particular mass threats, crisis situations and crisis-type events. This can be achieved by means of expert and social

debates initiated via and/or by the media. The media can also improve the decision-making process (Sturges 1994).

It is also important to mention the role of media communication in relation to the constant monitoring of activities and mobilizing the public. In the first case, we are dealing with a kind of motivator of all the actions taken by the authorities responsible for crisis management, decision-makers, guards and services. The media can, in this context, be understood as a means of persuasion to ensure the smooth performance of statutory duties and moral obligations in the field of security in the broadest sense. Cooperation with the media in crisis management also includes the possibility of support by all types of media of the security subsystem. Providing up-to-date information, including from places that are inaccessible to emergency services due to limited human or equipment resources, and providing access to machinery and equipment owned by radio or television stations are again only selected examples of cooperation with the media to improve the safety of local communities.

Methodological considerations

Research aims

When we look more closely at the local public sphere structure across Europe, we can clearly see that different ways of strengthening citizens' trust in local authorities and the creation of platforms of public dialogue are important factors that shape contemporary local communities. They search for solutions that will help in the realization of the essential principles of community communication, which are public trust and social dialogue. Both of these elements reinforce the sense of responsibility for the region, which improves the quality of local governance and all of the other institutions that create the local public sphere. The above needs must be met by creating sufficient digital communication platforms. Keeping all these aspects in mind, the main aim of the chapter was to analyse challenges and problems associated with the new information and communications technology used as part of COVID-19 pandemic strategic communication management in Poland, the United Kingdom and Italy. The three regions from which case study communities will be selected are broadly similar in terms of urbanization levels and socio-economic structures, making a comparative analysis possible. Based on the results of the research, the author was able to:

•   gather new knowledge about the advantages and limitations of strategic communication at the local level in terms of dealing with the global pandemic crisis;

•   learn about strategies (adjusted/not adjusted to community expectations) for information society activization during a crisis;

•   managing the strategic communication policy of different regions.

Research questions

May the cooperation between national and local bodies (supported by local media) improve strategic communication at the local level? Can digital media increase citizens' awareness of the pandemic and improve their participation? These questions are pertinent in the light of the current problems in strategic communication management, which are evidenced by two factors:

1.   first, that the processes of strategic communication management are too chaotic and too focused on top-down standards, and are therefore difficult for ordinary citizens to participate in;

2.   second, that the traditional channels with professional journalistic coverage, which formed the basis of exchanging information and public debate for more than a hundred years, have weakened and digital media together with social media content and the free flow of uncontrolled news (very often misleading) have become the leading source of information for most communities during the pandemic.

Technical aspects of the research

This analysis is based on both qualitative (in-depth interviews) and quantitative research as well as website content analysis. A comparative survey has been carried out in different regions of Poland (Lower Silesia), the United Kingdom (Kent) and Italy (Marche). The key factors for choosing communes were as follows:

1.   economy (rural, semi-urbanized, urbanized);

2.   population (demographic structure).

The data gathered in this analysis was obtained through:

1.   documents, reports, statistics data analysis;

2.   interviews with politicians, clerks, journalists, NGO representatives;

3.   the content analysis of chosen websites was based on parameters that focus on the character of the net communication. The data gathering consisted of collecting and registering material that focused on COVID-19 communication – 'whole site approach' of texts (e.g. reports, statistics, charts, articles, etc.) and links (e.g. chat rooms, blogs, social media, etc.).

Table 1: Sources for content analysis.

	Poland	Italy	The United Kingdom
Media	https://gazetawroclawska.pl/	https://www.cronachemaceratesi.it/	https://www.kentonline.co.uk/
	https://www.radiowroclaw.pl/	https://www.cronacheancona.it/	https://www.kentlive.news/whats-on/
	https://www.dzierzoniow.pl/	https://www.ilrestodelcarlino.it/macerata	https://www.kentlive.news/all-about/thanet
	https://doba.pl/ddz	https://picchionews.it/	https://www.kentlive.news/
	https://www.tvsudecka.pl/	https://www.corriereadriatico.it/	https://www.inquiremedia.co.uk/
	https://www.walbrzyszek.com/	https://www.anconatoday.it/	https://www.dover.uk.com/
	https://dziennik.walbrzych.pl/	https://www.vivereurbino.it/	https://theisleofthanetnews.com/
	https://www.jelonka.com/	https://www.qdmnotizie.it/	https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/live:bbc_radio_kent

	https://www.nj24.pl/	https://www.tvcentromarche.it/	https://www.kmfm.co.uk/
	https://www.tvdami.eu/	https://www.youtvrs.it/	http://www.dcrfm.co.uk/
Commune	Walbrzych District Council: https://www.um.walbrzych.pl	Ancona Province Office: https://www.comune.ancona.gov.it/ankonline/	Dover District Council: https://www.dover.gov.uk/
	Wroclaw City Council: https://www.wroclaw.pl/	Macerata City Council: https://comune.macerata.it/	Canterbury City Council: https://www.canterbury.gov.uk/
	Dzierzoniow City Council: https://www.dzierzoniow.pl/	Urbino City Council: https://www.comune.urbino.pu.it/	Broadstairs City Council: https://www.broadstairs.gov.uk
	Jaworzyna Śląska City Council: https://www.jaworzyna.net	Recanati City Council: https://www.comune.recanati.mc.it	Ramsgate City Council: https://www.ramsgatetown.org/
	Jelenia Góra City Council: https://www.jeleniagora.pl/	Cupra Montana City Council: http://www.comune.cupramontana.an.it/hh/index.php	Thanet District Council: https://www.thanet.gov.uk/

Table 2: Interview data.

| Number of interviews |
|---|
| Interviews with local authority representatives (mayors; chancellors; local politicians) and local government officers (IT officers; PR practitioners): Poland (5); the United Kingdom (5); Italy (5) |
| Interviews with journalists/editors/media owners: Poland (4); the United Kingdom (4); Italy (4) |
| Interviews with business sector representatives: Poland (3); the United Kingdom (3); Italy (3) |
| Interviews with local associations and NGO representatives: Poland (3); the United Kingdom (3); Italy (3) |

Research results

The local public sphere in times of crisis should be managed in many ways. All activities undertaken by entities operating in this space require an interdisciplinary approach. The basic objective, which is unfortunately difficult for local authorities to achieve, is to build a balance between the activities of the administration and all coordination activities that form the security chain. The most important issues of efficient crisis management include, among others, such elements as: preventing potential chaos; preparing the local community for the challenges that await it; proper response of residents during a crisis situation and, consequently, reconstruction of local public spaces. Therefore, it is important when building effective strategic communication in the local public space to be aware of what the threats are, where they may come from and how they might occur.

Referring, therefore, to the guidelines governing the management of strategic communication during the COVID-19 pandemic at the level of local public spaces, it should be emphasized that the key is to treat all events and facts in a systemic and networked way. When managing a crisis situation at the

local level, we must remember that it is only an element of a complex system of activities of various entities of administration (central government and local government), services, business sector, non-profit sector and, obviously, the media. Cooperating entities should form a homogeneous group with a single objective – to protect society through information and effective action. The desirable attributes of such a system are flexibility in actions and building mutual trust both between people and between the institutions they represent. Data from OECD reports for most countries facing the COVID-19 pandemic shows that this aspect requires special attention and care.

Figure 1: Policy tools at the core of a successful exit strategy. Source: OECD Regional Development Papers (2020)
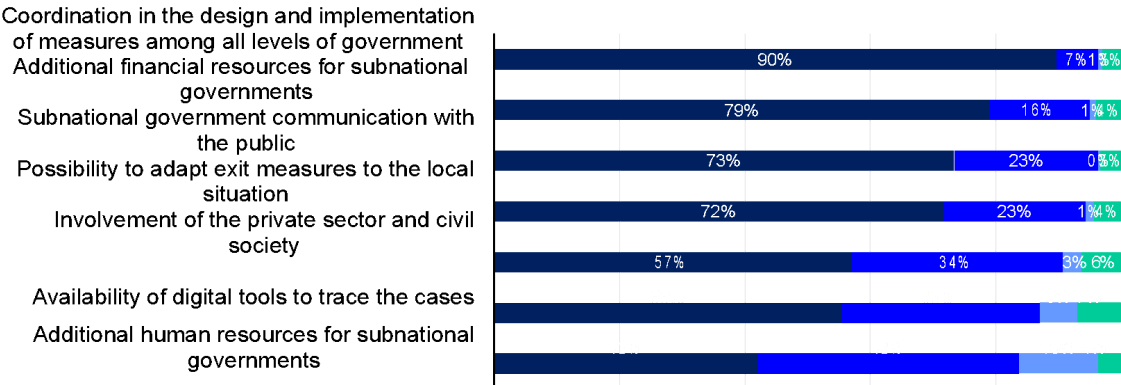
Source: OECD Regional Development Papers, *The impact of COVID-19 on regional and local governments: governance, finance and recovery plans* [https://cor.europa.eu/pl/news/Pages/econ-cor-oecd-survey-covid-19-results.aspx]

According to an OECD report, when consulted on how to manage a successful exit strategy, report data indicates that coordination and financial resources are of utmost importance: 90 per cent of subnational governments report that coordination in the design and implementation of measures among all levels of government is very important, and 79 per cent cite additional financial resources for subnational entities are very important. Communication with the public and the possibility to adapt measures to the local situation are also considered as key to a successful exit strategy (Figure 1). While results are broadly homogeneous between the different subnational government categories, regions and municipalities have slightly different priorities. Regions place more emphasis than municipalities on adapting exit measures to the local context (76 per cent versus 68 per cent), while municipalities are more likely than regions to highlight the need for additional human resources – 48 per cent versus 33 per cent (OECD Regional Development Papers 2020).

Research conducted in Poland, Italy and the United Kingdom also corroborates this thesis. The vast majority of respondents admitted that the greatest challenge for them in managing a crisis during a pandemic – especially at the beginning of the pandemic – was to maintain the coherence and correlation of actions at different levels (P: 91 per cent; I: 89 per cent; UK: 93 per cent %). They admitted that the difficulties were piling up both at the decision-making and competence level, but also at the information level. In addition, the majority clearly indicated that most problems arose when they did not have the appropriate financial resources and educated and professional staff.

One of the most important challenges during the crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic turned out to be increasing the level of social participation, built on strong trust in individuals and groups

forming the local public sphere. Contemporary local governments must be communities, not only administrators, supervisors or offices. Entities operating in the local public sphere were forced to use innovative techniques to activate it. Reference should be made to several proven methods (tools) for the development of social involvement of residents, which can be found in local public spheres developing in the smart city era. One of them is design thinking, which is increasingly used in western social systems to solve problems and meet the needs of residents (taking into account the needs of individual users). Design thinking consists of five stages: empathize, define the problem, ideate, prototype and test. The method of design thinking is becoming increasingly popular, for example, because it raises the self-esteem of the participants in the local debate and thus influences their greater involvement in social initiatives. It also has a particularly important impact on building public confidence in local authorities. Both factors are essential for an effective crisis management strategy in local public spaces. Local community representatives from the United Kingdom and Italy who took part in the survey stressed that, based on their experience during this year's crisis, they are certain that this is one of the main methods they should employ when preparing a proper crisis management strategy (the United Kingdom: 72 per cent; Italy: 65 per cent). Slightly less recognition was given to design thinking among the representatives of Polish communities (Poland: 49 per cent), which may result from uncertainty in relation to the effects of these activities. The respondents indicated as the reason for their doubts that due to the noticeable intensification of centralization in the crisis management system, the voices of local governments are not perceived and fully implemented. The participants stressed that the COVID-19 pandemic surprised everyone, and that their 'sleepy, calm and familiar space' was interrupted by chaos, fear and anxiety. The greatest challenge, not only in terms of disturbing a certain social order, but also in terms of the economic and organizational side, was the COVID-19 period for small municipalities, which also failed to avoid its effects. The representatives of local communities participating in the survey, mainly small municipalities (up to 10,000 inhabitants), claimed with one voice that they felt discomfort in practically every area of social life. Starting with the issue of healthcare provision gaps, through the insufficient technical preparation of municipalities (e.g. implementation of remote teaching – weak internet network in the region, lack of infrastructure in schools, training for teachers), communication or actually the lack thereof.

Apart from the design thinking method mentioned above, it seems that methods such as crowd sourcing and crowd mapping (mapping of social needs with the use of internet geo-survey questionnaires), which serve to quickly collect information from large groups of inhabitants, are equally important for increasing the level of social participation. Crowd sourcing is considered to be an element of smart city management. Applying the principles of crowd sourcing during the COVID-19 pandemic, which took us from the structures of the real to the digital world, seems to be not only a need but a necessity. Crowd sourcing increases the effectiveness of the management of local public spaces – thanks to crowd sourcing, activities can be carried out in the municipal space, which officials would not have been able to think of themselves (Ludwig et al. 20107; Lin et al. 2014). This gives the inhabitants the opportunity to directly influence the city. In this way, development is in line with the expectations of the inhabitants, who additionally feel they are co-creators of these changes. Crowd sourcing by the city authorities creates a conscious and active inhabitant – that is, the most desirable one, building the social capital of the city and the community of people. Drawing on the crowd can therefore contribute to building civil society and communities of inhabitants.

According to most of the interviewers (P: 65 per cent; I: 79 per cent; UK: 71 per cent) the development of municipalities is not determined solely by funds and managerial skills, but by the commitment, cooperation, knowledge and ideas of their members. The easier it is to express what one thinks, the more likely it is that people will benefit from this tool. The use of inhabitants as scouts in solving the problems of the community they form is valuable in terms of strategy. Crowd sourcing requires local government to be flexible, to think in a modern way, but above all to be open to social dialogue, to have a real willingness to cooperate with the inhabitants, which in today's reality must be based on the use of new technologies. Officials are helped by NGOs and business, who can do some of the work for them. NGOs have social objectives and a more flexible structure – it is easier for them to carry out such activities. Business is a good partner because it has financial resources. The crowd mapping methods help today's 'organizers' of the local public sphere to diagnose the problem in a very short time and to find solutions to it as quickly as possible, which is necessary for crisis management. Respondents admitted that the pandemic had changed the structure of local government management and most of them viewed crowd sourcing and mapping as challenging but obvious way to manage the crisis during the COVID-19 (P: 58 per cent; UK: 74 per cent; I: 77 per cent).

Listening to the needs of all those who form the local community is therefore a starting point and an axis around which a crisis management strategy should be built. The data indicates that the introduction of the principle of the need to respond to the comments and remarks made by the inhabitants may to a large extent improve the quality of crisis management in local public spaces. On the other hand, ignoring the opinion of the inhabitants by entities creating local public spheres, firstly, significantly reduces the level of social activity, building barriers in relations between the administration and the inhabitants that are difficult to overcome, which, in the case of the global crisis we encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic, may have irreversible negative consequences for the entire social structure of a given group, and its reconstruction may even be impossible. The participants in the survey also stressed that it should not be forgotten that in democratic countries, local government units have the constitutionally established freedom to define their internal system. Therefore, the introduction of temporary centralization and control of operations do not serve to combat the pandemic effectively (P: 78 per cent; I: 83 per cent; UK: 85 per cent).

It should be made clear that, in addition to the much-discussed issue of informing the public about the dangers of a pandemic, it is the participation of the local community in the creation of the surrounding area when a crisis occurs that forms the basis for managing the situation. All the representatives of the local public sphere who took part in the survey clearly admitted that the huge scale of COVID-19 provided an opportunity to check the previously developed guidelines for the interaction between the administration and services in a pandemic situation. For the majority of the representatives surveyed, it was a difficult exam to pass.

They stress that it is obviously not a targeted assessment, but both the people and the representatives of the authorities have unanimously admitted that if it were not for the sacrifice and devotion of the people, there would be no question of any crisis management. Local politicians participating in the study admitted that they could hardly count on adequate support from national governments because, firstly, the scale of the problem was enormous and, secondly, the element of surprise worked, and it turned out that the strategies to be implemented in case of a crisis situation

had failed. In addition to problematic economic issues, mayors and presidents also pointed to the difficult dialogue with central authorities, information chaos, the introduction of excessive centralization in crisis management. The most critical were the representatives of Polish local governments, who clearly pointed out the growing limitations and 'top-down control'. Politicians from the other two countries viewed the situation of crisis management between central and local authorities rather neutrally, emphasizing the prevailing information chaos. The statements made by the majority of the participants in the study show that only by reliably documenting the activities undertaken and the forces and means used were they able to carry out a reliable analysis of the situation during the COVID-19 crisis. It is precisely this meticulous analysis of successes and errors based on cooperation with all entities involved in solving the crisis (politicians, special services, the media, social organizations and committees) that has enabled significant adjustments to be made to the strategy. Crisis teams in all case studies analysed (Dzierzoniow, Wroclaw, Ancona, Macerata, Ramsgate and Broadstairs) pointed, among others, to the key issue that should be improved, inter-institutional cooperation between services and effective bridging of competence gaps between them.

The experience gained from crisis management in the municipality during the pandemic clearly shows the huge role played by cooperation with social organizations, which was visible during the pandemic. The invaluable help from various organizations (both global and local) and volunteers was mentioned by Italians in particular during the interviews:

When the pandemic broke out, it was especially tough for elderly people. They were locked up in their apartments without family, afraid for their own lives, and if it had not been for such guys as Mauricio, Simone and others (names changed), they certainly would not have survived. All those engaged and cheerful people have been with seniors almost every day. They brought them food, medicine. Sometimes, when they had a moment, they even talked through the door. It was because of them that lonely people saw a glimmer of hope.

(Male, 57)

Local government officials from Poland also emphasize the great support from volunteers:

It was thanks to the involvement of students and pupils that many people were able to have a warm meal during the pandemic. We gave money, essential goods, but someone had to deliver meals to these people, give it to them. It was the young people who supported us with their commitment.

(Female, 44)

Therefore, it is worth thinking about continuous support and the mobilization of volunteers. When thinking about effective strategic actions in the public sphere, one should consider setting up Local Social Support Centres, which would constantly operate under the auspices and support of local governments. In larger municipalities and districts, they could be run by local governments or managed by a local umbrella organization. In one place, it is possible to gather information about each organization, each of the volunteers, especially their predispositions and possibilities. It would, of course, be necessary to create an adequate space for such centres to function, which would ideally

be digital as well. The creation of such a base could be supported by technology companies and start-ups that can create the necessary solutions on an ad hoc basis.

Table 3: News source during COVID-19 – local communities case study.

	Poland (%)	The United Kingdom (%)	Italy (%)
National news outlets	76 (TV services; leading digital information portals, e.g. ONET; WP; leading dailies websites)	80 (TV/radio services and websites – BBC; leading dailies web)	78 (TV services and websites; leading dailies web)
Public institutions – national level (e.g. Ministry of Health; NHS)	53	62	54
Local/regional news outlets	59 (digital ones mainly independent local news services, e.g. doba.pl; wroclaw24.pl; jelonka.com)	57 [mainly local/regional newspaper web (e.g.: kent.online) or BBC regional division]	61 [digital ones mainly independent local news services (e.g. Chronache Maceratesi) or local/regional newspaper web (Corriere Adriatico)]
Public institutions – local and regional level (e.g.: Municipalities; Sanepid)	35	46	51
International news outlets	15	31	17

Source: Own research 2020.

Analysing the process of digitization of the local public sphere and its transformation in times of a pandemic, it is necessary to refer to the huge role of different media platforms in the process of communication management at this level too. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, clear communication and reliable information based on publicly available distribution channels have been essential to protect citizens' health. Not only central information channels (government agencies and centres; mainstream media) but also, and above all, regional and local initiatives (local authorities; local shared services centres; profiles of local authorities; local organizations; local media) have played a significant role in this respect. The research has confirmed that both national and local communication platforms play a critical role in building an informed local public sphere (cf. Table 3). The crisis situation information management strategy is based on effective proactive communication activities aimed at promoting, in a verifiable way, reliable information on the health and safety of residents facing the COVID-19 pandemic.

As our life during the pandemic moved online, the generation and exchange of information, arguments and emotions have also found its place on the web to a large extent, contributing to the further development of online culture. The number of hours spent in cyberspace has increased, and public awareness of the opportunities and need to coexist with and further develop online culture has also begun to change. This could be called an accelerated course of maturing to e-living. The

internet discussion has been filled with people representing all generations and almost all environments. During a pandemic, the internet became an even more expressive reflection of social moods and representations, the more traditional media, supported by the work of professional journalists and editors, became 'online media' as well. Today's societies have undergone an accelerated digital transition, bringing their professional and social lives online.

The internet, by democratizing access to information, has distorted the traditional model of communication: sender–message–recipient, hence the research conducted shows significant differences between traditional and strictly internet-based media displays. Entities such as companies, organizations or institutions use the internet to build up their brand or promote their content, e.g. through viral marketing (the equivalent of the spread of virtual infectious diseases). Also, for medical institutions, the internet is an important communication and information platform influencing perception in its environment and changing the professional–patient relationship by democratizing it, but also by objectifying it. In addition, many people and institutions have accounts on more than one platform (the so-called multi-layer structure) to diversify their repertoire of activities (e.g. Twitter has a limit of 280 characters per message, thus forcing concise messages, and e.g. Facebook posts can already take more elaborate forms). Social media provides information and misinformation about the virus globally at an unprecedented rate, fuelling panic and creating the so-called 'infodemics', destroying whole countries, like Italy. Before our very eyes, a new research field is emerging from the combination of epidemiology, e-health and information sciences, namely infodemiology, which deals with the analysis of internet content in the context of health phenomena (European Commission JOIN(2020) 8 final 2020).

When evaluating contemporary digital media from the perspective of their functionality in times of the COVID-19 crisis, it should be clearly noted that it is 'social media' that plays the most important role not only in the process of information distribution but above all in relation to building active local public spaces. Social media is above all 'media – a social system' which fulfils certain functions: it transmits information, creates a sense of community, allows the monetization of the audience's collected attention and gives the opportunity to share one's opinions. And, like the traditional media, it is still responsible for establishing the order and importance of topics for public debate. In social media this role is more complex, there are no dominant titles or programmes and the discourse is dispersed, often limited to narrow communication niches, circles of friends. Communication on social media has its barriers, analysed by many researchers: enclosing recipients in information bubbles, directing messages to narrow groups, automatically generated messages, the activity of professional companies taking care of the image of the client or lowering the ratings of competitors, including political ones.

Table 4: Follow local groups and government offices in social media – debate Arena (ranges 1–4).

	Poland	Italy	The United Kingdom
Local information services/journalists/media groups	1	1	1
Local civic groups (local community associations/parishes)	2	2	2

Local political leaders/government offices ('The problem is that they are not updated frequently and when you read them you are not sure who writes them, politicians or propaganda guys' comment of a man aged 28)	3	3	3
City departments – the quality of online services in local government has improved a lot; all analysed municipalities have a website and active SM (FB; Twitter); 90 per cent have You Tube; 82 Instagram. Snapchat and WhatsApp are less popular. It is worth highlighting that WhatsApp is very popular in Italy	4	4	4

Source: Own research 2020.

The analysis of local public spheres shows no differences in media consumption priorities. In the case of all three countries social media proved to be the platform on which the debate took place during the crisis (cf. Table 4). Facebook was a definite leader. It should be noted, however, that social media was also the main channel of information distribution for official institutions (government agencies and local governments). It is worth mentioning, however, that there are significant differences in the quality and frequency of transmission. The organization of communication via digital media is much better structured in larger industrialized communes (e.g. Wrocław; Ancona and Dover) than small, agricultural villages away from the main population centres. This aspect clearly differentiates the studies in question. Yes, in all three countries, social media was the 'information management centre' in the COVID-19 era, but the activity of individual municipalities was slightly different. As far as the urbanized and semi-urbanized level is concerned, some consistency can be observed. In all three analysed cases, communication on social media platforms was conducted very intensively and with the use of various tools (texts, statistics, instructional videos, scientific articles, infographics, etc.). All the 'organizers' of the local public sphere (presidents, mayors, journalists and service representatives) tried to keep in touch with the inhabitants. The information published within the network concerned the current situation, new problems arising and remedial actions taken in the city. Very often there were links to government websites or crisis management centres (cf. Table 4). However, in the opinion of the respondents, such a policy, especially during a pandemic, is not enough and often weakens the prestige and trust of the inhabitants in local government. In the opinion of the recipients, the representatives of local social elites who showed a high level of empathy towards the community and demonstrated it, e.g. through daily Facebook posts (e.g. Jerzy Łużniak, Raushan Ara and Margherita Rinaldi), performed much better. Very often their relationship was personal, which strengthened the bond with inhabitants. Listening, reading and reacting to the opinions and problems of the inhabitants have proved to be a highly effective technique for information management in the municipality. In relation to poorly urbanized and rural areas, as well as regions with a relatively high proportion of the older population, we can see differences in the use of digital media to ensure efficient communication and the development of strong ties.

Of course, the problems and the perspective of their interpretation are different, but the quality, access to sources and intensity of the debate are very high. The British and Italian picture is similar, but there is definitely less intensity and more distancing (especially among the British). Small villages in Poland form the most different picture. In this case, the activity of not only public figures (authorities; media) but also residents is significantly lower. The specificity of rural areas makes citizens reluctant to get involved in processes that affect everyone equally. The barrier to public engagement is the fear of being deceived – 'played'. Residents usually only become involved in public

processes if they are directly concerned or have a personal interest in the matter. There is also a common belief that there should be a strong authority in the country, to which it will always be possible to turn and 'get a mayor in the line'. It is a 'safety valve' that relies on an inner conviction that they are safe anyway, because they can complain if necessary. On the other hand, it is common to feel that if an action is not effective, then why get involved. Unfortunately, also during the pandemic, especially at the beginning, this fixed pattern was repeated. The information appearing on the web was laconic, often in the form of copied official documents. Discussions in forums, if they appeared, were rather far from substantive. It should be noted that over time this somewhat sad picture emerging from the initial assessment of the discourse conducted on social media in the Polish rural space has improved and much greater involvement of both the authorities and the inhabitants can be seen. Looking at the reason for this 'slowdown' in rural areas in Poland, apart from the previously mentioned lack of trust in the authorities, two more things should be emphasized, namely the lack of expertise and resources among persons responsible for conducting information policy in the commune. Very often, employees of promotion departments (if any) are responsible for carrying out all tasks related to the promotion and information in municipalities and the scope of their duties is so wide that they are not able to conduct a debate on Facebook in a reliable manner. Many large cities have separate budgets reserved for social media information policy only, and it is the responsibility of specific people to monitor Facebook and respond immediately to emerging posts. It is not uncommon for social media specialists to also manage the Facebook profiles of mayors or presidents, which is essential if they serve to ensure the safety of residents. Small municipalities simply cannot afford to employ specialists in the field of effective digital communication, hence the large disparities. It would, therefore, be appropriate to consider the funding of this sector and attempt to familiarize ourselves with the smart village concept. It can be assumed that there is a level of distrust on the part of the inhabitants who, living in a small, cohesive community, were used to building relationships based on direct communication patterns. However, the rules completely changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. One need to only look at the concept of today's communication about health, based on telemedicine and remote access to resources for managing our health.

Coming back to the problem of the debate on digital platforms in the era of a pandemic, it is worthwhile to look beyond the issue of social activity and involvement to the content itself, which was the axis of this discussion. The analysis of the collected material made it possible to distinguish several key topics, around which the exchange of views of forum participants on FB was focused. Research has shown that in times of global crisis, priority issues (health, security, economy and existence) prevail over individual needs. In all three countries, we observe the coherence of these threads (cf. Table 5). Of course, the perspective and content were adapted to the cultural, economic and social context of individual countries and regions. However, the discussion of pandemics, safety, health, prevention, etc. was on everyone's mind. In all three cases, global problems were interpreted in relation to local needs. In the case of Italy, a great deal of attention was paid to the decline of the tourism and gastronomy sector. In the case of the United Kingdom, the pandemic threads were linked to the Brexit issue. In Poland, on the other hand, information about the pandemic was intertwined with the presidential campaign that was conducted in the spring. It is worth stressing that the information policy conducted on Social Media has been implemented reliably. However, journalists stressed that there is an element of information chaos and access to public information is difficult.

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Table 5: Topics and problems addressed on Facebook during the pandemic.

COVID on social media – key issues	
Topic	Major comments and posts
COVID-19 – the virus itself	C19 – research approach – reference to: shifting the debate about the pandemic to the field of science, references to rational medical language and statistics; issues of government policy
	C19 – virus treatment – reference to: causes and symptoms of the disease, mechanism of its transmission, treatment, similarities to other diseases – mainly influenza; the internet as a source of knowledge about the pandemic and coronavirus functioning. In addition, the issue of diagnosed diseases is openly addressed in public discourse
Combating of coronavirus by the authorities	Reference to: the role of the media (including public service television) in creating a picture of the pandemic and the difficulty of reaching reliable information; lack of knowledge of the real situation and lack of trust in the political elite; information chaos. In Poland, the topic of the presidential election and the pandemic has also appeared as part of the election campaign
Lockdown – debate	Reference to: (lack of) strategy for a rational fight against the coronavirus and the economic and social consequences of government decisions (prohibitions and restrictions); problems in sport and culture (cancellation of subsequent competitions); consequences of home confinement for the mental health of the inhabitants of individual regions
	Particularly clear were all the issues relating to the functioning of the health service during the pandemic, in particular, the criticism of the suspension of medical activities unrelated to the coronavirus, but also the posts expressing respect for medical personnel, the description of alternatives to lockdown – isolation
Supply and trade	Reference to information about: shop closure and opening rules; security of purchases, including suspicion of hygiene rules in shops
	Moreover, there were also relatively frequent threads about who profits and who loses from a pandemic (loss of job, getting rich, unfair practices of businessmen)
COVID-19 – community perception	References to: particularly vulnerable groups and possibilities of support for them; spreading of the virus (shopping)
	In Poland, there were additional threads concerning the course of the election campaign and discussion on whether elections should take place
PANDEMIC – the state care	Reference to: health care system in the face of a pandemic, closure of hospitals, impact of coronavirus on medical personnel, sanitary regulations in hospitals
	Moreover, the following categories were also mentioned: social security system in the face of a pandemic, payment of benefits during a pandemic, changes in the labour market, potential unemployment. In addition, in the United Kingdom there have been

	frequent references to threats to social life resulting from the overlap of the pandemic with Brexit
Virus in common discourse	Reference to: information about the virus, the so-called neighbourhood knowledge, distributed through rumours about ways of preventing infection, the so-called conspiracy theories (5G influence, biological weapons produced in Chinese laboratories, mind control). In addition, reference was made to knowledge gained through commercials or film/series distributed outside official circulation
Politics and economy	Reference to: criticism of the actions of politicians, the subordination of health to the interests of those in power, the worsening state of the economy, especially small businesses (Italian communities have been very much exposed to the topic of tourism; in all cases, trade and gastronomy have also often emerged). In the case of Poland, the issue of the worsening level of remote education, resulting from the lack of appropriate facilities and suitably trained staff, was heavily discussed

Source: Own research 2020.

When assessing the aesthetics and content of the information provided through social media in all three countries, it should be stated that the content was edited in a clear and legible way, giving reliable knowledge about subsequent cases of COVID-19 infection, pandemic-related restrictions and guidelines of services controlling the course of the pandemic (e.g. Ministry of Health; WHO). The aesthetics of posts devoted to COVID-19 deserves a special mention, the uniform colour scheme and graphic design, the vector graphics used are quite simple, but they do their job well. There are also numerous pictures and information about initiatives taken by the institutions and cooperation with the services and even cities from other countries. Occasionally, videos were posted, made available from the national level (e.g. instructions on how to handle an infection/being quarantined/use and removal of protective masks) or statements by local politicians. However, at the level of local-regional communication, there has been manipulation of the information – the heterogeneous time of showing the number of infections, as it was often presented together with information about people who had recovered or who tested negative for COVID-19, to alleviate the fear of the growing number of infections in the area. There has also been an exaggerated emphasis on positive information of minor importance in order to create a positive environment around this grim subject and to make the recipients of the message understand that the situation is being handled at all levels of administration: European, national, regional and local. This was a form of delusion that was served to local communities. This was undoubtedly to prevent widespread panic.

Concluding, it is worth adding that without the support of crisis communication during the pandemic by the media, mainly local, it would be impossible to implement it. During the research, the discourse conducted on the social networking sites of local media was followed, and it is worth mentioning several of its elements. Firstly, in all three cases, local media is considered to be the most reliable source of information, secondly, local media tries to mobilize the local community by popularizing various top-down initiatives, thirdly, the media tries to be critical of the actions of local authorities, which is particularly important during a pandemic. However, it is worth looking at how the problem of sketching the media image of the pandemic is structurally approached by local journalists on social media profiles. Unfortunately, we see some shortcomings in this field (especially in the Polish

system), which resemble the underfunding of the small municipalities discussed above. So, it is clear that in the case of the United Kingdom and Italy, Facebook debates are taking place on the websites of regional/local newspapers, regional BBC or RAI stations. Additionally, in Italy, just like in Poland, important sources of information for the inhabitants of individual provinces are local digital information services which serve as a local daily newspaper (e.g. https://doba.pl/www.doba.pl;; https://www.cronachemaceratesi.it/www.cronachemaceratesi.it; https://www.kentonline.co.uk/www.kentonline.co.uk). As the editorial offices of the aforementioned media platforms are supervised by professional journalists and financed through public or corporate funds, the level and quality of the content provided are very high. The respondents' doubts were raised only in terms of the very structure of a certain politicization and generalization of the message. In the case of Poland, where there is no such model of local media management, in contrast to the one mentioned above – strong and stable public media; the historically established position of the regional press together with a well-developed distribution system – communication at the local level is mainly based on the media message being conveyed to the inhabitants through local, independent information portals, supported by private publishers. The level of information posted on social media portals edited by local editors is unfortunately slightly poorer visually speaking, although according to the respondents it is reliable. There were fewer articles than the recipients would have expected. The problems were often presented quite unilaterally and there was no panoramic view of them, which could help in managing the information. Moreover, the information presented in the area was not exhaustive (it did not include all the regions) and the inhabitants may have felt uninformed.

Conclusion

Summarizing the above, it should be noted, first of all, that what disturbed the strategic communication exercise was the fact that, due to extraordinary legal measures that did not receive much attention and practical reflection, there may have been conflicts of competence, under-information, administrative impotence, often justified by the data protection clause or 'coordination of activities at a higher level'.

Secondly, there were situations in which the lack of preparation and resources and the lack of elementary knowledge of both the national and local government in the field of public safety and order resulted in issuing misleading organizational and legal interpretations or in an attempt to cede responsibility to other levels of local government authority. Such a strategy of crisis management in the local public space only exacerbated the chaos and caused unnecessary anxiety, which destabilized actions aimed at levelling the effects of the pandemic.

Thirdly, the shape and distribution of information during the pandemic were of great importance for the quality of information strategy activities. The problem was noticeable disinformation at all levels, which was the result of a lack of control over the message and the pursuit of sensation or conspiracy. The deepening lack of trust in the information provided to the public has serious consequences. It can make people ignore official health advice and engage in risky behaviour. False information also has a negative impact on institutions, societies and, consequently, on the economic and financial situation. Therefore, it is crucial to build effective communication within the local public sphere, which should be based on cooperation between representatives of authorities, media, NGOs. Local communities operating in the era of smart cities and smart villages expect to build media platforms, applications

that will allow them to function efficiently and effectively and respond quickly to the emerging crisis situation. However, these platforms must feature content in line with individual canonical values such as freedom of speech and the right to access reliable information.

Further discussion

The research aimed to identify the most critical challenges during a crisis facing the local public sphere under widespread digitization conditions. Conclusions arising from the research may constitute recommendations for local government officials, entrepreneurs (representatives of the media sector), activists (representatives of non-governmental organizations) and inhabitants, indicating the need for and possibilities of optimizing the functioning of local communities. They emphasized the fundamental importance of fostering activities amid the digitization of the local public space to build strong structures of local communities, strengthen public participation and improve the quality of communication between the public and private spheres (Friedland 2001).

In the current European state model, the local administration is responsible for providing most public services and as such is the first point of contact with citizens. The future of citizens and local communities currently depends on its efficiency and ability to act. Unfortunately, government and government administration actions do not always strengthen self-government. Sometimes, using a top-down management model systematically weakens it, as the experience with the COVID-19 pandemic has shown (Burton-Jeangros 2019). Therefore, it is necessary to consider what can and should be undertaken to restore the strategic communitarian nature of self-government and ensure its financial and decision-making stability.

According to the assumption made at the beginning of the research, the local public sphere is identified as a community located in a specific sociopolitical space, culture and communication dimension (Habermas 1962). The research undertaken aimed to assess the current digitization of these communities in different political systems (Poland, Italy and the United Kingdom). The aim was also to highlight possible risks and challenges faced by local communities at the time of dominance and dependence on smart city/village technologies. The research's timing coincided with the outbreak of the pandemic, which significantly influenced how the initial assumptions were remodelled. Lockdown and previously used communication standards in municipalities had to adapt to new realities in a short period of time. The pandemic has revealed numerous shortcomings in local communication (especially in the case of small, underfunded municipalities). The following appeared to be the most significant problems: insufficient level of digitization in municipalities; lack of suitably trained officials; digital exclusion of certain social groups; inadequate infrastructure; the inappropriate structure of information transmission; information chaos; fake news; lack of trust in authorities; limited trust concerning official media messages. The pandemic highlighted the shortcomings of territorial self-government and demonstrated the shortcomings of coherent communication and action between central and local governments. The standard behaviour of central (political) government is to fail to consult the public (including a lack of discussions with local authorities) and to disregard the social and financial consequences of actions taken (Gu and Li 2020).

Indeed, the pandemic is certainly a special and very demanding period in terms of organizing communication at a local level, as it relates directly to crisis management issues. However, the development of effective communication standards within the local public space during this period

will certainly have a positive impact on the management of the municipality and the strengthening of public participation (Laajalahti et al. 2016). The experience gained from a few months of quarantine, the closure of businesses, institutions and schools or the restrictions on access to health services, can be ignored (passed over in silence) or used to draw conclusions and make changes. The author of the paper hopes that it will contribute to the discussion on the condition of self-governance and the effectiveness of communication at the local public sphere level. This article describes the risks and limitations arising from the digitization of the local public sphere, as well as a list of best practices.

Acknowledgement

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