

# Press releases – signs of a political conflict?<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** *Considered either a means of communication between an organization and its publics or an autobiographical means through which organizations mould their identity, press releases also become textual structures which help in the negotiation of political, cultural, social and economic meanings. The empirical data to be analyzed are press releases that express a position to some previous attacks (Coman, 2004) issued by the City Hall of Bacău in 2008. This type of press releases involves the existence of at least two categories of participants: the City Hall, metonymically represented by Romeo Stavarache (the Mayor and a LNP member) and the journalists from the Deșteptarea (a newspaper that is the metonymic representation of the Social Democratic Party/ SDP). The theoretical framework will combine two methods: a) “word clouds” method (Feinberg 2008) for the prominence of conflict themes; b) the narrative methods of deconstruction and intertextuality (Boje, 2001). They will be used in order to render, at the microdiscursive level, a causal framework of themes and an expressive representation of voices, and, at the macrodiscursive level, the framework of a (post)election local show.*

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*A long time ago, politics involved ideas. Nowadays, politics means persons. Or rather, characters. It seems that each leader will pick up a position and he chooses a role. Just as if for a show. (...) So, politics turns into a script. Each leader will display his qualities and he will act as if he were a star. Thus there starts the personalization of power. This concept relies on the Latin word *persona*, which means theatre mask.*

(Schwartzenberg [1977] 1995: 6; our transl.)

As R.G. Schwartzenberg ([1977] 1995) claims, politics has stopped being accomplished by politicians. For a long time, it has been highlighting some characters who, beyond their administrative and political positions, play some actantial roles (Greimas, 1966). Such a position is that of a mayor, which, because of its political-laden significance, turns this four-year investment into a never-ending election campaign where opposing forces keep confronting each other. During these permanent struggles for the preserving of the image projected in the election campaigns, the mayor and, implicitly, the City Hall go through some crisis periods when communication with the journalists “enslaved” to the opposing parties is hindered.

It is the case of the conflict between two organizational actors: on the one hand, Romeo Stavarache, the mayor of Bacău, the LNP metonymic representative, and, on the other hand, the *Deșteptarea* journalists (Bacău), the metonymical representation of the Sechelariu family, a former member of the SDP. The conflict between the two political characters could be traced back to the election campaign for the Mayor of Bacău in 2004. The two candidates reached the 2<sup>nd</sup> round of the local elections and “the less known” Romeo Stavarache backed up by the Romanian Humanist Party made Dumitru Sechelariu “step down” after two consecutive mandates (Pătruț 2008: 70). During the 2004 campaign, Romeo Stavarache succeeded in catching the media attention after having reached the 2<sup>nd</sup> round, whereas his opponent, Dumitru Sechelariu, the owner of the *Deșteptarea* media trust, was the beneficiary of an excessive mediatization within the local mass-media. Shortly after having been elected as a Mayor, Romeo Stavarache was the embodiment of a Romanian political phenomenon, namely “political migration” (“traseism politic”): he became a member of the Liberal National Party, and consequently, the President of the LNP Bacău branch.

## **I. Theoretical Background**

The right-of-reply press releases issued by the City Hall of Bacău in 2008 constitute the empirical data used to illustrate this local political conflict. We will mention two perspectives that have been used in analyzing press releases:

- an indirect means of communication between the publics and an organization (Coman, 2004; Aronson et al. [2007] 2008; David, 2008);

- an autobiographical means through which organizations might shape their identity (Dozier, Ehling, 1992; Gilpin, 2008).

In both cases, the organization places itself within the center of the relations with its stakeholders. Usually labeled as subjective means of rendering an organizational reality, press releases are, after all, those discursive structures through which certain political, economic, cultural and social significances are negotiated.

The communication crisis between the Mayor of Bacău and the *Deșteptarea* journalists will be analyzed within five right-of-reply press releases issued in 2008. This particular type of a press release can be considered a narrative act of a retrospective causality (Boje 2001: 93) because it will always refer to previous articles or press releases and a tendency could be noticed towards a favorable recontextualization of some facts which have been intentionally presented in a distorted manner. This is the reason for which right-of-reply press releases could be embedded into an emergence process of some new recontextualized discourses (Fairclough 2005: 932) where a game of verisimilitude is to be grasped. Another game to be found in this type of press releases is that of “masks of power” because we witness the recontextualization of a famous question “Who is the watchdog of democracy?”. Within this politically governed democracy, the journalists become the metaphorical embodiments of the master’s watchdog, whereas the representatives of the organizations attacked are forced to turn into the watchdogs of the organizational image. The right-of-reply press releases constitute such a discursive strategy where this twofold metamorphosis turns into reality.

## **II. Methods**

The five press releases will be analyzed using a quantitative and a qualitative method:

- the “word clouds” approach (Feinberg, 2008). This quantitative method renders the prominence of the words in shaping an image formed of the 50 most frequently used words in each press release. The most prominent words will be rendered through a larger dimension. The results of the data analysis will provide different isotopes of the conflict issues according to the dimensions of these words.
- the narrative methods of deconstruction and intertextuality (Boje 2001). Characterized by “instability, complex movements, processes of change (...) that make stability, unity, structure, function and coherence one-sided readings” (Boje 2001: 18), a deconstruction analysis will help us in pinpointing the networks of meanings created within the isotopes obtained through word clouds. Being conflict discourses, the right-of-reply press releases are based on intertextual elements: quotations from previous press releases or a polyphony of voices.





October, 7, 2008

These five right-of-reply press releases can be analyzed through a causal framing of issues (social events). The hierarchy of the decreasing prominence of words will provide some isotopic networks of meanings, rendered through the symbol „→”. These isotopic networks of meanings often enter into some antagonistic force fields, rendered through the symbols „≠” or „←”. We will provide below the issue framing of the five press releases, using the binary isotopic clusters:

April, 3, 2008	- [„nerambursabile”/“non-refundable” → „fonduri”/“funds” → „finanțare”/“financing” → „investiții” & „bugetul”/“investments & budget”] ≠ „îndatorare”/“indebtness”
April, 9, 2008	- [„reabilitare”/“rehabilitation” → „termice”/“thermal” → „studiul” & „fezabilitate”/“feasability studies” → „CET”/“Heat and Power Plant” → „HCL”/“Local Council Decisions”]
August, 22, 2008	- [„blocuri”/“flat buildings” → „reabilitare”/“rehabilitation” → „termică”/“thermal” → „programul”/“programme” → „național”/“national”]
October, 7, 2008	- [„Primarul”/“the Mayor” → „acte”/“papers”, „articolul”/“articles”, „muncă”/“labour” → „Codul”/“Code”, „legalități”/“legality”, „judecătorești”/“judicial”, „Conturi”/“accounts”] ← [„acuzat”/“accused”]
October, 7, 2008	- [„replică”/“right-of-reply” → „primarul”/“the Mayor” → „dovada”/“proof”] ← [„tendencios”/“tendencious” → „Deșteptarea” → „articolul”/“article” → „minune”/“wonder”] ≠ [„deontologice”/“deontological”, „profesionale”/“professional”]

As we have mentioned, through deconstruction, the “word clouds” method also highlights the polyphony of voices, namely some intertextual elements which become discursive arguments of authority. Beyond the main conflict actors (*Deșteptarea* ↔ the City Hall of Bacău), the five press releases are structured on two types of secondary actors who activate certain causal links (Boje 2001: 97):

- *implicit secondary actors* through an implicit “war” between the year 2003 (the indexical sign of Sechelariu) and the year 2006 (the indexical sign of Stavarache) (the press release – April, 9).
- *institutional secondary actors*. The mentioning of the European Union, of the Court of Appeal in Bacău (press release Oct., 7) or of some laws, namely the

Law of Press (Art. 72 and Art. 73) (press release – Oct, 7) provides the necessary causes through which institutional hierarchical relations are achieved. These could become reality if there are other factors, such as the legislators and the executants of the respective law.

### ***b. the macrodiscursive layer***

The crisis of communication between the representative of the City Hall and the journalists from the *Deșteptarea* turns into a polemical discourse where there are activated two actantial roles, namely the attacked versus the attacker. This actantial polarization is visible on the axis of power within the semiotics of action (Greimas 1966), where according to the temporal situational context, the two organizational actors turn into opponents. This constant reassigning of the “opponent” actant could be associated with the definition of the polemical discourse (Cmeciuc 2005: 60) defined as a continuous war of the (counter(counter(counter ...))) attack. Marc Angenot (1982: 147) considers that the persuasive power of the polemical word consists in attacking the opponent using discursive strategies which should enhance disappointment. The show of these polemical statements between Stavarache/LNP/2006, on the one hand, and Sechelariu/SDP/2003, on the other hand, has as a consequence the operationalization (Fairclough 2005) of a defense discourse delivered by Romeo Stavarache, which was shaped on a twofold crisis response (Coombs 2007):

*a) suffering and distance strategies.* The press releases are structured on the actantial role of a victim, lexically rendered either through qualifying epithets (“tendencious”, “ironic”, “distorted”) which bear expressive values or through verbs with a negative qualifications whose discursive purpose is to win sympathy: “(...) the journalists from *Deșteptarea* who keep on twisting my words and on providing a distorted image of some facts or on putting words in my mouth” (press release – October, 7, our transl.). These acts of twisting and misrepresentation make the Mayor force the journalists to publish the press release issued by the City Hall of Bacau without any recontextualization: “Under these circumstances, we would like to ask you to publish our reply in your newspaper, having the same paper size and typeface and within the legal period of time” (press release – October, 7, our transl.)

We are of the opinion that beyond any sufferance display, every organizational actor who passes through a communication crisis with another organizational actor should adopt a discursive distance strategy through which some past deeds could be justified. The five press releases are structured on a “war” of numerals, signs either of some achievements (invested funds), or of laws, contracts that should be fulfilled, or of the time periods of a previous or present governing:

<b>Press release, August, 22, 2008 – “The Mayor is accused of a 40 million embezzlement”</b>	Frequency	<b>Press release April, 9, 2008 – “Heat and Power Plant Modernization”</b>	Frequency
Collective Labour contracts, Law 130/1996 (Art. 24), Labour Code (Art. 281)	6	Local Council Decision (LCD) 320/2006, LCD 276/31.07.2007, LCD 200/28.06.2007	4
Year 1996, 2008	6	Year 2006, 2007, 2008	10
References to the public funds or the City Hall funds + 40 billion	2	References to the public funds or the City Hall funds + 40 million euro	3
<b>Press release October, 7, 2008 – „Thousands of people from Bacau do not matter”</b>			
	Frequency	<b>Press release October, 7, 2008 – “The wonder Mayor”</b>	Frequency
certificate no. 15711/19.04.2006, certificate no. 36625/28.09.2006, Order 1366/20.07.2006, Order 1772/22.09.2006, 387/19.02.2007	6	The Law of Press (art. 72 and 73)	2
Year 2006, 2007, 2008	9	Year 2008	4
References to the City Hall funds	0	References to the public funds or the City Hall funds	0

Although numerals have been labeled as neutral from a political point of view (Thedvall 2008: 145), they imply either a discourse of objectivity or subjectivity depending on the organizational actor, thus becoming signs of obeying or breaking the law, on the one hand, or signs of power and institutional corruption, on the other hand.

*b) denial and ingratiation strategies.* The titles of the press releases, mentioned above, are intertextual elements of quotations of the newspaper articles from *Deșteptarea*. They induce the idea of a crisis provoked by the Mayor of Bacău, which according to the newspaper articles, is due to the dilapidation of 40 billion lei from the City Hall funds, to the suspicious Heat and Power Plant modernization, to the indifference towards the people of Bacău or to the arrogance and personality cult associated with the current mayor. Within this attack situation provoked by some rumor launching, the Mayor used an ingratiation strategy, achieved through maximizing the transparency: “publishing this document on the site of the City Hall of Bacau is a proof of our transparency in what public acquisitions are concerned” (press release, Oct. 7). Using the organizational site as an instrument of communication between this public organization and its publics shows that the information becomes a significant component in the transparency process.

The detachment from the rumors spread by *Deșteptarea* journalists is rendered through the iconic representation of the negation discursive marker “no” in the image processed for the second press release from October, 7. The overdimensionality of this negation marker suggests two aspects that should characterize every right-of-reply

press release:

- the explicit denial. In cases of rumor situations presupposed by journalists, this denial is achieved through the lexical prominence of some words whose significance is lack of involvement and accusation rejection;
- a polyphony of voices. The chronological evolution of this type of press releases issued by a public institution against the same newspaper is directly connected with the discursive voice used by the respective organization. In our case, the neutral voice used in the press releases in April and August, rendered through facts (Heat and Power Plant modernization, non-refundable funds and bank credits) mentioned in some reports and legal acts, turn into a vehemently accusing voice within the press releases from October, rendered through denigrating qualifying words addressed to *Deșteptarea* journalists.

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