

COMMUNICATION IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION, NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND THEIR LIMITS¹

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Abstract: *Starting from a classical literature in the field, but also from a series of more recent papers and researches, the text aims to identify new communication strategies in public administration and to make a theoretical analysis of them from the perspective of advantages and disadvantages that such structural changes can bring in relation to the public. The premise of our analysis is that, regardless of the tool used, communication is an avatar of democracy. We also show that the entire reading we make of the phenomenon is circumscribed to an epistemological approach that privileges an approach through which technologies and tools used by man and in society have the status of generative metaphors (N. Free) in the sense that they recreate and reconstruct public space and beyond. From this perspective, participatory democracy is a new democratic formula of the old representational democracy, technologically restored. The pluses and minuses arising from this change at the communication level in public administration provide enough ground for reflection when research results correlate with mental and social data.*

Keywords: communication, public administration, public sphere, representative democracy, participatory democracy, communication strategies, new technologies

1. Public communication in administration – an avatar of democracy

Local public administrations have as main role the administration of the community within which they operate. This implies organization, management, intervention, involvement and solving problems that may interfere with the proper functioning of society. In addition, communication with the public is an important activity ensuring transparency of all activities and decisions in the field of administration.

If in authoritarian regimes the communication activity is unilateral, discretionary, put at the service of the regime and with the role of permanently refining its image and the administrative apparatus that serves it, in democratic regimes things are completely different. In the second case, communication is under the sign of the democratic game and the relationship it establishes between the governed and the governed, between the administration and the citizens. Therefore, beyond the routines of the administrative apparatus or the bureaucratic thickets that characterize it, democracy establishes a partnership between public institutions and citizens. In fact, the basic principles of social life, common living are aimed at recognition, reciprocity and cooperation (Todorov, 2009). Thus, public communication in administrative institutions and not only, through the principles and objectives underlying it, presents itself as a true avatar of democracy.

In *representative democracy*, the act of governing is enshrined by majority vote. Citizens delegate their representatives to govern and promote their interests. Elected officials are invested with power and authority in local or central leadership, but also with

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responsibility towards citizens by virtue of a social contract enshrined by vote. They are accountable to voters for all their decisions and actions. This responsibility is a certain form of communication between elected officials and citizens, between the administrative institutions they coordinate and the community. In this case, in the case of local administrations, communication plays mainly the role of informing and obtaining feedback from the population, the basis being electoral platforms and projects that convinced the population to choose one way or another. Basically, at least theoretically, trust is manifested between the governed and the governed. Under these circumstances, the act of public communication is a democratic exercise that enshrines the trust granted by voting, but also an important lever of image and control exercised by both parties.

Participatory democracy is a concept that proposes a new approach to the relationship between the governed and the governed. This new formula of democracy seems to have emerged as a necessity, as an alternative to representative democracies weakened by partisan and individual interests, backstage games and all kinds of manipulations, electoral arrangements and calculations and, above all, by the poor quality and performance of the people selected to represent us. Some authors believe that the emergence of participatory democracy is nothing more than a direct expression of the failure of representative democracy, an attack from within it, the fault being borne by both elected officials and voters. (Nichols, Th, 2022). Others, on the contrary, see in it not only a reaction, but a form of adaptation and rebranding of the old democracy in direct relation to new technologies and forms of communication. "If we are to focus on practices considered par excellence to be characteristic of the participatory approach, then we should list the local referendum, public debates, animation of public spaces (Nonjon, Bonaccorsi, 2006), local governance – including in electronic form, blogs, online protests, forums, publications and neighborhood councils, participatory budgets, consultations, (new) alternative media, and even electronic civil disobedience (hactivism). The list can go on and on, and it is easy to assume that it will expand considerably in the near future. What do all these participatory practices have in common?" (Grădinaru, A. 2010: 70) The new communication technologies seem to be the common denominator of the different participatory formulas that come to save the old representative democracy and place it in a broader, inclusive and global orbit. In fact, the globalizing virtues of technology were noted a long time ago, the expression "global screen" (Lipovetsky, Serroy, 2008), is a suggestive one in this sense. However, participatory practices are also seen as complementary formulas of the representative system and not as alternatives to it. (Grădinaru, 2012: 137)

In this regard, Thomas Zittel (Zittel, 2003: 1-31) identifies the need for participation in several democratic formulas. *Expansive democracies* see the mechanism of participation and involvement as a saving gesture for democracy in the face of citizens' disinterest and absenteeism, which could produce a greater rapprochement between decision-makers and administrators and citizens. This kind of participatory democracy proposes an extension of democratic practices to the administration area by mobilizing citizens as active and informed partners, but, equally, it has as stake the control of behaviours.

The integrative democracies mentioned by the same Zittel have as their main purpose shaping and empowering citizens through participation. They target a series of structural changes at the behavioural level through awareness and education. In the case of local public administrations, their activity and decisions are assumed at community level through communication, participation and involvement. In *efficiency-oriented democracies*, *cost-benefit* economic calculation prevails. Access to new technologies facilitates access to the administrative act, makes it more efficient and greatly reduces costs related to information, consultation or other communication activities for the public. We believe that all three democratic forms analyzed by Zittel are forms and expressions of participatory democracy, each with specific accents. What unites all of them, beyond their specificities, is the

mechanism by which they could be put into practice and function. It focuses on communication through new technologies.

In fact, like representative democracy, participatory democracy emphasizes the role of communication in information, participation and engagement. What differs are the tenhic tools they privilege. From old printing presses to new digital tools, a journey has been traveled that can hardly be ignored. An epistemological perspective promoted by Northop Frye, which is rather circumscribed to an anarchic relativism, considers that "the objects and technologies that man invents and uses have the role of resetting human existence and paradigmatically inscribing it in another orbit. They become metaphors that interpose between man and the object of his knowledge." (Gavriliuță, 2019: 253) From this perspective, we rewrite and recreate reality according to the tools we use. Oral, written, visual and digital communication can be considered *generative metaphors* (Postman 2016: 31) according to which we can rewrite knowledge, democracy or other forms of human coexistence.

2. A strategic effort in the realm of communication in new media

If in 1920 Edward Bernays tried to change the emphasis in public communication from the activity of informing the public to that of understanding it, today the emphasis is also on the participation and involvement of citizens in decision-making in administration. The reason, expressed through official documents, would be to strengthen democracy and increase trust in local public administrations. The documents elaborated at the level of the Romanian Government through the "Open Government Partnership. The National Action Plan 2020-2022" shows that:

"This Guide has been structured starting from these desiderata, but also from the principle that open government constitutes a paradigm shift for governments, public administrations, civil servants, citizens and stakeholders. Thus, the basic premise of open government starts from the idea that citizens can participate fully in life democracy of their country throughout the electoral cycle, as demonstrated by numerous studies OECD2, which confirmed increased citizens' satisfaction with concern governments to increase open government reforms and attempts to fill the need implementing mechanisms and instruments that can adequately respond to growing challenges complexes of current global and domestic policies. (...) In fact, societal changes, global economic dynamics, but also institutional techniques and approaches that need to be much more flexible, efficient and efficient create the right context for the paradigm shift at the level of policies targeting the new institutional design of the instruments through which the administration interacts with citizens. (...)" (Open Government Partnership. National Action Plan 2020-2022".. Source: General Secretariat of the Government, <https://sgg.gov.ro/1/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Ghid-final-12.11.2021.pdf>)

Inspired by international policies in the field (OGP - Open Government Partnership, OECD - The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) and sociological studies, the guide aims to develop an entire informative, consultative, deliberative and participatory mechanism at the level of public administration according to a series of models already tested in the English-speaking space (O'Grady, 2020: 518-521).

This mechanism is based on the current technological infrastructure on which new media operate. It is about new technologies, digital and the virtual space they make available to us. Basically, the digitization of communication and its move to the virtual world rebuilds not only the idea of communication, but also that of the public sphere. *The global village* of Marshall Mc Luhan (Mc Luhan, 1962, 1964) begins to exist today and thanks to public policies at national and international level. "The electronic market that provides citizens with an environment in which they can meet by surfing the Internet has been considered by many experts as a modern translation of Habermas' concept of the public sphere" (Bentivegna, 2002: 51-52).

Specifically, at the level of public administrations, new forms of communication with citizens are beginning to be established, such as *dedicated websites* and *social networks*. Among them, *the press* is a classic information formula that works in parallel with new methods of communication.

Email, dedicated Facebook group, WhatsApp, dedicated online platforms (YouTube) become useful communication tools with working groups, i.e. with a series of selected people who have specific skills in areas of interest. Therefore, we are witnessing a reconfiguration of communication in public administration, which has an impact not only on citizens and on the act of administration. The administration of a community is no longer just an activity that only those in the administrative apparatus delulate by virtue of norms and platforms assumed in electoral campaigns by candidates. It is a joint effort of the citizens of the community, the administration being the one that implements the common ideas and solutions. According to the new communication strategies, the informed citizen becomes an active and involved partner in the administrative activity of the community to which he belongs. At least theoretically and at the level of current policies and projections, this is the case.

However, it is illusory to imagine that the new public sphere created thanks to new communication technologies is homogeneous, and people show an equal and continuous interest in the field of public administration. As it currently stands, in Romania, citizens' participation and involvement is at an early stage, it is fragmentary, lacking consistency and not fully assumed. A simple online check of these communication tools of local public administrations in the Romanian space indicates a modest interest of the population for a partnership of this kind. It grows when there are more exciting themes at stake from the point of view of an audience or groups. In our opinion, the new public sphere reproduces and even augments in the virtual space differences of opinion and perspective and the particularities of different categories of real-life society. It consists of audiences and stakeholders (groups formed on specific areas of interest).

"In public relations, the term public encompasses any group of people who are linked, albeit weakly, by common interests and concerns that have consequences for the organization." (Newsom, Turk, Kruckeberg, 2010: 141). Any communication strategy within the public administration must take into account this diversity. In fact, in the specialized literature is built a typology of the public depending on the level of participation in debates on different topics. Thus, J.E. Grunig and F.C. Repper (Coman, 2004: 15) identify:

- *Active audience* represented by those who participate in all debates
- *Less active audience*, with sporadic participations and interventions
- *Activated groups* that react only to certain topics, generally to topics that come into the media's sights that turn them into hot and current topics.
- *Total inactive audience* is a category that we add and about which little is known. They do not express their opinions publicly and do not want to get involved in this partnership with administrative institutions. Probably, this category is recruited from among those who fuel electoral absenteeism.

In all this area, marked by different forms and degrees of participation, we cannot ignore the imitative behaviour of the crowd debated and analyzed in the psychology and sociology of the crowd by classic authors such as G. Tarde, G. Le Bon and others. As can easily be seen, the new public sphere formed in the virtual environment shows tendencies to differentiate and aggregate opinions and attitudes according to context, themes, comments and according to the message. In the same way, we notice a certain instability of attitudes at the level of the public, especially at the level of the uninformed public. This type of behaviour is easily visible in the online environment and represents a new form of contemporary tribalism, if we think of M. Maffesoli's saws (Maffesoli, 2000) resumed and adapted to the new technological contexts by the Romanian sociologist V. S. Dâncu (Dâncu, 2015). All this heralds a decline of individualism in its classical version. It is a decline at the value level that transfers

to the attitudinal, behavioural, communicational and relational level. The new tribalism gestated by digital communication technologies marks the triumph of *weak thinking* (Vattimo, 1995) and a permanent pendulum in a perpetual relativism. The transparency of the decision-making act at the level of public administration thanks to new communication technologies and cooperation with citizens can lead to a transparency of the public sphere in the sense of a randomly and inconsistently manifested interest subsumed to *weak thinking*.

In this context marked by a formidable openness to the public of decision-makers and administrative institutions, but also by the danger of inactivism and relativism, the new communication strategies could rebuild the public space in the sense of want, that of cooperation for the common good. Solutions are at hand and they are related to:

- A solid education of children and young people and educating the public in using new technologies in communicating with public authorities;
- Hiring staff specialized in online communication, on different platforms;
- Launching public awareness campaigns on the importance of involvement in decision-making through new communication formulas;
- Correct management of information delivered to the public in the sense of brevity, clarity and value;
- Proper management of information coming from the public, capitalizing on it in decision-making and providing feedback.

3. Advantages and limits of new forms of communication in administration

The effort to adapt the administrative activity to new technologies is a natural one. It is circumscribed to broader concepts of *good governance* and *e-government* and translates into large projects at European and national level¹. They involve providing information and services to citizens via the Internet in order to ensure transparency of decision-making and to improve governance and administration. A new tool represented by the online environment is interposed between the administration and citizens in order to facilitate access to the administrative institution and the services offered by them, but also to cooperate with citizens and gain their trust.

In 2019, the Authority for the Digitization of Romania was established in Romania "within the working apparatus of the Government and under the coordination of the Prime Minister, with the role of carrying out and coordinating the implementation of strategies and public policies in the field of digital transformation and information society"². Today, in 2023, there is a Ministry of Digitalization that has as main purpose the digitization of activity in different sectors of the public administration apparatus and beyond. In this context, the administration and governance activity is reconfigured both in relation to its tasks and in relation to the public.

Undoubtedly, all this marks a new beginning that promises a lot:

- It is a new expression of democracy;
- Transparentizes administrative activity;
- Facilitates access to information and services for the public;
- Informs in due time about the activities carried out, situations and problems;
- Facilitates citizens' participation in decision-making;
- Facilitates the process of notifying problems in the field;
- Provides feed-back;

¹ Research report published on the website of the National Agency of Civil Servants, signed by Anca Bucheru: "Public Administration closer to citizens through Social Media", project funded by EEA grants 2009 -2014, within the NGO fund in Romania, Component 1 – INVOLVEMENT, 2014, <http://www.anfp.gov.ro/R/Doc/2015/Proiecte/Social%20media/Raport%20cercetare%20social%20media.pdf>, consulted on 2.01.2022.

² The website of the Authority for the Digitization of Romania indicates the legislative basis on which it operates, as well as the duties it fulfills: <https://www.adr.gov.ro/atributii/>

- Provides a platform for discussion, debate and participation of citizens on topics of common interest;
- It ensures efficiency in terms of invested resources and capitalization of the population's feedback in decision-making plan. "(...) if pressing public policy issues are presented *online* in detail, and users are motivated to frequent sites specially designed for this purpose, it is possible that administrative institutions can benefit from solutions proposed by users or from emerging debate, starting from a negligible investment of resources" (Gherasim-Proca, 2014: 7).

The limits of this change in administrative activity through new communication strategies could be:

- A delimitation of public opinion only at the level of those who frequent the new media;
- Virtualization of the relationship with the public and the illusion of participation;
- Dilution of original information through takeovers, rollovers and reinterpretations in the online environment;
- Seizure of communion by certain social categories and groups irrelevant to the image of public opinion;
- Algorithmization of communication;
- The existence of communication barriers in terms of conceiving, perceiving and interpreting the message;
- Activating mechanisms to defend the public in front of an information avalanche, receiving only what they like or what they like (Abric, 2022: 16).
- The polarization of opinions and their radicalization due to an exaggerated narcissism cultivated by new communication platforms (Nichols, 2022: 107-108);
- Instability, pragmatism and relativism in expressing opinions and making decisions.

The results of a research (Beciu, 2009: 193-214) conducted by Camelia Beciu in 2007-2008, draw attention to aspects that betray a certain specificity of Romanians towards new projects and strategies regarding digitization and new forms of communication with local administrations. The author identifies among the investigated persons a sporty attention to the *procedural aspects* of digitization that help us *enter the ranks of the world*. Thus, respondents' attention is focused on forms and not on content, that is, on the profound changes involved in setting in motion a new mechanism of communication and relationship with citizens. Behind these attitudes could lie a series of mental aspects built over time, in our concrete relationship with institutions, authorities and standards that we have had to face over time.

From this perspective, it is worth reflecting on whether the new communication strategies in public administration and the entire e-government process are not perceived at a social level in all its complexity, the whole effort risking to have the fate of forms without substance.

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20. *** <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/>