

## Interface between the Public and the Press\*

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### **Abstract:**

This article presents the importance of spokesperson as an interface between the institution/ organization and the public, through the press. The article includes the attributes of the press bureau and its role in the economy of the organization it is incorporated in as well as the tactics that any spokesperson must master in order to have an efficient activity in his/her relation with the press and the public.

**Keywords:** press, spokesperson, public, PR

After 1990, a new profession was gaining field: the spokesman of the institution in its relations to the press. An interface between the public and the press. We will limit the public relations domain, referring only to the spokesperson's institution. Who is he, and what is his role? What difficulties is he confronted with? The applied, practical part of the project is a discussion with a former journalist, who chose to put her skills in use within spokesperson's institution. I chose a public institution that interacts often with journalists, the Police of Arad. Our interlocutor comes herself from the field of written press, being a former journalist. Thus, an advantage for the institution which she represents, because she manages to make herself better understood, guessing what her brethrens, the written press and audio-visual journalists want. We made an interview with Camelia Tuduce Berar, the current spokesperson of Arad Police Department. The journalist offers her perspective regarding this domain, revealing a few of the adventures of her profession.

The spokesperson is the individual who organizes press conferences, who draws up and conveys official statements, refutations or rectifications. Usually, the spokesperson knows very well the professional norms of journalists, their editing strictness, and their tactics. That is why, a professional spokesperson conveys important information for the public, hence for the press, consistent and most

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importantly, accurate. The spokespersons' manuals demand them to moderate the relation between the institutions which they represent, to be communicative, consequently, to have communication abilities. It is no surprise that, therefore, most spokespersons are journalists or have communication studies. Because they worked in the press, they know the basic rules of the guide for which they edit informative materials or convene press conferences. It is actually adequate that the organization has such communicative employees, who, coming from the press, know the tricks of their fellow journalists, guess what they desire and answer them accordingly.

### **Who Is S/He?**

The spokesperson is actually the individual who carries out his activity within the press bureau of the organization, which he represents. It is often said that the spokesperson bares on his shoulders the image of the institution, which he represents. He bares the hardship of communication, especially if the institution, which he represents, is going through an image crisis, or if the leader of the organization is not such a good public speaker, is a shy one, even if he is a very good professional.

We will see in the following, which are the attributes of the press bureau, and what is its role in the economy of the organization that incorporates it.

According to the theoretician *Jacques Deschepper*, in *Savoir communiquer avec les journalistes de la presse, de la radio et de la television – guide pratique*, Paris, Editions Eyrolles, 1990, on page 9, it is shown that the press bureau of the organization establishes and maintains a good relationship with the press, to the benefit of the organization which it represents. The press bureau, the French theoretician writes, – broadcasts the image of the institution among its audience. Another attribute of the press bureau is that of creating a climate of understanding and collaboration between the institution and the press.

The press bureau is the department that also satisfies the need for information of the audience and press. The press bureau, the analyst continues his enumeration, informs the organization on what the press states, in regard to its activities or aspects which can be of interest to or influence the organization.

Therefore, the press bureau tasks could be: the accurate research and evaluation of the need of informing the audience/press; the proposal of activity programs with the press; putting together the press magazine; the permanent updating of the complete data basis regarding the life and

activity of the organization; the elaboration of the press files, knowing the journalists that are going to deal with the events from the organization; knowing the structure of the editorial staff and the target audiences specific for each publication or audio-visual station.

Phillipe Bachmann, in *Communiquer avec la presse écrite et audiovisuelle*, Paris, Centre de Formation et de Perfectionnement des Journalistes, 1994, on page 84, tells us what not to do as a press bureau: As a press bureau, do not assault the press with official statements, without pause and discernment; Do not protest when your official statements are not published. Although, as already mentioned, many spokespersons come from the press, once they find themselves in the press bureau, they forget that the publishing space of newspapers is a limited one, that the lengthy texts edited in the organization's bureau cannot fit entirely in the newspaper page; Do not ask the journalists the article so that you may make changes before publishing it. Journalists must not be looked down upon, seen as puppets, stupid and incapable of discerning the important information from the less important one; Do not ask for the questions of an interview to be handed down to you in writing, a long time in advance, and do not answer until only after a week of profound thinking. Put yourselves in the position you once occupied, namely the journalist's, say the media analysts, and then you will understand how it is when you receive in the last minute the necessary informative materials; Do not organize a press conference each month and do not invite only journalists, which you like. You risk, in this way, to harass the journalists, which wait for news and not supposed events. The persistence in delivering false events, in the same news, repeatedly, leads to journalists refusing to participate in a new event organized by the press bureau. The most often claimed reason by them? "We aren't going, just to hear again the same novelties like a week ago!"; Do not systematically repeat the history of the organization at the beginning of each press conference or press dossier. These enumerations bore. However, it is recommended that the press dossier contain a brief history of the organization especially if the institution is celebrating an even number from its founding. At an anniversary it is even recommended to draw up flyers with the organization, which should include its history, the most important moments in the evolution of the organization, photographs with its headquarter/headquarters or management etc.; Do not adopt a highly technical manner of speaking; Do not convince your superiors that the press is hostile towards the organization or incompetent; Do not use the right to a replica, constantly, as a method of criticizing the press. A tense relationship with

the press does no good to the organization; Do not ignore going through the written press, radio or local and national television stations.

### **Tactics for Spokesmen**

Jan Bolema, former CEO in charge of communication and internal business at Haga City Hall, Holland, recommends the spokespersons to keep in mind a few key words: **hospitality, opening, honesty, and understanding**. An ideal spokesperson should have: availability for dialog, impartiality in his relations with the journalists, promptitude and initiative, the capacity to mediate the relations between the officials and the journalists, responsibility, the capacity to elaborate a concise, intelligible and appealing text, knowledge about the local/central mass-media, charisma, patience, the capacity to organize and lead the PR team.

The spokesperson must know how to anticipate precisely what journalists want to find out, so that he has all the information and is not caught in the crossfire of puzzling questions. He must know the previous concerns of the journalists, their thematic area, the type of articles they write, their tactics, their attitude towards the organization. The spokesperson must know the specifics of the journalistic types and formats so he may cope with the journalist's requests. The spokesperson must speak from a public interest point of view and not exclusively from that of the company's preoccupations and interests. He must not be passive: a question can be stirred up, a topic can be suggested. The spokesperson must not be defensive: the questions are an opportunity to present the organization, not to deny or confirm an opinion of the journalist. He must have the ability to place the most important information or statements at the beginning of his message and end the discussion with the journalists on a positive note. The spokesperson must give straight answers, without exaggerations, without aggression or haste. The spokesperson must not answer the questions, to which he does not have a clear answer, but must take up the task of quickly finding the information and put them at the journalist's disposal. It is not recommended that the spokesperson uses a formula like NO COMMENT, but to honestly explain why he cannot answer a certain question. No comment is a comment! The spokesperson must not be aggressive, must keep his calm and must not argue with the journalists, even when their questions seem aggressive. The spokesperson must avoid expressing personal opinions, and when he does, to underline this fact, so that he does not risk being quoted by the journalists as expressing a public opinion. Because when you work with the mass media, "any mistake that you make can become public in any moment".

(Carole Howard, Wilma Mathews, *On Deadline – Managing Media Relations*, Waveland Press Inc., 1985, p.71)

**The Journalist and the Spokesperson, Both Deal with News**

Two sides which resemble each other, in the respect that both deal with NEWS. They use the same methods, the same jargon. Both travel in the same circles and have the same wish, their creed to confirm themselves. Both have the same position concerning the persons from which they receive their information. Then, as a mode of organization, when things get urgent, a communication department of an institution functions as a newspaper. Let us not forget that journalists wish the acquiring of news as quickly as possible, press bombs, a big racket. The spokesperson also wants to make his news public as quickly as possible, but he will always try to optimize the impact of the message, wishing that the story published in the media is resealed in the most favorable light.

We have pointed out so far that the spokesperson of the organization or the leader of the institution in the relations with the press is a very important person for the institution, which he represents. The way in which he comes out to the press, presenting the institution, leads to the image the public perceives the institution through the press. However, why is a spokesperson necessary, in the end? Here are just a few answers in favor of the spokesperson and the institution he represents: The leader of the institution has a busy schedule and cannot always be at the disposal of the press. Then our person comes in, the spokesperson!; The leader of the institution may not necessarily have communicating skills; In certain situations, hazy ones, the spokesperson may state that he does not know the management's point of view, that the subject is still a matter of debate, offering a necessary time out for the completeness of the official statement. A stalling if you will, in favor of the institution!

The spokesperson becomes an important actor in the press bureau's structure, being the journalists' main source of information, at the same time, the accessible and concrete image of the organization. He takes the organization leader's place in front of the mass media, gaining a unique autonomy and responsibility, because he represents the institution at any time and he expresses, through his statements, the official attitude of the organization in regard to general or specific issues, requested by the journalists

The spokesperson directly subordinates himself to the leader of the institution and to the manager of the press bureau. Some studies have shown that women gain the confidence of the journalists easier, and are

better in this role, especially in the governmental institutions. Selection criteria: authority, credibility, personal charm. (See: Watson S. Dunn, *Public Relations – A Contemporary Approach*, Richard D. Irwin Inc.1986, p. 374)

The relationship between the journalist and the spokesperson has always been a tense one. Indisputably, they need one another to work, because a journalist without sources is deprived of topics worthy to be published. A spokesperson without the press, without the mass media is deprived of his main stream of conveying information. Then, each of these poles, the journalist and the spokesperson, proud, believe that the other is not up to it: the journalist sees the spokesperson as a manipulator of the information he holds, and the spokesperson imputes the journalist of lacking seriousness and rigor. In reality, the two professions confront daily. The analysts that write about the PR profession notice the fact that the interests of the journalists and the spokespersons from PR are antagonistic and complementary at the same time. A mixture of cooperation and conflict. They explain this state between the two professions through the nature of both their interest – journalist and spokesperson. The first works for the general (public) interest, and the latter protects the private interest of the institution, which he represents.

The ones from public relations have an advantage over the journalists. They can mold their message according to the media support, written press, TV or radio. It is known that, for instance, on TV the journalist has less time and space available to analyze the problems than the one from the written press. That is why the media analysts affirm that a good PR employee will know which media channel he should address his message to, which, thus, must be differently edited for the written press, radio or TV, including, for the written press, more details, which fade in the radio, for example.

Referring to the tense relationships between spokespersons-journalists, the Frenchman Gaston L'Heureux points out the fact that both of them end up by mutually bearing each other: Our relationships resemble those of an old couple that ends up living together. The flaws grow simultaneously with the wisdom. The disputes persist, the quarrels doing more or less damage, depending on the situation and the arguments. Are we already victims of routine? Too old to divorce and too helpless to find other solutions, we are condemned to bear each other.

**The spokesperson for Arad's Police is always energetic. Dialog with Camelia Tuduce Berar**



**– Please, explain to me a bit, how a day from a spokesperson life unfolds. What does he do since morning till 16 hours when his program ends? How many official statements a day does he send to the press?**

– My program starts before 8 in the morning, when, while I drink my coffee, I read the local press. I do the local and central press magazine practically. We must be informed about everything that appears in the mass-media in connection to our activity, the activity of the Police of Arad. Then I will document myself about the events, which took place in the last 24 hours, the documenting regards special cases and, subsequently, the editing of official statements. According to the number and complexity of the events, I try to edit each event as a piece of news. Thus, the classic event bulletin turns itself into more information. If I had to put my signature at the end of editing all these pieces of information, in any newspaper, and I could do it with my head held up high, it means that everything is very good; it is ok. Returning to your question, obviously that this activity goes on with its inherent interruptions, when, starting with 9 o'clock, the journalists start making documentary phone calls.

**– What do journalists usually ask you?**

– Well, they inform themselves about the events which took place or wish to be supported in documenting their own subjects. Most of the times, some come straight to the Police press bureau relations. Then follow the granting of synchrony for the radio and TV stations, statements for the written press etc. Anyway, in essence, no day is like the other, they are not alike. Each day is a new challenge; I couldn't say that I come to work one morning thinking that it will be an easier day.

We're always busy. And I never know if my program ends at 16 hours. If there are events in the afternoon or during the night, I'm on duty.

– **Were there any cases which marked you as a person, as a woman if you will. Crimes, frauds, thefts which emotionally moved you? Give me a few examples in this way.**

– I generally got used to all sorts of cases. I am still marked by cases in which children are involved, events in which children are victims, traffic accidents or worse...

– **You work in the police, you are a tough person, and how do you see yourself, now, at a mini-survey? Doesn't the femininity dissolve in a place like this?**

– Even if I work in the police, I don't think that the ones working here could be characterized as being rough. As far as I'm concerned, it's more likely the case of femininity and such an attitude. I like what I do and try to do everything as professionally as possible. Femininity is something native, a characteristic which I think the woman never loses, regardless of her working place. It's just that it shows more in some persons. Or less. I don't know if it's good or bad.

– **Which was the crisis that the police went through and took most of your time and energy?**

– The image of the institution I represent is eventually the final purpose of the activities I do daily. Of course, there were some delicate times from this point of view. We overcame them and labeled them under the chapter experiences from which we had to learn.

– **Do you pass on to the press the cases with corrupt colleagues of yours, felons? Don't you feel a slight regret?**

– It is obvious! Policemen are humans too. It is normal that the human impulse in such situations, to be the first, but we must distinguish between what the profession means, applying the law and the sentimental side of things. We cannot ask citizens to abide the law, and not do it ourselves. On the other hand, even worse, break it. As you've noticed, we make public all the cases in which policemen are involved. Today's police management is a pro transparency one. I don't think that anyone from the police inspectorate enjoys making public these aspects, but we all know that lying doesn't get you far. The people will find out about these events from other channels, maybe distorted, and will penalize us if we hide them. On the other hand, we must demonstrate that such cases are rare in the Police Department of Arad, and are not characteristic to the majority of the police force. It's a shame to label all policemen as corrupt... I think that because of this reason as well, the credibility percentage of the population in the police has increased lately.



– **Are you satisfied with the image of Arad's Police as it is reflected in the mass-media? What would you like to set right in the future?**

– I'm part of this category of people who are never satisfied. Although, as I've told you, I try to do my job as I know best. There's always room for better. As far as the image of the Police Department of Arad in the press, generally speaking, it is portrayed objectively and I thank the journalists who have chosen to show our activity in an equidistant way.

– **And still, for the future...**

– For the future, maybe there should be more stability concerning the fluctuation of accredited journalists around the police institution. Regardless if we are talking about the police, hospitals or public administration, I think that in order to benefit from more information characteristic to these domains, reporters should be kept on these fields for a longer time. Thus, they would be able to perceive much better the activity within these areas of institutions, and, obviously, will gain a plus of experience and more professionalism.

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