

Abstract of PhD thesis
Practices of Institutional Communication in Local Public
Administration

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Key words: institutional communication, public information, transparency of decision, institutional practices of communication, legal obligations of communication, administration communication relations with different categories of the public.

Abstract

In this research we dealt with the institutional communication of local government as a global form of communication that includes both internal and external communication of the institution, emphasizing aspects of communication with the external environment authorities. Practices or activities which are subsuming to the institutional communication have the purpose to inform, to present the institution, to report all its activities and outcomes and to assert its identity and image.

The research was guided by an overall goal, namely, the evaluation of the perspective of local government institutions on institutional communication.

The research objectives that guided its implementation in general, and the choice of methods, the construction of the research instruments and the synthesis of the results are:

O1. Assessing the extent to which authorities fulfill their minimum obligations resulting from the set of regulations which require the development of communication activities.

O2. Assessing the extent to which local government institutions, realizing the importance of communication with its mission, develops institutional practices of communication, proving a proactive attitude.

O3. The identification of institutional communication peculiarities of activities in the context of the typology of local authorities under analysis.

O4. The development of an assessment model of institutional communication and of an institutional communication strategy model.

Research questions and hypotheses:

a. Research hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1A: Local authorities, through websites, fulfill their obligations arising under the Act no. 544/2001 on free access to public information.

Hypothesis 1B: County Councils in Romania ensure a high level of accessibility of public information disclosed ex officio through websites.

Hypothesis 2: The website is a communication tool through which the local public administration ensure transparency of its activity, showing interest to inform and involve

citizens in decision making, in accordance with the obligations imposed by Law no. 52/2003 on decisional transparency in public administration, in particular.

Hypothesis 3: Through web pages local government authorities facilitate the petition procedure and initiate procedures for issuing various types of acts or documents.

b. Starting interrogations (Research questions). In order to develop the qualitative dimension of the study, I propose the following research questions:

Research questions:

1. What are the functions and purpose of local government communication, revealed by institutional practice (to inform itself and its citizens, to establish its institutional agenda, to promote, to determine participation, to obtain support in decision making and implementation, to consult the public)?
2. What are the practical aspects of institutional relations involving local government authorities and their effects?
3. Which are the factors that influence the development of the institutional communication practices and the main obstacles that appear in the process of running the institutional communication endeavour?
4. Which is the institutional practice regarding the organization of the activities of communication (internal and external) and the use of its results?

In researching these aspects, I collected data from two main sources: analysis of the web pages of the local public administration authorities, and the information obtained through interviews conducted with public servants with responsibilities related to institutional communication.

I chose to analyze the authorities' sites because this institutional communication instrument has a growing importance in the context of the population's interest and access to using it as an information tool. In the construction of the analysis grid of the web pages I took into consideration the laws which contain references to publicity or disclosure of the public activities, applying a complex method of analysis regarding the implementation level of these provisions, mainly taking into consideration provisions of Act no. 544/2001 on the free access to public interest information and the provisions of Act no. 55/2003 on decisional transparency. Different to this model of analysis, I developed an evaluation model of public information accessibility which the authorities must communicate by default, by law, which I

applied to the web pages of the county councils from Romania as a unitary group of authorities.

Considering the means by which authorities communicate through their websites as an institutional communication instrument is not sufficient for concluding on the importance that local public administration attach to institutional communication in its own activity, I conducted several interviews for identifying arguments in this sense, through examples given by the interviewed public servants.

The purpose of this method is based on identifying the institutional communication practices, to illustrate that the activity of communication is an important part of the public administration activity and has an instrumental value regarding all the activities realized by public administration in the process of fulfilling their mission. On the other way, we consider that using this instrument will identify institutional communication activities which emphasize practices that overcome of the duty provided by law.

In the process of constructing the interview guide and then applying it I started from the institutional components marked in the field literature – the informing activity as a legal obligation, civic informing (or public), communication relationships with the users of services, the communication relationships with different categories of institutional partners (other local authorities, subordinated services, media), communication activities for promoting the services, images, partnerships or projects.

Regarding the sites' analysis realized by using the analysis grid, in the first part of the analysis I focused on the insurance of access to public interest information by the authorities, and of the nine categories of public interest information which, according to Act no. 544/2001, must be posted on its own web page. Based on all data obtained for each category of information we can conclude that to, a greater extend, the nine categories of information are present on the web pages of county councils and city halls of municipalities residences of counties, the level decreasing in the case of municipalities (other than those residences of counties), cities and communes. Thus, we can conclude that the web page is an important instrument in realizing the public interest information access, particularly for authorities organized at county or municipal level, in which case the authorities realize information activities for larger communities of beneficiaries, thus answering the needs of information of a larger number of persons. In this context, we consider that in the case of municipalities and county collectivities, the population's structure is more diversified, characterized by growing interest for information through electronic means and benefit, at the same time, from multiple information possibilities through such methods in comparison to rural population.

Despite the facts presented above, there was not found a full compliance to legal obligations of information for categories of information that must be communicated by default, but just an increasing level of conformity regarding this obligation. Also, in terms of fulfilling the legal obligation by the administration authorities which are organized and function in small communities (cities and communes), there was noticed a lower level of respecting this obligation and an incomplete communication of these nine categories of information related to which the law dictates their communication by default.

In order to evaluate the communication conducted by local public administration authorities through their website, I also analyzed the degree to which the activity report according to Act no. 544/2001 is published using by this means, given the fact that the law provisions that authorities have the obligation to ensure the report publicity by default, which will be published in the Official Romanian Monitor. In this context, the research presents the degree to which local public administration authorities use their website as a method of publicity of their activity report. In this context too, we noticed that county and municipality authorities resort to a great extent to publishing by this means their report, but this practice is not realized constantly by authorities, for each year. On the other hand, as an example of good practice, in the way that law determines the making and publishing of the report at least annually, I also noticed situations where authorities make and publish biannual reports.

Another researched topic in order to identify methods in which authorities use their own site for realizing the process of institutional information was linked to information through press and through some instruments of information specific for the press, given that the activity of collecting and distributing information of public interest is a materializing of the right of citizens to have access to all information of public interest. In this sense, I analyzed to what extent authorities use in the process of ensuring the publicity of organizing press conferences, and if the press communicate is published on the web page, given the Act no. 544/2001 provisions at article 19, align. 1, which states the obligation of authorities to inform in due time the informing methods about the press conferences and other public actions organized by them. We appreciate that, when an express legal obligation for using the web page does not exist, using this means of communication represents a good practice which results in an interest of the authority to inform the press and the public, taking into consideration that, in practice, other direct announcement means are employed for informing the press, such as direct e-mails.

Regarding the research of the use of the site by the authorities in involving citizens in the procedure of drafting normative act proposals, organization of public debates, and

participation of citizens in decision making procedures, we can conclude that from the total number of authorities included in the study, only part of them included on their webpages information referred to by Act no. 52/2003 regarding decisional transparency, which establishes obligations of bringing to public knowledge the aforementioned information. In this context too, we can affirm that county authorities and those from municipalities resort to a greater extent to using the own web page for fulfilling their obligations presented in the Act no. 52/2003.

Through web pages the local public administration authorities facilitate the access of citizens to information regarding services and administrative procedures for citizens, including filling petitions.

Comparing this data with the data obtained in the case of publishing the report regarding access to public interest information and the report of decisional transparency, we notice that there are published to a greater extent activity reports of the authority, as executive or deliberative authorities, on the web page of the authorities. Also, in the case of these reports we can notice that the practice of publishing this kind of report it is not regularly made for each year. We consider that publishing this kind of report, with a greater frequency than the other two kind of reports mandated by the law, indicates a higher level of interest towards presenting the initiated and materialized projects, with the purpose of giving visibility to the activities which are realized and to the way in which the authority has fulfilled its mission, which is definitively to highlight the interest given to the problems of local interest.

Regarding evaluating the accessibility of information communicated by default, realized separately by applying the analysis grid to webpages, I have noticed that a significant proportion of the total number of the web pages evaluated, more specifically 20, have an accessible site from the point of view of the information of public interest, 14 are in an intermediate stage, and a number of 7 county councils present a low level of accessibility, from the point of view of categories of indicators used, particularly in order to complete the information of public interests that must be communicated by default.

The third stage regarding the research was conducting interviews with civil servants from the local public institutions. In the research made through this method, I followed the identification, based on the presentations of participations in the study, of institutional practices of communication, initiated and realized by authorities of local public administration, in achieving their institutional objectives and mission, in general. In this context, I considered the institutional communication like a sum of activities, practices and communicational behaviors that are realized by the organizations or public institutions. The

premise from which I started is that the authorities are aware of the importance of communication in achieving the objectives and develop institutional practices of communications, demonstrating a pro-active attitude.

On the other hand, we consider that in the communication activities are not conducted in a uniform manner, the importance and the functions of communication being capitalized differently in the institutional practice, although the legal framework equally applies to authorities, and the mission of public administration authorities is the same, being a generic one.

Reviewing the main practices of institutional communication observed during the research. In the present, it is impossible to conceive the communication realized by the organizations as being efficient without using the internet. This way of communication is used by the public and private organizations to send information, to everyone who is interested, without addressing particular types of receptors. In the case of public administration authorities, the receptors can be other public institutions, the client-citizens of public services, non-governmental organizations, companies and not lastly, the press. Although the information sent through web pages are of general interest, it is not possible yet to talk about the generalized availability of this form of transmitting this information, because unfortunately not all those interested in information transmitted by public institutions have access to the internet. This aspect was underlined by public relations officers interviewed, starting from the fact that a part of the persons that seek information of public interest came at the institution, although the information can be accessed through the website, telling that they don't have access to the internet or the don't have the ability of using the computer. In rural areas the internet is less used by the citizens to obtain information of public interest. An additional cause in this case is the low interest of authorities from the rural area of using this means of communication, starting from the point that a few people can use this way of information.

A good practice of communication used by the public administration is the official website and also a privately managed website (domnuleprimar.ro), where the answers are directly visible, so that it can be said that there is real competition between local government institutions (city halls, in this case) in terms of the number of responses given, and solved petitions. Through this website, citizens are able to communicate to the mayor, their personal or community interest problems. The citizen fills in a form indicated on the website, in which they are asked to write a concise message and provide real information on the identity and contact details. The website provides requirements the message must comply to and the

situations when the messages will be removed from the site. The mayor will be able to respond within 30 days according to Act no. 544/2001 (art. 7, align. 1). The citizen's notification and the mayor's answer are public, in order to ensure transparency and fast communication between citizens and elected mayors. In addition to the possibility of addressing complaints, the website allows city halls to post notifications, local information, interviews and analysis of local interest.

Regarding the organization of communication activities, the authorities aren't developing any strategies or planning communication activities, as a single document that brings together the main objectives, minimum standards etc., instead, there are a series of strategic documents, which are covering issues relating to communication with different audiences. A significant number of communication activities are developed and realized like institutional practices, the authorities and officials involved in these tasks, realizing the importance of communication in fulfilling the institutional mission and image enhancement. Heads of communications and public relations of the two types of authorities (county councils and city halls) consider the need and usefulness of developing a single document covering all these aspects, to be known by all employees in order to impose certain objectives, actions, standards and results, according to different categories of receivers (citizens, media, public services and private companies, NGOs), and also for the situation to organize events.

It is confirmed that the multitude of activities and communication practices obtained at institutional level, is conducted, according to policies undertaken, by the person who exercises the leadership of the authority, and it falls upon the communicational behavior and attitude of the subordinate officials. Therefore, it is confirmed that the practices of institutional communication are performed initially to meet obligations to ensure the transparency of the activity, but in practice, the legal requirements are exceeded, and in this case, when this is established, we can conclude that there is a real interest in developing relations with different audiences, both by informing them and by involving them in decision making.

The analysis of communication activities of the two local authorities reveals a wealth of best practices generated and used as a result of awareness of the role of communication with the various interlocutors, developed beyond legal imperatives. Given the entrench of the communication, the frequency of use and the variety of ways of communication, the short time in providing answers can emphasize that they fulfill two important objectives for those institutions, namely improving the image of local authorities and the transparency of their work. Starting from the idea that the use of communication in the work of public administration is an objective approach to reform this system, we can conclude that the level

of local government (county-level cities and county seat) it is possible to achieve these objectives, in the context of some indispensable factors: citizens interest, their information level, the existence and activity of civil society and interest groups and experts in various fields, the diversity of communication relations involving authorities at this level, the media's interest and activity.

Definitely, the administrative authorities communication practices taken into consideration for the analysis greatly exceed the legal requirements in this area, as these institutions do not perceive communication relations being made only as a consequence to the required legal obligations, but as opportunities to promote the image, identity affirmation and to promote projects and results.

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