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HOW MASS MEDIA INFLUENCES THE PERCEPTION ON QUALITY OF PUBLIC SERVICES?

Abstract: Nowadays, the role of mass media shifted from informing citizen to influencing and shaping their opinion about the environment they live in. Communication channels have also diversified over time, people having the opportunity to choose to obtain information from the online environment: websites, social platforms, blog, as well as from offline: television, radio. In this regard, the influence of mass media can be discussed in the context of the opinions people hold about the quality and performance of public services. Given the way messages are sent and the professionalism of journalists, trust becomes a fundamental element that underlies the power of the media to influence people's perception. Taking into account the aspects previously mentioned, this paper aims to identify the way mass media influences people's perception about the quality of public services in Brasov County, so as to find methods to improve this services. In order to conduct the research, several methods will be used. Firstly, a content analysis will be carried out, to obtain information from online platforms. Further, people's perception, types of news they have seen about public services, and people's trust in media channels, will be measured through a questionnaire as well as through interviews applied to people living in several areas of Brasov County such as Rupea, Codlea, Fagaras, Brasov. Considering that generally, perception about public services is negative in Romania, as results we expect to find out that media has a significant contribution in negatively influencing citizens opinions about quality and performance of these services.

Keywords: Mass media, influence, perception, public services, quality

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Introduction

In today's society, mass media has a major role not only in communicating messages but also in shaping public opinion. In the age of technology, mass media influences the way society understands social phenomena and "image becomes the nodal concept around which the communication or public relations campaigns are being developed" (Coman, 2018, p. 3). In other words, the information transmitted through media determines individuals to have more or less positive images about the reality around them. In this context, the concept of image can be understood as "clearly, a reflection, a representation" (Coman, 2018, p. 5) which appears as a result of the assimilation of information transmitted through communication channels.

About the formation of opinions, perceptions or images among the population, one can also talk in the context of public administration and the services it makes available to people. Thus, the public service represents "an administrative body created by the state, county or commune, with a determined competence and power, […] made available to the public in order to satisfy regularly and continuously, general needs" (Negulescu, 1934, p. 123).

Inevitably, people come in contact with civil servants and public service representatives daily and have more or less pleasant experiences in this regard. However, these experiences can also be influenced by the way in which mass media channels: television, radio, social platforms, present and transmit information about the way public services function: schedule, efficiency, speed, staff friendliness, but also information regarding the experiences of other citizens.

Taking into account the aspects mentioned above, the paper aims to identify the way information circulated by mass media influences the perception of individuals about the quality of public services in Brasov County, in order to later find ways to improve them.

Literature review

Mass media and peoples' perception about reality

Mass media, or classical forms of mass communication, refer to "social institutions that deal with the production and distribution of knowledge and are distinguished by: the use of advanced techniques for mass production and the distribution of messages […] to very large audiences, which are unknown

to the communicator and which are free to accept or reject the messages received" (Coman, 2007, p. 26). In this regard, mass media contributes to building the image of an organization or institution and thus influences the perception that people have about that institution. Even more, today mass media became "the voice of our society" (Singh, & Pandey, 2017, p. 127) it playing an important role in our everyday life.

Often being considered the fourth power of the state, mass media institutions have the ability to adapt their strategies so as to produce certain effects among the population. Thus, the effects of mass media can be represented by changes in the individual, which happen after the individual has been exposed to mass media information (Potter, 2011, p. 903).

One of these effects is that society forms its perception and opinion based on the information presented by the media (Sadaf, 2011). This effect is also visible when it comes to peoples' opinion about the quality of public services in Romania. Following the information transmitted through television, radio or social platforms, when people are in a position to interact with representatives of public services, they already have in mind an image, a perception, which is not always in line with reality and with the real experience they are about to have when they will appeal to such services.

Perception, although a complex concept that is usually difficult to define, in a broad and simple way, according to the Longman dictionary, it can be understood as "the way you think about something and your idea of how that thing is" (Longman, 2006, p. 1131). Hence, exposure to selective content transmitted by mass media can also influence how people think about an institution, how they relate to it, and can also influence the way they interact with its representatives. According to West & Lynn (2010) selective exposure is "a method of reducing dissonance by looking for information that is consistent with current beliefs and practices" (p. 118). In the context of public administration, if people have previously been exposed to negative or positive information about public services and the way they function, they will tend to select from new information that is being presented to them, the information that match their beliefs and ignore messages that are in conflict with their opinion.

Moreover, sometimes mass media can produce conflicts between different social groups, conflicts that might create social instability (Sadaf, 2011). In the case of public services, if the information provided is negative, people will perceive it as such and a conflict may arise in this regard between public service representatives and citizens, the latter having formed a negative

image about how they will be treated by the public servant and the will act accordingly to their beliefs.

Trust in the information transmitted by mass media

Trust is an important factor in the process of communicating information through mass media, but also in the process of assimilating this information. In this respect, "trust implies potential gains or losses for the individual" (Tsfati & Johnatan, 2013, p. 3). When people choose to believe the information presented by mass media they assume certain risks (Matthias & Jörg, 2007, p. 239). These risks also exist because of the selective exposure: journalists are selective when they choose what and how they transmit and if people choose to believe that information, they actually believe in specific content selected by journalists.

Thus, while trusting news, there are four dimensions that people could take into account: trust in the topics addressed, in the facts presented, in the accuracy of the information, and in the evaluation made by the journalist (Matthias & Jörg, 2007, pp. 239-240). Considering these dimensions and given that the situations presented in the media cannot be fully verified by the population, it can be inferred that trust becomes a fundamental element underlying the power of mass media to influence people's perceptions.

Furthermore, confidence in mass media, can mean that individuals are willing to be vulnerable to content shared by mass media channels, and that they expect it to function in a satisfactory way (Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, & Steindl, 2018, p. 3). Thus, in Romania, from all mass media channels, television remains on the first place in terms of media consumption, a study revealing that 82% of respondents declared they watch television daily, and that 67% of them watch the news on TV (Starea natiunii, 2018). It is thus understood that television still has the greatest contribution in influencing people's perception. Moreover, the same study reveals that the information that Romanians trust comes from the traditional media: TV, radio, while the messages transmitted through social networks or blogs, register doubts about the validity of the information (Starea natiunii, 2018).

Perception about public services in Romania

While there are many ways in which public services can be defined, a broad definition describes them as "a form of administrative action by which a public entity assumes and tries to satisfy a need of general interest" (Dincă, 2018, p. 36). Thus, public services satisfy social needs, they provide goods or

services that satisfy the interests of members of society and they are created following management and administrative decisions (Bedrule-Grigoruta, 2009, p. 28).

Citizens' perceptions of public services can be influenced, changed or shaped even by a simple incident such as a negative experience while meeting with a police officer, or even by a news whose purpose is to inform the population about new regulations or practices in the public service sector. In this regard, when media addresses audiences, the expectations of those people regarding the subject are imagined, and even though most often, they are not their real expectations, they become real precisely after mass media communicates and presents certain messages (Ghiță, 2007, p. 244). In other words, media sends information according to the "expectations" of people who, even if they are not the real ones, following the transmission of the message and the assimilation of the information, perceive these beliefs as expectations as being theirs.

Moreover, in Romania, people are extremely dissatisfied with the activities, initiatives and decisions taken by the institutions subordinated to the state. (Ghiță, 2007, p. 244). Thus, Romanians are also dissatisfied with the public services sector, and this is also highlighted by the media.

There are many situations in which TV news present people who have had less pleasant experiences with representatives of public services, whether it is services related to population records, transport, infrastructure or public order and peace. Therefore, those situations might be considered by individuals as a frame of reference, and their future experiences may be influenced by the information they had seen on the news.

In this regard, studies focused on peoples' perception about public services in Romania also revealed that citizens are not satisfied with these kind of services. For example, a study on this matter showed that 41% of respondents consider that the public administration takes into account only to a small extent the specific needs of citizens, that 46% of them characterize the activity of the mayor's office as good and 22% as very poor, 35% of the population is dissatisfied with the waiting time, and 37% of respondents are dissatisfied with the number of documents they have to fulfil (Institutul Român pentru Evaluare și Strategie, 2015).

Public services and the online environment
Social networks have become important means of communication and platforms where people also approach the subject of political issues (Hjarvard,

2018, p. 59). Thus, social media refers to "the use of online and mobile technologies to turn communication into dialogue and can take various forms, such as forums, blogs, wikis, podcasts, photos, videos or social networks" (European Commission, 2012, p. 4).

People today are increasingly using the online environment: blogs, websites and social networks, not only for personal but also professional purposes. In Romania, public administration institutions started using social network too, but in many cases, these platforms are used just as means of posting news or press releases, and the characteristics that make them different such as possibility to interact or build communities are not taken into account (Urs, 2015, p. 127).

With the development of the internet and of the communication channels, the concept of e-government has emerged, which represent the way Information and Communication Technologies are being used by the public administration in order to improve the way institutions carry out their activity and implicitly in order to increase the quality of public services (Tîrziu, Gheorghe-Moisii, & Iordache, 2017, p. 30). In other words, the use of online platforms by public service institutions can facilitate communication with citizens, problem-solving and can improve people's perception of the services provided by the public administration.

In Romania, however, this process is still under development and certain obstacles exists, that also include "the lack of an entity to coordinate efforts to implement the digital strategy and the lack of basic digital skills to enable both citizens and employees to use advanced technology" (Belciu, Farkas & Birgovan, 2008, p. 5). Thus, having as a frame of reference the field of public services, there are two ways through which institutions that offer public services can communicate online with people: through their websites, when information presented is controlled mainly by the institution and through social networks, that favor interaction and allow people to comment and give feedback.

Methodology

Since mass media has the power to shape public opinion and influence the way people think about public administration and public services, we are interested in finding out what is the perception of people in Brasov municipality regarding such services. The purpose of our paper is to identify the influence of mass media, of the information sent through it, on people's perception of the quality of public services in Brasov County, to later find

ways to improve and manage these services. The methods that will be used in order to conduct the research are represented by content analysis as well as by the method of sociological investigation based on questionnaire and interviews. The research tools used will be represented by an analysis grid, a questionnaire and an interview guide.

Through the content analysis, we will follow, both online and on television and radio, the information transmitted regarding public services: their quality, way of functioning, experiences that citizens have when they come in contact with public services representatives.

It will also be monitored whether or not there are significant differences between the messages transmitted depending on the communication channel. In the online environment, it will be analyzed on social networks and blogs, in addition to information about public services, people's reaction after they had been exposed to certain messages and posts. Thus, we will analyze the comments made, how many shares do posts have, how many appreciations they have. In addition we will also monitor if public administration institutions use the online environment to transmit information: if they have official web pages or accounts on social networks.

The interviews will be applied to citizens living in several areas of Brasov County. These areas are represented by Brașov, Făgăraș, Rupea and Codlea. Through interviews we intend to identify peoples' perception regarding the local public services that are provided to them, and implicitly to obtain in depth information about the factors that influence their perception. Even more, we will also assess if people's opinions differ depending on the area they live in.

The investigation based on the application of questionnaires will follow the current perception of citizen about public services while taking into account the information reported by mass media, that they had already been exposed to.

Thus, the questionnaire will comprise closed and open questions through which it will be obtained: data on the environment from which people gather information, information about their level of trust in various media channels and in various institutions of the state such as: city halls, the government or financial administration. Even more, through the questionnaire we also want to discover the opinion of citizen about the quality of public services, the type of news they have seen about these services, and also their personal experiences when they had to appeal to such services.

Expected results

After conducting the mixed method research and after the analysis of the data obtained, there are several results we expect our research to reveal. Firstly, considering the fact that in Romania the negative opinions regarding the quality of public services are more prominent than positive opinions, our expectations and results of the research regarding the perception of the citizens from Brașov County, tend to go in this direction.

In other words, we expect to find out that people living in the areas analyzed tend to have negatives attitudes towards public administration in general, and towards public services in particular. Especially, we expect results that state that people mostly have negative perceptions about the effectiveness and performance of public servants, and that most of them are dissatisfied with the waiting time and with the way their problems are being handled.

Regarding the influence of mass media on the perception of citizens, we expect the results to show a high level of influence in terms of presenting information through TV news bulletins, and a lower level when the information is presented on social networks.

Taking into account the results obtained by conducting the content analysis, we expect them to reveal that negative information about public services is transmitted more in the online environment than on television. Thus, this might happen because social networks offer people the possibility to express their opinions, and citizens may use them as means of describing their experiences in the hope that something will change in the way public services function.

Given the results obtained by applying the questionnaire, we expect them to reveal that people tend to have more confidence in the information transmitted by news on TV and radio, that the information sent by mass media channels influences, more than the information from the online environment, the way people relate to public services and how they relate to their future experiences with the representatives of these services.

Conclusions

Today, Mass media does not resume to being just a means of informing the public, but it also has the power to shape public opinion, influencing, more or less, people's perception of certain aspects of the world around them. This is also true when referring to the role of mass media in influencing opinion about the quality and performance of public administration and public services.

The purpose of our paper being to identify people's perception of the quality of public services in Brasov County to later find ways to improve and manage these services, we will also try to highlight how different types of communication channels contribute to shaping the opinion of the citizens of Brașov County. In this regard, we argue that by knowing how people perceive public services and how mass media affects them, we can further find ways to improve the quality and performance of such services.

Considering mass media and their influence on citizens, an important factor is trust in the veracity of the information transmitted, in the professionalism and correctness of journalists. Taking into account the fact that in Romania, the perception about the quality and good functioning of public services is rather negative, in the research part of the paper we will analyze if the inhabitants of Brasov County trust the information transmitted through the media, which are the channels in which they have the greatest confidence, and how depending on the level of trust, their perception can be influenced.

Even more, new media, represented by social networks or blogs, is constantly evolving and people are using these platforms more and more as sources of information. Thus, the paper will also follow how messages and post on these platforms influence people's perception about public services in Brașov County.

Therefore, the results that will be obtained through the research proposed in this paper, can turn attention to a new direction of research, namely the quality of life in Brasov County, and how it is influenced by the media, public services and other elements such as: financial security, health, work or social interactions.

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