

Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca
College of Political, Administrative, and Communication Sciences
Doctoral School: Communication, Public Relations, and Advertising

Summary

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Strategic communication through social media platforms.
*Case study: The communication of Romanian state institutions during
the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.*

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Strategic communication is a tool used by various actors on the public arena to communicate amongst themselves or, most of the times, to communicate straight to various categories from their target audiences. Today, the role of strategic communication is a relevant one, because this communication form can change opinions, can build ideas, or refute arguments (Cismaru, 2008). If at its dawn, strategic communication was used exclusively in the military and governmental areas, throughout time, its utility has spread across the economic area. One cannot talk about strategic communication without looking at its development in the wider context of the media development. The beginnings of strategic communication overlap with the oral transmission of information or the communication via letters and official documents. Since the emergence of the media, public institutions have been using these channels, communicating strategic information through print media, radio, and TV. The following step is digital communication, which uses Internet pages, as well as social media platforms. Thus, this work closely follows the evolution of strategic communication in the context of the large-scale use of digital communication.

The main objectives of this paper are:

- 1) to identify the features of strategic communication in crisis settings, a type of communication articulated in cyberspace, chiefly social media platforms, and
- 2) to analyze the efficiency of strategic communication in crisis settings.

Theoretic framework

In order to accomplish these objectives, in its second chapter, the paper discusses the main theoretical considerations of this research. A point of interest comprises the Agenda Setting Theory and the Framing Theory, both tackling media effects, mainly on a cognitive level. The Agenda Setting Theory tells us that media is the one that dictates the important topics, that is to say, what we – the public – should think about, whereas Framing Theory goes beyond that and asserts that media is the one that dictates how we should think about certain events (Balaban, 2008; 2009; Coman, 2016; Dobrescu, Bârgăoanu, & Corbu, 2007). Depending on the actors involved in generating the frames, one can distinguish between frames of political actors and of institutional actors, frames of journalists and frames of the public (Matthes, 2007; 2012). This research focuses on the first set of frames, whose actors are institutional ones.

The Agenda Setting model or setting the agenda is asserts that the media influences the

public in establishing priorities, political, economic or social ones, starting from subjects that benefit from media coverage. Agenda Setting requires the emergence of new media directions: that of indirect influences, that are not easily captured in current research. Indirect influences analyzed by Agenda Setting lead to long-term effects (Dobrescu & Bârgăoanu, 2003). The Agenda Setting theory states that the media tells people what to think, but not in what way, setting the order of business for discussions: media leads to the intersection of public opinions (Chelcea, 2006).

Emerged a few decades ago, the Agenda Setting theory is just as relevant today, making the theoretical framework for a significant amount of research endeavors in the field of communication sciences across the world (Hill, 1985). The process to establish the agenda involves three factors in an interdependence relationship: the media (who), the public (whom), as well as the news source (where from) (Lang & Lang, 1991). Thus, there are three types of agenda: public agenda, media agenda, and policy agenda. The public agenda is made of salient topics for the public, topics that are brought to the attention of the public agenda, the media agenda consists of topics presented by the media, and the political agenda is made of discussion topics from the political setting. According to the model later elaborated by Rogers and Dearing (Balaban, 2009; McCombs, 2002), these three agenda types influence each other and are evidently influenced by external events.

The emergence of Agenda Setting was fostered, among other things, by the lack of a bidirectional communication model; at the time of its onset, the media operated based on the paradigm of a unidirectional communication model, represented by print media, radio, and TV (Rotar & Lepădatu, 2013). People came across information via these sources, lacking the ability to offer real feedback. This thing changed once the Internet Web 2.0 and social media emerged. The technological development and the emergence of new media offers new routes through which people can get information: search engines, social networks, forums, podcasts, video sharing platforms etc. The way in which the public accesses information has changed dramatically, so much that we can now talk about the *news-find-me perception* phenomenon, which means that news found the users and the users were not the ones actively looking for information (Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, & Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017). In this context of society's platformization (Van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018), the question of whether the Internet influences print media and whether Facebook influences blog posts become a legitimate one.

Many researchers, thus, speak of the influence of the agenda by a different agenda (Chelcea, 2006).

Agenda Setting remains one of the most frequented theories discussing media effects on a cognitive level. The theory is still a current one, yet a nuanced analysis of how this theory can be implemented in the social media context. The information people receive are or can be mostly the same with those disseminated by traditional media. What differs is the tone in which they are communicated, the accent of the utterance, the additions or oversights carried out. People receive information from the media, but it is up to them to pass the information through the filter of their own thinking, crosschecking several sources to ensure their authenticity, precisely to tackle this widely spread phenomenon of disinformation (Bârgăoanu, 2018). Most of the time, research regarding Agenda Setting identified a positive relationship between issues in the mass-media and their frequency of the public agenda, and nevertheless, the media does not represent (or should not represent) the only factor influencing public opinions on certain topics: *“social processes affect the public’s opinion about a problem or a person if it they are important; people talk to one another about social issues and these conversations can play an important role in their judgements”* (Weaver, Zhu, & Willnat, 1992, p. 856), and social media here includes both dimensions of information and interaction (Weaver, Zhu, & Willnat, 1992).

The third chapter presents the development and impact of digital communication upon today’s society. Today, public and private institutions notably turn to social media networks to convey crucial information. To thoroughly understand the way strategic communication operates online, we will look into the dawn of the Internet, the route from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0, the emerge of social networks, their targeting of different publics and communicational needs. We refer to the way in which social media networks have changed the world and contributed to what Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018) call the platformization of today’s society.

When we discuss the current behavior of those who read and share online news, we cannot overlook the issue of disinformation, misinformation, of fake news and filter bubbles, social echo chambers. Social media platforms aim enhancing each user’s activity, and hence their time spent on the platform. Given that the interaction with advertising is directly proportional to the time spent by the user on the platform, it is natural to assume those stated above to be true.

For these reasons, undergirding algorithms are designed in such a way that the content presented to the user is consistent with their preferences expressed when signing up for the network or observed in their user behavior history, in terms of political preferences, psychological, hobbies etc. This turned out to be dangerous for the way in which the user interacts with his online and offline world because it enhances his convictions, it encourages isolation, while strengthening partisanship and unilateral world perspectives over time (Ackerman, Hindus, Mainwaring, & Starr, 1997). This phenomenon is called filter bubbles or echo chambers in the literature. This bears deep implications over the way in which information is disseminated online via social media platforms. In practice, it is unlikely for information to reach people who do not agree with us. Even though they are not as visible as in an online shop, filters are activated through algorithms that only operate to lead the user to spend more time on the platform. The echo chamber is an expression used to describe the effect of implementing filter bubbles upon the way in which the user receives and distributes the information online. As filters make it difficult for users to experience adversarial political, sociological, or psychological content on social media platforms, the user will only find the types of content with which he agrees; and the interaction with this type of content will only increase the odds to receive similar content in the future. It is like a snowflake in constant growth. This is the reason why feedback offered by the user and to the user stands among the general area of subjects of interest for the user. The posts or people with whom the user interacts and the people who themselves interact with the user share the same interests. The phenomenon has been compared to an echo chamber. Filter bubbles, echo chambers, and fake news are the byproduct of open social media platforms and tend to exist in an interdependent relationship (Spohr, 2017).

The fourth chapter of the thesis aims at presenting relevant concepts for the topic at hand, such as strategic communication and crisis communication. In this theoretical chapter, strategic communication in a crisis setting is discussed. Whereas the lion's share of recent research carried out in Romania focuses on the communication of private companies (Abrudan, 2010) in crisis settings, the empirical part of this thesis tackles a crisis in the public sector, a crisis in the public health area. Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Vercic, and Sriramesh (2007) design a definition of strategic communication as a set of communicational actions that reflect "*the way in which the organization presents and promotes itself, through intentional actions of leaders,*

employees, and communication practitioners” (p. 7). At the same time, Steyn (2003) centers his definition around a way to develop corporate communication strategic, meaning *what* should be communicated, and shows how strategy inspires strategic planning processes – *how* it should be communicated. Studying factors leading up to organizational success, Zerfass and Huck (2007) extend the definition of strategic communication by including the orientation towards processes of innovation and leadership.

Social media strongly and rapidly shifts the way in which we perceive reality and the way in which we communicate and interact with the others. Soon, using artificial intelligence will only expand the communicational gap that took over our society (Rauniar, Rawski, Yang, & Johnson, 2014). Private companies, as well as public institutions feel the need to be present on these platforms from a communicational standpoint. This is how a new industry emerged, as well as a new type of specialist who makes it possible for such a company not just to be present on social media, but also to thrive (Lacity & Willcocks, 1998). This is called social media management or managing customer relations in social media.

Going back to the strategic communication concept, this term gained momentum throughout the last decade (Freberg, 2019). Initially, the term was used to define communication processes carried out within governmental or even defense structures. Strategic communication has been and still is applicable to advertising, communication in monetary policy, communication, and finally, health communication. The pioneers of strategic communications in academia were American universities, where some colleges introduced strategic communication modules in advertising and public relations majors (Coombs, Falkheimer, Heide, & Young, 2015). In Europe, the strategic communication concept is often used in the area of local, regional, and national administrations’ communication, as well as to describe the communication of various non-profit organizations aiming to achieve agenda building (a concept presented in the section of Agenda Setting), in other words, to place themes they deem relevant in public debate.

Hallahan *et al.* (2007), beyond the comprehensive definition provided, emphasized that the objectives of strategic communication do not and should never consist of manipulating the public. Strategic communication is a commitment that organizations make, a comprehensive exercise of cooperation, a well-planned and effective act. Regardless, the way in which information is conveyed, the change or maintenance of preexisting emotional frames about a

certain issue, and the impact of communicational practices tackled to solve these issues by various public and private institutions stand central to strategic communication.

According to Hallahan *et al.* (2007), strategic communication presents the activity of professionals in institutions and insist upon their representation, consistently contributing to creating or consolidating the existing image. As a result, unlike merely focusing on the strategic communication process, this was also centered around the variables empowering or obstructing communicators from executing a communication plan. Finally, the named research (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007) indicated the importance of properly conveying the information via the strategic communication process. Transparent communication is more important than the hierarchical dimension. The strategic communication process is, thus, essential, and requires attention from any and every organization, be it public, private, or non-profit. Strategic communication is not only relevant in crisis settings, but it is advisable that it becomes a constant process.

Research setting

This research aims to analyze the way in which strategic communication was carried out during the lockdown declared as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is an unprecedented situation in the last decades on a global scale, and a situation that imposed unprecedented measures in Romania's recent history and beyond. During the state of emergency, there were held multiple press statements at the headquarters of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), by minister Ion Marcel Vela, MIA secretary of state Bogdan Despescu, and under-secretary of state Raed Arafat. The first statements tackled the measures decreed to fight and prevent the spread of COVID-19 (MAI, 2020a). Several military ordinances were issued throughout that time. The first one, from March 18th, 2020 (MAI, 2020), tackles a few necessary measures regarding crowded places and cross-border movement – according to this order, all restaurants and bars are shut.

Starting in March, on the Ministry of Internal Affairs' social media page updated statistics are posted daily or even several times a day, in the form of newsletters comprising information about the number of infected people, the number of deaths generated by COVID-19, and the number of cured people, as well as briefings.

The Ministry of Health certainly played one of the crucial roles in handling the crisis throughout this period, as it reflects a major public health crisis. The Ministry of Health took measures to contain and prevent the spread of the new coronavirus as early as February. At the

end of February, according to official information, measures of containment and prevention against the infection with the new coronavirus were supplemented at the borders, both on land and sea, as well as aerial borders, considering the unprecedented situation of a record number of people from the diaspora – especially Italy and Spain – returning to the home country. At the same time, in the following period, the Ministry of Health supplemented the legislative framework with necessary measures for lockdown, isolation, and treating cases of infection and suspect cases. The Ministry of Health also ensured that they would carry out an exhaustive information campaign for the population about the way in which the Sars-Cov-2 – the disease generated by the virus – is transmitted and the measures decided by the authorities, as well as the population’s obligations in this context of fighting the spread of the pandemic in our country. At the end of February 2020, the emergence of the newsletter is announced. Throughout this time, it was also forbidden for patients’ next of kin to visit them in hospitals. The Ministry of Health retrieved and disseminated recommendations of the World Health Organizations, such as avoiding contact with other people, covering the nose and mouth when sneezing/ coughing, frequently sanitizing hands, avoiding crowded places. Also, the Health Minister, Nelu Tătaru, made regular visits to county hospitals across the country, several hospital managers were replaced – such as Suceava County Hospital, Constanța County Hospital, Hunedoara County Hospital (Ministerul Sănătății – România, 2020). The Health Minister also checked hospitalization conditions of various hospitals across the country, such as Alba or Neamț County Hospitals, where he made several visits throughout those months.

Another relevant actor during this time is the Strategic Communication Group. Run by former journalist and state councilor Andi Eduard Manciu, according to *newsweek.ro* (Zoltan, 2020), the Strategic Communication Groups manages everything related to state communication in the public sphere, in the context of the crisis generated by the new coronavirus pandemic. The Strategic Communication Groups is an entity founded during the pandemic based on the Resolution no. 2 from 24.02.2020 of the National Committee for Special Emergency Situations (NCSES). According to the Press Corps of the Romanian Government, the role of the Strategic Communication Group is

“to inform the press operationally and the citizens from official sources, thus avoiding disinformation and spreading fake news. The Strategic Communication Group circulates daily newsletters on the evolution of cases diagnosed with coronavirus, the

number of cured, quarantined, or home-monitored cases, as well as other relevant information about the evolution of the epidemic and the measures taken” (Jipa, 2020).

What is more, the Strategic Communication Group is designed to counter disinformation through *“the analysis referring to publications that systematically and deliberately disseminate false information, ignoring the call for correct and objective briefing”* (Jipa, 2020). According to the Press Corps of the Romanian Government, the Strategic Communication Group is made up by communication experts from the following institutions:

“the Romanian Government, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of National Defense, the Ministry of External Affairs, the Ministry of Transportation, the Department for Emergency Situations, the General Inspectorate for Emergency Situations, the General Inspectorate of the Romanian Police Force, the General Inspectorate of the Romanian Gendarmerie, the General Inspectorate of the Border Patrol, the Special Telecommunications Service” (Jipa, 2020).

Since March 2020 and up to the completion of this thesis (n.a. December 2020), the Strategic Communication Group provided various information, recommendations and rules for several categories (recommendations for pregnant women, for those suffering from asthma, recommendations and rules for students etc.). Also, through the Strategic Communication Group, the importance of official source briefings was emphasized, so at the onset of the pandemic, a new website called *stirioficial.ro* emerged, a project developed by Code for Romania in cooperation with the Department for Emergency Situations and the Romanian Government. The Strategic Communication Group aimed not just to promote clear and correct information, but also to combat false information flowing heavily especially online.

Romanian institutions and authorities, chiefly the above-mentioned ministries (as well as other relevant ones, such as the Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Public Finance), the Strategic Communication Group and, last but not least, Romania’s President Klaus Iohannis have been trying to handle the crisis generated by COVID-19 in a balanced manner, on all grounds. Throughout this time, there was a focus on transparent communication, on respecting the measures aimed at preventing from infections with the new coronavirus, as well as on the importance of getting informed solely through official sources made available.

The state of emergency decreed in March was extended on April 15th, Romania thus being under a state of emergency for two months. After these two months, in Romania there were recorded over 1,000 deaths caused by the new coronavirus, and the full number of infected individuals surpassed 16,000. In May, other 14,313 people were under institutionalized lockdown, and 18,980 in home isolation. After May 15th, a state of alert followed, a time in which terraces and shopping malls were open, and the citizens were mandated to wear protection masks in closed public spaces. During the first month of the state of alert (May 15th – June 15th, 2020), the number of people infected with the new coronavirus was of 5,921. 374 deaths caused by COVID-19 were recorded during this time. A few months later, in December 2020, the total number of infections with the new coronavirus equals 539,107. 12,948 people infected with the virus passed away.

Methodology

Consistent with the above-stated research objectives, tightly connected to the Agenda Setting model (McCombs, 2002), and considering the specificities of communication via social media networks, we elaborated the following **research questions**:

I1. What was the frequency and form through which competent authorities of the Romanian state communicated, via Facebook, during lockdown?

I2. What was the engagement generated by the institutions' posts during that time?

I3. What were the leading topics identified in the Facebook communication of the competent authorities of the Romanian state throughout lockdown?

I4. In youth's perspective, how important were the topics present in the authorities' Facebook communication during lockdown?

I5. Is there a correspondence between the results of the sociological inquiry of individuals aged between 18 and 24 and the national representative opinion surveys, carried out during and regarding lockdown in Romania?

The methodological design of this research uses methodological triangulation via mixing content analysis with sociological inquiry, through the opinion survey technique. Secondary data analysis (Chelcea, 2007) is then employed by comparing the results of the survey to those of nationally representative opinion surveys carried out by a well-known public opinion research institute. The comparison endeavor of survey results entails data triangulation.

The Agenda Setting theory is by its very nature a theory that involves methodological

triangulation, and researcher triangulation is a necessity of any content analysis carried out manually, to ensure research reliability (except when using a computational approach). Data triangulation involves

“obtaining data from different sources or in different moments/ under different conditions yet does not include studies in which these involve independent variables in an experiment. All these considered, data triangulation is regular in studying presence, yet rarely explicitly commented upon” (Sandu, 2012).

In the present work, by comparing data obtained through administering the survey online to the data offered by nationally representative surveys, we look at the way in which cognitive effects of media communication emerge in various moments, which we can consider another contribution to the development of the Agenda Setting model, in the context of crisis communication and social media communication (Fig. 1). This research entails an exclusively quantitative approach, which we deem appropriate for the stated objectives and research questions.

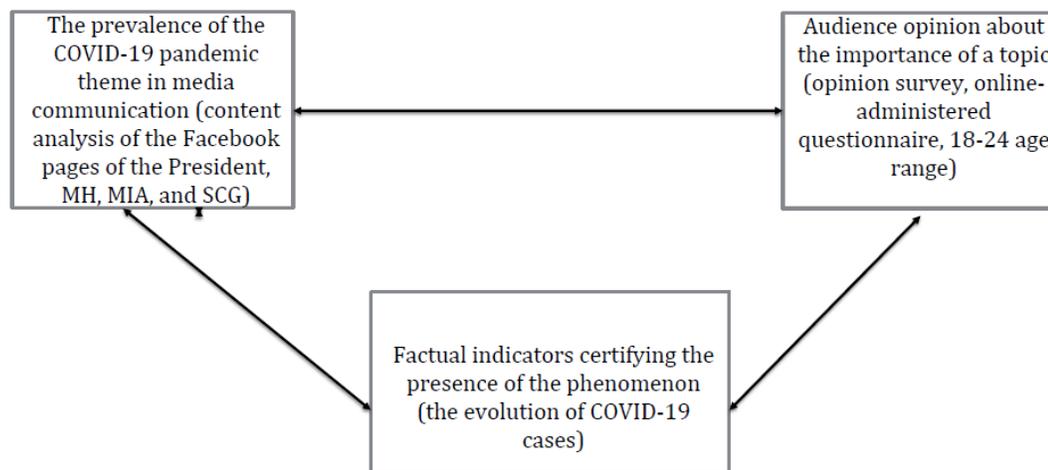


Fig. 1. Methodological framework according to the Agenda Setting model

The first three research questions are tackled via content analysis of Facebook posts throughout the lockdown period, published by the Romanian Presidency ($N = 40$), the Ministry

of Internal Affairs ($N = 272$), the Ministry of Health ($N = 505$), and the Strategic Communication Group ($N = 208$). The posts were collected manually, after identifying the official Facebook accounts belonging to the above-mentioned institutions. We chose to carry out the analysis of Facebook communication based on the reasons to be presented. In Romania, there is a hybrid media system, based on Andrew Chadwick's (2001; 2017) definition. The system offers a variety of channels for the widest part of the large audience, and TV is the preferred medium of Romanians, yet the Internet, social media, and streaming services represent a serious competitor to linear TV, amongst the young public. This also constitutes the sample of survey respondents, which is why we have decided to focus our attention of public communication on this platform. Facebook is the most popular social media platform in our country. In Romania, at the beginning of 2020, the rate of active use of social media is 57%, which places us in the bottom segment of the ranking including all European Union countries (Statista, 2020a). Before the beginning of the pandemic, in February 2020, there were about 11 million Facebook users and 81,241 pages (Zelist.ro, 2020). Moreover, another crucial argument in deciding upon the content analysis corpus consists of the mere observation of the fact that especially press conferences streamed live on Facebook were also broadcast live by the public TV station (TVR1) and the news stations in Romania (Digi 24, Realitatea etc.).

The posts were coded manually, and for 10% of the posts ($n=150$ posts) a second coder was involved, and after comparing coding results we established that coding was identical to an extent higher than 70% (Krippendorff $\alpha=.723$). Thus, the content analysis satisfies the necessary parameters in terms of reliability.

The answer to the fourth research question was examined by administering an opinion survey online via a questionnaire, amongst young people ($N=417$ respondents), aged between 18 and 24 years old, during May 15-25, 2020. To attract more participants from the targeted age range, the link together with the invitation to fill in the questionnaire were distributed through a Facebook sponsored post. 2,815 people clicked the link, 600 started filling in the questionnaire, and a number of 417 subjects filled it out completely, generating a response rate of 14.81%, which is considered in literature to be a relatively good rate for online administered surveys (De Leeuw, Hox, & Dillman, 2008; Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014). The participation was voluntary, and the structure of the convenience sample is 49% female and 51% male from a gender perspective, 53% rural and 47% urban from a residence perspective,

72% high-school graduates, 24% college graduates, and 78% student population. With regards to the participants' financial source, 23% declared self-supporting through full-time jobs, 29% have part-time jobs, whereas 5% of subjects declared being unemployed. In lockdown settings, 51% of respondents declared to be working from home upon their employers' request.

We decided to administer the survey online using the Facebook platform, while aware of the downsides of this technique that firstly consisted in the impossibility to build a representative sample. However, considering that the Agenda Setting model in the online setting during a major crisis starts from the content of the information distributed by the competent authorities on Facebook, we deemed it appropriate for this survey to be carried out on the same platform. We chose to restrict the survey to only young adults because of the high penetration rate of the Internet and Facebook in Romania, regardless of background, income, or education level. In October 2020, youth with ages between 18 and 24 years old constituted 17.9% of Facebook users in Romania, outnumbered only by the 25-35 age range, making up to 24.2% of the platform's users in our country (Statista, 2020b). Moreover, Internet and social media represent a crucial information source of this audience segment that does not share the same preferences for linear TV like their parents or grandparents, spending, on average, an hour less in front of the TV on a daily basis, as compared to people aged over 55 (Tupa, 2019).

Findings

In the timeframe targeted for this analysis, Facebook posts ($N=1295$) published by the four institutions mentioned were analyzed, as follows: President Klaus Iohannis ($n=40$), the Ministry of Health ($n=505$), the Strategic Communication Group ($n=208$), and the Ministry of Internal Affairs ($n=472$). These were posted during March 9th – May 22nd, 2020, a timeframe consistent with that of the lockdown (March 16th – May 14th, 2020). The data were collected manually from Facebook in September 2020, thus there may be differences from the moment closely following their publishing on the platform. The analysis of all posts published by the above-mentioned institutions determined that 30% of posts included a video, 29% were live streams on Facebook, 69.9% included a text, and 57.8% required using the *See more* option. The presence of photographs is rare and only shows in 0.3% of posts. The fact that on a frequent basis the same content was disseminated via the four different accounts stood out, most often this occurred for the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), the Ministry of Health (MH), and the

Strategic Communication Group (SCG). Without a doubt, this is a natural phenomenon, as these institutions have coordinated common actions, and the Strategic Communication Group, as shown in the thesis, is a common structure for both ministries. In the timeframe under investigation, the most active Facebook publisher was the Ministry of Health, which is also natural, considering the setting of a major health crisis.

Facebook pages, that of President Klaus Iohannis, of the Ministry of Health, of the newly founded entity called the Strategic Communication Group, and of the Ministry of Internal Affairs constituted the subject of this research work. In the timeframe under analysis, that of the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Romania (March 9th – May 22nd, 2020), overlapping to a large extent with the lockdown period, these pages included almost exclusively posts about the pandemic. The same information was posted, but presented differently in terms of shape, not of content. The communication frequency was also different, from the President's page ($n=40$ posts), that had the smallest sub-corpus, to the page of the Ministry of Health, which had the most posts ($n=505$). The pages followed the same purposes, to inform the followers on new changes, measures, recommendations, on the development of the new legal framework in the setting of an unprecedented health crisis in Romania's contemporary history. In these circumstances, one must emphasize that the frequency/ intensity of communication on these networks represents a crucial strategic aspect.

Differences of shape and frequency noticed in the analysis are relevant. Thus, the Ministry of Health informs its followers about new changes in an objective, detached manner, relying heavily on numbers and statistics in its communication, the Ministry of Internal Affairs sends the same message, but communicates in a varied manner and adds a human dimension, presenting the stories of first responders fighting against the COVID-19 pandemic. Certain life stories on this page are also picked up by traditional media. The page of President Klaus Iohannis stands out, as it has the fewest and most complex posts. Also, on Iohannis' official page one will not find post shares from other pages, not announcements or press releases to inform on the evolution of the pandemic in the country. These aspects are abundantly found in the communication analyzed from the above-mentioned ministries or the Strategic Communication Group. These three other institutions are alike in terms of official communication on their pages, although two of them also focus on other aspects. While the Ministry of Health focuses on specific posts regarding the evolution of cases and new press

statements, the Strategic Communication Group and the Ministry of Internal Affairs do not overlook this aspect – which is quite salient in their communication –, but also talk about the first-responders. Their posts about doctors, firefighters, rescuers in general gather many likes, comments, and shares. Also, these three pages do not lack recommendations, nor Q&A-type posts, on the most frequently asked questions about COVID-19 (e.g. “Is it true that vitamin C can prevent the new coronavirus?”). This type of approach emulates interaction on social media but cannot replace it.

As a conclusion, the posts of the four institutions had common goals: to inform people about the evolution of COVID-19 cases in Romania, to make recommendations for preventing the spread of the virus, and to publish announcements about the new legal framework. The Facebook communication of the four institutions during the onset of the pandemic shall be set in line with strategic communication objectives, those of presenting the desired communicational content, of approaching a proactive narrative (Pînzariu, 2018), even more so because in the online medium alternative stories that can be flagged as disinformation have been circulating.

Even if the potential of engagement of these networks has not been used, because with no exception, the state institutions preferred a top-down approach, their presence on this virtual setting is crucial, especially for young people who draw their information heavily from here, instead of traditional media. During the lockdown, amid movement restrictions, the time spent online by this audience has increased. Thus, the odds to see this information were high, and from the perspective of an effective strategic communication, the channel was properly selected. In light of the reaction analysis, we noticed that human stories engendered a higher effect than mere information or press releases. Maybe this is where the message should be optimized, in the future. In what concerns the effects of strategic communication, administering the online survey gives us clues that the main objectives of the communication efforts, mainly to correctly inform the population on the legislative framework of the lockdown, on the protection measures against the spread of COVID-19, have been met, amongst the age group under analysis. Once again noted, the sample examined was a convenience one. Causality is not as accurately emphasized as it would have been in the case of an experiment (quite difficult and challenging not just technically, but also ethically during this time), this being one of the research limitations.

From the point of view of the Agenda Setting model, the respondents of the online-administered survey after the end of lockdown, at the end of May 2020, have emphasized the saliency of the COVID-19 pandemic topic. At the same time, the relevance of measures referred to in the communication of the state institutions (frequent handwashing with water and soap, social distancing, wearing the mask – which at the time was not mandatory in the public space) reflected onto their answers. The respondents' fears regarding the disease, the state of the economy and future in general are the result of the pandemic setting, because at that time the incidence of cases was not very high, and the wide majority of respondents (81%) declared not personally knowing someone infected.

Certainly, when discussing the agenda effect and especially agenda building, we cannot say that the opinions of the respondents were exclusively based on their interaction with the Facebook pages of the competent authorities of the Romanian state. It may be expected that other sources of information, media and non-media (family, friends) were present. When analyzing the results of the survey, one must take into account the timeframe in which it was carried out – the first wave of the pandemic and the lockdown period in Romania. It is fairly difficult to analyze an ongoing phenomenon, as in the present research work, and this is another research limitation, together with the descriptive nature of this paper that does not include complex modeling, the convenience sample of the online-administered opinion survey that does not allow generalizations, not even across the population segment analyzed (young adults aged between 18 and 24 year old).

Conclusions and research limitations

It is worth formulating a few conclusions about strategic communication. If we return to the definition by Hallahan *et al.* (2007) of strategic communication as presentation of leaders' intentional actions, the way in which the four state institutions have communicated during the lockdown emphasized leadership, this being especially present in the messages posted on President Klaus Iohannis' Facebook page. Elements of professionals' representation are richly observed on the pages of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Health, where the activity of the first responders, the doctors and nurses during this time has not only been portrayed, but also glorified through a genuine approach meant to reflect – yet moderately so – the hardship met by these in their struggle against COVID-19. The innovative processes,

important in the view of Hallahan *et al.* (2007), are less present in the public messages found on Facebook within the corpus of analysis. What President Klaus Iohannis, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Health, and the Strategic Communication Group managed to reflect in their Facebook communication during the lockdown is a tight relationship between public action and public communication, which is essential in Bentele and Nothhaft's (2010) perspective, the latter being two theorists who brought a relevant contribution to the concept of strategic communication.

A few remarks about crisis communication are necessary, although this research is not mainly centered around analyzing this type of communication, but rather uses crisis as a setting. The competent state institutions have intensified their communicational efforts since the onset of this major health crisis that has marked the entire humankind in 2020. This fact is obvious, even without a systematic quantitative analysis of Facebook messages before the lockdown. A phase leading up to the crisis, if present, was very short and did not constitute the object of this research. And we can neither talk about a post-crisis phase at the time of concluding this research. While it is true that the summer of 2020 brought about a relaxation of the population amid a decrease of the COVID-19 cases rate, the health crisis carried on, at lower intensity – if such wording is permitted – not just in Romania, but across the European Union. The second wave, coinciding with the onset of fall, translated into a tightening of protection measures both nationally and locally, where lockdown orders were issued. What we were able to observe through the content analysis was the crisis response, according to Coombs, Falkheimer, Heide, and Young (2015). While in an organization the role of crisis communication constitutes protecting the organization and its partners from a series of potential damages (Freberg, 2019; Reber, 2020), the role of strategic communication of the competent state institutions in this major health crisis, according to public statements, was to prevent the spread of the virus and to prevent blocking the activity of hospitals, especially that of intensive care units. In regards to reputation management, the content analysis undergirds this effort in the case of all institutions whose Facebook pages were examined. The survey brought into light, in a nuanced manner, the appreciative perspective of young adults (18 to 24-year-olds) toward the efforts of the authorities.

This research work aims to thoroughly scan a crucial moment, that of the pandemic's onset, can be considered a benchmark in future comparative approaches, both from a temporal

and an international perspective, as the way in which Romania decided to communicate through the voice of its competent authorities could be compared to the way other European states set out to communicate. Thus, we could further develop an analysis on the whole strategic communication of the competent authorities of the Romanian state throughout the pandemic, selecting the lockdown timeframe as a starting point. Another perspective for future research may be a comparison of data collected at the onset of the pandemic to data collected in other European countries and beyond, to highlight the way in which competent authorities reacted at this crucial time.

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