

Journalism versus PR: theoretical aspects regarding the information flows

Assist. Prof. **Julia SZAMBOLICS**, Ph.D student

Department of Journalism, Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca

E-mail: julia.szambolics@ubbcluj.ro

Abstract: *This work analyzes the information flow between journalists and PR specialists, presenting at the same time how the events are treated in the vision of journalists and the professional communicators. What events meet the qualities of news? Only certain events are made available to the public or capture the attention of journalists. What are their criteria for selection? Information in public relations has an important role in maintaining a positive image or improving an existing image of an organization. How do professional communicators bring information to the public? Answers to these questions and more will be presented in the next pages.*

Keywords: *protests, newsworthiness, media, spokesmen*

Preliminary¹

An information system is structured in: data and information; circuits and information flows; information procedures and means of dealing with the information. An information flow is the amount of information which is gained between the sender and the beneficiary of the circuit of information.

The anti-governmental protests that started on the 14th of January 2012 filled the pages of many newspapers, but the television and radio have also taken full advantage of these events. Journalists on field reported in detail what happened in

¹ This work was possible with the financial support of the Sectoral Operational Programme for Human Resources Development 2007-2013, co-financed by the European Social Fund, under the project number POSDRU/107/1.5/S/76841 with the title „Modern Doctoral Studies: Internationalization and Interdisciplinarity”.

the University Square and also recorded the voice of the people. On the other hand, representatives of public institutions could not complain about media presence either. They had two roles: first, to answer the questions of the journalists, because they are thought to be credible sources, and second, to protect the image of the institution they represented.

In his book "Mass-media. Communication and Society", Maxim I. Danciu refers to Mihai Coman, that describes in one of his works the "gap between those who inform (or give information) to control the business environment of the institution (PR professionals) and those who inform only to inform (journalists)." (Danciu, 2003:21). In terms of function / role of journalists, they owe responsibility and commitment to their audience, and not to a political party or group. They cannot avoid controversial subjects, are not allowed to be biased in their lines or articles, they should enjoy constitutional and legal protection against the pressure exerted on them during their activity. The mission of the press consists of an operative broadcasting of information in all directions, but also keeping human consciousness focused on actualities.

Theoretical background

In the volume coordinated by Claude-Jean Bertrand, entitled "An introduction to spoken and written press", Christine Leteinturier describes different media professions. The development and introduction of computer technology in many areas, including journalism, led to many changes, because journalists nowadays must know how to use a computer and office software such as processing of text, tables etc." (Bertrand, 2001: 233).

The professional approach of the journalist can be defined in three stages: collecting, selecting and processing of information.

1. Collection

Journalists receive information from different sources. One of the main sources are **press agencies**. These are commercial enterprises aimed to search and/or disseminate information. Their approach could look like this: they search, collect and prepare the information, after which it is sent to subscribers in return for payment. Payers have some regards their selves: speed, accuracy and objectivity. Each press institution is subscribed to at least one press agency. Romania has the following news agencies: Agerpres, AM Press, Shipwrights, Romanian Global News, Media Prompt, NewsIn, Mediafax, Hotnews, Rompres, Click News Agency, Rador.

Other sources that can deliver information to journalists are **institutional sources**, such as governments, businesses, administrations and organizations of any kind, which provide information about their activities for journalists or organizations that are used for documentation, or information storage.

Another way to collect information is the **address book** of each journalist, which contains information about personal links and sources. These are so called people-sources that can approve or disprove a fact or information. Journalists can confirm certain information if they are on the field. They are journalists of 'investigation'.

2. Selection

When the information reached the newsroom through different channels and sources, the selection is the next step until the publishing. All the information is redistributed to journalists according to their specialty. The journalist reads the news, systematizes files correspondence and press releases, reads other newspapers, and gathers information from the television and radio. Every journalist is dealing with the selection of information themselves, because they know and can appreciate the relevance and the value of an event. The selection is sent to the heads of department involved in the editorial meeting where they decide what and where it will be published. Here takes place the hierarchizing of news, articles.

3. Presentation

In terms of providing events, journalists start to write, verify and to give shape to an article that can be published. Who? What? Where? When? Why? Are questions whose answers must be found in the journalistic text. The text must contain the following qualities: accuracy, clarity, brevity, reliability, intelligibility.

Lippmann observed already in 1922 how complex the quantity of information that surrounds us daily is. Without stereotypes and routine it would be impossible to record this amount of information. Therefore there must be a way of selection that can reduce the complexity of reality to an acceptable level. The selection of the information is made mostly by journalists, who decide which events are important and which ones are relevant to the public. However, we cannot exclude the danger that some events are explored more, others less. Journalists create a constructed reality through the media, which should not necessarily correspond to social reality. One could even say that journalists tend to select information relevant and important to them.

How does the Communication Department of an institution treat information?

“According to the Law on free access to public information, all public institutions are obliged to organize a department of communication or to appoint a person to perform activities of communication with the press.” (C. Coman, 2009:109). This obligation is imposed by the public through the media, allowing it to get more information from the organizations and to benefit from a transparency of decisions. Even so, the level of competence of the spokesmen is questionable: many speakers stutter, are not talkative, not trained etc.

“Companies in Romania have identified five categories of use of public relations activities - creating a positive image of the company, supporting communication products and services, creating a company’s reputation, involvement and motivation of employees and management crisis.” (C. Coman, 2009: 115).

One of the main methods used by PR advisers is informing the media. This can take the form of a statement for media, press release or else. Westphalen (2004: 147) notes that people entrusted with the task to maintain press relations are also called spokesmen, responsible for communication and chiefs of staff (Constantinescu, Dumitrascu, Girboveanu, 2011: 153). The Press Office is in charge of organizing press events, creating and updating basic documents about the organization (video, photos, text etc.), searching and selecting external information about the organization and monitoring the media.

The spokesman is a person who is responsible to represent the official views of an organization and to maintain a relationship with the media, its role is to “send important information to the public, consistent and above all, fair.” (David, 2008: 201).

Mike McCurry, former U.S. presidential spokesman: “Credibility is the most important asset of a spokesman,” “sense of humor, enormous patience, ability to speak and write at any given time and an attitude toward truth that rejects any compromise.”(David, 2008: 203).

From an event to news

“When a dog bites a man that is not news, but when a man bites a dog that is news.”² From the hundreds of events and information that reach the editorial departments of newspapers, radio and television only some succeed and appear in the newspaper itself. What is actually news and what features can be identified?

D. Randall (1996: 38) sees in the news “fresh and original information on a subject about which no more was heard.” Melvin DeFleur& Dennis Everett (1981: 422) argue that “knowledge is a picture of reality obtained quickly in difficult circumstances.” Thomas Franklin (1976: 12): “any statement of current events, unbiased, accurate, affecting the interests, life and well-being of people who read, listen or look that presentation.”

Qualities of news or what lies behind the term “newsworthiness”

The “Gatekeeper” studies written by U.S. researchers Westley and McLean, describes the selection of news. This process was described by European researchers also, including EinarOstgaard, which identifies three factors that determine a story: simplicity, identification and sensationalism. “Arguing that the concept of value of

2 http://www.thenewsmanual.net/Resources/what_is_news_00.htm, accessed on 12.04

information was in fact a complex set of 12 criteria, Johannes Galtung and Marie Ruge indicated that, as an event satisfied several criteria as it is more likely to be reported." (Zelizer, 2007:63-64).

The 12 criteria are the following:

- Frequency (distance in time to event)
- Intensity (size or magnitude of an event)
- Lack of ambiguity (clarity of an event)
- The degree to which it signifies something (cultural proximity and relevance of an event)
- Novelty (lack of predictability of an event within the limits of what is meaningful and what is consistent with expectations)
- Continuity (running events)
- Composition (balance in the sequence of events or the first page)
- Reference to the personalities and elite nations (especially in North America, Japan, Europe and Russia)
- Customize (events are encoded as actions of individuals)
- Negativity (seen as good news bad news)

The protests unleashed on the 14th of January in Romania, have been heavily publicized.

Where the protests newsworthy?

The 12 factors developed by Galtung and Ruge have importance both for journalist, because the selection of information can be eased, and also for specialists in public relations or press office staff dealing with background material for journalists, because once the information submitted as editorial contains several factors, the risk of not being published is almost zero. Since the early days of protest almost all the features listed above could be identified in the news published.

Once the protests spread over several days, the following factors could be found in the news: **frequency**, **continuity**, **novelty**. The **cultural proximity** was one of the most important features, as protests were held in several cities, not only in Bucharest. In terms of **composition**, protests arose weeks on the front page. The appearance of those supporters, which destroyed several stores, added the whole wave of negativity factor to the events.

Public institutions, including municipalities, police, gendarmerie, the ministry of interior have had to expose their view as these protests could affect the rest of the population.

As a result of adverse weather conditions, after January 24, the amount of news concerning the anti-government protests were reduced and then totally replaced by the events that were triggered after the heavy snowfall.

Analysis and results

Press-releases of the main local institutions from Bucharest

In the following pages I have analyzed the press releases of the Gendarmerie, Police, and Ministry of Interior on the timeline 14.01-24.01. As mentioned before, after the 24th of January news about the riots was replaced by news about the damages caused but the snowfalls.

Not only have I taken into consideration the press releases of the already mentioned institutions, but I also gathered information about the way the media presented the riots. Press monitoring agencies and other NGO's have monitored attentively the information released in this period and came to the conclusion that a series of slippages of the media had occurred. Some of the most serious and common types of deviations from professionalism will be listed below.

Romanian Police

Tab.1: Press releases of the Romanian Police

Date	Number of press releases	Titles
14.01.12	0	
15.01.12	0	
16.01.12	0	
17.01.12	0	
18.01.12	0	
19.01.12	1	Traffic restrictions
20.01.12	0	
21.01.12	0	
22.01.12	0	
23.01.12	1	Traffic restrictions
24.01.12	0	

Source: http://www.politiaromana.ro/relatii_publice/stiri.aspx?tip_id=3

In the interval of 14.01-24.01, the Romanian Police has published on its official site two press releases, both related to traffic restrictions in Bucharest during the protests that have taken place in those days. The Romanian Police had not given many press releases regarding the protests in this period. On the other hand, we can find a large amount of press releases on the homepage of the Police regarding other themes such as economic crimes, disappeared persons and other crimes.

Bucharest Police Department

The Bucharest Police Department was more "generous", and published four press releases during the 10 days of protests that have followed. In its press release from the 17th of January, we receive information about a number of 43 criminal cases, of which 22 were formed in 15.01 and 16.01 on 21, concerning offenses of outrage

Tab.2: Press releases the Bucharest Police Department

Date	Number of press releases	Titles
14.01.12	0	
15.01.12	0	
16.01.12	0	
17.01.12	1	Press release – Manifestation on the 15 -1 6 th of January
17.01.12		
18.01.12	1	Traffic Restrictions
19.01.12	0	
20.01.12	1	Persons investigated for offenses of destruction committed in the evening of January 15 in PiataUnirii
21.01.12	0	
22.01.12	0	
23.01.12	0	
24.01.12	1	Announcement of the High Court of Cassation and Justice

Source:http://b.politiaromana.ro/index.php?option=com_dmarchive&view=archive&Itemid=105

against morality and public order and disorder and destruction and harbor illegal weapons, illegal possession of weapons and drugs subject to authorization.

In the release from the 24th of January coming from the Bureau of Public Information and Press Relations Office by the High Court of Cassation and Justice the same information are recalled regarding the crimes committed 8 days before, but with a focus on Vasile Karol-Dieter and other defendants, which together with other 5 people would have vandalized a car, or others who threw stones, breaking the glass of the window of the Trade Union House.

Even though there were only 4 written press-releases on the homepage of the BPD, the spokesman of this institution, Christian Ciocan, appeared several times on screen regarding the happenings during the protests.

Ministry of Administration and Interior

The most press releases, I found on the website of the Ministry of Administration and Interior. On January 24 they come up with 9 press releases, in which they estimated hourly the growing number of participants, starting with 2 p.m. Compared to the other institutions way to handle the communication flow with the media, the Ministry of Administration and Interior was by far the most active.

As I stated before in this paper, the communication department and press relations is in charge of establishing and maintaining relationships between the organization and media. Their tasks consist in preparing the necessary materials for the media and organize events for the press. The Gendarmerie hasn't uploaded or published any press releases during this period. If the head of the Gendarmerie, AurelMoise,

Tab. 4: Press Releases Ministry of Interior

Date	Number of press releases	Titles
14.01.12	0	
15.01.12	0	
16.01.12	1	Press conference by Minister Traian Ionescu
17.01.12	1	Press release of the Bucharest PD recorded offenses during the demonstrations from January 15 to 16
18.01.12	1	Helpful information on traffic in Bucharest, in the context of the public meeting on January 19 this year
19.01.12	2	Press Release: Police and Gendarmerie will not act forcefully if the participants manifest peacefully
		Traffic restrictions in Bucharest
20.01.12	1	Persons investigated for offenses committed on the night of January 15 in Piața Unirii
21.01.12	0	
22.01.12	0	
23.01.12	1	Traffic restrictions in Bucharest
24.01.12	9	Info point of the Romanian Gendarmerie / Estimated participants at 2 p.m Info point of the Romanian Gendarmerie / Estimated participants at 3 p.m Info point of the Romanian Gendarmerie / Estimated participants at 4 p.m Info point of the Romanian Gendarmerie / Estimated participants at 5 p.m Info point of the Romanian Gendarmerie / Estimated participants at 6 p.m Info point of the Romanian Gendarmerie / Estimated participants at 7 p.m Info point of the Romanian Gendarmerie / Estimated participants at 8 p.m Info point of the Romanian Gendarmerie / Estimated participants at 9 p.m Info point of the Romanian Gendarmerie / Estimated participants at 10 p.m

Source: <http://www.comunicare.mai.gov.ro/stiri.php>

would not have occurred many times with various television interventions, we could say that the press office of the Gendarmerie has not done its duty to maintain communication with the media, on such an important event for the society. The head of the Romanian Gendarmerie has not proved to be a good spokesperson either, as asked by journalists after the first and second day of protests, how many people are in University Square, he could not respond specifically to this question, being elusive in his answers.

While no written communications have filled the homepages and archives of these institutions, newspapers, television and radio have been very nimble when speaking of the protests in the University Square. In the same interval, from 14.01-24.01, there were over 14,000 appearances in different articles related to the anti-governmental protests.



Number of appearances in different articles published during 14.01-24.01

Source: www.google.ro

Even if there were no large numbers of press releases or other materials on the websites of public institutions, the press has not served to inform the public fairly and impartially either.

“Signatories (Active Watch - Media Monitoring Agency, Centre for Independent Journalism, Romanian Center for Investigative Journalism, journalists in Romania ARIADNA Association, Society of Journalists of Galati, PUBLICMEDIA Association) found - in the period January 13 to 19 - a series of slippages of the media (written, audio-visual and online) for the purposes of abandoning neutrality and fairness required of good journalistic practice, the rise of sensationalism and rigorous verification of information. Below are some of the most serious and common types of deviations from professionalism:

1. Implicit and explicit association of a social group (ex. galleries supporters) with violence. Most journalists have taken over and provided information on violence whose authors were ultras, without a thorough verification of the authenticity of sources.
2. Distorted reflection of reality on the ground. Selection of speakers, the positioning of the cameras, often gives a false or aggressive image of the Square. The concern for sensational ridicules the protest and does not reflect the diversity of participants and opinions expressed.
3. Induction of certain themes, through the questions put to the protesters by the journalists, leading to the exposure of views belonging rather of the reporters;
4. Conveying the idea that the groups from the Square act in favor of political actors based on information whose source is not specified and launch unsupported accusations against those who put an equal sign between political actors in power and opposition;
5. Disseminating almost exclusively the position of the Gendarmerie, ignoring the position of the protesters when violent incidents took place.

6. Resuming excessively images without specifying the date and time when they were taken.³

The protests also gave birth to heroes, at least in the media. This is Lieutenant George Alexander, from the 71st Air Flotilla from CampiaTurzii, which appeared on Monday evening among the demonstrators wearing military uniform. The crowd and some journalists considered him a hero and described him as “a young man as beautiful as those in Romanian tales, clean, clear-minded and courageous as all his predecessors in the Golden Book of the Romanian Army, he, the unknown young man, wearing clothes of the long expected hero and bringing an intoxicating light into the souls of all Romanians”⁴. Not only one journalist has seen this young man a new hope. Alexandra Svet addresses herself in an article on www.jurnalul.ro to “the hyenas of the press”, which made the lieutenant “stupid” and do not know that “he did not sleep all night because of the pain of his people.” “Do you know what he went through feeling like a soldier held prisoner that does not want anything but to be free to defend his country?”⁵

“Lieutenant Alexander George remains a decent young officer, who really believes what he says. It is a young man who simply got tired of the arrogance of the political class, the interests of the parties and the disorder in society, the false models promoted by television.”⁶

The Ministry of Defense has not the same opinion about his actions. In their view, Lieutenant George Alexander violated some provisions of the “Rules of Procedure” of the Romanian Army:

1. “Participation in the meeting on 23.01.2012 / demonstration in University Square, Bucharest (...)
2. Wearing the military uniform while participating in the demonstrations, on 23.01.2012, in PiataUniversitatii in Bucharest, (...)
3. Unannouncing the commander about his travel to other towns while leaving the garrison on 23.01.2012, to the Municipality of Bucharest, (...)
4. Giving interviews and statements to representatives of civil media without retaining the political fairness of the army and without the approval of the commander of the unit (...) (Press release from 06.02.2012 of the 71st Air Flotilla).

3 <http://www.jurnalul.ro/observator/derapaje-grave-ale-presei-in-reflectarea-protestelor-602115.html> accessed on the 17.02.2012

4 Cornel Nistorescu in <http://www.cotidianul.ro/locotenentul-alexandru-gheorghe-un-roman-pe-inima-tuturor-170720/> 24.01.2012

5 (<http://www.jurnalul.ro/editorial/un-neam-traieste-doar-prin-cei-care-tasnesc-multumim-locotenent-alexandru-gheorghe-602781.htm>, 29.01.2012)

6 Sebastian Lăzăroi <http://www.evz.ro/detalii/stiri/editorialul-evz-si-daca-nu-e-nebun-963875.html> 30.01.2012

Journalists turned Lieutenant George Alexander overnight into a hero misinforming the public, without making prior imperative research (not taking into consideration the strict provisions of the Romanian Army).

Conclusions

As we can see, the flow of information between the editorial departments of the newspapers or other media and the communication departments within organizations is taking place constantly. To optimize messaging, public relations specialists must know how journalists work and make materials for the media in a format designed to facilitate the acquiring of information. Principles that must be taken into account are: accuracy, objectivity, indication sources, clarity, brevity and human interest.

We can also observe that an event can be a story if it contains some mandatory values, but very often, journalists make a selection based on their experience and mood, taking the risk of missing more important events. Press office employees must maintain a constant relationship with journalists and to contribute to a favorable medial presence to the organization they represent.

In this paper I analyzed the anti-government protests that were started in mid-January this year. I think that mistakes were made both in the press and in the departments of Romanian institutions supposed to maintain contact with the press. Journalists took full advantage of the protests in the University Square, but the mediating decreased starting with the departure of Mr. Emil Boc as a prime minister and the catastrophes caused by the snowstorms in the south of Romania. On the other hand, the spokesmen of various public institutions, which have played an important role during these protests, were not well trained and have not shown professionalism, and this led to a decrease in confidence and the smearing of the image of the institution.

I conclude by quoting Walter Giebert (in Kunczik, 1998:67), who said that "news is what journalists make of it."

Bibliography

1. Bertrand, Claude-Jean (coordinator), *O introducere în presa scrisă și vorbită*. Traducere coordonată de Mirela Lazăr, Polirom, Iași, 2001.
2. Boudon, Raymond (coordinator), *Tratat de sociologie*, Humanitas, București, 1997.
3. Coman, Cristina, *Relațiile publice: modele teoretice și studii de caz*, Editura Universității din București, București, 2009.
4. Coman, Mihai (coordinator), *Manual de jurnalism*. Ediția a III-a revăzută și adăugită, Polirom, Iași, 2009.
5. Constantinescu, Dumitru; Dumitrascu, Elena; Girboveanu, Sorina-Raula, *Comunicare organizațională*, Editura Pro Univeritaria, București, 2011.

6. Danciu, I. Maxim, *Mass-media. Comunicare și societate*, Editura Tribuna, Cluj-Napoca, 2003.
7. David, George, *Tehnici de relații publice. Comunicarea cu mass-media*, Polirom, București, 2008.
8. Randall, David, *Jurnalul universal. Ghid practice pentru presă scrisă*. Prefața de Mihai Coman. Traducere de Alexandru Brăduț Ulmanu, Polirom, Iași, 1998.
9. Rus, Flaviu-Calin, *Relații publice și publicitate*, Institutul European, Iași, 2004.
10. Zelizer, Barbie, *Despre jurnalism la modul serios*. Traducere de Raluca Radu, Polirom, București, 2007.
11. Zipfel Astrid/ Kunczik Michael, *Introducere în știința publicisticii și a comunicării*. Traducere R. Graf și W. Kremm, Editura Presa Universitara Clujeana, Cluj-Napoca, 1998.
12. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/45750553/Managementul-Public>
13. <http://www.comunicare.mai.gov.ro/stiri.php>
14. http://www.igpr.ro/relatii_publice/stiri.aspx?tip_id=3
15. http://www.pmb.ro/pmb/comunicate/index_presa.php
16. <http://www.mapn.gov.ro/cpresa/index.php>
17. http://b.politiaromana.ro/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=35&Itemid=55
18. www.google.ro
19. <http://www.jurnalul.ro/observator/derapaje-grave-ale-presei-in-reflectarea-protestelor-602115.html>
20. <http://www.cotidianul.ro/locotenentul-alexandru-gheorghe-un-roman-pe-inimaturor-170720/>
21. <http://www.jurnalul.ro/editorial/un-neam-traieste-doar-prin-cei-care-tasnesc-multumim-locotenent-alexandru-gheorghe-602781.htm>
22. <http://www.evz.ro/detalii/stiri/editorialul-evz-si-daca-nu-e-nebun-963875.html>
23. <http://www.portal-info.ro/citate/citate-john-bogart.html>
24. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/54118700/10/Imaginea-organiza%C5%A3iei>