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BECOMING FRIENDS WITH THE GOVERNMENT - A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF CITIZENS' DECISION TO 'LIKE' GOVERNMENT PROFILES ON FACEBOOK

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Research

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Abstract

The proliferation of social media has created various new potentials for governments to enhance their interaction with citizens. One of social media's main advantages is seen in the way it alters service delivery and service design in governments. Rather than merely consuming, citizens can now assume an active role in designing government services by becoming co-designers. While recent studies have concentrated on the benefits that social media offer to governments, the citizen perspective has remained unstudied yet. However, considering their needs and preferences is crucial for the success of governments' activities in social media. In order to gain first insights in this topic, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 32 German Facebook users enquiring them about their perceptions and experiences with their municipalities' Facebook profiles. Our results draw a disillusioning picture. Despite the possibilities to actively contribute to government activities, citizens prefer to passively consume information, if at all. The main barriers to deeper interactions with governments are citizens' unawareness of government profiles, missing perceived benefits, missing trust and perceived pressure from their social environment. In general, we find the social environment to play an important role, both in the decision to 'like' government profiles on Facebook as well as in the decision (not) to contribute to e-participation on Facebook.

Keywords: social networking sites, social media, Facebook, government, citizens, qualitative interviews.

1 Introduction

With the rise of social media, individuals have found new ways of interacting with each other (Rishika, Kumar, Janakiraman, & Bezawada, 2013), thus bringing the world closer together. In addition, Internet users have come of age since they are no longer passive consumers of information and services as in the web 1.0 era but they can now actively contribute to publishing content and generating new ideas (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Companies have rapidly acknowledged the various potentials that social media offer in terms of customer loyalty as well as service innovations. Besides using social media as marketing channels for advertising their goods and informing about new product releases (Gregurec, Vranesevic, & Dobrinic, 2011), companies rely on social media for integrating their 'followers' into co-creation or co-design campaigns (Bekkers, Edwards, Moody, & Beunders, 2011). Users taking part in these activities can play a part in designing new products and services (Arakji, 2009).

Governments, too, have slowly started to recognize the advantages of social media as a means to increase their relationships with citizens. The prospects of these new technologies are numerous for governments. With the help of social media they can address a broad audience since social media allows them to be "where the people are" (Garvin, 2008, p. 46). While previous, 'offline' government communication has suffered from poor perceptions by citizens due to mainly indirect, one-way communication via mass media (Liu & Horsley, 2007; Towner & Dulio, 2011), social media brings gov-

ernments closer to the public (Chun, Shulman, Sandoval, & Hovy, 2010). Especially the goals of open government to create transparency of government activities and to encourage citizens' contribution to e-participation can be supported by social media (Obama, 2009). Furthermore, governments can contribute to a sense of community by providing a platform where citizens can virtually meet and discuss important societal issues (Chun et al., 2010).

Empirical research on social media use in the public sector has focused on analyzing how governments act in this new communication environment (cf. e.g. Magnusson, Bellström, & Thoren, 2012; Maultasch Oliveira & Welch, 2013). The results suggest that rather than adapting to the new forms of use, governments rather stick to their offline communication behaviour known from the web 1.0 (Brainard & McNutt, 2010; Lee & Lee Elser, 2010). In order to further exploit the potentials of social media, governments are advised to expand their activities. However, this raises the question whether such efforts are actually worthwhile. Studies in the context of e-government have repeatedly shown that the problem of electronically provided government services is not their insufficient quality. Rather, citizens refrain from using them since they perceive no benefit or since they distrust government as well as the technologies these services are based on (cf. e.g. Carter & Bélanger, 2005; Sipior, Ward, & Connolly, 2011).

While the related work on social media use in the public sector concentrates on analyzing the government side, studies that actually consider citizens' perspectives on governments' activities in social media are rare. Being one of the few researchers addressing this topic, Magnusson et al. (2012), for example, have analyzed the interactions on government Facebook profiles and observed that citizens actively use it for directing questions to the government as well as for posting complaints. In contrast to this, in a 2013 study, Hong (2013) found that 83 % of US American citizens were not aware of their governments' social media activities. However, studies concentrating on citizens' perceptions and their demands for government profiles in social media are missing.

We argue that in order to provide a successful social media profile, it is crucial for governments to consider citizens' wishes (Mossberger, Wu, & Crawford, 2013). Therefore, *this study aims at understanding citizens' perceptions of government profiles in social media as well as the factors that influence their decision (not) to 'like' these profiles.*

In order to address this research aim, we conducted semi-structured, exploratory interviews with 32 Facebook users in Germany and enquired them about their perceptions and experiences with the Facebook profiles of their municipal government. Evaluating their responses using content analysis, we find that rather than actively participating and thus contributing to promising co-creation activities, citizens prefer to passively consume the posted information on government profiles. Citizens mainly become aware of a government profile with the help of their Facebook contacts. The main reason for 'liking' such a profile is to stay up-to-date with activities in their city whereas barriers to 'liking' a government profile are missing awareness, missing trust, as well as perceived pressure from the social environment.

In the remainder of this paper, in Section 2, we present the research background dealing with the benefits and challenges of social media both for governments and citizens and give an overview of governments' use of social media. In Section 3, we introduce our research design consisting of semi-structured interviews and content analysis. Subsequently in Section 4, we present the results of our study, interpret and arrange them in the context of related work in Section 5. Section 6 contains the conclusion, implications both for theory and practice, as well as further interesting research aspects that arise from our findings.

2 Related Work on Governments' Use of Social Media

Typology of social media

According to Kaplan and Haenlein's often cited definition, social media are "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the

creation and exchange of User Generated Content." (2010, p. 61) Users can create, edit, share, and link to posts published by other users and, thus, add to the creation of new content (Bolton et al., 2013). According to their functionality, social media can be classified as weblogs, social networking sites (e.g. Facebook), collaborative projects (Wikipedia), content communities (YouTube), virtual worlds (Second Life), or as virtual game worlds (World of Warfcraft) (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The most popular social medium is the social networking site Facebook with 1.59 billion monthly active users in December 2015 (Facebook, 2015). Social networking sites are "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system." (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211) Due to the number of users as well as the provided functionality, Facebook is the social medium that is most often used by governments (Agostino, 2013). According to Maultasch Oliveira and Welch (2013), in 2012 92 % of US local governments had created a Facebook profile.

Benefits of governments' social media use

Governments increasingly use social media to interact with their citizens (Agostino, 2013). As communication in social media is no longer one-directional or bi-directional but has turned into a many-to-many way of interaction, these new communication platforms enable an unprecedented proximity between governments and citizens. Furthermore, social media can contribute to governments' task of giving accountability of their activities to the public (Lee & Lee Elser, 2010). In making governments' behaviour more transparent, they can help to create a level of openness (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010). With the help of social media, governments can reach citizen segments that they could not address before or that they were even not aware of (Bonsón, Torres, Royo, & Flores, 2012). Rather than limiting participation activities to an exclusive circle of privileged people, all interested citizens can now catch up on relevant topics or actively contribute to the exchange of information between government and citizens (Agostino, 2013). In addition to providing information, social media can enhance the two-way communication between governments and citizens and thus also impact the relationship between governments and citizens in the offline world. Hong (2013), for example, found that citizens interacting with governments via social media are likely to increasingly trust governments in general.

The biggest advantage of social media, however, is seen in their ability to actively integrate citizens into government processes and decision making since citizens have the opportunity to become co-producers and co-creators (Bekkers et al., 2011). In doing so, citizens can contribute to governments' value creation by expressing their opinions and by involving their ideas into the design of new services (Mergel & Desouza, 2013). Thus, by enabling citizens to enter into a participatory dialogue with governments, social media can enhance the long-awaited democratic participation (Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, 2012). Typical examples of participation in social media are open innovation activities, where governments call on citizens to help finding new solutions to existing problems (Bertot et al., 2012) such as participatory budgets (cf. e.g. http://www.participatorybudgeting.org.uk/). Besides fostering government-driven participation activities, governments can offer a platform in social media where citizens can get into contact with other people sharing the same interests since they are members of the same community (Linders, 2012). Hence, the idea of governments using social media is not only to improve their interaction with citizens but also to connect citizens among each other (Chun et al., 2010).

Challenges of governments' social media use

Using social media is nevertheless accompanied by several challenges for governments. For example, current legal regulations often do not adequately address all aspects that are concerned by governments' use of social media since most laws date back to the pre-social media time (Picazo-Vela, Gutiérrez-Martínez, & Luna-Reyes, 2012; Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, 2012). Especially issues such as privacy, security of government data and information, the legally binding character of information published on government profiles as well as the question whether and how to archive information published in social media remain unanswered by current laws. In addition, the privacy policy of social

media providers often does not adhere to the regulations required by governments (Bertot et al., 2012). Governments need to ensure that data published on their profiles do not become personally identifiable thereby intruding citizens' privacy (Bertot, Jaeger, Munson, & Glaisyer, 2010).

In addition to these external factors that impact the application of social media, governments need to plan their social media activities strategically within their organization. In order to capitalize on social media most effectively, governments need to align their use with the overall communication strategy and, thus, define the goals of using social media, the target group to be reached; they need to identify risks and set up internal guidelines for their employees defining how to use social media (Lee & Lee Elser, 2010; Ng & Wang, 2013; Picazo-Vela et al., 2012).

Governments' use of social media

Contrasting the theoretical benefits and challenges of social media with governments' actual use of these new communication channels reveals that many governments are still far from an effective use. First of all, governments do not seem to adapt to the new media but they rather stick to their offline communication patterns: Instead of engaging in an interactive dialogue with their citizens, they merely publish static information (Waters & Williams, 2011). This behavior is also observed by Mossberger et al. (2013), Bonsón et al. (2012), as well as Brainard and McNutt (2010), who find that in most cases, Facebook is still used for pushing information, thus meeting the aims of creating transparency, whereas communicating and collaborating with citizens remains the exception. A slightly different picture is drawn by Maultasch Oliveira and Welch (2013), who witness that governments use social media for four different purposes. While, in their study, too, disseminating information to the public was governments' main activity in social media, governments nevertheless also gathered public feedback on service quality, offered participation activities, as well as used social media for internal work collaboration. Further evidence for governments' use of social media that extends the stage of providing information is provided by Magnusson et al. (2012). Analyzing the Facebook profile of a Swedish municipality, they find that a two-way interaction between governments and citizens does indeed take place. For example, citizens report service failures such as broken traffic lights via government profiles on Facebook, or they request information. Nevertheless, their results indicate as well that the main purpose of using Facebook is to provide information, for example about events taking place in the city. While the expectations of social media as an enabler for a new era of interactions between government and citizens are obviously not yet met, these benefits might still be exploited in the future (Bonsón et al., 2012).

Citizens' perceptions of governments' social media activities

Currently, governments' activities in social media are mostly ignored by citizens. As Hong (2013) found, 83 % of US citizens were not aware of their governments' social media activities, thus significantly reducing the number of potential government 'likers'. In addition to raising awareness of their profiles, governments are encouraged to actively maintain their profile in order to make it attractive for citizens (Bryer, 2013). This includes moderating without deleting critical comments, as well as encouraging active interactions. However, prior to an effective citizen engagement, the power relations between governments and citizens need to change (Hand & Ching, 2011). Especially young citizens are deterred from a high power distance between governments and citizens and wish for a less formalized relationship in social media (Bennett, Wells, & Freelon, 2011).

In order to support interactions with citizens, governments especially use social networking sites such as Facebook (Agostino, 2013). Facebook is a social medium in which users are easily identifiable since user profiles typically include various types of personal information such as personal interests, photos, as well as a list of a user's 'friends' (Utz, 2010). On the one hand, citizens can benefit from the close ties with their Facebook contacts. Whenever their 'friends' comment or 'like' information on government profiles, users are informed about these activities in their newsfeed. Thus, relevant information about governments can quickly spread on Facebook (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). On the other hand, however, citizens need to be aware that their posts are not anonymous and that socially undesired behaviour might be punished by other users.

In order to provide a successful social media profile that is adopted by citizens, governments need to consider citizens' wishes when developing their social media profile (Mossberger et al., 2013). By, for example, 'listening' to citizens' posts on their social media profile, governments can learn about their needs and, thus, become more citizen-centric and responsive (Bonsón et al., 2012). However, collecting feedback and evaluating user behaviour hardly happens in practice (Hofmann, 2014), and also research has neglected citizens' perspective on governments' activities in social media. This aspect, though, is important above all since a promising use of social media is crucially dependent on citizens' willingness to contribute to governments' activities.

3 Research Design

3.1 Semi-Structured Interview Design

In order to gain insights into citizens' perceptions of governments' social media profiles as well as the factors that influence their decision to 'like' or not to 'like' these profiles, we chose a qualitative approach. Qualitative research methods are most appropriate in areas where little previous knowledge exists (Recker, 2013) since they help to create a comprehensive perspective on complex situations. The most common way of collecting data in qualitative research is via interviews (Myers & Newman, 2007). In our study, we conducted semi-structured interviews using a previously developed interview guideline. Based on the above-mentioned research background of the potentials and challenges of using social media for interactions between government and citizens, we developed two interview guidelines: one guideline was used for conducting interviews with Facebook users having 'liked' the profile of their municipality on Facebook whereas the other one was designed for users not having 'liked' nor interacted in any other way with their municipality on Facebook.

The interview guideline for so-called 'likers' contained questions on the interviewees' experience with government profiles on Facebook, their evaluation of the content and the way government posts were designed, as well as further wishes for improving the government profile. In contrast, the guideline for 'non-likers' aimed at revealing the factors that inhibited the interviewees from 'liking' a government profile, as well as potential changes in governments' behaviour that would change the interviewees' decision to reject government Facebook profiles.

After pretesting and adjusting our two interview guidelines in several rounds, we contacted 97 randomly chosen German municipalities that offered an official Facebook profile and asked them to post a call for participation in our study, which 28 municipalities did. In doing so, we got into contact with 12 'likers' of government profiles from various cities. In addition, we used convenience sampling in our social environment for recruiting interviewees for the group of 'non-liker', i.e. people who use Facebook but refuse to 'like' a government profile nor interact with governments on Facebook in any other way. In doing so, we paid attention to a preferably high diversity in terms of the interviewees' place of residence, their age, as well as gender. In total, we conducted 20 interviews with 'non-likers'. Our interviewees are from different German cities. Therefore, citizens' evaluation of government activities in social media refers to various government profiles.

According to the interviewees' preferences, we conducted the interviews via telephone, Skype, or in person. On average, the interviews with 'likers' lasted 7:45 minutes and the interviews with 'non-likers' 7:54 minutes. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed using content analysis.

3.2 Content Analytical Design

Content analysis is a method often used for qualitatively analyzing texts such as interview transcripts. It aims at revealing both the latent as well as the manifest content in order to detect dominant concepts in the text (Recker, 2013). For that purpose, the text to be analyzed is coded with the help of a coding scheme (Krippendorff, 2004). The categories of the coding scheme can either be theory-driven, i.e. they are deductively defined prior to analyzing the text, or they can be empirically-driven, i.e. they

inductively emerge while working with the text. In most cases, a mixed epistemological approach is recommended, which we also followed in our analysis. First, we "operationalized [coding categories] on the basis of previous knowledge" (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008, p. 109). Categories that were defined during this step are, for example, reasons for 'liking'/not 'liking' a government profile on Facebook, or the evaluation of existing content. However, as little previous research exists that deals with citizens' perception of government profiles, we adjusted and extended the category scheme while test-coding the texts (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Categories that emerged in this step are, for instance, citizens' source for becoming aware of government profiles on Facebook. Afterwards, we analyzed all transcripts using the final coding scheme and identified dominant concepts. We evaluated these findings both with the help of the related work presented in Section 2 as well as by searching for further research that confirms or contradicts our results.

4   Results

In the following, we present the dominant concepts resulting from analyzing and coding the transcribed interviews. We support our findings with quotes from the interviews. The interviews were originally conducted in German and afterwards translated into English. The answers of the interviewees suggest that governments use the social networking site Facebook differently in terms of the topics they post, their way of interacting with citizens, or concerning the way they design their posts. Nonetheless, citizens' wishes and fears were quite homogeneous in our sample. We distinguish six different themes:

1. How citizens have learnt about the existence of government profiles on Facebook
2. Their reasons for adopting a government profile
3. Their usage behaviour of the profiles
4. Their perceptions of the topics posted by governments
5. Their perceptions of the way these topics are presented
6. Citizens' reason for rejecting government profiles on Facebook

1.   Becoming aware of the government profile on Facebook

Citizens' main sources of getting into contact with government profiles on Facebook are their contacts who have already 'liked' the profile: "I have talked about it with a friend [...]. I think I had asked him why he always knows what is happening [in the city]." It is rather by chance that citizens become aware of government activities: "I noticed that friends had 'liked' this page, too. This simply was displayed in my newsfeed one day." In contrast, citizens are seldom intrinsically motivated to search for their government on Facebook. In case they do so, their intention is rather to 'like' the city they live in than getting into contact with the government: "I wasn't aware that that was [the profile of] the municipality. [...] I just wanted to 'like' my city."

2.   Reasons for 'liking' government Facebook profiles

While some citizens do not pursue a specific purpose when 'liking' a government profile ("Someone else had already 'liked' the page, and then I thought 'You could do that, too'"), most citizens are driven by the wish to keep up-to-date with the activities going on in their city: "[...] to be informed, that is to receive news in my newsfeed [...], for example about events or [...] current activities. [...] The current flood, for example." They would like to receive information both on current events and on crisis situations, such as floods or when unexploded bombs from the Second World War have been found. Being informed about the activities going on in the city is closely linked to the fact that citizens increasingly start to use the government profiles as a substitute for local newspapers: "In the morning, I do not have time to read the newspaper. I do that in the evening and beforehand, I can have a look at Facebook."

Citizens disagree about whether 'liking' a government profile represents some kind of local patriotism. One interviewee stated "You want to show your friends where you are from. [...] I also don't like a band in order to learn about their next concert in America but to show my sympathy and to show my friends which music I like. That is the same for the city profile." Here again, we find evidence that a Facebook profile is often rather associated with a city than with the respective government. In cases citizens are aware that they have 'liked' their governments' profile, they state their wish to nevertheless want express their identification with the city: "I did not do this because of the government but because I want to show that I live in this city."

Most of the interviewees had 'liked' the government Facebook profile of their residence or of their native city. In addition, some also followed the profiles of cities where close friends lived or popular cities such as Berlin or Munich that they liked to visit.

3. *Citizens' usage behaviour of government Facebook profiles*

In most cases, citizens passively read the posts that governments publish. Actively contributing to a discussion or to specific activities does not happen: "In fact, I regularly visit the page to see what kind of information they have." However, visiting the government profile seems the exception. Usually, citizens do not consciously access the government profile but they are rather informed about new government posts in their newsfeed: "I seldom actually visit [the page] myself. I only get it on [my Facebook profile] and then I either read the posts or I scan them and read them if they are interesting to me." Several interviewees stated that the only time they had ever visited the government profile was right after they had 'liked' it: "I believe that I have not been on their page since I have liked them." or "Well, when you 'like' a page for the first time, you click through it but actually that's it."

Some citizens 'like' governments posts whereas the majority of government followers seem to remain inactive as commenting a post on the government profile is the exception: "If there is something on the page that I approve of, I do 'like' it but I have never commented anything."

Only one interviewee had directly contacted the government via Facebook and had experienced it in a positive way: "Yes, I have already […] sent a message directly to the internet editorials which has been answered promptly." Other citizens are not aware of this functionality or are simply not interested: "That [contacting the government] has not yet been my focal point of interest."

4. *Citizens' perception of the content posted by governments*

Citizens especially appreciate topics on government Facebook profiles that concern them personally: "The issue how the bicycle lanes shall be expanded […], that is a topic that is of course interesting to me as a cyclist." Furthermore, citizens like information about local political issues as well as events taking place in the city "for example, the marathon, or any other events where you experience what is going on." They also like being informed about "such cultural offers".

In addition to information that rather concerns citizens' leisure time, news about what happens in the government is appreciated as well. This also includes current information about extraordinary events such as changed office hours, road closures in the city or traffic works. In general, Facebook is seen as an adequate communication channel for sharing time-critical information. Occasionally, governments remind citizens of their civic duty by posting incentives, which is especially appreciated by citizens: "For example, the campaign at that time that when you change your address a as a new [inhabitant], you can win a bike. I did this but did not win a bike."

In general, citizens who read the information posted on government profiles, are quite satisfied: "Actually, I find almost everything interesting [on the page]" or "Actually, I like the diversity currently offered by the city. […] I like to scroll the page and meanwhile I am really enthusiastic". As mentioned above, citizens appreciate governments providing information on their Facebook profiles since they are "like a […] substitute for a newspaper." Furthermore, they like governments providing information at one glance which relieves them of searching for information on various channels: "Because I find it easier than when you have to access the Internet and look and have to google what is going on [in the city] and you have to look at everything separately. […] On Facebook […] you don't have to

fight through the whole program". Citizens often use these information provided by governments for planning their leisure activities.

Further topics that citizens would appreciate are more information about cultural activities and the city's historical background as well as "[m]aybe some more political information; they are missing completely." There was no consensus among our interviewees whether governments should mainly publish 'soft', entertaining topics or whether they should concentrate on factual information. Further-more, citizens would appreciate further incentives or reminders of their civic duties: "Current occa-sions, I would say. That you somehow see: 'Well, people, New Year's Eve is over, now you could start with [preparing] your tax return. You find the forms here and if you need help, then here is the [address of the] income tax help organization.'" One interviewee also suggested that she would like to learn "[...] what the city does for citizens. I almost think that the city could present itself a bit more. Simply say: 'We built a new kindergarten here' or something like that."

In contrast, citizens would not appreciate to receive structured information on Facebook that they need to access frequently, for example instructions or forms to be downloaded. Such information should rather be stored on a medium that is more clearly arranged and that allows finding information more easily. Furthermore, as pointed out above, citizens have no desire in contacting their government via Facebook. They rather see it as a medium "where the municipality pushes information to the citizens and not the other way around."

While some citizens can imagine receiving information about government services via Facebook, none of the interviewees would use Facebook for conducting transactional services: "If it concerns any forms or something like that, I would not download them from Facebook or fill them in on Facebook." One barrier to using government transactions is a perceived penetration of citizens' privacy. Two in-terviewees thought about offering a help chat on Facebook that would be administered by the govern-ment but promptly dismissed the idea: "The whole thing must not run on Facebook. I do not want the consultant of the government to see my Facebook profile photo or my holiday photos."

Furthermore, citizens have no intention to get into contact with other citizens from their community via the government Facebook profile. They simply see no benefit for this interaction: "Because such things don't bother me. I do not want to take part in public discussions." If any, citizens would rather passively read the comments of their fellow citizens.

5. Citizens' perception of the presentation of content

According to our interviewees, governments' way of presenting their content ranges from publishing mere texts to using pictures, videos, or links to external web sites. In general, citizens appreciate the use of pictures: "Photos are nice once in a while. They make the newsfeed more colorful and they catch your attention." In contrast, videos seem to be less popular: "I don't like videos because a) I like scrolling the pages with my smartphone while I am on the bus where I can't watch videos with sound, and because b) it takes too much time." As mentioned by several interviewees, governments' posts could contain a photo in order to catch citizens' attention, a short teaser text introducing the topic of the post, as well as a link directing to an external web site where further information can be found: "I definitely prefer photos with a very short text. For example, a photo of a bomb and next to it: 'Bomb found. Please check if you are in the radius of evacuation.', and then a further link that tells you how to proceed." However, as mentioned above, structured information should not be stored on Facebook since "[this information] would drown on Facebook."

6. Reasons for not interacting with governments on Facebook

According to the interviews with the 'non-likers', their main reason for not getting into contact with governments on Facebook is missing awareness: "I was never concerned with the topic and never came up with the idea that [governments are] on Facebook." or "Well, if you think about it, then you surely know [that governments use Facebook]… It's logical that such pages exist but I would have never come up with the idea myself." Trying to explain why she would not expect governments to

offer a Facebook profile, one interviewee assumed that "they do not have the technical skills; they are simply too stupid. […] I believe the main reason is: They have no clue how it works."

In addition to missing awareness, missing perceived benefits inhibit citizens from 'liking' government profiles on Facebook "because I don't simply 'like' things I am not interested in." Some citizens cannot imagine that Facebook profiles provide an additional value compared to government web sites: "I don't need something like that on Facebook. If I want to know something, then I visit the homepage." Furthermore, citizens do not see Facebook as the adequate medium for getting into contact with their government: "I use Facebook for friends and so on. Not for the city." In their understanding, "[m]unicipalities are rather something serious. They do not belong into such a network. It lacks in reliability. Anyway, I would not regard the representation of a city on Facebook as credible." In addition to being unaware or not perceiving a benefit, citizens do not want to express their ties with a certain city: "In addition, it depends on the city, of course. There is no way I would 'like' [the city]. I don't identify with it that much."

While the social context of citizens was the main source for becoming aware of government profiles on Facebook, it is also the social context that prevents them from taking part in active discussions on government Facebook profiles: "Even if you are registered on Facebook with a fake identity, my friends will still see what I post and that is too private for me. The perceived distance is too low." Citizens fear that posting socially unpleasant content might evoke negative reactions from their friends. Furthermore, one of the largest barriers to engaging with governments on Facebook is missing trust: "Because I don't trust them an inch and think that they can do a lot with the data. As long as the state is our friend, it's okay but this can change." Citizens refrain from interacting with citizens "because I am not sure how secure my data are on Facebook." Finally, some citizens were not aware of the functionality that Facebook offers and therefore did not know which consequences 'liking' a government profile on Facebook would have: "I wasn't aware what happens [when 'liking' the government profile] and that this would appear in my newsfeed."

5   Discussion

First of all, it is striking that there is a discrepancy between the theoretical acknowledged potentials of social media and citizens' intention to use them for connecting with governments. Although citizens generally exhibit different user characteristics and it is difficult to talk about tendencies in a qualitative study, it is striking that almost all our interviewees were reluctant to engage with governments in activities that go beyond the mere consumption of information. Based on the findings presented above, we derived several theoretical propositions that explain citizens' behaviour towards governments' Facebook profiles. They are summarized in Figure 1.

(Un)awareness

Our findings show that one main inhibitor to 'liking' a government profile on Facebook is citizens' missing awareness about its existence. This large share of unawareness among citizens is also acknowledged by Hong (2013), who finds that 83 % of US citizens have no experience in interacting with their governments in social media. In our study, we could identify three reasons for citizens' unawareness: First they do not waste a thought on the possibility that governments could actually have a Facebook profile simply because they are not occupied with government activities. Second, citizens believe that governments are not capable of managing social media technology and, finally, citizens themselves might not be aware of the functionality that Facebook offers such as following an organization by 'liking' their profile.

> *Proposition: Citizens' unawareness of government Facebook pages is the main inhibitor to interact with governments on Facebook.*
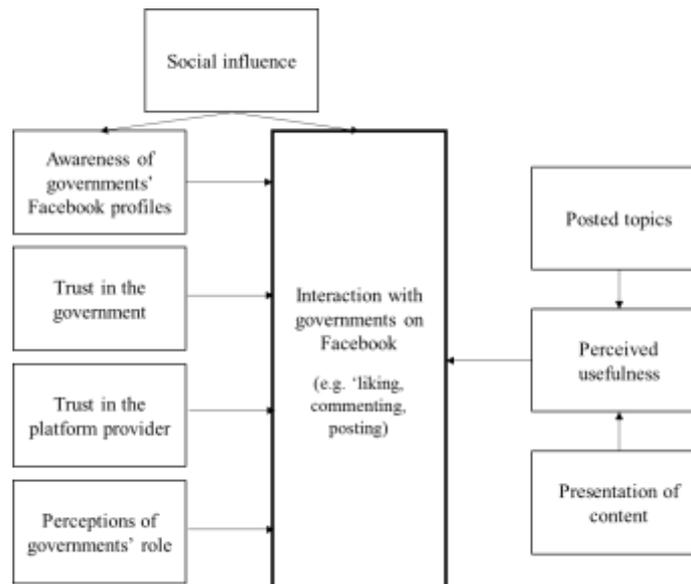
Figure 1.   Propositions for citizens' interaction with governments on Facebook.

Social influence

In most cases, awareness of government profiles on Facebook is created by Facebook friends having 'liked' the government page. This relationship is displayed on the user's newsfeed. Our finding supports Rogers's diffusion of innovations theory, which postulates that the "observability of an innovation, as perceived by members of a social system, is positively related to its rate of adoption" (2003, p. 258). Since the observability on Facebook is high due to the visible ties between its users (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), information about government Facebook profiles can easily spread within the network. In contrast to this enabling role of Facebook contacts, the social context can also prevent users from taking actions on Facebook. We witness that citizens refrain from posting information on government profiles because they fear that they might make a fool of themselves by publishing socially unpleasant content. However, citizens also 'like' government Facebook profiles in order to express their patriotism with a certain city, i.e. to show their environment parts of their personality. Halpern and Gibbs (2013) notice that, in contrast to other social media such as YouTube, users act more cautiously on Facebook since the personal profiles and the ties with friends allow identifying a user and, thus, blaming her for her behavior. The role of the social context has also been acknowledged by several IT adoption theories. The unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (UTAUT) and the theory of reasoned action (TRA), for example, both have integrated the influence of the social context respectively subjective norms on an individual's intention to use a specific technology (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Venkatesh, Morris, Gordon B. Davis, & Davis, 2003).

> *Proposition: Citizens' social environment influences their awareness of governments' Facebook profiles.*

> *Proposition: The (perceived) social context influences citizens' way of interacting with governments on Facebook.*

Trust

Another dominant concept that emerged in our study is trust. Missing trust prevents citizens from using government profiles on Facebook for activities that go beyond the mere consumption of content or from 'liking' a government profile at all. However, it is not obvious at first glance which party citizens actually distrust. As proposed by Carter and Bélanger (2005), trust in the technology, i.e. the Internet, as well as trust in the government influence citizens' intention to use an e-government service. Since the interviewees mentioned that they both distrusted Facebook as well as the government, it seems that when considering a government profile on Facebook, a further variable that refers to trust in the plat-

form provider should be added. O'Bien and Torres (2012), found that privacy concerns are prevalent among Facebook users with only one quarter of users actually trusting Facebook. Our findings are further in line with Ruiz-Mafe, Martí-Parreño, and Sanz-Blas (2014), who identify, among others, perceived usefulness as well as trust to be predictors of users' loyalty of fan pages on Facebook.

Proposition: Citizens' trust in the government influences their way of interacting with governments on Facebook.

Proposition: Citizens' trust in the platform provider influences their way of interacting with governments on Facebook.

Perceptions of the governments' role

Some citizens stated that they perceived it as odd when governments try to interact with them on Facebook, which many interviewees regard as an environment that is exclusive for getting into contact with friends. Linders (2012) and Hand and Ching (2011) propose that prior to engaging with citizens in social media, governments need to change their role from being a service provider to becoming a partner for citizens. However, our results suggest that this transformation has not yet taken place.

Proposition: Citizens' perceptions of governments' role influence their decision to interact with governments on Facebook.

Motivations for interaction

Regarding citizens' preferred way of using government profiles on Facebook, the interviews clearly show that providing up-to-date information is most appreciated. Liu and Fraustino (2014), too, acknowledge Facebook as an adequate communication channels for governments to keep the public informed about time-critical events such as crisis situations. Many citizens consume the information posted by governments rather passively. They click through Facebook without having a specific purpose in mind, for example when riding the bus. This finding is in line with Giannakos, Chorianopoulos, Giotopoulos, and Vlamos's study (2013) which reveals that users' main motives for using Facebook are social connection, social networking surfing, using applications, as well as wasting time. Having in mind these motives, we argue that it will be very difficult for governments to actually enter into a serious and productive exchange with citizens on Facebook. As to the presentation of content, citizens prefer to be attracted by pictures in combination with a text, which is supported by Lev-On and Steinfeld's analysis of Israeli municipalities on Facebook (2015).

Proposition: Citizens' perceived usefulness influences their decision to interact with governments on Facebook.

Proposition: Citizens' perceived usefulness is influenced by the topics that governments post on their Facebook profiles.

Proposition: Citizens' perceived usefulness is influenced by the way governments present the content on their Facebook profiles.

6 Conclusion

In our study, we conducted semi-structured interviews both with Facebook users who had and users who had not 'liked' a government profile on Facebook. Our aim was to understand citizens' perceptions of government profiles in social media and the factors that influence their decision (not) to 'like' these profiles. We used content analysis for evaluating the transcribed interviews. Based on the results, we identified several concepts that play a crucial role in citizens' decision to interact with governments on Facebook and proposed nine theoretical propositions.

First of all, we identify that citizens' source for learning about the existence of government profiles on Facebook is mainly their contacts having 'liked' such a profile, which arouses citizens' awareness. Second, we learn that citizens' main reason for 'liking' a government profile on Facebook is to stay up-to-date with the events in the city. Citizens both prefer 'soft' topics such as nice pictures but also

would like receive information on local politics. Interestingly, our results show that government Facebook profiles assumes the role of local newspapers for some citizens. Analyzing citizens' behavior on government profiles, we find that rather than actively taking part in discussions, they mainly prefer to passively consume the information presented by government. Finally, we learn that obstacles that prevent citizens from engaging more actively in government activities are their unawareness of government profiles on Facebook, missing perceived benefits, missing trust, as well as perceived expectations from their social context.

Our results have several implications both for research and practice. As to the implications for research, we have identified several concepts that play important roles in citizens' decision to 'like' or not to 'like' a government Facebook profile, which we summarized in nine propositions. First of all, our findings highlight the role of the social context both for becoming aware of government profiles as well as for citizens' decision to actively contribute to government activities on Facebook. Thus, our findings support several theories that have also acknowledged the influence of the social context such as the diffusion of innovations theory (Rogers, 2003), the unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (Venkatesh et al., 2003) or the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Furthermore, we point out the role of trust for citizens' activities on Facebook. We argue for extending Carter and Bélanger's distinction of trust in the Internet and trust in the government (2005) by a third variable, such as trust in the service provider (Facebook).

From a practical point of view, we have shown that there is a large gap between the theoretically identified potentials of social media and citizens' actual perceptions of government Facebook profiles. Governments will need to consider whether it is worthwhile to put effort into a sophisticated Facebook profile or whether merely publishing information will be sufficient for them. Be it one way or the other, we advise governments to integrate the wishes of their citizens into the design of their social media profiles. On the one hand, this refers to choosing the right content. Our results have shown that citizens are mainly interested in activities in their city. On the other hand, this also includes presenting the content adequately, e.g. by using a photo in combination with a short teaser text. Furthermore, since one of the largest barriers to 'liking' government Facebook profiles is missing aware, we suggest advertising their profile, for example on the government web site or on poster and flyers. Finally, governments need to address citizens' missing trust in their activities on Facebook. This might, for example, be achieved by clearly pointing out which data are gathered on their profile and how the privacy of users is guaranteed.

Our study exhibits several weaknesses. First of all, we conducted qualitative research with only 32 participants and furthermore used convenience sampling for some of our interviewees. Therefore, our results will not be representative of all Facebook users. Additional (also quantitative) studies could expand the scope of our research and also take into account the users' characteristics and their social media behaviour apart from governments' profiles. Second, our data were gathered in Germany thus representing only the opinions of citizens living in this culture area. As previous studies have found (cf. e.g. Akkaya, Wolf, & Krcmar, 2012), Germans are typically characterized by a high risk aversion. Thus, it seems worthwhile to extend the focus of this study by comparing the situation in different countries in order to identify whether trust as well as the social context have similarly high effects. Especially research from collectivist cultures might reveal different insights. Third, our study focused on municipalities' Facebook pages neglecting government agencies from the Federal and State level. In order to get a comprehensive understanding of citizens' perception of governments' Facebook activities, these levels should be addressed by further research. Fourth, we only considered the citizens' point of view, ignoring governments' actual behaviour. Contrasting citizens' perceptions and governments' actual profiles would yield valuable results. Finally, social media are extremely volatile technologies. Therefore, our results might already be outdated. In order to learn from the advances both in technology as well as in user behavior, we suggest conducting longitudinal studies that attend social media's comprehensive lifecycle.

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