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Public relations and relationship management theory. Institutional perspectives

- PhD Thesis Summary -

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INTRODUCTION

The relationships between an organization and its publics represent o a central concern for the research and practice of public relations. Some of the well-known professors, from PR have tried the development of some relevant measures for the relationships between an organization and the public and have identified indicators such as trust, mutual control, commitment, satisfaction that can measure the quality of these relationships.[1]

However, it is still not clear the way that relationships between an organization and its publics are developed and maintained.

Our research represents an attempt in clarifying the way that relationships between an organization and its publics are initiated, built and maintained by exploring the connexion between employee-organization relationships, employee – public relationships and organization- public relationships, from the public relations' perspective, as a bridge between internal and external communication.

These three dimensions represent key-concepts of our research and they will be theoretically explored – helped by the literature review from different fields, and empirically – in a real life context, represented by Cluj-Napoca City Hall and its relationship with the citizens.

Considering our academic background in public relations field and the interest for practicing PR, we are constantly preoccupied about the way that public relations can demonstrate their value inside an organization.

We might ask ourselves: "why is important to PR person to measure the relationships?" The answer to this question is given to us by the public relations research that demonstrates that, for an increasing number of practitioners, as well as students and

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[1] Between 1997 and 1999, The Institute for Public Relations has published a series of three documents, who's purpose was to offer orientation and suggestions regarding the best way to evaluate the relationships beteween an organization and it's publics. These suggestions were developed based on the results obtained by a public relations research team. These documents can be accessed at http://www.instituteforpr.org.

professors from this field, the fundamental purpose of public relations is to create and maintain positive long term relationships between an organization and its publics.

James E. Grunig argues that "in order to have the public relations valued inside organizations, the PR practitioners must be capable to demonstrate that their efforts are part in reaching the objectives of this organizations by building long term behavioural relationships with strategic publics".[2]

Literature frequently reminds of the instruments and techniques used in measuring and evaluating the productivity and short term results of some programmes, events and campaigns, but measuring success or failure of long term relationships, as a result mostly of the public relations efforts does not represent a explored subject in PR literature.

As we previously mentioned "organization-public relationship" concept, we feel the need of explaining it. Ledingham and Bruning describe this as being " the state that exists between an organization and its target publics, where the actions of each part produces an impact on the other parties' economical, social, political or cultural state."[3]

Given the context, our paper is based on four general research questions:

A. How habitants of Cluj Napoca, that are also included in our research perceive their relationship with the City Hall?

B. How the employee-organization relationship's quality does influence the employee- public relationship?

C. How the employee- public relationship's quality does affect the organization-public relationship.

D. How public relations, as a management function can contribute in building, promoting and maintaining the internal and external relationships of the organization.

Based on these general questions we have came up a series of more specifically research related questions:

1. How does the local press reflects the City Hall's activity?

[2] James E. Grunig. "From Symbolic to Behavioral Relationships," in *Public Relations Review*, vol. 19, 1993, p. 136.

[3] John A. Ledingham, Stephen D. Bruning, "Relationship Management in Public Relations: Dimensions of an Organization-Public Relationship," in *Public Relations Review*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1998, p.62.

2. How the persons involved in this research describe the PR practice inside the organization?

3. How the employees describe the internal communication system?

4. How does the participants in this research describe the organizational climate in forming external and internal relationships?

5. What does the participants to the current research understand by organization-public relationship?

6. What kind of organizational commitment have the employees that participate in the research?

7. Which are the most important elements in evaluating the relationship between City Hall and citizens?

8. from the citizens point of view, what characterises an mutual advantageous relationship?

The research questions in this thesis are based on investigating how theories function in a specific organizational context. This is the reason why we choose to use the case study. We choose Cluj-Napoca City Hall for the case study because we were interested in the way that a public institute manages their relationship with the publics.

We mention that we do not believe that by choosing one single case study we can underline the generality. What we are going to try is a detailed examination of some actions and events that we believe can expose the functionality to some theoretical principles.

This detailed examination will be made with the help of qualitative and quantitative research methods. The research design involves a content analysis, a set of semi-structured interviews and the opinion survey.

We will start the methodological incursion with a content analysis of the articles referring to the City Hall in order to see what the image of this institution is in the local press and how its activities are presented to the public opinion.

The research will continue with the help of the semi- structured interviews with employees and citizens. We will have four interview guides: for the top management, PR employees, non-PR employees and citizens. The semi-structured interview will be used

in trying to obtain information about the perception over the employee-organization, employee-public and organization-public relationships.

The final part of the research will be allocated to a quantitative method, the opinion survey. With this method we are trying to obtain extra information regarding the way citizens perceive the relationship between themselves and the City Hall.

The thesis is structured in two big parts. The first part represents an incursion in the literature. Concerning that the main point of our paper is the concept of "relationship", a concept that requires a multidisciplinary approach, the theoretical incursion will be as vast as possible. In this first part of the thesis we will approach themes from public relations and relationships management, from the organizational communication, organizational climate, organizational commitment and organizational psychology. The second part represents a methodological frame where we will try, with the help of the case study to offer empirical proofs of the connexion between the three major concepts: employee-organization, employee-public and organization-public relationships.

The subject of this thesis might be considered new and provocative for the academic community and practitioners in PR, since it represent a first attempt, in Romania to measure the relationships between an organization and its publics, by using the six dimensions scale suggested by researchers from Institute for Public Relations, from the United States of America. By developing this research, our thesis can offer empirical data about the way organizations develop and manage the relationships with the strategic publics.

PART I – THE THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this part of the thesis we are trying to present the theoretical background, who's purpose is to introduce the main concepts of the paper: pubic relations and the relationship management theory.

By presenting some relevant researches from this field we are trying to correlate the key concepts mentioned above and to introduce them in a larger frame constituted by the relationship management theory and excellence in public relations.

CHAPTER I – Public relations – definitions, history, delimitations

Chapter I refer to the first notion from the thesis' title, public relations. What are public relations? Who are those who practice it? What is there purpose? Who benefits from them?

The answers to these questions will help us understand the real purpose of public relations and the influence that these have over the way a society develops. The better understanding of the principles that this science uses represent the fundament that help us use this field and its specific actions in the interest of optimal development in any society.

Public relations are a field by its own, based on concepts, theories, models and well established rules. PR is practiced for profit companies, civic or ecological associations, governmental institutions and NGOs, for banks, educational or cultural institutions.

CHAPTER II – Relationship Management Theory: organization-public relations employees-publics

This chapter relies on explaining the relationship management theory.
Any organization must communicate with different publics. The way they action, especially the governmental ones, can influence the lives of people. George David quoting Wilcox and co. states that a simple action of organizations it is not sufficient for influencing the target audience, it is necessary for the audience to also perceive the actions of the organization. Thus, the organizations must have a constant and effective communication with their audiences.

Mary A. Ferguson, quoted by Ledingham şi Bruning[4], states that the relationships between an organization and its publics must be considered the central point in the researches in PR.

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[4] Mary A. Ferguson. *Building Theory in Public Relations: Interorganizational Relationships,* paper presented during the annual meeting of Association for Education in Jurnalism and Mass Communication,

Ledingham şi Bruning[5] argue that the idea that public relations are seen as a management function represented a conceptual change. Traditionally, public relations were seen as a communication activity and relationship management was defined as a function of management that uses the strategic communication.

Traditionally, public relations were described through what they do and not by what were. Introducing the notion of relationship management represented an attempt in defining the field in terms of: "what it is".

Bruning and Ledingham developed a scale for organization-publics relationship, based on more than one items and more details.

The research's results[6] obtained by the two professors have shown there are three types of relationships between organizations and its publics: professionals, personals and community relationships.

The relational perspective is attractive for various reasons. Adopting the relationship management's perspective allows practitioners to use quantitative evaluation methods in order to follow through time the evolution of relationships. "despite the difficulties in documenting cause- effect relationships when we have to deal with complicated human behaviours, the PR practitioners that use quantifiable measures for relationships might argue for the organization- public relationship as part of a complex interaction mix that combines in order to influence the perceptions and human behaviour"[7]

Gainesville, Florida, August, 1984 *apud* John A. Ledingham, Stephen D. Bruning. „Relationship Management in Public Relations: Dimensions of an Organization-Public Relationship", in *Public Relations Review*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1998, p. 56.

[5] John A. Ledingham, Stephen D. Bruning. *op. cit.*, p. 56.

[6] Stephen D. Bruning, John A. Ledingham. „Relationships Between Organizations and Publics: Development of a Multi-Dimensional Organization-Public Relationships Scale", in *Public Relations Review*, vol. 25, nr. 2, 1999, pp. 157-170.

[7] Stephen D. Bruning, John A. Ledingham. „Organizational-Public Relationships and Consumer Satisfaction: The Role of Relationships in the Satisfaction Mix," *Communications Research Reports 15*, 1998, pp. 198-208, *apud* Stephen D. Bruning, John A. Ledingham. „Relationships Between Organizations and Publics: Development of a Multi-Dimensional Organization-Public Relationships Scale", in *Public Relations Review*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1999, p. 159.

Studying public relations as relationships management requires the integration of some concepts from fields, such as mass-media, interpersonal communication, organizational behaviour, social psychology, marketing and management.

Hon and Grunig[8] consider the fundamental purpose of public relations to be the creation and development for ongoing or long term relationships with key audiences of an organization. They argue that no matter how important is for an organization to measure the effects and results that reply to the PR work it is even more important for an organization to measure the relationships.

CHAPTER III - The particularity of communication in public administration

In this chapter we approached the concepts in previous chapters by the perspective of an organization that belongs to a public sector.

We begun this by presenting the results of some opinion surveys referring to the public administration from Romania.

Than we discussed about barriers in organizational communication and organizational culture in the public institutions context.

L.G. Popescu[9] underlines that the elements that offer particularity to organizations from the public administration system and that also leaves a mark on the cultural organization and thus on the communication have their origin in the nature of the public administration's activity.

Any type of public organizations manifestation becomes possible only in the context of normative general frame existence as well as some special laws, where the objectives, organizational and functional system, its place inside the administrative system, the way they are built and the way its resources (financial, material, human, informational) are allocated.

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[8] *Ibidem*, p. 22
[9] *Ibidem*, p. 267-268.

PART II – Employee–Public-Organization Relationships. Empirical research

This part of the thesis investigates, from an empirical point of view, the public's perception over an organization and the way the quality of employee-organization relationship and employee- public relationships might affect the quality of organization-public relationships, based on the Cluj Napoca City Hall case study.

In this study we want to explore the complex relationships between variable, such as internal and external organizational relationships.

The hypothesis and research questions from this study are based on investigating the way theories function in a specific organizational context. Therefore, this is the reason we choose to use the case study in our research.

The methodologically incursion will commence with a content analysis of the articles referring to Cluj-Napoca City Hall in order to see what the image of this institution in local press is and how its activities are presented to the public opinion.

We will continue the research by using semi-structured interviews. We will have four semi-structured interview guides: for top management, for PR employees, for non-PR employees and for citizens.

Our analysis will continue with the usage of a quantitative method – the opinion survey.

Investigating the complex relationships, between variables like internal and external organizational relationships, require combining qualitative and quantitative methods in order to realise a descriptive-exploratory research.

CHAPTER IV – Content analysis – Cluj Napoca City Hall in local newspapers

Even though our study does not refer to the relationship between the City Hall and the local press we consider it to be relevant in seeing how the City Hall is presented to a certain audience category very important for our research, the citizens. Through this

content analysis we have tries to give shape to the image of the institution and we will analyse it in future chapters.

In our study, inside the content analysis we will go through all the articles that refer to Cluj-Napoca City Hall, during three months, on three local publications, two daily newspapers (Ziua de Cluj and Monitorul de Cluj) and one weekly publication (Gazeta de Cluj). We will analyse articles from the online version of the publications, from February to April 2011. We have chosen this period for the analysis as we wanted to observe how the City Hall was presented before and during our research, in order to shape the general image that we mentioned in the beginning of the chapter.

The online editions of Ziua de Cluj, during the monitoring period contained 55 articles on the subject. From these, 41 have over 500 views. From the 55 articles, only seven are negative. The rest of 48 have a positive or neutral aspect .

Monitorul de Cluj online contained 44 articles that refer to Cluj Napoca city Hall. From these 20 are positive, 16 neutral and 8 negative.

In Gazeta de Cluj we found six articles, five negative and one positive.

Therefore, we can argue that articles referring Cluj Napoca City Hall and its representatives represent interest to the press. The average is approximately 800 views per article.

In our analysis we have identified a number of 105 articles having as subject Cluj City Hall.

During this period, the City Hall appears to have a positive image in the local press.

CHAPTER V – Interviews' analysis

We have recruited four major groups of participants for the study: top management employees, PR employees, non-PR employees and habitants of Cluj-Napoca.

When selecting the participants to the study we used what we call the theoretical sample building strategy. Lindlof and Taylor argue that when a research project is

conducted by theoretical concepts, the participants can be selected in compliance to the key constructs used.[10]

These interviews were taken between April and June 2011.

The interview themes are as follow: Public Relations, organizational climate, relationship management theory, the synergy between internal and external relationships.

The first conclusion, as a result of the interview analysis is that public relations inside an organization are managed at the highest level, being direct subordinated to the mayor. For the City Hall the public relations is divided into two departments: communication, public relations and tourism department and the mass media department, both under the coordination of the mayor.

The PR activities are seen by the employees to have a major part in building and maintaining the relationships between the organization and the external publics and a less important role in building the relationships inside the organization.

The responses received referring the internal communication system shows us that employees can express their concerns, this being a positive aspect of the intenal communication.

Our research has underlined the existence of an internal positive climate, that is favourable in building long term relationships with the external publics.

The management has also a positive impact over the employees' perception over the organization.

With regards to organization-public relationships we argue that Cluj City Hall and citizens have similar perceptions over the quality of their relationships. Both parties brought into discussion the idea of mutual respect, as an advantageous chararcteristic.

The major conclusion, after the interview analysis with the City Hall employees and the citizens is that the relationship that citizens have with the employees represents a major reference point for the way citizens evaluate the whole organization. Also, we can argue that citizens that have positive interactions with the employees develop a constructive relationship with these employees and have a positive prespective over the organization.

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[10] T. Lindlof, B. Taylor. *Qualitative communication research methods*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002, p. 65.

CHAPTER VI - Citizens' perception of the relationship with the City Hall

This part of our thesis has as a purpose to highlight the perception of the citizens, of those included in this research, over the their relationships with the City Hall. We find mandatory to argue again that the three major concepts we researched are: employee-organization relationships, employee-audience relationships and organization-public relationships. If in the previous chapter we have explored these three concepts trying to understand the relationships created among them, in this chapter we will research only the concept of organization-audience relationships.

Considering our proposal to highlight the way citizens perceive the City Hall, our research questions we use in this methodological part are as follows:

1. How the respondents perceive their relationship with Cluj Napoca City Hall?
2. What are the most important elements in evaluating the relationships between the City Hall and citizens?
3. From the respondents point of view, what characterizes an advantageous mutual relationship?

In this context, the research hypotheses are as follows:

H1. Citizens are satisfied with their relationship with the City Hall.

H2. Citizens believe that City Hall cares about them when taking important decisions.

H3. Citizens believe there is a mutual interest in developing a relationship between them and the City Hall.

H4. Comparing the City Hall with other public institutions, citizens appreciate their relationship more.

H5. Citizens consider the City Hall offers something as they require something else in exchange.

In order to offer responses to the research questions and in order to verify the hypothesis we have used the opinion survey, having as instrument the questionnaire. The data was collected in May 2011.

The sample is one of convenience and it is made up exclusively by citizens of Cluj-Napoca. This sample consisted of 140 individuals.

The used instrument in researching is the questionnaire, made up by 29 items. These items are related to the respondents' perceptions over some relationships indicators: mutual control, trust, satisfaction, commitment, exchange relations, mutual relation.

We have used in our research the factorial analysis in order to underline dormant relationships for a large number of variables. This analysis helps in summarizing the information in a smaller set of factors. In our study we tend to identify powerful correlation structures between variables.

The result of the factorial analysis shown that respondents perceive the City Hall as being a rather selfish organization, that helps them as expects something in return.

In that that concerns the perception over an advantageous mutual relationship, the citizens notice such a relationship between themselves and the City Hall, if this is preoccupied on the welfare of the citizens and wishes to help them.
Regarding the trust, the results show that in order to consider the City Hall as trust worthy, citizens must, first of all to perceive it as being honest and fair.

A very interesting result was the one where stating the idea of organizational success regarding the Cluj-Napoca City Hall is in very tight connexion with fulfilling promises, with honesty and the interest manifested towards the citizens.

Referring to the communication process between the City Hall and citizens, the result had shown us that form the citizens' point of view in order to be able have a mutual relationship the City Hall should not impose its authority.

A very important conclusion resulted from the interpretation of the correlations between factors is that the City Hall will offer citizens the opportunity to participate in the decision making process that could affect them.

The six dimensions, that we have been referring to since the beginning of this part from our research should show us the strengths and the weaknesses of the City Hall-citizen relationship, but we can see that each one of the six dimensions matters almost equally in perceiving the quality of the City Hall-citizen relationship.

CONCLUSIONS

Our thesis begun from the idea that relationship between an organization and its audiences represents o main preoccupation for the practice and research in public relations. Given the context we have referred to the researches from the public relations field that have tried to develop some relevant measurements for the relationships between organizations and publics and have identified indicators that could measure the quality of this relationships.

The thesis was structured in two main parts. The first one represents an incursion in the literature from the public relations and relationships' management, organizational communication, organizational climate, organizational commitment and organizational psychology. The second part consisted by an empirical research throughout we have tried to offer real data about the way an organization develops and manages the relationships with the strategic audiences.

In the beginning of the thesis we have asked a series of research questions that represented the leading point towards two main research directions: the role of the employees in building relationships between the organization and the public and identifying the most important elements in evaluating the relationships between the organization and the public.

The empirical research started with an content analysis in which we have analyzed all the articles referring to the Cluj-Napoca City Hall, on a period of three months, in three different publications.

The result showed us that the City Hall appears to have a positive image in the local press.

We continued our methodological using semi-structured interviews for four major groups of participants: top management employees, PR employees, non-PR employees and habitants of Cluj-Napoca.

Finally, we have used the opinion survey, method that helped in obtaining extra information, besides the ones from the semi-structured interviews.

The results of the interviews demonstrated that public relations inside the City Hall are managed at the highest level, being under the direct subordinated to the mayor,

but we can not argue they have a major role in building the relationships inside the organization. The PR activities are seen as having a major part only in building and maintaining the relationships between an organization and its external publics.

Our research has underlined the existence of an internal climate that is favourable to positive, long term relationships with the external audiences. A very important aspect, identified by the employees of the City Hall, which also encourages the development of a positive relationship with the exterior, is to be opened to communication and to have a positive climax inside the organization.

The management has also a positive impact over the employees' perception on the organization.

With regards to organization-public relationships we argue that Cluj-Napoca City Hall and citizens have similar perceptions over the quality of their relationships. Both parties brought into discussion the idea of mutual respect, as an advantageous characteristic.

The major conclusion, after the interview analysis with the City Hall employees and the citizens is that the relationship that citizens have with the employees represents a major reference point for the way citizens evaluate the whole organization. Also, we can argue that citizens that have positive interactions with the employees develop a constructive relationship with these employees and have a positive perspective over the organization.

The six dimensions, that we have been referring to in our research should show us the strengths and the weaknesses of the City Hall- citizen relationship, but we can see that each one of the six dimensions matters almost equally in perceiving the quality of the City Hall-citizen relationship.

Combining the qualitative and quantitative methods, this research offered quantifiable evidence on the perception that citizens have on their relationship with the City Hall. These results could be used for developing management strategies in public relations, which could increase the practical value of this field.

Limits and research perspectives

Like any research, this thesis presents some sets of limits. These limits can be grouped into the following two categories: limits that concern choosing the case study and limits that concern the research methods. Based on these limits we will define some research perspectives.

The first set of limits refers to choosing a single case study. The results thus can't be reported as valid to other organizations. Even more we also considered a single public category that the City Hall interfere with, given that there are others publics that interacts with this organization and that could have relevant opinions.

The second set of limits refers to the research methods. First of all we have used in our research as a central point, relationships indicators that were not tested often. Secondly, the opinion survey was used on a convenience sample, thus the results can't be generalized or the entire population of Cluj-Napoca. Third of all, our research did not take into account the socio-demographic data of those involved in the research. This type of data could highlight even more the results of the research.

Based on these limits we can identify some research perspectives. One of the first ideas could be the usage of these relationships indicators in a comparative study on more organizations. For example, we believe that it would be interesting to research how publics perceive the relationships with different organizations from the public and private domains from Romania. By measuring the quality of the relationships perceived we can measure the relational forces that usually explain why organizations have good or bad reputations. Even more, by using relationships indicators in as many researches as possible we can measure their reliability, thing that could be of great value to the practice and research of public relations, showing how the value of public relations for an organization could be measured.

Another research perspective refers to achieving such a research, where respondents to be segmented into active and passive publics, in order to see if there are differences in evaluating the relationships with a specific organization. Also, it would be interesting to consider the socio-demographics data for the publics that evaluate the relationships with specific organizations.

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