

# Perceptions on the Effectiveness of Communication between Public Institutions and Journalists through Social Media

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**Abstract:** This article presents the challenges and opportunities of social media for public institutions and argues that the designing and implementing government public relations using social media involves more than merely having another communication channel for publics. I will explain the “social media”, the differences between social media and electronic-Public Relations - E-PR, and the communication between public institutions and journalists. The interviews with journalists or with PR specialists in public institutions were focused on the use, the extent of this use, and the perceived value of various social media as sources contributing to agenda building (Cobb, Elder 1983). If journalists are regularly monitoring sites and forums for story ideas and information, it is necessary for PR professionals within each industry to carefully monitor the information placed there and perhaps engage content producers. In this paper, I conclude that social media is an alternative instrument to encourage a two-way communication channel between government and publics. In public relations, the emergence of social media challenges the traditional instruments of government public relations. Responding to the development of information and communication technology (ICT), social media is considered as an alternative communication channel of government public relations efforts.

**Keywords:** social media, public relations, electronic PR, site, forum, PR models, Grunig, journalists.

## 1. What is social media?

Social media has significantly altered the world of media unlike any other medium. With its viral, informal and unedited format, it will continue to grow and change and present new opportunities for both public relations and traditional journalists. The integration of social media into the overall media landscape represents a new challenge for PR professionals.

This new term is defined by many scholars as “a variety of new sources” (Mangold, Faulds 2009), “internet-based applications” (Blackshaw 2006), “a channel or a group of new kinds of online media” (Mayfield 2008).

*Social media encompasses a wide range of online, word-of-mouth forums including blogs, company sponsored discussion boards and chat rooms, consumer-to-consumer e-mail, consumer product or service ratings websites and forums, Internet discussion boards and forums, moblogs (sites containing digital audio, images, movies, or photographs), and social networking websites, to name a few.* (Mangold, Faulds 2009: 358).

### 1.1. Definitions

This form of media “describes a *variety of new sources* of online information that are created, initiated, circulated and used by consumers’ intent on educating each other about products, brands, services, personalities, and issues” (Mangold, Faulds 2009: 358).

While there is a lack of a formal definition, ‘social media’ can be generally understood as *Internet-based applications* that carry consumer-generated content which encompasses “media impressions created by consumers, typically informed by relevant experience, and archived or shared online for easy access by other impressionable consumers”<sup>1</sup>. According to various scholars, social media elements and mainly business blogs promote and humanize the two-way communication by enabling companies to talk with customers and allowing customers to talk back<sup>2</sup>.

Social media not only gives the PR practitioners the opportunity of reaching out to and engaging their publics in conversation, but also provides an avenue to strengthen media relations. Brian Solis, the leading PR 2.0 “evangelist” and exponent, sums it up in his contribution to *The Social Web Analytics eBook 2008* by Philip Sheldrake of Racepoint:

*Social Media is no longer an option or debatable. It is critically important to all businesses, without prejudice. It represents a powerful, and additional, channel to first listen to customers, stakeholders, media, bloggers, peers, and other influencers, and in turn, build two-way paths of conversations to them. Yes, conversations are taking place about your company, product, and service, right now, with or without you. This represents priceless opportunities to build relationships and shape perceptions at every step. In the process, you become a resource to the very people looking for leadership, expertise, vision and solutions. The most important driver for outbound and proactive online relations is that it’s measurable and absolutely tied to the bottom line.* (Brown 2009: 18).

The real power of people can be noticed in the new revolutionized media channel, namely *social media*. According to Mayfield (2008), social media is best understood as “a group of new kinds of online media”, which share most or all of the following characteristics<sup>3</sup>:

1. **participation and engagement:** social media is a means of making everybody interested provide contributions and feedback. Thus the border between media and audience seems to disappear.
2. **openness:** participation imposes some freedom that the audience enjoys through voting, comments or sharing information.
3. **conversation:** unlike traditional media which is focused on one-way communication, social media provides a two-way conversation, thus communication is instantaneous.
4. **community:** the most important outcome of social media is forming communities. The backbone of these communities is a sharing of common interests.
5. **connectedness:** social media creates a sort of chain effect, making use of links to different sites, resources and persons.

Drury (2008: 274-277) suggests that when analyzing social media, marketers too often concentrates on the “media” factor, when “social” element is the key, because marketing within social media is about building a relationship and conversation with the audience, where the simple message delivery is changed by ongoing exchange of perceptions and ideas between company and the consumer.

Haven<sup>4</sup> suggests that social media key elements are not entirely new as features of sharing, connecting, opining, broadcasting and creating has been long in our lives, but there are several characteristics of new technologies and behaviours that set them apart from the past:

1. **reach** – A tribe, a family, friends, neighbours or the local community have been social habitats which we belong to. Nowadays the new technologies offer a new opportunity of crossing the local borders in order to reach a global audience.

<sup>1</sup> Blackshaw, P. (2006) “The consumer-generated surveillance culture.” Available from: <http://www.clickz.com/showPage.html?page=3576076>, accessed 20.10.09.

<sup>2</sup> Kelleher, T., Miller, M. B. (2006) “Organizational blogs and the human voice: Relational strategies and relational outcomes.” [In:] *Journal of Computer-mediated Communication*. 11(2). Available from: <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol11/issue2/kelleher.html>

<sup>3</sup> Mayfield, A. (2008) “What is social media, iCrossing.” Available from: [http://www.icrossing.co.uk/fileadmin/uploads/eBooks/What\\_is\\_Social\\_Media\\_iCrossing\\_ebook.pdf](http://www.icrossing.co.uk/fileadmin/uploads/eBooks/What_is_Social_Media_iCrossing_ebook.pdf), accessed 13July 2009.

<sup>4</sup> <http://thoughts.birdahonk.com/2008/10/media-has-always-been-social.html>, accessed 13July 2009.

2. **accessibility** – The advantage of new technologies is to reduce the costs of traditional media and to allow freedom to access to everybody.
3. **usability** – One consequence of accessibility is the freedom provided to everybody to create and operate the means of production. Creative and technical skills are no longer compulsory.
4. **transparency** – Nowadays it has been observed a craving for information. The new technologies provide the space where everything can be posted by everybody. But this sort of transparency might fire back sometimes since there is little control on the content.
5. **recency** – Instantaneity seems to be the governing word nowadays. People become addicted to emails, facebook or twitter and they seem to have forgotten the pleasure of holding a letter in their own hands.
6. These features show that social media is an encompassing term which combines technology, social interaction, pictures, videos and audio materials.

## 1.2. Advantages of Social Media

In *Optimizing Your Public Relations with Social Media*<sup>5</sup>, published on the site [www.prnewsonline.com](http://www.prnewsonline.com), some PR practitioners sustain that social media is important for a number of key reasons<sup>6</sup>:

- **stickier than traditional media** – According to a study conducted by InsightExpress (a market research firm) consumer trust in advertising has decreased 41% over the past three years (Elkin 2005). The prototypical consumer of social media seems to enjoy the trust and the message retention provided by this means of communication. The traditional forms of marketing and advertising are downplayed by word-of-mouth which, according to WOMMA (Word of mouth Marketing Association), is favoured by 92% of consumers.
- **viral nature** – social networking provides an instantaneous passing of information which might be interpreted either as a substantial opportunity and threat for communications professionals.
- **interactive** – (Corporate) blogging is the means of getting immediate response from the publics. The possibility of enabling comments should be taken into account by organizations since they might gain valuable customer feedback.
- **high visibility on the net** – Besides immediate communication, visibility is another keypoint that organizations should take into account. Wikipedia is perhaps the most notable example of this phenomenon. Spannerworks, a search engine marketing specialist, recently reported that social media platform Wikipedia appears in the top 20 Google search results for 88 percent of searches for the top 100 global brands (Mayfield, 2007).

## 1.3. Social media and Electronic Public Relations

Zerfab Ansgar (*apud* Vegheş Ruff, Grigore 2003: 26) says that:

*(...) in terms of public relations, the key to online business success lies in building and maintaining reputation through the exchange of information between the organization and the public online* (translated into English by – M.P.).

So, “public relations use the new interactive media which either allow an immediate and technical dialogue with different social groups (eg e-mail, newsgroups), or made available to a communication partner information in electronic form so that it can appeal to them directly (CD-ROM, WWW), or support the management process of public relations (eg.

<sup>5</sup> PRNewsonline is the industry’s community resource for news, research, analysis, business opportunities, market trends, and more in the field of PR and communications. From the publishers of the industry’s most-trusted publication, PR news, prnewsonline.com is also the first stop for information on awards, new books, studies, events and webinars.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.prnewsonline.com/Assets/File/whitepapers/socialmediawp.pdf>, accessed 20 July 2009

Automating press reviews and media monitoring)”. That is to say E-PR uses Social Media or E-PR means public relations on the Internet:

*E-PR is an area of public relations which through the implementation and use of tools available from online media and methods and derived measures seek to establish relationships with relevant groups of an organization. This means that online public relations support the objectives of public relations in general, helping to balance the long-term relationship between an organization and its target groups.* (Friedlander, *apud* Vegheş Ruff, Grigore 2003: 30; translated into English by – M.P.)

If so far the communication between an organization and its publics was through the media, the Internet now has to “enable an organization to become the sender in mass communication, the message sent via the Web being accessible anywhere and anyhow” (Vegheş Ruff, Grigore 2003: 31). Thanks to the social media, the communication is now transformed, so that the information arrives to the public through the Internet.

**Table 1**

ORGANIZATION → MASS-MEDIA → PUBLICS

ORGANIZATION → INTERNET → PUBLICS

<b>PR through traditional methods</b>	<b>E-PR through social media</b>
Transmission of press releases	Transmission of press releases Post press releases on sites
Dissemination of advertising lay-outs	Information on forums, blogs, websites, campaigns and so on
Press conferences	Video-conferences, press packs can be sent/posted as PDFs
Organization of events	Post pictures from events on sites, blogs and so on
Public communication by letter, fax, through the PR offices, audience	Public communicate by e-mail, finds out information directly from websites, and the audiences also take place online (eg. Ministry of Education)

As it can be observed, E-PR means sites, blogs, on-line information and communication mediated by Internet.

**2. Models of Public Relations**

An understanding of Grunig's Four Models of Public Relations which describe the evolving types of PR practice from Press Agency through Public Information to Two-Way Asymmetric and Two-Way Symmetric communication is also important to a study of effectiveness of communication between public institutions and journalists through social media.

Grunig and Hunt’s “4 Models” of public relations practice went on to become the most talked-about theory in the discipline. The “4 Models” describe different approaches to public relations in the context of a 130-year timeline that shows how public relations have evolved. In the process, Grunig and Hunt (1984: 21-22) identify an “ideal” approach to public relations, namely the 2-way symmetrical model — and place it at the top of the evolutionary pyramid.

The four models are:

- *press agency* (one way communication; often media relations and sometimes of the spin/propaganda variety; non-consultative)
- *public information* (one way communication; normally from the perspective of the organization only, so it can be one-dimensional; non-consultative)
- *two-way asymmetrical* (stakeholder views are sought; communication is adapted to potentially change stakeholder behaviours; the organization does not change its views or behaviour; very much in the mould of modern marketing)
- *two-way symmetrical* (as the one-way symmetrical model, *except the organization does change its views and/ or behaviour* to meet its stakeholders 'half-way' [or thereabouts, at least]; characterized by negotiation and compromise, education).

**The 2-way symmetrical model** is based on a free exchange of information that is used to alter attitudes in both the organization and its publics. This model of public relations depends on good feedback and is used primarily by organizations that are governmentally regulated and must prove that they are socially responsible.

The four models of public relations, and especially the two-way symmetrical model, have been the most controversial and the most debated component of the *excellence theory* (Grunig, Grunig, Dozier 1992). Many authors (Yarbrough, Cameron, Sallot, McWilliams 1998) have essentially equated the entire Excellence theory with the two-way symmetrical model.

Organizations that apply the notion of the two-way symmetrical communication will:

- enjoy more *mutually beneficial*, sustainable and commercially satisfying relationships with their stakeholders;
- make a more significant and worthwhile *contribution to society*;
- have more *committed employees* who are stronger *organizational advocates*.

I consider that the application of two-way symmetrical communication is the best way to build and sustain *long-lasting, mutually beneficial relationships* between an organization and its stakeholders. It will also make a *meaningful contribution to society* by increasing understanding of various factors by often heterogeneous groups of people. Finally, and most importantly, as organizations change to meet their stakeholders' needs, *society will become more satisfying and more equitable* to greater numbers of people.

## 2.1. The advantages of communication through social media

If we take a short look at social media, we can say that its main advantages are (Vegheş Ruff, Grigore 2003: 32): constant communication, immediate response, global audience, knowing the audience, bidirectional communication, low cost.

Social media not only allows public relations practitioners to reach out to and engage their publics in conversation, but also provides an avenue to strengthen media relations (Eyrich, Padman, Sweetser 2008: 412-414).

So, the public sector needs to understand that there are three elements underlying their existence, namely:

- *reputation*: It is their social responsibility to embrace this change.
- *perception*: Their social media participation will play an essential role in how the public perceives them.
- *measurement*: Their achievement will be evaluated not just on what they did, but also on people's perception.

There is a chance happening in public engagement. From the position of a representative of public sector, you do not know how the result will be, but your engagement will determine how the outcome is going to be. Another aspect that should be taken into account is that you (public sector) are aware of the fact that you must be open to any changes. Social media is not just global, but also local, so it represents rich sources of local interest issues, news, stories and local communication channels. Social media is the means of a transformation of a world in which people knew where the

barriers were laid into a world without limits. Each social media connection established on the digital landscape has the potential of adding (or reducing) meaning, understanding, life/ humanity.

Applications of bilateral symmetrical communication model define excellence in public relations, and thus the effectiveness of an organization. Giving all the characteristics of social media, we can say that they are tools that facilitate the implementation of bilateral symmetrical communication model favouring direct communication with all audiences, instant feedback and behaviour change.

### 3. Methodology and research design

Against this conceptual framework, this study focuses on the role of social media in government public relations. Journalists consider that the sites of the Romanian ministries are a source of information.

#### *Hypotheses:*

The PR officers of the Romanian ministries use social media as a means of information provider.

The journalists in Romania use this type of information in their articles.

*Corpus:* the 18 sites from the current government ministries and 8 journalists from different media<sup>7</sup>.

#### 3.1. The analysis of the 18 sites included the following sections:

News on homepage, Site updating, Media sections, Forum, newsletter, Scale of transparency: email webmaster/ questions-for audiences other than mass-media/mail PR/Contact leader<sup>8</sup>.

#### *News on the homepage:*

Of the 18 ministries, eight do not update their web sites daily: Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure, Ministry of Public Health, Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Youth, Ministry of Tourism, Ministry of National Defence, Ministry of Labour.

<sup>7</sup> **AGERPRES** <http://www.agerpres.ro> - The AGERPRES National News Agency is the most important source for news and media pictures about Romania and the most trustworthy source of information about Romania on which the national and international print media rely.

**ZIARUL FINANCIAR** [www.zf.ro](http://www.zf.ro) - ZF is the most read newspaper business in Romania. It is a business newspaper with a circulation of 20,000 copies per edition, presented as a broadsheet, the print size of 42.00 cm x 63.00 cm, with 12 pages, of which 6 are color.

**BUSINESS STANDARD** <http://standard.money.ro> - the first newspaper dedicated to a dynamic business community, aspirational and attitude. Its mission is to report and explain the significance of events and economic phenomena and decisive impact on quality of life for the reader. Starting with October 2009, Business Standard has become the only publication in Romania internationally awarded by IFRA WAN (World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers).

**RING** - From April 19 2008, Bucharest has a new publication: free "Ring". "Ring" newspaper is the most read free newspaper in Bucharest, distributed 100,000 copies to both underground and in hospitals, universities, airports, theaters, shopping centers, cafes and restaurants.

**ADEVĂRUL** [www.adevarul.ro](http://www.adevarul.ro) - a central newspaper founded in 1888 by Al. Beldiman in Bucharest on August 15 - until 1914 and from 1919 to 1937. Editorial policy of the next few years continued the Scântei line newspaper (the newspaper during the communist regime) adopting unfavorable views of Romania anticommunist opposition.

**ZIARE.COM** [www.ziare.com](http://www.ziare.com) - one of the top 50000 sites in the world and is in the Directoare/ Directory category.

**RADIO ROMÂNIA ACTUALITĂȚI** <http://www.romania-actualitati.ro> - RRA is the main station of the Romanian Radio Society. Audience surveys places it currently in first place nationally and in urban areas, with a diverse offer of information and music. RRA programs are debates, reports and documentaries, sports broadcasts, radio theater and government type store.

<sup>8</sup> This typology has been used in a study of Curtin, Patricia, Gaither, Kenn, "Public Relations and Propaganda in Cyberspace: A Quantitative Content Analysis of Middle Eastern Government Websites."

[http://www.allacademic.com/one/www/research/index.php?click\\_key=1&PHPSESSID=ddf12c3041d399bbb15bd33fba18a32](http://www.allacademic.com/one/www/research/index.php?click_key=1&PHPSESSID=ddf12c3041d399bbb15bd33fba18a32), accessed 20.10.09

Media Sections include:

Table 2

Ministry of Culture	Archive Press releases 2005-present, Conference
Ministry of Economy	Archive Press Releases 2004-2007
Ministry of Finance	Archive Press Releases 2008-present
Ministry of Justice	Archive Press Releases 2007-present
Ministry of Labor	Archive Press Releases 2008-present
Ministry of Youth and Sport	Press releases 2009, archive photo 2009
Ministry of Tourism	Press releases 2009, news, Photo
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Press releases, conferences, interviews
Ministry of National Defence	Press releases, conferences, interviews, courses
Ministry of Administration and Interior	Press releases, conferences, shows, news, archive, publications
Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Development	Press releases 2009, information
Ministry of Communications and Information	Press releases, events, Photo gallery, Public information
Ministry of Regional Development	Press releases, information, invitations
Ministry of Education, Research	Press releases, Relations with the public
Ministry of Small and Medium Sized Enterprises	Archive press releases, Press conferences, Discourses, Photo gallery, Contact Press office
Ministry of Environment	Press releases, Events, Conference in a video format
Ministry of Health	Press releases, Discourses, Meetings
Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure	Press Releases, Invitations, Announcements, Photo Album, Video, Annual Reports

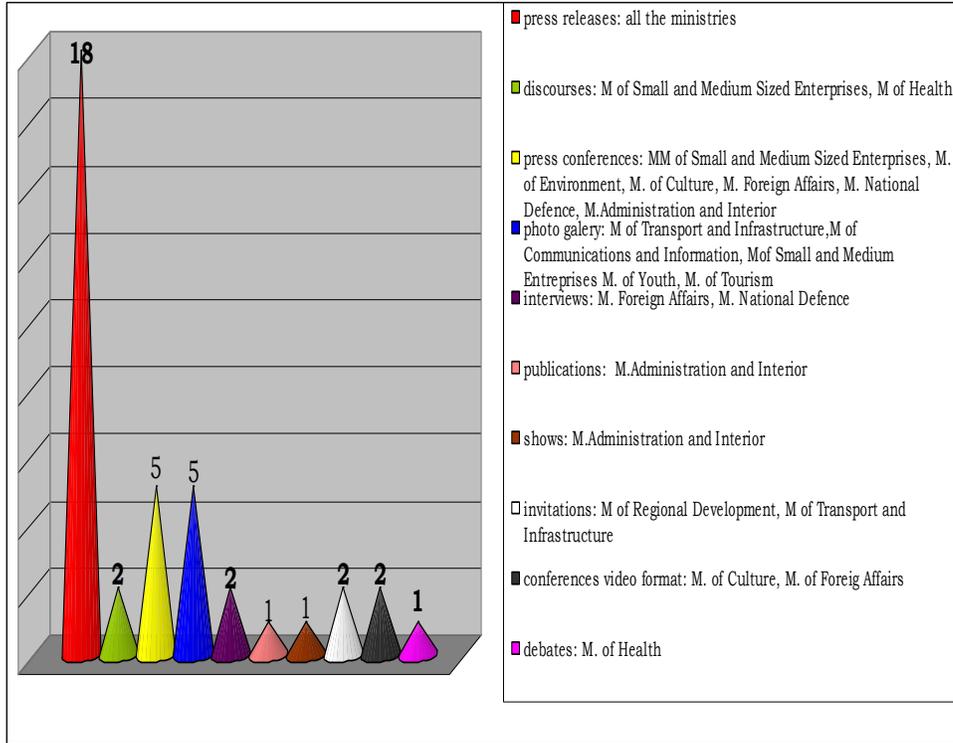


Fig. 1 Types of PR materials made for the Media Sections

From all the PR materials, press releases are the most used. We can say that a press release is the main instrument by which the PR departments communicate the latest news. Press conferences and photo galleries are some other instruments, but not very much used. The Ministries of Culture and of Foreign Affairs are the only ones which post the conferences in video format.

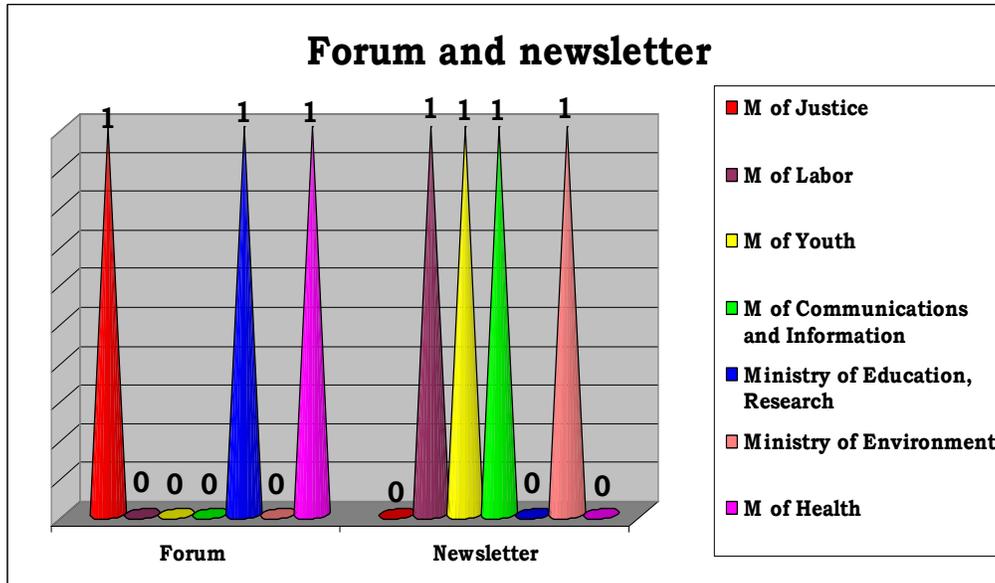


Fig. 2 Forum, newsletter

Forums are the longest form of online social media. They most commonly exist around specific issues and interests, for example education<sup>9</sup>. They are sites for exchanging ideas and information usually around special interests.

Internet forums are places for seeking advice on a topic, for sharing news, for flirting, or simply for spending time with idle chat. In other words, their huge variety reflects the existence of implicit face-to-face conversations. These sites are moderated by an administrator, whose role is to remove unsuitable posts or spam. However, a moderator will not lead or guide the discussion.

Most people in public relations are probably well aware that e-newsletters can be much more powerful and useful than just automated alerts. An e-newsletter is a smart tool for reaching a number of constituencies, including the press, employees, potential investors, and prospective business partners. Clients with limited staff can make a single effort to develop a newsletter that meets the needs of the various constituencies. A good e-newsletter can bring more people to a client’s Web site and expose them to the online pressroom and other offerings. However, this feature cuts both ways in that the newsletter must be carefully coordinated with the Web site so that newsletter recipients actually find what they are seeking on the Web site, but this cooperation can be difficult if the PR people are not responsible for Web site operations.

As we can observe, the e-newsletter is much more present than a forum.

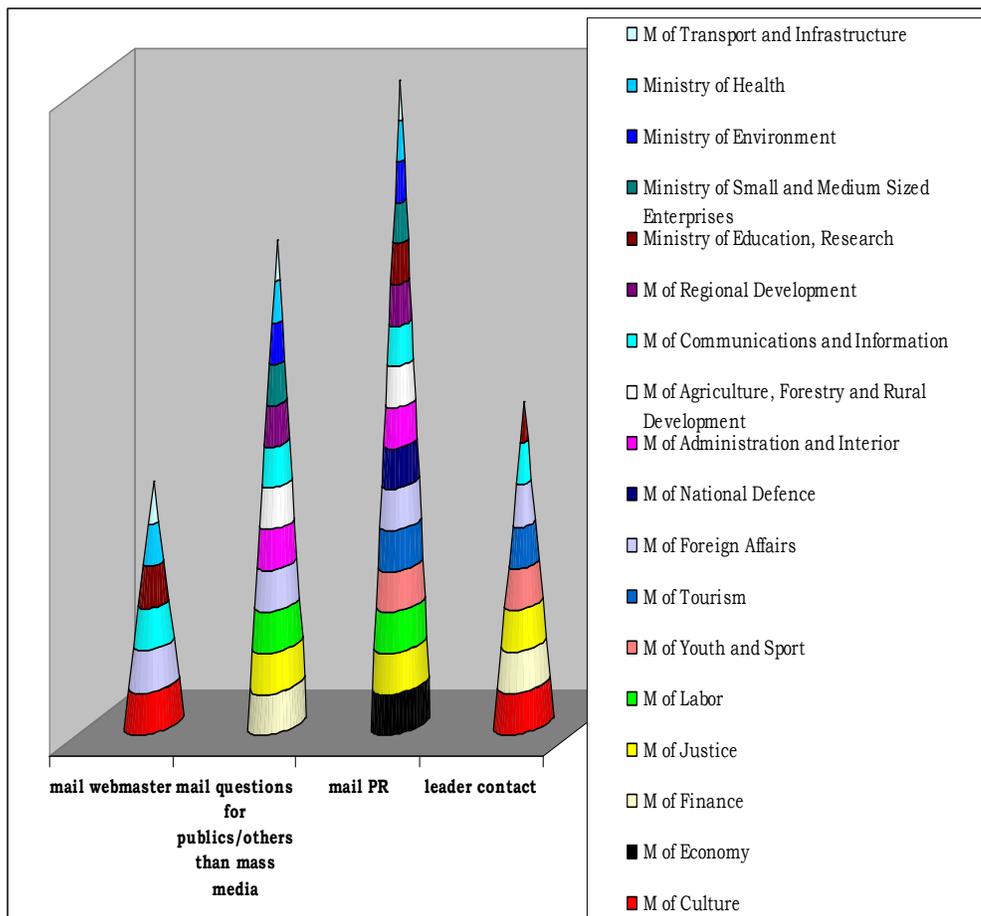


Fig. 3. Scale of Transparency

<sup>9</sup> see <http://forum.portal.edu.ro/>, <http://www.just.ro/TopLeftMenu/Forum/tabid/60/Default.aspx> or <http://forum.ms.ro/>

This scale has been used by Curtin Patricia and Gaither Kenn to measure how open, or dialogic, a government web site is. This implies

(...) the extent that organizations provide comprehensive information about their attributes and maintain timely communications directly to key public audiences. Transparency measures the effort made to make information available on the site and comprises three subscales: contact information, organizational and operational information, and freshness<sup>10</sup>.

The most transparent institutions are the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Communications and Information. The mail of the PR officer is more used as contact information than the mail for questions and the leaders' contacts.

Two sets of research questions were formulated, the former primarily aiming to understand the extent to which social media is used by journalists:

1. *Do you access websites of ministries to search information?*

All the journalists access the sites of Romanian ministries.

2. *What sections do you visit?*

**AGERPRES** – department of communication, PR and Press Office, org chart

**ZIARUL FINANCIAR** - news, press releases, Press office, organization contact

**BUSINESS STANDARD** - infrastructure projects, grant loans

**RING** - press releases, debates

**ADEVARUL** - press releases, org charts

**ZIARE.COM** - sections for press, draft legislation on public debate

**RADIO ROMANIA ACTUALITATI** - news, draft legislation

3. *What type of information do you search in these sites?*

**AGERPRES** – press releases, legislative acts, the Minister's decrees, the Government's decrees

**ZIARUL FINANCIAR** - statistics, implementing rules of the new decrees

**BUSINESS STANDARD** - infrastructure projects, grant loans

**RING** – debates, projects, statistics

**ADEVARUL** - press releases, org charts

**ZIARE.COM** – Ministries' projects, press releases, transcripts of Ministers' statements and speeches

**RADIO ROMANIA ACTUALITATI** - press releases, projects

<sup>10</sup> Curtin, Patricia, Gaither, Kenn, "Public Relations and Propaganda in Cyberspace: A Quantitative Content Analysis of Middle Eastern Government Websites."

[http://www.allacademic.com/one/www/research/index.php?click\\_key=1&PHPSESSID=ddf12c3041d399bbb15bd33fba18a32](http://www.allacademic.com/one/www/research/index.php?click_key=1&PHPSESSID=ddf12c3041d399bbb15bd33fba18a32), accessed 20.10.09.

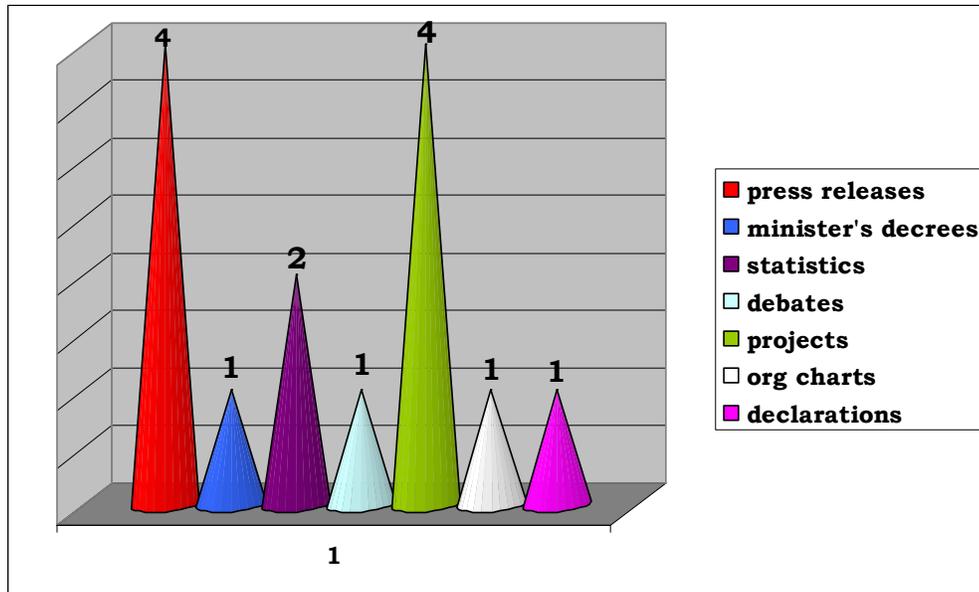


Fig. 4

Journalists usually search press releases and projects of the ministries, but statistics are also very important.

4. *The sites contain sufficient information for editing or are only a source of information?*

**AGERPRES** - For some articles, it is enough information on the site, but not for others.

**ZIARUL FINANCIAR** - Yes, they contain sufficient information.

**BUSINESS STANDARD** - Usually, the information, which interests me, could be very rarely found on the site. Most times, they are requested in writing and sent to the press office of the institution. Often, the answers need further explanations. Many of the members of the press office whom we ask questions do not provide sufficient information.

**RING** - Yes, they offer sufficient information.

**ADEVARUL** – Never do they contain sufficient information.

**ZIARE.COM** - Official communications are a primary source of information.

**RADIO ROMANIA ACTUALITĂȚI** – They do not contain enough data for editing; I always have to contact them by phone to receive more information.

Only two of the eight journalists consider that sites of Romanian ministries contain enough information for their articles. It is a key of fundamental journalism that reporters rely on two types of sources: primary and secondary. A primary source is one with firsthand knowledge of a story. Everyone else with knowledge relevant to the story is a secondary source. Stories are developed firstly around information received from the primary sources, which, in a perfect world, is further corroborated by other primary or secondary sources.

Every fact must be verified from a primary source. The primary source for a given fact is the source that originally generated that piece of information or the one that is able and authorized to report on that information firsthand. Common primary sources can include live experts, company literature, analyst reports, reference books, government agencies, and official organization websites.

5. *Do you use the information on forums? Do you believe that information on the forums is true and that it should be checked?*

**AGERPRES** - I have not checked if there are forums on these sites. Usually I do not use such information even if the sites of the Romanian ministries had such forums.

**ZIARUL FINANCIAR** - I read the forums, but there is no objective information.

**BUSINESS STANDARD** - Yes. But the information must be checked.

**RING** - I do not read forums.

**ADEVARUL** - I do not need to check the forums, especially that I do not have this possibility.

**ZIARE.COM** - The information on forums is trustworthy only if it is posted by the managers who run the forums. It must also be combined with other sources.

**RADIO ROMANIA ACTUALITATI** - I would not trust this information, it must be checked.

Information provided by the forums of the ministries must be verified by journalists because there are many articles which present forum opinions<sup>11</sup>.

The second set of research questions was formulated to understand the extent to which social media is used by the PR officers from ministries:

1. What section of the website updates the institution for which you work?
2. What type of information is posted on the site and what sections are you interested in?
3. Who do you think the target audience of the materials on site is?
4. Do you watch the site traffic daily? Do you know which the most frequent visitors are?
5. Do you know the journalists who access your site in order to look for information? If so, what are the most commonly accessed sections?
6. How do you verify that the materials posted are journalistic source material on “the forum”, “Press office/ communications with the media / information”?
7. If your site has a forum, who handles it and how often is it checked?
8. Do you consider that all the questions on the forum get a satisfactory answer?
9. Has it ever happened to write a press release or to develop a communication campaign, starting from a question on the forum? If yes, please exemplify.

From all the sites, [www.edu.ro](http://www.edu.ro) is monitored by [trafic.ro](http://trafic.ro). Some of the data collected are posted on [trafic.ro](http://trafic.ro) website (usually [www.edu.ro](http://www.edu.ro) is first in the category Education and in the general ranking of the top 20 hits - Daily and overall).

Almost all sites of the ministries are managed by a manager, other than the PR officer. Only the site of Ministry of Education and Research is managed by the Public Relations officers.

### 3.2. Results

Journalists consider that the sites of the Romanian ministries represent a source of information, the forums are helpful, but they do not contain reliable information. Communicators use social media provided by the websites of the institutions they work for. Of the 18 sites, only 3 are interactive, namely those of: the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Justice. Regarding the information accessed and used by the media, the press releases and the projects are on the first place. The website of the Ministry of Communications and Information Society is the first website of a

<sup>11</sup> see <http://www.gardianul.ro/Scandalul-tezelor-unice.-Profesorii-din-comisiile-de-evaluare-reclama-ca-sunt-nedreptatiti-s129862.html>

public institution in Romania to offer access to blind people: the user could read the speech content pages, the keyboard navigation being sufficient.

#### **4. Discussions**

Journalists embrace the concept of social media more than they put it into practice. Non-interactive online information sources (web pages, directories) remain the important “first line” sources for journalists. While it appears that journalists do not use social media extensively in order to shape in an agenda-setting process, they are not against it. As such, and given the responses to the desire to work with the practitioners using social media, it is necessary for the PR officers to begin engaging social media within the process of agenda-setting. The most popular tool used by the PR officers from the Romanian ministries was the e-press release.

#### **5. Conclusion and further implications of the study**

If public communication is a social binding tool (Zemor [1995] 2003: 37), then the citizen may be a client and

*(...) the citizen wishes to be informed, to be taken into consideration, to be listened to. His criticism has a familiar character, meaning that – the more he loves, the more he punishes. The critical tendency is justified with the hope to see the procedures changed simplified (Zemor [1995] 2003: 37; translated into English by – M.P.).*

Client status is not easy at all, but it may be more complicated, because a customer needs to be fully aware of his interests and to be able to decide for one of the offers provided.

Although there is the risk of using social media less, the practice of social media in government public relations has a positive feedback from citizens and mass media. If government public relations extend the fields of public service which social media handles and increase the level and scope of participation, government will better make use of the opportunities that social media might provide for government public relations. Government should address these challenges and it should take advantage of the utilities of social media in public relations.

Nowadays intensive observation of the PR practitioners’ roles should indeed include the use of social network sites and social media tools.

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