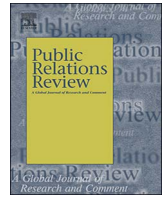




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Journalists and public relations practitioners: Comparing two countries

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ABSTRACT

The existence and nature of conflict between the journalists and public relations practitioners has sparked a lot of interest in both academic fields. In a study conducted in 2016, we examined some elements of the relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists in Croatia.

In this study we extend our previous research into another country – Serbia, and compare the results. Comparing the attitudes of Croatian and Serbian practitioners is essential for the expansion of public relations in those two countries, as well as for the development of global principles. The main goal of this study was to explore the relationship between the Serbian journalists and public relations practitioners. We used the coorientational model to analyze the perceptions and cross-perceptions of journalists and public relations practitioners on their role in organizational reputation building. Our results showed that the difference between the Croatian and Serbian practitioners is not in the general direction, but in the intensity of the connection. This means that the trends which exist among the Croatian public relations practitioners and journalists also exist among their Serbian colleagues, but that the level of understanding is different. In this study, both the journalists and public relations practitioners believe they have a significant influence on the organizational reputation. Both groups showed a certain level of pluralistic ignorance of the other side.

The results of this study have pinpointed some interesting similarities as well as significant differences between the two groups of practitioners. Even though the trends in Croatia and Serbia are similar and show an increasing understanding between public relations practitioners and journalists, Serbia has quite an unhappy group of journalists and a very confident group of public relations practitioners. We have confirmed the findings suggesting that the situation has improved and that the animosity has been on the decline, but Serbia still has a long way to go. Just as we concluded in our previous study the only way forward in further improving this relationship is by educating the journalists about the specifics of the public relations practice and by raising the level of how each of the fields perceives the value of their own efforts.

1. Introduction

Historically, the relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners has always been complex and ambiguous, characterized by cooperation and clash at the same time (Charron, 1989). Even today, the two fields retain an antagonistic

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relationship (Wilson & Supa, 2013). The existence and nature of conflict between the fields has sparked a lot of interest in both academic fields (Shin, Cameron, & Cropp, 2006) while the growing interdependence of public relations and journalism keeps raising the issue of how both fields perceive and evaluate each other (Neijens & Smit, 2006). Most of research on the topic has been focused on Western Europe and North America (Mellado & Hanusch, 2011). However, other regions of the world justify a (potentially) different conceptualization of the relationship, based on specific societal influences and various development levels of both fields. In a study conducted in 2016, we examined some elements of the relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists in Croatia (Tkalac Verčič & Colić, 2016). As in the most developing public relations environments, the majority of communication practitioners still have a journalism background which dictates the way they perceive and perform their everyday duties (Tkalac Verčič, 2014). In the original study we tried to answer the two main questions. First, we conducted a correlation analysis between the level of satisfaction with the working conditions of each group and their perception about the other practice. Contrary to our predictions, the correlations were neither negative nor significant. Second, we analyzed the perceptions of the two fields by using the coorientation model. Both groups of practitioners demonstrated pluralistic ignorance of the other side. The results of the described study suggested that there are fewer differences between the Croatian public relations practitioners and journalists than expected (Tkalac Verčič & Colić, 2016). In this study we extend our previous research into another country – Serbia, and compare the results.

1.1. Journalists and public relations—a complicated relationship

It seems that the problem of overestimating the value of media relations as a part of public relations is universal around the world (Tkalac Verčič & Colić, 2016). Even though media relations represent only a tactical element of the strategic communication practice, they are often its most visible part. Journalists everywhere seem to be particularly prone to equating public and media relations (Shaw & White, 2004). New directions in media development make it even harder to differentiate between journalism and public relations and this complicates the relationship further (Jo, 2003).

Despite the strategic management role responsible for the cultivation of good relations between an organization and its strategic constituencies – stakeholders and publics, many of them, particularly journalists, consider public relations to be just another name for publicity, as it is often the only public relations function with which a journalist has any personal contact (Shaw & White, 2004). Journalists believe that their status, ethics and skills are greater than those of public relations practitioners. The reason for this negative perception of communicators can be connected to their role as advocates with hidden agendas, who withhold information and compromise on ethics (Ryan & Martinson, 1988). Among various reasons for potential conflict, researchers have proposed unsatisfying job conditions and journalists' envy of public relations practitioners (Yun & Yoon, 2011), as well as communication practitioners' higher salaries and higher job satisfaction (Sallot & Johnson, 2006). A study conducted among journalists in Sweden shows that journalists have a negative attitude towards other journalists who start working as communication practitioners (Fredriksson & Johansson, 2014). Negative attitudes toward public relations are based in the educational process and in particular, the undergraduate textbooks studied by the journalists containing texts that are biased against the public relations practice (Cline, 1982).

As journalists are becoming more dependent on information subsidies (Jo, 2003), it is even harder to differentiate between journalism and public relations. The term “information subsidy”, created by Gandy (1982), labels the type of access to information that does not involve high cost of effort for the receiver (Tkalac Verčič & Colić, 2016). It is the role of public relations practitioners to provide information subsidies to journalists and the media (Curtin, 1999). Since public relations practitioners provide information subsidies to the media on behalf of their clients to influence the media agenda and potentially affect public opinion, the news media use more public relations information subsidies to contain costs and increase profits (Curtin, 1999). These activities of public relations practitioners and news agencies result in building and shaping the public agenda content in the national and local news media. Some studies show that the proportion of news that comes from press releases reaches more than 75% (Tkalac Verčič & Colić, 2016). Davies (2009) reports on a study in which 60% of the stories that were reported in five of Britain's best newspaper came (at least partially) from public relations agencies or wire copy. A study by Lewis, Williams, Franklin, Thomas, and Mosdell (2008) suggests that 19% of newspaper stories and 17% of broadcast stories come mostly (or even exclusively) from public relations and less than half the stories were entirely independent of public relations. Blessing and Marren (2013) call this the “the PR-ization of the media.”

Additionally, as multiple studies report (DeLorme & Fedler, 2003; Sallot & Johnson, 2006; Yun & Yoon, 2011) journalists are occasionally unhappy with their own position, especially in comparison to public relations practitioners. As DeLorme and Fedler (2003, p. 102) state: “journalists are burned out, fed-up, and pissed-off”. They add how the level of stress, low pay and long hours have always been a problem for journalists, amplified by current trends in their profession that cut costs and reduce staff. So it seems, not only are public relations and journalism often seen as two sides of the same coin, but public relations is occasionally seen as the “rich and powerful cousin” (Evans, 2010, p. 31). Sissons (2012) reports concern over research evidence that public relations has an increasing influence over journalism so much so that journalists are losing their agenda-setting role.

In spite of the abundant evidence on the complicated relationship between the two fields, the fact remains that most studies have been conducted in North America and Western Europe. This leaves a big gap in our understanding of how to apply the existing knowledge in other cultural contexts (Mellado & Hanusch, 2011). Since public relations as a practice (just as journalism) is under the significant influence of culture and the political system within which it operates (Sriramesh & White, 1992) it is important to broaden the focus on different parts of the world.

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