

# ONLINE COMMUNICATION AND PR IN ROMANIAN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION. THE CASE STUDY OF PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS FROM TRANSYLVANIA

Delia Cristina BALABAN

Mirela-Codruța ABRUDAN

Ioana IANCU

Cosmin IRIMIEȘ

## **Delia Cristina BALABAN**

Professor habil., PhD, Department of Communication, PR and Advertising, Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Tel.: 0040-264-431.505

E-mail: balaban@fspac.ro

## **Mirela-Codruța ABRUDAN**

Associate Professor, PhD, Department of Communication, PR and Advertising, Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Tel.: 0040-264-431.505

E-mail: mirela.abrudan@fspac.ro

## **Ioana IANCU**

Lecturer, PhD, Department of Communication, PR and Advertising, Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Tel.: 0040-264-431.505

E-mail: iancu@fspac.ro

## **Cosmin IRIMIEȘ**

Associate Professor, PhD, Department of Communication, PR and Advertising, Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Tel.: 0040-264-431.505

E-mail: cosmin.irimies@fspac.ro

## **Abstract**

New technologies such as Internet and new media introduce new challenges for public communication. Private companies from Romania use in a very creative way the new tools of Web 2.0, such as social media. In the Romanian public sector, especially in the public administration there are important steps taken towards a modern communication. Based on the example of over 40 city halls, city councils, prefectures and county councils from Transylvania, the present paper analyzes the use of new media tools in public communication by applying content analysis and in-depth interviews with the PR representatives in those institutions in two stages, 2011 and 2015. The most important advantages of online communication in public administration are high speed, cost reduction, reaching young audiences, etc. Nevertheless, there are also critical voices that express possible risks such as exclusion of audience groups that have no online media literacy.

**Keywords:** online communication, public relations, public administration, social media, Romania.

## 1. Introduction

The emergence and evolution of the Internet not only has meant the abolition of the space-time dimension of communication by facilitating instant access to global information, but also marked a shift to a new level of communication. Thus, if the Web 1.0 has meant mainly Internet based on communication by e-mail and websites, Web 2.0 releases the so-called social media era that made new possibilities of interaction available to users. New media communication marks a turn that does not start from the media to a specific target group, being defined by an exchange of information directly and multilateral (Zerfaß, 2007, p. 31).

With the introduction of the term Web 2.0, Tim O'Reilly has observed a series of changes in communication, mainly due to interactive trends, and a change in perception of the communication process. Thus, the communicator status changes and the term takes on new meanings, as well as media consumption behavior. Through Web 2.0, users can participate and even take an active role in the communication process given the fact that in the social Web message receptors can also become content generators (Ruisinger, 2007, p. 193). In this respect, the idea of symmetrical communication between public institutions and external actors is emphasized in the Law no. 52/2003 on transparency and openness.

One of the major changes caused by the emergence and spread of Web 2.0 is altering the role in media consumption and behavior of users. The key term governing their new status is participation. If until now the mass media users were simply receivers or consumers of information, this innovation facilitates the active involvement of everyone, generating and publishing content online without technical or financial effort and without communication specialists. Thus, access to mass communication is free for almost anyone who wants to produce textual content, audio or video through communication tools such as weblogs, podcasts or social networking. The exceptions are still some groups of people who unfortunately have no Internet access due to their economic situation or their age. Based on the Internet World Stats, in 2014, there were more than 11 million Internet users, with around 56% penetration of the Romanian population. However, although communication has been broadened through the use of Internet, its impact is not yet significant, the rural population being almost entirely excluded. Moreover, the websites of local authorities from the rural areas are likely not to be functional and updated.

New media also allow users to connect to global networks. Since software is located on the Internet, as a common platform, any user, regardless of location, can access or generate content at any time. Thus, Web 2.0 provides the right to participate and be actively involved in the communication process, guaranteeing the democratization of its kind worldwide. Web 2.0 has also launched a series of debates regarding the authenticity and subjectivity of its applications. They filled news from conventional media with blogs and podcasts, forming a second public opinion, which exerts its influence on traditional media, expanding them, adding new and interesting perspectives.

As we have said, the greatest achievement of new media is the determination to overcome the borders of sequence and linearity of communication, the revolution in the principle of role separation in sending and receiving messages in the communication process. Thus, if the classic media functioned according to the principle few-to-many, which designates limited access to the media production process, selection, filtering, processing and dissemination of information, social media overlaps the roles of generator and content user. The boundaries of unidirectional communication specific to mass media are abolished in favor of bilateral directions, dialogue, which operates by the principle many-to-many and facilitates unrestricted access to mass communication process.

Within the context of new tools and ways of communication, public administration, which is often perceived as being characterized by rigidity and conservative approach, now has to line up with the technological evolution and respond to the new society's needs. Thus, considering the aforementioned ideas, there are two major sets of issues the paper aims to emphasize and to analyze. Firstly, based on content analysis, the research is focused on identifying the new media tools the public institutions use, as websites, Facebook profiles, etc. Moreover, covering a large number of public institutions from Transylvania, Romania, the paper explores whether there are major differences between small cities and big cities from the point of view of new media usage. Secondly, through an in-depth interviewing mechanism, the analysis aims to underline the main factors that influence the structure of the online media mix within the public institutions. The research was conducted in two steps, the same quantitative and qualitative methods being used in 2011 and four years later, in 2015, aiming to determine the dynamic of change in the new media usage in the public sector.

## **2. Public relations in the online space**

The focus of this paper is mainly on the way new technologies and new types of communication succeed in improving the online communication of public administration. As the information and communication technologies arise and are profoundly integrated into the communication system of public institutions, the communication tools between public institutions and individuals facilitate a better interaction between the two mentioned entities.

This discussion is important in the context of digital divide, a still present issue in the Romanian context. Thus, while the digital divide is defined as the gap between the individuals that are computer literate and that have access to technology and those that are not (Norris, 2001, p. 4).

In the process of development from Web 1.0, Internet communication characterized by e-mail and websites, to Web 2.0 or social media, new ways of interaction occur. Targeted discourse is not only oriented from the media towards each dialogue group, but is rather characterized by a direct exchange of information. In this context, the biggest challenge for public relations is addressing new dialogue groups that benefit from active participation, content generation and connectivity in various online social networks.

Success of public relations, both online and offline, is based on detailed knowledge of the dialogue groups. Such planned action involves a thorough description of socio-demographic data, of criteria such as media literacy, knowledge and usage patterns of communication channels, etc. (Ruisinger, 2007, p. 19).

Opinion leaders of virtual communities represent new groups of reference for public relations in the online space, approaching them through traditional media channels that are normally limited. Exclusive users of the online environment generally fall into a young age category. They get informed especially through online channels and regard the information provided by traditional media as secondary. The presence of online journalists must be also considered in the activity of public relations. Even conventional media turns more and more to the online space, their communicators can therefore be easily accessed online (Ruisinger, 2007, p. 20).

Social media also brought new challenges in the business of PR. These issues include the inability to categorize subjects through journalists. Thus, ways must be found to generate attention among online users, who turned from simple receptors to content generators, multipliers and potential opinion leaders. Regarding press relations, discussion partners are now particularly online journalists who are different from conventional ones in terms of training and access to the profession. PR activity must adapt to these new communication tools to reach the new gatekeepers.

Another debate launched with the rise of new media is linked to the formation of public opinion in the virtual world, which is still characterized by a lack of transparency. For public relations this means that the linear distribution of messages is no longer possible. Opinion formation process must be adapted to new communication tools and models, bearing in mind that potential multipliers and opinion leaders exist everywhere in the online environment. Given the new conditions, content and PR practitioner's attention must take into account the degree of networking and digital reputation as crucial factors in the designation of new forms of opinion.

### **3. Methodological design**

The study was conducted in 48 public administration institutions from all the counties in the Center and North-West development regions of Romania, that are known in a larger sense as the historical region called Transylvania. One of the elements that determined our methodological choice was a relatively balanced economical situation in terms of the presence of foreign companies, which indicates a relatively developed private sector in the two regions. Among all the eight development regions existing in Romania, the two regions that are analyzed in this article are situated on the second and third positions in a ranking of the regions based on their economic development. Additionally, in 2011 the two regions were situated on the third (Center Region: 11,400 EUR) and forth (North-West Region: 10,500 EUR) position of a ranking regarding GDP per capita, after Bucharest-Ilfov Region (30,700 EUR) and West Region (13,500 EUR). In 2015 the contribution to Romania's GDP situated them on the second (Center Region: 11.1%) and third (North-West Region: 10.4%) position

of the mentioned ranking. Eurostat indicates the Bucharest-Ilfov Region as a leader, producing more than 27.9% of the GDP, and the North-East and South-East Regions on the last positions (each with 10%), (EUROSTAT, 2015; Medrega, 2015). The second aspect that motivated the methodological design was the fact that both Center and North-West regions have ethnical and confessional diversity.

The sample includes all the prefectures from 12 counties (Alba, Bihor, Bistrița-Năsăud, Brașov, Cluj, Covasna, Harghita, Maramureș, Mureș, Sălaj, Satu-Mare, Sibiu), all the 12 county councils, 12 city halls from the biggest cities in every county, and also 12 city councils. The chosen cities are county seats from all the counties of the two regions. According to the Romanian National Prognosis Commission, there are relevant differences in the economic development among these cities (for example Cluj-Napoca *versus* Zalău within the North-West Region), an element that could influence the diffusion of innovation in terms of using new media and especially social media tools in public communication.

The research has been conducted in two stages, the first one between October and December 2011, and the second one between November and December 2015. The research questions this paper aims to answer are the following:

**Q1.** What type of new media tools (websites, Facebook profiles, YouTube etc.) do the public institutions use? Moreover, based on the new media tools used, are there profound differences in the dynamic of the online public communication in public institutions?

**Q2.** Which is the role of social media as an integrated part of public communication from the perspective of PR employees in the public administration?

**Q3.** What is the dynamic of online communication and especially of social media communication in public institutions in 2015 compared to 2011?

The methods used are content analysis and in-depth interviews. The content analysis applied within this research aims to emphasize the level of new media usage within 48 public institutions from different prefectures, county councils and cities of the North-West and Center development regions of Romania. This method helps in mapping the content of online tools and the way they are used.

The present content analysis focuses on the study of different online media and on different variables for each medium. The same codebook is used in both of the research stages, 2011 and 2015. Firstly, the website of each analyzed institution is taken into account by focusing on its structure, the frequency of updates, the existence of RSS, the existence of newsletter and traffic. Secondly, variables like content and posting frequencies are considered. Thirdly, being a moment in which social media quickly develops at institutional level as well, Facebook pages are analyzed by underlying the existence of a profile or a fan page, the number of followers or likes, and frequency of updates. Fourthly, regarding Twitter accounts, the number of followers and the frequency of updates are considered. Finally, whether a YouTube page exists, variables as the number of posted videos and the frequency of updates are analyzed.

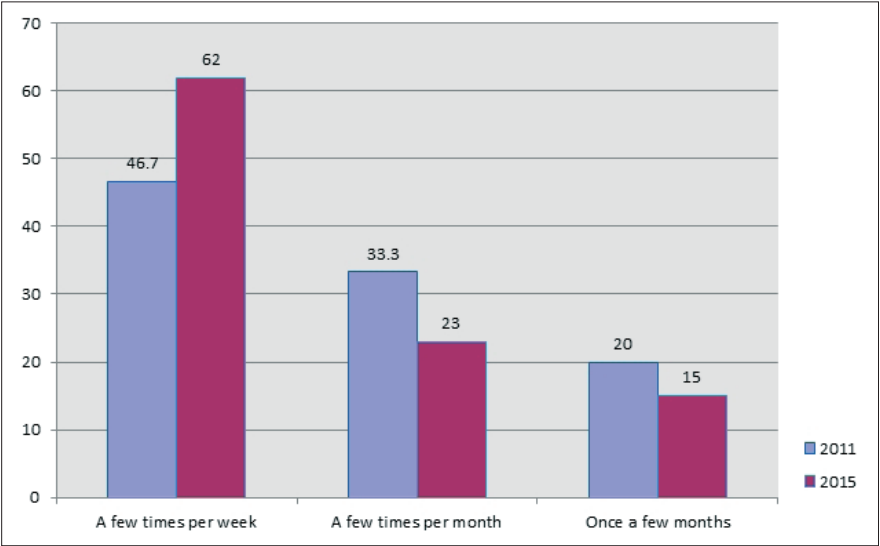
Although Twitter, YouTube or Trilulilu are not necessarily the most important parts of the online communication process of a public institution, it is interesting to see if these pages are used within a period characterized by a dynamic development of social media.

Additionally, 40 in-depth interviews with PR employees from the analyzed institutions have been applied in 2011 and 15 in-depth interviews in 2015. In the case of this particular research, the interviewed individuals are PR or mass-media specialists working within the researched public institutions. However, in the cases in which such persons do not exist, the interviews have been conducted with persons in charged with Internet information posting. The qualitative part of the research aims at revealing the attitude of the PR employees towards the use of new media tools in the PR activity in public institutions, the motivation of using social media and the perspective on the efficiency of using this type of tools in public communication. The transformation of media relations is another issue that has been discussed, as well as the dynamic of the interaction with the journalists. Most of the interviews have been applied online; yet there were also face-to-face interviews. The main topics within the interview were the following: the advantages of online communication, the new media usage in correlation with the educational level of the respondent, the existence of a strategy in order to gain more online traffic, and the interaction with journalists in the context of social media. In order to observe the development of online communication strategies in public administration over the last four years, interviews were applied with representatives from the same institutions in 2011 and 2015, even if, in some cases, it was not the same person that was in charge with the management of online communication.

#### **4. Findings**

Based on the content analysis, the data indicate the fact that all the analyzed institutions had websites in 2011 and are still using them as a main online public communication tool in 2015. There is a common pattern regarding the structure of websites. Thus, the main information categories can be grouped as it follows: information about the city hall, information about the city, public information, and direct contact with the citizen. In almost every case, the information about the city hall is related to the organization chart, internal regulation, commissions, subordinated institutions, the local council, income return, projects and strategies, partners and collaborators, useful links, and web cams. The information on the city concerns population evidence, the census report, tourist attractions and travel guide, virtual city, photo gallery, and related cities. The section dedicated to public information usually contains press handouts, taxes, events calendar, news, laws, or weather information. An interesting aspect is related to the fact that public institutions from bigger cities tend to give greatest attention to direct interaction with citizens, whether it is online ('your suggestion', e-magistrate or online payment) or offline ('live with citizens' or green line).

Regarding the frequency of websites' updates, the data for 2011 show that almost half (46.7%) of the analyzed public institutions update their websites a few times per week. However, there are important percentages of institutions (33.3%) that update their websites only a few times per month or once a few months (20%). In 2015 the percentage of public institutions that updated the websites a few times per week increased (62%) and the percentage that updated them a few times per month (23%) and once a few months (15%) decreased. We assume that the increased communication flow is not necessarily a sign of an increasing activity in the public institution, but a proof of an increased level of awareness among the public employees regarding the importance of transmitting information more often to the citizens through online communication tools. The data are summarized in the following figure.



**Figure 1:** The frequency of websites' updates (%)

As expected, the study shows that the most frequently updated are in 2011 the City Halls' websites. However, it is interesting to notice that the websites that are updated every day do not belong to the biggest cities, but to the medium ones, as Oradea or Satu Mare. The websites belonging to the public institutions of Cluj-Napoca or Braşov are updated fewer times per week. The least frequent updated websites are those from Alba Iulia, Bistriţa and Sibiu. Even if in 2015 some of the websites belonging to the analyzed institutions changed, a classic website structure was maintained. None of the followed institutions uses a mobile app connected to the website. In less than half of the analyzed public institutions, there are being used RSS and newsletters. The following table emphasizes the results.

**Table 1:** The existence of RSS and newsletters within the public institutions

	2011	2015
<b>RSS</b>	48.4%	53.84%
<b>Newsletter</b>	41.9%	15.38%

There are more public institutions that own a RSS than a newsletter both in 2011 and 2015. Even more, the number of institutions using newsletters decreased, some of the city halls preferring to print them instead of sending them online. There are two reasons for this option: the difficulty for public institution to develop a data basis with email addresses of the citizens, and the possibility of newsletters to land in the spam section. Newsletters seem to be in this particular case not such an efficient form of communication.

However, when these data are correlated with the type of public institution, the results are more interesting. The table below summarizes the results for 2011.

**Table 2:** The existence of RSS and newsletters according to different public institutions

	RSS		Newsletter	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
<b>City Hall</b>	42.9%	57.1%	42.9%	57.1%
<b>Prefecture</b>	80%	20%	40%	60%
<b>County Council</b>	40%	60%	40%	60%

Thus, while the same percentage of city halls (42.9%) and the same percentage of county councils (40%) use RSS and newsletter, in the case of prefectures the difference is more significant: 80% indicate the usage of RSS and only 40% the use of newsletter. Among the biggest cities, the ones including neither RSS nor newsletters in their communication strategy are Satu Mare, Sibiu and Bistrița.

Within this context, the traffic of the website is very important. Although there is limited information on the websites' traffic, the data show several interesting facts. Firstly, the websites of city halls are the ones posting their traffic mostly, both in 2011 and 2015. Secondly, the range of websites' traffic is very diverse, from 10 visitors to 2,108,097 visitors. However, most of the public institutions' websites have more than 65,000 visitors. The largest number of unique visitors belonged in 2011 to a county council and not to a city hall, as expected. Moreover, this county council belongs to a small to medium city, namely Târgu Mureș.

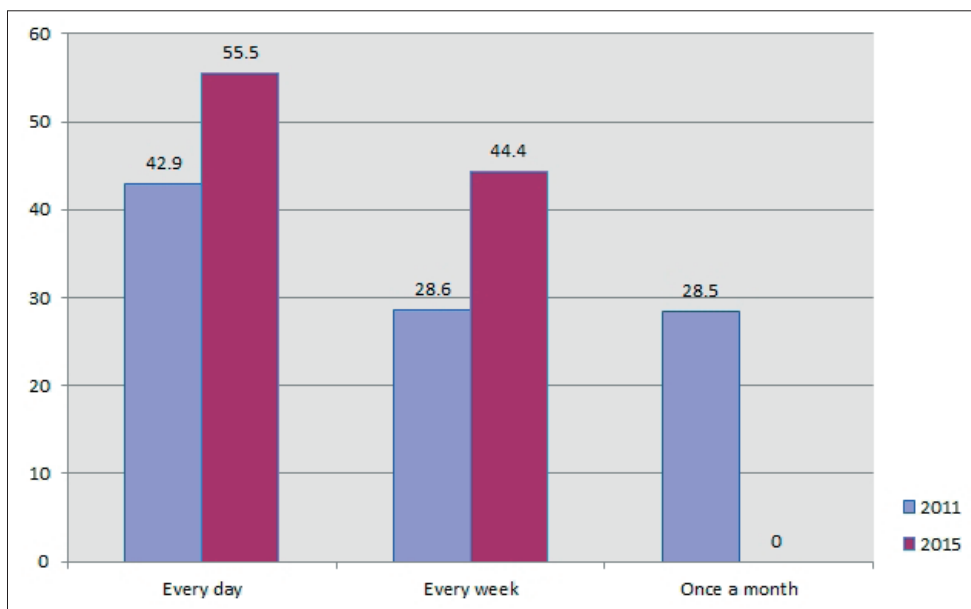
There were some institutions having Facebook affiliated pages already in 2011. Among these pages, 53.8% are fan pages while 46.2% are profiles. From the entire range of 45.2% institutions that have Facebook references, as the following table shows, most of them, namely 11, are city halls, while only 1 is a prefecture, and 1 is a county council.

**Table 3:** The frequency of Facebook profiles and fan pages according to the analyzed public institutions in 2011

	Facebook profile	Facebook fan page
City Hall	4	7
Prefecture	1	0
County Council	1	0

The number of friends on Facebook is diverse, the 2011 collected data show that the highest number of Facebook likes is registered for Oradea City Hall, namely 1,339, and for Alba Iulia City Hall, namely 5,427. A possible explanation for a high number of friends and likes mainly for the Facebook pages of Alba Iulia is related to its historical heritage and touristic significance.

In addition, as the following figure shows, while almost half of the Facebook pages (42.9%) were updated every day in 2011, the rest of the pages were updated once a week or once a month. According to the data registered for 2015, 55.5% of the Facebook pages were updated a few times a week.



**Figure 2:** The frequency of Facebook updates (the data are presented in percentage)

Given the constant growth of the number of Facebook users in Romania, in 2015 there also can be observed a diversification of Facebook tools used by public institutions and a significant increase of the number of followers and likes. Below there are some examples from December 2015.

**Table 4:** Facebook profiles of city halls in Romanian language 2015

	Likes	People talking about this	Number of photos on the timeline
<b>Alba-Iulia</b>	6,248	265	162
<b>Oradea</b>	7,776	1,186	281
<b>Bistrița</b>	-	-	-
<b>Brașov</b>	6,723	1,147	880
<b>Cluj-Napoca</b>	4,772	216	724
<b>Sfântu Gheorghe</b>	-	-	-
<b>Miercurea Ciuc</b>	-	-	-
<b>Baia Mare</b>	6,903	24	16
<b>Târgu Mureș</b>	4,124	123	969
<b>Zalău</b>	5,728	89	209
<b>Satu-Mare</b>	-	-	-
<b>Sibiu</b>	5,128	109	795

The most common posts the Facebook pages contain are related to public information, projects of the institutions, press handouts and press articles, events and news, and to pictures. However, there are situations where there is no interaction with the friends of the profile.

Within the same context, in 2011 there are only four public institutions registering a Twitter account and all of them are city halls: Târgu Mureș, Oradea, Cluj-Napoca and Alba Iulia. Among them, the highest number of followers, namely 438, belongs to Oradea City Hall. Four years later, the data indicate the same situation, the same four public institutions have Twitter pages. In 2015 Oradea registered 3,008 followers and is still the Twitter account with the highest number of followers among the analyzed public institutions. Alba-Iulia (21), Cluj-Napoca (30) and Târgu Mureș (52) indicate still modest numbers of follower compared to Oradea. The pages are updated either every day, a few times per week or once a few months. The Twitter activity is mostly related to public information, and it catches up the information posted on the official website of the institution: news, projects or online possibilities of tax payment.

YouTube or Trilullilu posts can be noticed for only one city hall, namely Târgu Mureș, and for two county councils, namely Cluj-Napoca and Sibiu. However, these pages are rarely updated, from once a month to once a year, registering only one or two videos.

Based on the above quantitative analysis, there are two main conclusions that can be drawn. Firstly, the results show that Facebook pages and Twitter, YouTube or Trilullilu activities are in 2011 mainly a follow up of the information posted on the websites of the studied public institutions. However, most of this information repeats or it is only presented in a different manner. Four years later, in 2015 we observed a tendency towards using Facebook in a different manner, meaning that some posts went online earlier than the information about the same event on the website. The visual elements were used on Facebook mostly in form of pictures, not of short videos like on the official websites. Secondly, the existence of online activity is not necessarily

correlated with the size of a city. On the contrary, although the websites belonging to the public institutions from the largest cities are more complex, the main public institutions that use a larger range of new media are rather institutions from medium sized cities. This tendency was registered in both of the research stages, 2011 and 2015.

In addition to the aforementioned findings, based on the content analysis of new media tools, using the results of the in-depth interviews, the research aims to determine the factors that influence the structure of the online media mix. City halls of larger cities indicate not only more resources invested in communication, but also more specialized employees working in the field and tending to use much more their creativity in their PR activity.

The PR employees are all aware of the advantages of online communication. The high speed of communication flow and the fact that the information is spreading in real time were mentioned as the major advantages. Another aspect stressed by some of the interview partners refers to the fact that new media offer the frame for transparency in the decision making process in public administration. New media, by clearly showing updated and real time information, provide a much more open perspective on what a public institution does. Moreover, these tools facilitate the direct access to citizens, individuals being able to consult the public information easier and anytime they want. Among the mentioned advantages are also the following: costs reduction, desired information flow, no interventions in the initial texts, and no time limits such as edition closure (PR representative, Zalău City Hall).

The use of new media in the PR activity is related to the educational background of the employees. The tendency to use new media tools is not only increasing with the dimension of the cities, being also connected to PR representatives who obtained a Bachelor or a Master degree in Communication and PR. There is also an interesting debate about what educational background the employees of the communication departments in public administration should have. However, this is a separate issue that needs an additional empirical study. With some exceptions, the majority of our interview partners declared that they do not have an active strategy to determine a larger traffic on their websites. Only few of them affirmed to use newsletters, Google ads or cross media advertising.

Criticism regarding the use of new media in the PR activity in public institutions has been also formulated. Communication in public administration is characterized by accuracy, sobriety and seriousness. The critics of new media tools among the respondents consider that social network sites, for example, are not suitable for these values. Another aspect refers to the fact that the access and the competence to use new technologies depend also on the age and on the economic potential of the public.

The new perspective in the relationship with the journalists represented a large part of the conducted interviews. The majority of the opinions indicated that there is a significant change in the journalists' activity and also in the interaction between journalists and PR specialist. Many journalists tend to inform themselves from online

sources. Journalists are working in different conditions now. They receive the information in real time and have to disseminate it very fast. New media are also a platform for participative journalism, for the implication of citizens in forums, in sending news material to different traditional media such as televisions.

The websites of public institutions cannot replace classical media, is the opinion of some of the interviewed PR experts: 'The majority of people still have a strong trust in media. Their trust in mass media is higher than their trust in public institutions. The majority of the users of our website are looking for particular information' (PR representative, Cluj County Council). Official websites contribute to the variety of information sources for citizens. 'The citizens can have parallel access to different sources of information; they have the possibility to compare the same information that has been transmitted by using different communication channels' (PR representative, Maramureş County Council).

Concluding, the interviews conducted with PR specialists from public institutions stress the main advantages and disadvantages regarding the use of new media tools. Thus, while the level of transparency and of external involvement in the decision-making process increases, some groups (for example, elderly persons, individuals without internet access, etc.) are excluded from this involvement. In addition, the level of new media usage is significantly and positively correlated with the level of specialized studies of PR representatives. Furthermore, the new media tools open a new and real time communication perspective between PR specialists and journalists.

Four years later, in 2015 the situation changed regarding some perspectives. The number of public institutions accounts on social network sites increased, the frequency of posts and the number of followers as well. In Romania the majority of the population is nowadays using Facebook. This is why almost all of the analyzed public institutions having accounts on social networking sites use precisely this network. Cluj-Napoca, one of the cities included in our research, was registering in 2015 the third largest population of Facebook users (250,000) after Bucharest (approximately 2,100,000), and Timișoara (320,000) (Facebrands, 2015). Compared to Facebook which registered 8,300,000 accounts in 2015, Twitter reported for Romania only a modest number of users: 330,000 (Manafu, 2015). This is the main explanation for the gap between the flows of public communication on Facebook in comparison to Twitter, pointed out in the conducted study. Why users prefer Facebook over Twitter in Romania, is a complex issue and can be the subject of a new research paper.

The technological development in terms of users determined public institutions to adapt their communication and to come up with new strategies, as stated by one of the interviewed PR representatives. Nevertheless, 'the dynamic of the change is still not the same for private and public institutions', was another idea expressed in two of the in-depth-interviews conducted in 2015. Communication experts working in public administration are much more aware of the information value of social network sites for journalists in 2015 than in 2011. Some particular projects of public institutions were promoted through online social networking. A form of 'communication

pressure shaping the dynamic of social media presence', like a PR representative interviewed in 2015 called it, came along with the increasing number of Facebook users.

The transparency issue was also pointed out in three of the conducted interviews as a distinguishing feature of online communication. An interesting tendency was observed regarding criticism on social network sites. PR representatives tend to see nowadays critics more often as an information source leading to improvement. Critical observations coming from citizens via online social networking channels are considered to be rather constructive in 2015 in comparison to 2011.

The following table is a synthesis of the main findings of the present research.

**Table 5:** Main findings related to the research questions

2011	2015
Q1. Websites are the main online communication tool in the public sector. They are updated a few times per week. RSS and newsletters are used by almost half of the analyzed institutions. Differences between types of institutions exist. Facebook is the first option when it comes to social network sites (SNS). The highest number of followers was registered by a city hall, namely Oradea. Only four institutions, city halls as well, use Twitter but the number of followers is irrelevant. The activity on YouTube or Trilulilu is not significant.	Q1. Websites are still the main online communication tool, but the frequency of updates amplifies. The use of RSS slightly increases, while newsletters remain an option only for few public institutions. Facebook is still the first option when it comes to SNS. 10 among 12 city halls have Facebook accounts. The highest number of followers is still registered by Oradea City Hall. The frequency of updates increased and a diversification of Facebook tools used by public institutions can be noticed, as well as a significant growth of the number of followers and likes. Twitter is still used only by the same four institutions, the number of followers remaining irrelevant. The activity on YouTube or Trilulilu is still not significant.
Q2. City halls are the most dynamic institutions when it comes to the diversity of online communication tools and frequency of posts. Institutions located in a city or region with touristic potential tend to use much more the analyzed instruments.	Q2. City halls are still dynamic. The use of online communication and especially of social media as an instrument for public communication increased in all types of analyzed institutions.
Q3. PR employees are aware of the advantages of online and social media communication such as: high speed of communication flow, real time updates, no journalistic intervention in the message content, and parallel access to different information sources. The new communication tools offer the frame for transparency in the decision-making process in public administration. Some concerns related to how to deal with criticism on social media were formulated.	Q3. The growing number of SNS users is leading to a form of communication pressure, determining public institutions to adapt their communication process and to come up with new online strategies. Critical observations coming from citizens via online social networking channels are considered to be rather constructive and also a valuable source of information.

## 5. Conclusions

By using the content analysis of the online communication tools of the above mentioned institutions in 2011 and respectively in 2015, we pointed out the dynamic of this phenomenon in relevant fields of communication in public administration in the Center and North-West regions of Romania. Although on an early stage, compared to 2011 the online communication platforms of public administration from the analyzed institutions are increasingly developing. City halls are leaders in terms of the dynamic of the information flow and the diversity of the tools used. Websites belonging to public institutions from the largest cities and especially from city halls were more

complex in 2011 and are still so in 2015. The advantages of city halls are reflected both on a high level of resources invested in online communication and on more specialized employees. The fact that city mayors are directly elected by citizens can also be an additional factor in making public communication much more efficient and closer to the citizens. This is one of the relevant findings resulting from the in-depth interviews.

We can state that the online information flow in the public sector and especially the use of social network sites such as Facebook was visibly higher in 2015 in comparison to 2011, due to an increased number of users that made the Internet suitable for a large communication, and to the initiative of creative persons working in public administration, especially in the city halls of the large cities that we analyzed.

The content analysis allowed us to see how communication functions in public institutions and how the use of online tools did change over the last four years. The qualitative part of our research aimed to answer the question concerning why communication is nowadays functioning this way. The new context allows PR specialists a direct and specific approach of dialogue groups and their involvement in a real dialogue, without using the typical information selection mechanisms of the press, which helps motivate, maintain and strengthen links within their own organizations. This is an aspect of which the majority of the people we spoke with were much more aware in 2015 compared to 2011. Although PR experts that we interviewed started from the premise that the most active user group of new media is the younger generation, due to skills in using new technologies and openness to new features, this must not mean that the single target group should be the segment of users with an age under 30. Consequently, possible differences in the perspective of various online applications should be considered within age groups. For a successful use of PR tools in Web 2.0, the particularities of each online application should be known. This implies not only setting the exact goal of communication and examining the target group accessing possibilities, but also reflecting on how to address target groups and on the coverage offered by the media in question.

We are aware of the limits of our research. Thus, by including only some public institutions from only two development regions of Romania, even considering the criteria described in the methodological design, we cannot speak about a representative study for Romania. By using qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews we had the purpose to determine tendencies, development directions and trends, which can be used to design new studies in the field. Interviewing communication specialists reveals another problem: a higher tendency to give socially desirable answers. Also the fact that we focused only on the communication in Romanian language, not including communication in English or in languages of ethnic minorities is considered to be a limit of our research. Due to the constant development of communication technologies, professional communicators from the public sector will permanently have to adapt their communication tools, so that our research questions will keep being relevant also in the future.

The Internet implies for the PR activity not only opportunities, but also a number of risks. However there are a number of issues that concern ethics regarding virtual communication. Dynamics and lack of control over the communication mechanisms increase the responsibility of communicators and facilitate misleading attempts, which can cause serious image damage for the initiators, when the truth eventually comes to light.

## References:

1. EUROSTAT, [Online] available at [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/GDP\\_at\\_regional\\_level/ro](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/GDP_at_regional_level/ro), accessed on October 10, 2015.
2. FACEBRANDS, [Online] available at <http://www.facebrands.ro/map.html> accessed on December 10, 2015.
3. Internet Word Stats, [Online] available at <http://www.internetworldstats.com/europa.htm>, accessed on October 10, 2015.
4. Manafu, C., 'Social Media în România', [Online] available at <http://www.manafu.ro/2015/03/social-media-in-romania-martie-2015/>, accessed on March 30, 2015.
5. Medrega, C., 'PIB-ul pe locuitor în București-Ilfov este de patru ori mai mare decât în Moldova', [Online] available at <http://www.zf.ro/banci-si-asigurari/pib-ul-pe-locuitor-in-bucuresti-ilfov-este-de-patru-ori-mai-mare-decat-in-moldova-14140798>, accessed on October 10, 2015.
6. Neuberger, C., 'Über den Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit', in Picot, A. and Fischer, T.E. (eds.), *Weblogs professionell. Grundlagen, Konzepte und Praxis im unternehmerischen Umfeld*, Heidelberg: dpunkt, 2006, pp. 113-129.
7. Norris, P., *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
8. Röttinger, U. and Zielmann, S., 'Weblogs – unentbehrlich oder überschätzt für das Kommunikationsmanagement von Organisationen?', in Picot, A. and Fischer, T.E. (eds.), *Weblogs professionell. Grundlagen, Konzepte und Praxis im unternehmerischen Umfeld*, Heidelberg: dpunkt, 2006, pp. 31-50.
9. Ruisinger, D., *Online Relations. Leitfaden für moderne PR im Netz*, Stuttgart: Schäffer-Poeschel, 2007.
10. Zerfaß, A., 'Von der Einkanal-Kommunikation zum Dialog – wenn Empfänger zu Akteuren werden', in Ellerbeck, T. and Siebnhaar, K. (eds.), *Vernetzte Welt – Veränderung der Kommunikation durch Neue Medien und Mobilfunk*, Berlin: B&S Siebenhaar, 2007, pp. 31-48.