



ORIGINAL PAPER

Communication and NGOs in Romania – A case study

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Abstract:

Romania is among the states with a low rate of volunteering. According to existing data, one could notice that only 10-19% of the population was involved in voluntary activities in the last years. The difference between Romania, on the one hand, and Western Europe, on the other is the result of a historical evolution. In Western Europe, in average, more than 40% of the total number of the population is involved in volunteering, this being the case for Austria, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The present paper intends to identify the way in which the Romanian NGOs used different media to promote their activities and what are the practical results for those organizations. As a general research assumption, we had the following statement: The communication channels used by NGOs could influence the way they accomplish their purpose and mission. As secondary assumptions, we have: (1) The story conveyed is more important than the presence on different communication platforms and (2) In Non-Governmental Organizations the efficiency of external communication is directly proportional with the efficiency of internal communication. The main research method used was the interview which was applied to a sample of ten respondents working in the non-governmental sector in Romania, all from the same NGO. The results of the study indicate that Romanian NGOs use new types of media (social media, websites, online newspapers, blogs) to promote themselves. Field events organized by Romanian NGOs are mostly interactive, gathering people and volunteers in parks, cinemas and theaters to enter into different activities with their target audiences composed mainly of young people aged 14-18 which came from disadvantaged social categories). The results have confirmed both the main hypothesis and both secondary hypotheses. The members of Romanian NGOs stated that their presence online as representatives of the voluntary activities had helped them in fulfilling their missions.

Keywords: *communication; NGO; media; qualitative methods; volunteers.*

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Introduction

At a general level, one can notice that Romanian Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) seem to be rather disadvantaged in comparison with their peers from the Western European countries. More precisely, according to the official statistics, Romania is among the states with a low rate of volunteering, registering only a percentage of 10-19% of the population involved (Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, 2010). This difference could be due to the historical trajectory of the two parts of the continent, the low general involvement in Eastern parts (such is the case of Romania) being in sharp contrast with an average of over 40% of the population from Austria, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

On December 30, 2015, in Romania were registered 13,750 associations, 1,140 federations and 18,449 non-profit foundations (Romanian Government, 2016). One year later (in 2016) the number of associations increased by 250, there were 1,293 federations and 18,545 foundations. How many of these are known? Locally, no more than 100, and nationally maybe not more than 200-300. The question arising is: How much had the founders of these organizations had to work to build a strong identity at social level and how can they keep their image alive in the public awareness? Any organization, regardless of its field of activity, is forced to create value in order to keep its customers involved in their activity and to gain people's trust, especially when it comes to fundraising.

The term "Non-Governmental Organization" implies a private mobilization of citizens for various social causes - a term which was introduced in the international repertoire since 1945 (Străinescu and Ardelean, 2011:4). Moreover, the purpose of those organizations should be strictly limited to help, without political implications or personal money laundering interests. On the basis of this definition the result was special at the financial level. Such an organization, because it is a non-profit organization should redirect all the funds obtained to other new activities specially designed according to the message and the purpose for which it was set up (Barna, 2014).

The concepts used in this paper are "NGO", "communication", "visibility", "branding" and "endorser". Regarding the public visibility of a Non-Governmental Organization, this could be assessed as involving a minimum level of media presence, necessary for a selected segment of the population to say that they have some knowledge about this organization. In an increasingly digitalized world, technologies are becoming more and more accessible to the public and they are built in such a way as to be as intuitive as possible and, much more, they are free for the public. For this reason, for many Non-Governmental Organizations it is easier now to meet their advertising needs at the lowest possible costs. "Due to the fact that there is a constant dialogue between the organization and its target audience, the online presence of organizations has a major effect on the public's perceptions and knowledge about this organization" (Hosu, Culic and Deac, 2014: 20). A Non-Governmental Organization faced, as such, the need to identify a specific niche, to create an easy-to-remember, pleasant brand identity and to build a strong story which could be presented in all the projects they carried out. In their study, Gulbrandsen and Just (2013) recorded and analyzed all the messages online delivered by different organizations. This was a reductionist approach, but it revealed how much we can learn from the internet about any organization and what kind of opinions are shaped by the new communication tools (Gulbrandsen and Just, 2013). Despite the large appeal of this approach, for an effective communication strategy, it is not enough that an organization is present in the online social media. The simple online

presence is only a part of the strategy. The organization has to be active. The activity of a Non-Governmental Organization is measured by different variables: the number of posts on social media sites, the number of people reached by a post, the number of people interacting with the message, the percentage of questions that are answered, the average duration of providing an answer (Hosu, Culic and Deac, 2014: 21).

In Romanian language one could notice that the word “endorser” comes from the English verb “to endorse”, which means to agree with something, to support, to approve something (Farlex, 2019). Thus, the endorser is the person who agrees with something (an idea, a plan etc.). We are accustomed to see such people in commercials and spots, or in different ads. Most of the time, they are all well-known celebrities, and their association with a product intends to increase the visibility of this product at the level of the target audience.

There are many advantages of using celebrities in public campaigns. According to Suttle there are five key-benefits (Suttle, 2019). The first refers to attracting new consumers. Due to the fact that it is difficult to capture the entire market, you can “steal” from customers of the competition if you repeatedly use the same endorser. If a product is no longer in demand on the market, a star can highlight the benefits of the company or product and arouse the audience’s interest. The increase in notoriety represents the number of people (expressed in percentages) who are familiar with a certain brand. The last two benefits would be to influence consumers’ buying choices through trust, the love they have for the celebrities and, last but not least, the positioning of a brand.

Each communication campaign is based on a creative concept determined by the specific message that the organization will want to convey for an indefinite period of time. The concept of the campaign will guide every action taken by the company or organization and, therefore a must be built taking into account several elements, such as the identity and target audience of the organization or institution and current market trends. It is also necessary to shape campaigns according to the values of the target audience (Hosu, Culic and Deac, 2014: 25). The effectiveness of communication campaigns also depends in a large extent on the efforts to use current social factors. For a real success, they must be able to increase the interest of the target population, in other words they must address current issues that attract attention (Hosu, Culic and Deac, 2014: 26).

Current research defines organizational excellence as “the ability of the people to use technology to solve complex problems in a creative way” (Zlate, 2004: 495). New information technologies have changed the way in which communication is made in all organizational levels, so most recent work in the field (Hosu, Culic and Deac, 2014) focuses on these aspects, somewhat overshadowing the sensitive aspects of communication in an organization.

According to Tripon (2019), three categories of external communication are identified. These are the following (Tripon, 2019):

- Operational external communication involves the idea that employees maintain a professional communication link as representatives of the organization with outside people, such as customers, public authorities or suppliers. Thus, they receive and provide the information or the messages which will be send back to the organization.
- The role of strategic external communication is to develop external communication relations and to make predictions about the phenomena that can change the evolution of the organization and affect the running of its activities. There are

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several elements that can influence in a certain way the nature of the organization's activities, such as the influential actors, the legislative norms and regulations, the social movements, etc. Those elements are continuously pursued in organizational communication.

- External promotional communication - in this case the communication process is maintained by the organization itself and takes place in the following shapes: advertising - through the media, sponsorships, articles in specialized publications, organization of open days or events or financial or logistic help given to humanitarian organizations etc.

Elements of methodology In our attempt to find out what are the most appropriate and effective ways to communicate and what are the best tools of communication used by the Non-Governmental Organizations, this paper will be centered around a single Non-Governmental Organization. The chosen organization has as main field of activity health followed by social involvement. As a research method, we chose a qualitative approach, namely interviews and content analysis of the social media sites.

As research assumptions we had the following statements:

Main assumption: The communication channels used by NGOs influence the level of fulfillment of the purpose and mission pursued by them.

Secondary assumption 1: The transmitted story is more important than the presence on as many communication platforms as possible when we capitalize on this through the fundraising power.

Secondary assumption 2: The efficiency of external communication is directly proportional to the efficiency of internal communication of non-governmental organizations.

As the instrument for collecting the data we used a guide of interview, observational notes and a grid of qualitative analysis for media content. We chose to combine the interview with the observation in order to have a complete and detailed picture of the communication process within this organization.

The guide of interview was a semi-structured one. We choose this format due to the fact that it offers more space for discussion and makes the discussion much more fluid, the two interlocutors being able to have a much stronger connection. In addition, the respondent is not forced to choose an answer predetermined by the researcher, but can formulate his/her ideas as he/she sees fit (Marvasti, 2004: 20). In the case of data collection establishing an order of questions was quite complicated, and, in addition, sometimes during the interview it was difficult to maintain the pre-established order of questions and to avoid the official tone. The option was for the use of the colloquial language, everything turning into a free discussion.

As regards the notes of observation those were made on separate sheets, and both the way the people communicated with each other and the way in which they communicate with the researcher. We considered that it is the easiest way to be able to compare the answers received (the way they see and consider their communication strategy) with the results of the communication campaigns they had. We were able to take advantage of the clear value of such an interview, observing and analyzing the types of communication at all three levels: verbal, nonverbal and paraverbal.

As regards the content analysis of social media the data were collected from a project which was online developed by the organization: an online portal for smart donations.

Analysis of the results

The Non-Governmental Organization was founded in 2012 and its main aim is to support cancer patients, giving them a chance at life and treatment in Romania.

The analysis of the online portal for smart donations revealed the fact that the basic concept is a classic one. The difference results from the fact that the project does not only “sell” an idea, but it personalizes the concept, turn it into a life story and provide clear evidence that the money invested gets where it promises. On the basis of the analysis it can be assessed that this online fundraising project confirms the secondary assumption (“The efficiency of external communication is directly proportional to the efficiency of internal communication of Non-Governmental Organizations”).

The project involved the existence of an online platform made in 2013 with the help of an advertising agency, in order to collect money from individuals and legal entities and give the funds to oncology hospitals. The main partners of the project are television stations, advertising agencies or small firms. The main tools of communication used in this platform are: podcasts, online banner, spots, and testimonials.

The project takes place at national level, addressing a group of unnamed people and does not deal with particular cases. The aim is to improve the elements and factors that facilitate the treatment of patients as a whole, not as a particular segment.

According to the National Institute of Statistics (2014) out of the total number of households, 54.4% have access to the internet at home, the majority - over 70% being from urban areas. As a distribution, the area where most Romanians with internet access are located in the Bucharest-Ilfov region (76.7%), followed by the West and North-West (60%) regions, at the opposite pole being those in the regions South Muntenia and North-East. Moreover, of those aged 16-74, only 61% have ever used the Internet (Institutul National de Statistica, 2014). On the basis of the above-mentioned data one could draw several conclusions regarding the possible success rate of an online fundraising campaign in Romania. First, if only 54.4% of the population had access to the Internet, it means that there was a potential donor market of approximately 9-10 million Romanians. The majority of them were located in Bucharest-Ilfov region. In addition, in the same region (Bucharest-Ilfov) there were over 10,000 Non-Governmental Organizations. As the result, they struggle to be known, to differentiate themselves and to be noticed by the population is very hard. In addition, not all people from this region (Bucharest-Ilfov) are interested in health-related campaigns, especially those related to the treatment for various forms of cancer.

One of the reasons for the succes of the online portal analysed was the aim of the campaign. The founders of the association chose to help children with cancer. At the same time, they did not intend to burden donors with negative emotions related to children, but to show the positive side, namely the results of their investment. Starting from the idea that in the equation of obtaining happiness, in addition to life expectancy, the freedom to make decisions also includes generosity, the communication campaign wants to make Romanians happier, letting them understand that this is built on giving happiness away to those in need. The organization launched an investment project following the classic model of a stock exchange. The platform has its own website, a

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place where, through a friendly graphic, you can find out both the story behind the project in which you are invited to invest and the fact, that is, what will happen with the funds, the projects in which they will be invested and the results from projects already completed with other funds. There are many ways to invest, starting with the classical “2% of the personal income tax” to the 20% of the corporate income tax to the main purpose - buying shares - online donations (by bank transfer, card payment or paypal, short message from the mobile phone). The platform mentioned both the names of the donors and the amount of money donated. Because they wanted people to remember their investment and to thank them, the members of the Non-Governmental Organization decided to send a certificate of shareholder to all “investors”. Following the donation, a unique code was generated; a code which is then registered on the shareholder certificate; then the document is handed over to donors, usually by e-mail. The e-mail address was used as the verification code for the user who registered the donation.

When we analysed the structure of the website, we noticed that, apart from the above-mentioned section, there were pages about ongoing projects and completed projects, pages presenting ways to invest in the stock market, a page which provided details about the project and a media page.

A special section was a page devoted to the promotion of a scholarship, where endorsements were used in large extent. There were many celebrities from Romania who agreed to associate their image with this association. The online presence has been expanded, not only using its own site and social media, but more, asking for the help of bloggers. In addition, the organization used social media sites, with at least three messages per day on the Facebook page and it also used Google and Facebook ads.

Because the organization used mainly word-of-mouth promotion - in a reliable and successful way - they have also made a subpage from where banners can be taken and used on their own web pages / blogs.

In a 2014 research report about online communication and managerial issues that can be encountered in organizations, one of the conclusions was that each organization will choose different online communication channels. “The private sector will choose the website, those in the public administration the social networks, and those in the NGO field, the blog.” (Hosu, Culic and Deac, 2014: 26). However, the organization included in this study did not make use of blog and, instead it used the website and social media sites, like the organizations from the private sector and the public administration.

Looking through the pictures published on social media sites (on Facebook) by the Non-Governmental Organization one could notice that from time to time there are images announcing their audience at what stage they are with the amount raised from donations, as well as what was the target-audience. Also, on the same page the organizations have a generic message for thanking the donors. It can be assessed that the online strategy of the organization is similar to that of a teenagers’ NGO, a type of organization which can not enjoy an incredibly large number of funds (and for this reason they have to focus on new mini-projects / actions).

Regarding the organization itself, in the offline world, it is located in an old building, where no sign announces that its headquarters are located there. Just an old building, a little neglected. The office of the Non-Governmental Organization is quite small, which leads to the first-hand impression that no more than two people could work there. The explanations were given by the person in charge with the organizations’ online communication:

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“Normally, we all work in the same office. We are hosted here, but this is not our own headquarters. Well, as an NGO, we try to allocate all the resources to the endowment of the oncology centres after the sponsors give us the money, and then we really appreciated the help of a former boss, who hosts us here. I mean it's a Non Governmental Organization, we did not need more space. For this reason we have only one room for the office and there is a total of four people who could work at the same time in this space.”

The office has a round table in the middle with the seats arranged in such a way that anyone sitting can look directly at each other. There is only one closet in the room. Otherwise, in a corner near to the window there are a few boxes and some files. People are working on their laptops and, simultaneously, use their phones.

As the existing literature pointed out (Hosu, Culic and Deac, 2014) the existing communication channels for a Non-Governmental Organization (as was the one in this case) are diverse. Starting from direct, person-to-person communication, passing through references and recommendations, and from here to social events (conferences, fundraising corporate campaigns), classic advertising (print, radio, TV, outdoor - billboards, flyers, brochures, posters), new media (online, social media) and even to unconventional advertising, the organization of interest for our study has tried them all. The conclusion would be simple: the more you are present everywhere – online and offline –the more chances you have to reach the target audience.

During the interviews we made, the respondents told that the presence on the TV programs helped them the most. The first notable presence in the media was during a meeting in front of the Ministry of Health. They organized it and set a call centre in order to raise funds for the settlement of a leukemia detection and treatment centre in the country. The launch of the call centre was presented at the TV station, as one of the respondents told us:

“At that time, someone had a campaign: “We have life in our blood” which aimed to obtain the establishment of the stem cell registry. We wrote to him and told what we were fighting for: raising money for a boy with leukemia. He contacted us, filmed us at the meeting, then we had a show at WTV station and after that we had received 200 emails in one night... all asking for help. Finally, we decided to set up an association”.

If in a normal volunteering environment there is often a volunteer coordinator who is responsible for them, the Non-Governmental Organization included in the study does not have it. We were curious to know if those who did not honor their presence were warned or excluded from the organization. Without any emotional involvement, the answer was no. Not being a typical organization, they do not have such a close relationship with volunteers. As one of the founding members told us:

“We don't have any of those actions: let's run in the park, let's plant trees. That's one kind of catchy action. We do not make this type of event”.

The Non-Governmental Organization did not enter into volunteer contracts with anyone. If they initially had this intention to somehow hold people accountable, they

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stopped when a man left when he was handed a contract to sign. We can assess that this is the case of an atypical NGO.

One of the founding members told us that people in organizations are disorganized when it comes to their internal communication. Most of the time, they do not actively listen, do not ask questions and do not confirm to each other that the message sent has reached the receiver properly.

“The fact that we have so many means of communication seems to confuse us. The typical answer is: “Please, write to me by email!”; “See you on Skype”, “Wait, I’ll give you a Whatsapp call” and “Why do you tell me that when we also have a Facebook group and you can write that there?” – all those are typical phrases used in internal communication”.

She continued with an important remark: internal communication is practically the one that connects the NGO with the external world. In numerous occasions the people from organisation only declared that in a number of NGOs the external communication is centered around the idea that they want to save the world.

“This is simply bad luck. Many people want to save the world. Bad luck, so there’s room on the market. I mean, we have competition in order to save the world. And we have to find another way to express it.”

Another founding member complained about the organization, she considers that there was no concrete hierarchy. Everyone did everything, they delegated automatically each task. Even if the organization involves hierarchy, it seemed that in the case of this Non-Governmental Organization the style of “family business” prevailed. She also stated that, in general, the misunderstandings among members of the NGO were originated in a lack of organisation at the level of daily tasks, in a general informal way of connecting people and tasks:

“There are moments in our activity when we should be more corporate. In those moments, if the plan does not work according to some procedures, rule or something of this type we cannot manage the entire flow of communications and activities. Everything could turn into a disaster in a moment”.

Due to the increase in the number of NGOs in recent years, people are skeptical about the way in which they handle donations. Thus, it is important that the results are made visible and that the activities of NGOs are transparent. The founders of the NGS included in the study had declared that from the very beginning they wanted their activity to be as transparent as possible, without any constraint from the outside (e.g from the state). The Non Governmental Organization studied offered on a constant basis newsletters and annual reports to all sponsors and also it published pictures announcing the amounts raised and the way in which they are spent.

The NGO has a humanitarian purpose and, therefore, the process of communication with the external environment had a special role for obtaining new collaborators, financiers and for maintaining the relationship with sponsors and donors for new donations or any form of help. How do the people from this NGO find these contacts and how do they maintain a relationship with them? As they told us, the main

way in doing that is through friends, acquaintances and recommendations:

“Whoever comes to us and likes what we do is trying to help us with something. We tried to keep spending in general below 10% of what we collect with everything we do, including administrative expenses with salaries and communication, also, to keep below 10%”.

The members of the NGO we have analysed said that *“if you know how to ask, people will help you”* and *“people will help you if they trust you that you are not stealing their money”*.

According to what the respondents have declared to us, the companies generally agreed to offer their financial support because *“we put the problem in such a way that they either help us or they do not do that”*. Much more, as they declared, if one sponsor did not help in one situation it was possible that it would help in another.

The ways of asking for donations and financial aids varied according to the size of the company. If the members of the Non-Governmental Organization send emails to small and medium-sized companies for potential donors, in the case of large companies they used other methods:

“We have addressed a lot of direct requests to small and medium-sized companies, but we go in person to large ones and apply for grants or set up in person meetings with the heads of those companies.”

Conclusions

At the end of our analysis we can assess that, although initially we thought that there will be no element of surprise in the analysis of the communication methods used by the Non-Governmental Organization considered for the study, the results showed the opposite.

In the present research project (although it was limited and minimal) we managed to confirm the main research assumption and both secondary assumptions.

As our data showed, there are numerous Non-Governmental Organizations which use new types of media (social media sites, website, online newspapers, blogs) to promote themselves. Field events organised by those NGOs are often interactive, gathering people and volunteers in parks, cinemas and theaters to do various activities together with their target audience (which consists usually of people aged 14-18 from disadvantaged social categories). In the case of the Non-Governmental Organization included in the analysis the confirmation of first secondary assumptions was based on the fact that this NGO was able to be present on as many forms of media as possible in order to fulfill its mission.

The study also confirms the secondary hypothesis. In addition, the information gathered showed us that for an NGO it is essential to maintain a certain degree of transparency in its external communication with potential and actual donors, in order to secure an adequate flow of financing for its activities.

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