



## ORIGINAL PAPER

# Importance of Communication in Public Administration

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### Abstract:

Communication within the system of public administration is considered a crucial factor for achieving effective and economical functioning of the whole system of public administration as a specific institutional tool for the implementation of public policies. The quality of information relationships between individual subjects of public administration is determined by a number of factors, and it influences the overall systematic structure of the whole public administration organization. Further, it also affects the quality of information flows carried out within the whole system of public authority of the state, as well as the characteristics of external relationships of public administration. The quality of communication can be (however it not necessarily must be) significantly influenced by utilization of modern information and communication technologies.

**Keywords:** *communication; public administration; crisis communication; stakeholder communication; citizen communication; public communication.*

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## **Importance of Communication in Public Administration**

### **Introduction**

The word 'communication' comes from the Latin word '*communicatio*' meaning "making common or imparting".

There are a lot of definitions of "communication" in literature. For instance, Udall and Udall (1979) characterise communication as "a process by which one person (or a group) shares and reports information to another person or group so that people (or groups) clearly understand one another". Eyre (1983) also defines communication as "the transferring of a message to another party so that it can be understood and acted upon". Communication, says Hybels and Weaver (2001, p .12) is "any process in which people share information, ideas and feelings".

To summarise, James, Ode and Soola (1999) consider that the essence of communication consists in the fact that "it helps us to understand ourselves, to keep in touch with other people, to understand them and to predict their response to situations, also as the medium through which relationships are established, extended and maintained, provides a means by which people act and interact; exchange information and ideas; develop plans, proposals and policies, make decisions and manage men and materials".

The above definitions can be summarized as a process of sharing ideas, information, and messages with others in a particular time and place. It is also important to state that communication is not just giving of information. It is the giving of understandable information and receiving and understanding the message. Continuously conveying information, ideas, attitudes and feelings among individuals and among groups of individuals is an important communication tool.

### **Space of public communication**

There are efficient public administrations and inefficient public administrations all around the world. Public administration modernisation has two components: a "hard" institutional one and a "soft" cultural and value one, which implies the adoption of certain sets of values to ensure the compatibility between administration and population. The communication process at the level of public administrations can be considered to be a crucial factor in the modernisation and efficient performance of social and economic function of this system, accountable for public policy implementation. In this respect, Marinescu (2017) emphasises that:

*The modern and functional character of a society is given mainly by the efficiency with which it is administered and the degree to which its citizens are represented and free to contribute to public life and build themselves the life they want. The key factors are the citizens; the public institutions; the space for cooperation and communication between the former and the latter; the rights, freedoms and opportunities they have, thus, for their development. Within this complex network, there is a key link which does not always stand out: institutional communication. (p. 326)*

The space of public communication is regulated primarily by its political and legal environment. Nowadays, the characteristics of each human society are shaped due to the laws which govern the share of and access to government information and policies on the exercise of democratic freedom. But the space of public communication is sensitive to changes not only in the political and legal environment, but also in other environments (community as a whole, economic environment, technological environment etc.).

At a declarative level, each public administration aims mainly at managing the necessities properly and solving the community members' problems, whose will they represent. Being in permanent and direct contact with the environment it belongs to, an efficient public institution takes over the necessities originating from it and establishes programmes by means of which it satisfies them by initiating, at the organisational level, certain steps oriented to changes, transformations, rebalances. But any transformation or change is felt externally as the public administration influences and shapes, in its turn, the external environment.

At present, in democratic countries, one can notice that the specific domain of communication is getting more and more structured in the public sector, as it completes and develops the exercise of public authorities and fulfils institutional attributions. Public communication has the role to convince, by means of adopted public decisions and implemented institutional policies, that a general interest is being followed, obtaining thus citizens' adhesion and engagement.

More often than not, the entities in charge of communication, respectively the civil servant (as transmitter) and the citizen (as receiver of the message) have clear aims: the transmitter seeks to inform, convince, guide, capture the interest and be efficient, while the receiver shall strive to be attentive, to understand, remember and assimilate the information. However, unlike informing, information transmission in the case of efficient communication must be bidirectional (from the transmitter to the receiver and vice versa), of mutual impact, seeking to transmit the messages of public institutions to citizens and the citizens' opinion and needs to the decision-makers in state institutions (Greener, 1995; Codoban & Cordoş, 2019).

In a democracy, where the source of power and legitimacy is the citizen, communication represents the fundamental process which puts public institutions in touch with citizens. In communication, the public administration–citizen relationship constitutes the essence of the act called public administration (Marinescu, 2017).

Taking into account the fact that public institutions are in permanent and direct contact with the social environment, they pick up the signals coming from it and try to respond by initiating projects oriented towards changes, transformations and rebalances. Thus, each change or modification is also felt externally, as the administration influences and shapes, in its turn, the social environment

By orienting its communication both externally and internally, public administration institutions must establish a series of communication objectives, adapted to the category of pu they have in mind. On one hand, a public institution informs citizens about its activity, their rights and obligations, the events which are to come, the aspects related to their daily life, directly connected to its activity and legal attributions etc. On the other hand, it collects relevant information, reactions, concerns, needs from all its stakeholders, citizens, private and public organisations. Hence, public institutions must fulfil the needs in the society, those of the citizens and their organisations, not the needs of preserving a bureaucracy independent from the community, with no responsibility for it. In this case, efficient communication implies taking into consideration and removing the disruptive factors, communication barriers, noise (Fiske, 2001) which lead to the alteration of the signal transmitted at both technical and semantic level.

In the context of the multiplication of interlocutors and, implicitly, of relations or connections it is involved in, a modern public administration requires even more the improvement and modernisation of the communication processes and the means it uses.

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In a recent study regarding communication between public institutions and business environment, Cruceru (2019) appreciates that the problem participants face in communication processes is that of obtaining clear, undistorted (free from any interference) and suitable information in real time, that is the right place and time, so that it has the expected effect, given that it is often difficult to establish the right place and time and suitable information.

### **The role and challenges of institutional communication in public administration**

The peculiarity of communication, when public administration enters the equation, can be identified as we understand its role, challenges and limitations. In this respect, we consider that the role of institutional communication can be defined by at least four major types of responsibilities.

#### *1. Citizen communication*

Any public institution in a democracy has the legal and moral obligation to publicly communicate its activity. The responsibility a public institution has towards citizens, related to its actions performed with public money is an integral part of the concept of “*public accountability*”.

*Nowadays, accountability has moved far beyond its bookkeeping origins and has become a symbol for good governance, both in the public and in the private sector. Public accountability is the hallmark of modern democratic governance. Democracy remains a paper procedure if those in power cannot be held accountable in public for their acts and omissions, for their decisions, their policies, and their expenditures. Public accountability, as an institution, therefore, is the complement of public management (Bovens, 2007).*

Citizens have the right to control public institutions, to request information, to be informed on what happens within it. The democratic vote does not invest any politician with the right to order according to their personal will by using the power they were invested. In a real democracy, the officials’ freedom of action is limited by citizens, laws and an institutional mechanism which ensures the balance of the powers of the state.

Institutional communication has the role to ensure the transparency of public activities and meet a citizen’s constitutional right: the right to be informed. Thus, the absence of transparency leads to the infringement of the fundamental law, the Constitution.

The nature of public information is that of an official one. Hence, there is a series of limitations. Fairness and adequacy are part of this series. Public information is often used by other participants to the democratic endeavour to make decisions. Public information have the role to explain a situation or endeavour, such as those about implementation and change of public policies, legislative changes, restructuring, public money investment, official statistics and reports, strategies and action plans, procedures and clarifying answers about these procedures, budget allocations, introduction of new services and their implementation, reduction or renunciation to certain services etc.

The manner in which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs interacts with the Romanians abroad who need consular services and who want to exercise their constitutional right to vote; the manner in which the Ministry of Education and Research succeeds in making known all the mechanisms of implementing different policies and measures which affect the students deeply, parents and teachers; the manners in which

the Ministry of Health implements and brings to public attention all the policies of maintaining and improving the degree of public health etc. can be clear and more or less successful examples of public communication with citizens.

Any wrong or badly communicated information can be considered to be a form of misleading the public opinion, with extremely harmful consequences for both parties involved in the communication process (transmitter and receiver): institutional disruption and charges of disinformation. Any refuse of the access of public information may even lead to litigations in the court with negative effects on the image and credibility of the public administration.

In certain situations, as we have already highlighted, a series of communication barriers in communication between public administration and citizen appear objectively and subjectively.

In order to overcome the communication barriers emerged objectively, due to the best interest of the state, two strategies can be chosen (used individually or together). On one hand, there can be a legal answer to the need of citizen informing: the law (legal frame) regarding the classification of public information. On the other hand, there can be a circumstance answer: a gradual, sequenced and adequate presentation of the message.

For example, Romania negotiates with other countries and international organisations in order to achieve certain goals. The reveal of too many details during the negotiation process may be harmful to the chances of reaching the proposed goals. Moreover, the reveal (communication) of uncomfortable matters in or during the negotiation, even after its successful conclusion, may be harmful to the diplomatic relations. Under these circumstances, it becomes legit that, in public communication, there shall be certain chosen information and forms of expression which shall shape and describe the situation without jeopardising the best interests of the country.

Moreover, in the field of taxation, it is normal that the Ministry of Public Finance announces the modification in the amount of taxes and duties, for instance, only when the decision is final and after consulting the interested actors and specialists based on significant impact analyses. Unfortunately, the local practice in this field often provides us with examples of “not like this”. Public announcements on the tax policy (and more) are often made, especially lately, without consultations (or as a result of pseudo-consultations), with no assessments, without having thought of a complete and integrated package of measures, and sometimes, to the opposition of some interest groups which are more or less representative to the population, decision-makers change their mind or modify ad-hoc the message transmitted initially.

Public institutions should have a leadership role (Berg, Barry and Chandler, 2012) because they must address concrete problems the society faces and identify the solutions of public interest. Hence the need to communicate in a carefully chosen manner as regards the tone and content, which gives the course of action and involves citizens in community projects. A tone which is too light, joking, which could create sympathy and bring benefits in the company of a private institution, could have negative effects in a public institution. Romanian institutions often lose their connection with citizens and civil society because of the excessive “baffle gab”. The focus on accuracy, correctness and the use of a language as accessible and easy to understand as possible is fundamental in this respect.

Last but not least, it is essential that a public institution chooses correctly when and how to communicate. In Romania, public institutions often communicate reactively

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and do not undertake the initiative of informing, which raises the degree of susceptibility.

### *II. Stakeholder communication*

As we have already mentioned, institutional communication has the right to develop and consolidate relations with groups directly interested in the activity of the public sector (non-governmental organisations, professional associations, syndicates, patronages, companies etc.).

Stakeholders have two major characteristics: they have significant interests in the design, performance and conclusion of the activities of different public institutions and they can influence the content and results of the activities performed by the latter.

For a useful and relevant communication, each public institution must identify its own map of relevant stakeholders. The map of relevant stakeholders for each public institution is unique. It does not only identify specific stakeholders (with names and characteristics), but it also groups them in terms of their importance.

Based on the map of stakeholders, one can develop partnerships and establish efficient communication strategies. Bourne (2009) mentions that the basis of successful communication is the definition of a communication plan adapted to each stakeholder category.

Successful communication can be achieved by examining and understanding the needs of each category of parties involved and adapting the messages and information provided to these strategies. Thus, there appear such policies and measures which satisfy the real needs of the society and which take into account the community expertise.

Unfortunately, the local reality shows us that several gaps in the process of communication between public institutions and stakeholders. Such communications do not often take place or are purely formal or only unidirectional. (Marinescu, 2017).

### *III. Inter-institutional communication*

Communication between public institutions constitutes the condition of an efficient cooperation. It is essential that, during the process of drafting and implementing public policies and measures, institutions with different attributions request information from one another, consult one another, use each other's expertise and experience and cooperate. Inter-institutional communication and transparency, in the context of observing the legal, administrative, ethic and deontological norms, create the framework for combating and preventing possible acts of corruption within public institutions, contribute to the correction and removal of institutional vulnerability. At the same time, they help the institution to function efficiently.

In Romanian administration, institutional communication is often blocked or is missing. In such cases, public actors are more preoccupied by their status and power than by finding partnership solutions. Absence of inter-institutional communication leads to corruption, dysfunctions and activity inefficiency and affects the interests of citizens and interested groups.

### *IV. Crisis communication*

Crisis communication is one of the fields for which modern public institutions must be prepared in advance, with a periodic upgrade at least one time per year.

From the perspective of the interest in crisis management it is important that public institutions are aware of the fact that all crises have three common characteristics:

it is not known when and where it happens; there will be news circulating almost always; there will be bad news almost always.

Crises are hard to understand from the very first moments and that is why it is hard for them to be managed correctly because the mistakes made in initial stages will influence the later decisions and reduce their positive impact. Among the characteristics of crisis situations the most obvious are:

1) *scarcity of information* (in initial stages, no one knows the exact nature of the problem faced by the organisation, part of the society or the entire society);

2) *information quality deterioration* (emergence of rumours and malicious comments);

3) *loss of control* (there are leakages of information outside the institutions, the reality is reinterpreted and deformed – either via classic mass media, or via new media); the panic (can have a devastating effect on the public institution, especially at personnel level, if it is amplified by the element of surprise and the lack of an action plan – either one drafted beforehand, or one drawn up in due time, which could be inspired, even if it is improvised);

4) *maximum visibility of the organisation* (which may have deep negative effects, on the medium and long term or, on the contrary, which can be an opportunity in the case of an adequate management strategy; sometimes crisis generates new leaders).

The trust citizens have in public institutions represents an essential element in the process of crisis communication. The trust gained in time insures the respective institution a blank check or the benefit of doubt when crisis strikes, which is a huge advantage in the subsequent crisis management. The benefit of doubt is very important, it is the power of an institution to make its message heard before any other information provided by third parties, speculations or rumours. It is the blank check an institution wants in a moment of crisis with the help of which it can insure a correct crisis management and full public cooperation.

Unfortunately, not all public institutions work in advance at the trust factor. According to the INSCOP Research (March, 2019), in Romania, the level of trust in public institutions is at a minimum rate (88,4% of citizens have no or little trust in the parliament, 87,4% in political parties, 85,8% in the government, 75% in the constitutional court, 72,7% in county councils, 62,8% in town halls, 61,1% in presidency etc.). Citizens keep in the collective memory different moments of poor crisis management with significant social repercussions (the Colectiv trauma and the way in which public institutions hid the truth, and hospitals and doctors demonstrated their limits in managing patients with burns; the HexiPharma scandal, which held a mirror against corruption, shortages and complicities in the medical system, deepened the trust in institution crisis communication; communication gaps in the management of the pandemic COVID-19, etc.).

On the other hand, any crisis usually comes with the momentum of society solidarity, the feeling of compassion for those who are in the first line of the challenges generated by the crisis. When citizens see efforts, good will and global adversities, they start hoping that leaders will know what to do. Then a new blank check will be written at a turning point when mistrust can be transformed into trust.

In moments of crisis, public communication can compensate for the shortages of the functional systems. But for that, there must be fulfilled certain prior and/or simultaneous conditions:

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- *Citizens must be prepared.* In this respect, both those directly involved and the interested groups and the general public need information in real time, clear procedures and exercise;

- *Citizens must be organised and made responsible.* Each institution which plays a role in crisis management has a responsibility. In each such institution there must be people who are named responsible people and who shall implement the procedures and principles stated (communicated) by the coordinating bodies. Responsibility comes with control and liability. Accountability must function as an additional motivation in performing all the actions necessary in crisis management. In Romania, this accountability has more often than not functioned only at a declarative level, not as an actual measure. If major errors are committed during the process of crisis management, people need to see that those responsible are made accountable for it;

- *Citizens need transparency.* Moments of crisis need the mobilisation and discipline of the entire community; this is why there is a need for a lot of transparency in communication, so that the community has enough trust in the authorities' calls and messages. If citizens believe that there is hidden or deliberately omitted information, public institution communication will not be efficient. It means that they will lose any chance for community binding around the authorities' messages, and they shall be covered in waves of criticism. Although it is sometimes hard to be transparent, for security of legal reasons, it is absolutely necessary for the entire communication endeavour to be transparent in any action performed. It also means that there must be public explanation of the reason why certain information cannot be provided. Honesty must be at a maximum level in these cases. It is preferable that a situation should be confronted rather than avoided. Only this way one can build trust and credibility and end rumours and speculations. The same honesty and transparency must function also in internal communication between institutions. The responsible team must work on a clear agenda with a sole objective. Information of the type "we are ready", when reality shows otherwise, destroys citizens' trust and demotivates them;

- *Citizens need clarity.* People must understand the purpose and result of the measures, both those taken for protection and prevention and the economic ones. Citizens need leaders who put themselves in their shoes and speak their language. They need examples, comparisons, simple and eloquent words. It does not suffice to create and present lists of measures dryly and expect everyone to understand them. Although time pressure is very big and a decision must be communicated promptly, the role of public communicators is that of translating institutional language into a language common to everyone. In the absence of an accessible language, citizens will take the information from parallel sources, which are not always credible. If it is left to communicators or external experts, there appears the risk of them over-interpreting certain meanings and, finally, of the message to be truncated or incorrectly transmitted. To sum up, operational teams should coordinate with those of public institutions communication.

### **Barriers to communication activities performed within public administration**

Noise (interference or communication barrier) induces a disturbance between the partners in communication, between the intended and perceived message, making thus communication more difficult. The nature of interferences and the moment they appeared can differ, which is why communication barriers take different forms. For



example, Popescu (2007) considers that most of the difficulties in the communication process in public administration are generated by: a) the components of the communication process: transmitter, receiver, relation between them; b) the message that is to be transmitted, the communication channel used; c) the characteristics of the entities involved in the communication process; d) the organisational context in which communication takes place; d) the specificity of public organisations.

Moreover, Koneru (2008) identified physical, psychological, semantic, organisational and interpersonal barriers, as follows (Table no. 1):

**Table no. 1 Barriers to communication**

<b>Barrier to communication</b>	<b>Cause</b>
Physical	Invisibility, physical and environment discomfort, conditions unfit for message display and broadcast etc.
Psychological	Prejudices, self-awareness (its lack), selfishness, tiredness, preconceptions, cultural differences between transmitter and receiver, rigidity, lack of interest, lack of attention, incapacity of perception, tendency to transmit only what the receiver wants to hear etc.
Semantic	Use of inappropriate words, incorrect formulation of messages, lack of clarity, lack of attention to the different word meaning etc.
Organisational	Information from uncertain sources, delay in collecting and disseminating information, communication of partial information, message distortions caused by different and outdated sources, deliberate disregard or disregard due to incapacity certain information etc.
Interpersonal	Unrequited emotions, perception, ideas, perspectives, values or opinions, different attitudes of the transmitter and receiver, time inadequacy of message transmission, incapacity of perceiving the messaged transmitted (informational inequity), incapacity of distinguishing a relevant message from one with low significance, hearing partially or lack of attention in hearing etc.

Source: Author's own interpretation

The “fake news“ phenomenon (was attributed different names overtime - rumour, diversion, misinformation, propaganda), appeared due to communicational interference, is getting more and more visible everywhere in the world and it is closely related to conspiracies and political toxicity. There are a few ingredients which favour it: lack of access to information and credible official explanations; a series of pre-existing beliefs; lack of media education and critical thinking; lack of culture; certain personal predispositions; a few personal need such as that of safety and sometimes that of astounding; presence of certain actors which support and feed the theories promoted (sites, social media accounts; politicians; organisations; propaganda machines).

In order to overcome communication barriers, one can use different strategies or courses of action. To sum up, among them, Popescu (2007) identified the following as possible barriers (Table no. 2):

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**Table no. 2 Strategies for reducing communication barriers**

Categories	Characteristics
Strategies for the transmitter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- encouraging two-sided communication and feedback;</li> <li>- paying special attention to the language used;</li> <li>- credibility cultivation and maintenance;</li> <li>- manifestation of a sensibility towards the receiver's perception.</li> </ul>
Strategies for the receiver	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- development of good listener abilities;</li> <li>- increase in the degree of general knowledge;</li> <li>- manifestation of a sensibility towards the transmitter's perception.</li> </ul>
Common strategies (both categories above)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- verification of message correctitude after emission or reception;</li> <li>- regulation of informational flow.</li> </ul>

Source: Popescu (2007: 248)

Alongside these courses of action, we consider that, without claiming to have an exhaustive approach, there can be identified others, for instance:

- clear establishment of the purpose of communication;
- preparation of the communication process by clarifying ideas and approaches;
- identification of the right moment for opening (starting) communication;
- use of a simple, clear, sincere and direct language;
- attempt to identify all elements which determine a certain perception;
- acceptance by each participant to the communication process, firstly of the position of listener, then that of transmitter;
- correlation of words with actions;
- the policy must be excluded from the messages transmitted;
- undertake responsibility for the messages transmitted;
- transformation of the communication style, from defensive to productive (proactive) etc.

Likewise, *trust* is a key element in the relationship between citizens and public administration, by means of which one can remove communication barriers. Trust must be won by taking decisions in a transparent way, via efficient and effective actions of the government and a clearly defined role for the chosen representative people. From this perspective, the responsibility of the public specialist in communication is huge, as their endeavours can contribute essentially to the public administration's transparency, shaping the institutional credibility and image definitively (Nedelea, 2006; Minculescu, 2017).

### **Conclusions**

In conclusion, communication within and from the public administration has a complex and strategic role, which affects the citizens' life and activity deeply. However, it is far from being considered a priority in Romania. The great communication gap of the last years has resulted in a much accentuated society polarity. Talking about communication barriers appeared between citizens and public administration, Bârgăoanu

(the dean of the Faculty of Communication and Public Relations within SNSPA and expert within the European Commission in combating fake news) observes the appearance of a climate of social division with extremely harmful effects:

*Polarisation has lowered in institutions, universities or corporations. The fact that people begin to be divided, that half see the world in a way and the other are at the opposite extreme, is harmful. (...) This division of Romania in good and bad, left, right, criminal, non-criminal, civilised, uncivilised, is a dangerous endeavour (...)* (Bârgăoanu, July 2018).

The criterion of institutional responsibility, which should be at the core of each decision of communication, is replaced in such situations by cases where the criterion is that of political interest of the official who runs a public institution temporarily. The communication process, in this case, transforms into a campaign of promoting the official/politician, losing the essential role of facilitating the agenda in the public interest. Public administration becomes a prisoner of the political interest, the individual interest.

The needs of modernising communication at public administration level become obvious and mandatory for this period. For that to be possible, one needs a radical change of mentality and attitude in the relation public administration-citizen. Citizens, whose emotions and fears are getting bigger and bigger, need insurances and reinsurances, competence, leaders with experience, they need firmness in order to believe that everything shall be done so that they are protected. More than that, citizens need to be spoken to. The aim of communication in such situations is not that of informing, but that of securing the population psychologically. Under these circumstances, the modernisation of the communication process and language used shall be the signal for the maturity of Romanian public administration functioning.

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