

THE ROLE OF PR IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR. CASE STUDY ON PR PROFESSIONALIZATION AT THE LOCAL LEVEL IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

Although the idea of creating internal and external links within and between institutions is a relatively established one, the public relations domain can be considered a new branch of the promotion process, mainly in the public sector in Romania. This paper aims at creating an overview of the profile of public relations departments within public institutions. In this research we aspire to uncover the main elements that characterize the profile of public relations departments within public institutions, from the point of view of their quality and professionalism. Moreover, this research aims to establish whether there are differences concerning the public relations profile between public administration institutions and other specific public institutions.

1. Introduction

In the Romanian public sector, the public relations domain can be considered a new branch of the promotion process, despite the fact that the idea of creating internal and external links within and between institutions is relatively widespread. Nowadays, communication has become a relevant domain in any organization and therefore many public and private institutions or organizations have public relations departments or at least a person in charge of the PR activities. The short history of the public relations in Romania in the last fifteen years witnessed the advent of various multinational corporations or international PR and advertising companies that have introduced PR services on the Romanian markets. We can also observe a constant professionalization of PR, arguments with respect to this issue being presented below.

In this context, this paper aims to create an overview of the profile of public relations departments within public institutions using as research instruments a set of semi-structured interviews conducted with public relations specialists and participative observation developed in some specific departments of the public sector. The core research question of this paper is the following: which are the main elements that characterize the profile of public relations departments within public institutions from the point of view of their quality and professionalism? Moreover, this research aims to establish whether there are differences between public administration institutions and other specific public institutions concerning the public relations profile.

There are two types of public institutions included in this research. On the one hand, there are the randomly selected City Halls from Transylvania: Blaj, Bistrița, Cluj-Napoca, Mediaș, Năsăud, Sibiu, Sighetul-Marmației, Sinaia, Oradea, and Zalău. On the other hand, there are some of the most important public institutions, other than the public administrative ones, from Cluj: Northern-Western Regional Development Agency, The Territorial Agency for Employment and Job Placement, The Health Insurance Office, The County Education Inspectorate, and the Water Company Someș. The legislative framework that provides the development of public relations activities in the public institutions consists basically in the Law no. 544/2001, that regulates free access to public information, and the Law no. 52/2003 regarding transparency in the decision making process in public administration.

The main indicators that will be discussed and compared are the following: the name of the department, its proximity to the board, the objectives of the public relations departments, the professional qualification of the public relations specialists, the main tasks, the characteristics of a public relations specialist, the frequency of using different tools in the relationship with mass-media, the problems which appear in this relationship, and the relationship with other departments.

The main shortcoming of this paper originates especially from the professional characteristics of the subjects. Related to the public relations specialists, it can be anticipated from the very beginning that some of the respondents' answers and part of their behavior are not desirable. However, by creating a complex set of questions, we have tried to overcome this problem.

2. Theoretical Background

We have searched for an appropriate scientific definition of professionalization in the communication industry. In his book, *Einführung in die Kommunikationswissenschaft*, the German scientist Klaus Merten considers that in the last years there has been a global trend towards professionalization of the communicators. Romy Fröhlich sees a causal relationship between professionalization and quality in public relations. Professionalization is achieved by the rules of the profession, professional education, a specific role of the institutions, and professional ethics (Fröhlich, 2005, p. 600).

James Gruning even developed a theory of excellence in public relations. He analyzed more than 300 successful companies in search for good practices. That is Gruning's point of view: "*A search for excellence, (...) consist less in a search for excellent management or excellent companies than in a search for attributes of excellence that can be isolated from a study of good companies*" (Gruning, 1992, p. 220). Among the characteristics of an excellent PR practice he sees the following:

- PR as part of the dominant coalition with connection to the senior management – principle that can be easily identified in an organization by the placement of the department in the structure, the PR or communication department should be situated in the proximity of the top management level;
- Integrated PR function – means that PR, marketing, advertising should work in an integrated way in order to communicate inside and outside the system;
- PR as a separate management function – there should be a constant practice of communication management;
- The role of the PR practitioners in the organization should be an important one;
- Internal communication should function in a symmetrical way, that means interaction;
- A system that works well needs well prepared PR practitioners, this can be achieved through the specific education of the practitioners, education that takes different forms, from BA or MA specific degrees to trainings sessions at the working place.
- And finally, not just the internal communication, but also the external communication should be symmetrical; the practitioners must also provide evaluation activities of their work (Gruning, 1992).

Based on the criteria presented below we chose to develop the interview guide and the observation protocol.

Adela Rogojinaru published the results of a qualitative study on public relations in the public sector in an article, in the journal *Revista Română de Comunicare și Relații Publice*, in 2008, under the title *Structure, Roles and Communication Strategies of Public Relations in Public Institutions in Romania (2006-2008)*. The research focused on the quality of information and communication of public services and the professionalization of the public relations' functions in public institutions (Rogojinaru, 2008, p. 99). One of the main questions of the research is if public institutions draft models of communication with the public. Some of the results of this study are similar to those presented by Adela Rogojinaru: the local councils and the municipalities presented complex hierarchies

in which the PR services were integrated in general structures mostly in charge with European Affairs and/or Economic Integration. In terms of human capital, the lack of initial qualification in the field was observed.

3. Methodological Framework

The main method used in order to gather data is the semi-structured interview. The interviews have been applied to one of the persons from the Public Relations department of each analyzed institution between November the 1st, 2008 and January the 31st, 2009. The interview guide contains fourteen questions, it can be consulted in Appendix 1. During the same period, we have also conducted participative observations in some of the departments, as a complementary method (Appendix 2).

Qualitative methods have been chosen due to their in depth perspective (Iluț, 1997, p. 74). The aim of this research is that of emphasizing the main characteristics and perceptions of public relations specialists, of giving meaning to their actions, and not that of quantifying certain aspects (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). Therefore, finding itself in an incipient stage, without any yet standardized rules, the issue of public relations in public institutions needs to be treated in an intensive and open manner.

4. The analysis of City Halls Public Relations Departments

This part of the paper aims to emphasize the most important characteristics of public relations departments within the City Halls.

a. The profile of the public relations departments

The identity of a department can be clearly described by both its name and the characteristics of the daily activities. Furthermore, the table below shows the differences between the names of public relations departments in similar institutions.

Table 1: The names of public relations departments in different City Halls

The City Hall	The name of the public relations department or of other departments that provide PR activities
Blaj	Information Center for Citizens – information and public relations
Bistrița	Department for Public Relations and Information <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Office for Information, Communication and Public Relations- Office for Tourism, Sports, Youth, Education and Culture
Cluj-Napoca	Department for Communication and Public Relations
Mediaș	Information Center for Citizens
Năsăud	Public Relations Department
Oradea	Public Relations Office
Sibiu	Communication and European Integration Office <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Office for Mass-media Relations- Department for Economic Development and Foreign Relations- Information Center for Citizens- Information Center for Tourism

Sighetul Marmăției	Department for Communication, Public Relations and Protocol
Sinaia	Department for Public Relations – Document Management and Archives
Zalău	Department for Internal and Foreign Relationships, NGO Relationships, Youth, Sports and Mass-media

The main aspect that can be clearly observed in the table above is that departments that are supposed to do similar activities have very different names. Moreover, it is also interesting to stress the different ranges of domains in which a public relations department is involved: from simple information centers for citizens to departments that deal with computer issues, culture, education, sports and even with foreign relations. In addition, it may be underlined that, while some of the public relations departments regard the relation with the mass-media as being good, in other departments, the relation with mass-media is managed by a fully independent office.

Almost all of the public relations departments, regardless of their names, are directly subordinated to the Mayor's Office. Moreover, it is important to emphasize the fact that, in Romanian, "*public relations offices*" actually refer to "*relations with the public*". This issue might be originated either in the intentional usage of this concept, as a concept that is exclusively limited to relations with the public, or in the misunderstanding of the *public relations* concept and in a poor translation of the term.

Besides the name of the departments, it is also important to observe the main objectives of a public relations department and the main activities of the staff that is working in such departments. Almost all the respondents interviewed emphasize the fact that the main goal of their department is that of creating and maintaining a good image of the institutions. Moreover, they consider the visibility and the way their institution and their actions are promoted as a very important success factor. Furthermore, a good image of the City Hall can be translated in a very good relationship with the mass-media and with other public institutions that can add a positive vision on the entire image. The respondents consider that through their daily work within these departments, they can increase the level of transparency and improve the internal and external communication. There were three cases in which the goal of the public relations department is stretched over different other activities, namely providing guidance for the Mayor, representing the Mayor when he or she assigns someone, structuring electronic data, and fundraising for projects.

An ordinary day in a public relations department unfolds almost the same responsibilities in all the analyzed cases. Thus, the activities can be grouped in four categories. Firstly, there are the activities related to the self-informing process. Two of the main activities are that of reading especially the written press and drafting press reviews. Secondly, public relations specialists have the primary task of providing information to citizens. It is an assignment that involves either preparing informational materials or replying to citizens' e-mails, participating to audiences or updating web pages. Regardless of the specificity of the tasks, the purpose of the relationship between public relations employees and citizens is that of solving the problems of the latter. Thirdly, the interviewed individuals have mentioned another important task that can have important implications on the image of the institution. This task refers to preparing,

organizing and developing events. Finally, the last but probably the most important assignment is that of maintaining a permanent relationship with mass-media. This task mainly involves drafting news or press handouts and organizing press conferences.

Based on all the above mentioned aspects, we may conclude that all the public relations specialists' tasks are actually mechanisms that can help them improve the image of the institutions they represent, through perception of the citizens or the mass-media. It is also important to notice that, besides the usual, daily tasks, there are also situations or events which can come up unexpectedly.

b. The profile of the public relations specialist

This part of the research emphasizes two sets of information that can create the profile of a public relations specialist. Firstly, there are some of his or her characteristics mainly related to professional evolution and to educational background. Secondly, there are the most important skills a public relations specialist should have.

The interviewed persons have different functions, they are: spokespersons, councilors, or simple representatives of the public relation department. The table below presents some socio-demographical characteristics of the interviewed persons that are working in a public relations department within City Halls.

Table 2: A socio-demographic profile of public relations specialists in City Halls

Personal characteristics	Experience in the field of public relations	Professional path (before occupying the current position)	Education in the field of Communication
Woman, age 31	6 months	- Radio editor, - Local newspaper correspondent - Political consultant	- Faculty of Journalism
Man, City Hall Spokesman	11 years	- Specialty Inspector within City Hall, - Councilor within City Hall	- Trainings in "Decisional transparency" and Communication with citizens"
Woman, City Hall Spokeswoman	3 years	- Executive function within the same institution	- Post-graduate training on Public Relations and Negotiation - Trainings in Germany, Austria
Woman, age 26, Head of the Office	3 years	- Specialty Inspector, - City Hall spokeswoman, - Head of the office, Public Relations Department within City Hall	- Master's Program in Political Communication, Electoral and Political Marketing
Woman, Head of the Office	8 years	- Head of the Office, Public Relations Department, City Hall	-
Woman, City Hall Spokeswoman	2 years	- City Hall Spokeswoman	- Faculty of Law - Course organized by Judicial Resource Center, on Law 544/2001 and Law 52/2003
Woman, Public Relation counselor	3 years	- Public Relations Department within an association, - Council assistant within Press Relation Department, City Hall	- Faculty of Political Science - Master's Program in Public Administration

Man, age 57, Head of the Office	20 years	- for 10 years is Head of the Department	- Some courses and trainings in the communication field
Woman, age 31, Press Officer	10 years	- Registry Department, City Hall - Press officer	- Fifth year student at a faculty with a communication profile
Woman, City Hall Spokeswoman	1 year	- She has been working in the City Hall from 2004 - From 2007 she has been working at The Department of Internal and Foreign Relationships, NGO Relationships, Youth, Sport and Mass-media	- An introductory course in TV - Internship at a central newspaper - A course on public image

The table above reveals that there are some remarks that must be made. First of all, the majority of the interviewed people are women. It does not necessarily mean that, in general, within a public relations department in a City Hall there are mainly women. However, this data raises questions for a further research. Second of all, almost all the respondents have a professional evolution related to public relations activities. They have either worked in other departments within the City Hall, or they have experience in mass-media. Finally, with only one exception, all the interviewed persons have some academic training in the communication field.

These socio-demographic data of the profile of a public relations specialist can be completed with the characteristics that such a person should have. The respondents have mentioned two sets of characteristics. Firstly, there are special characteristics like general knowledge in several fields including public administration, knowledge of foreign languages and PC skills, and the capacity to analyze information. Secondly, there are characteristics related to his or her relationship with the citizens and the mass-media: communication skills, team work, amiability, patience, sociability, diplomacy, openness to dialogue, respect for the citizen, stress endurance, and openness to journalism.

In conclusion, although one of the respondents has argued that *“the faculty is not an objective performance indicator anymore”*, and that *“university education is only a mass phenomenon”*, the profile of a public relations specialist seems to be composed both by specialized studies and by communication skills.

c. The relationship with mass-media

In a context in which the profile of a public relations department and of a public relations specialist is set, it is decisive to underline the relationship of the public relations specialists with mass-media. Thus, there are three important aspects that have been discussed with the interviewed persons: the frequency of sending different materials to mass-media representatives, the way the entire relationship with the media is perceived, and the most important problems that appear within this collaboration.

The table below presents how often public relations specialists officially communicate with the media representatives either by sending press handouts about certain events or by organizing press conferences.

Table 3: The relationship between
City Halls public relations specialists and mass-media

The frequency of sending press handouts	The frequency of organizing press conferences
Every 2 or 3 days	It depends on the event
5-10 per month	4-5 per month
Every day	<i>"Every week, in order to maintain a strong relationship with the journalists and in order to improve the communication and the image we promote"</i>
A few times per month	"Whenever it is necessary"
Around 41 per month	At least once a week
15 per month	Every Thursday, at 11 AM
1-2 per day	1 per month, but it depends on the events
<i>"Every time when we have information of public interest, for every organized event and for every important project"</i>	Approximately 1 per month
8 per month	1 per month, and more often if there are certain events

This data emphasizes the fact that one of the public relations employees' goals is that of maintaining very good relationships with the mass-media. It is very interesting that, depending on the City Hall, the number of press handouts varies very much from 5-10 per month to 41 per month, meaning, on average, more than one per day. Moreover, there is one situation in which the respondent underlines the fact that these documents are being sent to mass-media representatives only when there are important events. The high number of press handouts, makes us conclude that, within the analyzed institutions, there is at least one important event happening almost every day.

Regarding the number of press conferences organized, the interviewed specialists gave three types of answers: at least once a week, 1 per month, and whenever there is an important event. It is very interesting to note that this type of conferences can be considered to be a ritual that must be accomplished. Thus, it is probably not only about having an event and promoting it, but inventing one in order to be able to follow the already established schedule. One of the respondents has clearly emphasized this aspect and has scheduled for every week a certain day and a certain hour for press conferences.

Asked which are the most important instruments used in their daily life as a public relations specialist, all the respondents mentioned press handouts, press conferences and press briefings. The interesting element is that almost all of the interviewed people have instantly mentioned the documents listed above. This fact strengthens the idea that mass-media is a vital element that determines a good image of the institution. Other instruments that have been brought into discussion are interviews, discourses, responses to requests, monthly publications, flyers and brochures conceived by them.

In this context, it is important to underline the way the respondents perceive their relationship with the media, in general, and which are the main problems they have

encountered within this relationship. The following table presents the respondents' opinions.

Table 4: The way respondents perceive their relationship with the media and the problems they have encountered in this relationship – the City Halls cases

The perceived relationship with mass-media	The perceived problems
<i>"Normal to good, considering that almost all the press handouts of my institution can be found in their original form in the news."</i>	<i>"In our case, the geographical position. In our town, there are only two broadcasting stations with news programs that are not very well shaped; it does not help at all in the communication process. Moreover, due to the fact that the representatives of the written media are only in the capital of the county, the relationships are long-distanced relationships and not very direct ones."</i>
<i>"On a scale from 1 to 10, where 10 is the maximum, I would say that our relationship with the mass-media is 9."</i>	<i>"The quality of communication process, the removal of the suspicion that you have something to hide. [...] The fluctuation of people, mainly in the local press."</i>
<i>"From my point of view, it is a mutual collaboration in good conditions."</i>	<i>"The thing that I like the least is that they do not observe a schedule in what information request is concerned."</i>
<i>"Very good."</i>	<i>"There are no problems."</i>
<i>"I would say that it is a very good relationship. I think they have the same opinion."</i>	<i>"I do not have issues with the mass-media. On the contrary, some people say that, over the last few years, communication has improved."</i>
<i>"Very good."</i>	<i>"We cannot say that we are not criticized, but we receive compliments as well. However, in general, the media adopts a neutral tone in the process of treating information. We do not have major problems with them."</i>
<i>"It is like the weather, very capricious, not very good."</i>	<i>"The main issue in my opinion is the human quality (...). I refuse to talk to non-professionals. If they send me prepared and reasonable journalists we do collaborate excellent. If not, I prefer not to collaborate at all. [...] The problem I face is the lack of professional deontology regarding these people, reality that is reflected in their articles and documents which are of an amateur quality [...]."</i>
<i>"In general, we have a good collaboration relationship"</i>	<i>"We did not have problems until now, or, at least, we have solved them quickly and in good conditions. In general, they publish the material we send, mainly regarding the local press. However, a problem could be the publication of unverified information."</i>
<i>"We have a good relationship! And this is not only our opinion, journalists have the same opinion."</i>	<i>"I cannot say that we had problems, but I consider that a self initiative to promote cultural events (...) is not satisfactory."</i>

In general, the respondents perceive their relationship with mass-media as being good or even very good in some cases. The main value of this relationship seems to be that of collaboration. However, when asked which are the most important problems regarding the mass-media representatives, the respondents gave elaborate answers. Even though there are respondents that consider that there are no issues, the main problems listed by the most of the respondents can be grouped in two categories. Firstly, there is the issue related to information. Either there is no schedule the journalists must observe in their process of searching for information, or they use unverified information. Secondly,

there is the issue of human quality either translated into a permanent suspicion on the validity of the information given by the institutions, or into a lack of professionalism.

In conclusion, we may argue that public relations specialists organize their entire work around the relationship with the mass-media. Moreover, although there are annoying aspects that characterize the journalists' activities, in most of the cases, this relationship is perceived as being a good one.

d. The relationship with other departments

Being a central department of any institution, the relationship of public relations department with the rest of the departments in any institution is very important. In general, the respondents say that this relationship is good and very good and they perceive this relationship as being a mandatory one. In some of the cases, the respondents emphasized the fact that there is a nice atmosphere within the City Hall and that there is a permanent mutual communication and assistance oriented towards the achievement of visible results. In addition, one of the respondents has admitted that, although there is significant age difference, people have started to understand the role of the public relation specialists.

However, in two cases, the respondents have expressed their desire to have a better relationship between departments. They have argued that this relationship must be improved. Moreover, they implied that people from other departments do not have time to collaborate with them and to provide information.

5. The analysis of Public Relations Departments within other public institutions

In order to create a broader overview of the public relations departments in public institutions, this part of the paper aims to complete the conclusions referring to City Halls analysis by including five important public institutions from the County of Cluj. The chosen institutions are: Northern-Western Regional Development Agency, The Territorial Agency for Employment and Job Placement, The Health Insurance Office, The County Education Inspectorate, and the Water Company Someș. Moreover, this investigation of the public relations characteristics within public institutions aims to offer a comparative perspective between public relations in City Halls and public relations in other types of public institutions.

a. The profile of the public relations departments

Based on the analyzed interviews, the profile of the public relations departments consists in its name, its objective, and in the main tasks unfolded during an ordinary day.

The names of the public relations departments from the above mentioned institutions contain the concept of "public relations": Office for Public Communication and International Cooperation, Department for Information and Public Relations, Public

Relations Department and Department of the Spokesman, Department for Public Relations and Image, and The Office for Public Relations. In this context, it is interesting to observe that while some names contain terms like “international cooperation”, “information”, “spokesperson”, and “image”, the other names refer strictly to the idea of public relations. It is very important to mention the fact that two of the respondents have underlined, during the interview, the idea that people constantly mistaken “public relations” with “relations with the public” or “inquiry office”. As in the case of City Halls, these departments are usually subordinated to the general director.

Although having very different profiles, the analyzed institutions have similar objectives regarding their public relations departments. As in the case of City Halls, the main objectives are the following: improving the image of the institution, increasing its attractiveness and visibility, improving the civic dialogue, providing correct information, improving the relationship with the mass-media, and preparing strategic development projects.

An ordinary day for people which are working in public relations departments consists mainly in drafting press reviews, organizing and participating to events, giving answers to public demands, creating promotional materials, or writing reports. One of the respondents has emphasized the fact that when there is a press conference, the entire day is dedicated to it, because its organization is a priority. Moreover, another interesting situation refers to the fact that, in some circumstances, people that work in public relations departments have to do tasks that are unrelated to their job.

b. The profile of the public relations specialist

As in the case of the City Halls analysis, this part of the paper refers to two important aspects that can define a public relations specialist: the main socio-demographic characteristics and the perceived image of a public relations specialist. The following table shows the main socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Table 5: A socio-demographic profile of public relations specialist in different public institutions in Cluj

Personal characteristics	Experience in the field of public relations	Professional path (before occupying the current position)	Education in the field of Communication
Woman, age 32, PR expert	3 years	- In charge of the PR and mass-media relations for the Transylvanian International Film Festival	- Journalism (BA) - Master's Program in Public Services Management - Trainings organized by the Ministry of Development, Public Works and Households, and by the European Commission
Woman, age 41, Public Relations Counselor	8 years	- News editor in television and newspaper	- Master's Program in Social Communication and Public Relations - Trainings organized by the National Institute of Public Administration

Personal characteristics	Experience in the field of public relations	Professional path (before occupying the current position)	Education in the field of Communication
Woman, Spokesperson	2 years	- Child protection domain	- Master's Program in PR - Training in mass-media and PR
Woman, inspector on Public Relations and Image	1 year and a half	- Teacher of Romanian language	- Trainings in project management
Man, age 45, Head of Public Relations Department	20 years	- University professor, image consultant	- Mass-media Sociology and Social Anthropology (BA) - Post graduate studies in Diplomacy

Similar to the situation of the public relations experts in City Halls, in the case of the experts in other public institutions the predominant gender is feminine. It is also interesting to note the fact that all the respondents have specialized studies or trainings in the public relations or communication domain. The main difference between the public specialists' profile in City Halls and public specialists' profile in other public institutions is that the professional path of the latter is more specific. The interviewed persons carry out their responsibilities in employment agencies, in education inspectorates and in health insurance offices, hence the fact that they used to work and study these particular domains is understandable.

Referring to the abilities and knowledge, the most important seems to be the ability to communicate. Based on the respondents' answers, communication means the ability to communicate with anybody, the ability to negotiate; it also includes language skills, empathy, personal charm, authority and credibility. In addition, basic knowledge in a wide range of domains, the ability to understand information and to synthesize it, these are very important skills as well. One of the respondents has formulated a phrase that includes the essence of being a public relations specialist: *"an all-purpose man, because he/she is confronted with different issues everyday"*.

c. The relationship with mass-media and with other departments

As in the case of City Halls' public relations departments, the main links with mass-media are press handouts and press conferences. While the average number of press handouts is 2 per week, the number of organized press conferences varies between 4 conferences per year to 3 per month. Some public relations specialists from the analyzed institutions underlined the fact that communication with the mass-media through press handouts and press conferences must be done only when there are important issues to be transmitted.

In this context, the table below presents the main personal opinions of the respondents regarding the relationship with media in general and the main problems that they encountered.

Table 6: The way respondents perceive their relationship with the mass-media and the problems they have encountered in this relationship – the cases of other public institutions

The perceived relationship with mass-media	The perceived problems
<i>"Excellent"</i>	<i>"Insufficient knowledge on issues about the European Community and the European Union in general."</i>
<i>"I would like to deal exclusively with mass-media relations because I come from there and, therefore, I have a very good relationship with press specialists. [...] It is essential to have a good relationship with the press and it is a fact that both parts benefit from. [...] I have no issues with the mass-media. [...] I give them very friendly answers and I never argue with them."</i>	<i>"I believe that the main problem is the fact that journalists keep moving from one publication to another and these contacts can be lost."</i>
<i>"It is very ok. It is probably too much to say that we are <good friends>. The relationship is based on trust, respect, reciprocity, punctuality (...). There is no professional relationship without reciprocity."</i>	
<i>"Very good. I have worked as a reporter and after that as an editor (...) and it meant a lot for this job. I know what they expect from me and I can put myself in their shoes."</i>	<i>"First, there is a problem with knowing the public relations domain. While from inside I see the issues differently, I know the legislation and the methodology, they, who come from outside, have a superficial vision. Then, there is the lack of documentation because they refuse to do research by themselves and prefer to call me or to use information the way they hear it."</i>
<i>"I have always aimed to consolidate our relationship with mass-media. Therefore I already personally know a lot about journalists and some of them are my friends."</i>	<i>"All the materials that are sent to the press are being altered. Therefore, when we have something important to transmit, we take security measures by buying internet or newspaper space in order to transmit the message in the original form."</i>

The main conclusion that can be drawn from the answers presented above is that the relationship with the media is a good one and it is always an improving process. One important aspect that should be mentioned is that, due to the fact that some public relations specialists have once worked for the press, they present a high level of understanding of journalists' tasks. Moreover, one respondent has emphasized the fact that the atmosphere during the press conferences is very relaxed because they know each other and have the freedom to propose new discussion subjects and to ask anything. As for the most striking problems the interviewed people have mentioned, the main ones seem to be the lack of knowledge about certain issues and the superficiality of using information.

Beside the relationships with mass-media, the public relations departments have good and very good relationships with other departments from the same institutions. The main characteristics of this relationship are cooperation and the aim of having an interface when interacting with other public or private actors.

7. Conclusions

Aiming to emphasize the main characteristics of public relations departments within public institution in general, this paper refers both to City Halls and to other public institutions. In this context, there are four main issues that have been underlined: the profile of the public relation departments, the profile of the public relations specialists, the relationship with mass-media, and the relationship with other departments. Besides the fact that public relations departments from other institutions than City Halls have a more specialized working perspective, the resemblances between the two types of institutions are obvious. Although having different official names, their aims are to create, to maintain and to improve the image of the institutions they represent, to communicate with mass-media and with the citizens. In both types of public relations departments, the number of women is higher. While public relations specialists from City Halls perceive that their position implies having different types of skills (knowledge of foreign languages, computer skills), the specialists from other public institutions consider that knowledge from a large range of domains is very important. Moreover, the ability to communicate seems to have equal importance for both types of specialists. Both the relationship with mass-media and with other departments is mainly perceived as being good and very good. However, the public relations specialists from City Halls have emphasized that their entire work is organized and structured around the relationship with the mass-media.

If we make an overview on Gruning's criteria that we mentioned in the theoretical part we can conclude that public relations in the public sector, at least in the City Halls and in the county administration, are only partially part of the management. The departments are indeed settled in the proximity of the mayor or of the president of the County Council, but none of the members are part of the city or County Council were he/she could take part in the decision making process. This is why it is recommended to involve one counselor in the communication management process of that institution, particularly with the support of the department in order to insure the continuity over several election periods.

Communication activities have, in some regards, an integrated function and the problem of mixing public relations with marketing is not so strongly reported. PR is mostly understood as media relations, the internal communication is merely included in the activities of the practitioners in the organizations we analyzed.

There are efforts to work in accordance to the symmetrical communication model with the external public, including journalists, especially in the City Halls. The relationship of this structure with the local communities is encouraged by other mechanism as well, for example elections. The implementation of the Law no. 52/2003 on transparency and openness is related to the principle of symmetrical communication in some regards. In their study *Transparența decizională în România*, Cobârzan *et al.* stressed some problems of the implementation of the law that are connected with the symmetrical communication: *"In the first place, there is a scarce participative culture among the citizens and this reality*

leads to a rather weak pressure that is being exercised by the civil society on the administrative institutions that ought to function in a transparent manner" (Cobârzan et al., 2008, p. 73). Adela Rogojinaru stressed the difference between corporate communication and public communication. "While corporate communication tends to strengthen its strategic role within organizations, public communication developed in a hectic way, setting up linear (with predominance of technical role) or diffuse model (with predominance of cumulated roles assigned to managers themselves)" (Rogojinaru, 2008, p. 102). The PR professionals in the public sector tend to act much more as technicians and not as strategic planners and the asymmetrical communication is predominant.

The professional qualification of the people we spoke to is very different and can be related to the dimension of the organization they were integrated in. We could remark that the bigger the structure they were working for, the better their professional qualification was by attending specific academic programs or professional trainings. We noted the tendency to have better prepared specialists in bigger institutions. This can be explained by the fact that the size of the community influences the administrative capacity of the communities. "Bigger communities have better access to financial resources and are able to attract better employees, and therefore are more likely to invest using multiple and varied methods for informing the citizens about the local decision-making process" (Cobârzan et al., 2008, p. 112).

This exploratory study allowed us to take a closer look to the role and the understanding of public relations in the public sector in Romania. The Romanian public sector at its local level was only analyzed from this particular point of view. The few scientific approaches that were published both in scientific communication publications and public administration publications were focused on the central public administration.

Nonetheless, the study has its limits. It is based on qualitative methods it has no legitimacy of generalization, but it can be helpful in developing new researches. It could be interesting to compare the role and understanding of PR in both the public and private sectors in Romania.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1 – The interview guide

1. How long have you been working in the field of Public Relations?
2. Please describe briefly an ordinary working day.
3. Please describe your professional path over the last three years.
4. In your opinion, which are the abilities and knowledge a public relations specialist should have?
5. Have you graduated from any faculty with a communication profile (bachelor or master degree)?
6. Have you participated in other forms of specialized courses or trainings in public relations domain?
7. How often do you write and send press handouts each month?
8. How often do you organize press conferences each month?
9. Which are the main tools in your public relations activities?
10. How do you appreciate your relationship with mass-media?
11. In your opinion, which are the most important problems in the relationship with media?
12. How do you appreciate your relationship with other departments in this institution?
13. Which are the main objectives of your department?
14. What is the legal background you use in your daily work?

Appendix 2 – The observation guide

The following aspects will be observed:

1. The main characteristics of an ordinary day.
2. The professionalism items that can be observed during an ordinary day (abilities, knowledge).
3. The interaction of PR specialists with mass-media representatives.

- a. The way press conferences take place.
- b. The way PR specialists discuss with mass-media representatives.
- c. The atmosphere right after the press conference (formal, informal, rigid or relaxed).
- 4. The interaction of PR specialists with individuals from other departments.
 - a. The way PR specialists interact with individuals from other departments (formal, informal).
 - b. How often there is a transfer of information between other departments and PR specialists.