Bulgarian Public Administration's Social Media Communications Strategies During COVID-19 Crisis

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ABSTRACT

The global COVID-19 pandemic is transforming the communication practices not only of business structures but also of institutions. It has triggered a cascade of crisis situations in the state administration, which are specific to each structure, but at the same time involve coordinating communication actions with local authorities and related ministries. The public communications experts in the structures of the state administration in their routine activity carry out contacts with the media, building relations with non-governmental organizations and representatives of the civil sector, and work in coordination with other institutions. This study analyzes the strategies of Bulgarian institutions for communication in social media during the period March 2020-December 2020 of the COVID-19 crisis.

Keywords: Crisis PR, Crisis communications, Social media, COVID-19, Public administration

INTRODUCTION

Social media is seen as key channels for managing communication during a crisis. Organizations that neglect their media channels in a crisis run the risk of allowing information vacuum, spreading rumors and misinterpretations, losing the advantage of being proactive, and thus switching to permanent apologetical and exculpatory loop. The potential of social media can be fully utilized by organizations during a crisis – from following news, discussions, comments, and consumer reactions to conveying key information to affected groups and stakeholders, locating people at risk, and taking urgent measures.

The emergence of public communications in the institutional sphere, the peculiarities of PR in national and local government structures, as well as the importance of public communications in the field of health is traced in previous research articles (Kinnear, 2021). Some other publications provide empirical insights about how to build a relationship with the public prior to a crisis, how to be factual and honest and to post organization's massages timely on social media channels (Maal and Wilson-North, 2019). There is also analysis of organizational crisis communication in the social media era (Barrett and Posey, 2019) and the role of crisis management is

described (White, 2012). Eric K. Stern (Stern, 2017) describes the implications of social media and smart devices in crisis management. A critical assessment of the social media usage in crisis and how to design a citizen-focused crisis management platform is made (Andrews, 2017) as well as the implementation of internal and external social media technologies in the public sphere (Mergel, 2013). A research group investigates the factors that affect crisis management in public administration for safety incidents, during pre-crisis, crisis, and post crisis phase (Tokakisa et al. 2019). Research is made on how social media can be a beneficial tool for governments and crisis managers to track the progress of the crisis and to monitor its development (Wendling et al. 2013). Change management, organizational legitimacy, and the role of public relations in maintaining public trust in institutions have been studied (Luoma-aho et al. 2020). The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for the European Union (EU), as well as its response in dealing with an overarching, multidimensional crisis with consequences extending beyond public health safety are assessed (Maior and Camisao, 2022). A collection of papers compares and analyses the most prominent political communicative responses to the outbreak and global spread of the COVID-19 strain of coronavirus within 27 nations across five continents and two organizations: the European Union (EU) and the World Health Organization (Lilleker et al. 2021). The Bulgarian experience in the field of public crisis management and the need of educational programs and related subjects in universities is analyzed (Zafirova, 2016). Research is describing the importance of web pages, social media, and blogs for effective communication in the public sector (Vassilev et al. 2017). The process of choosing the appropriate social media channels for city administration is analyzed (Nikolova, 2013). Bulgarian research practice observes some of the social accounts of institutions and giving recommendations for quality and quantity improvements (Petrova, 2013). Some others aim to trace the development of e-services provided by the public administration in Bulgaria and their improvements because of the COVID-19 crisis (Kalcheva, 2020). The civil movements in Bulgaria and the institutional communication during crisis and conflicts are also a subject of local research papers (Valkov, 2014).

This is the first Bulgarian study that highlights the deficits in social media crisis strategies of local institutions. The research methodology includes: 1) review of theoretical sources for the specifics of crisis communication in public administration; 2) monitoring of the official Facebook pages of Bulgarian ministries, made by a complied codebook with following criteria: identification of a crisis situation, type of published content, communication techniques for reaction, feedback and frequency of publication; 3) a survey among 182 communication specialists working in Bulgarian ministries and municipal structures. The study aims to: 1) provide information on the practical challenges for PR experts in designing and implementing online crisis communication strategies on social media; 2) to review the quality and quantity of the published content on the Facebook profiles of the state administration.

We identified the following research questions:

RQ 1: Does the Bulgarian public administration have pre-prepared communication strategies for crisis management in social media?
RQ 2: Which communication channels are prioritized during the COVID-19 crisis?
RQ 3: What is the quality of the content created for social media during the crisis?

The limitations of the study are 1) territory – the observation of the Facebook minister's accounts is conducted in Bulgaria between March 2020 and December 2020; the survey is conducted among Bulgarian PR experts working in institutions in January 2021; 2) The analysis of accounts is limited only to the period cited above because this was the period of the first lockdown in Bulgaria; 3) Public administration institutions – the selection of the 10 ministers in Bulgaria is made on the base of the activity in the social media and their involvement in the crisis and its impact on them.

The period of Facebook pages monitoring is conducted in March-December 2020, when a state of emergency was declared in Bulgaria and the nature and type of restrictive measures are framed. The survey questionnaire was only distributed among communication experts in municipal and state structures in order to achieve maximum accuracy in specialized questions' answers.

Bulgarian Public Administration's Facebook Content Strategy in COVID-19 Crisis

The analysis includes the pages of ten ministries that maintain an official and up-to-date Facebook profile: Ministry of Health, Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Transport and Communications, Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Youth and Sports, Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Education and Science, Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The total number of Facebook followers of the analyzed pages is 270,481. Almost half of these followers are on the page of the Ministry of Health (126,737). The most active in publishing information related to the COVID-19 crisis are the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, given the specifics of their work – imposing anti-epidemic measures, instructions for disease prevention, travel restrictions to and from the country. The total number of analyzed posts is 842 as more than half of them is discovered on the Facebook pages of the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The analysis of the profiles of the other ministries shows a clear trend – Intensive publication of information immediately after the announcement of the first lockdown – in the period March-April 2020. Subsequently, the publication activity on the pandemic decreased sharply.

The analysis of the content shows that they are mainly related to imposed measures and restrictions, as well as instructive information on prevention. The unsuitable for social media long texts are mostly used in all profiles. The textual publications literally repeat press releases sent by the press center

of the respective institution to the media. We rarely observed publication of infographics or video content created especially for the purposes of crisis communication, showing statistics and other static visual elements with useful information.

Regarding feedback – comments from followers and discussion are almost absent, and all institutional pages are not moderated by an administrator. Under the publications of the ones directly involved in the crisis (Ministry of Health, Ministry of Foreign Affairs), there are comments and discussion, but they are left also unmoderated.

Bulgarian Public Administration Preparedness for Crisis Communication

The conclusions we made from the monitoring of Facebook profiles and the omissions we registered in strategic and tactical terms, led us to conducting a focus survey among 182 communication specialists in national and local administrative structures with a questionnaire that examines the professional profile of PR experts in public administration. 68.7% of them are employed at the "expert" position, and 27.5% hold a management position. The survey was created in Google Forms, sent by e-mail to PR experts, and the results are processed using the IBM SPSS Statistics software.

The results show that Bulgarian institutions do not have a preliminary strategy for communication during a crisis (47.3%), and the management of crisis communications is carried out by the head of the institution (71.4%). However, 28% of respondents indicated that such a strategy was developed after the COVID-19 crisis. Interestingly, despite the lack of a crisis communication strategy, 43.4% of PR professionals noted that they had defined stakeholders and target audiences and developed a specific communication strategy. However, the percentage (34.1%) of PR experts in public administration's institutions who haven't identified the vulnerable groups in COVID-19 and have communicated with the whole society stays alarmingly high.

Clearly, the Bulgarian public administration lacks crisis communication teams and crisis managers. Therefore, public communications specialists say that their work responsibilities during the COVID-19 crisis have increased (76.9%).

Regarding the state administration's own communication channels, the organization's website (96.2%), e-mail (90.1%) and hotline (46.2%) are prioritized, which in their technical nature are mostly used for one-way communication and are partially asynchronous. Of the most popular social media in Bulgaria, communication specialists in institutions use Facebook (54.9%). The most frequently used own communication channels during the pandemic were the websites (96.2%), e-mail (90.1%) and the institution's Facebook profile (54.9%). However, important advantages of own media such as scheduled publication time, optimized budget, direct contact with target audiences and building community relations are listed as neutral, insignificant, or completely insignificant. The neglected communication with local communities during crisis is worrying given the fact

that 33.5% of those who completed the survey work in the municipal administration, and the sector of the main institutional activity is local government.

PR specialists evaluate the website (88%), e-mail (78%) and the institution's Facebook page (72%) as highly effective channels. Our research team could question whether there are used metrics to trace the dynamics in the effectiveness of communication channels in public administration. The answers to these questions outline the acute lack of well-developed modern own communication channels such as specialized information platforms, mobile applications, chatbots. In addition, the use of social media such as Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube in the public administration remains extremely limited, which could reach audiences of different interests and ages in society. Not surprisingly, 72.5% of communication specialists answered that most often the information content they distribute is republished website articles. Visual content in its various forms – short videos, infographics or adapted static or video content from the World Health Organization website is rarely published. The predominant textual content is created most often for the website or Facebook page of the respective institution, and the frequency of publication varies from once every few days (64%), to once a day (22.5%) and several times a day (20.3%).

As priority stakeholders and target audiences, the specialists define: municipal structures and local authorities (63.7%), employees and workers of the so-called "first line" (60.4%), regional media (59.9%), related institutions (52.2%), traditional and online media (48.9%). The answers suggest a lack of segmentation of the pandemic vulnerable groups, citizens and business representatives, experts, and opinion leaders, which would be useful in the institutional communication campaigns during the crisis. Dialogue with stakeholders is not fully implemented and communication is asynchronous – 58.8% of PR specialists send inquiries to e-mail correspondence, 52.7% respond to messages on the Facebook page, and 41.8% declare that they respond to comments.

CONCLUSION

We noted a shortage of academic research on PR communications carried out by the public administration, as the main interest is focused on corporate public communications. In this regard, we can summarize that there is a dissonance in the professional profile of communication professionals in the private and public sectors. Therefore, the willingness of PR experts in the Bulgarian public administration (42.64%) to further qualify through training, some of which are international, makes a positive impression.

The study provided interesting data on the educational profile of PR experts in the public sector – only 14.04% have studied public relations, the rest specialized in journalism (8.77%), economics (16.37%), philology (10,53%), ICT (10.53%), engineering (5.85%), law (5.85%), management and administration (12.28%), marketing (1.75 %), sociology, political science, and philosophy (2.92%), pedagogy (3.51%) and others (7.60%).

The observation of social media profiles and the analysis of the survey allow us to conclude that this type of PR specialists face a serious challenge in practicing their profession qualitatively – to create communication strategies and manage public administration communications in social media, especially in times of crisis, such as COVID-19. They have the task to overcome the deficiencies in online communication strategies, to identify stakeholders and vulnerable groups, and to create suitable content with all known media and applications.

One of the biggest deficits of the Bulgarian institutional structures is the lack of native content, which is consistent with the tools and specifics of social media environment. Bulgarian institutions fail in several challenges in crisis – they fail to adapt quickly to the changing environment, and this is questioning their legitimacy.

Another important challenge is the absence of crisis teams and crisis managers in Bulgarian institutions, leading to the inability of PR experts to take over these functions operationally when a prolonged crisis occurs. This leads to the inability to regularly monitor risk situations, to have preliminary crisis scenarios for reactions, to identify the stakeholders and vulnerable groups and to prepare effective crisis communication response plans. Partially, this problem is caused by the lack of understanding of the importance of training in media and communications. Another reason for the deficits can be found in the vision of the governing public structures on how their communications with the citizens of the country should be carried out.

Bulgarian institutions do not have well-developed modern channels for communication during the crisis, which limits their ability to be proactive and to speak directly to their citizens. For the institutions, the organization's website remains a priority own communication channel, but it is extremely insufficient in a cascading and multidimensional crisis such as the pandemic. This limits the reach of target audiences and important segments of society remain on the periphery of communication campaigns. One of the main strategic approaches for persuasive communication is neglected in the local structures of the Bulgarian public administration – maintaining convincing communication with the local communities. The survey highlights problematic practices not only in crisis management but also in institutional public communications. Bulgarian PR specialists still prioritize media relations, using primary texts such as ordinances and administrative acts to maintain a website and Facebook profiles. The study also clearly highlights the shortage of native visual content.

Our vision for raising the level of communications of the public administration on the Internet can also be seen in the proposed topics for future discussion:

(1) what is the degree of cooperation between higher education institutions in which public communications and public administration are studied as subjects?
(2) whether the specialists in public communications in the state administration undergo trainings for crisis communications responses?

(3) how the public administration should be involved in a conversation about the importance of training in public communications for both PR experts and society.

Future works could be dedicated to the crisis communication and campaign strategic approach for promoting vaccination against COVID-19, targeting different audiences. Also, another research focus could be placed on institutional PR experts developing new skills and competencies in crisis communication, and the dynamic of changes in social media campaigns during crisis.

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