

# THE COMMUNICATION OF LOCAL PUBLIC AUTHORITIES WITH MASS-MEDIA. EFFECTS AND BEST PRACTICES

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## Abstract

The communication processes public administration is involved in (as part of communication relations) should always accompany administrative action in its efforts to achieve its mission and objectives, namely the public needs. The framework of the deployment of local authorities' communication activities has several features, one of them being the definition and description of communication methods (with the public, but also with the media) in the legislation. Sometimes, even though defined by law, communication methods are not used by public administration, thus public authorities minimize the fact that those who receive information from the administration represent at the same time sources of information for the administration. Mass media has a very important role in public communication. Depending on how the message is received, the effects of communication will be different. They consist in the emergence of actions, attitudes, behaviors or mentalities that manifest among the public, being partially measurable and having a long-term (positive or negative) impact on the receptors.

**Keywords:** communication, public authority, mass-media, public agenda, methods of communication.

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## **1. Preamble. Methodological issues**

Public communication is a field in which research can be approached from a multitude of perspectives, such as: types of communication, purpose of communication, means of communication, communication content, the effects of communication etc.

The present paper aims at analyzing the practices or methods of communication used by the local public administration authorities in relation to mass-media. By this approach I intend to reach two objectives: (1) the analysis regarding the stage of implementation of the specific legal framework in order to highlight the way in which, being aware of the role of public communication, the communication relationship is achieved between the local government and the media, beyond the limits imposed by law, and (2) the analysis of the way in which mass-media contributes to setting an administrative agenda, thus setting a communication relationship with the local government.

Thus I will try to emphasize the fact that public administration authorities, although operating within the statutory requirements, although expressing themselves in ways apparently fixed by the legislative power, are, on the one hand, able to increase the number of communication methods and practices and, on the other hand, they can prioritize aspects linked to institutional communication, with the purpose of reforming and modernizing the operation and organization of their work.

Considering the multitude and complexity of aspects regarding the communicational activity of public administration authorities, this paper will analyze the communication relationship between the local government and mass-media, especially focusing on the role the media in the context of the communication between the local government and citizens.

The research method used is the semi-structured interview with the spokespersons in the Mass-Media Office of the City Hall of Cluj-Napoca and Cluj County Council and with two persons in charge with the activity of the public relations and mass-media departments of the aforementioned authorities. The selection criterion of the persons to whom I applied the interview was that their tasks at work should include communication activities with mass-media and the citizens. For the substantiation of the analysis I also interviewed a journalist interested, due to his profession, in communicating with local authorities, as a secondary source of information.

The research is limited to the analysis of local municipal authorities' communication with the media, because as a result of interviews conducted with mayors in rural areas I concluded that, at this level, the local government's communication processes manifest a series of differences with the communication undertaken by authorities in urban areas. For example, in rural areas the spokesperson position is not filled and citizens get involved very little on their own initiative in the communication process with the administration, limiting themselves to the role of receptors of messages coming from the administration. Thus, the public, as a beneficiary of the public administration's activity, ignores the fact that it has the right to make complaints, to make proposals and suggestions or to request information from the public administration authorities.

Therefore, I consider that highlighting the differences in the communication processes which involve the public administration and are carried out in rural and urban areas should be the subject of a distinct study.

## **2. The theoretical background of the research**

Institutional communication “is the discourse of institutions (public, private, associative) about themselves. It is not the discourse about their products, but about the nature of the institution, its principles, personality, project, options, objectives, actions, performance” (Daniel *apud* Sfez, 1993, p. 1177).

In the present context, institutional communication becomes an effective tool used by organizations (public or private) for: succeeding in business, creating a relevant public image, surpassing a crisis, creating a favorable climate in the institution, change with respect to the human behavior in relation to the services provided by the institution (Rogojanu *et al.*, 2004, p. 1).

Whether we talk about a private company or a state institution, the use of institutional communication is mandatory, because in this way the information flow will be correctly perceived by the target audience and therefore there will be a major change in the organization’s image. Externally, institutional communication is aimed at two types of audience: the direct audience and indirect audience. For the direct audience, external institutional communication is mainly focused on marketing communication, being addressed to the company’s clients, sales representatives, merchandisers, distributors, suppliers and competitors. The indirect audience is provided with what we call institutional communication, oriented towards potential clients and investors, the financial community, the institutional community, government and the community oriented towards environmental issues. Thus, through the messages/information sent by the administration to the direct public, the administration tries to convince the public that the measures taken and services provided are opportune, efficient and qualitative; in other words, the administration tries to find support among the public. By communicating with the indirect public, public administration authorities send other types of information which take other forms. Through this information the administration transmits conditions, requirements, standards, exigencies, results or performance. The differences between these types of communication – between administration and the direct public, respectively administration and the indirect public – are mainly related to the purpose of communication and its contents.

The communication space is created and it develops in line with the precise nature of the public field where it takes place. The progress of the human community leads by default to its institutional development out of the need to create the proper communication framework with the public opinion. Thus, a new segment of communication science is formed: the public communication. “Public communication makes reference to the state administration’s increasingly visible and organized use of means of advertising and public relations” (Miege, 2000, p. 74).

Public communication is based on three communication cores: the administration, the media and the public. By using public communication strategies, public administration

tries to find out the public's option, but also to evaluate its public image. Thus, public administration will be interested in the manner in which its image is promoted and perceived, primarily using mass media in order to communicate. "In some cases, they [the public authorities] seek to act not only on their media representations, but also on our behavior: it is the case of campaigns of public interest on themes such as health, public safety, environment (...). In these cases we speak about social or behavioral communication." (Rieffel, 2001, p. 28).

Thus, it is considered that local communication can be perceived as a subcategory of public communication. This involves municipalities, local and regional or county councils, which need to promote their initiatives, achievements and projects in the eyes of voters, seeking to create a stronger sense of belonging. In order to come to the fore, they have to be known and recognized by the general public (Rieffel, 2001, p. 29).

By public communication the administrative authorities also seek to find out the population's needs and desires so as to, by the role and responsibilities they hold, address them, thus fulfilling their mission.

If communication within an organization takes place between employees, management or investors (in some cases), the external public category includes: the community, the consumers, the government, the international public and often even mass-media (Newsom *et al.*, 2003, pp. 134-135).

### **3. The communication of the local government: features**

The communication processes in which public administration is involved should permanently accompany administrative action in its efforts to achieve its mission and objectives, respectively to address public needs. The framework in which this communication relationship unfolds has some particularities arising from the privileged position of the public administration in relation to the beneficiaries of its services, a position under which the administration has the option (recognized by law) to impose binding decisions. Most of the times, the public communication of public organizations is achieved through spokespersons who represent them, by messages to the media and also by the publications of its own communication activity.

Public communication is directed towards the public, which means that the latter's actions impact public administration and vice versa. The message consists of information or opinions formulated and framed according to a set of specific rules for each communication channel and each type of target audience. The communication channel ensures the transmission of messages from the administration to the target audience and varies depending on the type of communication.

From the perspective of citizens or beneficiaries of the administrative action, the communication with the administrative authorities is mainly achieved through frameworks settled by the legislative power. These frameworks consist of regulations that permit and enable the public to access information, to participate or contribute to the decision making process and also to transmit requests, suggestions, complaints or claims whose resolution lies within the public administration's competence. By

communicating with the administration, the public seeks to impose its own views in order to create the possibility of social change, in other words, it seeks to participate and get involved in the decision making process.

#### **4. The importance of communication between public administration and the media and its effects**

With respect to public communication, an important role is held by the media. Depending on the manner in which the message is received, the effects of communication will be different. They consist in the emergence of actions, attitudes, behaviors or mentalities that manifest within the public, being partially measurable and having a long-term positive/negative impact on receptors. Most of the times, the institutions' messages may be perceived in a distorted manner. At this point, the so-called "noise" or "disturbance" appears which will encumber or even break the information flow. It is therefore necessary to choose a fluent and technologically developed communication channel in order to reduce, as much as possible, these disturbances of communication. In order to assess how important the mass-media system has become, it is enough to imagine what would happen in the social and personal life if, because of an inexplicable reason, all forms of mass communication we have today would suddenly disappear. How would order and stability be maintained? How would social change be produced, how would community conflicts be solved, how would adaptation be reached in changing environments? How would groups and organizations fulfill their goals and actions? Thus, mass media is a system which society, organizations and individuals have become dependent upon (DeFleur, 1999, pp. 296-322).

Mass media presents itself as a core magnifier of the information provided by the administration. A good communication with the media is always important in order to smooth the information flow of the institutional communication, both within and especially outside the organization, since information media has the capacity to facilitate change in a free society; they may give importance or significance to a message or a problem, providing space in the news. Sometimes, the public opinion with regard to an issue develops independently, being totally ignored by the media (Newsom *et al.*, 2003, p. 236).

Public information is usually done in two ways: the provision of information for transmission to the target audience and providing answers to questions that may rise with respect to the communicated message. The media can have a positive or negative impact on the individual, depending on the individual's choice. It can be assessed that the impact of media is positive if, when used as a communication channel by the public administration, it contributes to obtaining the public's adhesion as well as to ensuring transparency of actions taken by the administration or, in other words, to reducing suspicion or doubt among the public.

Also, aspects that influence the image of the institution are reflected in the press, given the general role of the media, that of influencing and forming the public opinion. The positive or negative impact depends on various aspects among which can be

specified the way in which the information is sent, the credibility of the communication channel used, the relevance of the message, the relevance of the arguments expressed. The mass media's negative impact on the public is diminished if the form, structure and content of information are less altered. Considering the diversity and closeness of mass media sources we can state that the local and central administration should make use of the media in order to provide the citizens with public information.

In their relations with the press, the majority of organizations build communication strategies based on an asymmetric model: they transmit information to the press and track the way in which the messages are taken over and processed by the mass media institutions; sometimes, unsatisfied with the media's behavior, they send new messages, exercising their right of reply, but without making an assessment of their internal system of communication with the media and, generally, with the external environment. It is often noticed that organizations have a tendency to blame external factors for their negative image and that, as a reaction to evaluations, thus they do not seek to change their internal and external communication strategy, to change their organizational structure or management strategies. In ordinary conditions, an imperfect presentation of an organization in the media does not immediately affect the proper functioning of that organization; in times of crisis, however, any distortion of data related to the organization will increase that state of crisis, will reduce public trust (Coman, 2001, p. 145).

### **5. The public agenda and the role of mass media in setting it**

Analyzing the forms of exertion of the media's influence, we cannot overlook the models identified in the specialized literature, the agenda model being of special interest to administrative action (Coman, 2004, pp. 137-142). According to this model, the mass-media functions as a "creator of agenda", a creator of classifications and priorities for individuals that form their audience (Coman, 2004, p. 137). This hypothesis, launched in 1972 by McCombs and Shaw was named the Agenda Model (agenda setting). In the theory of public agenda setting the message receiver is considered to be under the pressure of information, without discretion, representing the final point of the communication process. The source is the one who establishes the importance of public issues, the one who will decide how to interpret situations and will select those issues that will later become sources of public interest. Thus, the intention is to tell the public "what to think" and "what is relevant".

Mass-media often plays the role of a magnifier of public issues or of the promoted solutions by certain interest groups or think-tank organizations. They also represent an opportunity for some issues to get public attention (Profiroiu and Iorga, 2009, p. 39).

It can be stated that there are three types of agendas: a public agenda encompassing all problems perceived by the members of an organization, an institutional agenda summing up all problems the decision making actors plan to solve in a specific period of time and the media agenda which acts as a facilitator between the public and the institutional agenda, but it can sometimes promote its own priorities (Profiroiu and Iorga, 2009, p. 45).

The administrative agenda makes reference to the list of activities and priorities which guide the administrations' activity, being the assembly of issues that require an administrative intervention, therefore and it must be understood separately from the political agenda. The latter represents the list of objectives and measures the political power intends to achieve or undertake during its term of office. At a first glance, the public administration does not control the process of setting the activity agenda and the list of issues to be taken into consideration is apparently imposed from outside, under the double pressure of social demands and political constraints (Chevallier, 1994). The administration does nothing more besides implementing the measures decided by others (politicians, citizens etc.) for its agenda.

But this vision is not realistic. Thus the administrative agenda results, at least in part, from an autonomous production of the administration. Public administration benefits from autonomy in specifying the actual content of the activities undertaken. On the other hand, the administration's position in relation to social demands is complex; even if the administration must respond to such demands, it contributes instead to its development having the resources that allow an influence on the contents of the agenda. With regard to the administrative agenda, it is important to distinguish between the institutional agenda (mainly made up of routine issues, meaning the assembly of issues traditionally linked to the administration's sphere of competence) and the opportunistic agenda (concerning new issues for which there is a debate over the opportunity of an administrative intervention).

If in the case of the institutional agenda mass media may be considered a device used to mediate access to public administration, in the case of the opportunistic agenda the inclusion of various issues on the agenda represents an extremely complex process that involves groups with diverse profiles and resources; the promotion of these issues can be done by different categories of actors in the public space – social, political and administrative actors – in which the increasingly important role played by mass-media in agenda setting is to be noted, a role resulted from the fact that mass-media gives particular visibility to certain aspects, being able to generate a new prioritization of administrative action. During the interviews with the spokespersons and representatives of public relations departments, in the process of identifying the extent of mass-media's influence, the interviewed persons have stated that local authorities are aware of the role the media plays in giving visibility to issues of local interest and therefore public debates, proposals, solutions and evolutions in the media with regard to various issues of local interest tracked by the public servants in the mass-media departments. Frequently, the proposals for solving certain problems or for a series of projects, debated in the media, were taken over by local counselors, being included in the draft decisions of the local council and subsequently adopted. In this respect, examples of such situations were given by public servants in both city halls and local councils, most of these situations being linked to the local council's and the mayor's activity. Unfortunately, there is no procedure to record such cases. Also, the interviewed public servants mentioned that it can be observed, especially

at the level of municipal authorities, an increasing tendency of receiving suggestions or proposals from citizens, which usually overlap with the solutions debated in press articles, but also vice versa. The press bring into public debate the solutions obtained from citizens, problems and solutions which enjoy a broader support from the community through the media, so that authorities can no longer ignore them; these problems get to be included in the public authorities' opportunistic agenda.

In this regard, some examples were given, such as the need to improve the options for entertainment and playground for children in public parks, the need for demolition of insalubrious buildings or the need to clearly delineate the areas which are under the responsibility of the two companies dealing with city sanitation. Also in order to highlight the impact of the media's actions, there have been given examples where decisions of local councils that proposed unpopular solutions and were unsupported by the local collectivity, have been revoked.

## **6. Legal aspects regarding the relationship between public administration and mass media**

The legal framework with regard to the administration's means of communication encompasses a series of regulations aimed at either direct communication with the citizens or indirect communication with its service beneficiaries. Thus mass media is used as a communication channel by the public administration. I will briefly present the main legal provisions concerning the communication aspects of public administration, activity which also involves the media.

In this respect, a first regulation is Law no. 215/2001 regarding the organization and functioning of the local public administration and which provides that the normative documents adopted are to be made public by various means, including the media. The second important regulation is Law no. 544/2001 regarding information of public interest. It also contains special provisions with regard to the access of mass media to information of public interest, this regulation establishing a series of minimum requirements and standards. In this sense, a first rule is that access to public information is guaranteed (art. 15). Another rule to this effect is that the gathering and dissemination of public interest information conducted by means of mass information is considered to be a proof of the citizens' right to have access to any information of public interest.

In order to guarantee mass media access to public interest information, the law mandates that public institutions should designate a spokesperson from the Department of Information and Public Relations. In this respect, public authorities should organize press conferences at least once a month in order to provide the media with this information. The discrimination against journalists or mass media representatives who wish to attend these conferences is forbidden (art. 18).

A third regulation that has to be noted in this context is Law no. 52/2003 on decisional transparency in public administration. The obligation of transparency refers to the public authorities' duty to inform the public about draft legislation and subject



it to public debate, to allow access of citizens and legally established associations to administrative decision making and the minutes of public meetings. According to this regulation, within the procedure of drafting legislation, the institutions are required to publish a notice on their website with regard to the draft act, or to post it at their official address or in a place accessible to the public and to transmit this notice to the central and local media. Also, the institution must notice the public with at least 30 days prior to submission for review, approval and adoption by public authorities and to include a substantiation note in the notice, a statement of reasons or, where appropriate, an approval paper regarding the need for the proposed enactment to be adopted. With respect to the obligation to ensure the citizens' participation in the decision making process, this includes the dissemination of the notice and inviting citizens to the public meeting, tasks that are under the competence of the person designated as responsible for relations with the civil society and accomplished by displaying at the institution's official address, on its web site and transmission to the media within three days before the public meeting (art. 7).

## **7. Analysis of the methods of communication with the media used by the public administration**

In this section I will try to analyze the methods of communication with the media used by the two abovementioned authorities and the extent to which, by using these methods, they strictly fulfill the obligations imposed by law or if they exceed the minimum legal obligations, thus creating best practices to reverberate positively on their own activities.

The public administration's communication with the media is achieved through the following ways: direct (verbal), radio or central/local television broadcasts, interviews, conferences and press releases, local newspapers, official newsletters, the internet.

### **7.1. The press release**

This is an important PR form of communication that aims at transmitting information to a specialized audience, media editors or reporters, and it represents the main means of communication of a public authority with the media. With respect to the design of a press release, it is first of all necessary to ensure the transmission of all the desired information by the public organization or authority, all the information journalists need in order to create a material of interest. The main requirement of a press release is that it should be clear and unambiguous. Likewise, it is important that the relationship with the press is also addressed in accordance with the latter's point of view, since the media needs news that will sell the newspaper. The way in which the event is presented is influenced by the author of the press release and this could direct the media's attention and thus the one of the public opinion (Achelis *et al.*, 2004, p. 48).

Thus, from interviews conducted with the spokespersons and public relations departments' representatives in Cluj County Council and Cluj-Napoca City Hall, it appears that local authorities, through the press offices, customarily transmit the

information presented at the conference after it took place, both for those who did not attend the conference and for those who participated. Therefore, the public servants in charge with the analysis of media articles and comments with reference to their institution mentioned during interviews that the media transmits the full text of the original press release, avoiding the transmission of modified texts. It can be seen that generally there is full media coverage of the topics presented at a press conference, with few insignificant and generally explicable exceptions. The interviewed persons, both in Cluj County Council and Cluj-Napoca City Hall, have admitted that there is even a competition between the County Council and the City Hall in terms of the number of press releases sent to the media, thus both institutions seeking to develop as much as possible a good communication relationship with mass media. The press releases are not only transmitted to newspapers, but also via e-mail to journalists from the local or national mass media: for example, the Cluj County Council transmits every press release to 526 e-mail addresses of journalists.

The law only entails authorities to make public the normative acts adopted, to inform the media and send notices in the situations imposed by Law no. 52/2003 on decisional transparency. Thus, we can conclude that a frequent use of the press release is one of the communication practices used by the analyzed administrative authorities, which shows a very intense dissemination of information, exceeding the minimum legal requirements or those imposed by the principle of transparency.

## **7.2. The press conference**

Press conferences have become a common method that proved to be also extremely effective in transmitting information to the press. These are convenient when it is necessary that the spokesperson informs the public about unprecedented events or when an important or controversial issue arises, which may generate questions from journalists. Before the press conference, in special cases with regard to delicate topics, it is recommended to organize a briefing where it is established what to tell to journalists and how to answer questions that may arise. The introductory speech should be short, especially if it is anticipated that many questions will be formulated. The journalists present at the press conferences have expectations related to the novelty of the organization's activity, sincere, prompt, clear, concise, direct information, and a suitable form of written messages (Achelis *et al.*, 2004, p. 48).

Analyzing how the authorities respect this obligation, as a result of the interviews undertaken, it can be seen that there may be differences, as it is the case of the City Hall in Cluj-Napoca or of similar institutions in rural areas, and also if we compare the situation between the City Hall and the County Council. Press conferences virtually take place weekly in both institutions (with an exception in the last two years in the case of the reminded Cluj-Napoca City Hall) while the law entails the organization of one press conference every month. In the conference, the mayor, the County Council President or the spokesperson present the topics they consider important for public debate. Generally, journalists from all publications and broadcasters in the city take

part in the press conference. With respect to the journalists' participation in the press conferences, interviews revealed that sometimes when journalists from the regional publications and broadcasters do not participate, only those from the local media do; the explanation lies in the fact that quite often, the topics which represent the subject of the press conference are not previously announced, in which case, if the events that took place in the capital city are more interesting, the journalists from regional publications will lean towards the latter, disregarding the ones of local interest.

Those interviewed have mentioned that currently, the press conferences organized by the municipal and county authorities are considered occasions where the authorities, through their representatives, transmit what they consider to be necessary, thus it can be noticed the journalists' growing tendency of not asking questions. If there still are unanswered questions, they ask for clarifications, thus enabling the conference holder to detail the topic. This was observed in comparison with the way in which press conferences were held during other terms of office, when the relationship between massmedia and local authorities was tensed. Those interviewed in the City Hall offered examples of situations in which journalists brought to attention various issues related to the topic presented at the conference, issues that the person who held the conference did not address and refused to answer, considering the journalists to be mischievous. Thus, those interviewed have stated that the local public administration's relation with the mass media unfolds in good conditions also because the dialogue occurs more often and the degree of public transparency has increased.

A good practice with respect to the organization of press conferences was identified in the Cluj County Council where the representatives of subordinated institutions which undertake projects of maximum interest for the community or which may be of interest to the mass media, are also invited to address to the press. This is another example of a situation where good practices are used beyond the legal obligations.

This practice has extremely beneficial consequences because the sphere of competence of the subordinated public institutions and authorities was better outlined in the collective mentality. Another communication practice used by the County Council, related to press accreditation, is to give media institutions complete freedom in delegating journalists to handle the relationship with the County Council and not to grant accreditation for individual journalists. But in practice there have been certain moments when representatives of the County Council have regretted this choice; in this situation, the interviewed public servants sometimes stated that the accreditation would have determined the journalists to specialize themselves in issues of public administration in general and of the County Council in particular, with favorable consequences in terms of an easier understanding of certain technical aspects and their correct reflection in practice.

### ***7.3. The spokesperson***

The spokesperson's position can be established at organizational level, and the press and public expect formal and credible information from the spokesperson. The spokesperson is requested in certain situations, such as the lack of time of the head

of an institution, his absence from the country, his aversion or fear of the media or communication in general.

The spokesperson has many attributions, being the person that is in charge with and is directly responsible for everything that involves the image of the head of the institution – public appearances, interviews, conferences, meetings with the press, official meetings etc. The spokesperson is also responsible for declarations regarding the institution's positions and for the announcement of various events during press meetings (Achelis *et al.*, 2004, p. 67).

With respect to the spokesperson's institution within the local administration, currently there is a trend to promote in spokespersons positions people who come from the media, which confers an advantage for the institution and is likely to ensure a good relationship with the media representatives; these persons have the necessary knowledge and skills to carry out this function successfully. In the context of the dilemma of choosing between a good specialist in the field of public administration and a good communicator, some authorities tend to choose the latter. It is also the case of the spokespersons in the Cluj-Napoca City Hall and Cluj County Council. In a short period of time, these persons (the spokespersons) have specialized themselves in specific issues of public administration. In other situations, the spokesperson is recruited from the team of advisors of certain dignitaries. In addition to the organization of press conferences, the spokesperson is also in charge with answering specific requests from the press. During the interviews with the spokespersons in the two institutions, they listed as ways of responding to journalists about activities, projects: e-mail or instant messaging, dialogue at the institution's headquarter, and telephone calls. According to the respondents, other activities performed by the spokesperson together with the public servants in the public relations departments, in addition to those mentioned above, are: to issue publications of the institution and different materials of presentation and promotion, to draw-up activity reports, and to constantly update and adapt the institution's website.

It can be noticed that also in the case of spokespersons public administration institutions can promote good practices, with beneficial effects on the institutions' activity and image, although the law does not specify obligations in this respect, except for the obligation to set up the position of spokesperson.

#### **7.4. The web page**

Nowadays, it is impossible to conceive an effective communication process of organizations without the use of the Internet. This means of communication is used by public and private organizations in order to send information to anyone interested, without addressing a certain type of receptor. In the case of public administration authorities, receptors may be other public institutions, the clients-citizens of public services, non-governmental organizations, companies and not least, the press. Although the information transmitted through web pages is of general interest, it is still not generally accessible as a form of transmission of information, because unfortunately,

not everyone interested in the information transmitted by the administration has the possibility to access the Internet.

This aspect was highlighted by the public relations officers, starting from the fact that some of the persons who request the communication of public interest information come to the institution's headquarters, although the information is available on its website. They motivate that they do not have internet access or the ability to use the computer. In rural areas the Internet is even less used by citizens in order to obtain information of public interest. An additional cause of this fact is the low interest manifested by the rural public authorities in this form of communication, justified by the low number of people who can use this source of information.

Another good practice used in communication by public administration is the official site, but there is also a privately managed site ([domnuleprimar.ro](http://domnuleprimar.ro)), where the answers to questions are directly visible, thus it can be stated that there is a real competition between the local public administration's institutions (mayors, in this case) with respect to the number of responses given and complaints resolved.

Through this site, the citizens have the possibility to communicate their personal problems or problems of community interest to their mayor. The citizen fills in a form on the website and is asked to briefly write the message and provide real data regarding his identity and contact information. The requirements the message has to comply with and the situations in which the messages will be deleted are presented on the site. According to Law no. 544/2001 (art. 7, paragraph 1), the respective mayor will have the possibility to respond within 30 days. Both the citizen's requests and the mayor's response are available on the site in an attempt to ensure transparency and rapid communication between citizens and elected mayors. In addition to the possibility of addressing requests, the site enables mayors to post bulletins, local information and present interviews and analyses of local interest.

### ***7.5. Participation in radio and television broadcasts***

Participation in radio and television broadcasts can take the form of a dialogue between the public authority representative (this may be the mayor, the deputy mayor, the chairman of the County Council, the prefect, or their representatives) and the citizens or of an interview conducted by the broadcaster with the person invited on the show. This is another good practice which can be reported in the communicational activity of public authorities. For example, the mayor of Cluj-Napoca maintains a permanent dialogue with the citizens in live, weekly broadcasts, at two television stations. In this case, the media's role is purely technical, namely to facilitate the mayor's contact with the citizens who present their problems live and within a week, in the next broadcast, they get an answer directly from the mayor. The interviewed persons stated that such communication is more and more successful in the case of the City Hall and it has a moderate success if the president of the County Council participates in such broadcasts, fact also acknowledged by the persons interviewed in the County Council. The explanation is that most of the problems raised by citizens

are under the competence of the administrative level nearest to the citizens, namely the mayor and the Local Council. The success of this type of communication can be observed taking into consideration the high number of questions addressed to the person participating in the broadcast. The prefect's presence in this type of broadcasts is rare (monthly), since citizens manifest less interest in them.

### ***7.6. Telephone discussions and requests for information***

Another positive practice in the communication activity of the public administration with mass media is identified in terms of the communication related to the request for public information. Such discussions take place in situations where journalists want to obtain information, in addition to those provided during press conferences. As I have already shown in the section on legal aspects (section 6), Law no. 544/2001 provides the possibility of requesting public interest information, thus journalists are guaranteed by law free access to information about public authorities. The persons interviewed in the office for public relations and mass-media of the City Hall specified that the provision of information is very efficient (rapid) and that Law no. 544/2001 is invoked only in exceptional cases, usually the journalists are given an answer immediately, if not, in 2-3 hours at most, these situations having the largest occurrence. In the case of the County Council, the average answer time to requests made under Law no. 544/2001 is about three days for 2009 and 2010, well below the legal limit of 10 days or, where appropriate, 30 working days; the fact that 74.17% of all requests were solved in a day or less than a day, is also relevant. This data is not recorded in the reports on the implementation of Law no. 544/2001, since the reports only include information on how citizens' requests for public interest information are answered. Also, the public servants noticed that there is a growing concern from the part of journalists for the citizens' problems, projects and local development, to the detriment of local policy, thus the journalists' requests with respect to the citizens' specific problems represent the majority of public information requests.

Trying to determine, through the interviews undertaken, whether a communication strategy with mass media exists at the level of the two institutions in which the research was conducted, I found out that such a strategy does not exist. The institution's communication strategy that should also include the strategic planning of communication with the media, acts as a guide in using the communication means analyzed above. By using public communication strategies, a public organization tries to find out what are the public's options and also to evaluate its public image. Thus, any public institution should be interested in the manner in which its image is promoted and perceived, primarily using, for communication the mass-media, demonstrating awareness regarding the importance of a sustained communication, based on objectives, planned actions, the identification of arising or created opportunities and results. This involves taking into consideration the following types of relationships: relationships with the media, relations with citizens/service beneficiaries, relations with public and private firms or services, relationships with public servants and relationships with different actors involved in the organization of public events.

With respect to the County Council, I found that there is no communication strategy with the media as a single document containing key goals, minimum standards etc. but instead there is a series of disparate documents with strategic character, which regulate the relationship with the press and also other aspects of communication with citizens. These documents set out the authorities' objectives and priorities in relation to the media, the concrete ways of their achievement and evaluation etc. These documents are also transmitted to and assimilated by institutions operating under the authority of the County Council in order to comply with their requirements. The heads of the public relations departments in the City Hall and the County Council state that it would be very useful to create a single document covering all these aspects, which should be known by all employees in order to impose certain objectives, actions, standards and results, according to various categories of recipients (citizens, mass-media, companies and private public services, non-governmental organizations) as well as for the organization of certain events.

In the City Hall, although such a strategy is not developed, participation in television broadcasts, press conferences, events with media participation and subsequently with written coverage, basically all means of communication with the press are carried out according to certain objectives established by the mayor. These objectives are set with the purpose of ensuring transparency and preserving good relations with the media, since these elements will reflect positively on the image the mayor will have at the end of his term in office. These aspects cannot be observed in the case of mayors from rural areas who were also interviewed, since in the rural environment the elaboration of a communication strategy is not considered in a context where other problems gain priority.

## **8. Conclusions**

The analysis of the two local authorities' communication activity reveals a multitude of good practices used in relation to mass media and not only, practices generated by the awareness of the role the media plays in addressing public issues of local interest, used beyond the imperatives imposed by law. Given the permanent character of communication, the frequency of use, the multitude of means of communication, the promptness in giving answers it can be emphasized that two important objectives for the two institutions were fulfilled, namely the improvement of the local authorities' image and of their transparency with regard to activities. Starting from the idea that the use of communication in public administration's activity represents one of the objectives in the reform process of the administrative system, we can conclude that achieving these objectives is possible at the level of urban administrations, with mass media as an essential factor.

Certainly, the communication practices of administrative authorities with the media go far beyond the legal provisions in the field because these institutions do not perceive the communication relationship with the media as a legal obligation, but as an opportunity to promote their own projects and successes, as a marketing tool, and why not, as a permanent free advertising.

Although from the perspective of their communicational activity the analyzed institutions do not have a communication strategy, the fact that they promote and support a good communication with the media can lead to the conclusion that these institutions are aware of the role played by such communication relations. It can be also concluded that both institutions have a purpose in their communication activities, more specifically improvements in the image of the institution in the eyes of the beneficiaries of services provided, namely the citizens of the city and county of Cluj, as well as the increase in citizens' satisfaction with regard to provision of information. Last, but not least, public communication of the two institutions through the media seeks not only to inform the public, but also to consult it.

Citizens thus have the opportunity to submit proposals or suggestions, to approach aspects of interest with regard to the authorities' initiatives and actions, or to propose amendments. On the other hand, mass media synthesizes and brings into public debate issues of public interest, some of which are brought to the attention of journalists by citizens. Once brought into public debate, the authorities cannot ignore these issues. It was acknowledged that, in the case of both institutions, the media often contributes to the completion or modification of the administrative agenda of the respective public authority.

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