

VARIA

THE EFFICIENCY OF LEGAL NORMS IN COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC RELATIONS DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC IN ROMANIA*Alexandru CORDOȘ****Abstract**

The present study is the result of an empirical research of qualitative sociology of communication and public relations in the context of the "Coronavirus Pandemic in Romania". Our hypothesis was that, just as in commercial communication, public relations take precedence over advertising, in the administrative and political context, public relations overwhelm public communication. We analyzed the relationship between the efficiency of transmitting legal norms through public communication. We analyzed the relationship between the efficiency of transmitting legal norms through administrative and political public communication, related to the ability to influence and divert public opinion of public relations conducted on social networks, but also in traditional media. We compared the influence of messages from one sphere or another on public opinion with the intention of highlighting the mechanisms of action of the "post-truth" and "fake-news" and to outline possible rules and legal procedures to limit influence.

Key Words: *pandemic, public communication, administration, rules in communication.*

JEL Classification: [D83, K19, K24]

1. Introduction

For more than a year, the entire globe has been facing a coronavirus pandemic, which has killed millions of people. (Taylor, 2021) This pandemic has led to changes in people's behavior and lives, has brought about a change in terms of education, democracy, human relations, the functioning of the economy, etc.

This health crisis has come unprepared for both the medical system and for entrepreneurs, politicians, managers and all fields. In our country, the first infections with the new Covid-19 virus took place in February 2020¹, and since then three waves have already passed both in Romania and in other countries in the world. Governments in all countries around the world have taken steps to combat the spread of this virus, such as - physical distance, wearing masks both outside and inside public spaces, restricting traffic, but in the end the only solution found by world governments has been vaccination. For more than a year now, many people have

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¹ <https://www.mai.gov.ro/buletin-informativ-28-februarie-2020-ora-10-00/> accessed on 1st of July 2021.

been asking questions to which no one has found an answer, such as - how long will this pandemic last? When will we recover from all points of view and be able to live normally as before this virus? What is the percentage of people who have gone through the disease or who have not? How many people have antibodies? How many people have been vaccinated? What does the vaccine contain? What are the long-term effects of the vaccine? These are just a few questions.

2. Research objectives

By conducting these opinion polls, we wanted to find out both the behavior of students during the pandemic and what aspects bothered them to a greater or lesser extent. We wanted to know their opinion about this pandemic, how they were informed, how much time they allocated to information. They also wanted to find out what are the sources from where they chose to extract their information. From the beginning we wanted to find out from a theoretical and methodological point of view what was the difference between knowledge and communication. (Codoban A., Cordoș Al., 2021)

Knowledge involves data or information that includes figures, facts and events. The collected data were transformed into information after an extensive process that focused on their correct processing. Information is knowledge from which one can act. It also includes some experience that helps to make decisions that are effective in the future.

Communication is the action by which a message is transmitted, having as a desired result that by playing that message a thing or a fact can be made known. (Codoban A., Cordoș Al., 2019) This is an obvious aspect of social life, regardless of the pattern of this exchange of stories and also in human relationships. With the help of communication, a person can be closer to the nature of the processes and phenomena in society, trying to find a better adaptation to the world. (Lochard G., Boyer H., 1998)

At present, we can observe a very good aspect, namely, that this communication is censored by knowledge, because knowledge nowadays means power, and those who have it know what and how much information to communicate to the population to obtain certain benefits from following them. The less information is communicated to people, the more easily they can be influenced in certain respects.

The average person says what he knows in communication, but the one who communicates and especially communicates publicly knows what he is saying. In this context, we come to your aid with this study, because we noticed that this public communication during the coronavirus pandemic was made more by government emergency ordinances, usually provided by military personnel, which distorted the message, and through non-verbal communication they aggravated the situation even more. (Codoban A., Nădășan T., 2009)

Public communication must consider the message and the relationship between the receiver and the sender.

This study was attended by fourth year students, bachelor's, and master's degree education DNEA, of the Faculty of Law in Cluj Napoca of the "Dimitrie Cantemir" Christian University. They completed the opinion polls by answering the six questions. The students who made up the research team participated in the optional *Communication and Public Relations* course.²

The research included 6 questions, formulated as follows:

Question number 1: "When did you first find out about the virus?"

Question number 2: "Through which communication channel?"

Question number 3: "In what period did you follow the evolutions of the pandemic more closely and by what means?"

Question 4: "What changes have you noticed in the relationship between Public Communication and Public Relations?"

Question number 5: "Which messages had the biggest impact on you? Analyze communication, why."

Question number 6: "Which messages had the least impact or were the most annoying? Analyze communication, why."

After going through all the opinion polls, we noticed certain aspects among the students, which we will present in the following.

Most of the students who were involved in this opinion poll were disturbed by the fact that, due to the pandemic, their college courses went from physical to online. This came with technological difficulties, and they noticed that both they and the teachers needed to adapt to this. It bothered them the most when there were various technical problems, such as situations where the internet did not work, or there were problems with the online platform. From their answers it was felt that they missed the face-to-face contact with the rest of their colleagues, with the teachers and they felt the lack of courses within the faculty.

At the same time, they noticed that, following this pandemic, only certain forms of work can be carried out online or only online. Some of them suffered from restrictions imposed by the authorities.

A surprising and interesting aspect is the fact that all the participants in this survey only now, with the arrival of this pandemic and the appearance on the news of the information that this virus may have appeared in a small town in China, more precisely in Wuhan, they heard about the existence of this town.

These young people noticed that the recommendations given by the authorities soon became binding. However, it is apparent from their pleadings that those restrictive measures initially disturbed and subsequently complied with them.

Some of the students also talk about the fact that vaccination would be the only solution by which we can return to normal and are disturbed by those who do not follow the protection measures and by those who do not get vaccinated.

² The data processing team of this research study was made by the following students: Chris Rușdea, Andra Lupulescu, Carmen Ilea, Călina Taloș, Adela Todoran.

They also noticed that the messages communicated by the authorities divided people into two categories - pro-vaccination and anti-vaccination. Some respect the decisions of others to be vaccinated or not, but some cannot do so. This is a sad aspect, because in times of hardship we should be more united than ever, accept the different opinions of each person and understand that everyone is different and that we cannot all be on the same wavelength. , but we should not forget that, we have the option to be more tolerant of our fellow human beings.

It was noticed from their answers that, at the beginning, everyone felt after the news given through the media feelings of: panic, anxiety and fear, which later over time, as a result, they noticed that the messages were transmitted to induce feelings. from that moment on, they stopped watching TV or the Internet and focused more on their family and work and college responsibilities. They became somewhat immune and were no longer allowed to be influenced by repetitive messages that worried them. This was also done by the students who stated that they had been vaccinated, and then did not pay attention and attention to the news as they did constantly and intensely at the beginning.

One aspect that I noticed in these young people and that bothered them the most was the election period, because they noticed that they were possible, and the cases suddenly dropped, so that the world could feel safe and able to participate in the vote. At the same time, in the case of the Horeca industry, one of the most affected in this period, it was closed or limited as much as possible, the same happened in the cases of schools and faculties. We notice a double measure in this case, namely: it was possible to go to the polls, but not in the restaurant. Both activities involved many participants. This seemed like a discrepancy in the crisis we went through and are still going through, a possible discrimination because it left in the communication aspects regarding the image of the leading politicians, who did not pay attention to the real problems of the people.

All these aspects were felt in the public opinion as: lack of empathy towards other fields of activity, lack of professionalism and lack of real perspectives.

Another aspect that I could deduce from the answers given by them was that the closure of bars, restaurants, clubs was a good thing, because those places were potential outbreaks of infection, and in addition, the restriction had a minor impact on them because they were not frequented.

A large part of the young participants was of the opinion that the measures taken by them were correct because the number of infections was visibly increasing and measures had to be taken to prevent the virus. However, another part of the students believed the restrictive measures led more to the restriction of human rights than to the protection of health and the prevention of the spread of the virus.

Many of the students, at first, did not take the news about this coronavirus seriously because they did not think for a second that, from a small town in Asia, more precisely in Wuhan, as stated in the news and on the Internet, will spread so quickly all over the world, nor will it reach Romania and will affect people's lives, living standards, behavior, and health.

3. Research

In the following we decided together with the team to present some of the answers and interpretations to the questions answered by the fourth-year students, students at the "Dimitrie Cantemir" Faculty of Law in Cluj-Napoca. We present together with the team each question and some of the answers provided. Together we have differentiated the responses of students from the form of part-time education (IF) and those from the form of part-time education (IFR), as the situation of the latter, a large part of them is employed in different enterprises and institutions that were affected by this pandemic.

3.1. Question number 1: "When did you first find out about the virus?"

To this question, both those in the form of part-time education (IF) and those in the form of part-time education (IFR) answered that they found out about this virus in early 2020, some in January, others in February, and a small part found out only in March.

3.2. Question number 2: "Through which communication channel?"

Here all students from the two forms of education responded that information about the existence of this virus reached their lordships through the media, mostly national news channels through television and the Internet, which is now the general trend. (Newman, 2021)

3.3. Question number 3: "In what period did you follow the evolutions of the pandemic more closely and by what means?"

Opinion of IFR students on question number 3:

"We have been following the most closely since March 2020 and with the entry into force of the Military Ordinances. After declaring a state of emergency, we preferred to follow with priority the official communications of the representatives of the public authorities, then any kind of news. We believe that some sources of mass communication have distorted the information they have delivered to the population, with a possible aim to have a higher rating."

From the above it appears that the students had more confidence in the beginning of the pandemic in the public authorities and considered the information provided by them because they noticed that on the internet or in the news were broadcast on television some unrealistic information, impressive, some of which are even fake-news, only to make a rating as high as possible and benefit financially from advertising.

"We watched more closely, in the second half of March, when the cases started to multiply and especially when the issue of establishing a state of emergency arose. Another period in which I watched with interest the official communications, was when statistics were transmitted on deaths recorded as the effect of the virus, more specifically: the number of deaths, their age, the diseases

they suffered. One period in which I paid more attention was the period in which he began to communicate about the Covid vaccine and the exact date when it would be available."

The data on the registered deaths, but also those on the news that the fact that the places at ATI were less and less worried most of the students and established a feeling of fear in them. Another period of interest for them was when the authorities started reporting on the creation of the vaccine against this virus and its launch on the market. Some of the students who participated in this survey supported the idea that the vaccine can fight this virus and that it is the only solution to return to normal, namely: the life before the pandemic.

Opinion of IF students on question number 3:

"We have been following the evolution of the pandemic most closely since the state of emergency was established through the media in March."

Most of them watched with interest the news and novelties regarding the evolution of the pandemic, but also the changes of the prevention measures. After leaving the lockdown in May, they lost interest in being up to date with the news and developments communicated to them by the authorities on the news, as well as on the Internet. After a few months of restrictions, the students noticed that the situation was getting worse, and then they felt that they were tired of the whole situation, the lack of freedom and the multitude of data presented everywhere and then they chose to stop watching each other. announcement or each news. Some of them focused more on the family and on fulfilling their duties at work and in college.

Young people in the fourth year, from the Faculty of Law in Cluj-Napoca, "Dimitrie Cantemir" Christian University of Bucharest, noticed that the media sometimes exaggerated with the news, this industry giving the virus SARS - CoV - 2 (Covid-19) of particular importance. They also noticed that other patients suffered in relation to Covid-19 patients because the latter were treated with priority. Among the patients who suffered, we would like to mention: cancer patients. With the help of the research team, we noticed that this category of patients was severely affected.

Another opinion claimed that it followed "the evolution of the virus most actively between March and October 2020. After finding that the faculties are no longer open and online education will remain, I did not follow the news."

From this opinion we can see the disappointment with the idea of returning to the courses within the faculty, which took place physically before the pandemic. It is a pity that many students had and supported this idea and resigned themselves to it. The fourth year of the faculty within the Faculty of Law is a final year and a large part of the students would have liked to spend it in the team and to physically participate in the courses.

"We followed the evolutions of the pandemic much more closely in the first part of its appearance in Romania, but also in the autumn-winter period of 2020 regarding vaccination, the number of vaccinated people, immediate side effects, but

also long-term ones, as well as administration and contraindications through news channels. "

"We followed more closely the evolution of the pandemic, when the first case was confirmed in Romania, then when the vaccination campaign began, on television and on specialized websites."

Vaccination data, the number of people who were vaccinated were an important topic for some of the students. They wanted to know more about the vaccine. I have noticed by carefully analyzing the fact that many people have been and are worried about compulsory vaccination. I noticed with the help of the data that I consulted together with the participating colleagues the fact that the idea was instilled at the beginning that vaccination is a right and not an obligation.

3.4. Question 4: "What changes have you noticed in the relationship between Public Communication and Public Relations?"

Opinion of IFR students on question number 4:

"In the case of the pandemic evolution in Romania, public communication and public relations went well at the beginning, the citizens being informed about everything that this virus entails, the protection measures to be taken, as well as the evolution of the disease in each part of the country. However, due to the instability of the virus and its evolution, the competent authorities have had to change their measures more and more often, so citizens have been provided with an abundance of up-to-date information on measures to prevent and combat the virus. to the authorities through their own language the administrative, military, and judicial documents, familiar to very few people."

One issue that the students highlighted was that the messages communicated by the authorities through specialists had in their composition a specialized vocabulary and did not send a clear and simple message for everyone and those in the urban environment, as well as those in rural areas. In their view, the emphasis in public relations should have been on mutual understanding and trust. The authorities should have understood the public concern to convey to them effective messages that would achieve their expected effect, that of reducing the fear and panic. The messages could have been simplified to be more concise and clearer, and the communication impact would have been different. In conclusion, the authorities could communicate more effectively.

Opinion of IF students on question number 4:

"Communication at a general level was more of an imperative communication, implementing many restrictions and rules during this period. The citizen-state relationship has improved at the beginning of the pandemic and will suffer a decline as the implementation of increasingly stringent restrictions and the emergence of the vaccine. The media played an important role in this alteration of the communication relationship, as a lot of conspiracy theories appeared both on TV and on various social networking sites, with the aim of creating chaos, instilling a lack of trust and panic. among the citizens. Weaknesses in communication

affected the confidence that representatives of these institutions enjoyed at the beginning of the pandemic and gave rise to negative discussions in the public space. Relationships between individuals in this society have suffered greatly for the reasons listed above. "

The students noticed that such a communication did not have a proper and healthy approach since the beginning of the pandemic, and this led to a rigidity towards restrictive measures. It was more of a formal communication. The lack of communication led to a great chaos, and the authorities, interested in the population to comply with the imposed measures, omitted the concrete and correct way of their implementation, the proper way of public communication, the appropriate channels, and actions in public relations. We notice that everything went in a hurry, and this accelerated the process which did not benefit from a detailed and extensive analysis.

"Public relations and public communication were in deep opposition. The restrictive measures, which in addition to being absurd, have led to the restriction of several rights guaranteed by the Constitution. What was not considered was that these restrictive measures have a negative impact on children, adolescents and young people. We are now talking about teenagers and young people, who have had most of their rights restricted. Imposing restrictions was the biggest mistake. Another factor that led to a discrepancy between Public Communication and Public Relations were large, unjustified and also unconstitutional fines."

The fact that they closed the schools for a week and then opened them, after which they closed them again for a while, did nothing but confuse the children and young people, as well as their parents. However, other solutions could be found than closing schools and faculties. It was the hardest for young people and children to follow the restrictive measures, because they are used to socializing, going to parties, having fun. Despite all these measures, the young people still found ways out and knew how to have fun in the pandemic. They rented cabins in the mountains in a group where they had fun and did not post on social networks so that the authorities would not notify themselves, and the surprise among them was that none of them got sick.

3.5. Question number 5: "Which messages had the biggest impact on you? Analyze communication, why."

Opinion of IFR students on question number 5:

"Among the messages that had an impact on me are those related to the increase in the number of daily infections, this fact leading to a state of anxiety and uncertainty among people, because this disease manifests itself differently from person to person, not existing a concrete treatment that benefits everyone. Also, this mass illness has led to a medical collapse as there are no more places in hospitals to treat all the sick."

Messages of this kind during the pandemic sent a negative state to the receivers, the media being also responsible to some extent for this fact. The chaos and panic created by this virus have caused fear among the population. As a result,

people stopped watching TV and surfing the Internet, and when new news about Covid-19 appeared, they tended to ignore it or change the channel. They instinctively began to protect themselves from the aggression of negative and repetitive messages so that they would not be affected.

Together with the team we noticed in this qualitative sociological research in which we had the honor to participate together with our colleagues that the biggest impact on young students were the restrictions imposed by the authorities. The messages sent about the virus were received differently depending on the support of those around them and the education received.

In conclusion, as some channels have received more fake news than others, the information must be verified from several sources.

Opinion of IF students on question number 5:

"The biggest impact on me was the hospital broadcasts, the ATI departments, the messages and broadcasts and the reports that generated panic."

"The way of communication was publicized; the media took advantage of the fact that it became the most important source of information about the pandemic."

The messages with those images from the hospitals full of patients were devastating for many. The news about the coronavirus and about social responsibility, about the number of deaths, all this negative news had the effect of scaring the world more than necessary. People were more afraid of death than of the virus. Therefore, by repeating the negative messages along with truly sinister images, a state of fear was created among people and thus, they gave up their social life, freedom and concluded that the only solution to get rid of this virus is the vaccine.

3.6. Question number 6: "Which messages had the least impact or were the most annoying? Analyze communication, why."

Opinion of IFR students on question number 6:

"There were three types of messages that had little or no impact. The messages communicated in a technical language and difficult to understand for the general public, the messages much too optimistic considering the situation we are in and / or the situation in other countries near Romania and the inconstant messages and without a clear plan behind and which have leading to confusion and at the same time making it possible to spread false information due to inconsistency and a lack of clear direction in statements and decisions."

The students noticed that, in crisis situations, it was necessary to know exactly the data of the problem, to identify solutions that would help as many people as possible. This pandemic has surprised many countries, but some have been able to communicate more effectively than others. This pandemic has shown the public gaps in public communication. From the above we can see that the authorities have been put in a new situation which they have managed as best they could, and the measures they have communicated have not always been the most effective. The fact that in some situations news appeared in the public space in which the

authorities contradicted each other generated the distrust of the citizens in their competence and good faith.

Opinion of IF students on question number 6:

"The smallest impact on me was the news related to the aberrant measures imposed by the Romanian Government, the stutters of the current rulers, the Minister of Health, the head of DSU, because they generated chaos among the population and a high degree of revolt and revulsion on all the circumstances that happened in Romania since the beginning of the pandemic."

For many, the fact that the authorities contradicted themselves in statements or did not effectively communicate an answer to certain questions of public interest, generated a distrust of people in the competence of those invested in positions and made some people revolt against them.

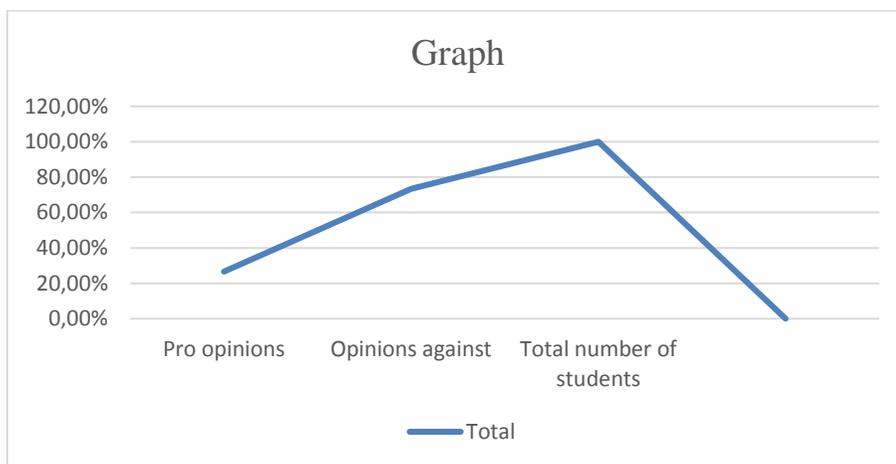


Figure. 1. Graphic showing the pro- and against opinions

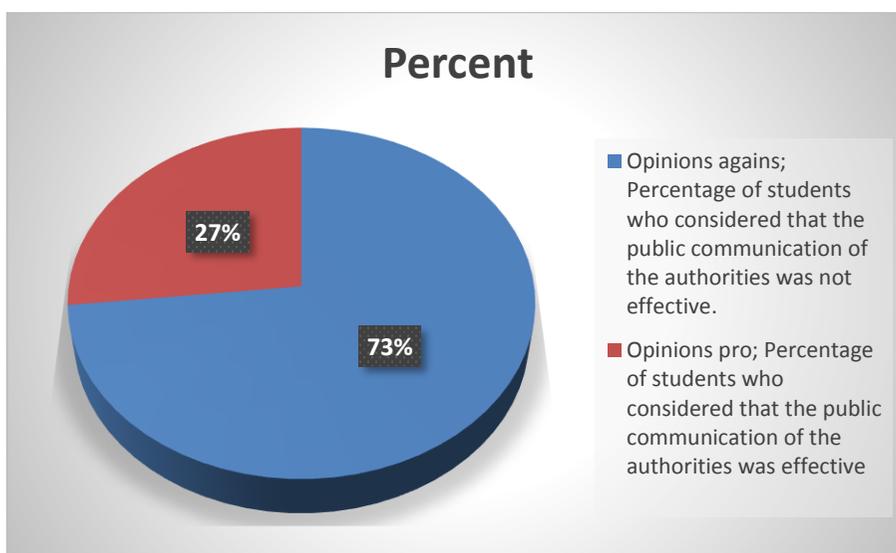


Figure. 2. Percentage of the pro- and against opinions

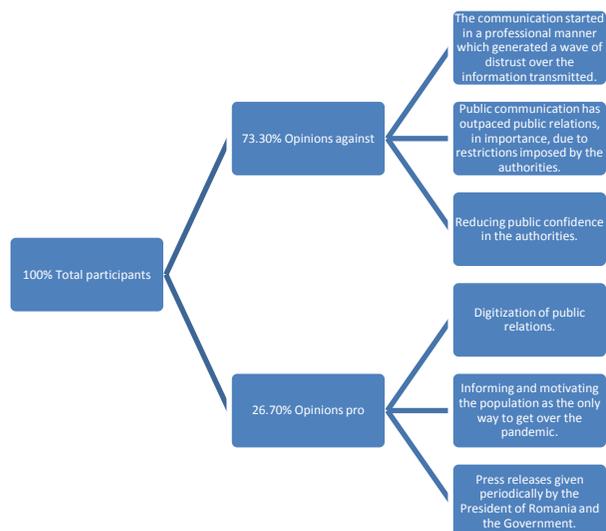


Figure. 3. Structure of the pro- and against answers related to the topic questions

Conclusions

The resulting general conclusion is that, in crisis situations, public communication must be carried out by specialists in public communication, with experience and expertise in the field. The reality resulting from the sociological and qualitative study shows us very clearly that this did not happen, and the public communication was made by politicians and military. Or politicians are better at politics than crisis management, and the military is better acquainted with the techniques to be followed in war situations. We can only say that in situations of health crises, pandemics, it is very difficult to collaborate between the three categories, population, political and military space.

In the end, this pandemic was more about death, restrictions, restricting rights than about caring for people's health. Both public relations and public communication for more than a year have not been effective, it has created more panic than responding to a short, medium and long-term waiting horizon. The authorities focused more on imposing restrictions than on conveying the public message, public communication instead of being simple and concise, was in specialized and rigid terms, aspects that brought the authorities only disadvantages, bothering people regulars who were unfamiliar with this vocabulary. Thus, the people came to revolt, to no longer respect the imposed measures, being disappointed and frustrated by the whole situation that affected their life and health.

Following this pandemic, we can see that it showed us as obvious as possible the weaknesses, the gaps in the system of relations and communication between the

central, local apparatus and citizens. It is very clear that the two important pillars of communication were not taken into account in public communication: *MESSAGE* and *RELATIONSHIP*.

This period brought to the surface the helplessness, lack of training and discipline of the central structures of the state. Even those who instituted the state of emergency and alert failed to give precise directives, to communicate effectively both with the lower structures in the territory and with the population of the country and the diaspora.

We often hear that our country is far behind other European countries and beyond. In this regard, we must also mention the fact that some beneficial measures have been taken for the population, even if this has not been properly communicated. We need to take the time to look at the issue of the pandemic from all points of view. Thus, seeing the experience of other states, analyzing in all aspects the global pandemic, as well as the one in Romania, to be able not to repeat the mistakes found, to have an effective public communication and last but not least all these things to be subordinated the interest of citizens.

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