

POSTHUMANIST FORMS OF COMMUNICATION IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION DURING THE PANDEMIC

Alexandru IOAN¹

¹Lecturer, PhD, Apollonia University of Iași, Romania
Corresponding author: Alexandru Ioan; e-mail: alexandru_ioan@yahoo.com

Abstract

Under the sign of the ruthless SARS-CoV-2, the vast majority of the traditional social structures seemed to have collapsed completely. The comprising institutions were forced to adapt rapidly and to look for solutions which, at least for the democratic societies seemed inconceivable. One of them was the isolation of the population. This extreme measurement forced the administration to make important investments in the world of computers, to be more transparent, more explicit and to explore all the possibilities offered to the society by the new technologies. Experts suddenly found themselves confronted with a lack of technological profiles, not only in the sphere of medical sciences, but also in that of public administration. But this problem is not only technical, but also human. It is absolutely necessary to jump from the preservation of the operability of the old systems to the training of highly-qualified specialists in technological profiles, able to understand the problems of public administration. This happens because regardless of how perfected the robot that will serve us in the posthumanist era will be, man is "stubborn" to remain the essence of planetary consciousness. For how long, it remains to be seen.

Keywords: SARS-CoV-2, posthumanism, public administration.

A year ago, shortly after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the adoption of the extreme isolation measures, in a small village on the banks of Milcov a strong storm interrupted the power supply for 24 hours. The universe collapsed. The streets were empty, the dark screen of the television set and the monitors of the intelligent terminals were closed and these created a feeling of darkness. All connections with the world were closed. This was a shocking moment in which we realised that because of the electrical current we take with us the whole universe regardless of the place in which we are. According to McLuhan "the electricity, equally available at a farm or at a luxury residency, allows every place to be in the centre." With its help we immediately communicate with our

friends from the different parts of the world and we follow together the operations from a space station orbiting the Earth. When electricity stopped there was a sensation of emptiness. The only movement space was clearly delimited by the four walls of the house in which we found ourselves isolated. The inevitable takes place. The accidental stopping of the power supply triggered a stop in the social relationships and sent the human being in the prehistory of communication. When power came back on the virtual universe was reconstructed, the only space available for the people isolated because of the pandemic. Because, as McLuhan also said "the centre-margin structure" of the geopolitical cartography of the 21st century "experiences an immediate reassembly of all its mechanized bites in an organic whole. This is the new world of the global village." (MCLUHAN, 2003). Of course, "the global village" finds itself in a "global economy" whose "technical and scientific structure" is built from "the different and previously differentiated branches of technology, especially the four riders of the posthuman apocalypse: nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology and cognitive science" (BRAIDOTTI, 2013).

According to posthumanists (BAUMLIN, 2020), the microscopic coronavirus rightfully (according to them) denounces (why only know?) the right to be equally treated as the human being. This sudden change of paradigm led to a general state of fear. The psychologist Florian Gheroghe notices two kinds of suffering. On the one hand, the normal ones, triggered by illness. On the other hand, the abnormal ones, determined by the fear produced by institutional reasons. This happens because the public administration

officials, meaning the centre of the integrative force of the human beings in the modern society, do not offer the answer that the citizen awaits from the entity that he or she considers responsible for his security. But there is no shred of compassion for the sick or for the families of those suffering. The well-known psychologist points out the fact that, one year after the outbreak of the pandemic, the lack of thorough psychological studies represents, for the Romanian state, a major problem. According to Florian Gheorghe, it is true that in the state of maximum tension (reported all over the world) no one had time to thoroughly lean on these issues that would have strictly required the presence in each hospital of psychologists to qualitatively observe the evolution of the situation, provide specialized support and collect the data needed for in-depth studies. At least, in the hospitals aimed at treating Covid patients. Special care was needed not only for the patients, but also for their families. In terms of state institutions, the specialist notes not only the absence of a clear vision on behalf of the authorities, but also the lack for long periods of empathy on behalf of doctors, explainable not by the concern for their own health, but by physical exhaustion caused by very a high workload, the unknowns of the disease they had to treat and also by the stress generated by the situation of their own families (BADEA, 2020).

The poverty of the gestures expected from the authorities is accompanied by the contradictory messages offered by the media institutions. Firstly, through the television channels which mediate the vast majority of the messages between public authorities and the citizens. The significant help offered by the government (over 40 million Euro) at the beginning of the pandemic to the media institutions is well-known and it matters significantly (PIRVOIU, 2020). But the debates hosted by the means of mass information, through the opposing opinions that they disseminate, did not only not manage to clear the need to respect measures, but, on the contrary, accentuated confusion the feeling of uncertainty. It is enough to remember the alarming messages broadcasted by media channels with a national coverage regarding toilet paper (STIRILEPROTV, 2020; DIGI24, 2020) and the fact that today

everyone gets into a bank wearing a mask, and we are able to understand better the feeling of insecurity triggered by the pandemic. The topic of the coronavirus was accompanied by an aggravation of the perception of insecurity caused by others but also self-fear, of the harm we can do ourselves. They alarm call came right from those specialists who accused authorities of having taken "grotesque and absurd measure, with an unimaginable impact on the global economy" (NIȚĂ, 2020). One of those measures was to isolate the population at home. This was such a radical measure that it forbid people to even visit their sick relatives. The author knows cases in which patients, who were in house isolation, were refused medical aid due to the overcrowding of hospitals as well as people who, despite having repeatedly lost their conscience, refused any kind of medical help because they were afraid of not contaminating the others. Fear was so strong that many people preferred to jump into the arms of the conspiracy theory. There were studies which presented the faith that the killer virus was artificially created in a laboratory, escaped due to carelessness or that it was released intentionally in order to drastically reduce the population. A polemic appeared among scientists (FREEMAN et al., 2020a; FREEMAN et al., 2020b; FREEMAN et al., 2020c). But the promotion of the conspiracy theory starts from the social and institutional mistrust, from the conviction that the government cannot fulfil its mission which derives from the social contract, from the assessment of the efficiency of politics, from the attitudes towards democracy and the populist gestures or from the approval of the technocrat government. We find the research conducted by the International Society of Criminology to be extremely relevant. They confirm the alarming increase of the feeling of fear and draw attention on the negative consequences of promoting this conspiracy theory. Other studies were required in order to dismantle the initial conclusions and to contradict the scientific basis of the first ones (GARRY et al., 2020, GEMENIS & LITTVAY, 2021).

Therefore, it is easy to imagine that the situation could have been much worse if it had not been for the alternative solution offered by the new technologies. Their unprecedented

development allowed, even remotely, the continual existence of social connections. The mass adoption and generalization of artificial intelligence-based equipment took place gradually, as prices have become widely accessible. Firstly, out of curiosity, later on out of amusement or even out of pride. You are not trendy if you do not possess a social network connected state of the art mobile phone! It is like in a movie rendered normally up to a point from which the presentation of the images becomes accelerated in order to synchronize with the new frame. This also happened with mankind's adaptation to artificial intelligence. If up to some time ago, efforts were targeted towards the development of new systems, the world is from now on forced to adapt to this new life environment.

Institutional digitalization - the Romanian solution

Where do Romanians start this survival race from? Statistics is tough. At the moment, Romania holds the place in the Digital Economy and Society Index. Not a very good position for one of the world's pioneers in terms of cybernetics and computer production, isn't it?

At the beginning of 2021 village townhalls said that they will provide public internet in at least 10 points, in the rural localities. It was hoped that, by doing so, the less fortunate pupils have access to online education. Nota bene! The population of most Romanian villages is old and the villages are at least a quarter abandoned. On the other hand, not all the people living in villages know how to use smart devices or the internet. Therefore, they still pay their bills after receiving the envelopes in the classical mail. One step has yet been taken. Either in a cane or in a wheelchair, the old people now pay their bills at the pay point from the village shop.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the need for institutional digitalization. According to IT specialists, in only a few weeks we witnessed more technological innovation and digital transformation than in the last 30 years. In the fall of 2020, the Authority for the Development of Romania created the National Council for Digital Transformation - "a digital agora and a technical organism in which public service

institutes together with their private partners from the IT&C industry are called to create the correct path towards a digital Romania, strongly connected to the EU and NATO partner states. Romania starts this accelerated path towards digitalization having two major vulnerabilities: the lack of the essential pillars, such as electronic identity or interoperability and the limited digital skills." (ADR.GOV.RO, 2020a)

The central mission of the new consultative entity is to present the necessary directions for the development of public policies in the field of digital transformation. The priorities of the new Council clearly stem from the workgroups of the institution: a government Cloud, electronic identity, digital transformation, artificial intelligence and big data, digital skills, electronic billing and interoperability.

The decision to create this government subordinated structure was based on the least honourable position that Romania holds within the European digital concert when it comes to the digitalization of public administration. And all this despite the fact that Romanian software companies, as well as the individual specialists, are well-known in the entire world for their performances and creativity. Of course, there are some strong premises in order to accelerate digital transformation and to change this situation. According to the government in Bucharest, the existing human resource could be supplemented by important funds from the EU budgeted for 2021-2027 and from the financial envelope available for the member states for relaunch and resilience. The message coming from the European Union was clear. The community directions are as following: the future has to be digital or it will no longer exist (ADR.GOV.RO, 2020b).

The Authority for the digitalization of Romania represents an institution created in 2020 in order to achieve the ambitious goals related to the digital transformation of the Romanian society. It is a kind of process that, once initiated, cannot ever be stopped. That is why the digitalization of Romania means the shift towards a new paradigm - technological, informational and social. Public institutions represent only one of the fundamental components of this digital transformation process. The private environment,

the associative environment, the local communities and the entire society represent equally interested parties in this process. All these forces are summoned to build and make processes more efficient, standardize them and offer assistance to the central and local administrations in order to solve concrete and punctual problems. The disappearance of the queues at the counters where taxes are paid will be conditioned by the development of high quality online public services

But which are projects that get us even closer to artificial intelligence and further away from the normal actions of the human being? For the beginning, let us remember the projects which already are in the implementation stage. A brief analysis of the website of the Authority for the Digitalization of Romania tells us that this year we started the 2021-2027 Strategic framework for the adoption and use of innovative technologies in public administration.

The Centralized Software Platform for Digital Identification has to become operational by the end of summer of 2023. Here are the most important goals:

- the building of the National Electronic Register for Electronic Identity, which will include the Electronic Identities of all electronic eGovernment service consumers;
- the interconnection with the unitary and secure access portal to eGovernment electronic services and the citizens' enrolment to their desired services.

Another programme which takes place at the moment is the National Adoption Informatic System which offers citizens and any other actors involved in the national and international adoption process a web interface, with sophistication level 4. This system should become operational in the fall of 2022.

Starting from the middle of the present year we shall benefit from an Integrated Informatic System for the Issuance of Civil Status Documents, which will computerize the system for submitting applications for the registration and effective issuance of civil status documents, as well as the implementation of the necessary support for the development and access to electronic services based on primary civil status information.

And also, from the summer of the present year we shall benefit from the National Management System regarding Disability. The general aim of this project is to develop a centralized national platform for collecting, preserving and distributing information regarding people with disabilities (adults and children) to the central and local public authorities, individual beneficiaries and institutional partners.

We also briefly present the Platforms operated by the Authority for the Digitalization of Romania. The Electronic System of Public Acquisitions is a platform which ensures the transparency of the process and of the procedures of public acquisitions. It represents the information path through which public authorities acquire, via electronic means, the goods and services necessary for the development of activities for a particular administrative unite.

For many Romanians, www.ghiseul.ro platform has become an important time saver for several years. But the great mass of citizens are still waiting at the classic counters. The project, supported by the Romanian Electronic Payments Association, offers taxpayers the opportunity to view existing payment obligations and / or to pay online with the card, in part or in full, local taxes and duties, as well as existing fines. Through this system, the queues for taxes and fees will become an increasingly erased memory, just as few today remember the collectors of 100 years ago and even fewer those who have ever heard of the bankers who collected the tributes in ancient times.

The platform aici.gov.ro is an intermediary for the registration of the documents addressed to the public institution which do not have their own online registration system. All public institutions in Romania will be able to enroll in the platform to respond to citizens' requests in electronic format, in the shortest possible time.

Let us also remember the Information System for Electronic Assignment in Transports, used with the purpose of the electronic assignment of authorizations for the international transport of merchandise and the electronic assignment of the internal transport routes for people.

Through the Unique Electronic Contact Point, to which the central public administration and

other competent authorities are connected to, one can easily fulfill, via electronic means, all the procedures and formalities required for access to their service activities, in particular the declarations, notifications or applications for authorization, including applications for entry in a register and any applications for authorization required for the performance of services

The National Electronic System informatizes the interaction between the citizen/private companies and public administration. It offers the citizen the forms used in relation to the administration, facilitating the obtaining of various documents. With its help, all contributors at a national level have the opportunity to post online the "Declaration on the obligations to pay social security contributions, income tax and nominal records of insured people", on the basis of owning a qualified electronic certificate issued by an accredited certification service provider.

These plans are interesting. They are partially put into practiced. Some public administration tools work. Many taxes are paid online. But the road is still long and difficult. Posthumanism is still here. The hope of the transhumanism which speaks about prolonging human life for an indefinite period of time is still in the hope phase. And we still do not know at what cost!

References

- ADR.GOV.RO, (2020a) *CNTD launch. Event concept* [in Romanian]. Available from: <https://www.adr.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/CONCEPT-Lansare-CNTD-1.pdf> [10 February, 2021].
- ADR.GOV.RO, (2020b) *Press release regarding the launch event of the National Council for Digital Transformation* [in Romanian]. Available from: <https://www.adr.gov.ro/anunt-de-presareferitor-la-evenimentul-de-lansare-a-consiliului-national-pentru-transformare-digitala/>, accessed on February 10, 2021.
- BADEA, D. (2020) *The Romanian Digitalization Authority launches the National Council for Digital Transformation* [in Romanian]. Available from: <https://www.agerpres.ro/economic-intern/2020/10/27/autoritatea-pentru-digitalizarea-romaniei-lanseaza-consiliul-national-pentru-transformare-digitala-597973> [15 January 2021].
- BAUMLIN, J. (2020) From Postmodernism to Posthumanism: Theorizing Ethos in an Age of Pandemic. *Humanities*. 9(2), p. 4.
- BRAIDOTTI, R. (2013) *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity.
- DIGI24 (2020) *How the coronavirus triggered toilet paper hysteria in Australia. A roll sells for \$ 1,000* [in Romanian]. Available from: <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/cum-a-declansat-coronavirusul-isteria-hartiei-igienice-in-australia-o-rola-se-vinde-online-cu-1-000-dolari-1270153> [20 February 2021].
- STIRILEPROTV (2020) *Unusual ideas in the pandemic: Toilet paper, replaced with "reusable sanitary napkins"* [in Romanian]. Available from: <https://stirileprotv.ro/diversi/idei-inedite-in-pandemie-hartia-igienica-inlocuita-cu-zservetele-igienice-refolosibile.html>. [20 February 2021].
- FREEMAN, D., WAITE, F., ROSEBROCK, L., PETIT, A., CAUSIER, C., EAST, A., JENNER, L., TEALE, A.L., CARR, L., MULHALL, S., BOLD, E. & LAMBE, S. (2020a). *Coronavirus conspiracy beliefs, mistrust, and compliance with government guidelines in England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- FREEMAN, D., WAITE, F., ROSEBROCK, L., PETIT, A., CAUSIER, C., EAST, A., JENNER, L., TEALE, A.L., CARR, L., MULHALL, S., BOLD, E. & LAMBE, S. (2020b). We should beware of ignoring uncomfortable possible truths. *Psychological Medicine*. DOI:10.1017/S0033291720002196.
- FREEMAN, D., WAITE, F., ROSEBROCK, L., PETIT, A., BOLD, E., MULHALL, S., CARR, L., TEALE, A.L., JENNER, L., EAST, A., CAUSIER, C., BIRD, J.C. & LAMBE, S. (2020c). Do letters about conspiracy belief studies greatly exaggerate? A reply to Sutton & Douglas. *Psychological Medicine*. DOI:10.1017/S0033291720002913.
- GARRY, J., FORD, R. & JOHNS, R. (2020) Coronavirus conspiracy beliefs, mistrust, and compliance: taking measurement seriously. *Psychological medicine*. 10, pp. 1-11.
- GEMENIS, K. & LITTVAY, L. (2021) *COVID-19 Conspiracy Beliefs and Government Rule Compliance*. Available from: <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/docs/about/Gemenis-COVID-19-Conspiracy-Beliefs-and-Government-Rule-Compliance.pdf> accessed on [2 May 2021].
- MCLUHAN, M. (2003) *Understanding the media: the extension of man*. Berkeley: Gingko.
- NIȚĂ, I. (2020) *12 eminent virologists warn: The Covid-19 panic has led to grotesque, absurd measures with an unimaginable impact on the world economy* [in Romanian]. Available from: <https://www.qmagazine.ro/12-virusologi-eminenti-avertizeaza-panica-de-covid-19-a-dus-la-masuri-grotesti-absurde-cu-un-impact-inimaginabil-asupra-economiei-mondiale/> [February 2 2021].
- PIRVOIU, Claudia (2020) *What does the GEO that provides for the allocation of 200 million lei to support the media through an information campaign look like* [in Romanian]. Available from: https://economie.hotnews.ro/stiri-media_publicitate-23984591-oug-bani-presare-200-milioane-lei-campanie-informare.htm [28 February 2021].