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## Evaluation in PR through current methods and performance indicators. Future trends

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**Abstract:** In today's economic environment, deeply marked by a crisis whose impact continues to spread, we are talking more and more about efficiency: efficiency at society's level, as well as efficiency at the company and at the individual level. Efficiency in the field of public relations professionals is achieved by evaluating the work done. Although evaluation is not a new chapter of the communication plan, generated by the economic crisis, but a compulsory one, irrespective of the external environment, lately we notice an increased pressure in this regard. The "client" – the one who runs a campaign – wishes now, more than ever, to know the impact his money has bought. Although the PR world is a complex one, generally based on purely creative concepts, in the evaluation of the "client" it wishes to simplify to the fullest extent all the syllogisms and, finally, a clear answer to one single question: what impact has the amount invested in communication activities?

**Keywords:** evaluation in PR, communication campaign, Advertising Equivalency Value (AEV), the value of public relations, the principles of Barcelona

**JEL Codes:** M3

### 1. Introduction

Without exception, the strategy of a communication campaign must be linked to that of the organization by promoting general common goals. In addition to increasingly complex and diversified corporate strategies, the need for evaluation is also required by the increased communication budgets, as well as specific channels and instruments. Let us not forget that the world of today's communication is significantly marked by the digital and social media revolution. Also, external pressures and professional requirements force communication specialists to address the assessment aspect more closely.

### 2. Purpose of the evaluation

Despite these new challenges, the *methods* on which most of the assessments are based have remained largely traditional. *Evaluations focus mainly on the number of published articles, readers, site traffic, unique visitors, etc.* Although these parameters should not be excluded, in order to be able to carry out an effective and relevant PR assessment, we need to introduce a new concept designed to facilitate the evaluation process from the campaign's conception phase, namely: **communication controlling**.



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The internal implementation of the “communication controlling” process offers methods and systems designed to define both the objectives of a campaign and the ways of measuring it. By focusing on transparency, **the controlling process makes available to communication specialists, as well as to stakeholders**, the followings:

- performance indicators,
- audit methods and
- reporting methods relevant for each of them.

In **evaluating a communication campaign**, the following parameters must be considered:

- **Input**– resources invested in a communication process
- **Output**– availability of the message in the external environment
- **Outcome**– the relevant effects the communication process has on stakeholders
- **Outflow**– economic effects correlated with the organization’s objectives and generated by the communication process

The latter parameter is relatively recent introduced in the specialist practice, being also the most difficult to assess.

In general, **the costs of evaluating a communication project** are small compared to the total amounts invested in the project. But, yes, a professional evaluation costs: there is a need for funds and well-trained people in the public relations evaluation segment.

### 3. Objectives of the evaluation

**The evaluation of the public relations activity** does not take place, as one might expect, only at the end of it. To ensure the success of a campaign or of any type of communication where certain goals are to be met, **the evaluation must take place before, during, and at the end of the PR campaign**. This is the only way to find out what the audience wants, in which adjustments can be made to what is going to happen along the way depending on the feedback received and in which the effects and outcomes of the activity can be seen, so that to ease the work of the PR representative in the future.

Unlike sales, marketing or advertising, where it has more to do with tangible figures and results, in public relations, this stage is more difficult, but all the more important. Many public relations specialists are struggling with this issue because it’s easy to find out how many people bought a product or how many have seen a TV ad, but it’s much harder to measure a company’s reputation, consumer’s loyalty, or a message’s degree of awareness.

Besides the need to know the results of the communication actions, the evaluation is motivated by the desire to do things better in the future, to know what has actually worked and what needs to be improved. In addition, another important reason is the need to validate the activities of public relations in front of clients or business executives who want to know if the time, the effort and the money invested in public relations have been well used and if they have accomplished the organizational goals.

**How does assessment work?**The evaluation is closely related to:

- targets set at the start of the campaign and



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- performance indicators.

**The objectives** must be:

- firstly, measurable,
- then realistic,
- oriented towards results,
- and compatible with customer's requirements.

In the most general terms, the evaluation can be of two types:

- quantitative and
- qualitative.

**What is being evaluated in a public relations campaign?**

1. First, the exposure to messages is measured. This measurement is quantitative and aims at:

- media coverage, i.e. the number of press releases and the number of people who have been in contact with the PR campaign message,
- the number of site visits, and
- the number of social media interactions.

*In the case of an event*, the effectiveness of media coverage can be measured quite simply taking into account the number of participants at that event.

2. Further, a higher level of assessment is represented by the level of public awareness, i.e.:

- if the message has been received,
- if attention has been paid to it,
- if it has been understood, and
- if it has been retained.

In this case, *the evaluation techniques* used are **totally different**.

3. The next step in the public relations hierarchy is **the modification of the public's perceptions and attitudes**, and one of the most important techniques to determine such changes is **the comparative study or the benchmarking**. This involves measuring attitudes before, during and after the campaign, thus determining the degree of influence of the public relations actions.

4. In the last instance, and most importantly, **the actions of the public are measured**. A public relations activity was successful if it managed to change the behaviour and actions of its audience, so as to achieve the organizational goals.

When the evaluation process is subject to certain prejudices, such as lack of time or lack of money, it is the public relations practitioner's duty to see and demonstrate the necessity of his work, especially in a world where the numbers are eloquent and no one has the availability to observe results and long-term changes.



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#### 4. Current status of measurement and evaluation

The challenges faced by the PR industry inevitably reach the practice of evaluating, which is progressing heavily and unsatisfactory. Good evaluation practices remain minor and, in these circumstances, the value of PR in the face of other business functions is often questioned. The practice needs a reset in the field of measurements, a new beginning in the so far usages. Practitioners need to rethink the evaluation and reconnect it to the purpose of the PR activities and to the business processes, even if this is a laborious and costly process.

To the question “How can we measure *the value of public relations*?” Freddie Mercury would have answered: ‘Barcelona’... Leaving the joke aside, I believe that the adoption of the Barcelona Principles in 2010 was an important moment for the evaluation field, being the first time when professional organizations around the world have agreed upon the basic principles of PR research and evaluation.

One of the Barcelona principles tells us that **AVE is not the value of public relations**. **Jim Macnamara**, Visiting Professor at London School of Economics, said for PR Romania: “The Barcelona Principles should not surprise practitioners, while AVE-type evaluations are not a measure of value, but rather talk about a hypothetical cost.”

**Crenguța Roșu**, Managing Partner DC Communication, associates AVE with the saying “When all you have is a hammer, all your problems seem like nails.” If the PR activity is only a push on visibility and is regarded as “cheap advertising,” then advertising-type measures are applied. If what matters is visibility itself, without any positioning, attributes, relevance for target audiences, then only volumes per kilogram will be measured. If other result than the company being visible does not matter, then all that can be measured is how much money has been invested and how much it would have cost if the space had been bought.

In the recent years, the PR industry has made efforts to link the value of public relations to the value of business, but it cannot be said that this is standard practice in the domestic industry. **Robert Wynne**, the practitioner and author of the Forbes publication, stirred a new wave of indignation on Twitter following the publication of a document in June 2016 in which he exposed ‘the benefits of AVE’. Wynne argues that practitioners should consider customer needs, even when they contradict the standards of the professional community. In his opinion, the client is the one who gives the tone and decides whether AVE helps or not. The figures released recently by Kantar Media, the British media monitoring company, confirm that Wynne is not alone in the landscape. Of the 1000 clients monitored by Kantar, 25% still count on AVE-type indicators.

**Ana-Maria Diceanu**, Senior Partner of GMP PR, notes: “In Romania, and I do not think we are an exception, a lot of AVEs are still required, and even big brands ask for it... they are requested internationally. So we cannot say that Romania is slower in giving up AVE, no, by no means. I estimate that 70% of the market still requires AVE, 20% have understood that it does not help and 10% does not measure the PR in any way. But what I would like to hear more in Romania are the voices fighting against AVE.”

Returning from the AMEC annual conference, held in London from 14 to 17 June 2017, **Miron Mateescu**, CMO Media Image Group, says: “The AVE subject is associated with some sort of



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shame, because the big analysis 'houses' from abroad do not even want to hear about such 'metrics'. Those who are still using it are seen as a sort of pariah, a little pitied, something like 'ah, you cannot yet impose your own indicators on your customers.' But it is very interesting though that beyond the spotlights and the 'political' statements, almost everyone continues to use it, alongside other less 'shameful' indicators. The reality is that abroad, as in Romania, more than half of the final beneficiaries and agents require AVE as one of the most important performance indicators in communication. I do not want to go into pro or contra polemics, I just want to point out that, at international level, no one has the courage to publicly recognize that AVE is still one of the most sought-after indicators of most media analyzes."

**George Domnișoru**, Sales Director of MediaTRUST Romania, notices a discrepancy between the declarative assumption of standards and the practice of evaluation: "We are living an apparent paradox: all communicators know that AVE is not the value of public relations, and yet (almost) all ask for it in the reports, whether we are talking about media analyses, complex press files or even the simple daily reports, in one form or another ('gross' or weighted, the 'Weighted Media Cost' type). I say apparently, because in reality, the pressure on budgets is increasing, the need to justify the amounts invested and the effort made by a 'pragmatic', concrete indicator, easily understood by the non-specialists and especially the colleagues in the board (financial directors, general directors/presidents) make public relations specialists abandon the famous Barcelona principle."

Explanations of AVE persistence are multiple. **Marta Niculaie**, Communications Director of Roche Romania, believes that "AVE is still seen as a 'quick win' by many PR people, because in the end, the impact assessment of a communication campaign is translated into figures and AVE is an easy to calculate figure. Yet, not at all relevant. Its use is grounded and, unfortunately, we still see this KPI in some presentations. The discussion of how often this alleged indicator of project performance is used is an old one. As professionals, we need to take a step towards more sophisticated evaluations that highlight the real value our work really brings."

**Alexandra Diniță**, General Manager at Free Communications, believes that the AVE practice is still quite extended. "We use AVE in measurements when this is specifically requested by the client (and is still going on quite often), but evaluation always includes qualitative indices. AVE is not dropped primarily because of the need to calculate ROI through a simple, inexpensive, fast, and easy-to-understand mechanism. Is not dropped because AVE is the easiest way to 'sell' the PR to some categories that are not necessarily familiar with the communications industry and who are generally decision-makers in corporations (financial directors, boards of directors). The transition is gradual and has accelerated with the imposition of digital and social media. Large agencies are pushing for educating the market because they are already investing in new ways of assessing communication and have to attenuate their investments. From what I see, however, I do not think the AVE will be dropped very soon, I think it will continue to be used in parallel with other measurement methods."

**Tudor Dăescu**, Managing Partner at Dăescu Borțun Olteanu, adds: "AVE is the God of reporting in Romania. Even those who are aware of the lack of relevance do not have the budget that will allow them that measurement that gives them the conclusive data: hiring a research company to tell if their message was received by the target audience and how it was received. We will continue with the AVE as long as there are still big companies who say 'lucky' that we have this communication budget. We will continue



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with the AVE as long as communication is perceived only as an investment that has to bring ROI. And the first ROI is the square centimetre's value of a newspaper page sheet. No matter if your target audience is since long a reader of online niche publications from New York."

For **Ana-Maria Diceanu**, GMP PR, "AVE is a battle that increasingly resembles the fight against carrying a gun or against drugs. It is a habit that makes you feel in control and fulfilled. The real problem is that there is nothing else, just as simple, to replace the AVE in the reports that the PR man prepares for the CEO in his effort to attract budgets."

**Andre Manning**, Vice President of Corporate Communications Amcor, declares for PR Romania: "In pitch, when everything is a fight against time, the agency delegates a colleague with the mission to include in the presentation some slides that talk about the results. Everything has to happen quickly. With all the logistical deficiencies related to the new business process, I think 2010 was a new beginning for the public relations community, with the adoption of the Barcelona principles. With AVE being definitely 'cast out' of PR's instrumentation, the Barcelona Agreement is a step forward, even if the principles themselves will not definitively solve the issue of evaluation."

"There are probably a thousand arguments against AVE, but from my most important point I think AVE does not measure impact. However, in order to be credible and effective, a PR campaign must have impact, that is to bring about concrete changes of perception or behaviour. Otherwise, we get drunk with cold water. Our agency has migrated from AVE to more relevant measurement systems. It is an effort of continuous improvement, a costly but assumed effort. Yes, there are still 1-2 customers requesting AVE. The solution is that besides AVE we can offer other types of indicators, those who offer a more relevant picture," says **OanaBulexa**, MSLGROUP The Practice.

**Ana-Maria Diceanu** proposes to look closely at the "illusion of AVE". "We knew in the fundraising campaign for the 'Land Lamentation' we had to reach the € 6 million donation threshold. It helps me measure AVE every month? What good those it make me to know I have an AVE of over 6 million Euros until the end of the campaign, if I do not have the money in my account? And if we consider how much the subject is being talked about, I think we have already exceeded 6 million Euros in the AVE. What do we do instead? We overlap several figures and try to relate them qualitatively. We look at the donations'trend, we overlay it to the communicated topics, which we overlap over the tones of voice and over the spot'svisibility figures. I have seen moments in the campaign when a large volume of negative tone of voice has brought a lot of donations. So we can decide the next steps in the campaign."

**Dana Dobrescu**, Communication Manager at Unilever South Central Europe, notes: "I would like to think industry has quit AVE. I do not take this performance measurement indicator into account for years, and either the agency I work with does not send me this evaluation. There is no point in lying to each other; we all know that the basis from which this calculation goes does not reflect the reality, just as with impact assessments, which are often exaggerated, from my point of view. I think we have to go back to the value that the communication function brings to the business and, strictly related to the media appearances, we have to analyze the quality of the appearances we generate, the way we sent the company's messages, we have to know which are these strategic moments when we communicate these messages and to intend to make the voice of the company we represent be relevant in the media landscape, on the subject that the company has expertise in. Personally, I think the board of a company expects more from the PR people



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than an AVE rating of a media campaign and is our role to show that the communication function has a strategic role for business.

Over the past 7 years, professional organizations around the world have stepped up their disapproval towards AVE (Advertising Equivalency Value) measurements, pleading increasingly pressing for their banishment from the current assessment practice. But, contrary to the debates that have denied its relevance, the reality is that AVE has continued to persist, in Romania, but also outside it, among the tools of the communicators' guild. And the prominence and use of these measurements has greatly hampered the transition to relevant evaluation systems, assisting, in practice, to a frequent disconnection of communication from the business processes.

An AMEC initiative aims to completely eliminate the AVE metric from the public relations practice. The move seems bold, especially because it places debates on AVE in a market education area and firmly accepts relevant measurement practices.

**Richard Bagnall**, President of AMEC and CEO of Prime Research UK, said at the Bangkok summit in 2017: "The time has come to put an end to the unnecessary debates about AVE. AMEC will invest time and dedicated resources for the full eradication of AVE in the current practice." Bagnall also said that the demand for AVE measurements fell globally from 80% in 2010 to 18% in 2017, according to the latest research undergone by Prime Research. Another PRCA research from February 2017 indicates that 35% of the respondents reported using AVE in the current practice, 50% of them using AVE at customer's request.

**Auto-regulation vs. regulation. The new CIPR position in the AVE debate.** In support of the AMEC initiative, the Chartered Institute for Public Relations (CIPR) announced concrete measures to eliminate the use of AVE among British organizations. Thus, CIPR will publish in September 2017 a new professional standard for measuring public relations, qualifying the use of AVE as unprofessional and confusing. The new guide will highlight the role of CIPR's code of ethics in maintaining UK professional standards. CIPR members using AVE in the evaluation practice will have one year to transition to instruments considered relevant. Those who continue to use AVE after this period risk disciplinary measures, CIPR President **Jason MacKenzie** announced. Discipline remains, however, the form of these sanctions. In its 70 years of operation, CIPR was rather a guarantor of British professional standards. Through the AVE debate, the organization seems to assume the role of watchdog and regulator. The CIPR initiative, adds MacKenzie, responds strongly to the almost generalized belief that AVE is predominantly the problem of others – global brands, customers, purchasing departments, etc. In fact, the whole guild suffers from the use of irrelevant standards, says MacKenzie.

**AMEC Initiatives to eliminate AVE-type measurements.** Among the concrete initiatives to support the AMEC statements are:

- Creating an online Resource Centre to provide concrete arguments about the inadequacy of using this metric in public relations practice;
- The firm commitment of AMEC members not to provide AVE-type indicators in the standard service offer. If customers request this indicator, AMEC members will explain, based on standardized resources, why this tool is irrelevant and why it should not be included in the measurements. Instead, they will offer alternative measurements relevant to the practice of public relations;
- Improving the AMEC measuring platform – Integrated Evaluation Framework;



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- An educational program that promotes among the communicators the most relevant measuring instruments;
- Partnerships with local contest organizers for disqualification of applications that include AVE as an appraisal metric;
- Partnerships with international profile associations and universities to improve existing measurement and evaluation tools.

***AVE, a business ethics issue?*** The debates on AVE bring back the issue of business ethics. In my opinion, the irrelevant and confusing measures (especially when they know their shortcomings and yet they decide to continue using the logic “another one is guilty”) defeat the elementary relationship between professionalism and truth, so vital in the communicator’s guild. After all, ethical standards are related to professionalism and are one of its prerequisite. Beyond a normative approach of the auto-regulation, which implies communicators’ acceptance of ethical tools, there is also a pragmatic approach that insists on the costs of wrong practices and the benefits of the guild’s compliance with minimum professional and ethical standards.

Against the backdrop of international debates about AVE, I find it a good time to move beyond the classical bias that separates ethics from professional performance. Thus, it is often said that business ethics, with all that it means, is just a personal option and, like any option, is something relative and useless.

However, to the extent that we are acting on the behalf of a business project, an organization, a client, we must take into account those whose interests may be affected. And, as we act as professionals and want to be perceived as such, the actions taken can no longer relate to what is supposed to be done, but to the standards of the profession we are claiming.

In business, in general, in business communication, in particular, moral marks are also professional standards, and not just their annexes, usable as some please. In addition, when included in the management decisions, as organizational strategies, these moral marks will also prove profitable, because moral values and practices generate trust in the profession and in the organizations and, indirectly, profit on the long run.

**Acquisitions and perpetuation of AVE.** Purchasing services through the procurement system is today a fairly common practice for the local communications industry. It is a system traditionally applied by multinational corporations, taken over by large Romanian companies that want to increase their costs. Almost without exception, multinationals have specialized procurement departments. As the communication market depends about 70% on the budgets coming from there, it can be said that the percentage of services contracted by the procurement is given by this percentage.

“If I look at the 1-2 customers who are still requesting AVE, but also the others on the market who still use this indicator, I tend to think that they are not the people who ask for it. Most of them know that AVE is completely irrelevant. Only that, in the last few years, the ‘client’ no longer means only the communication person, but also the purchasing person or the marketing man. For them, PR is only meaningful when compared to advertising. They are the ones who necessarily value PR services with the advertising ones; demand the PR agency fee to be no more than 10% of the supplier costs; compare the cost of one PR consulting hour with that of an art director and so on. The discussion, therefore, is not just about AVE, but how much it is known about what PR does in general as a stand-alone discipline. Until the





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common comparison to advertising disappears, it will be hard for the AVE to really die,” notes **Oana Bulexa**, Managing Director, MSLGROUP ThePractice.

**Miron Mateescu**, Media Image Group, completes the picture: “As long as such a highly specialized service is still bought exclusively through the purchasing departments of the big companies, the advising provided during acquisition remains virtually impossible. The professionals who are the final beneficiaries of the acquisition cannot be contacted, so in most cases in Romania (9 out of 10 for large companies), the provider has to respond ad-litteram, without many discussions. We are most likely left with the option to press lightly and patiently towards a general change of attitude, both in terms of how to buy such a service and, last but not least, to move to other evaluation systems.”

**Ben Levine**, Vice-President of Ketchum UK, comments: “The procurement specialists are quarterly under pressure to demonstrate financial efficiency and, most of the time, they are no longer keen to understand the long-term impact of PR activities. They want fast and palpable results. Let’s not forget that the role of procurement specialists is to save the company’s money, so they will do everything in their power to see their accomplished goal. This explains, at least in part, the demand and perpetuation of some indicators such as AVE in the rating systems. I encourage business communicators and procurement specialists to ask agencies for something else, not to be satisfied with just output or AVE analyzes. At the same time, the PR industry and monitoring specialists have to convince them of the irrelevance of metrics and indicators such as AVE and advocate for the use of reasonable indicators of outcomes.”

**Linking communication to business processes and the impact on measurements.** I have come inevitably to the legitimate question: How do we explain the success and perpetuation of AVE despite the obvious deficiencies? Why do not we give up on it? If there are other measurement possibilities, if one can see results, one can track the progress of the communication process, why not? **Crenguța Roșu** explains: “Because it supposes the approach of communication as part of the processes in the company: information is a product by means of which the target audiences can better fulfil their role: partners in business projects, employees in understanding the direction of development, involvement, and solutions for a better functioning of the company, customers in the informed choice of services and products.”

**The predominance of AVE measurements** shows in fact a massive disconnection of communication from the business processes. If we want a peer to peer treatment in front of other business functions, then the measurements need to be reconnected to the ‘big ensemble’. The practice of punctual and irrelevant assessments will greatly hamper the transition to more relevant measurement systems. In evaluating, disconnecting an audience from other audiences does not provide the full picture.

It’s a more laborious move, **Crenguța Roșu** believes, but you better measure thrice and cut once. Also **Crenguța** believes that over-analysis leads to procrastination and blocking the decision. As in all, in fact, there is the middle way, which is the most difficult.

Let’s see how this reconnection of communication with the business processes with direct implications on measurements would look like. **Crenguța Roșu**’s argument proves to be functional. When communication is integrated into the company processes, and communication is part of the activity and not an appendix, **the measurable parameters are**, in addition to volumes:

- the quality of the understanding and the type of retrieved messages,
- the action generated and



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- the progress made in establishing dialogue on relevant themes.

Moreover, in *the set of metrics*, one can separate:

- topics that were more interesting from those less interesting,
- the media most interested in topics and,

then, establish a connection with:

- the type / profile of the reader,
- key themes in the industry,
- how they correspond to the proposed agenda,
- who undertakes certain topics,
- which topics have been more poached than others?

And this on the media relations segment - on and off.

## 5. A new Pandora'sBox: onlineAVE

"At present, I would also notice a worrying trend in the Romanian market, namely the one to associate a moneyvalue with the online media articles or even with the social media posts. Such a tendency opens a Pandora's Box in terms of subjectivism or 'adocracy', which would probably be the two biggest enemies of a correct media analysis," says **Miron Mateescu**, Media Image Group.

**George Domnişoru**, mediaTRUST Romania, adds: "Online media have become very important, social media is unavoidable nowadays, so that the demands for AVE reporting in online, in general, and social media, in particular, are on the carpet, despite the existence of indicators with a higher quality component, such as engagement."

"With media migration to online, the idea of 'column inch' becomes ridiculous. Moreover, the idea that an online article might be equivalent to an online ad or an online banner is even more ridiculous, if I were to use the conclusion of the media critic **Bob Garfield**, 'no sentient human being ever intentionally clicked on a banner ad'," says **Katie Delahaye Paine**, CEO of Paine Publishing, LLC.

Because the social media segments also have their associated metrics, besides the likes and shares, here as well the use of the right analysis tools and their right set-up could also show us more, so as to be aware of:

- what the fans say,
- what they prefer,
- what concerns they have,
- what information is useful to them and
- comparisons are made with similar competition media,
- comparisons are made with similar market media on the whole, to see more correctly where the company is located ... etc.

The following are the analyses made for the communication with the employees - ranging from:

- observing and analyzing the types of interaction
- up to direct investigation.

The same for business partners:



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- from one-on-one interviews
- to polls.

All this will be associated to the relevant business topics and projects.

Disconnecting an audience from the others ones does not give the full picture. Even if the analysis is based on media (in order to compare the same units of measurement), at the end, in a score-card of communication integrated on media and strategically approached—all the parameters will be there and, at the end, many more meaningful action channels will unfold. We can see what the common topics of cross public are, we can see the problems that exist, where it is best to place the resources – precisely from parsimony.”

**Pioneering provision instead of deadlock.** AVE is part of the arsenal of bad ideas that the public relations discipline has advanced and practiced for some time now. The members of the Institute for Public Relations Measurement Commission in the US have recently wondered who had originally the idea of using AVE, but could not decide whom to grant this “honour”.

At the 2017 summit in London, AMEC presented an integrated and interactive measurement framework (AMMF). Originally developed for social media by Prime Research, the tool is free and allows the organizations:

- add online the details of the communication projects,
- set goals and
- develop an evaluation plan.

The launch of ICMF is certainly a good news, but we must be aware that AVE does not disappear based on the Barcelona principles or the standards that will be agreed from now on. There is a need for a change of perception at the practice level. Personally, I think it would help us see public relations as a profession where we can apply values that are important to ourselves. Sincerity, dignity, transparency and relevance for others are central values in PR.

**Ana-Maria Diceanu**, GMP PR, notes: “I would like to see a consistency between what specialists in monitoring, reporting and PR preaching and what they do. It’s not easy, and I know how difficult it is to refuse customers when they ask us for AVE, but if you’ve chosen a road, stick to it all the way, no matter the immediate losses. Neither the excuse ‘we are asked for AVE, there’s nothing we can do’ does not seem to me worthy of a professional. If we want to change the perceptions as to the role of the PR in achieving the goals, we must start to fight more intensely for a qualitative measurement of the communication efforts. The fight against AVE is not relevant, but what we bring in exchange for AVE. How important in achieving the business goals is what we use instead of the AVE, that’s actually the biggest stake.”

**Rareş Petrişor**, Head of Strategy at Media Pozitiv, adds: “The AVE void must be filled with ‘helped’ assessments, based more on one technology, using the software that has been present on the market for some time. It’s a difficult transition towards math, but the PR will not lose its importance or emotion by boeing more with the bits. We do not have to ‘accept’ a new paradigm, but simply create it.”

If practitioners will cease to request AVE measurements, than the switch to other evaluation techniques will be natural. I think it is up to all practitioners and PR specialists to actively contribute to the change. The guild needs more than ever strong voices, enthusiasts of good ideas and in-house activists able



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to convince specialists and non-specialists of the irrelevance of AVE measurements. But in order to do this, practitioners need to develop their knowledge of measurement, confidence in their own beliefs, and actively contribute to accepting the PR profession by other business functions.

**Large number reflex: onlineAVE – Earned Media Value (EMV).** A worrying trend is to associate money value with articles in online media or even with social media posts. In a recent article, British consultant **Stephen Waddington** speaks with concern about the evolution of the online AVE phenomenon. It refers in particular to Earned Media Value, in short EMV. This metric is particularly promoted by online tool providers, media agencies and public relations consultants as an easy way to compare online campaigns. EMV emerged as classical media relations lost ground and, in their place, the relations with the influencers developed. As with AVE, EMV suggests that the space earned in online and social media through public relations and social media activities is equivalent to the same space paid in online advertising.

**Scott Guthrie**, management consultant and social media marketing specialist, believes EMV is already rooted because it provides a simple answer to a complex issue. “The customers’ appetite for large numbers. They give the impression of ROI, though, in fact, they do not offer any clue whether the online campaign has worked or not.”

## 6. Conclusions: AVE is not a legitimate way to measure ROI in public relations

Experts conclude: There is no evidence to suggest that the editorial space obtained through public relations has the same value as that obtained through advertising.

The Measurement and Evaluation Committee of the Public Relations Institute took a stand on the use of AVE (Advertising Value Equivalency) as an assessment measure in public relations. In the field of communication and media relations, AVE suggests that the space and time earned in media through public relations is equivalent to the same space and time paid in the media, bought as advertising.

**ROI (Return of Investment)** is a comparative analysis of investments in relation to the benefits. That is, it is the way to measure whether a certain investment has been profitable in the long or short term. An example would be hiring a social media specialist in a company that will improve the relationship with the public in the online environment. It is an investment that benefits the company in the long run. ROI analysis may be difficult to measure in some cases, especially if the benefit is not immediate and involves a long series of factors to be taken into account.

After a year of research and debates on the subject, the committee’s IPR members came to the conclusion that there is no evidence to suggest that the editorial space and the advertising have the same value.

**The advertising** is purchased and allows full control of the advertiser over content, placement and frequency, and is always positive.

By contrast, the publicity or the media won is only semi-controllable after the release of materials to the media channel, and can lead to positive, neutral or even negative messages. “It was about time an important voice in PR research and evaluation to reject this practice,” said **Robert W. Grupp**, President and CEO of the Institute for Public Relations. “The use of AVE has distracted industry’s attention from more valid forms of measuring the impact of public relations on business objectives and targets.”



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“AVE is not a legitimate way to measure the return-of-investment in public relations,” wrote **Dr Brad L. Rawlins**, who chaired a team from the IPR Commission on the subject. Dr. Rawlins is also chair of the Department of Communication at Brigham Young University. “Even more problematic is the use of AVE to illustrate the results of public relations and the return of financial investment. This practice often prevents us from taking into account the more important public relations outcomes.”

***IPR Commission on Public Relations Measurement and Evaluation aims:***

- the establishment of research and evaluation standards in public relations,
- the establishment of research and evaluation methods in public relations,
- the drafting of “white paper” documents on research and good practice.

Its members are leaders in PR research, specialists from universities, companies and corporations. The Commission met on 8<sup>th</sup> of October 2010 at its eighth Summit on Measurement in Portsmouth and voted unanimously on the adoption of the Commission’s Task Force Report prohibiting the use of AVE in the public relations industry. The report is available on the Institute for Public Relations website.

“In the report, the Commission recognizes that the use of AVE is a practice that is often used, because the calculation of AVE is affordable and does not cost,” said Commission President **Pauline Draper-Watts**. “But this does not justify the practice as an appropriate one.”

**Dr. Rawlins** added, “The cost of advertising is not a useful measurement method. Advertisers do not use the costs of placing ads as evaluation results. It’s a cost by which the effect of increasing sales or brand awareness is obtained. Therefore, it is of no use for public relations to compare the results with the costs of obtaining advertising results. Publicity is not a result; it is a process through which much more important results are achieved, such as protecting the reputation or increasing awareness regarding responsible behaviours.”

The position taken by the IPR Commission supports the Barcelona Declaration of Research Principles, a relatively new set of standards and practices that guide the measurement and evaluation of public relations. The principles were discussed in Barcelona in June 2010 and adopted by the delegates who have participated to the second European Summit on Measurement organized by the International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC) and the Institute for Public Relations (IPR).

Firstly, the IPR Commission promotes the assessment and measurement practices that demonstrate the extent to which public relations contributes to the organizational goals. Finally, impact-based measurements – such as awareness, understanding, attitudes and behaviours – provide a much better way of demonstrating the unique impact of public relations.

Media coverage is a valuable way to evaluate public relations focused on the media and the way in which intentional and unintentional messages are spread. Where possible, the Commission suggests that it is preferable to isolate messages generated by public relations and to control other variables in order to more accurately measure the impact on target audiences.

Institute for Public Relations is an independent non-profit organization, headquartered at the University of Florida. It brings together the academic and professional fields, supporting research in the field of public relations and the application of theoretical knowledge in practice.



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Members of the IPR Commission, besides Dr. Rawlins who was part of the AVE team, are: Toni Griffin, Public Relations Director, MetLife; Rebecca Harris, Research and Measurement Strategist for General Motors; Fraser Likely, President, Likely Communication Strategies Ltd.; Tim Marklein, Executive Vice President, Measurement & Strategy, Weber Shandwick; Mark Weiner, CEO of North America, PRIME Research.

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