

Chapter 3

Local Authority Websites in Rural Areas: Measuring Quality and Functionality, and Assessing the Role

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ABSTRACT

The methodology, case studies, and results of assessment of local authority website functionality and quality are described, related to e-administration and local area promotion. Rural areas and smaller communities are considered at the administrative level corresponding mainly to the European LAU 1/2 (county / municipality). The assessment is placed in the context of ICT role and use in local development, rural area problems, and local agriculture. The prerequisites for rational conduct and use of results of the website assessment are formulated. The methodology includes the standard WAES technique complemented with a much broader scoring system, called WSOSI. An outline is provided for relating website assessment to development indices of a given area and for drawing respective conclusions and recommendations.

Illustration comes with a case study in Poland, where a sample of varied characteristics of rural counties and municipalities was considered. The assessments were related to characteristics of respective units – the general socio-economic indices and the custom-made yardsticks.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-621-3.ch003

A separate section presents a cursory study of local authority websites in regions of four other EU countries (UK, The Netherlands, Romania and Spain). The conclusions and recommendations concern both policy and technicalities of assessing and evaluating rural ICT development and use.

INTRODUCTION

Assessment of local authority websites constitutes a specific element of analysis of development and impact of information society infrastructures on the local level. It relates, on the one hand, to the reach and content of the information provided and exchanged, including quite definite functionality, and, on the other hand, to the effectiveness thereof, as perceived through the association between this information and the characteristics of the socio-economic development within the respective local area. This is of particular importance for the rural areas, given the presumed (frequent) presence and significance of the urban-rural digital divide and the uncertain fate of the European countryside.

Thus, this chapter refers to assessment of local authority websites in terms of their functionality and quality, related to e-administration, as well as broader functions, associated with local area promotion and information on it. Attention here is primarily focused on rural areas and smaller communities, with respective administrative units corresponding mainly to the European county and commune (LAU 1/2) levels. This assessment is, first, placed in the context of ICT role and use in local development, rural area problems and, in particular, (broadly understood) local agricultural economy. The basic prerequisites for the rational conduct of and use of results from the website assessment of such units are formulated. Then, methodology of the assessment is introduced and described, the standard WAES technique being complemented with an own scoring system of a much broader functionality monitoring, called WSOSI. The manner, in which methodology works and the technical characteristics of its actual implementation are commented in detail.

An outline is also provided of the manner, in which the results of the website assessment can be compared with the actual development indices of a given area, and how respective conclusions and recommendations can be drawn.

The above set of principles and technical indications is illustrated with the detailed results for a case study in Poland, where a set of quite varied administrative units, in terms of their socio-economic characteristics and functionalities (residential & service, leisure & recreation, farming, as well as, treated separately – peripheral and/or marginal units), were considered. Then, these website assessments were juxtaposed with characteristics of the respective units, covering both general socio-economic indices and some custom-made yardsticks, designed for this particular purpose. A separate section of the chapter is devoted to a shorthand description of a cursory study of local authority websites in definite regions of four other EU countries (UK, The Netherlands, Romania and Spain). Conclusions and recommendations follow, concerning both the shape and effectiveness of respective ICT-related policies and strategies, and the technical, as well as scientific aspects of the study.

INFORMATION SOCIETY, RURAL SPACE AND LOCAL AUTHORITY WEBSITES

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