

# PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA ARENA: SEARCHING FOR CITIZENS' ATTENTION. ZOOM ON ROMANIA'S PARTICULARITIES

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## *Abstract*

*Social media is taking up increasingly more space in the government's media toolbox. In Romania, both local and central public organizations are getting savvier in communicating through these channels, intuitively thought of as the playground of teens and startups. By analyzing the social media pages of some of the more active (on social media) Romanian public institutions, and by interviewing the people in charge with their online communication, we tried to find the amount of importance these new forms of communication are given by the public sector - usually seen as more cumbersome and slower to adapt to changing media landscapes. One other goal was to find out how formalized the role of 'online media communicator' is in the Romanian public administration.*

**Keywords:** social media, local sector, Romania

## 1. Introduction

State institutions communicate a lot. They make use of a great number of communication channels, from traditional media (newspapers, magazines, radio, and television stations), billboards and posters, to emergency messaging systems. It comes as no surprise that the new communication channels offered by the internet were quickly colonized by government agencies, universities, and local public institutions. This was not so hard at first because the type of communication (one-to-many) was something public institutions were accustomed to. Websites were, in their first iterations, little more than online notice boards.

This changed with the advent of online services, e-government, and web 2.0. The interactions between public institutions, citizens, and companies became increasingly complex, and this complexity was no longer properly served by the mostly unidirectional communication channels available. One possible solution for this communication asymmetry can be given by social media tools.

In Romania, more and more public organizations use social media tools (for example, all 40 city halls in county seats have an official or semi-official Facebook page), for a number of purposes. Two-way communication between public officials and citizens is still fairly limited, but pressure to adopt more dialogue is mounting. Aside from this, the Facebook pages are sometimes used to communicate with other public institutions, somewhat akin to the twitter arguments happening in the United States this last few years.

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Mergel and Breitschneider have proposed a three-stage model for the adoption of social media tools for communication in the public sector [10]. The first one is experimentation, often outside official communication procedures, with the initiatives usually coming from individuals working inside the organization, interested and knowledgeable in these technologies. As this communication channel becomes more and more often employed, institutions enter the second stage, in which they feel the need for some rules and procedures, and officially support the communication happening on social media. The third stage usually comes with separate departments responsible with this type of communication, clear rules and procedures (for example, the types of subjects suitable for social media), clear accountability rules, and integration of social media in the day-to-day media mix. In other words, social media channels end being a novelty.

In order for organizations to benefit from social media communication, organizations must invest resources in the following: time, personnel, and money. It also helps if there is a clear vision of what social media could bring to the organization that the other communication channels are unable to offer.

The public sector consists of a wide array of institutions, which fulfill different purposes and have different objectives in their media communications. We selected three public organizations, specifically a city hall, a county council, and a university, to see how much their social media strategy, resource allocation, and results differ. In Romania, social media is almost synonymous with Facebook, especially in the public sector. Very few institutions use other social networks (Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn), so the vast majority of this type of communication happens on Mark Zuckerberg's platform.

## 2. Literature review

The study of the use of social networks by public institutions is no longer a niche field of study. There is increased recognition among researchers that, despite the evident pitfalls (lack of control over the development and management of the platforms, limited access to users' data, little control over information distortions), public organizations have to use the social media platforms popular among citizens (they may differ from country to country). There were attempts to establish social networks controlled by the government (for example the consultations for a new constitution in Iceland) (Landemore, 2015), and private networks of public servants can exist and thrive, but for communicating with citizens commercial social networks proved much more successful for a number of reasons: it's what the citizens already use; not being there does not mean that the conversation – for example about the quality of public services – is not happening, but that institutions have no way of influencing it; an increasing number of people take their news from social networks, as opposed to traditional media, etc.

Like almost any new technology introduced in public institutions, expectations for beneficial effects were inflated, and actual results are more nuanced and less susceptible to generalizations. Reviewing the literature, Picazo-Vela et al. found a gap between expectations (increased participation, increased openness) and the reality of using social media channels to push information towards citizens [12]. Eom et al found that there is a gap of unfulfilled expectations between what the theory says social media effects should be (more openness, increased participation, and enhanced accountability) and what the empirical studies show it is happening [3]. This can be attributed to a period of adaptation of public officials with the new tools at their disposal.

Mergel contends that social media drives organizational changes before reaping benefits. Interviews with public servants show that these changes lead to routinization and then to the institutionalization of the new technologies [9]. These different results are also the consequence of understanding the purpose of social media in the public sector. A study in South Korea finds that people's perception of their satisfaction differs if they use e-government services as opposed to social media. They are more satisfied when using social media, probably because citizens expect different things from these offerings (online services as opposed to information services) [13].

From our experience, in Romania, government agencies start using social media pages thinking about their potential in fostering dialogue with citizens and not expecting fast results. This is in line with research findings in other countries [11]. For example, social media use in local governments boomed between 2011 and 2013 in the US. Their overall strategy was one of "build it and they will come" type, with the expectation that positive effects will appear in due time.

An increasing body of research shows that this seems to be the case, albeit more slowly than the cheerleaders of social media adoption in the public sector would like. Researchers found out that high level of social media use is correlated with increased transparency and decreased corruption perception [6], [5]. Local governments in the EU use social media to increase transparency, although the effects are only slowly emerging [2] and can help fostering a culture of openness and transparency [1]. The findings of Maria del Mar Gálvez-Rodríguez et al suggest that starting a dialogue with citizens via social media has positive influences on citizens' online engagement, a useful strategy for increasing democratic participation [4].

Social media communicators from public institutions are also stymied by the double headwinds of rules and regulations, which have not kept up with the rapid technological and societal developments, and the steep learning curve and constant adaptations necessary for using the social media accounts at their full potential. Fostering two-way communication is hampered by the propensity of public institutions to redistribute (when they do that at all) of messages from established sources (mainly traditional media). This is understandable, but it is another obstacle in leveraging all the potential of social media [16]. There is also a general lack of measurement practices for social media interaction. Many agencies are reluctant or unable to measure their online interactions [8].

The role of social media is different from the digitalization of public services that e-government initiatives are tasked to. The inclusion of these new tools in the quiver of public institutions has more to do with opening new channels of communication than with delivering services to citizens and companies; for now, at least. It is a simple reaction of public institutions to fundamental shifts in the way that citizens access information, and to the modification of the news diet of young people. More than 67% of Romanians use social media as a source of news, and the number is growing, even as television stations' role in the news ecosystem is decreasing (in 2017 it was at 82% and falling) [14].

### 3. Research

In trying to better understand the way in which Romanian public institutions use their social media accounts, we selected three different organizations; Cluj-Napoca City Hall, Cluj County Council, and "Babeş-Bolyai" University. In Romania, social media in public institutions equates with Facebook pages for now. There are almost 10 million Romanians who use Facebook at least once a month and almost 8 million do so on a daily basis. Of the other social networks, only YouTube

comes close, with 7 million daily users, but adoption is low among public organizations (one of the reasons could be that producing good quality videos is much harder than taking a picture or writing a line of text). Twitter is not used in Romania (there are around 20 thousand active users), while Instagram is popular chiefly among high schoolers at the moment, and much less among the usual target groups of public institutions.

The research consists of two parts. In the first we conducted a quantitative type of research of the messages posted by the three organizations on their Facebook official pages. Data was collected using FacePager, and analyzed with Microsoft Excel and Tableau. We analyzed messages posted between January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018, and December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2018. The second part of our research was a qualitative one. We interviewed the social-media managers of the three institutions using the elite interviewing technique detailed by D. Richards [15]. It was a semi-structured interview, followed by a number of phone calls to clarify some of the responses.

#### 4. Findings

During our research, we added to the quantitative research the Facebook page of Emil Boc, the mayor of Cluj-Napoca. He is a well-known political figure in Romania (mayor of the second largest city in Romania 3 times, former prime-minister of Romania) and his Facebook page was used until recently as the official page of the Cluj-Napoca City Hall. The reasons why a number of Romanian mayors of big cities use their Facebook fan pages in lieu of institutional pages are manifold: the position of mayor is highly visible, and, many times, the whole local administration is personified in the minds of citizens by the mayor; the Facebook pages were usually created during the electoral campaign (Romanian mayors are elected) and they are loath to abandon them and move their communication to an institutional page with a much lower number of followers; or the Facebook pages of the city halls were non-existent and had to be created and nurtured. This personalization of local institutions is not specific only to Romania: the mayor is seen as a bridge between different clusters of citizens and public officials in other countries, also (Eom, Hwang și Kim 2018). In terms of followers or fans, the page of Emil Boc is much more followed than all the other pages surveyed:

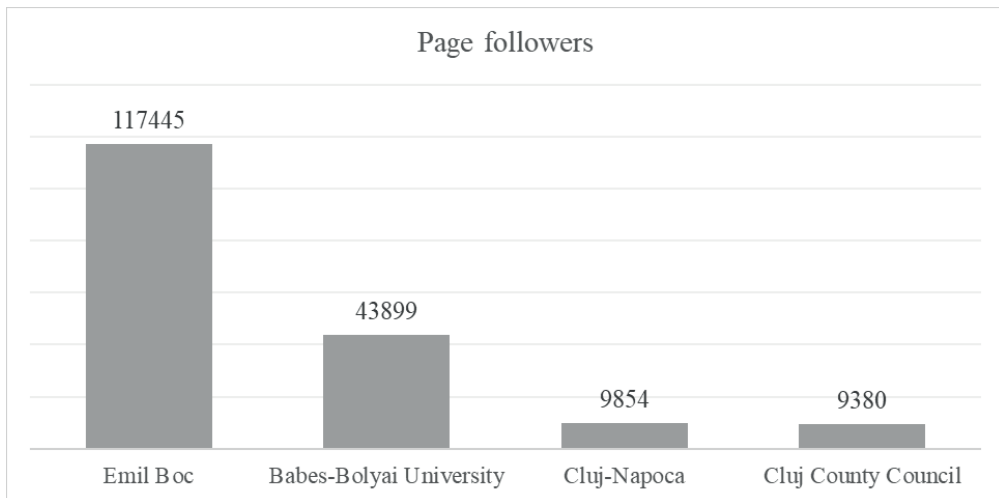


Chart 1. The number of followers in January 2019.

The following chart shows the types of messages posted by all the pages in 2018.

| Page                    | Total posts | Video | Photo | Status | Links |
|-------------------------|-------------|-------|-------|--------|-------|
| Cluj County Council     | 732         | 8     | 722   | 0      | 2     |
| Emil Boc                | 381         | 120   | 256   | 4      | 1     |
| Babeş-Bolyai University | 245         | 10    | 177   | 43     | 15    |
| Cluj-Napoca             | 236         | 48    | 173   | 2      | 13    |

**Table 1. Types of messages posted in 2018.**

To measure the success of the Facebook pages, we used two composite numbers. The first metric by which most researchers judge the success of Facebook communication is the engagement rate. This consists of the total number of interactions (likes, comments and shares) per number of followers or fans. A score of 1 is generally considered a good result, while one over 0.5 gets a passing grade [7]. The following chart shows the engagement rate of the four Facebook pages examined.

| Page                    | Total posts | Engagement rate |
|-------------------------|-------------|-----------------|
| Cluj County Council     | 732         | 0.25%           |
| Emil Boc                | 381         | 1.24%           |
| Babes-Bolyai University | 245         | 0.22%           |
| Cluj-Napoca             | 236         | 1.44%           |

**Table 2. Total number of posts and engagement rate.**

As we can see, the pages managed by the city hall have good scores, but those of the County Council and the university are not faring quite so well. In the case of the County Council, the reason could be that the services they offer are not aimed so clearly at the citizens (most people will never deal with the County Council directly), and so, even if they post a lot (twice a day on average) the engagement is lower. For the University, the reasons could be an inflation of institutional pages (a student should follow and interact with the University's page, her own College's page and the Department's page – engagement is likely to be higher with the Facebook page that is closer to the student).

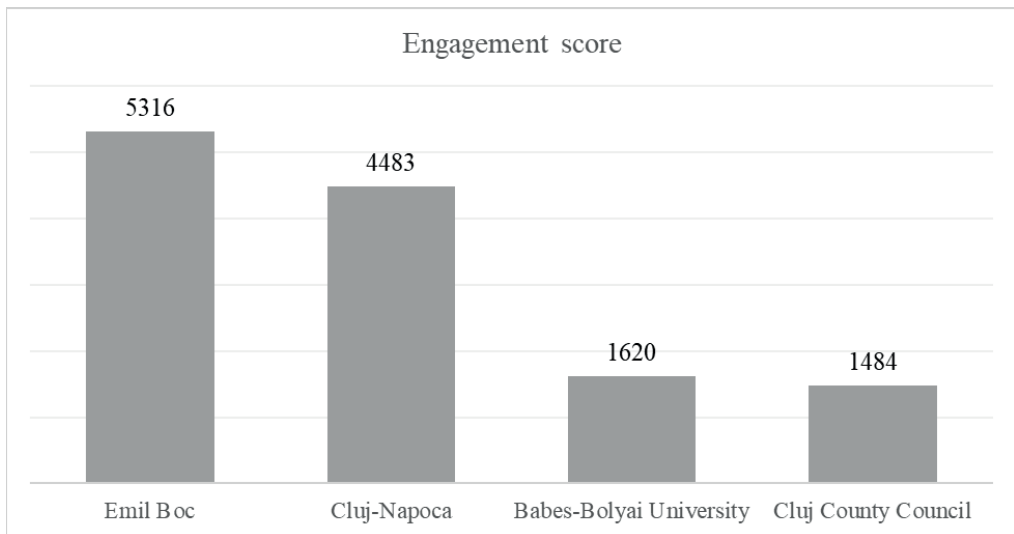
The engagement rate, however useful, is a pretty rough instrument, especially because we have neither access to data related to the reach of the messages posted on the pages, nor any reliable information about the underpinnings of the Facebook algorithms that decide the reach of those messages and the relative importance of, for example, the type of message (status update, text, photo, video, or event). We know, for example, that a video is more extensively circulated, but we don't have any hard numbers. As such, researchers have tried to construct other metrics for scrutinizing the success of a Facebook page. One of them was created by the social media analytics company Unmetric. It is called an Engagement score, and it aims to evaluate more accurately the overall success of a Facebook page. Their formula is:

*engagement score*

$$= \frac{(\text{number of likes} + 5 \times \text{number of comments} + 10 \times \text{number of shares}) \times 10000}{(\text{number of followers or fans})^{0.8}}$$

Their rationale for the modifiers for comments and shares is that these interactions are much more valuable than passive likes, because they start a conversation. The power of 0.8 to the number of fans comes from the company's experience in dealing with a social media analytics and accounts for the fact that the greater the number of fans a page has, the smaller percentage of them will that receive its messages. This modifier is created, in effect, so as not to penalize successful Facebook pages for being successful. In order for the results to be comparable, the score is than normalized (so all results are distributed between 0 and 1000).

The following charts show the overall Engagement score for 2018:



**Chart 2. Engagement score for 2018.**

For all pages, the engagement was much higher for videos posted than for any other type of message (photo, link, status update). As opposed to our research studies in previous years, we noticed that posts containing photos are little different in terms of engagement than text-based messages (status updates, for example). Increasingly, followers think that having a photo in your posting is normal; video is now novelty and more share-worthy.

After we looked at some hard numbers, we aimed to find the reasons behind those numbers: the decisions taken by social media managers in this organizations.

## **5. Cluj-Napoca City Hall institutional account**

Cluj-Napoca is the second largest city in Romania, after Bucharest. Its population is growing and counts, at present (2018), probably in excess of 400,000 people. As home to one of the largest ITC centers in Central and Eastern Europe, Cluj-Napoca local public organizations, and especially the

city hall, is expected to be a trailblazer in Romania in using all technological tools, social media included.

Diana Apan is responsible for the Cluj-Napoca institutional Facebook page, as well as the Emil Boc's fan page. She leads the marketing Strategies Department inside the City Hall, which was created in 2016. It is a 7 people team; they collaborate with the people in the photo/video team of the City Hall, but they take care of a lot more than just the social media pages of the institution.

Facebook is the main social media channel, supplemented by YouTube and Instagram. Twitter was used and abandoned because of disappointing results; the same with Forsquare; Snapchat was considered and has been rejected at this time. The main page is the one of the City Hall (PrimariaClujNapocaRomania), the content posted online is created in-house, and they chose not to share content from other pages (but they do have cross-posting between the pages administered by them).

They calibrate their social media communication to the public likelier to be reached through social networks. They are now trying to make the institutional page more visible and transfer trust from Emil Boc's fan page (117,000 followers) to the City Hall page (10,000 followers) and are now in a phase in which reach is more important for them than engagement. This is part of a bigger strategy that aims to segment the City Hall communication in different channels that serve different purposes. For example, they did not insist on the institutional page until the MyCluj app was up and running. This app allows citizens to report problems or offer suggestions (which were previously handled by third-party platforms or social media pages) and integrate them with the internal document management system of the institutions, so complaints directly reach the public servants in charge of solving them.

Diana Apan told me that her department routinely conducts testing and pilot programs on social media pages (communication tone and voice, for example). As a direct result of messages on social media (in the past) and now on MyCluj, changes inside the institution did and do happen, but more in an ad-hoc manner and not driven by any internal procedures. In dealing with the avalanche of messages on the Facebook pages, they try to send complaints and the like to the MyCluj application and not answer them on the Facebook page. They try to remove inappropriate comments and report them to Facebook (hate speech, slurs, unfitting language), but it is a low priority task. They also try to eliminate copycats (there are a number of pages that pose as City Hall pages).

They have a lot more to do in formalizing procedures (access, page management, legal requirements, data protection, crisis management, and security). They say they do not have taboo subjects, but on sensitive matters they take advice from the Mass-Media and Juridical bureaus. An objective for 2019 is a more structured monitoring strategy (campaign results, the success of different types of messages, mentions of the institution on other pages).

## 6. Cluj County Council Page

Romania is divided into 41 counties. They represent the country's NUTS-3 (Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics – Level 3) statistical subdivisions within the European Union, and each of them serves as the local level of government within its borders. Each county has a county seat, which is the largest city inside the county. Cluj-Napoca is the county seat of Cluj County, for example. In Romania, most administrative services are offered by city halls and not by county councils, so the interaction of ordinary citizens with the latter is fairly limited.

Alin Iuga is the head of the Communication Bureau team of 7 people that is in charge, among many other things (organizing events, handling all media communication, international relations, FOIA requests, and relations with civil society), with the social media pages of the Cluj County Council.

The Facebook page started as an experiment of the communications team and they enjoy autonomy in the day-to-day running of it. They are aware that messages should be adapted for social media, but do not usually have the resources to do it. The best things about Facebook, in their opinion, are that it is a complete communication channel (text, photo, and video), and that citizens are used to using it. The Twitter account proved to be a drain of resources for little gain, so it was abandoned.

The County Council's communication on Facebook is reactive or a "spur-of-the-moment" type of initiative. There is a lack of planning and monitoring of results, mainly because of lack of time. They too emphasize *reach* as opposed to *engagement*, also because the type of messages are more suited to this (more information than dialogue). Taboo subjects do exist: they steer away from political messages or entering into heated debates. They do not share posts from other pages, not even other local institutions.

There is a lack of procedures for crisis management or page management; no one realized until now that there was such a need. Some of the complaints posted on the Facebook page are transformed into official complaints and they enter the administrative workflow, but, also because of a lack of resources, there is no formal procedure for this. Exchanging good practices with other public institutions is considered important, and every opportunity for this (for example, courses to which public servants from other organizations participate, even if they are not experts on this particular topic) is used. They did not have problems with copycat pages until recently, but they are beginning to be pestered by them and they will probably report them to Facebook.

## 7. Babeş-Bolyai University Page

Babeş-Bolyai University (BBU) is the largest university in Romania, with almost 45,000 students at all levels (BA, MA, Ph.D, life-long learning). Social media plays an increasingly important role in young people's media diet, so any educational institution that wants to remain relevant should make use of the platforms colonized by students.

Laura Irimieş is the University's spokeswoman and she is in charge of the social media pages of the institution. The Facebook page is also the most important page on social networks, but it is supplemented by a YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram accounts.

The most important thing in social media communication for the University is community building. Traditional mass-media does not offer the same level of control over the recipients of the messages conveyed. It is essential to become more informal (although, since the University is such a complex organization, the level at which this necessary change of tone is understood varies widely). The focus has recently been changed from building the community (reach) to increasing engagement.

Another aspect that is appreciated is the way in which calls to action can be easily transmitted through the social media pages and the increased interaction tools built-in into these pages (such interactions are much harder to achieve through a website, for example).

On social media, different tools are used for different purposes: Facebook is used in talking to students, Twitter is more successful in the conversation with alumni, while Instagram is used for



reaching high schoolers, and prospective candidates. The looming danger, on all these platforms, is the high potential that discussions stray from the subject pretty quickly. The strategy for the future development of all social media pages plans for a more lively and multimedia activity on Facebook and the testing of Snapchat). The sharing policy is limited mainly to posts from other pages inside the University (for example, department pages). They try to answer to as many comments as possible, usually within 24 hours. They also try not to delete any messages, with the exception of hate speech and swear words. In a small number of cases, repeating offenders were reported to Facebook.

BBU also suffers from the lack of formalized procedures in how to use social media, and a need for them is increasingly felt. The results of the communication, or of the different campaigns, are monitored in a less structured manner, for now; this is one of the issues to improve in 2019. Dealing with impersonator pages is cumbersome (so far three such pages were taken down by Facebook, but each such process took months).

## 8. Conclusions

Like any other channel, social media has strengths and weaknesses. After the initial experiments and false starts, public institutions are generally eager to add another arrow in their quiver. But using these new platforms well is a process. Simply putting up on Facebook the same communiqués posted on their webpage is no longer enough. Romanian public organizations understand, by and large, how this new channel should be used (with all its declinations, depending on the platform used), but are hampered by a lack of resources, especially human resources. People in charge are generally knowledgeable and understand the importance of social media in connecting especially with the young, and are gradually moving toward a professionalization of the field. But the promise of social media creating an online democracy agora are still a distant prospect, for reasons both objective (like I said, lack of resources, the tendency of online debates to quickly veer of course) and subjective (public institutions need time to adjust to the increasing scrutiny that online transparency and participation bring into the equation).

The cases presented and the quantitative results show that a strong and programmatic presence online can yield good engagement results (the case of both pages used by the Cluj-Napoca City Hall). In the case of the University page, the recent shift from a strategy that favored reach to one that looks for engagement is too recent to be visible in the numbers. The Cluj County Council presence on Facebook is one that aims to inform more than to foster debate, and the large number of posts with relatively low engagement is consistent with this approach.

The picture presented in the paper is necessarily limited. A wider and more numerous selection of institutions would paint a more accurate picture. This study is meant to be a proof-of-concept for a more comprehensive research and the starting point for a comparative project on the use of social media in the public sector in countries from Central and Eastern Europe.

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