

THE DECALOGUE OF PANDEMIC COMMUNICATION AND MORE

Carmen Liliana CÎDU¹, Raluca Eugenia FLORESCU¹, Marius HRISCU²

¹Student, „Apollonia” University of Iași, Romania

²Lecturer, PhD, „Apollonia” University of Iași, Romania

Corresponding author: Marius Hriscu; e-mail: mariushriscu@yahoo.com

Abstract

In the years 2020 and 2022, mankind was confronted with a high proportion pandemic and the beginning of a war, crisis situations which it did not yet overcome. The management of such situations depends largely on communication. In order to avoid the sensation of chaos, incoherence and incompetence in such crisis situations a communication decalogue during times of pandemic, war or other situations might represent an important landmark. Our proposals would be the following: the messages have to be clear, made by unitary voices and in an authoritarian tone. Communication must also explicitly denote empathy and compassion, and must be digitized on an easily accessible platform. For efficiency and a better understanding of the messages, the tone must be direct and familiar. We must neither neglect transparency and the recognition and assumption of our own mistakes, nor the explanation of scientific phenomena as well as their shortcomings, without forgetting an important component: openness and cooperation with civil society. It is therefore useful to have some “tools” at hand, that can facilitate our communication processes and, implicitly, it is possible to become more successful in getting what we want to communicate.

Keywords: *pandemic, communication, war.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In our view, at the moment, there is no human activity more important in the world than the political one. The complexity of this activity stems from the significance of the political decisions taken and also from the effects that these decisions might have on large masses of people and for long periods of time, sometimes measurable only on the scale of history.

Therefore, both our individual and our collective destiny depend on politicians. And politicians, in any situation, have to communicate. Of course, they do it better or worse. That is precisely why, the political action is carefully followed, discussed and disputed by all population segments.

The social profile of the modern individual, free to seek happiness and fulfil his destiny according to his aptitudes, skills and talents, either natural or acquired, is triggered by political freedom, democracy, the existence of political parties and of parliamentarianism, even though these elements belong to the recent conquests of human civilisation.

In 2020, mankind was confronted with a significant pandemic, a crisis situation that it did not yet overcome, although there were important efforts made in order to eradicate it. Immediately after the outbreak of the pandemic, the other major issues on the agenda of the politicians became less important, neither hunger, nor pollution or wars, the economic interests or even the elections in states which are said to have supremacy in the world, did not seem to matter anymore.

But things got worse in 2022, when people thought that things cannot become worse, as the war in Ukraine began.

The manner in which situations such as the war or the pandemic were managed depended largely on communication. The state, through the measures that it adopts, has to correctly inform and protect the population in order not to create panic, and especially in order not to further the crisis.

However, not all measures are fully understood and they may even generate protests of different intensities and manifestations. This is the reason why communication plays a primordial role in such crisis situations, in order to avoid the sensation of chaos, lack of coherence or incompetence (MCQUAIL & WINDAHL, 2001).

2. DECALOGUE OF PANDEMIC COMMUNICATION AND WAR

In order to better communicate in such situations, a decalogue of the communication manner in emergency or critical situations, would represent an important landmark. Therefore, we propose the following decalogue:

2.1. The broadcasted messages have to be clear.

Although things change rapidly and many aspects are still unknown when it comes to COVID-19 or to the war in Ukraine, decisions should not be taken from one day to the next, but communicated in time, for at least a few days. And especially, when they are communicated, they have to be clear.

Most of the times, the bureaucratic language replaced clarity and nobody knew what was going to happen next: if they were going to close restaurants, bars or casinos. It was assumed that something in the inside was going to be closed, but nobody knew exactly what and when.

If, at the beginning of the pandemic, the officials sent the police to sites that were "broadcasting fake news" and said that we should only read official news, nowadays if you read that site, you only find "the informative bulletin" belonging to the Group of strategic communication. And it is not at all clear.

The general population learned late the importance of the infection rate that led to the closure of localities. It was difficult for it to understand what the positive cases meant, what being declared positive following a retest meant, whereas the communication of cases of cured people was almost abandoned.

For a person with digital education and solid literacy it is almost impossible to find out any clear information: what it was going to close and why, when it was going to close, until when or where; what are the risk areas, how you can travel abroad, etc. All this information can be found on various official sites, but if you've ever searched a police site, for example, you know how much you have to browse there in order to find out what it is about.

2.2. Communication has to belong to unitary voices

This rule continues the rule of clarity. We had a limited number of voices which expressed themselves during the pandemic, but which came along and we did not understand who did the clear message belong to. Here, we speak about Streinu-Cercel, Rafila, Arafat or Vela, whom nobody knows besides Mircea Dinescu, but who attended the press conferences and then suddenly disappeared. There were also Iohannis, Orban and all kinds of ministries or state secretaries present on TV. We have not yet understood, not even today, their order and responsibilities. Who is the superior of whom? Who answers what and to whom?

It should have been explained who does what and who makes the decisions, because otherwise the large number of official voices only led to a cacophony of noises.

2.3. The communication tone has to be an authoritarian one

After the end of the state of emergency and with the approach of the elections, first the local ones, then the parliamentary ones, the authoritarian tone decreased. There was a fear in statements on the probable electoral background. From messages such as "If we do not protect ourselves after Easter, there will be funerals," one of the best messages of Klaus Iohannis from the pandemic, we witnessed some press conferences, without density, with boring messages that said nothing (BIBLIAORTODOXA, n.d.).

Sometimes, both the authorities and the citizens needed more authoritative messages in order to understand the gravity of the situation. Of course, the messages were not to be like those of Italian mayors during the lockdown, when they said they were "sending carabinieri with flamethrowers" over those who did not respect the decisions. But between the softness of our messages and those in Italy at the time, there is some middle ground, where there was room for authority.

But the issue of authority is quite serious. If you come with authority, you must also come with enforcing the law. And one of the problems during this period was and remains the inability

to enforce the law. Ordinary and ok people stayed in their homes, respected the measures, whereas in fancy clubs, people attended weddings, baptisms, parties, whereas another segment of the population went unhindered in pilgrimages because no one knew how to apply the law.

2.4. Communication has to explicitly express empathy and compassion

As we are going through a complicated period, in which the pandemic does not affect only our physical health, but also our mental health, where there is authority, there should also be empathy and compassion. It is normal to miss the things belonging to our life's pleasures, such as holidays. It is a period of uncertainty which has put our adaptability capacity to test.

The communications of our governors completely lacked empathy. When we offer the case of New Zealand, a country which fought against COVID-19, we mainly refer to communication. When it comes to measures no country is perfect. Many years from now, we shall realise which country had the perfect strategy. At the moment we are only offering our opinion, as if we were betting on a 0-0 score, in the 13th minute. The countries which fought accordingly received empathy from their authorities.

In their speeches, when they announced harsh measures, the authorities in other countries spoke humanly, understanding grief. Both that of business and of ordinary people forced to stay indoors. From ordinary youngsters forced to stay in town, people who lost their jobs or people who have been working from home for 8 months, to parents with children either in school or at home, everybody needs empathy. And we would add that after the pandemic, in addition to support funds for entrepreneurs, therapy should be promoted at the national level, because it will definitely be highly needed.

The president, prime minister, ministers and other authorities spoke dryly, without empathy. I don't think it was necessarily intentional, but here we are talking about emotional incapacity. It's hard to believe that Iohannis, for example, has the right empathy to "caress" us and say "We understand that it's hard for you, but...."

2.5. Digitalisation and an efficient and easily accessible platform

This aspect is connected to the clarity of communication, since we speak about a pandemic which has lasted for more than 11 month and it shall continue to last. People do not know where to take their information from. In the country of IT, we do not have a unitary coronavirus platform. Since the beginning of the vaccination campaign, the platform has not been functioning properly... no clear and coherent information is available regarding what is closed, what is open, how we should protect ourselves, how to leave the country, why and how to properly wear the face mask.

Analysing all kinds of official sites that offer information about coronavirus in Romania, we notice that they are a clusterfuck of information, sorry for the term. Otherwise, the only appropriate sources of information remains the various news platforms, social media shares, but those need to be clarified, documented and better understood.

Some time ago, in the written press, there was a so-called "clear head," which analysed the texts published during a particular day. His only daily duty was to analyse the texts and have a clear view. From a communicational point of view, a "clear head" of the pandemic is definitely needed (PALER, 2014).

2.6. Communication is more efficient and better understood if performed on a direct and familiar tone.

The pandemic press conferences were military, dry and boring, face to face with journalists in Cotroceni. This approach is not ok.

On the other hand, a good example comes from New Zealand, where we witnessed a live Facebook communication; we noticed discussions in an ordinary language and simple answers to people's questions.

In our country, we only saw this on the website of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, through the state of emergency. It was a kind of "Frequently Asked Questions in the Comments" that was answered. Especially in crisis situations, people also needed more humane communication. It would be advisable to take their questions and answer them in live shows on Facebook, on Reddit, something, anything, more original and first of all, human.

2.7. Transparency, an essential quality of communication

During the pandemic and even now there have been and there still are moments in which transparency lacked or lacks. Transparency comes from a combination of a lack of clarity, the failure to acknowledge mistakes, lack of empathy etc. Moreover, we live in a country in which we "have everything" but things still catch us unprepared. There were times when communication focused on "we have everything," but it was not the case to...

2.8. A fair, efficient and honest communication is based on acknowledging and assuming one's own mistakes

It is obvious that communication mistakes have been made and that authority and empathy have to be accompanied by the honest acknowledgement of mistakes. In order to keep the facts straight, there were small acknowledgments in some places, but otherwise, when the state had to assume a mistake or clumsiness, we did not see much responsibility. We heard many political statements; we heard a lot of PSD. Authority also appears when one acknowledges his or her own mistakes.

2.9. A clear explanation of the scientific phenomenon and its shortcomings

In this particular case, science, no matter how impertinent it appears, seems to be only efficient solution. And science has to be explained to people. For example, at the beginning of the pandemic, many countries did not acknowledge the face mask, but later on they started to recommend it. The problem basically referred to the stock. New information was then added. For example, textile masks have become ok, but with a lower degree of protection.

Science has to be explained as a constant evolution.

Researchers know that this is a process of failure and success up to the end result. However, this aspect has to be communicated to the individual who, most of the times, does not understand the scientific phenomenon and the research activity... A painter thinks, "How much inspiration he will I need to paint a picture,"

while an ordinary man thinks, "How long will he have to work to have time to paint a picture?"

This is why some things have to be explained: the fact that today we discovered something new, which has to be applied, and that we did not know about yesterday is due to the fact that science evolves.

Unfortunately, we do not have some very good communicators when it comes to the medical area, in order to explain the scientific changes and the new information which appears during this period. They should also be able to respond to the conspiracies of the so-called science which appear. For a short period of time this task was performed by Alexandru Rafila. Now, there is a young doctor who explains such aspects, but not enough. Unfortunately, the political belonging dilutes the messages, especially since it seemed that such communications were only present on some TV channels. Therefore, we saw some public health experts, but they are experts and not state representatives or authorities able to take decisions.

For example, no representative "bothered" to explain to the public, authoritarian, but empathetic, what "thermometry" means. Some were afraid and another mass of people laughed at them. But no one explained to them why this is done, what data is obtained and how it changes.

Scientists are awkward, most of the times they tell truths which hurt, but we really need them.

2.10. Openness towards civil society is essential

Authorities and civil society have to make a common front in such a situation. At the beginning of the pandemic the civil society came up with answers. With websites, with donations of equipment and visors. There were many examples but, unfortunately, there is no known state body to look at the civil society and help these organizations manage these solutions, to implement them nationally and apply them where needed.

If we take the example of the contact tracing applications, they warn you that you were in the proximity of an infected individual. Obviously, they function only if you have large numbers of people who install it. We found out from the

promoters of the start-up.ro application that there are also such applications in Romania. One of them is called First Contact and it is in the testing phase at the moment. The state must pursue and support such projects without confusing them. Not to mention that Apple and Google already provide almost “turnkey” Bluetooth-based solutions.

It would have been desirable to call on the citizens to come up with solutions. And the calls should be completed by a clear path: where do you get with that solution, what do you contact, where are they centralized, what happened to them. None of these normal things happened.

3. CONCLUSIONS

There was no and there still is no strategy for this new contemporary normality, we hope for a as short period of time as possible!

These are the reasons why the society was confronted with a major crisis, whose effects are going to go far beyond the duration of the pandemic situation.

Being an uncertain and new period, shortcomings are beginning to appear and they are reflected in the various areas of our lives. We will, more than likely, end up in situations where we will test our communication skills in order to solve the problems we encounter. That is why it is useful to know that we have some “tools” at hand that can facilitate our communication processes and, implicitly, we will become more successful in getting what we need and want.

The above-presented decalogue, alongside an assertive communication, might bring good results in crisis communication and not only

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