

## THE RELATIONAL FRAMEWORK OF JOURNALISTS AND COMMUNICATORS

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### Abstract

The relations between journalists and communicators were never considered ones of friendship and an example of positive and strong collaboration. The article below tries to reveal the contradictions in the perception of these professions, from one side and the other, the opinions of different researchers in the media and communication field regarding this problem and why a contradictory relationship characterizes the communication process between journalists and communication specialists from the most diverse institutions. This article also presents the objective and the subjective, controversies perceived by journalists against the background of several actions of communicators and spokespeople, as well as the communicators' controversies when it comes to journalists.

**Keywords:** *relational framework, controversy, human resources, media institution, public institution, professional interaction, negotiation, professionalism.*

Nowadays, the activity of the media is closely related to the usual process of requesting information from diverse institutions: public or private, and this fact supposes certain relational actions that arise between the media representatives and the institutions responsible for providing information to the press. The daily journalists' experience, as well as a rich specialized bibliography, underlines the fact that the two professional categories often maintain tense relations, and each professional entity from the two evaluates critically or even negatively the work of the other entity. This attitude, often preconceived, was born based on the errors made both by journalists in the mediatization process of institutional information, and by communication specialists in the process of providing information and the expectations they have from media receivers. This way, it is particularly important to investigate how journalists and communicators evaluate, on the

one hand, their own activity and, on the other hand, the activity of their dialogue partners.

Jean Charron, in his well-known 1991 study entitled *Les journalistes, les medias et leurs sources*, defines the relationship between journalists and public relations specialists (a category which also includes the communicators of various institutions or spokespeople) as one that is based on a double negotiation:

- on the exchange of resources (journalists are given access to information, communicators and the political leaders they represent are given access to the public);
- on the rules governing these exchanges.

The same researcher says that this relationship can be defined as a game of negotiations between interdependent actors; this game implies the existence of a relationship of influence that unites cooperation and conflict. Journalists look for information from political representatives, and the latter look for the visibility that journalists offer. At the same time, each actor tries to exert an influence on the behaviour of the other, gain and maintain control over the mechanisms which help construct the political reality... Therefore, we can distinguish two levels of this negotiation: on the first level, the actors negotiate the exchange of resources (information and visibility), and on the second level they negotiate the rules that coordinate these exchanges (Charron, 1991).

In the process of professional interaction between the two categories of professionals, both try to claim their importance, exclusivity and primacy in the usefulness of the service they perform. The researcher Lothar Rolke, quoted by Raluca Nicoleta Radu, described the relationship between public relations experts and journalists

as “an antagonistic partnership,” (Radu, 2015) this fact confirming once again the contradictory relationship that characterizes the communication process between journalists and communication specialists from the most diverse institutions. In a market economy, which generates a strong competition between media institutions, the relationship between the two professional categories is also characterized by the demand-offer model, which perfectly meets its functional characteristics, from a logistical point of view, through the whole of the operations undertaken to ensure the service: journalists request information (through a written form) from the institutions they are interested in, and the latter, respecting the legal deadlines for providing the requested information, transmits to the press the information requested. The simplicity of these actions, however, is often countered nowadays by certain unprofessional actions or even bad faith, which both journalists and communication specialists show. The objective, but also subjective, controversies perceived by journalists appear in the background of the following actions of communicators and spokespeople:

- Journalists consider their job more important than that of communicators, resulting from the public interest that guides them in their daily activity;
- Journalists believe that the representatives of public institutions, in particular, are used to hiding from the eyes of the public information of general interest, not always favourable to the image of the institutions, which could aim at the selective distribution of the institution’s budget, the subjective selection of collaboration projects, depending on certain preferences, faulty organization of public procurement, etc.). For the mass media, this information is of vital importance, which could remove them from anonymity or give them even more credibility and professionalism, and for the activity of the public institution, providing these types of information could represent an act of suicide;
- Journalists negatively evaluate the activity of institutional communicators, if they violate the legal deadlines for providing information to the press, according to the Law on access to information (no later than 15 working days

from the date of registration of the request for access to information) (Lex.justice.md, 2000);

- Journalists believe that the main task of the spokesperson is to satisfy the information needs of the press, while the experts-communicators of the institutions act so as not to damage the image of the institutions in which they work, including by concealing information of public interest;
- Journalists appreciate the information provided by the representatives of the institutions as being incomplete, truncated, for advertising purposes, poorly edited, etc.

On the other hand, communication experts also show a less friendly attitude towards media representatives, with whom, by virtue of their position, they interact regularly. Their dissatisfaction is often manifested after the appearance of materials in the press, in which the institution they represent is targeted and they are based on the following perceptions:

- Communicators consider that the declared intentions of journalists in the process of requesting information are always other than those of objectively informing the public;
- In the view of communicators, the information distributed by public or private institutions will always be subject to profound changes (sometimes distorted), in the process of writing press materials by journalists, depending on the interpretative background that is desired to be obtained;
- Most communicators believe that journalists are extremely rude in the process of requesting information orally. On the one hand, journalists consider that they perform their job correctly, requesting truthful information, not always favourable to the image of the institution, from those who, through the nature of their job, polish the image of the institution that hired them, and, on the other hand, communicators seek to establish some win-win situation relationships and demand respect from journalists for their job and communication activity.

Based on the mutual perceptions held by both professional categories, we can find that their relationship is based on the ambiguity of roles, feelings of disregard sometimes reaching

contempt for the other's job, and this attitude can only give birth to mistrust and fear of being compromised or sabotaged in activity. To remove these fears, communicators usually document/formalize every media request, by registering written requests for access to information from journalists, sending written answers to journalists, recording journalists' phone calls to institutions, for consultations with their superiors in order to formulate and send answers to requests for information within 15 working days, according to the law, etc., which is not always an advantage for the mass-media, resulting from the speed and efficiency with which current information must be distributed, of major public interest.

However, it should be noted that with the introduction of the position of communicator in the staff of public and private institutions, the work of journalists has been greatly simplified, in that they do not have to independently identify within the institution the person capable of providing certain types of information, but calls every time to a single person responsible for the relationship with the press, for providing the necessary types of information. This way, the journalist ensures that the institution will unconditionally provide feedback, or, in the absence of the person responsible for press relations, the journalists' intention to discover certain information could end up in failure, due to the passing of responsibility from an official to another, in order to avoid the exercise of certain obligations that would not necessarily be included in their duties.

The functionality of the relationships that are established during the development of any communication activity depends decisively on the professionalism of those nominated to take care of the transmission, retrieval, editing of information, and, subsequently, their provision to the general public. In this context, both journalists and communicators must have the skills to work with representatives of the most diverse media structures, and sometimes with even the most hostile ones. G. Stepanov claims that the assimilation and promotion of one or another behavioural-professional ideology depends on the editorial policy of the media institution, especially on its political component (Stepanov, 2015). The practice of recent years

demonstrates that public institutions will disseminate information regularly, in a much larger volume, even offering a certain level of exclusivity, to media sources that are the docs of political power, which keep the same tonality of information in the process of editing and providing it to the large public. It is known that spokespeople and those responsible for public relations represent important sources in the mediatization process of social reality, therefore the skills they are endowed with constitute an assessment criterion of their professionalism. C. Coman lists some of the qualities, indispensable to a good communicator:

- Sociability: he must be able to establish human contacts easily, not be a shy or emotional;
- Tact: he must show patience, kindness, a sense of humour, the ability not to give in in some respects, malleability;
- Good memory and the ability to easily remember facts, data, names, figures;
- Open mind, intuition, imagination in solving unpredictable situations;
- Quick thinking and decision-making;
- Capacity for analysis and synthesis;
- Organizational skills;
- Honesty, fairness, objectivity;
- Written and oral communication skills;
- The ability to present simply and clearly, in a language accessible to the general public, ideas or messages specific to various fields and specialized languages;
- Work power and the ability to be available at any time;
- The ease of adapting to irregular work schedules (Coman, 2000).

The most frequent extra-institutional contacts that spokespeople from public institutions establish is with the media representatives in the process of carrying out their daily activity. Thus, these qualities of a good professional in the field of communication should intersect perfectly with the skills of a good journalist, eager to obtain truthful information from the first source and transmit it objectively, undistorted to the public whose interests he or she protect.

David Randall talks about the qualities of a good reporter from the perspective of performing quality work and obtaining favourable results in order to bring to light "the best available version

of the truth.” (Randall, 1998) Among the most valuable skills of a good journalist in the field of journalism, the author mentions the ability to write under time pressure, the developed sense of news, the passion for precision, the lack of prejudice, empathy with readers, the desire to win, the sense of urgency, the sense of justice, determination, curiosity, accentuated individuality, etc. All these qualities should help the journalist achieve his status as a professional, who operates dominated by the supreme interest - that of the public. We notice that the series of qualities of professionals in the field of communication and that of journalism induces, rather, a kind of nobility, which is associated with those who work in these fields. However, as G. Stepanov mentions, “peer relations between journalists and communicators are a rarity, because the first reflex of communicators is to avoid the dissemination of information about the real state of affairs, and journalists, aware of the interests of communicators, look for alternative sources, able to refute or confirm official information.” (Stepanov, 2015) The same authors mention that the nature of journalistic behaviour depends not only on the types of sources, but also on the individual-psychological characteristics of the journalist, on the one hand, and of the interlocutor, on the other: on their mental state, on their attitude and interaction, of the specificity of the current situation, etc.: “Sometimes, due to the lack of time or to other reasons, journalists fail to adapt their behaviour to new situations, which can cause misunderstandings or obstacles in the relationships they establish with their sources” (Stepanov, 2015). On the other hand, George David emphasizes that a communicator should manage

two languages very well: “the language of his own organization, to be able to exchange information with the other members and to equally well manage the language and way of working used in the media world, in order to make his message pass the barriers inherent in the acts of communication.” (David, 2008) Speaking about the qualities necessary for the one who fulfils this position, M. H. Sullivan, the former US presidential spokesman, stated: “Credibility is the most important asset of a spokesman...as well as a sense of humour, enormous patience, the ability to speak and to write at the moment and an attitude of truth that rejects any compromise.” (Sullivan, 2001) Generally, nowadays information received from public institutions, politicians or parties needs to be treated with all caution, given that its purpose is to preserve a certain state of affairs or to gain power.

In these conditions, the struggle for power causes the parties and politicians, especially in a fragile democracy, to use not quite the most orthodox procedures in their desire to win the trust of the media, and hence the trust of the public, whose periodic vote they require. The media must not become a promotion platform or an advertising agency for the parties, but look for the truth, because news can inform, but also misinform or manipulate. The general recommendation for journalists would be that the daily dialogue between media institutions and the public or private ones should be carried out strictly at a professional level. Any attempt to offer a note of friendship to this dialogue and companionship will generate negative and destructive influences on the credibility of the media. All information should be treated with caution and tested for veracity.