Online Communication of Public Institutions Before the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract:
This paper aims to analyze the online communication methods used by the Romanian Police before the crisis caused by the global pandemic COVID-19 (and the decree on imposing the state of emergency). Among the public institutions, the Romanian Police is one of the most active in its relationship with the public. The image of the Romanian agent has always fluctuated between police officer jokes and stories of street heroes, without ever being able to reach the size of a James Bond persona with the status of a civil servant. In the case of the adoption of communication with the outside world through Facebook by the Romanian police, the analysis showed that before the COVID-19 pandemic we could not speak of a fully professional communication strategy. At that time, there were, admittedly, some Facebook pages that correctly defined both their organizational identity and the external procedures for entering into dialogue with others. However, most of the Facebook pages considered in the analysis did not have a professionally constructed identity for the community to which they were addressed. On the other hand, from the perspective of the content strictly related to the activity of the Romanian police, our analysis highlighted the fact that most of the Facebook pages owned by the Romanian police were not able to communicate all types of information specific to their field of interest. From the perspective of our analysis, it is obvious that additional efforts are needed in the future to professionalize public communication for this state institution.

Keywords: *Public communication; social network sites; state institutions; communication strategies.*

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Introduction

Most of the "classical" approaches to the relationship between the police and the media started from Chibnall's thesis according to whom "people pay attention to media in order to learn about those areas of social life where their direct experience is limited" (Chibnall, 1975). From this point forward, the relationship between the police and the traditional media (radio, TV, newspapers, magazines) has often been shaped by conflicts, whether they were "real or imaginary" (Kelly, 1986).

In recent years, this relationship has been analyzed from different perspectives. Lovell (2003) claims that the US media presented the police officers either as heroes or as figures of fun, thus proving the permanent distrust of the police towards the media, which negatively influenced the communication of this organization with the public or with the society in general.

As far as the relationship between the police and new media is concerned, and particularly what is known as SNS ("Social Network Sites") or social media, we noticed that research is not particularly numerous at present, and almost completely lacking in some parts of the world, as is the case with Romania.

In this article, we are trying to identify the particularities of the social media use by the Romanian police – specifically Facebook – in order to communicate with citizens before the COVID-19 Pandemics.

Theoretical framework

The current development of SNS has made it possible to remove the difference between the producer and the consumer of the information, thus having the potential to increase the power of the interaction between the police departments (central or local) and the citizens (Svara & Denhardt, 2010; Heverin & Zach, 2010; Crump, 2011; Procter et al., 2013). The current trend, according to Wang and Doong (2010) is that most police departments from various countries use this type of communication in order to improve their capacity to disseminate information and attract citizens to their side (Heverin & Zach, 2010).

For several decades, media, criminology and sociology researchers have drawn attention to the various contributions of social media to legitimize the activity of a specific organization, namely the police departments (Lee & McGovern, 2014; O'Connor, 2015; Schneider, 2016a, 2016b).

In specialized literature (International Association of Chiefs of Police National Law Enforcement Policy Center, 2010; Police Executive Research Forum, 2012; Walsh & Conway, 2011) the current trend is to investigate how SNS can help police to actively interact with citizens and engage the community in an active dialog with the police officers.

Existing studies show that police departments in the United States, Canada, Europe and Australia have integrated SNS into their corporate communication platforms (Lee & McGovern, 2014; LexisNexis, 2012). Besides from using the social media in order to allow officers to disseminate important information and engage in a dialog with the citizens, these police departments also use SNS to communicate internally with their employees (Meijer & Thaens, 2013; Meijer & Torenvlied, 2016; O'Connor, 2015). According to Mawby (2002), the use of SNS by the police departments democratically legitimizes them, considering the fact that the emphasis is placed in this case on values such as: transparency, accountability, and trust, specific to a democratic society (Bullock, 2017).

A survey conducted in 2015 by the International Association of Chiefs of Police National Law Enforcement Policy Center on a sample of 553 US police departments shows that the vast majority of these departments (73.9%) did not use SNS, but intended to adopt this type of communication in the future (IACP, 2015). As for the social media, the North American police departments most frequently used SNS for investigations related to surveillance and crime prevention (88.7%). Moreover, according to the same data set, the most commonly used social networks were: Facebook (94.2%), Twitter (71.2%) and YouTube (40.0%) (IACP, 2015).

Based on the usage of SNS by the US police departments, Heverin and Zach (2011) conclude that their purpose was mainly to distribute information related to crimes and incidents and to disseminate information related to their work (of the departments), events, traffic and to prevent crime and violence.

At present, according to Brunty and Helenek (2013), some police departments use SNS for investigation purposes, and there are even handbooks that explore it (Brunty & Helenek, 2013). The New York Police Department created a unit dedicated to social media communication in order to gather relevant information from Facebook and Twitter (Parascanola, 2011). Another manner of gathering useful information from SNS by the police is the case discussed by Thompson (2009), in which a local US newspaper used social media to gather information about a crime case.

Crump (2011) studied the use of Twitter by the English police and showed that, until 2011, the English police had only used the service to disseminate various information and not to engage with the public. Following the London and the Manchester violence acts of 2011, the researches started to address the way in which police used Twitter during the time these events occurred (Panagiotopoulos et al., 2012; Denef et al., 2013; Procter et al., 2013).

In North America, Lieberman (2013) studied how the US police departments used Facebook and sought to identify the prospects for using the service. Meijer and Thaens (2013) showed that the police used communication strategies with other organizations and the public that are different from those previously identified by Mergel (2013) for the public sector: "simple push strategy", "push and pull strategy" and "a network strategy".

Brainard and McNutt (2010) analysed the relationships between the police departments and the citizens through SNS in the case of the Metropolitan Police Department of Washington D.C. The results of their study show that these relationships are more focused on providing information, are rather transactional, and the issues involving the collaboration between citizens and the police are almost completely missing (Brainard & McNutt, 2010).

Kabrud's 2015 survey shows that most of the Idaho police Facebook posts (47.02%) contained information related to public relations, with a particular emphasis on information related to the life of the community (43.17%) (Kabrud, 2015). The second type of important information used by the Idaho police was related to crime and violence acts (17.04%), followed by posts containing warnings (16.57%) (Kabrud, 2015). Based on this information, the author concludes that the Idaho police mainly used Facebook in order to communicate (daily, if necessary) with the public (Kabrud, 2015).

O'Connor (2015) focused on the online communication of the Canadian police and showed that SNS can help the police manage their image and interact with the citizens. In a different research, Perron (2016) reached to the conclusion that the

feedback between the police and the citizens (or the bidirectional communication) has led to an increase in the number of followers on social media.

In his turn, by analyzing the public relations from the police perspective, McIntee (2016) shows that when the police departments proactively used the online dialog with citizens, they benefited from many advantages, resulting in an increase of public's positive appreciation of police officers.

Schneider (2016a, 2016b) analyzed the way in which Twitter was used by the police to promote the organization's commitment to professionalism as a central value.

The study conducted by Sakiyama, Shaffer and Lieberman (2010) shows that the police uses Facebook for various purposes, from public warnings about violent attacks, to employees' recruitment (Sakiyama, Shaffer & Lieberman, 2010).

Other researchers only analyzed police's online interaction with the citizens, by focusing on counting the number of followers of the Twitter and Facebook accounts of the police department (Crump, 2011), trying to find out whether they posted online any information related to events that drew public's attention or solicited the involvement of the police, with a special focus on how the information was delivered (Procter et al., 2013) and whether or not users reposted the initial police posts on social media (van de Velde et al., 2015).

However, as Bullock points out (2017), police departments are skeptical about the ability of SNS to promote an effective and professional communication due to the risk of harming their reputation during the online interactions. Moreover, police officers often believe that social media are more effective when other organizations communicate with their public (Bullock, 2017).

Bain, Robinson and Conser (2014) believe that SNS can be seen as an important tool used by the police in order to initiate a conversation with the younger generation, considering the fact that young people are less interested in traditional media. The same authors point out that the police must attract a wide range of audiences, and therefore, it is essential for the focus to be placed on easily accessible and rapidly distributed information (Bain, Robinson & Conser, 2014).

According to Bain, Robinson and Conser (2014), social media is a quick and effective means to distribute information and receive feedback from the audience, i.e. the citizens. This feedback from the citizens helps establish effective police communication and sets the premises for the development of a relationship between them and the community (Bain, Robinson & Conser, 2014).

It is worth mentioning that the inclusion of social media in the organizational communication of the police departments (Goldsmith, 2015; LexisNexis, 2012; Schneider, 2016b) did not mean abandoning traditional communication, since the new forms of communication did not replace existing ones but worked alongside them, and sometimes merely supplemented the existing information on traditional communication platforms (Heverin & Zach, 2010; Seelye, 2011; Procter, Crump, Karstedt, Voss, & Cantijoch, 2013; Van de Velde, Meijer, & Homburg, 2015).

Methodology

The mini-research project presented in this article has an exploratory nature, as the purpose was to identify the main elements defining the communication strategy with the exterior (citizens and/or other organizations) by using a small sample of Facebook pages belonging to Romanian departments, agencies and police organizations.

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Based on the specialized literature (Geary 2016; Rodgers, 2016), we explored three areas of interest for our analysis:

1. The main elements of the communication identity: we were interested in identifying the main variables related to the communication strategy, such as: whether there is an introduction on the Facebook page stating its general purposes; whether or not there is a link to the website of the department, agency or organization and whether or not it is stated that the page is intended for a target audience, such as young people or potential candidates.

Table 1. The main elements of the external communication of the department/agency/police organization

Category	Description
General introduction	Introductory presentation on the Facebook page, stating its main purposes
The place in the communication strategy	Link to the department's website
Facebook page special attribute	Information regarding the target audience, such as young people and potential candidates

Source: Rodgers, 2016

2. The procedures related to the external communication: our interest was to see whether the page is managed by the sub-division dealing with spreading the information and the relationship with the citizens; whether the contact information of the department is clearly presented; if the page contains the following information: the page explicitly adheres to existing regulations and laws, opinions expressed by Facebook users do not reflect the views of the department, posts are moderated and that some comments can be deleted, posts are public and can be seen by anyone.

Table 2. Procedures related to the position in communication with citizens of the department/agency/ police organization

Category	Description/Subcategory
Administrator(s) identity is clearly stated	The page is managed by the sub-division that deals with information and the relationship with the citizens
Contact details	Department contact information is clearly stated
General regulations related to the content	The content explicitly adheres to existing regulations and laws
Position in communication with citizens	It is stated that opinions expressed by Facebook users do not reflect the views of the department
	It is stated that posts are moderated and that some comments can be deleted
	It is stated that the posts are public and can be seen by anyone

Source: Rodgers, 2016

3. The specific content of the communication with the exterior: we were interested in the following categories:
- Advice: we included posts containing advice on the safety of the citizens and on preventing crime and violence;
- Criminal offenses: Internet crime warnings; general criminal warnings; warnings related to criminal acts already registered with the police; pending cases; requests for additional or new information; posts showing arrests or successful police operations;
- Alerts: we included posts related to road traffic information;
- Traffic accidents produced by the alcohol consumption;
- Missing person's reports: posts related to missing persons or posts informing that a missing person was found;
- Public relations: posts related to the recruitment process; the mission of the department; information about a particular community; the overall strategy of the police department; the link to the last issue of the department newsletter;
- Messages related to the department's services: we focused on identifying the posts that mentioned phone lines open to citizens, references to other SNS of the department, reposts from the department's website.

Table 3. The specific content of the procedures related to the external communication of police departments

Advice	Safety advice	General reminders regarding the safety condition
Crime acts	Advice on preventing crime and violence acts	General advice on how to avoid situations in which an individual is the victim of a criminal act
	Internet crime warnings	Warnings about current specific risks of Internet crime
	General warnings about crime	Warnings about the specific risks of crime in general
	Warnings related to criminal acts already registered with the police	Presentation of criminal/ violence acts that are currently taking place or recently happened
	Cases in progress	What has been done in a criminal investigation or an existing case
	Request information	Asking for help from the public in order to identify or find a suspect or proof
	Arrest/successful operation	Announcements that the suspect has been arrested, located or extradited
Alerts	Traffic	Traffic issues or traffic issues affecting daily traffic
Car accidents due to alcohol consumption		Anything related to traffic accidents produced by the alcohol consumption, including safety advice and checkpoints.
Missing person's report	Missing person's report	News about a missing person
Public relations	The missing person is found	News about a missing person (victim) being found

	Recruitment	Any information related to employment or the competition for employment of potential candidates
Advice	Mission	Message highlighting the success of a department
	Community interest	Message to the community designed to incite pride for the police/department's activity or community
	Strategy	Messages showing a new perspective
	Safety related advice	General reminders regarding the safety condition
	Newsletter	Post containing a link to the latest number of the department's newsletter
Organization roles	General advice for people	Messages concerning what needs to be done in a particular situation
	Open telephone lines	Message promoting the open telephone
	Reference to other SNS	Mention of the SNS used by the department
	Presentation of posts from the department's website	Comment containing a link to the department's website or to posts from other SNS

Source: Geary 2016

The analyzed sub-sample consisted of five Facebook pages of police departments, agencies subordinated to the Romanian police, or organizations working for it. The analysis was carried out in November – December 2019. For reasons related to the GDPR law we will refer to these pages by using numbers and not the full name.

Data analysis

The configuration of the analyzed Facebook pages indicates that four of them have cover photos, with the exception of the second Facebook page. As for the profile photo, only the third Facebook page depicts an everyday image (a mug engraved with the message "Today is a good day to smile"), while the rest of the pages only feature the logo of the organization, department, or agency. Almost all of the Facebook pages analyzed are being updated regularly, aside from the second Facebook page, which had its last post in 2011. The remaining four pages released their last posts in November and December 2019. The number of likes (subscribed users) ranged from 536 for the second Facebook page to 13.371 for the fifth.

Table 4. Number of users who liked the page (subscribed users)

Facebook page code	Number of users
Facebook page 1	662
Facebook page 2	536
Facebook page 3	4.127
Facebook page 4	9.043
Facebook page 5	13.371

From the perspective of the main elements of the communicative identity for the Facebook pages included in the sample we can see that all pages feature a "General Introduction" but none of them specify whether this is addressed to a target group or the community in general. All analyzed pages display a link to the website of the organization, department or association they represent, this being an element that specifies their place in the general communication strategy (see Table 5).

Table 5. The main elements of the communication identity of the departments, agencies and/or organizations included in the analysis

Category	Description/ subcategory	Facebook page 1	Facebook page 2	Facebook page 3	Facebook page 4	Facebook page 5
General introduction	Introduction specifying the general purposes of the page	X	X	X	X	X
Place in the communication strategy	Link to the organization, department, association website		X	X	X	X
Facebook page special attribute	It is stated that the page is intended for a target audience (such as young people or potential candidates)				X	

„X" represents total compliance with a considered indicator

Regarding the external communication procedures, our analysis can highlight the fact that the inclusion of contact data is an indicator used on all Facebook pages included in the analysis. However, the usage of this indicator varies. Thus, the contact details are indirect for the Facebook pages 1, 2 and 3 (via the link to the organization or department website). Only for Facebook pages 4 and 5 we could see the existence of complete contact details: address, phone number and location map on Google Maps. Only Facebook page 4 specified the page administrators or editors. Moreover, it is the only page from our sample where the official position, as well as general regulations regarding the content, were presented. The rest of the analyzed Facebook pages included no such elements of external communication (see Table 6).

Table 6 - External communication procedures for departments, agencies and/or organizations included in the analysis

Category	Description/ subcategory	Facebook page 1	Facebook page 2	Facebook page 3	Facebook page 4	Facebook page 5
Administrator(s) identity is clearly stated	The page is managed by the sub-division that deals with information and the relationship with the citizens				X	
Contact details	Department contact information is clearly stated	Y	Y	Y	X	X
General content regulations	The content explicitly adheres to existing regulations and laws				X	
Position in communication with citizens	It is stated that opinions expressed by Facebook users do not reflect the views of the department				X	
	It is stated that posts are moderated and that some comments can be deleted				X	
	It is stated that the posts are public and can be seen by anyone				X	

„X" represents total compliance with a considered indicator
„Y" represents partial compliance with a considered indicator

The specific analysis of the external communication revealed the existence of significant differences between the Facebook pages included in the sample. On a general level, we found that none of the pages provided information on two of items included in the analysis: what to do in case a missing person is found and which telephone lines are permanently open to citizens (see Table 7).

Table 7 - Specific content of external communication for the departments, agency and/or organizations included in the analysis

	Facebook page 1	Facebook page 2	Facebook page 3	Facebook page 4	Facebook page 5
Safety advice	X	X	X	X	X
Advice on preventing crime and violence	X	X	X	X	X
Internet crime warnings	X	X	X	X	
General warnings about crime	X	X	X	X	X
Warnings related to criminal acts already registered with the police			X		
Cases in progress			X		
Request information			X		
Arrest/successful operation			X		
Traffic			X		
Car accidents due to alcohol consumption	X				
Missing persons	X		X		
A missing person is found					
Recruitment					X
Mission			X	X	X
Community interest	X	X	X	X	X
Strategy			X	X	X
Newsletter					
General advice	X	X	X	X	X
Open telephone lines					
Social media links		X		X	X
Organization roles		X	X	X	X

„X" represents total compliance with a considered indicator

At the same general level of analysis, we could find that Facebook page 3 contains most of the information subsumed to the indicators considered important for the external communication of the police by the specialized literature. At the same time, Facebook page 2 satisfied the lowest number of indicators out of the considered total. All Facebook pages included in the sample had posts featuring safety tips, advice on preventing crime and violence, general warnings about crime, information showing the organization's interest in the community, and general guidance.

Regarding the differences between the Facebook pages analyzed according to the publicly disseminated information, we could see that only Facebook pages 1 and 3 posted information regarding traffic, car accidents due to alcohol consumption and missing persons.

For the indicators subsumed to the "Public Relations" category, we found that four of the analyzed Facebook pages (numbers 2, 3, 4, and 5) redistributed information taken from the web page of the department or organization they presented and three of

them (numbers 2, 4, and 5) have posts that (directly or indirectly) refer to other social media (especially YouTube).

In the case of items subsumed to the category "Messages related to departmental services", we found that only Facebook page 5 publicly shared some information related to staff recruitment. At the same time, Facebook pages 1 and 2 did not provide any information on the overall communication strategy of the organization, department or agency presented (see Table 7 above).

Conclusions

According to the literature (Mitchell, Wolak, Finkelhor & Jones, 2012), the police has the same success in using SNS in its practical activity as if it used Web 1.0 (chat-rooms, discussion sites). The strategic use of media (traditional and SNS) to legitimize police activity (Tyler, 2003) has become an organizational value in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Europe, and police departments now typically hire public relations specialists to help promote their organization (Lee & McGovern, 2013). Led according to their own norms and managed by specialists, many police communication departments are currently professional and hire civilians only (Mawby, 2002; Surette, 2001).

According to Meijer and Thaens (2013), police departments believe that better relations between citizens and the police can be achieved through "more authentic external communication of police officers" (Meijer & Thaens, 2013) and online platforms or social media make such communication possible. As Lee and McGovern (2011, 2014) point out, the widespread use by departments of corporate communication strategies and techniques (including SNSs) has led to the situation where "the image of the police and its practical actions are currently inseparable" (Lee & McGovern, 2011, p. 104). In other words, representing and promoting the image of a professional, accountable and transparent police helps to legitimize this organization and facilitates its practical actions (Lee & McGovern, 2013). These strategies involve an "image restoration" in which the communication actions of a police department are subsumed to the objective of transmitting an image of authority and legitimacy to the audience (Bullock, 2017; Chermak, 1995; Ericson, 1982; Manning, 1997; Mawby, 2002).

The mini-research project we carried out identified a series of particularities of the online communication strategies used by Romanian police departments, organizations and agencies via Facebook. Thus, most of the analyzed Facebook pages only partially satisfied the set of indicators related to external communication (with the community or outside departments, agencies or organizations). Only in the case of Facebook page 4 this communication with outside entities was conducted professionally (according to existing standards in other countries). Furthermore, from the perspective of the procedures used for this type of communication (external), the only page included in the sample that met these indicators was Facebook page 4. Regarding the analysis of the specific external communication content, our analysis indicated that Facebook page 3 complied to a large extent with the indicators considered important by police departments in the USA, Canada and Europe.

In the case of the adoption by the Romanian police of external communication through Facebook, we can state that before the COVID-19 pandemic we could not yet speak of a fully professional communication strategy. There were, admittedly, some Facebook pages that correctly defined both their organizational identity and the external communication procedures, but they were, in fact, similar to those of some international

agencies (such as Facebook page 4). Most of the Facebook pages considered in our analysis have not yet had a professionally constructed identity for their community. On the other hand, strictly from the perspective of the content related to the activity of the Romanian police, our analysis highlighted the fact that only one Facebook page included in the sample (Facebook page 3) communicated almost all types of information specific to the field of interest (police).

A further development of this mini-research project could include both increasing the size of the analyzed sample and performing data analysis through an examination grid appropriate for the communication features identified by this research project. Also a necessary development at the moment is the inclusion of the temporal dimension in the analysis by comparing the type of communication of these institutions with their public before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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