

Effective Promotion and Communication in modern Censuses: A study about 2021 Romania's Census

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Abstract

This study underscores the vital importance of conducting a census to obtain accurate population data, crucial for informed decision-making in various domains. Censuses are pivotal national events, requiring effective promotion. Adapting to technological advancements and societal needs is imperative, with a shift from traditional paper questionnaires to digital tools for enhanced data quality and reduced costs.

The 2021 census in Romania, organized amid the COVID-19 pandemic, introduced unique challenges and transformed communication strategies. Evolving public attitudes, influenced by factors like census complexity, question sensitivity and time constraints, underscore the need for adaptable communication and promotion approaches.

This research sheds light on census promotion dynamics, social media engagement, and public perceptions, offering valuable insights for policymakers, researchers, and government agencies striving to enhance census efforts and build public trust in an increasingly digital age.

Key words: census, communication strategy, promotion methods, social media, interest in census

J.E.L. classification: A10

1. Introduction

To make the best decisions in domains such as economics, social development, administration, and scientific research, the collected data must reflect the size, nature and structure of the population. Therefore, a census becomes an important event for a nation, as it provides information about the population's status at a critical moment, thus requiring adequate promotion. Expectations following a census are high from all participants and the institutions involved in the organization face increasing challenges. At the European level, efforts are being made to standardize the methodology and legislation regarding the organization and conduct of censuses, ensuring data comparability between European countries. According to Colibabă D. Ş. (2007), the census is an indispensable tool, a safe and long-used method for counting the population and houses.

Technological advancement and society's needs are the main reasons why censuses will require adaptations. Abandoning the traditional paper questionnaire is inevitable, both for ecological reasons and to ensure higher data quality, given the massive volume of data. The preference will mainly be for the use of mobile applications or web tools (email or dedicated websites), reducing costs and the time needed for data collection.

For Romania, the 2021 census holds special importance among citizens because of the involvement of the National Institute of Statistics. It is a unique census, given its organization during the COVID-19 pandemic and the registration method - self-enumeration and direct interviews.

Compared to 2011, the approach to promotion has changed, and communication campaigns have evolved, driven by technological advancements. These were not the only changes; the population's attitude toward all these actions and statistical research has also changed. The reasons are diverse, such as the complexity of the actions, the type of questions (especially their sensitivity), and the lack of time. All these factors are taken into account in the development of the communication strategy and promotion.

2. Literature review

According to the UNECE, the presentation of official statistics is an essential element in the decision-making process. The use of tools like social media, international collaborations, online applications and media has facilitated communication and presentation. The impact of the message presented contributes to both the understanding of the data by users and the improvement of quality and transparency.

In recent years, social media has become an indispensable tool for authorities, as it is a useful solution for communicating with citizens. Thus, social media can be seen as an opportunity to strengthen the relationship between governments and the community, as suggested by Yavetz G. and Aharony N. (2020). In critical situations, social media can rapidly transmit information, becoming a bridge between authorities and citizens. Al-Omouh et al. (2023) states that that social media can contribute to shaping citizens' opinions about the government and can impact trust through contradictory discussions among users. Therefore, decisional transparency and collaboration are essential elements that contribute to enhancing the government's image. As example, in US, social media applications have become an accepted way of communication by government, with the aim of becoming more transparent and strengthening collaboration with citizens.

Understanding the characteristics of the population is more easily achieved through segmentation and the identification of target groups. The population's perception of the census is influenced by the level of education, standard of living, age, environment, and civic engagement. Each target group has defining characteristics that will influence the choice of communication methods and the adaptation of messages.

According to Ghetau V. (2022), a modern census has various advantages, such as cutting-edge technological and economic resources. It is necessary for society to conduct a proper census because the demographic data collected during it will support development programs and government policies.

3. Research methodology

Considering the importance that the population attaches to social media networks, I conducted a selection of the most used platforms and analyzed various elements of posts to examine the effect of the promotional campaign on the population. On the other hand, social networks are a place where people can express their opinions and share their experiences.

The communication campaign was carried out in stages, as follows:

- Education Phase (Attention) - September - November 2021
- Awareness Phase (Interest) - December 2021 - February 2022
- Motivation Phase (Desire) - March - April 2022
- Reminder Phase (Action) - May - June 2022
- Appreciation Phase - August 2022

I analyzed the posts of the National Institute of Statistics on the social network Facebook, regarding the 2021 Population and Housing Census, from August 1, 2021, to October 31, 2022. (<https://www.facebook.com/INSTATISTICA/>, accessed on 04/24/2023, at 8:41 AM) The analysis was conducted in April 2023. The total number of posts was 297, of which 72% (213) addressed the subject of the Population and Housing Census.

To gain a closer insight into the population's attitude towards the Population and Housing Census, I used the Google Trends platform, a tool provided by Google that offers information on the popularity of specific search terms or groups of search terms over a period of time and in various geographical locations. With its assistance, I can track trends, public interests, and make comparisons of search terms. (<https://support.google.com/trends/answer/4365533?hl=en>, accessed on 04/23/2023, at 5:44 PM)

The selected time interval was from September 1, 2021, to September 1, 2022, as it allows us to observe the impact of the promotion campaign carried out before the actual census and the public's interest following the census. The level of interest is measured on a scale from 0 to 100, and the obtained data is aggregated weekly. I analyzed the search term "Recensamant 2022".

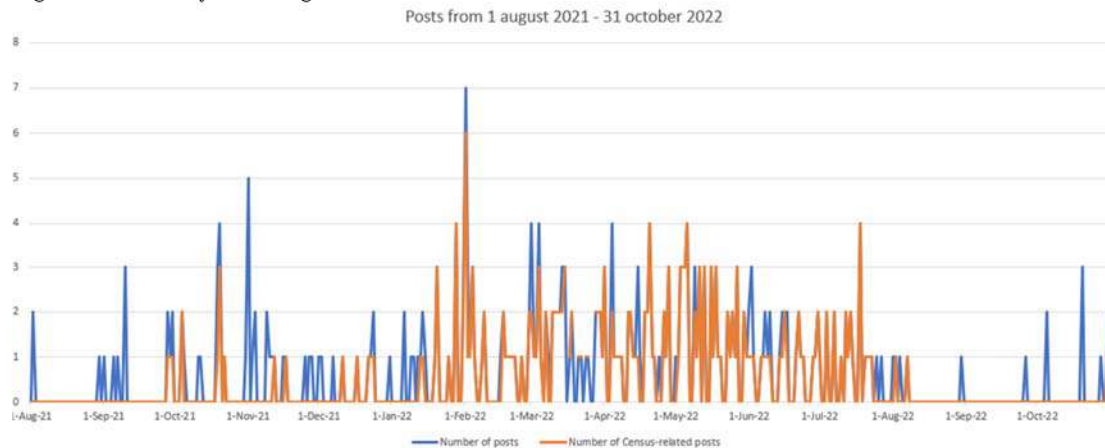
Using GeoDa, I created a map with unequal interval ranges, comprising 6 groups, providing a clearer picture of the spatial distribution of the variable "interest." This approach ensures that there are no intervals with zero frequency and it maximizes homogeneity within the groups.

4. Findings

I have classified the posts related to the census into main categories: Census News, Census Promotion, Census Clarifications, and Participation in TV, Radio, and Podcast Shows.

The day with the most posts was February 1, 2022, with a total of 7 posts, out of which 6 were related to the Population and Housing Census. The average number of likes on census-related posts is 95 likes. Most posts did not receive comments. The posts received a total of 3,588 comments, predominantly with a negative tone related to distrust in the purpose of the census, data processing, platform functionality, standard of living, conducting the census during the pandemic, and enumerator compensation. There were also comments supporting the initiative, as well as questions regarding how to complete the census. Additionally, there were comments unrelated to the census, even if the post's subject matter was related.

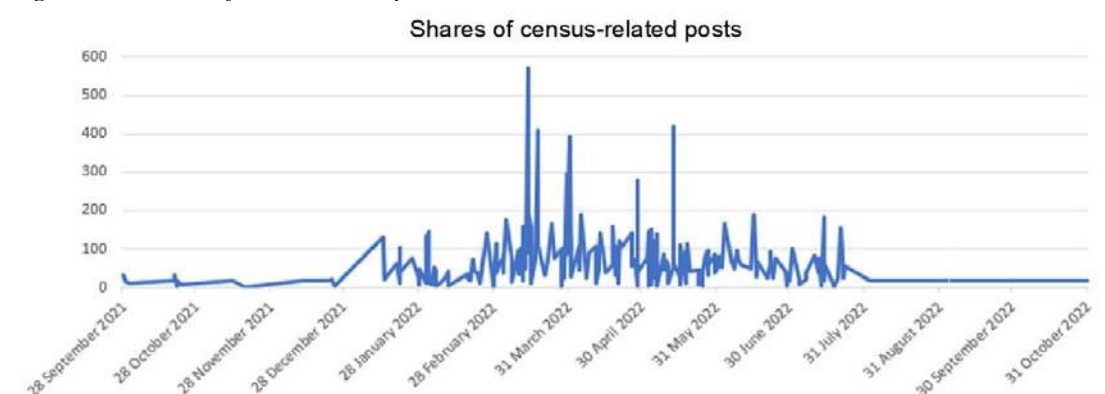
Figure no. 1 Posts from 1 august 2021 - 31 october 2022



Source: Own elaboration

The posts related to the Population and Housing Census by the National Institute of Statistics on Facebook were shared 14,069 times from August 1, 2021, to October 31, 2022, with the most intense sharing activity occurring during the census period.

Figure no. 2 Shares of census-related posts



Source: Own elaboration

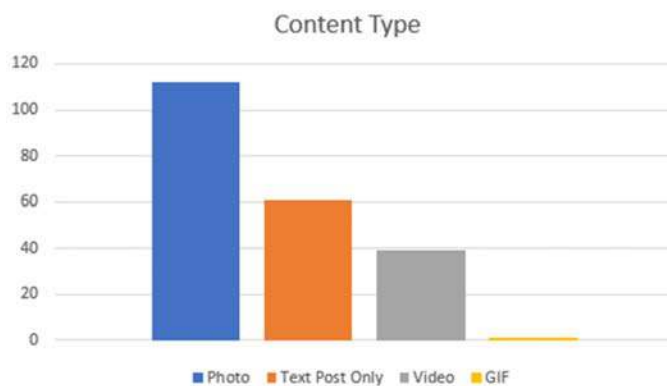
The post with the most likes and comments is from April 28, 2022, during the self-enumeration period, and it's about correctly filling in the birthplace. This post has 521 likes, 437 comments, and 278 shares. It contains two links to the European Regulation governing the census and a press release by INS defining the birthplace. It also encourages the population to complete the self-enumeration, and the post includes a photo drawing users' attention to correctly filling in the birthplace.

The post with the most shares is from March 14, 2022, one day before the start of self-enumeration. It has 365 likes, 214 comments, and 569 shares. It contains two links to the self-enumeration platform and a tutorial for completion. Hashtags (#startrecensamant, #rpl2021, #catimaisuntem, #recensamant) were used to attract users' attention. The post includes a photo with various illustrative elements: the census logo, the slogan "om cu om, casă cu casă" (person by person, house by house), and the self-enumeration online period (March 14 - May 15).

A total of 59 hashtags were used 572 times, with the most used ones being: #rpl2021 (110 times), #catimaisuntem (86 times), #recensamant (84 times), #populatie (35 times), and #omcuom (30 times). In this analysis, hashtags like #startrecensamamt and #startrecensământ, #rpl2021 and #rpl2021, #auorecenzare and #autorecenzare were combined due to typing errors. Also, hashtags in uppercase and lowercase were combined.

The most frequent posts contain photos (112 posts). 61 posts had neither photos nor videos, and 39 posts had an attached video. Only one post had a GIF attached. Out of a total of 213 census-related posts, 90 contained a link redirecting the user to another page.

Figure no. 3 Content Type



Source: Own elaboration

Unlike Facebook, posts on Twitter are less frequent, have no comments, and most of them have fewer than 10 likes.

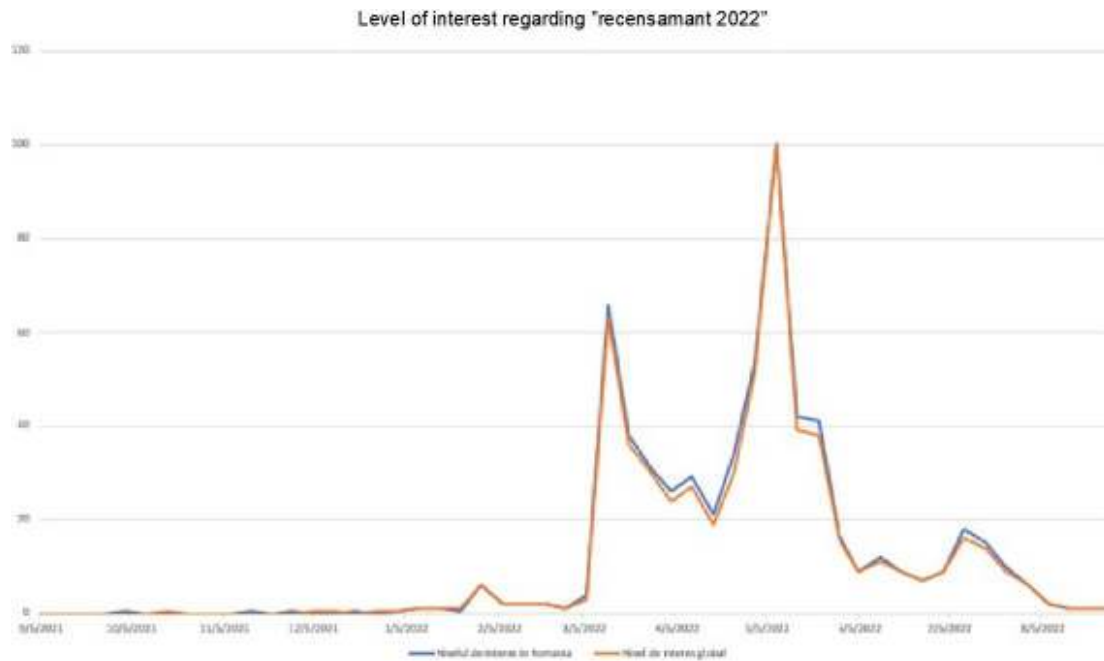
(https://twitter.com/ro_statistics?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauth or, accessed on 04/23/2023, at 7:35 AM)

On March 9, 2022, a YouTube channel, @RPL-InstitutulNationaldeStatis, was created. (<https://www.youtube.com/@RPL-InstitutulNationaldeStatis/about>, accessed on 04/23/2023, at 9:46 PM) The types of videos published are diverse and cover various topics. A helpful category for all users includes videos that explain frequently asked questions. Promotion videos are available in different languages: Romanian, English, Hungarian, and Romani. There are tutorials for self-enumeration, promotional clips and public interest messages. The most viewed video is the self-enumeration tutorial available in Romanian with 169,515 views, 65 likes, and it was published on April 12, 2022, followed by the video that clarifies who the head of the household is that will complete the pre-registration form, with 8,792 views. For all videos, comments have been disabled.

In the following chart, we can observe the evolution of the popularity of the 2022 census. Interest remains low at the beginning of the selected period, with a noticeable increase at the start of self-enumeration. The National Institute of Statistics' social media posts had a higher frequency during the census period.

As a result, the promotion campaign was actively carried out during the census. The peak interest in this group of words occurred one week before the end of self-enumeration. Significant interest was also noted at the beginning of the self-enumeration period. There is a slight difference between the interest shown by people in Romania and the interest at the global level, with the latter being slightly lower during the sequential peak moments.

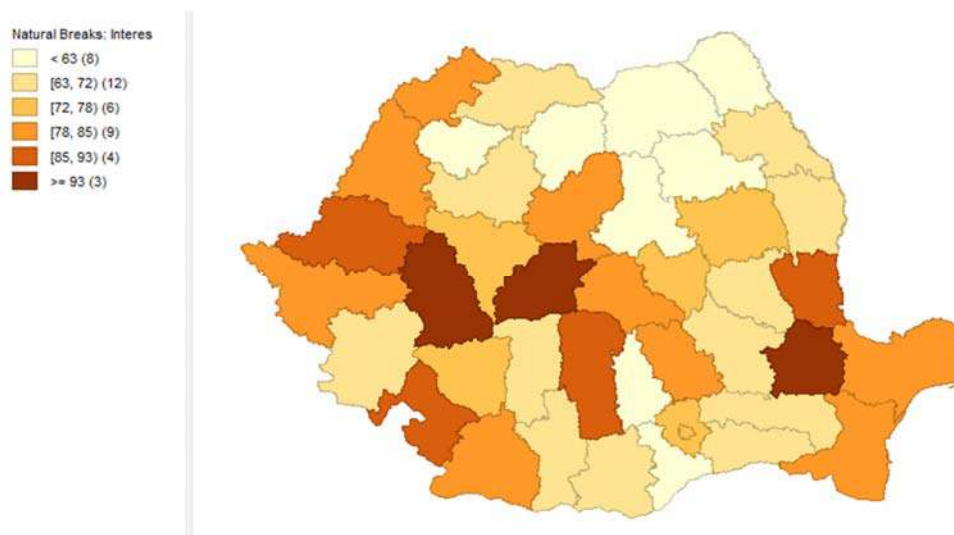
Figure no. 4 Level of interest regarding "recensamant 2022"



Source: Own elaboration

We can observe that most counties fall within the range of 63 to 72. High interest in the 2022 census can be observed in the Brăila, Sibiu, and Hunedoara counties. Residents of Harghita, Bistrița-Năsăud, and Sălaj counties show lower interest in the 2022 census.

Figure no. 5 Interest of "recensamant 2022"



Source: Own elaboration

5. Conclusions

The data collected in census is indispensable for making informed decisions across various domains, including economics, social development, administration and scientific research. The census represents a pivotal event for any nation, as it offers insights into the population's status at a crucial juncture, demanding appropriate promotion efforts to ensure its success.

This study also emphasizes the need for adapting census methodologies to keep up with technological advancements and changing societal needs. Traditional paper questionnaires are becoming increasingly obsolete, and embracing digital tools, such as mobile applications and web platforms, not only promotes ecological sustainability but also enhances data quality while reducing costs and collection time.

In the context of the 2021 census in Romania, the article highlights the unique challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the switch to self-enumeration and direct interviews. The transformation of communication strategies, driven by technological progress, is a noteworthy aspect of this census. The population's evolving attitudes, influenced by various factors, including the complexity of the census, question sensitivity, and time constraints, have further necessitated an adaptive approach in communication and promotion.

In conclusion, this study offers significant insights into the dynamics of census promotion, social media engagement, and public perceptions, shedding light on the evolving landscape of data collection in an increasingly digital age. It serves as a valuable resource for policymakers, researchers, and government agencies seeking to optimize census efforts and foster greater public engagement and trust.

6. References

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