

MEDIA RELATED STRESS AS A BARRIER IN THE COMMUNICATION WITH THE PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS: KNOWLEDGE AND PREVENTION CASE STUDY – MUNTENIA SOUTH REGION

Dorina TĂNĂSESCU¹, Delia POPESCU², Irina IONESCU³

Rezumat. Pentru instituțiile publice comunicarea este vitală. Ne referim în special la comunicarea cu beneficiarii serviciilor de interes general, cetățenii. Calitatea acestei comunicări depinde atât de **competența lingvistică** cât și de abilitățile de comunicare ale participanților la acest proces. Eficiența acestui proces este diminuată de prezența barierelor de comunicare. O barieră mai puțin evocată de specialiști în studiile lor este reprezentată, în opinia noastră, de către **stresul mediatic** – dezechilibrul creat, în interiorul organizației, asupra sistemului comunicațional de către modul de reflectare a activității în mass media. **Metoda noastră de cercetare** a fost sondajul pe bază de chestionar, desfășurat pe un eșantion de 803 manageri și executanți din instituții publice, situate în euro-regiunea Sud Muntenia. **Concluziile cercetării noastre** au confirmat toate cele trei ipoteze formulate. **Principalele soluții propuse** pot fi aplicabile pe termen scurt și mediu.

Abstract. For public institutions, communication is vital. We refer especially to the communication with the beneficiaries of general-interest services, the citizens. The quality of this communication depends both on the **linguistic competence** and on the communicative abilities of the participants to this process. The efficiency of this process is diminished by the presence of communication barriers. One such barrier that is less evoked by the specialists in their studies is, in our opinion, the so-called **media-related stress** – the lack of balance created within the organization on the communicational system by the way the institution's activity is reflected in the mass media. **Our research method** has been the survey based on a questionnaire, on a sample of 803 managers and employees from public institutions situated in the South Muntenia euro-region. **The conclusions of our research** have confirmed all the three hypotheses formulated. **The main solutions proposed** can be applied on short and medium term.

Keywords: media-related stress, communication, linguistic competence, reasons, consequences, prevention

1. The communication in public institutions

Communication in general, and especially human communication, and language are systems. In any system, the components (the whole and the parts), the interactions (the set of relations and actions among the components) and the organization that governs the interactions are indissolubly related (Lohisse, J., 2005, p. 123).

¹Professor, Ph. D., Economic Science Faculty, Valachia University of Târgoviște.

²Professor, Ph. D., Economic Science Faculty, Valachia University of Târgoviște.

³Ph.D. student, Economic Science Faculty, Valachia University of Târgoviște.

For public institutions communication is vital. We are considering first of all the communication with the beneficiaries of general-interest services, the citizens. The quality of this communication depends first of all on the *linguistic competence* (knowledge of the grammatical system of the language) and it also depends on its use according to the social context (the interlocutors are not the same and the circumstances differ) which defines the *communicational competence*.

In public services, the diversity of language combines with social diversity. That is why the *communicational community*, the group of human beings having certain communicational practices in common is very important. We are not talking here about the community of those who speak the same language, but about a community that has in common rules governing the carrying out and the interpretation of the communicational exchange (Lohisse, J., 2005, p. 162). Between the service providers and their beneficiaries practically appears a *code* based on which the interaction takes place.

The perennity of the code, of the capacity of empathic interaction that a public institution employee has to ensure depend on the *quality of the communication inside the organization*. In other words, an external communication cannot be better or worse than the internal communication existing in the public institution.

We are interested, in essence, in the identification of the internal communication barriers that have a direct impact on the quality of the external communication (with citizens, clients, partners of these organizations).

One such barrier that is less evoked by the specialists in their studies is, in our opinion, the so-called *media-related stress* – the lack of balance created within the organization on the communicational system by the way the institution's activity is reflected in the mass media. Public institutions (Town Hall, police, justice, education, health, religion-church, service providers in the domain of electric energy, gas, water, thermal energy) satisfy the interests of very large groups of people (socio-professional groups, communities, nations etc.).

The activities in these domains have a common denominator: *social optimism*, namely the possibility for all the categories of citizens to have access to a minimum of necessary services, respecting at the same time the economic efficiency requirements. Given this mission of the public institution, it has, at the same time, a social responsibility in the sense that the citizens need to have a transparent knowledge of the offer, need to participate to the decision-making and to receive answers to their “interpellations”. The latter are often asked via the mass media. Communication is biunivocal from the institution towards the target group and the other way round, and the informational vector is the mass media. Unfortunately, both in the written press and in the audio-visual press, the content

of a piece of news falls increasingly often into sensationalism. The *distorsion* of the public clerk's declarations and attitudes with a view to increasing the number of spectators and press readers has become a practice meant to touch, catch the attention and impress the public. The dishonest negative image so produced blocks communication, troubles the interaction code with the beneficiaries and the collaborators of the institution, while inside the institution this image inhibits creativity and conviviality. Barriers in communication appear, because the employee is afraid of the way how his ideas, words, opinions will be interpreted and rendered in the mass media.

Media-related stress can be induced as well by means of *overinformation*, generated by manipulation or by the tentative to lead the public. It is defined by Andreas Freund (quoted in Popescu, C. F., 2005, p. 140) as follows: "Attention given to certain events at the expense of other more important one. It is a diversion creating confusion, turning dramatic events into banal ones and making people lose their head because of the abundance of insignificant details". An event is treated as ordinary situation, the aspects highlighted are the striking ones that "please the public" at the expense of the fundamental values. Instead of obtaining a well-outlined image and the recognition of its exceptional activities, the institution finds itself turned into a topic for the "news in brief". The dilution of the real significance of the event produces discontent among the personnel, and turns into a communication barrier.

Underinformation is another source of media-related stress. The fact of not following through distinct tests the deployment of an event up to its last consequences is defined by Andrea Freund (quoted in Popescu, C. F., 2005, p. 139) as incomplete media coverage or "truncated or even inexistent information about important topics". The public gets an incomplete or false image on the institution or its services, and becomes unfavourable or, just as bad, neutral (indifferent) to it. In this way, underinformation can turn the employees into weary people tending not to provide complete information, in other words it can turn into a communication barrier.

2. Media-induced stress

From the youngest to the oldest of us, today we are all submitted to at least one form of stress. The society in which we live, by the alert (to be read: infernal) rhythm it imposes on us, creates stress. We have to realize more and more in less and less time and so stress enters our life becoming the most popular topic for discussion. Much has been written about stress, not only in the specialized literature, but also in other types of publications. Worldwide, so much has been written, spoken and researched and experimented on this topic, that today there are even specialists in the psychology of stress.

Le Monde diplomatique, no. 36, March 2009, has published an interview with the American intellectual Noam Chomsky (professor of linguistics of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology – MIT), Boston, USA. Author, among others, of the work “Pirates and Emperors, Old and New: International Terrorism in the Real World”, Fayard, Paris, 2003) done by the journalist of France Inter, Daniel Merme. Here are a few fragments: “The study Edward Herman and I carried out concerning media manipulation or manufacturing consent approaches the issue of the mass media effects on the public. The topic is complex, yet the few deeper research works suggest that, in reality, the influence of the *mass media* is most strongly present among the most educated people. And even the «hot» debates in the mass media are situated within certain implicitly consented parameters which marginalize the opposite points of view. The control system of the democratic societies is as efficient as possible: it makes us breathe the directions to follow together with the air that surrounds us. People do not realize it and they often get the impression that they assist to some very hot debates. Actually, the system functions infinitely better than the one of the totalitarian societies.” For instance, he reminds the fact that the totalitarian regimes relied on the levers of the advertising communication perfected in the USA after the First World War. Moreover, he evokes the perspectives of social transformation in today’s world and what utopia might look like for those who, despite the media-induced pedagogy of helplessness, never gave up the idea of changing the world.

“The acquisition of the important newspapers – *Wall Street Journal* in the US, *Les Echos* in France – by rich people accustomed to distort the truth according to their own interests, the unlimited mediatisation of Mr X, the cannibalization of the information by sports, the weather forecasts and news in brief, all these accompanied by an advertising debauchery: «communication» represents the instrument of permanent governance of the democratic regimes. It is for democracies what the propaganda represents for dictatorships.”

In 1995, Bill Gates declared: “The Revolution of the communications turns however the world into an inexorably smaller place“.¹ and “There is a strange sensation, certainly felt by people with the most diverse political sympathies, that the mass media distorts the message... finally, press trust owners have one and the same goal, that of offering the people what they want within a framework of *relative competitiveness*.”²

Relative competitiveness, indeed, if we take into account the relatively low number of the possessors of media empires, but whose sphere of influence tends to cover as soon as possible the entire globe.

¹Gardels, Nathan, *Schimbarea ordinii globale*, Editura Antet, pag.224.

²Gardels, Nathan, *Schimbarea ordinii globale*, Editura Antet, pag.221

Here is the specialists' opinion¹: The TV, radio or written press consumer's behaviour relies on a series of unconscious mechanisms, known by the *mass media* producers. The experiments have shown that, the moment when the information is presented too fast, the human brain has the tendency to consider it ever truer, without doubting its veridicity. Mass media overcharges our brain with information to such an extent, that we no longer doubt it." What an interesting viewpoint! And it is just one of the numerous results of the experiments done in this domain. We should know that mass media, especially television, has deep effects on the human mind, especially on the mind of the youth². Here are just a few landmarks for knowing the effects of television on the human being:

Effects on the cerebral structure and functions

The hypnotic effect

The neuropsychologists have proved that television, regardless of the broadcast we watch, has as a first effect the introduction of the TV-watcher's brain into a semihypnotic state (alpha cerebral waves). This explains the attraction that the audio-video mass media exerts on all of us.

TV addiction

Corelated with the hypnotic effect, appears as well the addictive behavior. The American psychologists R. Kubey and M. Csikszentmihalyi have proved that both television and the video games or the internet have the capacity of creating a strong addictive relationship, the deprivation of these means of evasion producing, in the case of those that have become addicted to them, the same symptoms as in the case of drug or behavioural addictions.

Attention and hyperactivity problems

About the structural development of the brain, neuropsychology has discovered that, depending on the time spent in front of them and on the age when it all starts, television and the computer can lead to serious prejudices for the development of the prefrontal cortex, of the left cerebral hemisphere and of the interhemispheric communication achieved via the corpus callosum. The damage produced in the prefrontal cortex following excessive exposure to TV or computer waves leads to the appearance of the ADHD (Attention Deficit with or without Hyperactivity Disorder) syndrome, namely the weakening, up to a pathological level, of some fundamental mental capacities: impairment on focusing attention, short-term memory, creative imagination, motivation to carry out an action that requires effort. A symptom is the fact that such people no longer find anything interesting in all the things that suppose effort, everything is boring for them.

¹Bohler, Sebastien *150 de experimente pentru a înțelege manipularea mediatică*, Ed. Polirom, 2009.

²Gheorghe, Virgiliu, *Efectele televiziunii asupra minții umane*, Ed. Evanghelismos, 2008.

Learning disabilities

LD (Learning disabilities), a syndrome that in many western countries affects over 50% of the children, are largely determined by watching TV and computer games. An essential role is played by the imbalances that watching induces on the functioning of the left cerebral hemisphere, the one governing the logical and analytical thinking, the ability to construct syntax and discourses. The difficulties related to language learning, reading abilities and mathematical reasoning are mainly determined by the lack of a normal development of the neuronal networks from the left hemisphere, systems whose activity is undermined during the watching.

II. Effects on mindset and behaviors

Violence gives birth to violence

All the sociological studies prove that TV violence gives birth to violence in the real world:

1. People get to overestimate the presence of violence in the real world. It increases the feeling of fear, of insecurity in front of danger, perceived as imminent.
2. Living with a permanent feeling of potential aggression, people not only become more stressed out and irascible, but they also prepare themselves to answer with violence, in self defence, in case of a possible attack. The violent behaviour insinuates itself in the individual's imagination and he considers it is justified to use it in order to prevent danger.
3. The individuals, to an increasingly significant extent, perceive this violence as a legitimate and implicit component of the social institutions. And if the world we live in is a violent one, violence becomes a means and a necessity.
4. There appears a desensibilization of the people in front of violence, pain and suffering; violence becomes, to an increasing extent, a desirable means to solve one's problems and impose one's interests on others, to acquire the desired pleasure or comfort.
5. Young people become more and more impulsive and less and less capable to control their violent impulses. From game to obsession, the violent behaviour becomes a constant of the behaviour of the generations brought up in front of the TV set.

The revolted and tyrannical behaviour, the ironical attitude and the impertinent language promoted on TV gives birth to a generation of selfish and individualist young people, incapable of socializing normally. And the advertising messages multiply people's desires, generate states of frustration and, consequently, constitute an extremely dangerous stress factor for the development of the children's personality.

These are just a few of the conclusions of the researchers of the media phenomenon presented in the work “The effects of television on the human mind”. It is essential to get informed and to know these means of communication in order to be able to use them rationally and in order not to become their slaves.

3. Questionnaire-based research on the effects of media-related stress on communication in the public institutions

Context

Any public institution’s main mission is to ensure the access of all the categories of citizens to a minimum of necessary services. It has, at the same time, a social responsibility in the sense of ensuring a transparent knowledge by the citizens of the offer and of the obligation to answer the “interpellations”. The communication is biunivocal from the institution towards the target group and the other way round, and the informational vector is the mass media.

Unfortunately, the distortion of the public worker’s declarations and attitudes with a view to increasing the number of spectators and press readers has become a practice meant to touch, catch the attention and impress the public and at the same time a source of stress, namely media-related stress, which produces communication barriers.

In order to solve the crisis situations rapidly, we need to avoid a series of factors that can lead to an aggravation of the crisis. They are enumerated and explained in Delia Popescu’s work, *Tendințe contemporane în managementul afacerilor* (Contemporary tendencies in business management): keeping silent and lacking initiative, distorting the truth and hiding information, using a much too technical language, being incapable to anticipate secondary consequences, neglecting the relationships with the press.

By neglecting the relationships with the press, the institution can lose its room for manoeuvre, its credibility and its legitimacy.

There are, at the same time, rules that can be followed in order to neutralize possible errors.

We must highlight the fact that these rules involve an action based on a strategy elaborated in advance.

The problem we identified and which led us to our present research work is the increasingly significant media-related stress within the public institutions.

Based on the unfavourable situation that exists today in Romania, the press does nothing less but worsen the public workers’ feelings, rendering certain events “abounding” in picturesque aspects that delight the public.

Definition of the group under analysis, of the researched unit and of the survey unit

The group under analysis is represented by 803 public workers; *the research unit* is the public institution in the following public service domains: public administration, health, and social care, education, scientific research, national defence, protection and security, network services.

The survey unit is determined as being the person, the public worker, regardless of his sex or socio-professional category.

Methodological research aspects

The topic of our research is the public workers' media-related stress. Our main purpose is to determine the extent to which the public workers are affected by the way their declarations are presented in the mass media and especially to find out their opinion concerning the distortion of their declarations.

The objectives of our research:

- to evaluate the influence of the media-related stress on the process of internal and external communication of the institution's personnel
- to identify the communication barriers between the public institution and the citizens

The hypotheses of our research are:

- The institution's external communication, with the mass media, generates dissatisfaction for the personnel of the institution
- The information transmitted via the mass media, concerning the activity of the budgetary sector, implicitly the social care activity, generates media-related stress among the institution's employees
- Public institutions do not assure, via an adequate communication, appropriate information of the population concerning the activities carried out and the steps taken in order to attain the goals of the institution

Our research method has been the sociological survey, and the *research technique* used for this study was the paper self-applied questionnaire.

The questionnaires were applied with the help of the master degree students from the program "Managementul serviciilor publice" (*Public services management*). The database was created with the help of the students Lupu Maria-Magdalena and Căluș Magdalena Adriana, enrolled in the second year at the ECTS specialization.

Research instruments – we have used a structured questionnaire (with 9 questions) filled in by a number of 803 people. Being a paper self-applied questionnaire, it

was accompanied by an explanatory letter in which the interviewees were informed about the purpose and the fill-in instructions.

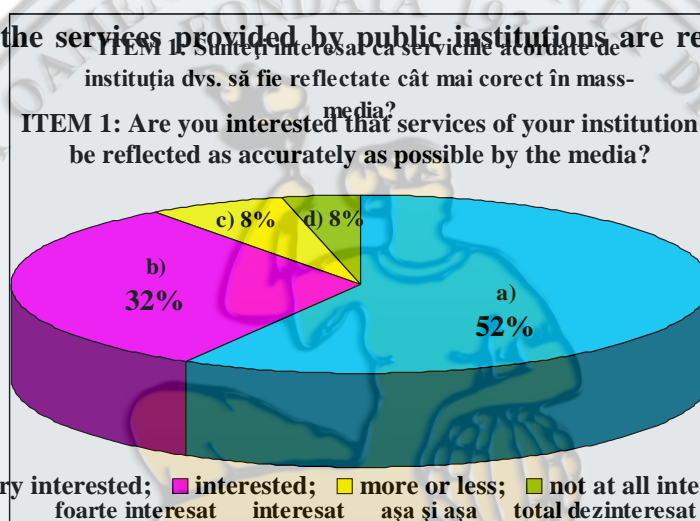
The data gathering took place during the period 10.03-04.04.2009.

Codification and centralization of the answers

Each answer variant has been given a code in order to centralize the answers easily. The questions: 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 received a simple code, each answer variant receiving a number from 1 to 2 or from 1 to 4.

The results of our research

1. The way the services provided by public institutions are reflected in the mass media:

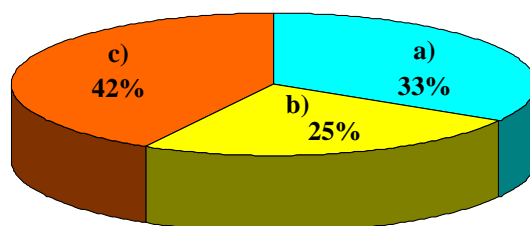


The results obtained show that most of the employees are interested in the fact that the services of the public institution may be reflected as accurately as possible by the media. Consequently, we can suppose that the employees are aware of the fact that an unpleasant event presented by the media can affect:

- the internal communication process, by generating confused reactions, the desire not to comment, etc.
- externally, the relation with the institution's clients, partners, sponsors and other categories of collaborators.

2. Situations concerning events dealt with by the mass media.

The results highlighted show that there have been situations when the mass media related events concerning the institution in a different way than the desirable one (33%), and especially the fact that important aspects of the situations related were neglected, so that the information became incomplete, truncated (42%). We remark as well that some employees know as well cases (25%) when the situations related abound in picturesque aspects.



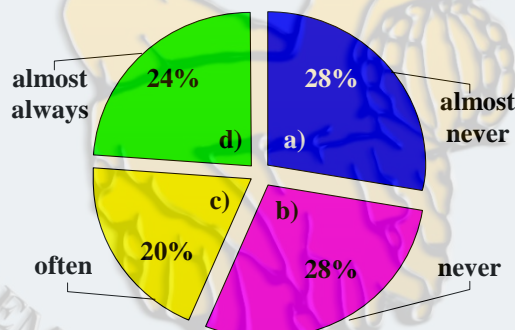
ITEM 2: Did you have in your activity situations when?

- a) yours statements or your colleagues' statements were related in media in a different way than the desirable one? ■
- b) events indicated by you or your colleagues as essential were "charged" with picturesque aspects liked public so that result a "miscellaneous fact"? ■
- c) important aspects of your presentation or your colleagues' presentation were neglected so that the information became incomplete? ■

3. Situations concerning the employee's feelings when erroneously related events concerning the public institution were signalled in the media.

The results obtained show that the employees are affected by the inaccurate or incomplete media coverage concerning the institution, the pressure being more significant when they are directly involved in such situations.

4. The way the employees act concerning the meetings with the managers for analysis and propositions in case a situation is inaccurately related by the mass media.

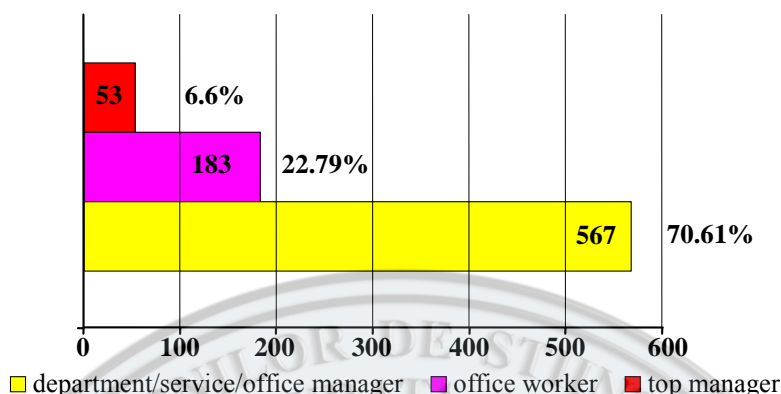


ITEM 4: Did you meet your managers for analysis et propositions when, in your opinion, media don't reflect correctly you're your public services?

We can see that 24% of the employees get almost always involved in the clarification of the situations created, and for the other response variants (almost never, sometimes, often) opted out equally about 20% of the interviewees.

5. Socio-professional category

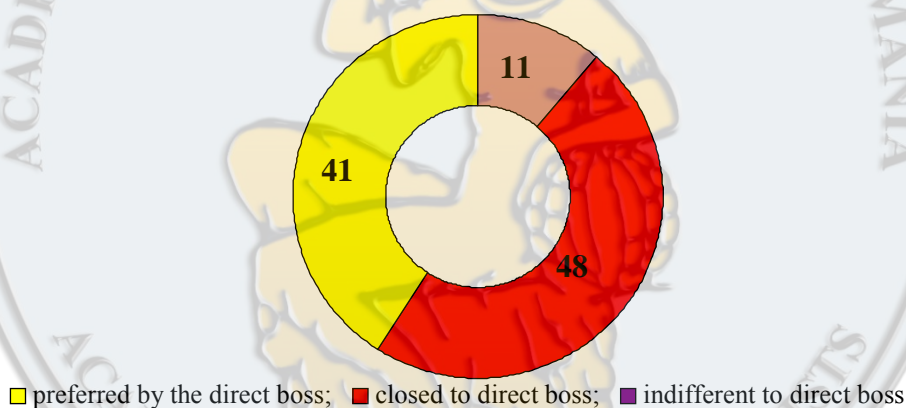
Practically, we endeavoured to include in the structure of our sample all the socio-professional categories. We obtained a percentage of 6.6% interviewees from the category of the top managers, 22.79% department/service/ office managers, and 70.61% office workers.



ITEM 5: Which is your socio-professional category?

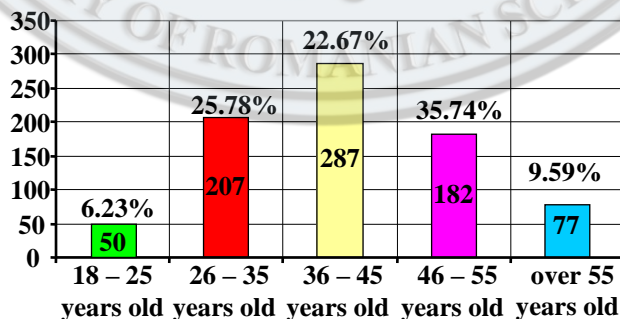
6. The relation with the direct boss.

Most of the employees (48%) consider themselves to be close to their direct boss, 41% consider themselves preferred by the direct boss, and 11% think they are indifferent to him. We can deduce that there is a close relation between managers and employees, which leads to an efficient communication in the public institution.



ITEM 6: You consider yourself?

7. Age group

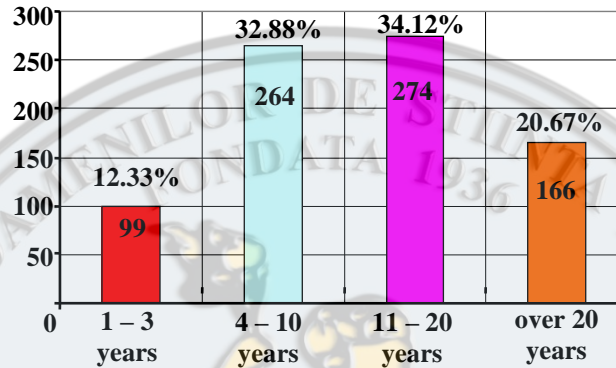


ITEM 7: Distribution by age

The repartition on age groups shows that there is continuity in the work, as the newly arrived employees are guided by the older ones.

The age average of the interviewees is optimal, most of them being aged between 36 and 45.

8. The years of service in a public institution



ITEM 8: Distribution by oldness in institution

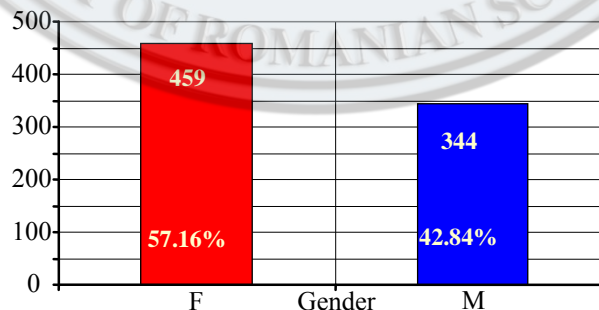
The results obtained show that most of the employees have a significant length of service in the public institutions. We can draw the conclusion that in this sector the employees are adequately motivated, and the institution is not faced with personnel fluctuations.

Moreover, the employees know fairly well the internal environment of the institution and cannot be easily influenced by the mass media accounts.

9. Sex.

We endeavoured to have a rapport between the interviewees on sexes of about 50% - 50%. We can notice that we have reached our goal; the proportion of the employees on sexes is very close to the natural one.

This is necessary in order to highlight both the women's and the men's point of view concerning the media-related problems.



ITEM 9: Distribution by gender

Conclusions

The main conclusion drawn following this research is that the mass media produces a state of stress constituting a communication barrier. Public relations are at the heart of the great debates of the contemporary society. The correct choice of the information channels will provide a solution to a part of the existing pressures generated by the requests of the public, for the public to be able to receive answers to some of their interpellations, for instance, by means of the mass media. The public employees and the journalists have a common goal, namely to serve the public by providing information. Consequently, they need to work together, relying on a relationship of trust and respect. So, anyone that works in public administration faces the challenge to appropriate the basic communication abilities, for the citizens to have access to the information of public interest and to know their rights and their duties. In the materials published, the content, the language, the presentation, the structure and the style need to be used so as the material may be easy to read and to understand by the people concerned. At the same time, it is important to provide the right information at the right time; a campaign may not attain its goal if the receiver is worried about other problems, related to immediate necessities. So, it is important to take into account these obstacles, because public communication requires as well making sure that the public understood the message you wanted to convey.

The analysis of the internal and external communication, of the media-related stress and of its influence on the communication process represents a challenge that the present paper can accomplish only in part, both because only certain levels of these issues were approached and because our temporal and spatial vision is limited. The purpose of this theoretical approach was not to highlight the positive aspects – which are certainly present – but to show those aspects that can be improved in order to obtain better results, to optimize the institution's image and to obtain the much-desired percentages of trust from the citizens. Our study highlighted the fact that in the public institutions has been created no monitoring system concerning the mass media reactions to the problems appeared in the current activities, in order for distortions to be neutralized by means of a correct and prompt management of the crisis image. Most of the interviewees have shown that the distorted accounts do not lead to analysis meetings and to official reactions towards the manner in which certain events are reflected in the mass media. The frustration experienced by the public institutions employees creates communication barriers between the management and the office workers and affects the quality of the public services, as well as the relations with the citizens.

The conclusions of our research confirmed all the three hypotheses we had formulated.

To complete the propositions mentioned during our analysis, we considered that the following measures are necessary as well:

- creating an information and public relations department, whose spokesman's attributions should concern only the institutional marketing;
- elaborating the duty sheet of the spokesman and a public relations guide reuniting all the internal provisions in the public relations domain and containing examples of good practices;
- organizing reunions with the managers in charge when any problem, however little, appears in the external communication in general, in order to find solutions to mitigate or, why not, to eliminate the possible negative effect on the civil society;
- initiating media campaigns involving the civil society and the education as well, with a major focus on volunteership, taking into account the fact that social care is an issue that interests the large public;
- organizing specialized courses for the employees of the specialized structure and also for the institution's top management, which through assimilation of specific knowledge, may meet the two main requirements of this domain: to know the public relations domain and also the specifics of the institution whose activity they promote;
- taking into account the number of working hours, the high level of responsibility and the risks they expose themselves to and in order to avoid, in the future, the fluctuation of the personnel who deploys its activity in this domain, it is necessary to create the logistic and financial conditions able to stimulate the continuity in the respective function;
- the public relations cannot be conceived outside the scope of the research, monitoring and assessment activity and all these require funds and, consequently, it is absolutely necessary to elaborate regulations stipulating a budget allotted for the public relations activity on the institutional level.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bohler, Sebastien, *150 de experimente pentru a înțelege manipularea mediatică* (150 experiments to understand media manipulation), Ed. Polirom, 2009
- [2] Gardels, Nathan, *Schimbarea ordinii globale* (The Changing Global Order), Editura Antet, Filipeștii de Târg, Prahova
- [3] Gheorghe, Virgiliu, *Efectele televiziunii asupra minții umane* (The effects of television on the human mind), Ed. Evanghelismos, 2008
- [4] Lohisse, Jean, *Comunicarea. De la transmiterea mecanică la interacțiune* (La communication. De la transmission à la relation), Ed. Polirom, Iași, 2005
- [5] Popescu, Cristian Florin, *Manual de jurnalism* (Journalism textbook), Ed. Tritonic, București, 2005
- [6] Popescu Delia, *Tendințe contemporane în managementul afacerilor* (Contemporary tendencies in business management), Ed. Economică, București, 2002
- [7] www.monde-diplomatique.ro.