

PUBLIC COMMUNICATION IN THE PANDEMIC

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Abstract: *In general, communication is the key to solving organizational problems, including any type of organization, whether public or private, national or international. Adequate communication in a pandemic is vital to society. The way governments communicated with citizens determined how they developed their behavior in the crisis situation generated. The communication strategies used by the leaders of the states dictated the directions of action of the governments and, at the same time, influenced the reaction of the target audience. In the pandemic, when the priorities of all entities suddenly changed, organizational communication proved to be a key element in maintaining social distancing at work, but also in the private life of workers, who found information and answers at work.*

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1. Introduction

Organizations play a key role in society, and their success is a key ingredient in a nation's well-being. Public organizations need to focus on openness, transparency, equal treatment, impartiality and predictability.

Communication in public administration is subject to the same theories and practices of communication as any other type of organization, although the public environment involves different actors involved in the communication process.

Within any type of organization, the purpose of the communication or customer relationship process is to gather and disseminate information in order to perform certain actions following this communication (Luță, 2003).

The most difficult form of communication or the one that raises the biggest problems is, as a rule, direct communication between the civil servant and the dissatisfied citizen. However, dialogue is the most appropriate way to disseminate and gather information at the same time, but also to address the specific needs of each employee and to overcome the personal barriers specific to each person involved (Luță, 2003).

Communication is not exclusively a voice action. Verbal communication represents a small percentage in the whole process of transmitting a message. Nonverbal communication accounts for most of this process.

Therefore, when we communicate, in order to convey the desired message, we want the other participants in the communication process to be able to perceive the transmitter's gestures, tone of voice and facial expressions. An important factor in this process is the physical presence of the interlocutors and the emotions and messages transmitted nonverbally through direct contact.

The health crisis and the economic effects generated by the pandemic have also spread problems in the communication process, both at the organizational level, at the governmental level, and in people's private lives.

If society has changed and adapted its way of life to the new measures imposed by the rules for health safety, we deduce that the way in which individuals communicate has adapted to this new reality.

Given that we can no longer make direct contact with the people around us as we used to, we, as a society, have suddenly embraced all forms of digital communication provided by the online "universe".

We now use social networks, applications, platforms, IT devices to communicate with the family, at work, in the relationship with the state, for essential shopping or for moments of relaxation. In each of these areas of everyday life, the way we communicate has been forced to adapt and digitize.

Forced digitalization at government and labour level has produced the most important effects of the pandemic crisis in the field of communication.

2. Public communication during the pandemic

Communication is a manifestation, a form of human expression. Because this expression satisfies in addition to a personal and a social need of others, communication must be learned, and from the amount of knowledge gained, results education and management of communication that corresponds to the value of present and future attitudes and behaviours (Cheney et al, 2010).

The communication accompanies the activity of the public institutions, contributing to its realization in good conditions. Public communication refers both to the exchange and sharing of information of public utility, and to the maintenance of the social bond (Zemor, 1995).

The external communication of the public institution contributes to the notoriety and image of the organization. It also fulfills the function of promoting the public institution. Institutional communication is an extra-organizational communication through which the institution seeks to strengthen its image.

It is very important that public institutions, regardless of the nature of their activities, use precisely the essential elements necessary for effective communication, especially in the institution-citizen relationship.

The citizen must be informed about the existence and functioning of public services, he must be listened to when he expresses his dissatisfaction, his wishes and needs must be taken into account.

Professional life in public services in the postmodern era, in short, is very different from what it was in the more secure and predictable era of modernity, with subtleties of difference and depth between position, career and department-based systems (Fenwick et al, 2010). Now, mass communication is a form of public communication, achieved through the media, so through a set of different media channels, from books and print media to television and the Internet (Lesenciuc, 2017).

Electronic communication is a fast and popular way to communicate with citizens. The technology allows a considerable variety of applications and platforms to facilitate direct communication between citizens and public administrations.

Over time, electronic communication has been embraced by leaders, presidents, politicians, or rulers. An example of this was given by President Barack Obama in 2010, when he delivered a speech via YouTube, where he answered questions directly from citizens. Another example of effective communication between citizens and local councils is the FixMyStreet website, where UK citizens can report all sorts of community management issues (graffiti, missing pavers, mud, asphalt holes, stray dogs, etc). The administrators of this site receive the information from the citizens and pass it on to the local council of the area to which they belong (Romanian Cities Association, 2011). Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Estonian government has used a unique approach to the problem and organized an event called "Hack the Crisis" through which it gathered ideas

from citizens. Ideas were gathered on: e-health care, art, culture, workplace reforms, community volunteering (Accelerate Estonia, n.d.).

The pandemic has managed to change the way people have communicated so far. Since the beginning of the pandemic, many public or private organizations have implemented work models at home to provide safety for the employees. Telework has become the new "normal" for large companies and the trend shows that people will not return to the office too soon, even after the eradication of the pandemic.

During this period, leaders and managers are forced to deal with waves of crisis, including global protests, which affect workplace productivity, mental health and the economic status of employees. On the other hand, employees have to deal with irregular cycles of disruption to public health and the reorganization of the workforce.

The pandemic has forced a dramatic shift in the way professionals or officials practice their jobs, including the way they communicate.

The trend for the coming years for all companies, as well as for governments and public institutions, will be to improve digitization programs and invest in artificial intelligence (Wittbold et al, 2020).

Just as it is crucial for a company to communicate with its customers, it should be just as important for a public administration to communicate with the citizens it represents (Romanian Cities Association, 2011). Local governments should communicate as effectively as private companies to meet the needs of their "customers", to provide them with the products and services they need to the standards they want (Romanian Cities Association, 2011).

In order to overcome this period of crisis, clear and inspiring communication is needed in any field of work. Leaders need to support the workforce and build confidence in a more stable future. In some cases, the employer has been the most reliable source of information for employees, especially where public entities have failed to provide appropriate answers (Honigmann et al, 2020).

In an article published in 2020, McKinsey & Company is trying to come to the aid of leaders, building a communication model to help people overcome this moment of crisis. The model aims at communication in 4 steps: laying the foundations, honoring the past, marking the transition and looking to the future, transposed in the specific context of any organization (Honigmann et al, 2020).

A 2021 study (Thompson et al, 2021) of 240 U.S. adults found that social anxiety symptoms significantly increased during the COVID shutdowns. The society has forgotten how to behave around people, feel anxious about how social patterns have shifted, or find that conversation that used to flow easily is now exhausting.

According to the Labor Department, in USA, a record 4 million people quit their jobs in April 2021. More than 740,000 people who quit in April worked in the leisure and hospitality industry, which includes jobs in hotels, bars and restaurants, theme parks and other entertainment venues (Hsu, 2020).

Tsedal Neeley, a professor at Harvard Business School and author of the book „Remote Work Revolution: Succeeding From Anywhere” (Neely, 2021) claims that during the pandemic, the people have changed, Work has changed, the way we think about time and space has changed. As a result, workers now want the flexibility given to them in the pandemic.

Governments need to plan for the new form of labor. The measures taken in the short term have achieved their purpose, but in the long term, a clear vision is needed. Without it, public services risk an involution (KPMG, 2021).

The COVID-19 crisis has accelerated the adoption of digital tools in all areas of society. During a call on his company's revenue in April 2020, Microsoft CEO, Satya

Nadella, said we had witnessed two years of digital transformation in two months. This phenomenon has occurred at all levels of government, worldwide (KPMG, 2021).

Old-fashioned governance, which has slowed down the digital transformation, has transformed rapidly in the last year. As a result, national, regional / state, and local government departments are now doing things they would have considered impossible just a few months ago, such as virtual meetings (online communication) or entire services that are developed and delivered online (KPMG, 2021).

The very large number of teleworkers in the last year has led to a growing demand for broadband, which would allow them to work from home in optimal conditions. This creates an impetus for faster delivery of 5G infrastructure. 5G technology seems to be the next step in the evolution of technology, and therefore in the evolution of mobility and global communication. Governments have a key role to play in delivering infrastructure for 5G networks (KPMG, 2021).

Governments must avoid reverting to old models of government. The public sector should recognize that the digital transformation can provide not only long-term savings and huge efficiencies, but also better experiences for citizens and the workforce (KPMG, 2021).

3. Communication in crisis

The communication strategy should be carried out with great responsibility, by going through well-defined steps (Romanian Cities Association, 2011):

- Defining the problem;
- Analysis of the situation;
- Setting the objectives;
- Identifying the public;
- Carrying out the business plan;
- Setting the necessary timetable and resources;
- Developing the evaluation procedures.

To design a suitable pandemic communication strategy, it is important to have a clear narrative, to ask questions about how and when to communicate, as well as who should communicate and to what kind of audience. Audience is the key point of the strategy. The audience is different for each state, which means that the communication strategy is not universally valid. It must be adapted to each state, depending on the cultural context, the political system, the media system (Bodenheimer et al, 2020).

Crisis communication has the following characteristics (Wingen 2019): true and cautious (factual, transparent and without speculation); Understandable (short, simple, and catchy messages); Fast (active and early); Consistent (uniform, coordinated, and continuous); Explanatory (committed to gaining knowledge); Addressing different target groups via appropriate channels.

If communication during a crisis combines these characteristics, it can meet the need for people to have reliable information and can significantly increase the interest in expertise (Keyworth 2020). This directive applies not only to information on how to overcome a disaster, but also to questions about its origin and how similar situations can be avoided in the future. Consequently, crisis communication is appropriate to provide the narrative linking COVID-19 and the need for sustainability transitions (Bodenheimer et al, 2020).

The right time for crisis communication is always the same: as soon as possible (Wingen 2019). Communication during a crisis can help people understand it better. Isolating people allows them to seek out and address the causes and effects of the pandemic, to understand and learn how they can help prevent such an event. In times of

crisis, people are generally more sensitive to what experts say and also more open to new ideas, as new answers to previously unknown questions and problems are needed. In such situations, providing the correct information should be a priority. In doing so, rapid crisis communication could help prevent the spread of rumors or conspiracy theories that result from a lack of information, or at least counteract its dissemination and provide more clarity on the real situation.

Rapid reactions also have downsides, as they leave less time for reflection. Therefore, communication should be restricted, fact-based and openly address knowledge gaps. (Caspari 2020).

This is an important aspect in building the trust of the target audience. Once the crisis is over, it is advisable to return to classical scientific communication. Academic communication takes place within the scientific community, but its perspectives are also summarized for the non-scientific public (Bodenheimer et al, 2020).

Another aspect of communication in crisis situations is "who" should communicate. In this case, the scientific field proves to be the most reliable subsystem of society, which can provide valid information. For example, in Germany, the most wanted personality for pandemic communications is virologist Christian Drosten. He became known to the public after the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, when he suddenly became the most sought-after expert in Germany and even launched his own podcast (Kenya et al, 2020). A similar situation occurred in Italy, with the virologist Roberto Burioni in 2016. He explained that the language used on social networks must be different from the language used in conferences, with colleagues or even with patients. Therefore, he tried to use simple and easy words, concrete, non-medical metaphors that were easy to understand and addressed to the general public (Starr, 2020).

These examples show that in crisis communication, scientists elected as "public ambassadors" support the correct dissemination of scientific messages.

Once it has been determined who should communicate, the next question is "who will be the target audience of the communication". In order to answer this question, we need to know what the objectives of communication are. In this situation, the objectives are: to provide the public with information on the causes of the pandemic and to increase the public's desire to change their behavior in a sustainable manner. To achieve these goals, the most appropriate communication channel is the mass media.

4. Conclusion

Nowadays, information is everywhere and power belongs to consumers. Anyone who owns a laptop or smartphone can document a specific incident, share their experience or give opinions in the public space, and the consequences can be significant. The pandemic added an extra layer of complexity to what was already a challenge.

During the pandemic, people tend to turn to established channels of communication with expertise on the public health and economic crisis (Koeze et al, 2020). Television news or print media are an example of reliable classic communication channels (Greb, 2020). However, they also contribute to an excessive supply of information. because it naturally follows specific rules, selecting news based on features such as unexpectedness, controversy, the location of an event, or continuity. That is why it is necessary to take these factors into account when designing a scientific communication strategy.

In any kind of organization there should be an established plan for crisis situations, represented in 3 general phases: planning a crisis situation (pre-crisis planning) - through which they find and establish possible ways of action in such situations; crisis - which establishes the team that will manage the crisis, as well as the person who will handle the communication of key messages; post-crisis learning - after overcoming the crisis, the

management team shares the key elements that helped overcome the crisis and improves the action plan for even better results in the future.

The crisis communication plan must have: the crisis management team; the spokesperson; the stakeholders mapping (who are the target groups that need to be informed on the developments and how will they be reached); the approach (proactive / reactive / both); the key messages; the monitoring and reporting procedures.

In order to design the best crisis communication strategy, the selected spoke person must know all the details related to the situation and must have a good grasp of the key messages. This person needs to be a professional in every way possible. The language the spokesperson uses must be simple and fact-based. Technical terms, twisted phrases or personal assumptions should be avoided. Another quality a spokesperson needs to have is empathy. The absence of it may add generate pressure and negative reactions.

It is very important that the public administration, both local and central, uses precisely the essential elements necessary for effective communication, especially in the relationship between public administration and the citizen.

An administrative communications system is an attempt to ensure in all relevant points of an organization the ability to detect, understand and respond appropriately to information. Today, a new decision-making technology greatly facilitates the collection, storage, retrieval and use of data and the determination of appropriate data. However, the major communication issues are still administrative or organizational, rather than technological. In other words, technology is now far ahead of the administration (Thompson, 2006).

Social media will not disappear. Its presence has grown and will continue to grow as technology continues to advance. Social platforms offer the ability to share posts and videos from one platform to another. It is safe to assume that the presence and penetration of social networks will increase only in the coming years.

In the face of a pandemic, it is important that governments are transparent and provide the public with clear and honest information. Public confusion leaves citizens unprepared to fight a public health crisis. In addition, it is dangerous for politicians to politicize this pandemic. At such times, the message of government leaders must be consistent so that the public regains confidence in civil servants (Mian, Khan, 2020).

Cooperation with social media platforms is a key element in developing a comprehensive communication strategy. People need relevant local information about COVID-19 in a timely manner. Also, the institutions involved are overwhelmed by the situation and must use mass communication to reach everyone. Any communication strategy must use redundancy by obtaining the same information through as many different channels as possible.

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