

IS THERE ANYBODY OUT THERE? FOR A BETTER COMMUNICATION BETWEEN ROMANIAN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATORS AND THEIR CONSTITUENCIES

Tudor VLAD

Tudor VLAD

Senior Research Scientist, PhD., Associate Director, James M. Cox Jr. Center for International Mass Communication Training and Research, Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Georgia, Athens, USA
Tel.: 001-706-542.5037
E-mail: tvlad@uga.edu

Abstract

Modern public administration education has been established in Romania and in other former communist countries in the early 1990s. As a result, many senior managers in central and local governments have not had the opportunity to attend these academic programs, and the number of in-house training programs has been limited. This study focuses on a set of communication skills – including the use of new technologies and social media – that top local administrators should acquire in order to develop a better relationship with their constituencies. The study is based on assessments of eight workshops conducted in Romania and the Republic of Moldova with government spokespersons and top public administration managers, and on the most recent data on Internet use and Internet penetration in Romania provided by Internet World Stats (2012) and by Intellinews (2013).

Keywords: public administration education in Romania, communication skills, communication management, relationship with media, new technologies.



*Transylvanian Review
of Administrative Sciences,
Special Issue, pp. 189-195*

During many training programs for journalists and/or government communicators in East and Central Europe¹, discussions have often focused on the same complaints and concerns by both sides. Journalists were often claiming that government officials were hostile to the media, unwilling to share the information, secretive or lacked communication skills. Government officials were saying that journalists were lazy, superficial, biased or did not represent the public's interest. What the participants in the programs usually concluded after three or four days of workshop was that, while local or central government entities and media do not always have the same goals, they can work with each other to the betterment of the public if both parties are honest and respect each other.

Modern public administration education has become a part of the academic curricula in East and Central European universities only in the early nineties. Public administration schools have experienced a significant development only after the fall of the communist regimes in the CEE countries; after this moment they strived to develop in a similar way to their Western or American counterparts (Hințea, 2013). Post-academic training programs in public administration hosted by universities in East and Central Europe have been rare, and usually their goals have been narrow. An exception is the new program on communication management in the public sector, a partnership between the College of Political Sciences, Public Administration and Communication at Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, the Carl Vinson Institute of Government and the Cox International Center, University of Georgia, USA (Făclia, 2013). As a result, most of the government sector employees in East and Central Europe, and especially Romanian employees in the public administration sector haven't had the opportunity to attend educational programs that fit the needs of their occupation or had the opportunity to enhance their professional development.

One of the most important issues related to public administration organizations is their ability to communicate effectively with their constituencies. As with public administration education and training, Romania has a very short history of communication education (Coman, 2007). Before 1989, there was only one school of journalism in the entire country and its courses were based on the communist doctrine. After the fall of communism, new journalism and communication programs were created within universities, but the quality of the education was uneven and courses on professional communication have been added only recently (Vlad and Balasescu, 2010). However, a potential advantage in the future for Romanian graduates in public administration is that their programs are often hosted by colleges of political sciences, public administration and journalism, which makes it easy to incorporate into their curriculum communication courses.

1 For such a program in Romania including both U.S. and Romanian journalists and government spokespersons, see http://www.grady.uga.edu/coxcenter/Activities/Act_2001_to_2002/Act0102_16.php. For a program in the Republic of Moldova, see http://www.grady.uga.edu/coxcenter/Activities/Act_2011_to_2012/Act1112_6.php

Good communication skills are crucial for senior public administration employees. According to some studies (Scudder, 2012), 90% of the job of a CEO is communication. Though the job descriptions are not similar, there are resemblances between the work of executives in the private sector and the duties of top public administrators managers: their employees have to be motivated to do a good job, social groups and individual citizens need to believe that the organization operates ethically, and that the services that are offered are safe and reliable. Senior public administrators communicate with their constituents in a variety of ways. They should always have in mind the principles of good communication. What they say has to be clear, concise, credible, and delivered with confidence (Scuder, 2012, p. 4). As the central and local governments' work is reflected in the media and mass communication channels, these become an efficient way to disseminate information to large audiences. As a result, understanding how the media function is of great value to public administrators. Sigal (1973) argues that the larger the news organization, the more complex its characteristics of bureaucracy are. No matter the size however, every media outlet develops routines to generate stories. These 'news routines', as described by Shoemaker and Reese (1996), are the result of the limited human and financial resources of media entities that are used to select and produce stories from a vast amount of raw material that has the potential to become news. Newspapers, television and radio organizations have created mechanisms to generate story ideas, a process that Bantz, McCorkle and Baade (1980) have called 'story ideation'. These routines vary based either on the type of media (newspaper vs. television), on their size, or on the 'news philosophy' that the organization develops (Becker and Vlad, 2009). Journalists assess information coming into the newsroom from a variety of sources such as telephone calls, other media, press releases, mail reporter tips, or information from police or firefighters. In television, an early decision by the news director or assignment editor about what is going to be in the newscast – except for breaking news – is important as TV crews cannot afford to produce many stories that will not be aired.

The economic crisis in Romania, as in many other countries, has negatively affected the media industry. Advertising budgets have been cut, newspapers' circulation has dropped, and many journalists have lost their jobs. As a result, the remaining reporters, editors and producers have more assignments and less time to create stories. Public administrators who understand this process can take advantage of it. The probability for good press releases supplemented by professional audio or visual materials to make the news is higher than ever. Press conferences scheduled three or four days in advance at times convenient to the media workers, along with an agenda and other informative materials distributed prior to the event, will be well attended. Knowing the reporters' assignments and sending the materials or calling the right person also are useful tips.

During one training program in the Republic of Moldova with government communicators and one in Romania with senior court clerks, the groups were asked to grade from 1 to 10 the quality of the media coverage of their organization by the

newspaper with the highest circulation and the TV or radio station with the highest audience in their city. Two days later these same groups were asked to report if those media organizations had the same reporter assigned to cover their institution most of the times or the coverage was more random. 22% of the respondents did not know the answers. Out of those who knew the answer, it was observed that the grades that had been given to assess the quality of the coverage by those who said 'yes' were much higher than the grades given by those who responded 'no'. This is informative, though it is based on a small scale and non-probabilistic sample, both for the media and for public administrators. If this is the case, public administration organizations should identify whose journalists' reporting has been more accurate and then constantly provide information to those news workers.

Some of the most influential local public administrators in Romania have been called by the media 'local barons'. Many of them have not understood the role of the press in the society. As a result, they have perceived the local media coverage (which, in some cases, has been biased or less professional) as personal offense. In a polarized country like Romania where media sometimes ignore the long-term impact of lack of credibility, there are occasions when media manipulate and are manipulated as well. However, the assumption that this is the norm is wrong. The attempt of some of the 'barons' to bribe or to intimidate journalists or media organizations has led to two negative effects: the citizens' trust – both in their administration and in the local media – has dropped and consequently the local government leaders have weakened their most accessible channel to communicate with the constituency. It would be much better if top public administration managers understood the importance of accurate communication and hired professional communicators to create and carry their messages.

The public's negative perception of the government work and disbelief in the traditional media is not unique in Romania. In the United States, Gunther and Schmitt's research (2004) has demonstrated that traditional media were singled out for hostile assessments, and that those perceptions disappeared when the same content was attributed to non-media sources. Gunther and Liebhart (2006) used the same data to test the impact of the sources (journalist vs. student) and the recipient (media entity vs. classroom composition). The findings suggest that messages associated with larger audiences, such as a story published in a newspaper are more likely to generate a contrast bias, while a message in a smaller size context has the potential to lead to an assimilation bias.

Fortunately, newspapers, television and radio stations are not any more the only mass communication channels accessible to central and local governments (though the importance of radio in rural Romanian communities should not be underestimated). The modern communication technologies have created new avenues to reach the audiences and get their feedback. Though there are still many public administration units in the rural areas of Romania that are not well equipped and the Internet access in those regions is limited (mostly because people cannot afford to buy a computer), it is not too early to talk about the use of ICT (information and communication tech-

nologies) in local public administration. Some researchers claim that the digital divide (defined as a huge gap between Internet users and non-users) will create additional problems in poor countries if the governments will use ICT in their communication with the citizenry. The consequences, based on a study in Africa, would be social exclusion, separation, and isolation (Ochara-Muganda and Van Belle, 2010). In Europe however, it is a common belief that public services using ICT will have a positive impact on citizens' life standards and economic wellbeing (Osimo, 2008). Central and local public administration organizations have already opened the access to their databases to encourage the involvement of the citizens into the decision-making process acknowledging the role of the Internet and social media in increased government transparency. A U.S. study found that 90% of local governments surveyed were using social media such as Facebook and/or Twitter to communicate with their citizens, and of these, 72% had an official Facebook page overseen by the mayor's office or by city's communication office, a 22% increase in two years (Hansen-Flaschen and Parker, 2012).

There were 9,642,383 Internet users in Romania (44.1% of the population) by June of 2012. The percentage of users is divided almost equally among three age groups, 18-24, 25-34 and 35-45 (Internet World Stats, 2012). Many local government units in Romania have developed sophisticated web sites. It is difficult for the public administrators to persuade the public that it is worth visiting those sources. The belief that the governmental administration is a slow and opaque bureaucracy that is unwilling to develop an open and efficient dialog with the citizens is still alive in the minds of many Romanians. That is why local governments in cities in Romania need the communication skills to move one step further toward social media. This would provide public administrators four major potential advantages: participation, collaboration, empowerment, and time (Bertot *et al.*, 2010). Participation and collaboration belong to the nature of these mass communication tools, being identified as interaction. The participants create communities based on their interest, exchange information and agree on specific goals. The empowerment comes from the online coalitions that distribute information and use these platforms to express themselves. Social media also are time-effective and have the potential to become the main sources of information when traditional media ignore an event or an issue or are forced not to report on it as the Arab Spring has shown. The social media outlets have the potential to promote positive images of the public administration if used properly.

Romania still lags behind in the use of social media compared to the countries in the European Union. The top five social networks in 2012, according to Internet World Stats (2012), were Hi5 (3.5 million users), Netlog (1.6 million users), Neogen (1 million users), Facebook (327,000 users) and MySpace (170,000 users) (Internet World Stats, 2012). The numbers have grown exponentially however in recent years, and it is expected that this trend will continue. The number of households with broadband connection doubled in Romania between 2010 and 2012, while between 2008 and 2012 the most spectacular increase (more than 30%) had been recorded in the Czech Republic,

Romania and Slovakia (Seibert, 2012). The rural areas still lag behind the urban areas. Nonetheless, the growth rate in rural areas in Romania in 2012 was 22.2% - compared to only 3.9% increase in the number of connections in urban areas (Intellinews, 2013). It is always easier to be relevant in the new technology world by anticipating and acting early rather than reacting, so it would be better if new social media users in Romania found from the beginning public administration dialog partners and sources of information.

The categories of communicators that can be easily involved in an online dialog with public administration units are bloggers, community and citizen journalists. They are generally willing to participate in such debates as this is how they gain visibility. In a study of the new media market in one Romanian community, the city of Cluj-Napoca, Vingan (2013) found that bloggers wanted to differentiate themselves from the journalists working for local media, but were willing to compete against the local media in terms of audience. Though it is a relatively new trend in Romania, some bloggers, citizen and community journalists have the potential to become important public voices and good communication links between the local administration and local citizens, and this would be beneficial to all sides.

With a recent and notable exception, the protest against the planned gold extraction at Roșia Montana, the youth in Romania have been relatively silent in the public sphere. If this phenomenon is not desired by the central and local government, social media can be used by the administrators to invite and engage the younger generation in the debate of issues relevant to their communities. If this is accomplished, young technology-skilled people also can become a transmission channel of information to their older relatives. This is also true in rural areas where most of the households do not have computer access, but many of the middle or high schools have at least an Internet lab. According to Internet World Stats (2012), school is one of the most popular places where people access internet, with almost 10% of participation occurring there. The mayor's office, as an example, can invite the technology-knowledgeable students to help with the design and update of an information website for the community.

In conclusion, Romanian public administrators and their constituencies have to overcome a stereotype that has been in existence for many years: while publics have thought that employees of central or local governments had no desire to transparently communicate, public administrators have believed that citizens are passive and not interested to engage in a dialog. A good use of the traditional media and of the new communication technologies has the potential to improve the relationship leading to better management and more mutual trust.

References:

1. Bantz, C.R., McCorkle, S. and Baade, R.C., 'The News Factory', 1980, *Communication Research*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 45-68.
2. Becker, L.B. and Vlad, T., 'News Organizations and Routines', in Wahl-Jorgensen, K. and Hanitzsch, T. (eds.), *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*, New York: Routledge, 2009, pp. 59-72.

3. Bertot, J.C., Jaeger, P.T. and Grimes, J.M., 'Using ICTs to Create a Culture of Transparency: E-government and Social Media as Openness and Anti-corruption Tools for Societies', 2010, *Government Information Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 3, pp. 264-271.
4. Coman, M., 'Global Pattern and Local Experience: Journalism Education in Romania', in Bohrmann, H., Klaus, E. and Machill, M. (eds.), *Media Industry, Journalism Culture and Communication Policies in Europe*, Köln: Halem, 2007, pp. 187-205.
5. Făclia, 'Program postuniversitar internațional', article published on October 25, 2013, [Online] available at <http://www.ziarulfaclia.ro/program-postuniversitar-international/>, accessed on November 13, 2013.
6. Gunther, A.C. and Schmitt, K., 'Mapping Boundaries of the Hostile Media Effect', 2004, *Journal of Communication*, vol. 54, no. 1, pp. 55-70.
7. Gunther, A.C. and Liebhart, J.L., 'Broad Reach or Biased Source? Decomposing the Hostile Media Effect', 2006, *Journal of Communication*, vol. 56, no. 3, pp. 449-466.
8. Hansen-Flaschen, L. and Parker, K., *The Rise of Social Government*, Philadelphia: Fels Institute of Government, 2012, [Online] available at http://2012naspaconference.wikispaces.com/file/view/Social_Media_2_Promising_Practices_FINAL_web_version.pdf, accessed on October 14, 2013.
9. Internet World Stats, 'Internet Penetration in Europe', 2012, [Online] available at <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats4.htm#europe>, accessed on September 12, 2013.
10. Hințea, C., 'Public Administration Schools in Romania: Strategic Choices for the Future', 2013, *Revista de Cercetare și Intervenție Socială*, no. 42, pp. 294-309.
11. Intellinews, 'Broadband Internet Penetration Rate for Romanian Households hits 45.2% at End-2012', 2013, [Online] available at <http://www.intellinews.com/cee-telecoms-media-it-newswatch-1208/broadband-internet-penetration-rate-for-romanian-households-hits-45-2-at-end-2012-6052/>, accessed on November 11, 2013.
12. Ochara-Muganda, N. and Van Belle, J., 'A Proposed Framework for E-Government Knowledge Infrastructures for Africa's Transition Economies', 2010, *Journal of e-Government Studies and Best Practices*, pp. 1-9.
13. Osimo, D., 'Web 2.0 in Government: Why and How?', JRC Scientific and Technical Reports, European Commission, Joint Research Centre, Institute for Prospective Technological Studies, Seville, Spain, 2008, [Online] available at <ftp://ftp.jrc.es/pub/EURdoc/EURdoc/JRC45269.pdf>, accessed on November 12, 2012.
14. Scudder, V., *World Class Communication*, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2012.
15. Seibert, H., 'Internet Use in Households and by Individuals in 2012', Eurostat, 2012, [Online] available at http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-SF-12-050/EN/KS-SF-12-050-EN.PDF, accessed on October 13, 2013.
16. Shoemaker, P. and Reese, S., *Mediating the Message*, White Plains, NY: Longman, 1996.
17. Sigal, L.V., *Reporters and Officials: The Organization and Politics of Newsmaking*. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1973.
18. Vingan, A., *Digital Communication. Challenges in the New Mass Media in Cluj*, Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, 2013.
19. Vlad, T. and Balasescu, M., 'Few Educators, Many Media and Journalism Programs: Journalism and Mass Communication Education in Romania after the Fall of Communism', in Josephi, B. (ed.), *Journalism Education in Countries with Limited Media Freedom*, New York: Peter Lang, 2010, pp. 217-233.