

## COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND CITIZENS THROUGH NATIONAL WEBSITE

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*Abstract: Participatory practices and on-line communication in Public Administration institutions are expected to enhance citizens' participation in public affairs and develop a more functional and democratic work style. The paper presents some major criteria of classifying the types, forms, and characteristics of communication between Public Administration and citizens. A short review and meta-analysis of the form, nature, language, and style of some select individual complaints and replies posted on the Romanian Local Governments National Website is presented. Letters from claimers are generally formal, polite, mild tempered, and include few emotional elements. Authorities' reply style and wording is also formal, 'cold', impersonal, and homogenous across departments, while messages are short, precise, and lawfully relevant. In terms of on-line direct informational exchange with the citizens, the City Hall of Cluj-Napoca (Romania) is ranked among the first 12 local Public Administration authorities in the country that replied to 90% ...100% of the on-line addressed complaints. During the 9-year period since the implementation of the website, the Mayor's Office of Cluj-Napoca is the absolute leader of the on-line communication with the citizens, with a response rate of 92% replies to more than 25,000 intimacies.*

*Keywords: public administration, local government, citizens, information technology, online communication, style*

### 1. Communication and the 'New Public Management'

The Public Administration institutions rely, by their nature, on **communication**. This can be formally defined as a process of sending an information from a *transmitter* to a *receiver* while using a communicational *channel*, with the aim to produce a certain *effect* upon the receiver, in a *context*, and from an *interactive perspective*, more than 120 definitions of communication being also available (see Mihai, 2000, p. 8).

As with other systems, the management of the communicational streams in the public administration institutions is vital for attaining their aims. When implementing national and local government policy tasks, they depend on and usually proceed to a rich exchange of information. This facilitates goal-oriented command and control actions, assembled in balanced activities performed in the citizens' interest. The exchanges happen between the *staff members*, between the *internal departments* of the institutions, or with the *environment* they are intended to adjust and interact with. Various criteria can be used when trying to describe and classify these exchanges.

Historically, the traditional 'European inspired' administrative institutions were subjected

to various pressures targeted to modify their working manner. In this respect, *role diversification, budgetary, citizen, technological, and globalization pressures* are worth to be mentioned. In the democratic countries, all these pressures, along with an increased awareness about the citizens rights, led to quick and profound changes aiming to *efficiency, responsibility, decentralization, transparency, long-term strategies, quality* etc. (Hințea, 2007, p. 76).

Nevertheless, this kind of modern government policies emerged since the 1980s and is known as ‘**New public management**’ (NPM), a term already conceptualized by C. Hood (1991, pp. 3-19). Gradually, the public sector management became more market oriented, leading to better cost-efficiency for governments, without harming other objectives and considerations. Nowadays, due to the increasing complexity of the modern administrative management in a less stable social-economic environment, the Public Administration is expected to develop *a much more participative and democratic work style*, with improved self-regulating properties. Governments are socially required to lower costs, to fight bureaucracy, to constantly interact with the taxpaying citizens who benefit from the provided public services and goods. A large amount of *feedback* is needed from these beneficiaries, who are also expected to serve as *creativity tanks*, coming up with their own suggestions, proposals, and priorities. Within this framework, *communication and PR policies*, based especially on modern information and communications technologies (ICT or ‘e-communication’, as WWW, email, and global point-to-point audio-video transmissions) are expected to contribute to a greater citizen participation in public affairs. They can also make administration bureaucracy more transparent and accountable to citizens and enhance (or restore) citizens’ trust in government (Ahn, 2007, p. 4).

The electronic digital interaction contributed up to the subsequent elaboration of concepts such as ‘e-government’, ‘e-democracy’ a.s.o. (Hughes, 2012, p. 273). However, within innovative participatory practices and opportunities for networking and collaboration in *open government*, only the added value should be considered. The public value of open government needs to be studied applying the public value research approach (Maier-Rabler and Huber, 2011, pp. 190-191). It would indeed “*be a tragedy were ‘digital democracy’ merely to create virtual parallels of obsolescent political processes and structures*” (Coleman, 2007, p. 377)

## **2. Aim of the paper**

Two observations will clear up some options of the present paper:

**a.** messages transmitted through various channels available to the Public Administration institutions are mostly in *written form* – neither iconic, paraverbal, non-verbal, nor subliminal one. The mainstream messages are of *conceptual nature*, essentially based on **language** as a conventional ‘institution’. Therefore, and also due to our previous background and limited time resources, the discussion and the case study will use **a sociologic-linguistic approach**, focused mainly on the ‘virtual’ written communication through ICT, as a boosting novelty in our administrative field;

**b.** because the *local administration* is the most tangible governing level and the most frequently accessed by the great majority of citizens during their daily life, we devoted the case study exclusively to the web-based dialogue between concerned individuals and the **local Public Administration Services**.

Considering all the above mentioned facts, with the view to enhance the understanding and awareness of the communicational issues involved by the functioning of the contemporary public administration institutions, the aim of the present paper is twofold.

**First**, to briefly synthesize the major aspects of the symbiotic types and forms of the communication within our Public Administration environment, particularly between Public

Administration and citizens, leaving apart any references about their particular content.

**Secondly**, to elaborate a short description and meta-analysis of the form, nature, language, and style of some select individual complaints/intimacies posted on the Romanian Local Governments National Website, which was intended as a web portal (or on-line channel of communication) between citizens and the mayor's offices all over the country. This will include comments on the attracted response rate, with a particular view to the on-line presence of the municipal City Hall of Cluj-Napoca during the 9-year period of time since the implementation of the website.

### 3. Types and forms of communication in public administration

The criteria used when reviewing and classifying various types/models of communication in public administration institutions enjoy a large diversity. The resulted knowledge becomes particularly useful when administrative decision-makers elaborate the *messages*, choose the *channels*, *transmitters*, or *recipients* to be addressed, according to the needs, requirements, intended effects, local institutional culture, or other characteristics.

The types (or forms) of communication proper to the general picture of the administrative communication processes are needed to be exposed first, in order to address and characterize the specificity of the communication *between public administration and citizens*.

Here is a brief synthesis of several criteria used in describing and classifying these types, as they are commonly and largely listed in literature (see Deac, 2010, pp. 49-53, Zémor, 2003, pp. 25-45 et al.):

1. the 'orientation approach' defines the **intra-organizational** and **extra-organizational** type of communication (which aims to enhance and consolidate the image of the institution, to create a climate of trust and sympathy); each have distinct aims, their own direction and scope of action;
2. the material support and channel of the communication decides its **verbal** (oral), **non-verbal** or **written** nature; varieties can be identified, based on the more detailed nature of the *transmission channel* (direct contact, TV, audio-video, phone, paperwork, booklets, posters, fliers, WWW, email etc.);
3. the set of goals, rules, and channels define the dichotomy between **formal** (official) and **informal** communication (conversations, private talks or messages, gossips);
4. when considering the direction or sense of information, one can discern between **descendant** (orders, requirements, guide lines, briefings etc.), **ascendant** (reports, analyses, feed-backs), or **horizontal** communication (between peers or departments at similar level);
5. **one-way** (unilateral) communication differs from the **two-way** (bilateral) one, when a response, feed-back, confirmation, or reply is expected, in one or more cycles (real exchange of information); **communicational networks** (or multiple-way communication) should be added, as either directly or mediated *work groups* or *group debates* are built up (everyone can talk to everyone, but eventually selective links evolve for each individual, outlining particular patterns of communication, of 'centrality' or 'marginality' etc.);
6. when accounting for the number and nature of the communicating 'actors', one can distinguish between **intrapersonal** (self-addressed), **interpersonal**, **group**, **public** (larger groups), and **mass** communication; each variety has several specific features in terms of *nature and structure of message, communication channel, and accessibility*;
7. the frequency criterion is involved when considering the **permanent**, **periodic**, or **aperiodic** communication; and
8. **hybrid categories** emerged along with the implementation of new information and communications technologies – ICT (mainly the on-line communication and other wire or

wireless based technologies); however, there is little ground to define some of them as ‘new’, as they look identical or are combinations or varieties of the above ones, only using a different channel.

Nevertheless, contemporary electronic communications have a couple of **advantages** (see Radulescu, 2009, p. 244) that supersede their ‘virtual’, ‘elusive’ character, or the need for the average citizen to be a computer ‘literate’ in order to access this web-based information. **Speed of access, low costs, efficiency, convenience, quick updating possibilities, automation of document processing, distant access to data bases and networks** of people, administrative or business structures, international organizations etc., and last but not least, **interactivity** are the main assets of the web-based communication. Both staff and citizens, professionals and laypersons can get the needed information in minutes, register papers, arrange appointments, ask questions and get replies in real time. Point-to-point transmission of formatted texts, pictures, audio and video recordings with an unprecedented speed, *from* and *to* any site (or workstation) in the world, is a revolutionary tool able to promote transparency and democratic innovations in any public institutions, to fine-tune their decisions and increase citizens’ involvement in government.

In conclusion, any particular act of communication can belong simultaneously to several categories and enjoy their respective features. Therefore, in many circumstances, there is no precise boundary between types of communication as described above. Many modern public administration services are prepared to adopt an increasing range of diversified means and types of communication, with the view to better respond to the social needs and political demands. Considering the above classifications, now it is easy to characterize and identify the specificity of the particular field of the **communication between public administration and citizens**. This is a well defined category of informational exchange, involving types of communication that can be described and characterized as follows:

- a. the communication with citizens is an **extra-organizational** one;
- b. is set in **verbal** and/or **written** forms;
- c. is usually **deliberate**, always **formal** (i.e. non-conversational) and **organized**;
- d. is **bilateral** (with unique or multiple cycled exchange of messages);
- e. it is diverse in terms of covering range, from **individual contacts** to **mass communication**;
- f. it is usually **aperiodic**, but also **permanent** in some respects; and
- g. uses as many **different means of communication** as possible: personal or on-line contact, written forms (letters, fliers, boards, posters), public meetings including discourses or lectures, printed matters or audio-visual transmissions, mass-media.

#### **4. Case Study: language and style on the Romanian Local Governments National Website <domnuleprimar.ro>**

In the act of communication, the **language** has an essential role, being a system of signs referring to specific semnifications that will be ‘deciphered’ by the receiver. The great efficiency of language in the oral or written communication act consists in the fact that it allows to act upon us by ‘words’ (Slama-Cazacu, 2000, p. 33). The adjustment and coordination of the activities through language was extensively studied by psychologists and sociologists who discussed such concepts as *social influence*, *persuasion*, and *manipulation*, obtained by direct or technically mediated **speech**.

*Speech* can be perceived as being a linguistic system, more or less specialised in rendering a content of ideas that are specific to some occupational fields or socio-cultural groups. These fields, professions, or groups have their own organizing rules in the linguistic field, which can

generate a substantial reduction of the polysemy of certain words.

An interesting case study of on-line communication with a certain specificity was suggested by **the website <domnuleprimar.ro>**, which offers various examples of *written communication between public administration and citizens* using an administrative-style language.

#### **4.1. At national level**

Through the instrumentality of the website <domnuleprimar.ro>, citizens from all over the country can communicate freely and directly with the mayor or the administrative officials in their town or city. They can forward requests or complaints without leaving their place/home, avoiding the congestion and bureaucracy in the city halls. The electronic forms of communication are much less formal, feel more familiar and comfortable to most computer literates when exposing their problems. Everything is more ‘humanized’, as this tool was created in order to facilitate a better communication between citizens and the holders of the administrative power. The mayor or other representatives must answer the complaints in 30 days, in conformity with the Romanian law.

<Domnuleprimar.ro> is a Romanian platform that acts as a direct two-way link between City Hall and its electorate. The mayor’s offices have the opportunity to post news and updates and inform member of the community of a certain event or action, while people can send in complaints or suggestions directly to the mayor of their community. The site is quite informative, rich and well organized, with tabs that direct the reader to various chapters and sections: *index of counties and mayor’s offices, legislative issues, analyses, interviews, news, weekly updated ranking lists, useful links, blogs, search and retrieval engines, and letters of complaint.*

In the sections where local governments bring an input, the style is often cold, written in a detached style and a monotonous tone. Otherwise, they resemble more to small activity reports than to news articles, meant to keep the ‘electoral pool’ updated on the activities of the elected mayor and local council.

Specifically, when approaching the complaints, many of the aforementioned intimations are replied by providing the petitioner with information on whom to contact, what to do, the offices responsible for the issues, step by step guides on how to contact them and so on. Most of the complaints, requests, or notifications require formal documentation when being submitted to the relevant public entities. When this is not the case, the mayor’s offices use to directly handle the problems and check the alleged facts by themselves.

At first glance, the website <domnuleprimar.ro> looks like a huge archive of complaint letters supplied by desperate people with ‘impossible’ problems. Some of them do not even realize that they are requiring measures that are not that simple to be taken, even when sufficient funds are provided. Most complaints are written in a request-letter language, with form of pronouns and verbs in the second person, plural, without Romanian diacritics and, in some cases, even with a severely deficient, informal, web-like punctuation. The given answers are impersonal, short and essentially use terms that make them look like automated responses. Apart from these remarks, we noticed that even though the citizens are in a complaining position, most of them are polite and seem like being mild-tempered in their messages. Their language is mostly formal and ‘diplomatic’ rather than vulgar or aggressive, the overall style being textbook formal. It is interesting how these claimants maintain a quite formal style when addressing the mayor of their city. The courtesy protocol is basic but, anyway, some emotional elements such as exclamations, rhetorical questions and, sometimes, words that denote a violent temper are also present.

#### **4.2. At local level (the City Hall of Cluj-Napoca)**



Cluj-Napoca is the historic centre of Transylvania and has a multi-cultural population of various ages in excess of 314.000 stable residents, inhabiting now an area of 180 sq. kilometers. The city accommodates a large number of commercial societies, educational, medical, cultural, and administrative institutions, while *its contribution to the aggregate national budget* is one of the most significant in the country. On the other side, its combined modern and traditional architecture continuously generates a conflict between the increasing needs of the population and the limited capabilities offered by the partially outdated infrastructure.

Consequently, the City Hall is permanently challenged by a multitude of administrative tasks that are currently addressed within the limits of the local budget and the capabilities of the enrolled staff. **Implementing information and communications technologies**, restructuring its internal offices, and modernizing its services has been a priority for many years, attaining now a satisfactory, above-the-average level of effectiveness and involvement of citizens. Nevertheless, problems continue to arise and the communication processes hosted by the <domnuleprimar.ro> website offer now plenty of evidence in this respect.

When analyzing the on-line informational exchange with the citizens, a few statistics derived from the website can comparatively describe the activity of each qualified City Hall in the country. They show that **the Mayor's Office of Cluj-Napoca is the absolute leader** among a total of 228 enrolled, qualified major city halls (i.e. receiving at least one on-line notification), with **25,003 letters of complaint** recorded during the 9-year period since the implementation of the website (December 2005 – October 2014).

This number means 54.4 complaints/week and exceeds almost *six times* the number of notifications received by the next classified, the Piatra Neamt City Hall (Neamt County), which collected only **4,271 complaints**. Only 42 City Halls were addressed with more than 100 on-line intimations in 9 years, leaving the other **82%** of the local governments with less than one web-based complaint per month. Anyway, these numbers are not demonstrative enough, as they do not necessary reflect the urgency or the real amount of unsolved problems in the field. The various sizes of the communities involved, the level of populational web access, the use of other traditional channels of communication, variations in local culture in addressing the authorities etc. must also be considered. At least, the above statistics show *the leading on-line addressability of the Cluj-Napoca local government and the citizens' trust, participation, and readiness to use the modern electronic means when communicating with the authorities*.

On the other hand, **the rate of response** to the intimations addressed by the citizens is more significant. The observed figures place the Cluj-Napoca City Hall (and particularly the mayor), among the first 12 local Public Administration authorities with 90% ...100% on-line replies addressed to the claimants. Specifically, a ratio of 22,996 replies to 25,003 letters means **a response rate of 92%**. Out of these 12 authorities, *eight* are located in Transylvania and, particularly, *three* represent major towns located in Cluj County. Nevertheless, a contrasting proportion of **68%** of the City Halls (which received between 1 and 1207 on-line complaints, including Bucharest Mayor's Office) **never replied on-line to any letter**, to their disgraceful shame.

Impressively enough, it came out that the **City Hall of Cluj-Napoca** is one of the most active local governments in the country when it comes to the on-line activity, while the present mayor, Mr. Emil Boc, is one of the most prompt representatives in replying to peoples' complaints. Therefore, we decided to take a particular look on Cluj-Napoca division of the website (*complaint letters and notifications* section), in order to evaluate the formal characteristics of both-way messages, their linguistic style, some hot topics of complaint etc.

As expected, the local people use the same formal style as the one practiced all over the country, being a bit more ‘acid’ because of obvious reasons. The posted complaints commonly observe the same stylistic pattern, following the official formulary that you can get from the City Hall office, as everyone is expected to write in a formal way on this local government website.

In a more specific perspective, we found a quite funny example in which a gentleman was bothered by the fact that the street construction is making the traffic difficult and he ended his complaint with a rather childish formula: ‘*With less respect*’. (<http://www.domnuleprimar.ro/79344-Domnule-primar-aduc-cunostinta-lucrarile-modernizare-trame.html>).

The people’s requests are usually diverse; they go from environmental problems to vandalism, noisy buses, and changing the urban landscape of the city.

For example:

The *environment problem* is to be detected in the following addressing: <http://www.domnuleprimar.ro/79279-Buna-ziua-Doresc-atrag-atentia-asupra-unui-lucru-minor-dar-deranjant.html>.

The *vandalism problem* is approached in the following example: <http://www.domnuleprimar.ro/79353-scriu-numele-copiilor-parintilor-care-isi-duc-copiii-joaca.html>.

The *landscape problems* are considered to be important for the Cluj-Napoca citizens: <http://www.domnuleprimar.ro/79373-Domnule-Primar-Legat-sesizare-http-www-domnuleprimar-79337-Domnul.html>.

On the top of all things, it could be emphasized that on this website people are following an official pattern. Messages of gratitude for the mayor’s cooperation are also present: <http://www.domnuleprimar.ro/79381-Dorim-multumim-public-pentru-interventia-rapida-care-avut.html>.

Still, there are some posts that used an aggressive language or proved a violent attitude: <http://www.domnuleprimar.ro/79361-Domnule-primar-pana-cand-mai-bateti-joc-noi-locuitorii-strada-ste.html>.

All these recently accessed messages (2-10 September, 2014) were posted during a short period of time. This suggests that people are generally feeling responsible to address the deficient issues and to quickly report community’s problems. It is not only a matter of a formal style but also of a responsible feeling they have when writing to the <domnuleprimar.ro> website.

The most relevant characteristics regarding the style of **the reply letters** as related to their public nature were: *the impersonal style, the formal, respectful tone, the homogenous wording across all answers and departments and the short and hands-on approach*.

All the answers were completely impersonal, as the letters were being answered by a public institution, not a specific individual. First person plurals were used throughout. This shows people that the issue raised is important to the city itself, and is being handled by ‘**The City**’, which gives them a feeling of assurance, without allowing them to get too close. It also prevents them from becoming unnecessarily angry at a certain person (if their issue remains unsolved), as may happen when a member of the public engages in a face-to-face confrontation with the city employees.

The formal, respectful tone can be clearly noticed in the way the officials begin and end their responses, as well as the wording throughout. The answers always begin with ‘*Dear [...]*’ and end with ‘*Sincerely,*’, consistent with the norm for all formal letters. The askers are also addressed in a formal manner. Quite frequently, the letters end with ‘*Thank you for the message*’

or ‘*Thank you for your understanding*’, which add an extra, seemingly caring touch.

All the responses, be they from the department of health or the local police, have the similar wording and style. This homogenous formulation goes a long way in reassuring the public that the entire city public system works together as a ‘well-oiled’ machine, and that they all know their duties whilst being aware of what the others are doing and how to handle their tasks as a team. While all the aforementioned qualities are very important, the very brief and concise nature of the answers can be noted. Citizens often complain about bureaucracy, about the many needed forms and offices to visit. The site provides short, logical answers, with clear instructions on the exact paperwork that needs to be filled out and where it should be submitted (if that is the case and the issue cannot be handled directly). Vague responses are avoided and laws and exact terms for any and all activities are stated. This goes a long way in effectively minimizing modern-day bureaucracy.

The only thing that was actually bothersome was the rarely misused punctuation and the lack of diacritical signs (which should be non-issues, easy to overcome in a public office).

*As a conclusion*, the writing style being used in the complaints is a mixture between the administrative-official style and the language common with virtual social networks (Facebook, Blogs, E-mail). Nowadays, electronic social media became part of our lives because they represent an easy way to create contacts, to keep in touch, to mass communicate – and this capability was quickly valued by the authorities. All the Public Administration institutions have now a Facebook page where they post significant messages, pictures, or videos in a friendly, accessible manner. The fact that Facebook, Blogs, as well as <domnuleprimar.ro> website involve a written, self-paced communication in the privacy of a workstation is also a significant advantage for many people. When properly used, the online environment contributes to innovative participatory practices, offering opportunities for a free networking and collaboration in an *open government*.

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