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Ethics and Efficiency of Communication during COVID-19 Pandemic; Role of Public Administration Digitalization

Andra-Nicoleta BORȚEA[1]

Abstract

In the age of technology, communication seems to be much easier for public institutions. Citizens' access to the necessary information is much easier, by accessing official websites or by e-mail.
The pandemic has limited people's access to interaction with public institutions, which has increased the need to use online digital tools. Thus, the process of digitalization and the process of modernization of the public administration were hastened. This has led to the emergence of new types of social behaviours that have had negative effects on the use of digital tools by public entities.
Until now, several approaches to public administration ethics have existed, and they have mostly centered on the civil servant's behaviour in his interaction with citizens and his respect for the workplace. As the online environment has become a necessity for public services in the digital age, ethics in the public system meets new challenges.
Today, there is a need for a modernized digital system for civil servants to use. It should facilitate applicants' access to information and protect the confidentiality of certain information in an ethical and professional manner for all parties involved, in order to reduce misinformation.
Misinformation in a pandemic can have serious consequences: it can lead to ignoring official health advice and risky behaviour, or it can have a negative impact on our democratic institutions and societies, as well as on the economic and financial situation. Therefore, there is a need for new protection measures, that can protect people, not only for medical safety in a public institution, but for ethic means in the online environment.

Keywords: *ethics, pandemic, misinformation, digital, public administration.*

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1. Introduction

The procedure of digitizing the economic system and all of the associated branches, implies modifications withinside the behaviour of all actors on this field. Digitizing the daily life of society and modernizing governance implies a matter of infrastructure, a matter of human resources and the most important, the ethics of those individuals who provide public services.

In terms of local governance, innovation and change have a huge impact. In this area, management policies and procedures are not designed to produce such results (Tîrziu, 2016). However, it is important to recognize that any innovation depends on human resources (Grigorescu & Chiper Neculau, 2016).

In our virtual times, ethics in public structures is going through new challenges, because the on line surroundings have turn out to be a need in provisioning on line public services. Now, the moral norms need to be tailored to using virtual structures.

One of the disadvantages of digital communication, ie in the online environment, mostly through social networks, is misinformation. Disinformation is spreading rapidly in the online environment, especially on social media platforms.

Governance should be a moral and democratic effort. Therefore, the authority of the government must be exercised in accordance with moral principles through its special instruments. During the exercise of their function, civil servants must perform both technical duties, in a correct manner, and act ethically. When exercising their work, civil servants must not only carry out technical actions correctly, but also carry out correct actions from a moral point of view (Bowman & West, 2018, p. 6).

To date, the issue of public administration ethics has had different approaches. The approaches focused largely on the attitude of civil servants in relation to citizens and the respect of civil servants towards the workplace. Today, during the pandemic, when digital tools are crucial to any field of activity, ethics in public administration faces new challenges, as the public environment is forced to provide public services online without adequate infrastructure.

The convenience, the anonymity or the intimacy offered by the online environment encourages people to exhibit behaviour separate from classical moral customs (Grigorescu & Chitescu, 2018).

As long as there are internal rules of civic behaviour over time, for the proper functioning of the public organization and for efficient

communication with citizens, there must be new rules for the use of the digital tools in digital public services (Baiasu, 2020).

2. Problem Statement

The social context and the economic environment have known new values with the development of technology and the digital society. The same happened with the daily life of the citizens (Lesenciuc, 2017).

Citizens generally have high expectations from the public administration, and its main concern should be their wishes (Grigorescu, 2018).

It is of great importance that there should be a legal framework that does not limit the development of technology and digital markets and does not add to existing regulations, but brings improvement, especially with the safety norms adopted recently. Improvement will bring about progress and economic growth, especially with the recently adopted safety standards

The most difficult form of communication is direct communication between the civil servant and the dissatisfied citizen. On the other hand, dialogue is the most appropriate way to disseminate and gather information at the same time, but also to address the specific needs of each employee and to overcome the personal barriers specific to each person involved (Luță, 2003).

Communication in public administration requires legal and ethical coordinates alike (the legality of the content of the public message, the objective through excellent ethics of the forms of public communication, because the public interest is always served) (Rădulescu, 2009).

Misinformation in the digital era

The COVID-19 pandemic was accompanied by an unprecedented "infodemia". This means an avalanche of information about the virus, not necessarily true, false even or inaccurate and spreading rapidly via social media platforms (European Commission – EC, 2021a).

The pandemic generated a double crisis that tested the ability of communication skills of every state around the world. This has caused the infodemia to spread, because in such a context the level of uncertainty in society increases simultaneously with the need to consume information, and the population becomes vulnerable to suggestions (Bunescu, 2021).

The sharp increase in the implementation of IT solutions in almost all component parts of society has as a direct consequence the change of daily life in all its aspects (Lesenciuc, 2017). This consequence has gained a

different approach when the social media and the digital communication became even more useful for people who needed the public services.

False news has the same capacity, reflecting the emotional needs, desires and fears of a society as well as rumours. In addition to the economic function, false news also fulfils a tactical function. They can act in the form of a manipulation technique associated with misinformation and propaganda (Bunescu, 2021).

Turning fake news into a manipulation technique involves spreading false information specifically designed to harm a person, an organization, a competitor, or a state (Sadiku et al., 2018).

The American writer Jon D. Lee claims that from one epidemic to another, the news reported by both traditional media and those circulating online are recycled. During the SARS 2003 epidemic, some news talked about the virus being the result of vibrations transmitted to the population through microwaves or audio waves (Lee, 2014).

Submission of false causes of the spread of infection, promoting medicines as effective treatments against SARS-CoV-2 without scientific foundation, launching various assumptions about the starting point of the pandemic outbreak become unmanageable problems for government and security apparatus of the State (Perțea, 2021).

Forms of misinformation

Misinformation can be intentional or unintentional. Manipulation of public opinion can be based on political, economic or social principles, and by distributing false news in these spheres, ethical and moral principles are violated (Baiasu, 2020).

Misinformation can have serious consequences: it can lead to ignoring official health advice or risky behaviors, it can have a negative impact on institutions, societies or even the economy (EC, 2021a).

Theories and hypotheses about COVID-19 are currently spreading almost as fast as the virus. Headlines such as "5G technology promotes SARS-CoV-2 infection" or "US military launched the virus intentionally in China" flooded the Internet and generated reprehensible perceptions, emotions, feelings or behaviours among the recipients of this news (Perțea, 2021).

Since the beginning of the pandemic, misinformation has had many forms (EC, 2021b):

- dangerous pranks and misinformation about health, with false messages (such as "hand washing is useless" or "coronavirus is a danger only to the elderly");

- hate speech (for example, as a result of misinformation that a particular ethnic or religious group is responsible for the spread of COVID-19 has led to a worrying increase in racist and xenophobic content in connection with COVID-19);

- misleading consumers (eg selling "miracle products" without proven benefits);

- cybercrime (hacking / phishing that uses COVID-19-related links).

Even search engines and social platforms have had difficulty matching the right information to the right person at the right time. For example, searching Google, Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube for "Where can I be tested for coronavirus?" returned various information - or worse, fake news, a predatory scam or malware (Donovan, 2020).

The fake news phenomenon was amplified by a series of factors present in social life after the end of the twentieth century. Consumer society and new communication technologies have increased the appetite for information. Journalism has become increasingly based on opinions and comments, and the news has focused on meeting consumer expectations and profit, to the detriment of the quality of information provided (Bunescu, 2021).

In this context, a type of false news is developing, with an economic function, focused on satisfying the need for consumption and obtaining financial income. False news is sensitive to the needs of consumers, who are influenced by their behavior. In a post-truth world, consumers are tempted to access false news that strengthens their emotions, legitimizes their prejudices, and solves their needs, and is less interested in the truth (Cooke, 2018).

Fabrication, a form of misinformation, refers to news that does not have a solid basis, is published for the purpose of misleading, and claims to be authentic. In this case the intention to misinform is explicit. To be credible, they associate themselves with true stories and use either legitimate platforms or platforms that offer the appearance of legitimacy to the public (Voinea, 2021).

Misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic is particularly damaging, as any wrong measures can pose a serious risk to public health, leading to the exponential spread of the disease and accidental death from it. As a result, it is extremely important to identify and limit the potential for the spread of misinformation as close as possible to its point of origin (Sharma et al., 2020).

The health crisis has shown us that it is necessary to make a clear distinction between the various forms of false or misleading content that "infodemia" has highlighted and to calibrate appropriate responses. To this

end, it is important, first of all, to distinguish between illegal content, as defined by law, and harmful content which is not illegal.

3. Research Questions/Aims of the research

The article's hypothesis states: the communication in public administration during the pandemic, has been forced to use exclusively the online environment, which determined the occurrence of a problem such as misinformation, by analysing the public data offered by the European Commission, by the national press and by the reports and articles published so far.

4. Research Methods

By analysing official communication on official websites and even social media of public institutions during the pandemic inducted crisis, the author wishes to assess that, in this time of incertitude only deepened the need for digital reform in public administration.

Other public and official materials were used as well in order to complete the overview by being processed through critical analysis so that one may understand the way in which particular elements contribute to the current social and economic context of communication in a pandemic

5. Findings & Discussions

This chapter presents the results, in a structured manner.

From the beginning of the pandemic crisis, a clear, accessible and accurate way of communication was needed to protect citizens.

The reason why false news about COVID-19 continues to be accessed is closely linked to social psychology. During this period, individuals are more connected to news programs and the online environment. Modern means of communication remove spatial barriers and turn users into a homogeneous mass (Bunescu, 2021).

From a psychological point of view, when individuals are faced with new situations, characterized by the difficulty of distinguishing between safe and uncertain information, they become permissive towards false stories, particularly those that fold on their system. of beliefs and on one's own filter of thought. Moreover, the constant flow of distorted information about COVID-19 can lead to harmful behaviors for both oneself and others (Perțea, 2021).

Methods to reduce misinformation

The European Commission's digital strategy is becoming even more useful in a pandemic, given that digital tools are used to: monitor the spread of the virus, research, develop diagnostic methods, treatments and vaccines, ensure online safety (EC, 2021b).

Representatives of online platforms, of cutting-edge social networks, and the advertising industry have agreed on a Code of Good Practice for Self-Regulation to address the spread of online misinformation and false news (EC, 2021c).

The Code of Good Practice was signed by online platforms Facebook, Google and Twitter, Mozilla, as well as parts of the advertising industry in October 2018. Microsoft joined in May 2019, while TikTok signed the Code in June 2020 (EC, 2021c).

European Commission held talks with platforms that signed the EU Code of good practices on combating misinformation (Google, Facebook, Twitter and Microsoft). They agreed to actively promote official sources, dismantle false or misleading information, and launch new tools that lead users directly to official sources or provide accurate multilingual information about the crisis (EC, 2021c).

Adherents to the Code of Good Practice provided five sets of reports on their action to combat misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic. These reports acted as a measure of transparency, ensuring the responsibility of adherents in combating misinformation (EC, 2021c).

Organizations such as FullFact and Snopes are also conducting studies on the credibility of social media posts (especially those on Facebook and Twitter), while the Conversation news site offers tips on quickly identifying fake news (Perțea, 2021).

In Romania, the national authorities have taken measures to combat the false news such as: The Strategic Communication Group set up at the level of the Ministry of Internal Affairs said that the sites that distribute false articles about COVID-19 will be blocked; they found six pro-Kremlin sites distributed in Romania which distributed false news; another measure taken by the Romanian authorities was the launch of the stirioficiale.ro platform meant to provide only information from official sources, in order to combat false news about COVID-19 (Bunescu, 2021).

In addition to national information channels, the European Union has helped through its institutions and networks in the member states. Effective proactive communication efforts have been made to promote reliable and verifiable health information, to inform third-country nationals and partners about the EU's efforts to combat the crisis, and to raise awareness of the crisis. In March 2020, the Commission launched a specific

website aimed at highlighting false claims about COVID-19, promoting well-documented content and helping to differentiate between reality and fiction (EC, 2021c).

The influence of false arguments can be so infectious that it can influence government policy, which has the potential to be fatal. It is important to learn from past mistakes, and the media has an important role to play in this (Mian & Khan, 2020).

6. Conclusions

Public administration should deal with sustainability as a condition for enabling better decision-making process, for a sustained public trust and for being a change-oriented actor (Romanelli, 2020).

The crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide, including in Romania, has accelerated long-standing but slowly progressing processes before the crisis, such as automation, digitization or implementation of remote work, but fiscal uncertainty and lack of transparency persists (Deloitte, 2020).

It is very important that public institutions, regardless of the nature of their activities, use precisely the essential elements necessary for effective communication, in the institution-citizen relationship, especially in times of crises.

Now, the IT component of an institution comes to a great help. The digitalization is now more important than ever. It is a known fact that the public administration is very resistant to changes, but the pandemic forced this change in a matter of few months among the local public authorities. In this context, digitalization was no longer a choice, but the only existing option. As a result, existing technologies were adopted, in order to function at a basic level.

The citizen must be informed about the existence and functioning of public services, he must be listened to when he expresses his dissatisfaction, his wishes and needs must be taken into account.

In order to support the institutions and the citizens, the Romanian Government has adopted an Emergency Ordinance (Emergency Ordinance no. 38 of March 30, 2020 on the use of electronic documents at the level of public authorities and institutions) which partially regulates the use of documents in electronic format at the level of public institutions. It was also reminded the possibility to send documents and make payments online through the „ghiseul.ro" platform or „aici.gov.ro".

The digitalization of the administration involves databases with easy and interoperable access, internal and external computerized flow of documents, electronic signatures and, last but not least, professional training in this regard for civil servants. The proposed recommendations are: procurement of electronic signature certification services; development of new working procedures; providing IT&C equipment; updating the national normative framework; training staff on digital tools and digital workflows; developing a guide on the implementation of flexible forms of work (National Institute of Administration, 2021).

„The guide for managing pandemic crisis situations", developed by National Agency of Civil Servants, includes 28 action models from the Romanian administration and 3 initiatives of some public institutions from Latvia, Portugal and Luxembourg (National Agency of Civil Servants, 2020).

However, the digitalization of public administration should be made in a safe environment. Cyber threats have been an ongoing problem due to the new technology, a conductive environment exploited by hackers (Somepalli et al., 2020). Currently, the institutions are the first targets of cyber-attack, which means that cyber security is extremely important and needs to be implemented in every institution (Constantin et al., 2020).

Digitization means agility, process analysis and redesign, appropriate skills, and not just the implementation of digital tools. Even if the restrictions imposed by the pandemic hastened the digitization at the level of public institutions, it is obvious that there is still much to be done. The public sector must adapt to the trends in the economy and society in order to respond with quality services, but also to ensure its proper functioning. The nature of the public sector brings a different set of limitations, challenges and opportunities, requiring different ways of thinking about the potential of these new technologies (Bumbăcea, 2020).

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