Journalists on the "dark side"? Self-perception study on the relationship between journalists and corporate communication practitioners in Barcelona

¿Periodistas en el "lado oscuro"? Estudio de autopercepción sobre la relación entre periodistas y profesionales de la comunicación corporativa en Barcelona

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Abstract

This empirical study explores the self-perception that over a hundred Barcelona journalists have of their relationship with corporate communication professionals. The data stems from forty in-depth interviews and one hundred and thirteen surveys carried out by fifty students of Journalism and Corporate Communication. The study assesses the effectiveness of different corporate and public relations (PR) tools, from classic press conferences to exclusive interviews, and the worst time slots for contacting journalists, according to the experience of interviewees. The study establishes rules for corporate communication from the perspective of journalism and sheds some light on the realities of the "dark side". One conclusion is that for journalists nowadays the other side is not that dark after all.

Keywords: Journalism, Press offices, Corporate Communication, PR

Resumen

Este estudio empírico explora la autopercepción que más de un centenar de periodistas barceloneses tienen de su relación con los profesionales de la comunicación corporativa. Los datos proceden de cuarenta entrevistas en profundidad y ciento trece encuestas realizadas a cincuenta estudiantes de Periodismo y Comunicación Corporativa. El estudio evalúa la eficacia de diferentes herramientas corporativas y de relaciones públicas (RR.PP.), desde las clásicas ruedas de prensa hasta las entrevistas en exclusiva, pasando por los peores horarios para contactar con los periodistas, según la experiencia de los entrevistados. El estudio establece reglas para la comunicación corporativa desde la perspectiva del periodismo y arroja algo de luz sobre la realidad del "lado oscuro". Una conclusión es que para los periodistas de hoy en día el otro lado no es tan oscuro después de todo.

Palabras clave: Periodismo, Gabinetes de prensa, Comunicación Corporativa, RR.PP.

1. Introduction

The relationship between journalism and corporate communication is not an easy one. By definition, these professions serve different masters. Journalism's first obligation is to the truth "based on facts" (S. C. Lewis, 2019) and its first loyalty is to citizens (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). In theory, at least (Zelizer, 2005). Corporate communication is utterly devoted to enhancing the positioning and overall strategy of a given company (Argenti et al., 2005). If journalists are to maintain independence from those they research, public relations (PR) practitioners — possible actors among corporate communication professionals (Cornelissen, 2023) — are eager to seek influence and gain coverage. In classical terms, this is known as publicity (Kotler & Keller, 2006), "securing editorial space in the media (i.e., space that is not paid for) for promotion purposes" (Eisend & Küster, 2011). In order to achieve this, PR practitioners hope to draw the attention of journalists, professionals with ideals "grounded in detachment, objectivity, and independence" (Ryfe, 2013).

Furthermore, to try to sell without paying for advertising is a trade-off that was pointed out thirty years ago (Balasubramanian, 1994) and has a good and a bad side to it: "The primary advantage of advertising is the sponsor's control over the content; its disadvantage is audience skepticism". So recipients consider such publicity more objective and less biased than regular ads, but at the cost of being out of their reach and control. Although publicity cannot be controlled by marketing professionals, who are also corporate actors (Illia & Balmer, 2012), it can be favourably influenced, an influence which "constitutes the main task of public relations" (Eisend & Küster, 2011) and clashes with the widespread supposition that news is precisely the opposite — anything that anybody wants to suppress, an idea commonly attributed to George Orwell, who is quoted as saying "A man who gives a good account of himself is probably lying, since any life when viewed from the inside is simply a series of defeats" (Orwell & Packer, 2009). This position is quintessential to Orwell as an author and reporter

and contrasts sharply with the classical PR approach, the work of a press agent who used "stunts and distortions to get free advertising space in the mass media" (Hiebert, 1966).

This old-fashioned approach traces a conflictive intersection between journalists and corporate communication practitioners, long developed by researchers and PR legends (Dozier, 1992; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Heath, 2010) in so far as the relationship between the two is still commonly cast in a good versus evil framework (Perreault et al., 2024). Journalists, if viewed as defenders of the people's right to know, were perceived as the good guys as opposed to PR practitioners who, by protecting corporate interests, ended up playing the villains of confusion in their attempt to "displace the logic of journalistic reportage with the logic of corporate promotion" (Bauer & Bucchi, 2007a).

The outcome is a natural adversity, particularly in terms of the press-government relationship (Rubin, 1972), but also between the press and the private sector (Davies, 1999; Ries & Ries, 2002). The more specific the field of study, the clearer the juxtaposition: Science (Bauer & Bucchi, 2007b), Sports (Boyle & Haynes, 2018) Arts (Schiller, 1989) or Politics (Palm & Sandström, 2014), "each with its own modus operandi, rules of engagement, and quality criteria", to set an example, just as Bauer & Buchi (2007a) conceived the world of science journalism and PR. It's not so much a role-play as a battleground, although we should say that this film is no longer playing in cinemas.

The present study intends to go beyond the battlefield and explore how such tensions have been reduced, focusing on at a specific snapshot of one of the opposite sides of the corporate world: journalists. Rather than a general all-round view, this is an image defined by time, active journalists and place, the city of Barcelona in Spain. There is, of course, a risk in pushing the comparison too far without taking sociocultural, political and economic specificities into account (Gifreu, 1991, 2000; Masip et al., 2020; Risquete, 2006; Sáez et al., 2015), and without considering the interests of power and geopolitics that even Orwell (Orwell, 2015) could not refrain from mentioning. Yet what has really become international is the idea of a migrating trend between fields (Palm & Sandström, 2014), depicted as a move to the other side (Palau, 2003), the dark side (Kester & Prenger, 2021; Macnamara, 2014), the richer side (Williams, 2014; Zambrana, 2024).

A former BBC journalist described it quite vividly: "Every newsroom I worked in, there were stories of colleagues that had 'defected' to 'The Dark Side'. It was always said with a wry smile and a teasing tone, but the implication was that they had sold out, switching to a world where the motivation was not truth, but profit" (Sayani-Bromley, 2018). This narrative has remained in place for a long time (Dozier, 1992; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Heath, 2010; Lalueza Bosch & Estanyol i Casals, 2013).

But then, the rapid digitalization of life disrupted society as a whole and influenced all its industries; journalism would be no exception (Anderson et al., 2015). In its aftermath, "the media has lost its monopoly as channels for spreading information and, as a result, the parameters of functioning and analysis of journalism, advertising and corporate communication have changed" (Sáez et al., 2015). Yet, the idea of a crossover remained for journalists moving from conventional media — legacy media — to corporate media. What has changed, in fact, is the negative connotation of this idea (Adriani, 2019; Kester & Prenger, 2021; J. Lewis et al., 2008; Serazio, 2021).

Indeed, the good-evil dichotomy is becoming old news, as a catchy headline from The Guardian stated over a decade ago: "To some extent, this outdated opinion persists today, but clearly the profession is becoming more acceptable, as so many journalists are increasingly crossing over to 'the other side'" (McCormack, 2007). Some even call it "the bright side" (Madsen & Andersen, 2023). Outmoded, outdated or finally surpassed, it should be noted that the first PR practitioner to have crossed over is

ironically the one who invented the job, for Ivy Lee was basically a journalist who graduated at Princeton (Castillo-Esparcia, 2004).

1.1. From PR Agent to Chief Communications Officer (Dircom)

There is evidence of how the bad press surrounding the field of corporate communication and especially PR began to disappear in Spain. The fact that the first label has eclipsed the other is far from coincidental, as PR practitioners formally reject the actual name, which is "discredited and linked to negative connotations" (Fernández et al., 2012). This explains the exponential leap from understanding PR as political propaganda (Gutiérrez García & Rodríguez Salcedo, 2009) – PR first appeared in the mid-twentieth century under the Franco dictatorship – to its present new definition (Carretón-Ballester & Lorenzo-Sola, 2020).

A historical review (Castillo-Esparcia, 2004; Gutiérrez García & Rodríguez Salcedo, 2009) tells us that the first PR agency and campaigns were launched in Barcelona almost twenty years before the onset of democracy and it wasn't until the nineties that the occupation gained institutional legitimacy "with the establishment of the Degree in Advertising and Public Relations in Communication Faculties" (Gutiérrez García & Rodríguez Salcedo, 2009). This marked the "consolidation of a conceptualization removed from the commercial and economic objectives of marketing with which it is sometimes mistakenly confused" (García Nieto et al., 2020).

In order to defend the figure of chief communication officer over and above the classical press agent as chief guardian of corporate communication management, a new association was born in Spain in 1992, "Dircom, the association of communication directors based in Madrid that in 2007 welcomes its first provincial office, Dircom Catalunya" (Sáez et al., 2015). The Association of Consulting Companies in Public Relations and Communication (ADECEC, for its initials in Spanish) was founded almost simultaneously, followed in Barcelona by the College of Advertisers and Public Relations of Catalonia before the turn of the century.

From the point of view of journalism, 2009 marked an important milestone when the Association of Catalan Journalists founded in 1985 published the final draft of a pioneering document, a Best Practices Manual for Corporate Communication Professionals (Col·legi de Periodistes de Catalunya, 2009), based on the Code of Ethics for Journalists. This meant recognition from within the profession to those crossing over. Until one decade ago at least, talent pools for corporate communication positions were to be found in the fields of journalism, public relations or related educational sectors with varied professional experience (DIRCOM, 2014).

1.2. Research Question

The research poses two closely related questions:

RQ1: How do journalists perceive themselves?

RQ2: How do they relate to corporate communication professionals?

Considering that the research starts from the idea of a two-way street between both professions and that the whole weight of the question falls on one side, that of journalists, we could say that, having accepted the coexistence of both sectors, as a study in self-perception it seeks recommendations from one side to the other rather than any in-depth analysis or theoretical comparison between the various actors. To set the record straight, the Star Wars saga has come into play — having helped explain major world issues

related to law, behavioural economics, history, psychology (Carlson et al., 2007) and even fatherhood (Sunstein, 2017), it can now be used to clarify the antagonistic relationship between journalism and corporate communication.

To date, all agree that the Star Wars legend is "populated with intentionally flat, archetypal characters; reluctant young hero, warrior-wizard, brave and beautiful princess, and monstrous black villain" (Gordon, 1978). In this sense, it's easy to adapt the film analogy to journalists and corporate communication officers, especially as the entertainment industry has contributed to the positive or, if you like, the heroic imaginary of journalism: "Films like Spotlight, series like The Wire and fictional characters as famous as Peter Parker, the photojournalist who dons the costume of Spiderman, shape the image of the journalistic profession in these popular culture genres" (Cantudo & López-Redondo, 2019).

Of course, journalism has also been depicted negatively: "Feared, revered, hated, flattered, downtrodden, repressed, fawned, bribed, scorned, dismissed" (Diezhandino et al., 1994), each cliché is endorsed by a cultural product. "Literature, film and television have to a great extent helped spread certain ideas that have reinforced these images printed on the minds of many citizens. Yet, as pointed out by the authors of the previous quote, another cliché, probably the most widely accepted, is that journalists are the fourth power" (Cantudo & López-Redondo, 2019).

This is the cliché on which the analogy with the legendary space-opera is based, as follows: The Chief Communications Officer played by Darth Vader commands the storm trooper, most likely embodied by the Press Officer, to target a group of Jedis (the journalists), to provide access and information about The Empire. Why? Because the company needs media coverage, as stated in one of the objectives of the Communication Plan (Liu et al., 2012). So, actions have to be taken in order to accomplish this mission.

Darth Vader has to deploy a strategy. The number of bylines and the quality of the content generated could be Key Performance Indicators (Romenti & Murtarelli, 2020). But, what tools really work? Can we take any advice from The Rebel Alliance? The fact is that this description could be applied to one of the numerous tasks attributed to the Dircom, the Chief Communication Officer, who, among other duties, "advises the dominant coalition on issues related to the management of corporate identity" (Sáez et al., 2015), so that it is in keeping with the company's foundational creed. In short, what this research is really about is asking the Jedis (the journalists) how they can become better villains.

2. Methodology

The layout of this study is based on semi-structured interviews and surveys conducted by fifty students of the Identity and Corporate Culture course leading to the Degree in Journalism and Corporate Communication taught at Blanquerna School of Communication and International Relations (academic years 2021-2022 and 2022-2023).

Each student had to prepare one in-depth interview with a media professional, making sure there were no repetitions within the sample, and ensuring that another four journalists answered the survey, along with the interviewees. In all, forty in-depth interviews and a total of one hundred and thirteen surveys were conducted with journalists working in the same teams as their interviewees or, at least, in the same media outlets even if independently.

2.1. The limits of the sample

The first task was to define the sample according to pre-established criteria, taking the categories introduced by the General Board of Media of the Catalan government as a starting point and limiting it to the Barcelona region, leaving out an entire ecosystem of possible local and provincial media.

As regards television, this meant public national channels in Catalan, public and private state channels in Spanish, and as regards radio, public national stations in Catalan (chiefly Catalunya Ràdio) and also private national stations in Catalan. With respect to the press, an initial list included national generalist newspapers published in Catalonia (*Ara*, *El Punt Avui*, *El Periódico* and *La Vanguardia*) and specialized newspapers (sports press such as Mundo Deportivo, for instance), news agencies (EFE, Europa Press and Agencia Catalana de Noticias) and digital media.

The latter extended and complicated the repertoire and even the General Board of Media avoided listing them: "Not only has traditional media considered it vital to create their own niches on the Net, but a large number of new media outlets has been born directly on the Internet" (Direcció General de Mitjans de Comunicació, 2024). Broadly speaking, the complications arise from one source: "The digital media of television and radio stations, particularly the Catalan Corporation of Audio-visual Media (CCMA), and the private station RAC1, compete for their audiences with press editors" (López López et al., 2023).

It was also deemed important to add magazines as a category, a medium of communication that, despite experiencing a golden age, seems as destined to disappear as printed newspaper editions: "Both are still quite able to bring people together around an issue or an idea and to serve and add value to communities and their members" (Jarvis & Paredes, 2015). Our pick was *Time Out Barcelona*.

Conversely, the new media category was added in order to accommodate sound experiences such as the podcast ,"that has entered a new phase of its evolution, one where it is beginning to generate a market that is no longer simply complementary to radio, but an alternative; one that is moving towards the professionalisation of production and the normalisation of consumption" (Bonini Baldini, 2015). Our candidate was La Sotana, "a humorous podcast on FC Barcelona that a group of friends launched in 2014 and which at present commands over 100,000 weekly listeners. La Sotana has tried different podcast formulas ranging from amateur self-publishing and broadcasting on local radios to large media outlets and back to self-publishing, professionally this time" (Ponsa, 2021).

A similar logic is followed by streaming platforms like Twitch, no doubt a new player whose influence deserves to be acknowledged by the academic community (Roca-Trenchs et al., 2024), journalists and corporate communication, in so far as it is still "relatively unexplored territory, with studies focusing on its possible use by public administrations to disseminate information (Kazanin, 2017), its potential as a strategic communication tool based on the existence of influencers and opinion makers (Wulf et al., 2020), the information overload in its chats (Nematzadeh et al., 2019), and live streaming platforms as tools to attract the public and increase engagement (Yang & Kang, 2021) or for political messaging (Ruiz-Bravo et al., 2022)".

Our candidate was Jijantes FC, a channel owned by journalist Gerard Romero who, with over fourteen years' experience covering FC Barcelona (Barça) on private radio stations and then corporate radio, left to devote himself entirely to a captive audience of 40,000 followers and "a sufficient number of subscribers, he says, to make a living" (Pérez-Soler, 2022). Romero was on one side and didn't cross over to the dark side but to a new side. A battalion of storm troopers would be watching.

2.2. Closed questions (surveys) and open questions (interviews)

Once the database on which the work would be carried out had been established, it was necessary to define the surveys and the issues that would be addressed in the in-depth interviews, i.e., the questions that would be posed to those taking part in the research for which the team counted on the advice of Enric Mur, CEO of New Age Strategic Insights, a company specialized in Statistics and Market Research.

Although Mur recommended understanding the survey as a form of interview, a social questioning situation (Brinkmann, 2013) in order to facilitate the subsequent management of the information a pre-coded questionnaire was chosen, although Mur did stress the importance of giving careful consideration to the wording of each question and, in some cases, of foreseeing possible answers.

To make sure there were no doubts about the quantitative data, the information concerning interviewees' professional profiles was compiled before the surveys were conducted, including names, ages, positions, years spent in their current media outlet, and relevant aspects such as the role of press offices/communication in their daily work, periodicity, dependence on corporate sources, etc. Most answer options were structured with a rating scale from 1 to 5, in which 5 equalled "highly effective", 4, "mostly effective" and so on down to 1, which meant "least effective" or a Yes/No option.

It is important to say that most of the survey mirrored the "Worlds of Journalism" study (Hanitzsch et al., 2019) and its tool, adapting it to the chapter dedicated to Spain (Berganza et al., 2017). The six roles with which journalists were asked to identify also derived from the latter: watchdog, citizens' spokesperson, instructor of the audience, disseminator of objective information, infotainment journalist and promoter of the status quo.

Another important take came from "The State of Journalism 2021" (Galant & Semel, 2021), a study conducted by Muck Rack in partnership with over a dozen journalism-focused organizations in which more than 2,400 journalists in the US took part and which focused on topics ranging from reporting during COVID-19 to preferences for working with PR professionals,. In this survey, journalists were asked to declare in broad terms how they saw their relationship with PR teams and people at PR agencies; their options were partnership; mutually beneficial, but not quite a partnership; antagonistic, but not inherently a bad thing or a necessary evil. Darth Vader.

A background paper served as a guide document to the questions in the in-depth interviews, an open script to co-ordinate the meetings. Researchers paid special attention to a checklist followed by Massot (2015) in her analysis of communication offices as a source of information for daily news media and news agencies in Catalonia. Massot organized the interviews in thematic blocks whose titles could spark debate: the role of press offices as advertising engines, that of cultural journalists (in this survey bearing in mind the source or section of the interviewees), news selection criteria, the advantages or facilities implied by working with these offices, examples of bad professional practice and media prestige, among others (2015, p. 191).

There were, of course, other subjects that arose before the data was gathered: handling off-the-record information, the impact of the pandemic on the organization of press conferences and other social events, whether or not the relationship changed during a period of crisis, etc.

3. Analysis and results

As for the property of the media, results indicate that 70.8% of the respondents work in private outlets and 29.2% in public funded media. Their contractual relationship was full-time in the case of 82.3% of participants; as for the rest, 8% were freelance journalists, 6.2% media associates or owners and only 3.5% had part-time contracts.

In terms of years of experience, 33.6% of participants had a seniority of over twenty years, 23% from eleven to twenty years, 24.8% from two to five years; only 5.3% had less than two years of work experience. Students managed to gather a well-balanced sample between young and senior journalists: 24.8% of participants were over the age of forty-five, 29.2 %, were aged between thirty-five and forty-four and the other 46% were professionals aged between twenty-two and thirty-four.

Regardless of age, experience or media ownership, the degree of contact between journalists and press offices was notably high: 86.7% of respondents replied positively to the question of whether they had had a relationship with press offices. 62.7% of participants had had almost daily interactions, followed by 20% who had had two or three interactions a week. So, the two worlds, corporate and journalistic, are undeniably intertwined.

Table 1. *List and characteristics of participants in the in-depth interviews*

Code	Type of media outlet	Property	Contractual relationship	Seniority	Source	Gender
I-1	Radio	Radio	Radio	Radio	Radio	Radio
I-2	Private	Private	Private	Private	Private	Private
I-3	Full-time employee	Full-time employee	Full-time employee	Full-time employee	Full-time employee	Full-time employee
I-4	Over 20 years	Over 20 years	Over 20 years	Over 20 years	Over 20 years	Over 20 years
I-5	General	General	General	General	General	General
I-6	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male
I-7	TV	TV	TV	TV	TV	TV
I-8	Private	Private	Private	Private	Private	Private
I-9	Full-time employee	Full-time employee	Full-time employee	Full-time employee	Full-time employee	Full-time employee
I-10	From 2 to 5 years	From 2 to 5 years	From 2 to 5 years	From 2 to 5 years	From 2 to 5 years	From 2 to 5 years
I-11	Sports/Soccer	Sports/Soccer	Sports/Soccer	Sports/Soccer	Sports/Soccer	Sports/Soccer
I-12	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female
I-13	Newspaper	Newspaper	Newspaper	Newspaper	Newspaper	Newspaper
I-14	Private	Private	Private	Private	Private	Private

Code	Type of media outlet	Property	Contractual relationship	Seniority	Source	Gender
I-15	Full-time employee	Full-time employee	Full-time employee	Full-time employee	Full-time employee	Full-time employee
I-16	Over 20 years	Over 20 years	Over 20 years	Over 20 years	Over 20 years	Over 20 years
I-17	Society/Crime	Society/Crime	Society/Crime	Society/Crime	Society/Crime	Society/Crime
I-18	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female
I-19	News agency	News agency	News agency	News agency	News agency	News agency
I-20	Public	Public	Public	Public	Public	Public
I-21	Full-time employee	Full-time employee	Full-time employee	Full-time employee	Full-time employee	Full-time employee
I-22	Over 20 years	Over 20 years	Over 20 years	Over 20 years	Over 20 years	Over 20 years
I-23	Society/Science	Society/Science	Society/Science	Society/Science	Society/Science	Society/Science
I-24	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male
I-25	TV	TV	TV	TV	TV	TV
I-26	Public	Public	Public	Public	Public	Public
I-27	Full-time employee	Full-time employee	Full-time employee	Full-time employee	Full-time employee	Full-time employee
I-28	From 6 to 10 years	From 6 to 10 years	From 6 to 10 years	From 6 to 10 years	From 6 to 10 years	From 6 to 10 years
I-29	Corporate	Corporate	Corporate	Corporate	Corporate	Corporate
I-30	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female
I-31	TV	TV	TV	TV	TV	TV
I-32	Public	Public	Public	Public	Public	Public
I-33	Full-time employee	Full-time employee	Full-time employee	Full-time employee	Full-time employee	Full-time employee
I-34	Over 20 years	Over 20 years	Over 20 years	Over 20 years	Over 20 years	Over 20 years
I-35	TV shows	TV shows	TV shows	TV shows	TV shows	TV shows
I-36	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female
I-37	TV	TV	TV	TV	TV	TV
I-38	Private	Private	Private	Private	Private	Private
I-39	Full-time	Full-time	Full-time	Full-time	Full-time	Full-time

Code	Type of media outlet	Property	Contractual relationship	Seniority	Source	Gender
	employee	employee	employee	employee	employee	employee
I-40	Over 20 years	Over 20 years	Over 20 years	Over 20 years	Over 20 years	Over 20 years

Source: own study.

3.1. Quantitative "dos" and "don'ts"

To the question "What is the most effective way to get in touch with a journalist?", WhatsApp still featured as highly effective whereas a Direct Message via Instagram was the least. And yes, half the participants thought a double check was always required as having read a message doesn't necessarily mean having accepted its content.

Almost 70% of the journalists considered mornings to be the most effective time slot for making contact, and as regards communication tools, exclusive interviews rated top or highly effective, over and above press releases, press conferences, statements, press kits, video releases, social events, press trips and fact sheets.

The majority of respondents, however, still considered press releases highly effective as corporate communication tools while press conferences – their partners in crime – ranged from highly effective to mostly effective as they would later enlarge upon in the in-depth interviews. Having established this, 86.6% of the journalists taking part in the survey considered morning shifts (from 10.00 a.m. to 1.00 p.m.) the most suitable time slot for calls, and Thursdays (67.3%), followed by Tuesdays (64.5%), as the best days of the week. Mondays were definitely chosen over holidays (84.8%) as the worst days for anything corporate-related.

Broadly speaking, 67.9% of respondents considered their relationship with PR professionals as mutually beneficial, which can be read as a win-win scenario. Only 17.4% considered the relationship as antagonistic but not inherently bad, while 7.3% considered PR people as a necessary evil or and a further 7.3% considered them an association.

As for role definition, 58.9% of the journalists described themselves as disseminators of objective information, 15.9% as citizens spokespersons, 13.1% as infotainment journalists, 6.5% as watchdogs and 5.6% as audience instructors. None of the respondents thought of themselves as promoters of the status quo. Finally, the crossing of the two data blocks (Table 1) shows that over 40% of those who felt the relationship was mutually beneficial considered themselves disseminators of objective information, in contrast with the data gathered by Berganza et al. (2017), according to which "in line with recent political, economic and social developments in Spain, professionals feel more identified with the role of citizens spokespersons". This opens up research possibilities that should be looked into.

Table 2. *Crossing self-perception with "the other side"*

	Citizens' spokesperson	Disseminator of objective info	Infotainment journalist	Watchdog	Instructor of the audience	Watchdog
Antagonistic, but not inherently bad	0.93%	9.35%	3.74%	0.00%	0.00%	14.02%
Mutually beneficial	14.02%	41.12%	3.74%	4.67%	4.67%	68.22%
Necessary Evil	0.93%	1.87%	0.93%	1.87%	0.93%	6.54%
An association	0.00%	4.67%	2.80%	0.00%	0.00%	7.48%
Total	15.89%	58.88%	13.08%	6.54%	5.61%	100.00%

Source: own study.

3.2. Qualitative conclusions: the "yes, but" of journalism embracing the corporate world

Even though numbers are eloquent in terms of establishing a high rate of interaction between journalism and corporate firms — over 80% of journalists answered "yes" concerning their dealing with corporate firms — some distinctions were subsequently made in the interviews: "Yes", journalists deal with PR professionals almost daily, "but" treatment is different depending on whether the PR cabinet is a private or a public organization, as a senior journalist pointed out (Radio, private, I-1).

From a journalistic point of view, those PR firms that are publicly-funded "basically try to manage the image and message of public or political institutions, therefore, they try to sell you ideas" (radio, private, I-1). The private sector, on the other hand, becomes harder to deal with "because everything goes through sponsored content", i.e., branded content.

One journalist working at TV3, the Catalan public television broadcasting channel, made an important distinction: "With Government and Parliament it's different, because institutional deference is required by law" (TV, public, I-5). So, if deadlines are generally strict, working with Parliament they are even more so, chiefly because the Catalan political chamber is responsible for appointing the board of directors and controls the public media outlet. With private companies everything more relaxed: "I would say that at the public level the relationship is more institutional and adjusted to law, and with private companies it is more direct and informal" (TV, public, I-5).

On the fine line between advertising, branded content and information, this executive stressed the importance of having an informative angle. In her opinion, PR professionals cannot overlook the importance of offering information to media outlets: "Otherwise you lose the ability to communicate through the filter of control and rigour of the media that publish you. Then, everything would be advertising" (TV, public, I-5).

The example mentioned by the journalist is eloquent: a few days ago they received a request to cover the 150th anniversary of a privately-owned beverage company. "Sure, but, is this newsworthy?", asked the public-media worker, making a case for journalistic reportage clashing with corporate promotion, as

mentioned earlier. "Well, there may be those who believe it is, because in fact, there are not too many Catalan companies that have worked for so many years in such good shape, but still, we have to be very careful with the angle, with the way we treat them, so that it doesn't look like advertising in disguise" (TV, public, I-5). If they don't like it, as a senior reporter said, they should pay and get their brand coverage tailor-made.

3.2.1. Selling ideas versus placing branded content

Hence, the relationship varies according to commercial interests, making the interaction an ongoing negotiation in which "firms try to place their message for free", and journalists try to resist this. With this picture in mind, a newscaster agreed that "private offices in large companies are very insistent on selling you topics with no interest to us" (TV, private, I-2), which is why she described them as "heavy-duty" characters, because their only aim is to place advertisements in disguise and "most of the time, they don't succeed" (TV, private, I-2). So, newsworthiness of a given event depends on who's selling and who's buying.

The ideology of the media outlet is relevant to the transaction, however, as this journalist explained, "it certainly has an effect on whether or not we accept" (TV, private, I-2) the PR firm's proposal. This behaviour is reinforced if you're intent on keeping up with the city's cultural agenda or on covering soft-news like cuisine or other cultural events: "We receive thousands of invitations" (Magazine, private, I-9), complained a journalist whose e-mail inbox is always deluged "with more than 10,000 messages from communication agencies, which is practically impossible for any journalist to manage" (Magazine, private, I-9). In this case, the editorial criterion prevails over invitations or pressure.

The type of media is also relevant, because needs vary. Television is more demanding as corporations have to take into account footage, permission to set up equipment, etc. "It's not the same if you come from print media, which is always easier" (TV, private, I-2), said one journalist. In most cases, it would only take a phone call to set a story.

3.2.2. About the tools: nothing like a classic in decay played with mastery!

The common opinion is that press releases are becoming increasingly less useful, yet the reason for this is quite unexpected: "Communication agencies have grown so much," stated one interviewee (TV, private, I-1) "up to a point where they are full of young talent with no journalist experience whatsoever." For him, understanding news-making routines is key, for without that background you are more than doomed. "When this happens, they end up generating dysfunctions," a senior journalist added (TV, private, I-1).

Yet, one should never underestimate "the selling power of a good headline," as another professional said: "If you know how to sell a headline and you know how to write a proper press release, we end up showing up to your event and doing the coverage" (TV, private, I-2). And she went on to add: "If there are strange words in the headline, you're done." Another setback is the feeling that "everybody has it", as another journalist stressed "When a news item is covered by all media, audiences are divided. Those that are 'ours' work best for us" (Magazine, private, I-9).

Another common error surrounds the understanding of the tool: "Some people interpret that PR is just making propaganda for the institution they work for" (Radio, private, I-1). As a result, they send out press releases with the expectation of having journalists reproduce them verbatim. From a journalist's perspective that's just wrong: "The way I see it, PR must be a bridge between the demands of journalists

and institutions. I won't just reproduce what you send me" (Newspaper, private, I-38). The journalist insisted: "You don't have to be a shield. A press officer is not a shield" (Newspaper, private, I-38). This is where news-making and corporate gatekeeping clash once again.

3.2.3. A corporate chaperon, really?

For most journalists, working with a PR firm boils down to asking for sources. One interviewee described it as follows: "If we need to talk to a psychologist, for instance, then we contact the press office of the main Psychologists Association and ask for someone there" (Radio, private, I-31). Usually, once the contact has been established, the job of the Press Officer is done. This key function is paramount for journalists: "Communication offices can provide you with a much more accurate profile, almost tailor-made, according to what you're looking for, as they have a large range of contacts" (Radio, private, I-31). Hence, they become a bridge between journalists and sources: "I'd rather work with them than without them," said one journalist specialized in the arts. She considers them "a very effective source".

Yet the problem arises when the press officer goes beyond making the connection between the two sides — journalists and experts — and also supervises the outcome of the meeting. This tends to be the case in public organizations, especially those related to law enforcement. A senior journalist who works for the press and for television described what has become routine: by requesting permission from local police officers to be embedded in a night patrol, the communication office understands that the norm is to send someone from the department with her. She considers this an unnecessary mediation practice: "It's not about supervising or anything, but I feel it's nonsense, a childish behaviour" (Newspaper, private, I-3), for it "inhibits and conditions" the source in front of the journalists, killing all spontaneity.

3.3. Content creators: new stakeholders to be taken into account

Do freelancers or "content creators" with large audiences but no legacy media behind them have different experiences? Are they journalists? This depends. Some of them are quite sure that they're not, although they are aware of the distinctions: "The line between a journalist and a content creator who uploads videos to YouTube or has a podcast is very fine" (New media, private, I-21), said Magí G. Vidal, a scriptwriter on a comedy radio show about FC Barcelona and perhaps, in this case the tag "radio show" is an understatement because they stream on different platforms and do a weekly live show. Furthermore, in their Instagram account they define the programme as "a sports show, 100% free of journalists."

So where is the confusion? Vidal explains: "We're not journalists, because we don't report news about Barça. Everyone already knows what we're talking about" (New media, private, I-21). But the minute you break a headline, then you do start to inform, and that's basically a journalist's job, by definition.

In some cases, if the streamer has a journalistic background and experience the confusion is more than settled. In fact, they demand equal treatment. Gerard Romero, a journalist who has become a heavy content creator of the interactive live streaming service Twitch, said "I ask that the clubs, the league, the federation don't see us as 'twitch channels,' but as information channels" (New media, private, I-29). His argument is strong: "We're a very large community and it's proven that we have the ability to be a first source, we get exclusives and provide first-hand information. Finally, I have contacts from when I worked at Barça and I often communicate directly with the PR team" (New media, private, I-29).

So in this case, the angle is quite different from that of the comedy show. In fact, the scriptwriter doesn't recall ever being contacted by a PR firm. At least not for the radio show because he is also a regular collaborator on a public television show that explains news from a satirical point of view which does get corporate attention: "Often when the phone rings it's a communication office that wants us to discuss something in particular or try to get a guest to have some screen-time with us" (New media, private, I-21).

3.3.1. The football bunker

And yet, there's one criticism that these two new media flag-bearers share with conventional journalists, "the bunkerization of soccer players" as they called it, and which stands for the barriers the corporate teams established between football players and the media (regardless of their nature). The Twitch-broadcaster Gerard Romero considered it an outrage (New media, private, I-21); the other, the comedian podcaster on La Sotana, a bump in the road to be avoided (New media, private, I-29); for many of the sports journalists interviewed, it is an ongoing reality.

The different treatment depended on the size of the club, as one reporter said (Newspaper, private, I-8). In the case of big clubs, there's more distance. Journalists subscribe to a database from where they get all press releases directly in their in-box; in smaller clubs the relationship can be closer as journalists follow them on a daily basis, which makes it all much simpler — fewer e-mails and more direct conversations.

However, distance isn't only related to the frequency of the coverage but to geographical factors. This is the case of Barcelona-based journalists when dealing with football clubs in Madrid: "I don't want to say they shut you out, but they make it less easier to contact the players, less access to dressing-room issues or even press conferences" (Newspaper, private, I-8).

The personality of journalists is also important. For those seeking prominence, as one journalist put it, going to a press conference can be worth it. In his own words: "If you feel that you'd like to be there and play more of a leading role, you need to go to the ground. But if you'd rather go unnoticed, then approach the PR team, which is more of a closed circuit" (New media, private, I-29).

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The general and most important conclusion of this paper is that regardless of their self-perception, journalists share a common ground on what not to do when dealing with PR practitioners professionally. If the chief communication officers had rules concerning the mission of their office (DIRCOM, 2014), this research presents a series of recommendations from the point of view of journalists.

4.1. The ten commandments of PR practitioners according to journalists

1. Never forget to double check. Whatever channel you use to contact a journalist, a second confirmation is required at least 50% of the time, as proved by the data.

2. Do not take journalists for a ride. The main idea is to desist from selling advertisements as editorial content. Be straightforward about your intentions.

3. Do not promise media coverage in vain, as some PR agencies reportedly do with their clients.

4. Do not ignore non-conventional media (and their audiences). If what you are looking for is publicity, take all channels and content creators into consideration.

5. Do not try to be a shield. In other words, do not set up unnecessary barriers between sources and journalists.

6. Do not spam journalists. If you want your e-mail to be read, think twice before sending it.

7. Do not abuse press conferences. Make them count. Even better: newsworthy.

8. Do not cut and paste. Journalists notice and it affects your credibility.

9. Be aware of the news-making routines. Previous experience as a journalist is a plus when working on the corporate side. Following the Star Wars metaphor, "Darth Vader, hire your son!".

10. Do not neglect your social networks. These are prime material for journalists.

These ten ideas emerged from the forty in-depth interviews and became a pattern. It was quite clear that journalists demanded respect for the news-making cycle. "Should not bother me after office hours", or "afternoons" or "holidays", could have also made it to the list. And even though reporters aren't usually "morning people", mornings are the most suitable time slot to send out corporate information.

From the overall sample of interviewees, two out of forty were from the corporate communication departments of the chosen media. Despite being outside the framework of the research, their understanding of the job and its conflicting values between corporate and journalistic information proved insightful. The press officer of a public television channel, for instance, claimed never to have received any kind of pressure: "In a joint communication action we coordinate professional aspects that suit us all, related to the format or the writing," (TV, public, I-5) but nothing else, she stated. From her point of view, pressuring a journalist has nothing to do with having high standards. Researchers consider this an angle for future research: introducing the vision of the corporate world into journalism.

It is obvious that for most journalists, dealing with a PR firm is just a fact. At this point we can fairly say that the much debated change-of-lane narrative between journalists and PR practitioners has softened into a two-way street idea. One senior reporter is quite clear about it: "What I do know is that journalism as a profession cannot be understood without the corporate side" (Digital media, private, I-32). And this leads to one conclusion — that the dark side is not that dark after all, an idea that is reinforced by the results of RQ2; almost 70% of those questioned considered their relationship with PR professionals a win-win, followed by "antagonistic, but not inherently bad" and a similar percentage considered it to be a "disseminator of objective information".

Dependency, of course, changes according to the seniority of the journalist. PR firms reached out more often to a journalist who had over twenty years' experience when she was a trainee, kicking off her career at the Spanish private news agency Europa Press. "At that time, I was more steadfast. I went after them more", she said. "I was younger and had less experience" (Digital media, private, I-32). As years pass, the relationship moves to a point where both sides could be considered opposing teams. The more experienced you are, the more you clash with the corporate side.

The perception is that the technological revolution and the emergence of new digital media have added new layers of complexity to PR actions that seek increasing notoriety. For the time being, nobody has been replaced but new competitors have appeared with a will to stay.

In the Star Wars saga, the Empire takes over the universe. Is this also the case with corporate communication? Are PR practitioners taking over the news? And if so, how are they doing it? Such questions remain for future students to answer, if they choose to, because reality suggests a downfall of journalism as a university degree: "The gradual decline in tuition and in access qualifications and the low satisfaction of graduates are some of the indicators that point to a situation concerning the state of university studies in Journalism in Spain which, while not alarming, is at least worrying" (Martínez-Nicolás, 2023).

One of the problems is the curricula design, of course, "a degree anchored in a strictly media-based conception of journalistic activity" (Martínez-Nicolás, 2023) "and in the transmission of a 'journalistic ideal' that graduates are unable to put into practice when they enter the labour market". Perhaps, for once, corporate communication is willing to change roles and become the hero for a day. As an example, in 2014 the Blanquerna School of Communication and International Relations — the first private course of such studies established in Barcelona — added Corporate Communication to the classic denomination of its degree in Journalism, enabling students would to graduate with a complete set of tools to work in any of the two lanes.

Fifty of them took part in this research and found it hard to fully understand the values associated with journalism, even with the help of a legendary saga. The reasons for this could inspire a whole new research, but definitely speak for the transformation of the morals and ethics once associated with journalism. "What may be required", says Lewis (2019), "is nothing less than a complete rethinking of what journalism is and why it matters". This is the real problem that has to be solved.

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