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COMMUNICATION ETHICS IN LOCAL PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN THE AGE OF FACEBOOK¹

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Abstract

The article aims to discuss communication and public relations in local public administration in the context of widespread use of new information channels. It is a theoretical approach and is based on a specific methodology such as documentation and the hermeneutical method. The premises from which our entire analysis starts are that in the Romanian public administration there is no code of ethics in public communication. We prove that this is all the more useful in the face of the challenges that come from the area of new communication channels in the digital environment. In the context of diversifying public communication channels, within the local administration it is increasingly necessary to outline a code of ethics for communication and specific tools to guide communication with citizens in public institutions. In this regard, we have identified a sum of principles and values that could underpin a code of ethics in the field and a legislative framework that could represent a starting point in this regard.

Keywords: public administration, communication, public relations, ethics of communication, professional ethics

1. Introduction

The relationship between a public administration and citizens is now seen as good communication. A series of laws in post-December Romania regulate precisely this relationship mediated through communication and information. Firstly, the free and unrestricted access of the person to any information of public interest is established, and secondly, the legislator also indicates how to put it into practice, by organizing "specialized departments of information and public relations or designating persons with responsibilities in this field" (Law no. 544 of October 12, 2001). The regulations in force emphasize the information character of these specialized structures, giving public relations, as they have developed over time, an official character of liaison between *public* administrations and citizens. The diversification of communication channels, the process of digitization of public administration, as well as the interests arising from the exercise of public functions by politicians, bring into discussion a whole series of issues related to ethics in public communication. The concept marks a series of principles and values that public communication must respect in local administrations and those who deal with this fact. Specifically, it is about

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the duties that public relations practitioners have towards citizens, on the one hand, and towards the institution within which they operate, on the other hand.

2. Methods

We propose a theoretical approach to the phenomenon of communication in local administration in order to argue the necessity of ethics in the field. The working methods used are predominantly qualitative. Thus, we used documentation (bibliographical, from a legal point of view and an analysis of the websites of public administrations in Romania) and hermeneutics.

Being a theoretically dominant approach, the premise from which we start is represented by the absence of a code of ethics in public communication in the field of administration and the need for an instrument in this regard. The fact is all the more important in this sector Communication has a number of characteristics and a whole series of challenges arise in the field of new digital technologies and new communication channels.

3. Results

Documentation on this topic highlights the fact that the ethics of communication in the field of administration is not a topic in its own right. It is circumscribed to broader themes that refer to ethics in general, with serious philosophical accents (Aristotle or I. Kant) or to the field of applied ethics, pointing out especially the ethics of communication in general or ethics in journalism.

The legal documentation highlighted that the laws and regulations in force under which local public administrations have the obligation to provide information and communicate with the public are:

- *Law no. 544 of 12 October 2001 on free access to information of public interest*, which provides for free and unrestricted access of any person to information of public interest, as well as the obligation of public institutions to organize specialized communication services and to designate persons with specific attributions in this regard.
- *Law no. 52 of 21 January 2003 on decision-making transparency in public administration* which clearly stipulates: the obligation for meetings and debates to be public, the obligation to inform citizens *ex officio* on topics of public interest; consultation of the public and organizations in order to elaborate draft normative acts.

In essence, these laws refer to a series of principles that configure a professional ethics (Broom & Sha, 2013, pp. 271-314) in the field of communication in local public administration. Punctually, these ethical principles that we have developed in a doctoral research could be the following:

- *"The principle of transparency.* The activity in the local public administration must be made known to the public through different communication channels. It involves an elaborate work of verifying information, constructing and transmitting the message to the public;
- *The principle of fairness.* It follows the adequacy between reality and those communicated, avoiding obscure, lacunary, allusive formulations or those that leave room for arbitrariness and interpretation. Beyond image and strategic calculations, the main stake of communication is knowing the truth;
- *The principle of efficiency.* It aims both at choosing the communication channel and at how the message is formulated for the public, for information and communication as much as more correct and fast. In the local public administration, the efficiency

of the communication act can translate into a certain efficiency and in the plan of concrete action;

- *The principle of non-discrimination.* Information must be the same and accessible to everyone, without differentiating between different categories of people. In addition, the message must not harm any social category, incite hatred or generate various forms of discrimination. This fact means that the values of its audience must be known and understood by the management of the institution. In this case, public relations practitioners have an important role to play. For example, communication in public administration targeting sensitive topics related to a series of religious, ethnic or other factors, will pass through the public relations filter all messages, so that communication does not harm or discriminate in any way against the institutions, bodies or persons referred to.
- *The principle of respect.* The way communication with citizens is conceived and carried out by the local administration can be an important indicator of respect for citizens. The content of the message, the form in which it is presented and the channel on which the message is delivered can say a lot about the respect enjoyed by the public in the eyes of the institution.
- *The principle of reciprocity.* It targets not only the activity of good transmitter, but also that of faithful receiver of public messages. Reciprocity implies an equidistant and correct positioning, based on a correct knowledge of the two actors of communication, respectively the institution of public administration and the public." (Cucu, 2023)

In the specialized literature, all these ethical principles and normative requirements outline a number of values such as those stated above: *trust, professional privilege, social responsibility and positive attitude*

Following the documentation, we did not identify any code of ethics in the field of communication in administration, and on the websites of the Romanian city halls we did not notice the existence of any communication guide specifying a number of ethical principles in this regard.

4. Discussions, analyses and interpretations

4.1. Public relations and communication in public administration

Maintaining the relationship between public administration and citizens is built, nowadays, around several communication elements such as: information, public interest, transparency, involvement in decision-making. At the same time, "(...) the democratic system grants all citizens the right to speak by establishing freedom of expression as a basic constitutional right" (Roventă-Frumușani, 2012). Public relations, as a field of activity in the field of communication with the public, recognized worldwide, is the mediator of links between an organization and the public, including the entire area of activity that is the object of communication. In the case of a public administration, public relations practitioners will act taking into account a series of organizational rules arising from the legislative sphere and internal operating regulations established by the organization's management. The tasks of specialized communicators of an administration are reflected in the manner of communication, which can cover any of the established communication models (Coman, 2004, p. 11):

- *The publicity model* – which aims to transmit information to the public, whether it is true or not, with the purpose of persuasion, manipulation.
- The public information model – refers strictly to the transmission of information, in accordance with reality, but without taking into account the public's reaction.
- Two-Way Assymetric Model – this model represents an evolution in the field of public relations, marking the concern for understanding the public, analyzing

reactions and using feed-back to improve communication. "In this case, scientific research and the use of data from sociology, psychology, linguistics intervene in order to convince the public of the correctness of the organization" (*Apud Coman, 2006, pp. 45-46*),

- Two-Way Symetric Model - considered by some researchers to be unrealistic, this model expresses how the sender takes into account the reactions of the public and models his actions according to them.

For a modern public administration, the ideal communication model is the one that refers to: informing and understanding the public, adjusting actions according to their wishes, monitoring feed-back, involving the citizen in the decision-making act. From this point of view, public relations has a noble aura, the one conferred by the phrase generally attributed to public administrations: *in the service of the citizen*. The actions of the local public administration would focus, from this perspective, on the fulfillment of *the common good*. There are many reasons why this common good is understood differently by the actors of the communication to which we refer. Lack of credibility can be a serious barrier to effective communication, and the big challenge for public relations practitioners today is gaining public trust. This trust cannot be built anyway, but through communication that calls for clear messages, in accordance with reality and taking into account the problems that concern the community. Communication channels are also important, because they connect with the audience that the organization is considering (in this case, a public administration). Currently, the communication channels of a public administration have diversified, starting from post, press to the use of social networks (via the Internet).

4.2. Current challenges in communication in public administration

Depending on the communication model used by a public administration, we also understand the challenges arising from this activity. The model of the press agent will never be compatible with the notion of public administration at the service of the citizen, as long as worldwide emphasis is placed on placing the citizen at the table of discussions with decision-makers, in order to establish together the directions of development of a community. In this paradigm, everything starts primarily from informing the public, and the communication channel used is of particular importance. The evolution of technology provides a variety of communication channels, and many public institutions are now turning to social networks to disseminate messages. Moreover, the use of social networks as a means of communication is specified in official documents of several public institutions in Romania, the practice being attributed to the need to ensure decision-making transparency and information of the general public.

The usefulness of social networks, especially Facebook, also calls into question the form, the content of the message. In a world overcrowded with information, the public's attention must be gained through messages about topics that interest the public, clear, with ingenious formulations. For a public administration, this challenge must also take into account the institutional image. A public administration cannot be perceived as a trader promoting its products to be sold, but neither can it remain enclosed in unattractive wooden language. When we talk about public relations in public administration, there is a *social responsibility* referred to by authors such as Grunig (2014), Bowen, Hung-Baesecke, and Chen (2016), Parsons (2016), along with trust, professional friendliness, positive attitude. *The social responsibility* to which the authors mentioned refer recalls the context of communication of an administration, namely mass communication. At stake is not a private discussion between two people, but an act that can have profound implications at the level of a community. Closely related to this responsibility, which can be perceived as caring for what is transmitted and when, lies the construction of a relationship based on *trust*. On the one hand, there is the public's trust in the

organization, and on the other hand, there is the question of the organization's trust in its communicators, which leads us to *professional privilege*. This concept refers to the concern of public relations practitioners not to reveal information that could cast a bad light on the institution they represent. In the case of a public administration, the management of the institution's image swings between the debt to the public and the duty to the institution. A public administration is accountable to citizens, and public opinion is the "court" that decides to what extent the institution has fulfilled its duties, so that public relations uses a *positive attitude* in everything that means the act of communication. Whether we are talking about relieving the tension of a difficult situation, or the activity of the institution is presented through briefings, communicators consider maintaining a positive attitude in the relationship with citizens. There is, in this situation, the danger of using a discourse that is no longer related to reality, but to the desire to shape the public's perception, to present "cosmetically" certain situations, in the sense described by Mihăilescu (2017), of *exceptionalism*. This trend is perceived as a challenge, in general, and even more so in terms of communication of a public administration. "If in other areas of public communication reality can be "cosmetized" in a positive or negative sense, the public relations activity, insofar as it respects its professional status, completely excludes this practice. This is because public trust develops on the basis of the credibility of the person concerned, either individual or organization. Any loss of credibility seriously shakes the trust, sympathy and goodwill granted by public opinion" (Șerbănică & Brătfălean, 2003, pp.19-22).

Last but not least, managing the communication of a public administration is also related to the persons in the management of the institution, as image vectors, as well as people coming from the political sphere. This aspect brings to attention the temptation to use the administration's communication channels to promote people, using mainly the Facebook platform, which, unlike the media, is not so problematic. In the case of the press, the transmission of messages to a public administration is not guaranteed from the start. That is, there is a filter that the press can apply, starting from the selection of messages it takes from the administration to transmit them to the public, or journalists' own contributions regarding the initial texts of the public administration. The situation described leads us to a potential benefit of using social networks, as well as temptations such as exceptionalism or promotion of people in charge of the administration. Thus, in the case of social networks, public administrations can instantly be in touch with citizens, sending the messages they want, without any kind of "censorship". But here, too, communicators need to be people familiar with using social media. In this context, it is necessary to clarify the following: no matter how easy it is to use Facebook, monitoring all messages coming from citizens is difficult, given the enormous amount of information circulated through this virtual space.

4.3. About the need for an ethics of communication in administration

All aspects arising from deciphering the communication of a public administration, especially through the use of social networks, cannot be considered separately from the understanding of the mission of public relations practitioners. Notions such as morality, deontology or ethics (Broom & Sha, 2020, pp. 271-314) are a concern in this area, and in the case of a public administration the debate can be centered around the idea of presenting exclusively the truth, the real information. A communication strategy appropriate to the current needs in relation to citizens calls for the use of professionals who understand the public, follow their interest and inform management about the public's wishes. The image of the institution or its leaders should not be confused with obedience to those leaders. In the absence of a code of ethics, the communication of a public administration could easily slide down the slope of manipulation or could give greater importance to the possibility of building the image through communication to the detriment of objective and accurate content and information. Similarly,

communication platforms of public administrations could become useful channels for promoting the political interests of those with positions in the administrative apparatus. This could alter the content of communication, transparency. Currently, communication in the local public administration is carried out on the basis of internal regulations and norms, respecting the legislative framework in force.

An ethics of communication in local public administrations is all the more useful as currently the communication landscape is quite colorful, similar to a "communication bazaar" (Gavriliuță, 2020), a "civilization of spectacle" (Llosa, 2016) in which anything, however much and anyway is communicated. This has a direct effect on the perception and understanding of the message and raises serious questions about the objectivity of communication (Rădulescu, 2021), this even more so in public administration.

An ethic of public communication in local government cannot fully capture and manage the complexity of communication. Basically, in social life everything means communication: gesture, word, image, refusal to speak, etc. This entire symbolic universe needs to be decrypted and interpreted in terms of social codes. What can surprise a code of ethics is a certain orientation from the perspective of the objectives of public communication and the principles that it must respect, regardless of the communication channel used.

Thus, a series of objectives (Coman, 2006) of public communication could be the starting point of an ethics in this field:

- Public information
- Collection of information, requests and problems from the public
- Crisis management
- Providing feedback

Therefore, the need for ethics in the field, materialized in a clear instrument, such as a communication guide in local public administration, could be a guarantee against distortion, manipulation, new tendencies to use communication channels provided by the virtual environment, which can bring many challenges in the act of public communication.

Conclusions:

The theoretical study we propose highlights, on the one hand, the existence of a legislative framework that is based on the principles that must underpin communication in public administrations and the absence of a code of ethics and specific tools to guide communication in the field of public administration. For example, during the doctoral research, we identified at the level of Constanta City Hall an internal regulation that regulates from an organizational point of view the communication in the institution but does not make explicit references to ethical and deontological aspects in this field.

Effective communication, in the sense of establishing a partnership between a public administration and citizens, is built respecting a code of ethics based on a series of elements resulting from understanding the mission of public relations. Therefore, beyond the legislative framework and good practices in the field, a well-articulated code of ethics, built around principles and values such as those set out above, is necessary and useful in local public administration. In our opinion, an instrument of this kind could be the support of a communication guide that could serve public communication services in the field of administration and facilitate cleaner communication, rid of ideological ballast, particular interests or a series of communication models specific to the consumer society. The principles and values governing the act of public communication in administration express the need for honesty, clarity, coherence in this field and reject any kind of manipulation, propaganda, censorship or any form of distortion of information (Șerbănică & Brăftălean, 2003, pp. 25-26) regardless of the communication channel used.

Informing the public and following the feed-back to establish further actions that serve the common interest are the main milestones in this communication ensemble. Establishing lines of communication that favor serving the public interest and not individuals is also a matter of public relations ethics. The result of such an approach could lead to the achievement of the objectives assumed through various official documents: *administration at the service of the citizen*.

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