

## **COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES DURING THE PANDEMIC PERIOD AND THE IMPACT ON THE ECONOMY AND SOCIETY**

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### **Abstract**

*The aim of this study is to present the ways and channels of communication during the pandemic, and the effects on the economy and society. Thus, the qualitative research method used is the interview. Most of the interviewees consider that during this pandemic period they changed both the way of communication and the communication channels. Also, they believe that all these changes will generate effects in the medium and long term. We are in full digitalization process in the public and private sector and this aspect can generate a positive impact in the economy and society.*

**Keywords:** *communication, strategy, digitization, impact, opportunity*

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### **1. Introduction**

During a global pandemic, the need for information is at a very high level, as is the volume of false information or fake news. For this reason, we must choose very carefully the communication channels, online or offline and check the veracity of the information in other secure and official sources.

Starting from the slogan "What is illegal offline is illegal online!", The European Commission proposes new rules for online platforms and estimates some main results: transparent and accountable online platforms; protecting freedom of expression; no more barriers for businesses; a single set of rules for the EU hole. (European Commission, 2020).

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Communication has an extremely important or even decisive role in emergency situations, and this process is defined by Adriana Pistol and Adrian Streinu-Cercel (2013): „communication in public health emergencies is an important tool to ensure population’s confidence in the decisions of the central authority. Usually, the lack of planning communication strategy entails negative reactions from the population and decreased compliance to the recommended preventive measures in response to the emergency”. (Pistol, 2013).

One of the most important documents issued by World Health Organization in 2020 is about Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE). World Health Organization sent a set of recommendations for communication in the event of a pandemic, which should be taken into account by all those involved in sending messages, whether we are talking about public or private institutions. (David, 2020).

World Health Organization define this document: „is an essential component of health emergency preparedness and response action plan. This tool is designed to support risk communication, community engagement staff and responders working with national health authorities, and other partners to develop, implement and monitor an effective action plan for communicating effectively with the public, engaging with communities, local partners and other stakeholders to help prepare and protect individuals, families and the public’s health during early response to COVID-19.” (World Health Organization, 2020).

Communication in emergency situations must be performed in real time and messages must be transmitted through all communication channels.

At the same time, in this document (RCCE) we have also a recommendation about choosing channels: „Ensure your health agency has relationships and agreements with relevant partners and access to identified and trusted media channels including: Broadcast media: (television and radio); Trusted organizations’ websites; Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.); Text messages for mobile phones; Hand-outs and brochures in community and health centers; Town forums  
Community health boards; Billboards”. (World Health Organization, 2020).

How we communicate has now become one of the very important topics. We are exposed daily to extremely many messages, to many styles of information transmission, we hear and see communicators of different levels or abilities to transmit the essence of messages. (Rarau, 2020).

Alexandru (2013) stated that “an isolated incident can become overnight a national crisis or a topic of interest to the whole world. One of the reasons is the fact that, thanks to the new media, citizens have the opportunity to transmit information about the events they participate in in real time, just like the established news agencies”. (Alexandru, 2013).

In the last 50 years, Coman (2009) stated that studies and reality have shown that most companies (public or private) are not prepared for a crisis, especially in terms of communication. From this perspective, we can mention the appearance of "Problems Management", as a reaction to the decline of public confidence in the ability of corporations to play a positive social role. (Coman, 2009).

The coronavirus pandemic has caused major social problems, online media are now the basis of communication between people. According to an analysis by Picodi.com, when the restrictions generated by coronavirus were implemented in most European countries, interest in online communication increased 7 times. (Dragoi, 2020).

Being an uncertain and new period, the shortcomings begin to appear and be reflected in various areas of our lives. (Tegsesiu, 2020).

Although there has been a change in terms of public and private communication, there are still problems from this point of view. The efficiency of a communication strategy depends very much on the dynamics of a crisis and its impact. The global crisis we are in now has a major impact on the general population, but also on all states, all medical systems, all educational systems, etc. There must be real-time coordination, adaptation and information.

From this point of view, we can describe shortly the difference between communication of crisis and communication in crisis. Hurducas (2020) define also the role of communication of crisis, that “is to protect the reputation of a company, an organization or even a person and to resolve the conflict situation and minimize damage as much as possible. On the other part, communication in crisis is particularly important, because there is a risk that good business decisions will be made, but that they will not be communicated or will be poorly communicated, then the consequences will be dramatic. Communication in crisis can be divided also into two categories: internal and external. Internal communication in crisis refers to employees, suppliers, subcontractors, etc. They are the stakeholders involved in the services provided by the company for which we communicate. External

communication in crisis intertwines marketing with public relations techniques and social responsibility”. (Hurducas, 2020).

One of the largest communication companies in the world (Group M) conducted a study with the following conclusions: “impact of the crisis on business depend on the actions of the big businesses. If you halt your activities, stop payments to suppliers, stop advertising, then the money stops flowing and the economy will grind to a halt. This will lead to a cascade of negative effects which will reverberate back to your own business. Keeping money flowing, and especially continuing to advertise to encourage commerce will be critical in mitigating the severity of the economic impact of the crisis in Romania for everybody. It is also useful to invest money with Romanian companies when possible, as long as it does not harm the results, as it fuels the economy and improves the outlook for the whole country”. (Rotariu & Group M, 2020).

We live in strange times, unprecedented. And, until a few months ago - unimaginable. Not only for us, as individuals, but also for companies/brands. (Codrean, 2020).

## **2. Research Methodology and results**

In this research, I will interpret the answers of the interviewees concerning the ways and channels of communication during the pandemic period and comparisons between the audience of online and offline media channels, and their impact on the economy and society will be up for review.

Thus, the qualitative research method used is the interview, and the hypotheses underlying this study are the following:

- During the pandemic, people changed the way they communicated.
- Most entrepreneurs who communicated through media channels during the pandemic noticed a positive impact.
- All this period of crisis has generated and continues to generate many opportunities.

The topic of the interview is: Communication strategies during the pandemic period and the impact on the economy and society. The main objective is to describe the ideas of the interviewees regarding both the ways and channels of communication during the pandemic, as well as the impact on the economy, society and the educational system.

I conducted interviews with people who live in Romania, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, Denmark or the United States. Also, the interviewees are

entrepreneurs and employees in public institutions or multinational private companies, have higher education and are over 30 years old. Certainly, all these people use online and offline media channels daily, both personally and professionally. Most use international media channels, so their expertise will be useful in this research. The number of interviewees was 32. On average, the interviews lasted approximately 20-25 minutes and took place between June 20, 2020 and September 7, 2020. After receiving all the answers in the interviews, I will try to find the answers to the following two research questions:

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of online communication in this pandemic period?
- What opportunities can this global crisis generate? locally, nationally or internationally.

The structured interview consists of nine questions (open and closed) that will be addressed to all interviewees, and which will have as main topics both the ways and channels of communication during the pandemic, and the impact on the economy, society and the education system. The last two questions have the role of confirming the age and residence of the interviewees. I will also present some opportunities that may be generated by this period of crisis, at national and international level.

I will present each question with the corresponding answers.

### **2.1. During the pandemic, what were your sources of information, nationally and internationally?**

The responses of the interviewees regarding the information sources, during the pandemic, by categories, were:

- Online: social media platforms (especially Facebook and Twitter); the official pages of local, national and international television, radios and newspapers; national and global news sites; local media platforms; national media apps; the official pages of local, national and international authorities; the official website of the World Health Organization; official websites of governments; online publications
- Offline: local, national and international television, radios and newspapers; official sources from public institutions; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

**2.2. In terms of information, have you used online sources more than in previous years?**

After asking the second question in the interview guide these percentages arise, in terms of online sources used, in comparison with last years: 62,5% of respondents consider that this year they used online sources more often, and 37,5% approximately equally, compared to recent years.

**2.3. Based on the information received through the media, have you made important decisions? (personal / for business)**

After addressing the third question in the interview guide, the following percentages result, in terms of decisions made based on information received through the media: most of the respondents said they made important personal and business decisions based on information received through the media, and 12% of the respondents said they did not make important decisions for the company, based on information received through the media.

**2.4. To what extent do you consider that during this pandemic period, the public authorities and private companies from Romania communicated in real time?**

Answers: 40.6% of respondents consider that during this pandemic period, in Romania, public authorities and private companies communicated in real time to a large extent, 31,3% to a very large extent, and 28,1% to a small extent.

**2.5. What categories of media channels have you used most often this year?**

The answers of the interviewees about the categories of media channels, used during the pandemic, by categories. The responses of the interviewees were: online platforms, tv and radio channels and newspapers.

**2.6. To what extent do you consider that the pandemic influenced the educational system from Romania?**

After asking the sixth question in the interview guide, the following percentages result, regarding the influence of the pandemic on the Romanian education system: all of the respondents consider that this period of pandemic influenced the educational system in Romania to a large or very large extent.

**2.7. In the company you represent, through which media channels did you communicate with clients during this period? Have you noticed a positive or negative impact?**

Most of the answers were similar, we have some examples with positive impact: „online, but also by telephone or e-mail; through social media; offline to a lesser extent; online and offline; local radio and local newspaper; the communication was mainly in the online environment; online, radio and local print media.”

**2.8. In general, to what extent do you consider that the information provided through the media channels influenced the economy and society in this period of pandemic?**

Answers: 97% of the respondents consider that the information transmitted through the media during the pandemic period, influenced the economy and the society to a large or very large extent, and only 3% of the respondents consider to a very small extent.

**2.9. What do you think are the opportunities in this period of crisis?**

The responses of the interviewees about the opportunities during this period of crisis were:

- „Possibility to start a new business - new jobs, reconfiguration of the „HORECA” sector; payment by card for most economic operators.
- Amazon; Costco; All home delivery services (food, medicine, restaurants); Drive-through businesses. Also, there are certain sales businesses that would not have been in other conditions; innovation
- Work from home - implicitly with the advantage of staying longer with the family. We avoid business trips; we can spend more time with family. Digitization, online business opportunities, flexible schedule for employees who have the opportunity to work from home. Previous for the future to carry out your activity remotely. Possibility to work simultaneously in several projects; the advantage of working from anywhere; investments with lower costs
- Digitization and transformation of traditional media channels. Services designed to benefit the customer at a click away or better said, very easy to access; appreciation of good employees, who bring added value within

companies; developing a balance between personal and professional life; we can do more sports.

- Continuing education for conducting online courses. Specializations. Development of new skills or professional retraining. Opportunity to hire valuable people who have lost their jobs. Optimizing the public system, adapting to the new reality.”

#### **2.10. What is your age?**

Most of the interviewees are between 30 and 40 years old and about 20% of the interviewees are between 40 and 50 years old.

#### **2.11. Where you reside at this moment?**

The interviewees live in Romania, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, Denmark and the United States of America.

### **3. Conclusions**

Communication is crucial in this pandemic period but it must be just as important after the pandemic or after the crisis. Also, during the pandemic, many activities went from offline to online (business, education, shopping, medicine and even friendships, etc.). For this reason the risk is very high in terms of security and safety measures must be taken. The way of communication between companies and clients, partners, suppliers, but also between public institutions and citizens has changed. In 2020-2021, we have the next global situation, from a digital point of view (Kemp, 2020):

- „Total world population: 7.81 billion people
- Number of people using mobile phones around the world: 5.2 billion
- Global internet users: 4.66 billion
- Worldwide social media users: 4.14 billion”. (Kemp, 2020).

Also, most of the interviewees believe that all these changes will generate effects in the medium and long term, and everyone's behavior will be changed. Most of the interviewees consider that during this pandemic period they changed both the way of communication and the communication channels, in various fields.

Most of the interviewees consider that we are in full digitalization process in the public and private sector, at national and international level, and this aspect can generate a positive impact in economy, society and educational system. Most respondents often used official information sources, as far as



possible. They also tried to verify any information from at least 3 reliable sources, online or offline. Also, this year most respondents consider that this year they used online sources more often, compared to recent years.

We can conclude that during the pandemic, most respondents made important personal decisions or decisions regarding the company, based on information received through the media. Most of the interviewees consider that during this pandemic period, in Romania, public authorities and private companies communicated in real time to a large and very large extent.

This year, most respondents most often used online platforms, but also the official websites of television and radio. All interviewees consider that this period of pandemic influenced the educational system in Romania to a large and very large extent.

During this pandemic, most respondents communicated with customers through online channels. However, there were also respondents who communicated with customers through offline channels. Most of them noticed a positive impact. Most of respondents consider that the information transmitted through the media during the pandemic period, influenced the economy and the society to a large and very large extent.

Most of the interviewees consider that any period of crisis generates uncertainty, fear, but also many opportunities. Some examples that can be applied: Possibility to start a new business; digitization, online business opportunities, flexible schedule for employees who have the opportunity to work from home; mobile application development; we can spend more time with families; development of education system regardless of level; possibility to work simultaneously in several projects; the advantage of working from anywhere; digitization and transformation of traditional media channels; investments with lower costs; opportunity to hire valuable people who have lost their jobs; digitization of the private and public sector; optimizing the public system and adapting to the new reality.

The results of the case study confirm the three hypotheses and also open a new direction of research in this field, especially due to the continuous need of society to be informed constantly and in real time. The online industry has already experienced a very aggressive development and many people get information through online media channels. In such circumstances, is there possible the disappearance of traditional media channels in next years? Now we can say only that media channels will always exist and will adapt to any situation, locally, nationally or globally.

Through an efficient and optimal communication strategy we can first of all obtain TRUST. Especially in a time of national and global crisis, trust is crucial in making important decisions. If there is trust, real solutions can be found to generate opportunities, because any crisis generates many opportunities. We just have to get out of the area of uncertainty, mistrust, fear and have a perspective, to generate real opportunities. All this can become a reality only by adapting to the new global reality and collaboration at any level. During a period of crisis, many mistakes are made, implicitly of external or internal communication. It is imperative that after the crisis to make a thorough analysis and the results to generate a new strategy, adapted to present and future.

The communication process within public and private organizations must be a priority for all managers! It's necessary to adapt very quickly, to find the necessary solutions. Turn this crisis into a great opportunity!

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