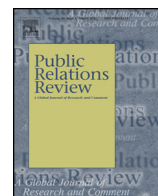




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Journalists and public relations specialists: A coorientational analysis

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ABSTRACT

Journalists and public relations professionals have had a difficult, interdependent and always complicated relationship. In spite of their differences, the growing dependence of both professions on each other once again raises the question of how journalists and public relations professionals perceive and evaluate each other. Here, we examine various elements of this complex relationship. Our research was aimed towards answering two main questions. First, we conducted a correlation analysis between the level of (dis)satisfaction with working conditions of each group and their perceptions about the other profession. We expected these correlations to be negative and significant, but this did not prove to be true. In spite of the conventional wisdom that there is a love-hate relationship between the two professions, this study shows that maybe it is time to reevaluate this assumption. Second, we used the coorientational model to analyze the perceptions and cross-perceptions of journalists and public relations experts on their role in organizational reputation building. Both professional groups showed pluralistic ignorance of the other side. It also seems public relations specialists underestimate journalists' opinion of the communication profession. They seem to perceive the relationship as more adversarial than it really is. Our results fall in line with some of the more recent studies on the journalist–public relations relationship and actually suggest that there are fewer differences between the two groups than assumed.

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1. Introduction

In a rapidly changing media landscape, the question is—how are technological, economic and political developments affecting journalism and public relations? Some scholars predict that such changes of position present a threat to the communications field in general (Mellado & Hanusch, 2012). Here we try to explore this issue further.

Journalists and public relations professionals have had a difficult, interdependent and always complicated relationship. The old, often mentioned statement that journalists treat public relations with contempt still seems relatively common. While public relations as a profession shows growth in many areas, journalists are having a hard time with increased work hours, decreased salary, lowered status, job satisfaction and burnout (Yun & Yoon, 2011). Some authors believe that this type of work environment adds to their antagonism towards public relations (DeLorme & Fedler, 2003; Yun & Yoon, 2011). On the other hand, it is possible that these negative opinions have roots in the differing goals, incompatible values and conflicting

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Table 1

Pearson correlations between journalists' statements about their working conditions and their opinion of the public relations profession.

	How would you rate the public relations profession (on a scale from 1 to 5)?
How satisfied are you with your job?	0.03 (p = 0.769)
Do you believe public relations specialists, on average, have a higher salary than journalists?	0.091 (p = 0.402)
Do you believe that public relations experts are usually under less stress at work than journalists are?	0.042 (p = 0.678)
Do you believe that public relations experts have better working conditions?	0.04 (p = 0.698)

ethics of the two professions (Mellado & Hanusch, 2012). While there is some evidence of similarities in professional values (Curtin, 1999; Nejiens & Smit, 2006), other studies have shown that public relations practitioners are less negative about journalists (Nejiens & Smit, 2006).

However, in spite of their differences, the growing dependence of both professions on each other once again raises the question of how journalists and public relations professionals perceive and evaluate each other (Nejiens & Smit, 2006). Are journalist's views of public relations professionals really as negative as previous research shows? Are public relations practitioners more positive in their perceptions of journalists? It seems that lasting issues of both professions feeling misjudged could be reduced by a higher level of understanding and knowing each other better. There have been a few studies which applied coorientational theory to test public relations practitioners' and journalists' views toward each other (Shaw & White, 2004; Stegall & Sanders, 1986; Yun & Yoon, 2011). Here, we propose to build on some of these studies and examine various elements of this complex relationship. How do public relations professionals perceive journalists and vice versa? Is their view of the other profession connected to their own job satisfaction? How do both professions perceive their influence on the reputation of various organizations and how do they estimate the influence the other profession has?

2. Literature review

2.1. Journalists and public relations practitioners—friends or foes?

The value of media relations as a part of modern public relations is largely overestimated. From the public relations perspective, media relations as a tactical function is only a small part of the strategic communication profession. Even though relating with the media is often the most high profile part of public relations, it would be unfair to reduce it only to that. For journalists however, it is often one and the same—they don't seem to perceive that there is anything else public relations specialists do other than relate with the media, often badly (Shaw & White, 2004). This perception shapes the way journalists view the public relations profession. According to Davis (2003) the growth of public relations will make it even harder to differentiate between journalism and public relations, while journalists are becoming more dependent on information subsidies (Jo, 2003).

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. It is the role of public relations specialists to provide information subsidies to journalists and the media (Curtin, 1999). This allows public relations practitioners to affect public opinion and participate in agenda building. There are many studies that give an assessment of the proportion of news that come from press releases (Maat & de Jong, 2012; Tkalac Verčič & Mueller, 2007; Sallot & Johnson, 2006; Cameron, Sallot, & Curtin, 1997) and these estimates reach more than 75% (Macamara, 2002).

Under the right circumstances communicators can become trusted sources and have the role of "journalists in residence" (Curtin, 1999). Conversely, Jeffers (1977) found that journalists view public relations professionals as an obstruction to their quest for truth. They also 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 (Turk, 1986). Additionally important for our study, hostility could be traced to journalist's perception that practitioners tend to have higher salaries and higher job satisfaction (Nayman, McKee, & Lattimore, 1977; Yun & Yoon, 2011). As Yun and Yoon state (2010, p. 307):

"There must be something irrational and emotional in journalist's attitude beyond a rational assessment of the quality of media relations: something similar to the feeling of a legitimate child for its younger bastard sibling. In this sense, journalists may clearly 'hate and envy up close' public relations practitioners as their occupation has been on the decline, plagued by job-related problems, while public relations have been on the rise. This unique occupational psyche, resulting from frustration and envy, is seen as the cause of media negativity."

As DeLorme and Fedler (2003) noted, the origin of journalists own problems goes back to late 19th century. They described journalists as: "chronic complainers, forever griping about their long hours, low pay, stress, insecurity, and unpleasant assignments" (2003, p. 114). Various authors underlined the possibility that jealousy fuels journalists' negative perceptions (Nayman et al., 1977; Tilley & Hollings, 2008) because they "resent the higher salaries and better working conditions they perceive practitioners to enjoy" (Sallot & Johnson, 2006, p. 157).

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