



UMEÅ UNIVERSITET

Dialog och digital kommunikation i svenska kommuner

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Abstract

This thesis explores the work of Swedish municipalities in dialogue and digital communication. It examines digital communication and dialogue through field studies in Örnsköldsvik municipality from 2015 to 2019, and the presence of Swedish municipalities on Facebook from 2009 to 2017. During this period, digital communication and dialogue have been prominent on the agendas of municipalities both in Sweden and internationally. The development of social media, e-services, strategic communication, branding, and citizen dialogues are crucial for understanding the evolution of communication and democracy, both now and in the future. The overall aim of this thesis is to investigate how municipalities communicate with citizens, with a focus on digital media.

The dissertation is grounded in the fields of participatory research, organizational research, strategic communication, and organizational communication. The material includes notes, reports, and documents from observations, policy documents, guidelines, interviews with officials and communicators, and Facebook posts from municipalities' Facebook pages. The four case studies draw on new institutional theory, communication theory, and deliberative systems theory to varying degrees. These case studies are theoretically linked through a focus on institutions and how they shape and are shaped by understandings of communication and participation.

The thesis captures ideas about communication and participation through eight perspectives, shedding light on what it means to be, work in, and represent a municipality today. Communicators play a central role in conveying meanings about communication by acting as internal consultants, trainers, and critical reviewers of the organization's communication purposes. They also have a strategic role in formulating guidelines and standards for communication design. The thesis argues that both communication and participation must be understood through a broader media concept to grasp the complex interactions between the municipality and citizens. The municipality speaks, listens, and negotiates with citizens directly and indirectly in various ways, from user data and motion sensors to physical meetings. The thesis also shows that municipalities use communication to steer citizens in different directions, from how they should contact the municipality to how and where they can be involved in designing services and policies. Through large-scale digital text analysis, the phatic nature of communication also emerges. Municipalities seem to communicate to maintain, build, and establish social relationships with citizens on social media. This form of communication not only fulfills a social function but also alludes to local pride and community by highlighting landmarks and other local and "sacral" objects. The results also show that citizen participation from the municipality's perspective is characterized by ideas about inclusion and strengthening the decision-making process. The more (and different) perspectives that can be considered, the better and more sustainable the decisions will be. However, the perspectives on participation are fraught with problems and challenges, as broad inclusion is time-consuming and makes it difficult to reach consensus.

Keywords

public sector communication, participation, institutional theory, public organization, local government, municipal, social media, digital media, dialogue

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