

Press Releases – a Discursive Means of Framing Culture. Case study: The National Museum of Art of Romania

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Abstract: *Museum studies focus on a fourfold perspective: museographical or archaeological approaches, PR approaches, visitor studies approaches or IMC approaches. Starting from the frame theory, our aim is to analyse the discursive means through which the National Museum of Art of Romania (NMAR) frames cultural issues. The empirical data focus on 58 online press releases (2008 – n=26; 2009 – n=32) and they have a twofold objective: on the one hand, to shape an organizational representation of the Romanian social reality in what the (inter)national cultural aspects are concerned; on the other hand, to position the NMAR as a reliable source in what the education of the publics through culture is concerned.*

Keywords: *frames, cultural issues, publics (subjects and sources)*

“The museum was to be a civic space in which
(...) we could understand a little better
the world and our place in it.”
(MacGregor 2009:40)

In his opening address¹ at the Focus Fest (November, 10, 2000), Craig Judd mentioned three directions that could be related to museums: (a) creation of culture, history and tradition; (b) activities and roles of the artist; (c) language and senses. It is clear that museums bear a deeper meaning than the place where mere collections of objects are exhibited. Actually this relation between museums and objects constitutes the main perspective from which museums have been dealt with. Considered “repositories of objects” (Cuno 2009: 2), museums have been analysed through the object-oriented policies they mainly focus on. Three main purposes are often mentioned: preservation, dissemination of knowledge and access to tradition.

Beyond these informative and culturally-laden functions, museums have also been labelled as “theatres of power”, the emphasis lying on nation-oriented policies. According to Michael F. Brown (2009: 148), the outcome of this moral standing of the nation-state is a mobilizing public sentiment in favour of the state power.

We consider that the constant flow of national and international exhibitions or events that could be hosted in museums has a twofold consequence: on the one hand, a cultural dynamics due to the permanent contact with unknown objects, and on the other hand, some visibility strategies in order to attract visitors. This latter effect actually embodies a shift within the perception of museums from entities of knowledge towards leisure environments (Kotler, Kotler [2000] 2004).

I. Literature review on museum studies

Within the mission of preserving a museum’s integrity through interweaving apparently two distinctive organizational sides (collecting, conserving, research, exhibiting, educational part versus the competitive and popular part – Kotler, Kotler ([2000] 2004: 314), at least four main approaches on museum studies could be identified:

a) Museographical or archaeological perspectives. In the book *Whose Culture? The Promise of Museums and the Debate over Antiquities*, James Cuno (2009), as editor, makes a plea for encyclopaedic museums since they reveal a plurality of meanings/truths about some social practices that are embedded within the composition of the respective object(s)/antiquities and that teach us about tolerance of others and about ourselves and since they are focused on three regulatory imperatives (Merryman 2009: 187-188): *preservation* (protecting the object and its context from impairment), *truth* (valid information about the human past, for the historical, scientific, cultural, and aesthetic truth), and *access* (the objects to be accessible for study and for education and enjoyment).

b) Public relations perspectives. Paul Capriotti (2009:385) is of the opinion that museums, as social actors, play a twofold role within a local community (Taragonna, Spain): agents of dissemination and agents of cultural sensitivity. Having as main aim

1 <http://rewired09.files.wordpress.com/2009/06/framingthemuseum.pdf>, retrieved October, 5, 2010.

the analysis of the way in which museums communicate with their local community, Capriotti (2009: 397) reached the following conclusions: 33% of the respondents consider that the information received is adequate, 25% of the respondents evaluate it as inadequate and most people (45%) rate it as “not good enough”. These outcomes clearly show that in the local community under study there is a tendency towards a negative evaluation of the information means on the museum activities.

c) Visitor studies perspectives. In the article “Museumchronotopics: on the representation of the past in museums”, Pascal Gielen (2004) considers that the majority of visitor studies, which mainly focus on a causal relation between social background variables and cultural participation, should take into account the distinction between visitors as passive viewers and visitors as active interpreters. Having Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of chronotope as theoretical background and using the First World War museum in Flanders Fields as empirical data, Pascal Gielen considers that the historical mediation between different forms of museum presentations and museum visitors is achieved through a visitor’s interpretation grid based on three general chronotopics (local, global and glocal times).

d) Integrated marketing communication perspectives. The advertising campaign (The Antipa Museum. Hard to forget!, 2003-2004, Leo Burnett&Target), analysed by Ruxandra-Irina Popescu (2007), should set an example for other Romanian museums that attracting visitors depends on the visibility strategies provided by an IMC approach. The awareness strategy focused on several (media) executions targeted at different types of stakeholders: prints (*the dolls* for children, *the dog* for young men, *the jars* for women, *the bones* for young adults); TV spots (the terrace, graffiti); radio spots (children singing Romanian songs having scientific words instead of common words used for animals: a monopod gastropod for a snail or a pachyderm for an elephant) and outdoor (city lights placed at bus stations).

II. Theoretical framework

Despite the label of a traditional organizational communication device that is usually associated with press releases, they should be considered the starting point of digital press releases and of social media releases. These two new variants of a traditional press release actually show the impact that internet has been playing in the organizational life. Interactivity and accessibility have been the main causes for which organizations have made their press releases visible on their web sites thus turning them into digital press releases. Social media releases have gone one step forward and included “the additional elements a reporter or consumer would want to see before they create their own content to broadcast or transmit further” (Steyn et al. 2010: 87). All these new means of interacting with the stakeholders do not change the content level of press releases. Be they traditional, digital or social, press releases should bear at least two features, namely factuality and objectivity (Brody, Lattimore 1990) which at a lexical level, could be attained through preformulation

(Jacobs 1999 cited in Pander Maat 2007:61): a use of third-person references and past tenses when depicting future events. But beyond the informative purposes that objectivity presupposes, press releases have been considered an autobiographical means through which organizations might shape their identity (Dozier, Ehling 1992; Gilpin 2008), incorporating “persuasive and sometimes even promotional elements” (Bhatia 2004: 90).

Within the context of subjectivity that press releases implicitly can be related to, we are of the opinion that the frame theory might shed some light on the way in which organizations discursively embed relevant information about their actions and members. R.M. Entman (1993: 52) defines the verb “to frame” as the selection of “some aspects of a perceived reality” which are made “more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (emphasis by R.M. Entman). Unlike the agenda-setting theory which views the process of salience transmission as a more or less unintentional byproduct of the news production system (Lasorsa 2007), the framing theory (Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss, Ghanem 1991) views this process as more deliberative, with emphasis upon the process of how dominant social entities promote powerful frames.

Even if framing is usually associated with the manner in which media report on a topic, and consequently with the influential role that media play in the shaping of the public’s perceptions and opinions about a particular issue, this theory has gained ground in public relations as well. Kirk Hallahan (1999: 228) considers that PR practitioners, as media sources, engage in two apparently different processes in order to provide a story idea to a reporter and implicitly to stakeholders. Firstly, they “solicit interest in the story topic in itself” and secondly, they ensure themselves “that the story is slanted or framed in a way that is consistent with the source’s preferred framing”. Hallahan’s model of framing adapted to public relations focuses on seven frames: situations, attributes, choices, actions, issues, responsibility, and news. Applying these seven frames to the field of cultural communication, PR practitioners have been trying to provide a picture of cultural problems to different categories of stakeholders (framing of issues), to make them aware of the necessity to visit cultural places and of making a habit out of this (framing of actions), to educate young generations through creative events held in the respective cultural buildings (framing of responsibility), to gain media coverage of cultural news by providing news items about cultural events in the local community (framing of news).

Based on the above literature review on museum studies and frame theory, we propose the following research questions:

RQ1: What types of frames does the National Museum of Art of Romania (NMAR) use in its press releases?

RQ2: What issues does the NMAR use in order to show its activities?

RQ3: What types of publics (subjects and sources) are the most frequently mentioned in the NMAR’s press releases?

III. Method

We used content analysis as a method for framing research (Wimmer, Dominick 1997: 114), since it is seen as a “reality check, in which the portrayal of a certain group, phenomenon, trait, or characteristic is assessed against a standard taken from real life”. The data collection included 58 online press releases issued between 2008 (n=26) and 2009 (n=32) by the National Museum of Art of Romania. Our choice for this organization was mainly influenced by a piece of news read in a newspaper (*Evenimentul zilei*) about an exhibition of ties that was going to take place at the NMAR. At that point, we had been curious whether this cultural organization has an online means of sending press releases. We discovered that the website of the NMAR has a distinctive entry for press office where there have been posted press releases since 2005.

III.A. Coding procedure

In order to determine the frames used in the NMAR’s press releases we used two independent coders who were asked to code a press release for several content categories. The frames and issues categories were based on different roles that museums have got in the literature review. In order to draw a final codebook, the two coders have also analysed a sample of press releases (n=10), five press releases from each year. In order to determine inter-coder reliability we used another subsample of articles (n=10). This subsample met Wimmer and Dominick’s recommendation of coding 10% to 25% of the total sample to test inter-coder reliability.

Following the three research questions, the coding scheme focused on three main points:

- *frames*. Five frames have been identified: (1) the information frame (reports on a cultural issue, statistics, exhibitions, press conferences); (2) the educational frame (seminars, conferences); (3) the research framing (projects, books or articles written by the NMAR members); (4) the preservation framing (preservation of authentic, traditional artefacts); (5) the entertainment framing (contests, workshops). Even if information is the frame which should prevail in each press release, we consider that there should be made a distinction between those cultural events which involve the visitors as mere viewers and those which turn the visitors into active participants in the respective cultural event, such as seminars or workshops. We would also like to highlight the fact that there should be made a distinction between the educational and the entertainment frames even if we are aware that education could be gained through entertainment. But in our coding procedure, we took into account the variable of “game” to make a difference between them, thus the educational frame is rather based on serious and scientific activities, such as seminars and conferences, whereas the entertainment frame focuses on play targeted towards young people.

- *issues*. The NMAR press releases were analysed according to the following 16 categories: (1) description of the museum, such as mission, vision, values, history; (2) exhibitions, such as temporary, permanent and international; (3) conferences and seminars, having a scientific value, the target being the NMAR members and professors or teachers; (4) press conferences held to announce the NMAR activities; (5) distinctions/awards; (6) cultural policies (at a governmental level); (7) contests for young people; (8) funds for research and restoration; (9) workshops; (10) exponents (national and international); (11) galleries; (12) collections in Romania; (13) restoration; (14) sponsorship; (15) heritage; (16) relations with other museums, such as conflict versus cooperation relations.
- *publics*. The stakeholders were analysed taking into account, on the one hand, the subjects, namely the agents of the NMAR activities, and on the other hand, the sources, namely the experts as arguments of authorities, who might provide credibility. In the former category (subjects), we included the following categories: (1) the NMAR; (2) the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage; (3) artists; (4) external collaborators; (5) sponsors; (6) media partners; (7) art collectors; (8) NGOs; (9) curators. In the latter category (sources), we included the following categories: (1) the NMAR; (2) the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage; (3) ministries of foreign affairs and ambassadors; (4) artists; (5) external collaborators; (6) museographers/restorers; (7) art historians/(medieval art) specialists; (8) collectors; (9) Romanian official representatives; (10) foreign official representatives.

IV. Findings

The first research question focused on the identification of the NMAR's main frames reflected in its press releases. As shown in Table I, the most frequent main frame was basic information mainly on national and international exhibitions and press conferences (55.1%, n = 32), followed by the entertainment frame (18.96%, n = 11), the preservation frame (12.06%, n = 7), the educational frame (8.62%, n = 5) and the research frame (5.1%, n = 3).

Table I. Main frames (the NMAR press releases)

Main frames	2008	2009	Total
Information	13 (50%)	19 (59.37%)	32 (55.17%)
Research	0 (0%)	3 (9.37%)	3 (5.17%)
Educational	2 (7.69 %)	3 (9.37%)	5 (8.62%)
Entertainment	7 (26.92%)	4 (12.5%)	11 (18.96)
Preservation	4 (15.38%)	3 (9.37%)	7 (12.06%)
TOTAL	26 (100%)	32 (100%)	58 (100%)

$\chi^2 (df = 4, N = 58) = 3.30, p < .05$

Overall, the cultural news sources in the NMAR press releases were information-oriented focused on announcements about the date and locations of exhibitions or of press conferences organized by this cultural organization. But apart from this main frame, two main tendencies could be noticed:

- on the one hand, a focus on activities that might attract more visitors, the main reference being on two types of frames oriented according to the age and professional criteria: a) the educational frame which implies seminars and conferences targeted towards adults, mainly art teachers and professors; b) the entertainment frame which implies contests and workshops targeted to children, young people or adults whose professions are not in the art domain. As we have mentioned above (III.a.), these two frames should be interpreted as interweaving frames since beyond every entertainment activity there lies an educational purpose. If we had included both of them in one single frame, there could not have been distinguished the activities oriented towards different types of stakeholders.
- on the other hand, a focus on activities that go beyond the displaying of artworks. We could include here the research and preservation frames targeted towards the internal stakeholders. While the former frame involves the projects, books or articles written by the NMAR members, the latter frame also involves the Romanian or foreign authorities that focus on preservation of national and international authentic and traditional artefacts. One important point to be mentioned refers to the discrepancy that can be observed between the lack of existence of any research frame in 2008 and its emergence ($n=3$) in 2009.

RQ2 examined the issues that the NMAR addresses on cultural problems. Among the 16 issue categories (Table II), the top five key issues were cooperation relations with other museums, national and international exponents, temporary exhibitions, workshops, (scientific or press) conferences.

The greatest majority of issues dealt with the relations that the NMAR had with other museums in order to organize different national and international exhibitions. This has had two main consequences: on the one hand, the high ranking obtained by exponents, exhibitions and press conference because all these museums played an important part in these activities, and on the other hand, these issues that could be embedded in the basic information frame (see Table I) which prevails among all the other frames promoted in the NMAR press releases.

There could be noticed some variations within the distribution patterns among the two years. Whereas the five most frequent issues in 2008 focused on temporary exhibitions ($n=11$), international exponents ($n=9$), workshops ($n=9$), national exponents ($n=6$) and cooperation relations with other museums ($n=5$), in 2009 there was a shift, the main emphasis lying on the cooperation relations with other museums

Table II. Cultural issues (the nmar press releases)

Cultural issues	2008	2009	Total
Cooperation relations with other museums	5 (8.19%)	56 (91.80%)	61 (100%)
Temporary exhibitions	11(36.6%)	19(63.4%)	30 (100%)
International exponents	9 (45%)	11 (55%)	20 (100%)
National exponents	6 (35.29%)	11(64.70%)	17 (100%)
Workshops	9 (69.23%)	4 (30.76%)	13 (100%)
Conferences/ seminars	2 (33.33%)	4 (66.66%)	6 (100%)
Press conferences	2 (33.33%)	4 (66.66%)	6 (100%)
Sponsorship	1 (25%)	3 (75%)	4 (100%)
Collections in Romania	2 (67 %)	1(33%)	3 (100%)
Restoration	0	3 (100%)	3 (100%)
Heritage	2 (100%)	0	2 (100%)
Contests for young people	0	2 (100%)	2 (100%)
Research funds	0	1 (100%)	1 (100%)
Foreign funds for restoration	0	1 (100%)	1 (100%)
Description of the museum	0	1 (100%)	1 (100%)
Galleries	0	1 (100%)	1 (100%)
Awards	0	1 (100%)	1 (100%)
Exhibitions abroad	0	1 (100%)	1 (100%)
Cultural policies	0	0	0 (100%)
Permanent exhibitions	0	0	0 (100%)
History of the museum	0	0	0 (100%)

(n=56). The striking dominance (ten times greater in 2009) of the relations with other museums does not signify that the NMAR has not been involved in that many partnerships until 2009, but that since this year every museum which took part in these cultural events has been mentioned. This specific mentioning could be interpreted as a sign of acknowledging the efforts and support of every partner. Another variation could be observed within the issues of workshops (n=9 in 2008, n=4 in 2009) and of conferences/seminars (n=2 in 2008, n=4 in 2009). This discrepancy could be correlated with the fact that the entertainment frame prevails in 2008, whereas the educational frame is more dominant in 2009.

RQ3 aimed at identifying the types of publics mentioned in the NMAR's press releases. We have distinguished two main thematic roles: on the one hand, the agents/ the subjects as the (co-)doers of the NMAR activities, and on the other hand, the sources as signs of authority and credibility. For the subjects (Table III.), the media partners (n=45) were the most frequent mentioned, followed by the NMAR (n=36), curators (n=16) and external collaborators (n=11).

Table III. Subjects (the nmar press releases)

	2008	2009	TOTAL
Media partners	14 (31.11)	31 (68.88%)	45
NMAR	15 (41.66%)	21 (58.33)	36
Curators	2 (12.5%)	14 (87.5%)	16
External collaborators	4 (36.36%)	7 (63.63%)	11
Artists	3(50%)	3 (50%)	6
The Ministry of Culture and National Heritage	2 (40%)	3(60%)	5
Sponsors	0	5 (100%)	5
Art collectors	1 (33.3%)	2 (66.6%)	3
NGOs	0	1(100%)	1

The dominance of media partners over the analysed organization could be explained by the fact that in most press releases there were mentioned each individual media partner and automatically there was a number prevailing, the NMAR was the main organizer but it had several media partners for each event. However, there were significant differences among the two years in what subjects are concerned. For each of the four subjects mentioned above, a double reference growth could be noticed in 2009. We consider that the explanation lies in the awareness of emphasizing each organization or person involved in the NMAR cultural activities. The variation is obvious in what the mentioning of curators is concerned. Whereas in 2008 the specific curators were only twice mentioned, in 2009 there could be noticed that the NMAR laid an important emphasis on its internal public (curators, n=14).

For the sources (Table IV), the museographers/restorers (n=21) were the most frequent mentioned, followed by art historians (n=9), the NMAR (n=8) and collectors (n=4). The fact that museographers and art historians prevail in the 2009 press releases

Table IV. Sources (the NMAR press releases)

	2008	2009	Total
Museographers/restorers	5 (23.80%)	16 (76.20%)	21
Art historians/ (medieval art) specialists	1(20%)	8(80%)	9
NMAR	5 (62.5%)	3 (37.5%)	8
Collectors (bankers)	2(50%)	2(50%)	4
External collaborators	2 (66.6%)	1(33.3%)	3
European commissioners	2 (66.6%)	1(33.3%)	3
Romanian official representatives	1(50%)	1(50%)	2
Ministries of foreign affairs and ambassadors	0	2 (100%)	2
Foreign official representatives	0	1(100%)	1
The Ministry of Culture and National Heritage	0	1 (100%)	1

is due to the press release on April, 9 when there was a dispute between the NMAR and the Presidential Administration over the transfer of 108 cultural assets from the former organization to the latter. Being against this movement, the NMAR mentioned different experts who brought arguments about the danger that these objects, especially the iconostasis of the former Cotroceni monastery, might be exposed to in case of such a location change. Another aspect to be mentioned lies in the lack of involvement of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage (in 2008 – n=5, in 2009 – n=1).

V. Conclusions

The visibility of a cultural organization as the National Museum of Art of Romania through press releases should constitute an example for other national and local museums in their endeavour to make their activities known to their publics. The findings provide four primary implications related to the press releases as a public relations tactic:

- basic information and entertainment are the most important frames. Despite the dominance of the basic information frame, a tendency of framing the NMAR cultural activities as means of attracting different categories of visitors (young people – entertainment frame and adults – educational frame) has been noticed.
- an emphasis on partnerships with other museums, the exhibition contents and workshops. The frequent use of these partnerships with other similar national and international museums shows the NMAR strivings to turn what might have seemed a competition relation into an active and cooperation relation.
- curators are seen as responsible subjects. Whereas the cultural issues revealed an emphasis on external publics, the examination of subjects brought to surface the importance that the NMAR invests in its internal public as persons in charge of the cultural events.
- museographers and art historians are seen as trusted sources. The NMAR's points of view on sensitive issues were always accompanied by arguments provided by experts.

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