

## (Re)presenting the University of Bucharest in the Media. Fundamental Approach to the Process of Academic Leadership

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*Higher education in a global market has a business aspect to it in which communication is important, as in any other industry. But it's not the main point. The real stake is an institution's identity. A good communication does not have to bring new student applications to a school but the right positioning, from which the right applications will then stem.*

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**Abstract:** *The aim of this paper is to integrate the quantitative content analysis methodology into the broader perspective of the social representation theory, in the attempt to illustrate the manner in which the mediated social representation of an institution can be included in an effective communication strategy.*

**Keywords:** social representation, media, higher education institution, effective communication strategy

Working within a dynamic, ever-changing, highly competitive environment, subject to the commercial logic and to academic rigours too, the University - whatever its name or reputation - must consistently use market-oriented leadership strategies and marketing mechanisms that, until recently, were only associated with commercial organizations attempting at imposing a favourable image among its target audiences : pupils as prospective students, students, parents, teachers, institutional partners, etc. Rarely adequate to the logic of central planning specific to the communist period, destabilized by the logic of transition that led to the inflation of „diploma mills“ that have undermined the very idea of higher education, the universities in Romania must adapt on the fly to the market logic, characterized by high competition in a space that transcends national boundaries.

Traditionally, the role of the University has been related to the aspirations oriented towards achieving high level of education and culture; hence, higher education was understood as experiences of the (intellectual) elite. Since the beginning of the concept of European Romania<sup>1</sup> the idea of society has been replaced by the idea of the market (Touraine, A., 1995,p.103), the elite service has become a mass accessible product (Kumar,M, 2009, p.137) and efficiency and marketability have become standards of evaluation for academic activities (Hayrinen-Alesatalo,M., Peltona, U., 2006, p.251)

In order to be effective, the management of an organization should take into account the representation(s) of organisations among

target audiences. An adequate, solid and proper representation of the organization determines the manner in which various categories of individuals with whom it comes into contact (suppliers, customers, competitors, etc.) relate to it and, implicitly, impact on its business as a whole. In the communication conquered society (B. Miede, 2000), this image is constructed / deconstructed / reconstructed through the media.

### **Social representation: theoretical and methodological grounds**

Our approach is in line with the structural methodological approach to the social representations initiated by Serge Moscovici and detailed by Jean-Claude Abric (in Mosovici, S., Buschini, F, 2007, pp.450-469). In this context, we consider the social representations as:

Images that condense manifold meanings that enable people to interpret what is happening; categories which serve to classify circumstances, phenomena and individuals with which we deal, theories which enable us to establish facts about them. When we consider the social representations embedded in the concrete reality of our life, we refer to all the above-mentioned features as a whole. (Jodelet, D., 1991,p. 89)

In a project co-financed by the European Commission, Caroline Maury (2007) finds four characteristics of social representations:

- A social representation is an organised set: the structure and the various elements that constitute the social relations are linked to each other;
- A social representation is shared by the individuals in the same social group. In general, the partial

<sup>1</sup> In Western Europe, the process started in the 1980s In Western Europe, the process started in the 1980s

consensus around it depends on the homogeneity of the group and the position of individuals within the group;

- ▶ A social representation is socially useful as a means of apprehending the object to which it relates. A social representation is a system for interpreting and understanding the social environment;
- ▶ A social representation is collectively produced by means of a mass communication process. Exchanges between individuals and exposure to mass communications enable the members of a group to share those elements that make up a social representation.

For our study on the mediated social representation of the UB we retain this last feature of the social representation. To follow, we will focus on how the media (re) present the UB. We start from the assumption that an image is, like any social representation, an organized grouping of information, options, attitudes, and therefore we consider necessary to study its both components (Abric, JC, op.cit. pp.450): content and structure. Basically, the social representation of the UB in the media can be seen as a socio-cognitive system with specific features: it is organized around a central core, constructed of one or of many elements that confer meaning to the ensemble and which has a narrative structure.

Therefore, the analysis of the mediated social representation of the UB in the media requires three components: *the content, the internal structure and the central core*. As Jean-Claude Abric said, in the study quoted above, currently there is no technique to allow alignment of those three elements, which

means that any study of representations must be based on multiple methods articulated in two stages:

First step: *delimitation of the content*

Second step: *identification of the central core and of the internal structure*

#### **First step: delimitation of the content**

Depending on the scope of the research (questions needed to be answered, available resources etc.), there are several strategies for delimiting the content that will be studied. In the present study, we decided on a cross-sectional analysis. The corpus of analysis consists in all articles about the University of Bucharest appeared in the national press in the October 1th 2013 - April 1th 2014 period. For this purpose, we use the Daily Press application on the UB website; from all the articles about education, we select those that concern the UB directly. It is worth mentioning that, for a comprehensive analysis, it is interesting to study the upstream representations (the image of Romanian education in general) as well as the downstream representations (the images of the faculties and the research centres in the UB and the image of the people and the personalities associated with the UB), but time and space restrictions made us to consider those articles that have the UB as a subject.

The corpus has the following structure:

Newspaper	total	UB is the main subject
<i>Adevărul</i>	18 <sup>2</sup>	5
<i>Evenimentul zilei</i>	11	1
<i>România Liberă</i>	6	1
<i>Cotidianul</i>	5	1
<i>Gandul</i>	5	2
<i>Puterea</i>	5	0
<i>Other newspaper</i>	4	2
total	54	12

<sup>2</sup>During this research, we chose to present data as numbers and not as percentages, because the total number of articles is less than 100

Adevarul, a newspaper with the tradition of treating subjects in the field of education, allocated the largest space to the UB (18 articles), one-third of the total number of articles on this subject.

The same hierarchy is maintained if we consider only the articles where the UB is the main topic. In Adevarul there are 5 articles, equal with the sum of the following four newspapers on the list.

We emphasize that the quasi-absence of the UB in the media can become an opportunity for developing an effective communication strategy.

**Second step: identification of the central core and of the internal structure**

Central core theory suggests that the core elements express the meanings that individuals (or, in this case, the media) collectively assign to the object of the social representation. They are highly consensual because they are determined by the shared values and history. They affect the peripheral elements and determine the logical relationships that individuals establish between those elements.

The peripheral elements represent knowledge about the object of the social representation that different individual (or, in this case, different media) have accumulated in various contexts. Consequently, they reflect the variety of individual experiences but they obey a logic shared by the group as a whole, since these experiences are interpreted on the basis of the shared core elements. Finally, in this conception, investigation of a social representation involves identifying those elements that belong to the core, among all the opinions and beliefs relating to the object. In this way it becomes possible to go beyond the discourses in order to understand the meanings the group attributes to the object of the social representation.’ (Moliner, Rateau, Cohen-Scali, 2002, p. 24).

To determine the structure of the UB mediated social representation relying on the content collected in the previous phase we will apply the methodological tools that enable tracking and tracing the central core, the connections and hierarchy of its components. One of these tools, the thematic analysis, reveals the following structure:

Topic	Total	UB is the main subject
Stefania Duminica's plagiarism	28	4
Academic performance	17	7
Student's associations	5	1
Other subjects	4	0

Even if, in the analysed period, the UB is most often mentioned in articles about Stefania Duminica's case of plagiarism, one can argue that, the image of this institution is mainly built in articles about academic performance (those 7 articles in which the UB is the main subject).

We present below the structure of the UB mediated social representation as it results from each subject area. At the end of our analysis, we assemble the data in order to achieve an overall composite image. To

achieve this goal, we consider two levels of reading: the article's title and the content.

a. The mediated (re)presentation of Stefania Duminica's plagiarism case

The *woldle* image of the titles of the articles in which the UB appears is the following:

Since it is obvious that the UB is associated, in the analysed period, most often with Stefania Duminica's plagiarism case, it become necessary to study this case in depth and to identify the structure of the UB image linked to this issue.



However, it must be noted that the UB is not a major player in this case; out of 28 articles that discuss it, it is in only five that the UB is the main subject, while in 14 the UB is just mentioned. The wordle image of the articles about the case of Stefania Duminica's plagiarism in which the UB is the main topic, shows a different picture:

In these articles, the UB is associated with: the Ethics Commission -21 co-occurrences; the title withdrawal procedure -17 co-occurrences and the diploma cancellation -10 co-occurrences. The UB is associated with plagiarism in 6 cases; in all of these cases, the verb is to establish.



b. (Re)presenting UB as the space of academic performance

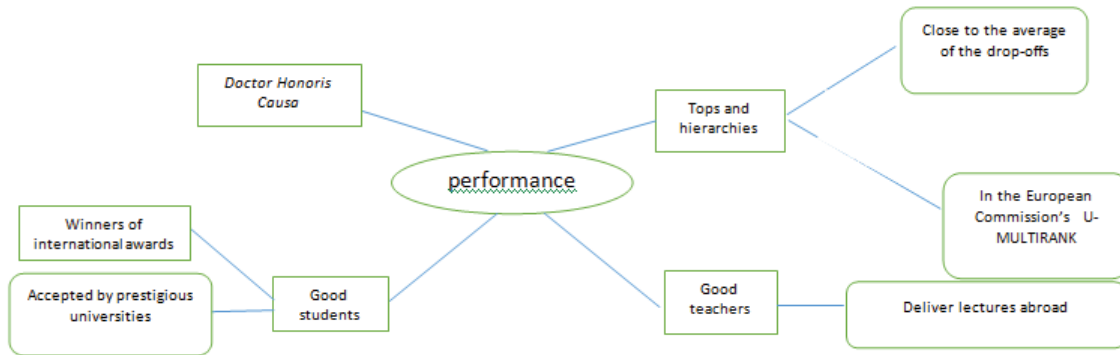
From the articles that have the UB as a main topic, in more than half, performance is the main theme. The UB is placed among the best 200 institutions of higher education (in a European Commission report) while in the top of school dropout the UB only occupies the 7th place, below the national average (38% compared to 38,8%).

Moreover, the UB students won prestigious awards and could be easily accepted to prestigious universities abroad. Through association, the UB can be compared with the American universities, as proved by Ionut Budisteanu, a young computer genius (*Adevarul*, 10.01.2013): *courses are identical, those of Stanford are identical to those in Romania (na- those given at the Faculty of Mathematics and Informatics of the UB). I attended some courses at Stanford (na- Stanford's courses are available online to anyone on their platform) that were better explained in India. I've seen some concepts*

*from Romania that were less explained than those from Stanford. Of course, not all of them. But the theory is universal, there is not a more sophisticated theory in America than in Romania.*

It is not only the UB students, but also the teachers who achieve high standards. Among the (many) communications options available to universities there is one that is increasingly successful: having their professors and experts express themselves outside the classroom. The idea of turning research professors into ambassadors or spokespersons for the institution is a very attractive one. Therefore, the article in *Evenimentul zilei* presents the case of an assistant professor who travels around the world on research scholarships (21.01.2014) and is invited to give lectures abroad, contribute to a positively mediated social representation of the UB. Likewise, the UB associates its name with prestigious personalities that have received the title of Doctor Honoris Causa.

The graphic representation of this theme is the following:

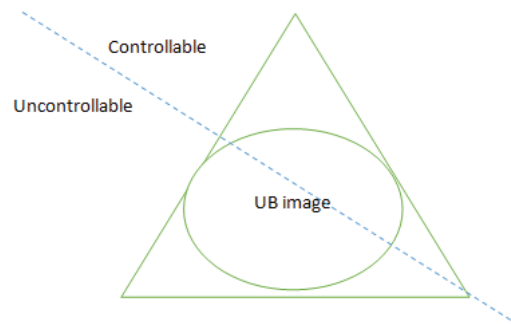


c. The (re)presentation of students' associations in the media

Students' organisations are an important part of the university life. Their image that falls upon the UB mediated social representation, is ambivalent: students organize charity events on Christmas (Be a better student on Christmas Day Campaign, Evenimentul zilei 13.12.2013: the UB students, gripped by the

magic of the holidays, want to bring smiles on the faces of those who can't fully enjoy the Holy feast of Christmas) but contest each other and dispute the UB management.

The central core of the UB mediated representation, in the Romanian newspapers, between 1.10.2013-1.04.2014 circumscribes a triangle of themes consisting in:



*The Stefania Duminica's case*

As shown in the chart above, there are events that can be institutionally controlled (academic titles granting, maintaining the international charts, etc.), others that can be partially controlled (business students' organizations) and others that escape institutional control (cases of plagiarism, scandals). In order to build a positive UB mediated social representation it is necessary to communicate

more efficiently the positive events happening within the UB and to supply a prompt response in crisis situations.

The quality of teaching and research, the creation of knowledge and academic excellence remain the primary concerns of UB; it is and must remain its core mission. But it is no longer enough. With international competition, an effective mediated social

representation is a must for the institutions that want to survive in this environment. Therefore, the UB must construct and maintain an efficient social representation in the Romanian media.

A good communication is a key element in realising the strategy of a school, sharing

the newest insights and latest knowledge with students and society alike. Effective communication will help the UB to attain higher levels of excellence by emphasizing the link between research and society, which is a key factor in branding the university.

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