

Communication of the Social Assistance and Child Protective Services of Timiș County with the Media, during the Sars CoV-2 Health Crisis

Andreea LUKIČ

Abstract. *The communication of public institutions in Romania characterized by transparency, citizen orientation, efficiency and timely information has been subjected to unusual pressure in the health crisis triggered in early 2020 by the COVID-19 pandemic. Expectations of the media and the general public towards public institutions on communication rhythm and transparency have not diminished, even if the institutions that were in charge of protecting public health were mostly in the forefront of the attention. In this context, the Social Assistance and Child Protective Services of Timis County has adapted to the communication style by quickly developing those communication tools that it has created since 2019 - social media page on Facebook, groups on WhatsApp application, website, etc. Tools that did not seem urgent before the measures of social distancing and electronic services that the state of necessity has imposed have emerged as new everyday realities for the entire Romanian society. This article analyzes the innovative way of communication adopted by the Social Assistance and Child Protective Services of Timiș county in the context of the pandemic and the new means of communication used to meet the institution's objectives.*

Keywords: *communication, institution, media, pandemic.*

1. Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, Cernicova (2003) stressed that a feature of the Romanian services sector was that it offered a “narrow range of available services”, in other words “few for many”, even after 1989. The classic methods, namely sending a press release or holding a weekly or monthly press conference, proved to be insufficient or outdated. Videoconferencing via the Zoom platform took the place of face-to-face meetings, and digital tools such as WhatsApp have become, from occasional ways of communication, current practices in contact between the Office for Communications, Registry and Public Relations within the Social Assistance and Child Protective Services of Timiș county, and media representatives.

This article presents the way in which the journalistic community of Timișoara perceived the communication effort of this public institution during March 2020 - March 2021.

The journalists' opinions were collected through a questionnaire of 9 questions, distributed through the www.isondaje.ro platform to 44 local journalists (Timișoara and Lugoj) who write articles or broadcast news about the protection of minors in particular, but also on social assistance in specialized institutions.

Unlike the individual interview - the collection of data based on the questionnaire facilitated the collection of a significant number of opinions in a relatively short period of time. These opinions can be analyzed and important conclusions can be drawn regarding the optimization of the communication strategy and the substantiation based on tangible information of the future strategy.

2. New communication strategies implemented by the Office for Communication, Registry and Public Relations during the pandemic

The Social Assistance and Child Protective Services of Timiș County is a public institution, subordinated to the Timiș County Council, established by HCJ 64 / 22.11.2004, regarding the reorganization of the Timiș Child Protection Directorate and the Timiș County Social Assistance Directorate.

This institution is responsible for promoting, coordinating and monitoring the child protection, but also it sees to the wellbeing of people who are alone, the elderly, those with disabilities and any other person who has difficulty in making a living because of sickness or disabilities.

The Social Assistance and Child Protective Services of Timiș County performs the following functions:

- ✓ **strategy**, which ensures the development of the social assistance strategy and of the social assistance plan for preventing and reducing the social exclusion, as well as the anti-poverty action programmes, which it submits for approval to the County Council
- ✓ **coordination** of the activities of social assistance and child protection at a county level
- ✓ **collaboration** with the decentralized public services of the ministries and institutions with responsibilities in the field of social assistance, with the local public social assistance services, as well as with the representatives of the civil society carrying out activities in the field
- ✓ **implementation**, by providing the human, material and financial means necessary for the implementation of strategies on anti-poverty actions, prevention and reduction of social marginalization, as well as for solving individual and collective social emergencies at county level
- ✓ **representation** of the Timiș County Council internally and externally, in the field of social assistance and child protection. (Cojocaru et al., 2009)

According to wan.anfp.gov.ro, "The essence of the bureaucratic apparatus is related to how officials manage public services through the connection between citizens' needs and documents written and issued by them, with internal and external documents and procedures created by the public organization to solve problems".

Some institutions have set up Citizen Information Centers, others have a Public Relations Department or work with Citizens Advice Bureau, the latter being guided and supported by the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureau (ANBCC).

The Office for Communication, Registry and Public Relations has, according to the organizational chart, 7 employees who, in their job description, must ensure the activity of document registration and communication with the press, they also have to write the press releases, organize press conferences, and maintain an efficient communication with the citizens who write or come to the institution, but also to improve the communication relations with other institutions / legal entities and re-drafting the answers on law 544/2001 on free access to public information.

With the Decree of the State of Emergency on 16.03.2020, even if it imposed the restriction or even the cease of interaction with the public in almost every public institution, the management of documents had to be ensured further. Information on legal regulations, protection measures and restrictions, as well as information on the work schedule, on how to obtain and submit forms continued. "Beyond the obvious requirement of citizens to be informed, there are also the needs of administrations to inform and educate the public about special aspects of the activity", shows the Guide of the civil servant.

For most civil servants working in social assistance, the home office method was not an option, although in most private companies this way of working has been adopted and encouraged.

The amount of information necessary to be, or clarified, to the beneficiaries of Social Assistance and Child Protective Services of Timis County or mass media services increased with the onset of the health crisis, but it was necessary to change the method of transmission and adapt it in compliance with the Law of transparency. This, which should not be confused with the Law 544/2001 about the free access to information of public interest, involves a collaboration between two partners: public administration and recipients of regulations developed by it (citizens, non-governmental organizations, business associations. (Transparency International Romania and Pro-Democracy Association - Decision-making transparency in public administration).

As a first step, for a better accessibility of the information regarding the decisional transparency, the web page of the institution, www.dgaspctm.ro, has been updated, so that the sections regarding this aspect can be easy to access (Law 52/2003 on decision-making transparency in public administration). At the same time, the Office for Communication, Registry and Public Relations showed flexibility and streamlined its communication mode by adapting it to the dynamics of the technology evolution.

In order to keep in touch with the media representatives, who were waiting for real-time information from the institution's spokesperson, the communication was moved quickly from e-mail to dedicated groups, on social networks, on the institution's website, on blog and on WhatsApp. The interviews given to the radio and tv media were made via skype or the zoom platform.

The registration of all documents was done strictly online. Additional e-mail addresses were created to make it easier for the people to send in all the required papers. Dedicated telephone lines were put in place so that people facing problems due to restriction measures imposed by the pandemic could call in and ask for help or advice.

3. Visibility of child protection services on social media

Prevention campaigns, meant to bring to attention sensitive topics such as violence in schools, bullying, domestic violence, school dropout, etc., were also done online. If in the pre-pandemic months these campaigns were organised monthly, in schools, in a partnership with the Timiș County Police Department and the County Education Board, now they were limited to paid posts on Facebook or meetings on Zoom /Google Meet / WebEx, but with a much smaller audience and a lesser impact.

The Facebook account of the institution, active since February 2019, was created to promote the achievements and to present its strategy. It also made it easy and effective to let the followers know what was happening in the residential centers for adults and children. In the community, even after the intense information campaigns in recent years, most citizens do not know the duties and even less the achievements of Social Assistance and Child Protective Services of Timiș County. Therefore, the development of this communication channel was imposed both by the trend and also by the need to explain and show transparency in the evolution and achievements in the child protection services.

Within the Office for Communication, Registry and Public Relations, a person has been appointed to provide dynamic and interesting content. The goal is to grow the number of followers, and also to provide real-time feedback to any person who contacts the institution through this communication channel.

Since March 2020, the number of daily posts has gradually increased, as did the interest of the public and of the media representatives in the activity of the institution. If in December 2019 the Facebook page of Social Assistance and Child Protective Services of Timiș County had 2560 followers, obtained after 8 months of moderate activity on the account, this number increased to 3260 in March 2020.

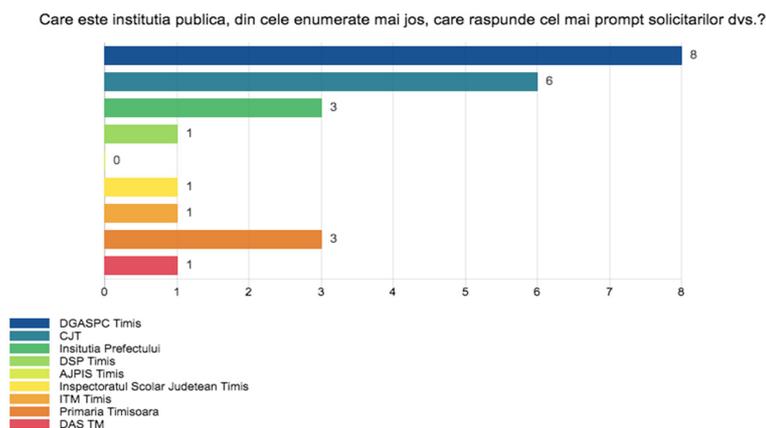
4. Feedback from the media

To see if the local journalists appreciated the innovative way of communication of the Social Assistance and Child Protective Services of Timiș County in comparison with other public institutions, a questionnaire, consisting of only nine questions, was created. The maximum amount of time required to answer them was no more than 3 minutes.

The questionnaire was answered by 26 journalists, who know the local public administration well, who have been working in the field for several years and who have had the opportunity to collaborate with several spokespeople or communication officers, on countless occasions. All of them qualified to evaluate and to assess the way in which communication was made by public institutions during the health crisis.

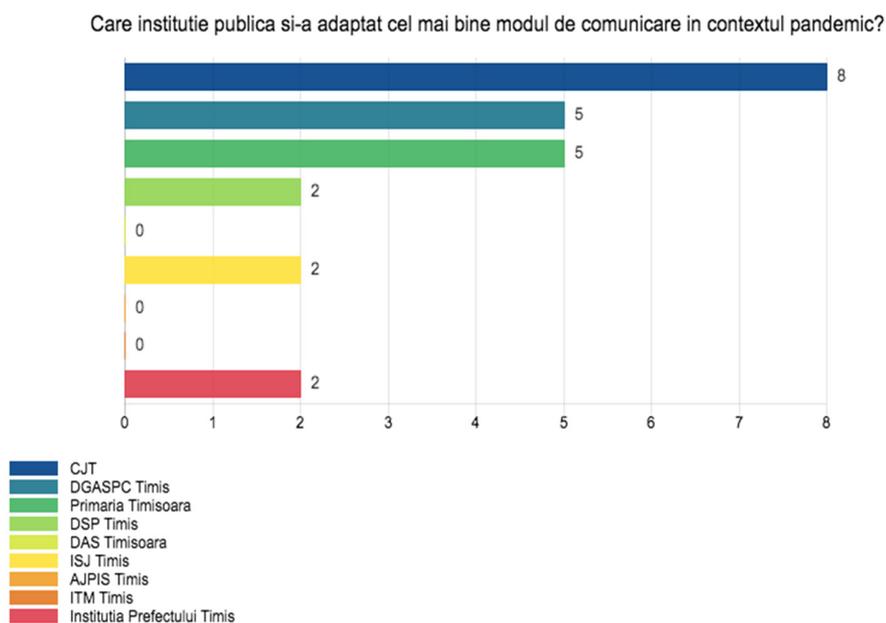
Most of the respondents believe that Social Assistance and Child Protective Services of Timiș County is the public institution that responds most promptly to media requests, even more efficiently than the Institution of the Prefect of Timiș, Timișoara City Hall or Timiș County Council (Fig.1).

Fig. 1 Which public institution from the ones listed below responds the quickest to your requests?



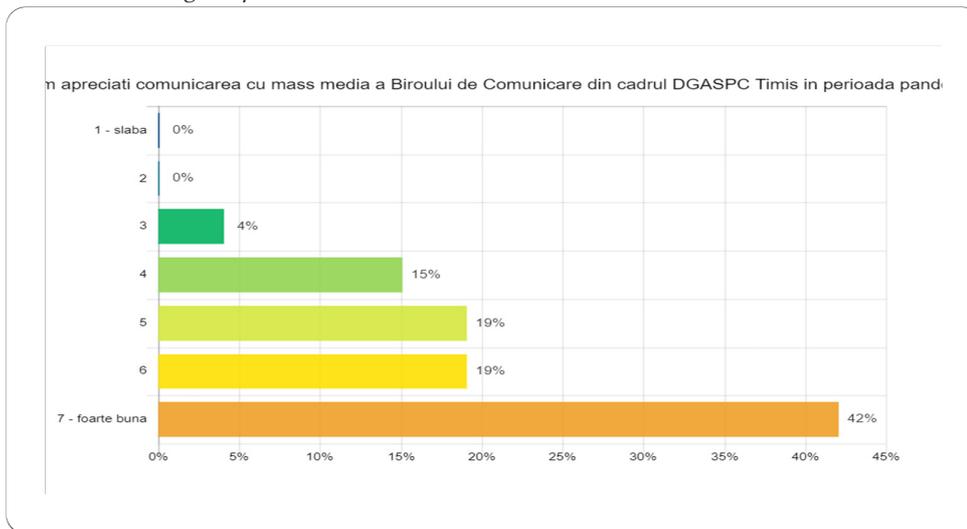
In terms of adapting the communication to the necessities imposed by the pandemic period, the Social Assistance and Child Protective Services of Timiș County ranked second after the Timiș County Council, according to the journalists (Fig.2).

Fig. 2 Which public institution adapted its communication the best during the pandemic?



In order to find out how the journalists assessed the activity of the Office for Communication, Registry and Public Relations during the pandemic, especially with the spokesperson, and taking into account the experience with other public institutions from the county, the respondents were asked to grade it from 1 (very poor) to 7 (very good). The conclusion is presented below (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3 How would you assess the activity of the Office for Communication, Registry and Public Relations during the pandemic?



Conclusion

As Cernicova (2003) puts it, “The direct effect of this development, relevant for the transition period, is that there is a wide disparity between the expressed needs of the population and the available services (this being the basis for a rapid, even spectacular, development of services), as well as a lack of experience on the part of consumers to pay adequately for the provided service (this being the limiting factor for expanding the sector)”.

It is expected that, after the end of the health crisis, digital communication skills will be perpetuated. They have been proven to save time and resources that can be directed to other innovative events.

An important factor in maintaining and developing digital communication methods in the future is the positive feedback of the media, but

also the appreciation from the beneficiaries of social services, who thus have quick access to any information of public interest within DGASPC Timiș.

However, regarding the activity of promoting and protecting the children's rights, the methods developed and perfected during the pandemic, such as Zoom, WebEx, Google Meet platforms have shown their limits. The representatives of private organizations, the institutions and the citizens directly involved in the process would rather have face-to-face meetings, group discussions and debates, where projects aimed at defending the minors' best interests can be approached and applied.

In conclusion, civil servants, regardless of the institution in which they operate, have only to keep up with this trend, use and apply the best communication tools to achieve the expected results. Innovative and efficient communication is, without a doubt, the key to success in public administration.

Bibliography

1. Bădău, H.M. (2011). *Tehnici de comunicare în social media*, Iași: Polirom.
2. Cebotaru E. (2015). *Rolul și importanța comunicării în administrația publică*.
3. Cernicova, M. (2003). *Reforming Public Services in Romania*. Zagreb: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.
4. Cojocaru, S., Cojocaru, D., Bunea, O. (2009). *Evaluarea serviciilor din perspectiva managementului de caz. Serviciul de evaluare și monitorizare*. DGASPC Bacău. *Social Research Reports*, vol 6.
5. Coman, C. (2000). *Realții Publice și Mass Media*. Iași: Polirom.
6. Șerb, S. (1999). *Relații Publice și Comunicare*, București: Teora.
7. *Ghid de e-comunicare la nivelul administrației publice*. Județul Giurgiu, 2011
8. Șandor, S. D. (2013) - *Metode și tehnici de cercetare în științele sociale*, Cluj-Napoca: Tritonic.

9. Transparency International Romania și Asociația Pro Democrația - *Transparența decizională în administrația publică.*
10. Asociația Pro Democrația Club Brașov - *Ghidul funcționarului din administrația publică.*

Webography

1. Direcția generală de asistență socială și protecția copilului. Available at: *www.dgaspctm.ro.*
2. Agenția națională a funcționarilor publici. Available at: *www.anfp.gov.ro.*