

Readjustments in Public Institutions due to Covid-19 Pandemic and the Communication Effects in Dâmbovița County Council

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Abstract

The entire globe is facing challenging times, due to an invisible threat named Covid-19. This virus that has generated a worldwide health crisis is forcing all levels of administration to work in an environment of uncertainty and to cut access to priority sectors like health, education, economy and social life, considering the challenges it poses. This pandemic has a very divergent local and regional impact and a strong territorial dimension, with major consequences for citizens, businesses and public institutions. This article explores the authorities' response to the crisis, with particular examples from the impact upon Dâmbovița County Council, by examining the efforts and good practices that are being made to tackle the pandemic and the remodeling of the local communication management.

Key words: Covid-19, public institutions, health crisis, communication, grounded theory

J.E.L. Classification: H7, H11, H12, I0, R1

1. Introduction

Today, the world has changed significantly, in comparison with last year. Mankind is crossing difficult times, like civilization has never seen before. This microscopic organism has spared no level, no system, no country or continent, but it has turned our lives upside down. This organism is basically a virus that has been brought to attention, officially, on 31st December 2019, when the World Health Organization (WHO) first learned of it. It is a novel Coronavirus that has been called COVID-19, after reporting a cluster of cases of 'viral pneumonia' in the city of Wuhan, People's Republic of China (World Health Organization's official website). Following an evolution of events regarding this matter, WHO publicly announced on 11th March 2020 the Covid-19 outbreak as a pandemic: "WHO has been assessing this outbreak around the clock and we are deeply concerned both by the alarming levels of spread and severity, and by the alarming levels of inaction. We have therefore made the assessment that #COVID19 can be characterized as a pandemic" (via Twitter.com) stated Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the General Director of the World Health Organization, during a media briefing.

The Covid-19 pandemic affects many sectors of activity - economy, tourism, culture, sport, but mainly health care system. It involves different types of intervention from the central government level, and also ministries, to the regional and public administration. The past 9 months of the pandemic in Romania have led to significant changes within administrative authorities and the implementation of special administrative policies in order to fight against Covid-19 and prevent mass spreading. A good communication and cooperation between central and decentralized administration structures is needed, due to the fact that a country cannot properly function if it lacks efficient coordination between these two parties.

We are facing transformations in every area, from health to economy, public safety and security, education and freedom. This document aims at emphasizing the impact of the new corona virus on the public institutions in Romania, pointing out a number of effects that can be noticed in Dâmbovița County Council, especially within the local communication management. At European

level, the digital divide between Romania and other EU countries is still very significant, regardless the past years' efforts towards the implementation of the Digital Agenda Strategy in our country. Romania was considered to be a remote nation in the transition towards an information society, a deprivation that is affecting the way our administration is responding to the Covid-19 pandemic.

To measure the impact of this pandemic towards a public institution and to determine the distribution of powers between regional and local agencies, department prefects and decision-making officials, the authors analyzed the response of the Dâmbovița County Council throughout nine months of pandemic, namely from March to November 2020, using the ground theory as a qualitative research method. Health crises are unique in that they do not only concern the health care and social fields (for which establishments and health professionals are mobilized by nature) but they are also the reason for an examination of the administration and its public institutions' powers.

2. Literature review

Scientific research is a dynamic process and an analytical approach which allows to examine a phenomena, to solve a problem and/or to obtain precise answers based on investigations (Durkheim, 1982, p.36). This process is characterized by the fact that it is systematic and rigorous and generates new knowledge for both the researchers and the targeted audience. The types of research are determined by the researcher's objectives and are quantitative, qualitative or a mixed approach between the two. Research methods, no matter their purpose, can properly function only if they have explicit procedures and have been proven to be working during time. The broad application of qualitative and quantitative research methods in public administration field are changing the way researchers are analyzing open data and information of public institutions, especially during times of crises.

Quantitative research aims to collect quantifiable data for describing, explaining and predicting some events based on observation of objective facts. The data and information that are being analyzed by the researchers must be reliable and valid, guaranteed by the owner – in this case by the public institution which is being investigated. This type of research results in descriptive figures, tables and graphs that show a correlation of facts, associations or differences between one or more variables chosen (data or information). In qualitative approach, the researchers begin with a real, specific situation or event that involves a particular phenomenon (in this article's case, a health crisis) that aims to understand and to give meaning to a certain situation that is being analyzed through observation, description and interpretation of the context and the phenomenon as it is. The mixed approach, which is a combination of the quantitative and qualitative research, gives access to all of the advantages from the two types and provides a wide and complex analysis of the situation in all its dimensions.

Within this article of study, the authors determined as best fitted instrument to investigate, analyze and draw conclusions over a worldwide event (the Covid-19 health crisis) the grounded theory of Glasser and Strauss - a qualitative research method that has been firstly introduced to researchers in 1967 and has been widely used ever since (Strauss, Corbin, 1990, p.12-16). As time passed, this method has suffered adjustments in order to fit the realities of when it was used and the complexities of the events that were analyzed. The most important principle of the grounded theory is the principle of change. Everything is touched by time and nothing remains in the same state forever. People, societies, cultures, religions, medicine and technology - all is changing as time passes, due to different conditions. The end goal of the grounded theory is to determine, by analyzing given data, if and how an individual, organization or society is responding to certain conditions in a certain time frame and what are the effects of a situation or crisis upon that individual, organization or society.

The event that is being analyzed by the authors and that gives raw data and information in scope of this research is the Covid-19 pandemic, a unique health crisis within the modern world. A pandemic is defined as an epidemic occurring worldwide, or over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries and usually affecting a large number of people (World Health Organization, 2011). The classical definition includes nothing about population immunity, virology or disease severity.

Central, regional and local authorities are in the front line of the 2020 health crisis, therefore they are responsible for almost all measures that must be taken in order to build a 24-hour communication and dissemination of information every day, an effective public service delivery, reliable medical services, needed financial instruments and targeted economic development. In this framework, the coordination of the activities is mandatory for each action to reach its intended goal and maximum effectiveness. The Covid-19 pandemic has reached all levels of administration, having a significant territorial coverage. In response, the government actions need to become more proactive and innovative to meet the rapidly evolving challenges, in order to minimize the impact of this new coronavirus crisis. Innovation is generally the result of multiple evolutions, very well calculated, accompanied by means, resources and various competences (Akrich, Callon, Latour, 1988, p.4-11). Innovation is often compared to a bet, where the public institution or organization that uses it needs to assess some risks (Alter, 2000, p.27-28) in order to achieve its purposes. This paper is aiming to highlight the areas where the pandemic has had an impact in Dâmbovița County in Romania, the response given by the County's decision-making officials and the effects in terms of public communication. The most affected areas and its impact due to the 2020 pandemic are detailed below.

Health and social impacts: although the current pandemic has affected the entire country, some regions have been stricken more than others, in terms of their vulnerable communities, poor and disadvantaged areas, along with the capital city due to its large population.

Impact on education: this pandemic has affected heavily the education system. Although efforts have been made at governmental level towards keeping the schools and universities open, the risks the experts identified were too high, therefore online schooling became mandatory. Although this has been done for the safety of the students, the measure is threatening the normal development of children, as it is cancelling some of their habits, like networking, learning by doing and experimenting (Perpelea, 2004, p.54).

Impact on economy: the impact in terms of economy varies from one region to another, but there are some sectors like HoReCa - travel, events and entertainment - that have known almost the same impact, because these are sectors that were the first to be closed or got most restrictions in terms of working. Other sectors, which derive from these ones or are complementary or depend on them, have also been affected. On the other hand, there are sectors whose revenues have practically exploded, like the private health care sector, the manufacturers of medical supplies, the food delivery business, the online shopping and online payments systems. The degree of institutional liability across Romania varies from one region to another, depending on the capability of each local institution to respond to these challenges.

Financial impact: it is no news that for 8 months now, the Romanians have overspent their money, and that was a reaction to the fear and panic that the pandemic has spread among the people. The population has bought large amounts of food and beverages, over the counter medication, home goods and online services, even though the salaries of a significant part of the population have been reduced considerably. Local administrations have also started to spend large amounts of public money on improving the health care system, to ensure the citizens access to the medical services that are being provided to treat Covid-19, financial support for those who have lost their jobs, and incentives for the health care workers and other related public services for a sustainable coronavirus prevention and containment.

3. Research methodology in dealing with a global health crisis locally

In order for the authors to establish a pattern or to come to certain conclusions regarding the topic of analysis, research has been made in order to gain some knowledge and reach some conclusions on how a worldwide health crisis has been affecting the public institutions in Romania and to find answers in respect of the communication process within Dâmbovița County Council, a local public institution affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The grounded theory of Glass and Strauss is an easy, yet powerful qualitative method based on facts directly observed by the researchers - in this case, by the authors - during an analysis of an event over a determined period of time (Strauss, Corbin, 1990, p.12-16). This research method has the ability to provide qualitative data and generate significant information for the authors to

construct an opinion and determine facts over the chosen topic. This method is very appropriate to use when little is known about the crisis, when facts change from one week to another and when there is no prior pattern or precedent. The 2020 Covid-19 crisis has been new to every nation on earth, except for China who was maybe ahead of the rest of the world due to the fact that there was the ground zero of this nationwide crisis. The authors' goal is to develop a theory based on a process of analysis of certain findings generated by raw, open and public data, which were accessed freely on the official website of the institution that was subject to the authors' investigation.

In the current context of the health crisis caused by Covid-19 pandemic, Dâmbovița County Council is working to guarantee the continuity of its services and mission towards the county people. As containment has caused the stopping or slowing down of the activities of many economical actors, this new coronavirus has brought a certain impact on the county council too. Having faced changing scenarios since March 2020, when the quarantine started all across Romania, Dâmbovița Council had to find alternative solutions to ensure the communication and public service delivery, to offer shaped support to its citizens' needs, to ensure the coordination of the local systems and ongoing projects and to maintain a 24/7 communication. Nevertheless, the pandemic got to influence the decentralized and institutional cooperation, with important consequences not only for the citizens as individuals, but also for Dâmbovița County's systems (healthcare, economy, education, security and safety, trade and tourism).

In front of this situation, Dâmbovița County Council has had a number of approaches to reaffirm its commitment to serve the population in terms of their health and wealth. These initiatives, which have been put into practice at local and regional level, have been analyzed by the authors to obtain information and draw conclusions using the ground theory, regarding how the County Council has been responding to the Covid-19 pandemic over a determined period of past 9 months. The research method used by the authors aimed to monitor the public communication and the official channels of communication of the County Council, the media briefs of the president of the Council announcing actions and activities related to the pandemic and their implementation on regional level from a valid, trusted source: the official communication channels of the institution (the website and the Facebook page). The timeframe of this analysis is March to November 2020. The authors collected public data and information that made it possible to overview the situation of the monitored county institution, the evolution of public communication and to uncover relevant conditions of response in the situation of a crisis. All information that was published by the institution during the chosen period of time was considered relevant to this study and was taken into consideration.

4. Findings

The technical evolution and innovation is generally accompanied by a change of the organization itself, often disturbing the traditional processes and activities that are heavily grounded for years inside the organization. With the digital transformation, institutions advanced from manual labor to a more automated one, using digital tools and instruments that have restructured the activities and work flows (Bouzon, 2006, p.55).

One of the main objectives of Dâmbovița County Council has been to allow an exchange between the local communities and the institutions engaged in preventing Covid-19 spread and make the best approaches to deal with this issue rapidly in a changing and challenging environment. This type of public consent can be done only if the public institution "makes efforts to explain to the public the advantages of cooperation for creating a win-win situation for both parties involved in public decision-making" (Dozier, A. Grunig, E. Grunig, 1995, p. 47). This health crisis has definitely weakened the local authorities, especially the County Council, as the main partner for the Târgoviște City Hall, the regional Police and county hospital network. Even since the beginning of the pandemic, the Council started to elaborate and accommodate public policies as a fast response to a new, invisible threat that is able to weaken the medical systems all over the world.

The actions and solutions that were put in place after the COVID-19 pandemic started (in March 2020) in the short and medium term in the region of Dâmbovița by the County Council had one priority in mind, namely the health risks for all the vulnerable citizens and communities across the region, that were highly exposed to this virus and were deprived of access to proper health care, education and wealthiness. Despite all the precautions and preparations, not every measure and decision by the decision-makers of the Council proves to be effective.

To prevent a Covid-19 crisis, the Dâmbovița County Council has had a wide field of interventions:

- immediate help coordinated with the other county councils, regional or local health providers and the central Government institutions, in order to maintain the public order;
- temporary public policies according to the severity and intensity of the health crisis during a given time or moment, along with the necessary resources to put in place;
- materials and personnel provision, mobilization of the health reserve and fast acquisition of medical equipment;
- closure of schools and other public and private educational organisms, in response to the fast spread of the virus in local communities around the county;
- adapting the delivery of daily public service in a more safer environment, for not to endanger the public order,
- protecting the public servants who are more exposed to the risk of contamination from the virus due to the nature of their usual activity (health personnel, public servants who come into contact with many citizens due to the nature of their work, teachers, public transportation drivers), because they are systematically exposed to Covid-19, making them more vulnerable to getting infected;
- reducing the risk of contamination by promoting online interaction in relation to the public services and developing smart mechanism in order to reduce the close and regular physical contact between the citizens;
- round the clock cooperation with the regional police department, hospitals and schools, county town halls, regional health providers for developing immediate solutions to the everyday challenges.

The interventions developed by the Dâmbovița County Council as a response to the 2020 pandemic have met the people’s expectations to some extent. The municipalities and departments in the region, with the help of local professional organizations, have been working continuously to support the actions of the County Council. The instruments that are being used by the institution to communicate, disseminate and promote the daily activity in the context of Covid-19 are 90% online (on the official webpage <http://www.cjd.ro/> and also on the official Facebook page). The Council is still holding press conferences at its headquarters, but with adapted safety measures like: fewer journalists invited and less physical audience, social distancing between the participants, mask wearing. Drastic changes have been made regarding the communication strategy, as a result of adapting to the new pandemic.

These changes represent the effects that Covid-19 has had upon the institution and were observed, analyzed and interpreted by the authors in the context of this health crisis with procedures of grounded theory, based on facts that were transparently presented and published by the institution on its official communication channels. The qualitative research gave the following integrated set of findings that provide an analytical explanation of the event that was under study:

- the interaction between co-workers within the Council has been reduced;
- most of the meetings and work discussions with people from outside the institution are held online, via the Zoom platform. The number of work related meetings about tackling this health crisis has increased, with online discussions taking place daily with the local police, local schools, local hospitals and the regional health care providers. Working discussions are taking place with representatives from the central level every week or when necessary, at any given moment;
- the press conferences are held in larger rooms, with a smaller audience, and they are being broadcasted live on the official Facebook page of the institution. The number of physical press conferences from March to November 2020 has decreased compared to the same period in 2019, due to the new safety measures adopted (as seen in Table 1 below);

- the number of announcements and press releases decreased also from March to November 2020 versus the same period in 2019, mainly because some activities have had to be postponed or cancelled due to new safety measures and restrictions (as seen in Tables 2 and 3 below). Law 544/2001 states the citizens’ right to a free and unconstrained access to public information as one of the fundamental principles of the relation between the individuals and public authorities (Law 544/12 October 2001).

Table no. 1 Comparison in Media briefs

Announcements (by Law 544/2001)		
	2020	2019
November	2	8
October	7	24
September	7	14
August	8	11
July	11	16
June	7	9
May	3	10
April	3	8
March	6	8

Table no. 2 Comparison in Press releases

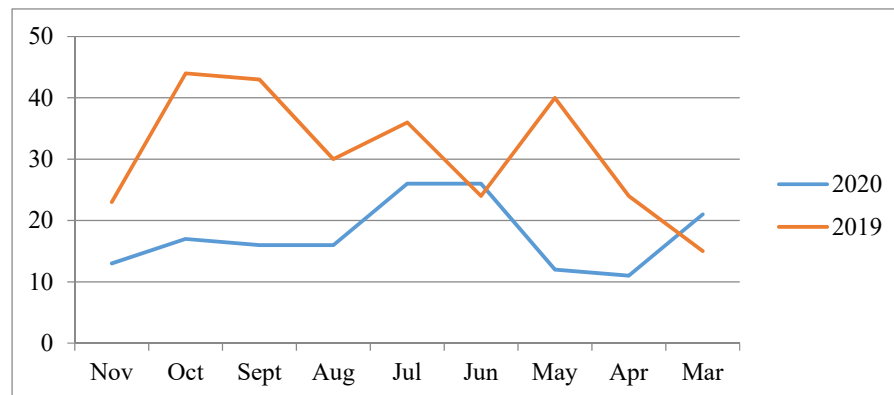
Press releases		
	2020	2019
November	9	14
October	9	20
September	9	25
August	8	16
July	15	19
June	17	13
May	8	29
April	6	14
March	13	6

Table no. 3 Comparison in Media conferences

Media conferences		
	2020	2019
November	2	1
October	1	-
September	-	4
August	-	3
July	-	1
June	2	2
May	1	1
April	2	2
March	2	1

Source: (<http://www.cjd.ro/>)

Figure no. 1 Comparison of the Council’s communication during Covid-19 vs. non-Covid-19



Source: (<http://www.cjd.ro/>, 2019 – 2020, the total number of announcements, press releases and media conferences)

One of the downside effects of this new normality is the less frequent social interaction between citizens and politicians, or between journalists and politicians. The communication process has become very dry and highly formal, because of the severity of the crisis. Also, as it can be seen in tables 1, 2 and 3 above, the Council has communicated less during the analyzed period of time (November – March 2020) compared to the same period in 2019. The main reason for this decrease is the cancellation of many on the field projects and activities in the region. There is no room for error, meaning the information that is to be communicated is being verified and confirmed, so that it can be trusted by the population. These online instruments were not perfectly calibrated from the beginning to face a health crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic. But efforts are being made daily, in order to tackle the disadvantages and to come up with a better and more efficient response and not to deprive the citizens of information.

However, it should not be denied that, in some cases, the answers and solutions that Dâmbovița County Council provided did not meet the expectations of the county communities. Not all initiatives and communication actions have proven to be effective. In addition, public decision-makers were and still are often blamed for the bankruptcy of the HoReCa industry and low coverage of the losses, for the loss of thousands of jobs, for the shortages in family income, for restricting freedom and denying the access to proper education by closing the schools or for late communication of a solution or response.

The following recommendations made by the authors after the careful observation and analysis performed in this study using the ground theory, show that there is still a lot of work to be done in the future, to support the local communities in Dâmbovița County and its citizens during this difficult time that the world population is passing:

Recommendation 1: continue and increase the digitalization of the procedures and public services in order to restrict as much as possible the physical interaction between the people.

Recommendation 2: accelerate the digital transformation of our health system to promote information sharing, support the increase of the e-health practices and improve the protection of the hospitals against cyber risk.

Recommendation 3: increase the number of public communication activities, so that the population can feel safe. The Council needs to become the watchdog of its community.

Recommendation 4: continuous developments of the health care services.

Recommendation 5: mobilize the citizens in order to follow up and observe the minimal required health measures in order to fight against the fast spread of the virus, which will generate a slowdown in terms of infection and therefore a relaxation of the medical system and restrictive measures.

Recommendation 6: promote the citizens' engagement in the online activity of the Council, because the information and data that are being shared are vital for the health and safety of the population. The more people are being reached, the more efficient the communication will be.

5. Conclusions

The evaluation performed in this study, the discoveries made by the authors are easy to value and understand by the readers, who can make their own subjective evaluation and can interpret the presented findings based on their own personal knowledge. The impact of the new Coronavirus pandemic on all primary sectors of a country and of a region is obvious and has already been widely commented on. Via online channels, data and information are circulating day-and-night to make the people aware of the consequences and risks of this pandemic. But the new coronavirus, also known as Covid-19, has already had effects on public institutions and authorities. Not only is the delivery of public services affected, but also the way in which the data and information reach the public. Public communication has definitely changed, due to the restrictions in human interactions and drastic safety measures that were put in place. By November 2020, due to the fast spread of the virus, the activity of the institution, along with the communication process, were affected, with significant decreases in the amount of information released to the public, because some of the Council's projects had to be cancelled or postponed.

Today, all the public service providers have been mobilized in Dâmbovița County to support the protection measures and implement the action lines by the decision-makers. It is in the public institutions' hands to ensure the continuity of public service with adaptive measures in order to allow the people to cope with the pandemic and public officials to ensure the continuity of public order in the region and a transparent communication process.

The central administration in cooperation with every regional and local authority is working on the establishment of immediate health service, region by region, for the benefit of the population, as an essential management measure to tackle this health crisis. Regardless if the decisions are in the hands of the public officials and politicians, communities will have to adapt quickly to allow life to continue. The world after Covid-19 will probably not be what all of us strive to imagine, and for sure the world would never be the same as we all knew it. Nevertheless, we must all together put an effort to fight against this virus and make the most out of this new normality. It is in our hands, as citizens, to support the public institutions – not to act against them – and avoid a global resignation. Even if it will not be easy, even if resistance will rise, we will have to rethink our lives and embrace this transition towards a new beginning.

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