

# Educational leadership in a changing media space. Social Media Policy as an element of an educational institution's activity management.

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## **Abstract**

Traditional media space understood as institutional media (press, radio, television), through a controlled distribution of messages, on the one hand was an obstacle for educational institution, and on the other hand was a guarantor of content concerning the school appearing in the environment. With the development of internet technologies the method of the distribution of content has also changed the existing recipients of content can also become its broadcasters, and the institution itself can create its *own media*.

In such conditions an educational leader should possess awareness and competencies in the management of school's communication in order to effectively protect its image and reputation. These competencies should con-

stitute a preventive function of crisis management. The rules and regulations of an institution formalized in the form of statutes (*Social Media Policy*) could be helpful in this, and therefore the ability to construct guidelines and rules setting desirable and unacceptable behaviours within an educational institution in the area of new media, especially *social media* becomes an important element.

**Keywords:** educational leadership, media world, social media

## **Introduction**

Traditional media space understood as institutional media (press, radio, television), through a controlled distribution of communicates, on the one hand was an obstacle for an educational in-

stitution, and on the other hand was a guarantor of content concerning the school appearing in the environment.

With the development of internet technologies the method of distribution of content has also changed—the possibility for the existing recipients of content to become its broadcasters has appeared, and the institution itself can develop its *own media*, retaining independence from institutional media.

This situation can be a source of potential crises, because each member of the institution's internal environment (teachers, non-teaching workers, students, parents of students, etc.) as well as external (public institutions, media, private individuals, etc.) may become an agent distributing contents about its activities.

An educational leader should be aware how to manage an institution in order to minimize the risk of a crisis, and if such a thing occurs, have competencies in the field of its management. Hence also the ability to construct guidelines and rules setting desirable and unacceptable behaviours within an educational institution in the new media, especially *social media*, becomes an important element. Such rules, often formalized in the form of regulations (*Social Media Policy*) are within the range of preventive actions for managing the communication of educational institution.

### *Informational and educational actions of institutions and the distribution of content in media*

It would be a truism to say that a modern school should communicate with its environment. On the one hand, this issue seems to be indisputable because such are the expectations of its environment. Students, parents, teaching staff and non-teaching workers as the internal environment of the institutio, but also entities from its external environment: superior institutions, local governments, media, society, graduates or potential candidates often want to obtain information on the scope of its activities. Thus, there is a need for information, and educational institution should try to fill this gap. On the other hand, there are formal requirements obliging schools and institutions to conduct informational activities. The Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 7 October 2009 on pedagogical supervision should be noted here (Journal of Laws No. 168, item 1324), as it mentions tasks that include: the concept of a school or institution to be known and accepted by students and parents (since it should be known and accepted, the process of communication, transfer of information and possible explanation of actions must occur earlier); a school or institution to be positively perceived in the environment and the value of education to be promoted. In the aforementioned Regulation the analysis

of the attractiveness of the offer of the institution and implementation of changes on its basis was also indicated. Also the environment of an educational institution is recorded by taking into account possibilities and needs of the environment.

It follows from the above that both the demands of an educational institution's environment, as well as formal and legal requirements, may be a reason for communication. Depending on the competencies and awareness of the headmaster-leader-educational leader concerning the risks associated with the communications of members of an educational institution, the risk of a potential crisis situation may vary.

#### *Management of communication processes.*

Organizations operating in the market implement management of processes of communication with the environment through public relations activities. According to the definition formulated by Scott M. Cutlip, Allen H. Center and Glen M. Broom: "Public relations is the management function that establishes and sustains mutual beneficial relationships between the organization and its environment, on which depends its success or failure." (Cutlip, Center, Broom, 2000). One of the leading figures of the Polish PR, Krystyna Wojcik, points out that PR is a management function with a continuous and planned nature thanks to which the organization acquires and sustains the understanding, sympathy

and support of those in whom it is interested now, or may be interested in the future - by testing their opinions about the organization, in order to maximally adapt its goals and business to them, to achieve - through planned, wide dissemination of information - better cooperation with the community, and better achievement of its objectives (Wójcik, 2015).

This approach to the communication with the environment, assuming care for dialogue with respect for the ethics of communication, should be one of the strategic activities of an institution, included in the framework of its operation. Then it would have the chance to be an effective action that allows the determination of objectives in accordance with the vision and mission of an educational institution, through the construction of a strategy, as well as identification of tactics and implementation programs (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2013).

One of the important components of the aforementioned communication strategy will be to determine the environment of an educational institution that seems to be particularly important for the effective achievement of goals. The figure below (fig. 1) shows a simplified typology of an institution's environment and assumes the existence of two groups: internal environment, understood as direct members of the organization (students, parents, teachers, management, and others) and external environment understood as entities that currently are not direct members of the organization, but have a

relationship with the institution now, in the past or in the future (candidates for students, graduates, media and others).

There are many typologies of an institution’s environment (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2015), but from the point of view of the subject matter under discussion - managing the communication of the institution in a changing media space - it is worth mentioning the typology aimed at communication with the environment in crisis situations. It presumes the relationship of an institution with three groups in the environment, namely (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska,2015),:

1. Priority - groups from the organization’s environment, which should be strictly taken into account in crisis communication, as they are directly involved in the crisis (e.g. a crisis situation such as students injured in a school bus accident; the priority environment certainly in-

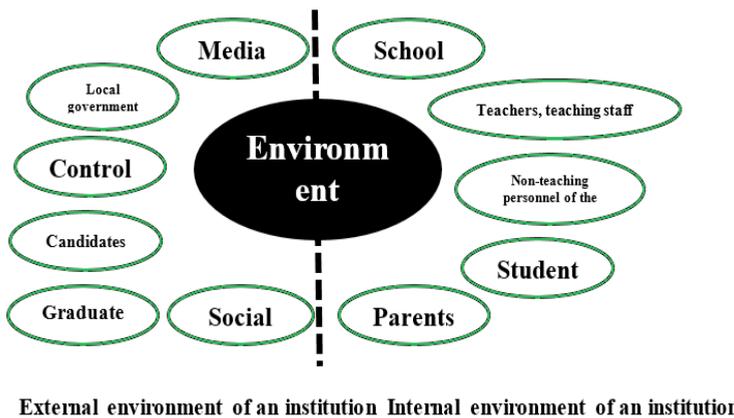
cludes students, their parents and carers).

2. Important - groups from the organization’s environment which in the case of having sufficient resources (staff, time and financial) should be included in scenarios of crisis situations (referring to the aforementioned crisis they may be groups of potential candidates to the educational institution).

3. Possible to omit - groups from the organization’s environment the lack of which in crisis situation scenarios should not lead to negative consequences (an example could include social groups associated with the pro-health movement).

Familiarity with environment groups is a particularly important aspect of an institution’s strategy of communication because incorrect definition of groups with which communication should be maintained can lead to weakness or lack of effectiveness in reaching and under-

**Figure 1.** Environment of an educational institution in view of the subject of communication.



Source: own elaboration

standing the message.

*The consequences of changes in media space in the context of content distribution and potential risks of crisis situations.*

Together with their use in the activities of organizations of various types, the internet and its services also appeared in the sphere of communication. Initially in the mid-1990s, and from today's perspective, these forms were very limited in terms of interaction, as well as active participation of recipients. This was related both to technical limitations and the costs of using the Web, as well as a lack of preparation of Internet users for maintaining active communication through the creation and distribution of their own content.

Less than a decade later the internet social space was completely different: improved technical and computing competencies of users, greater availability of easy-to-use applications, lower costs of using the internet, but above all much greater awareness of users and their activity in the processes of creating own content, and distribution of the content of other network users, both institutional and individual. Conditions for carrying out activities related to the communication of organizations (in the paradigm of public relations, as well as for formal and legal reasons), including educational institutions, had earlier often been pointed out but due to the awareness, competencies and capabilities of the internet's infrastructure, in reality, they could not

be created until after 2000. F.P. Seitel, in relation to the activities of commercial organizations, indicated three main reasons, namely: the need for information experienced by consumers, action in real time and the need for individualized messages (Seitel, 2000). It quickly turned out that the information needs of customers in relation to organizations offering commercial goods are similar or even identical to those of customers of other types of organizations, which probably contributed to the use of practices familiar in the commercial property market in relation to the educational services market.

The change caused by supplementing the traditional media trinity (press, radio, television) with internet space on the one hand led to an expansion of communication opportunities of organizations but also to a greater risk of potential crisis situations. These two reasons—greater opportunities for the distribution of an institution's content supporting its PR activities and promotion of education, and a higher risk of crisis—should serve as an occasion to supplement the competencies of an educational leader.

Paul Miller pointed to changes in the area of the internet as a medium, and expressed his thoughts in the following manner: "*Web 1.0* led people to information, *Web 2.0* led information to people." (Rahiman, 2010). An educational leader should be aware of the fact that this leading of information to people, and then distribution of content in a completely arbitrary manner (without any control

on the part of the institution) and without an organization's (educational institution's) influence on its form, manner, time and context, may cause threats.

Changes in media space result primarily from changes in the role of existing recipients of media. Those people who until now were only recipients (and if they were also broadcasters of messages or their creators, then it was to a very limited extent) were given the opportunity to create and distribute their own content, as well as content obtained from other internet users or entities on the internet. In practice, in many cases this may mean that on the internet there are entities which have the nature of an old medium, such as editorial offices. Unfortunately, the threat may be the fact that while editorial offices respect the rules of applicable law or professional industry codes, internet sources can act on self-appointed terms within the law, and sometimes act outside of it.

The diagram above (fig. 2) presents a simplified method for the distribution of messages in media space. Two entities - institutional media and educational institution (organization) - in addition to traditional forms of content distribution to their environment also have communication channels on the internet. There is public opinion, which in all kinds of ways, and often dependent only on its decisions, can become a source of distributed content. Finally, there is the opinion leader, who has also appeared in offline communication processes (e.g. as an expert in a TV programme or in the press),

but in today's media system he may be an entity with a significantly different role and functions. While in the space of offline media the opinion leader was mostly an entity with a recognized professional role, in online space he may be an entity with any professional position but with significant impact on the environment around the internet instruments used by him (e.g. around a blog or account on social network). Media space defined in this way is characterised by the possibility of high activity of all entities but from the point of view of the discussed subject matter - public opinion, opinion leader and educational institution. Through the use of online tools they can become a source of information independent from traditional journalistic channels. This can lead to considerable facilitation of the transfer of content to the facility's environment, which is particularly important when this content seems unattractive to editorial offices. However, it may be a cause of an organization's problems because functioning within social media requires specific competences, and perhaps also regulations within the institution.

*Possibilities of regulations associated with the distribution of content of an institution's environment*

Observing the communication of educational institutions, there is a clear tendency to take example from entities of the market environment. Although in the case of educational institutions we should

not talk about the product in a commercial sense but about values and promotion of education, instruments and methods of implementation can be identical. Taking on the practices of a commercial market is probably related to the realities of the educational services market—increasingly fierce competition between entities, demographic decline and the search for savings through elimination of institutions.

Certainly there are three areas that could be a challenge for an educational leader, namely:

1. The impact of content distributed by an educational institution (from the managerial level) on its image and reputation.
2. Activities of the society of an educational institution in the field of media having an impact on its image and reputation.
3. Activities of the environment of an educational institution in the space of media having an impact, negative or positive, on the way it is perceived.

While in the traditional media (newspapers, radio, television) the above-indicated problems could exist marginally, in the space of social media they can be a source of crisis situations. Therefore, relations with the media, including activities in social media, should be recognized as part of the strategy of an institution's activities with preventive and regulatory measures.

Regulations and principles that engage expected and undesirable actions in the relations of an institution with its internal and external environment may include com-

ponents (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2013):

1. Relating to the relationship with the external environment:

a. provisions determining *principles of moderation*, or lack thereof, of user activity (e.g. posting comments after prior moderation by an administrator representing the educational institution).

b. rules that raise the issue of *users anonymity* (experience shows that some institutions choose to leave considerable freedom to users and the right to be anonymous, appearance is apparent in reality, since the user can be identified through IP); some institutions require logging in preceded by registration or using a social network account due to the possibility of so-called *self-disclosure* (Valkenburg, Peter, 200 ) and *disinhibition* ( Joinson,2001),

c. information related to *legal regulations* (e.g. issues of defamation, insult, or any violation related to the goods of another entity or the institution itself; the issue of minimum age for users in the processes of communication),

d. rules determining *user culture* (the culture of criticism relating to the subject of discussion, the adoption of

e. principles of substantive criticism, exclusion of any form of electronic aggression ( Pyżalski,, 2012), and thus:

f. information on *desirable and exclusive content*

g. determination of the *consequences of non-compliance with the rules* presented by the institution (e.g. blocking users, and in extreme situations taking legal action).

2. Relating to the relations with the internal environment, the execution of which - from the point of view of an educational institution - is facilitated because the organization's members (students, teachers, etc.) remain in a relationship with the institution which is specified by law. These components can be specified as:

a. *behaviour towards the organization* (e.g. an appropriate method of criticism, involvement or lack of involvement in discussions about the institution),

b. *behaviour towards colleagues and other members of the institution* (e.g. students) especially relating to the method of commenting on their behaviour and actions (e.g. acceptable forms of criticism of a student by a teacher and vice versa),

c. *behaviour towards competitors*. It is worth remembering that—in the case of criticism of actions—we should remember to maintain the form of referring to facts and avoid comments in a situation where it is not possible to confirm the heard opinions. A special case is the critique of competitive institutions struggling with a crisis situation, where a crisis situation may be transferred to the industry, and thus the institution may be affected by the crisis (e.g. critique of another school for lack of supervision of pupils during a school trip, during which students used drugs. This problem may be raised by the media, because it is “attractive,” it will arouse interest of recipients, but it can also transfer the questions of the media and environment to the insti-

tution itself),

d. *behaviour of members of an educational institution towards the external environment*. The role of educational leaders is also to draw attention to relations between the internal environment and entities from the external environment that constitute a hazardous element especially in the face of a crisis situation. Then one of the elements of the external environment's behaviour is thorough observation of the institution and attempts to obtain information related to the crisis situation. Both school staff and parents should be familiar with the information policy of the institution in order to create one message and not give out information that may be causing the so-called growing crisis (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2015).

Two more aspects are also important in relation to the internal environment of a facility:

e. rules determining the desired *level of worker/student culture*, and expressed in two perspectives as:

i. *behaviour as representative of the institution* - teachers and students represent a school; on their profiles there is information about their belonging to a particular institution, etc.

ii. *behaviour as a private person* - on this issue rules should be determined taking into account the fact that management of the institution has the right to require certain behaviour but they cannot violate the rights of members of the institution, for example, the freedom of expression, criticism and others.

f. *Professional standards* in terms of:

i. guidelines on *ethical issues* (e.g. for teachers - the matter of professional ethics; for students - ethical issues contained in the statute of a school),

ii. guidelines referring to *values and norms of an educational institution*.

The analysis of the activities of organizations, not only educational institutions, shows that the *Social Media Policy* regulations, which have been created as a result of joint work and agreements between management and members of organizations, are effective. It is the educational leader who should stimulate and guide the work, but at the same time he should try not to impose solutions which are comfortable or safe from the point of view of management of the institution. Such rules should be the result of a consensus, arrangements arising through understanding the needs of members of the organization (e.g. needs of self-presentation, the right to freedom of expression, etc.), and on the other hand there should be awareness and understanding among members of an organization that actions taken by them may affect its position, image or reputation.

### **Summary**

The changing media space will set new tasks for educational leaders. Ten years ago, media coverage and content distribution were limited to a situation in which the leader managing an institution was its main representative. Today,

when every internet user can be a creator and broadcaster of content, it should be assumed that each member of an institution is its face, and can affect—positively or negatively—the perception of the institution in the internal and external environment, as well as represent the values with which it will be associated.

Due to the fact that media space is not constant, but is subjected to constant transformations, we must acquire competencies that will allow the creation of institution media space through which the distribution of content will create the smallest risk of a crisis situation.

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