



Media relations in Catalonia: A co-creational approach

Las relaciones con los medios en Cataluña: Una aproximación cocreacional

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Resumen | Partiendo del informe FAPE 2006, que realizó la Federación de Asociaciones de Periodistas de España (FAPE), el propósito de este artículo es ofrecer cuál es la valoración de los periodistas de sus relaciones con los profesionales de las relaciones públicas en la comunidad autónoma de Cataluña (España). Se analizaron las entrevistas cuantitativas (cuestionarios) y en profundidad realizadas a 68 periodistas catalanes y se investigaron las valoraciones de los periodistas sobre los subsidios informativos. Se observa que los periodistas catalanes demandan unos estándares profesionales alejados de la actuación unidireccional de los profesionales, y, por consiguiente, más cercanos al enfoque cocreacional de las relaciones públicas. Se trata, pues, de unas necesidades que no son tan evidentes en investigaciones similares realizadas en otros países. .

Palabras clave: Relaciones con los medios, relaciones públicas, comunicación cocreacional, Cataluña.

Abstract | Using as a basis the FAPE 2006 report, compiled by the Spanish Federation of Journalists' Associations, we offer journalists' assessment of their relationships with public relations professionals in the Autonomous Community of Catalonia (Spain). We analyzed quantitative interviews (questionnaires) and in-depth, conducted with 68 Catalan journalists regarding their relationship with public relations practitioners and investigated their assessments of information subsidies and contact preferences. We observe that Catalan journalists demand professional standards which are distanced from the one way practice of public relations practitioners, and consequently closer to the co-creational approach to public relations. Needs which are not so obviously found in similar research conducted in other countries.

Keywords: Media relations, public relations, co-creational communication, Catalonia.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, public relations scholars have become interested in relationships between practitioners and journalists from different perspectives: journalists' assessments of public relations subsidies (Sallot & Johnson, 2006a, 2006b), journalists' contact preferences (Sallot & Johnson, 2006a), influences in news selection (Kim & Bae, 2006), the nature of the relationship according to national cultural values (Berkowitz & Lee, 2004; Jo & Kim, 2004) or perception between the parties involved in the relationship (DeLorme and Fedler, 2003; Neijens & Smit, 2006; Sallot & Johnson, 2006b). Two important studies have also been published in Spain in recent years: the report by the Spanish Association of Public Relations and Communication Consultants (ADECEC, 2008) and the report by the Spanish Federation of Journalists' Associations (FAPE, 2006). The ADECEC report constitutes a structural analysis of public relations activity in Spain. The FAPE report analyzes key elements of public relations practitioner-journalist relationships. However, both reports constitute merely a gathering of data and include no type of conclusion.

Of the four models of the public relations practice proposed by Grunig and Hunt (1984), only the press agency/publicity model is asymmetrical and based on one way communication. In this model practitioners act as propagandists and professionals of disinformation. They disseminate information regarding their clients which is often incomplete and distorted. Grunig and Hunt's models are not exclusive, however. Thus, press agency and persuasion are not inherently asymmetrical. As Deatherage and Hazleton stated:

"Publicity may in fact be used as an ethical and legitimate means for making publics aware of information. The effectiveness of publicity is dependent upon the perceived independence of the news media. The fact that most publicity is rejected and goes unused would tend to support this position" (1998, p. 69).

In the same sense, Zoch and Molleda (2006) pointed out that public relations has expanded well beyond the concept of one-way press agency.

On the other hand, research into Grunig and Hunt's public relations models (1984) beyond American borders identified personal influence as a fifth model of public relations (Sriramesh, 1992, 1996). Qualitative research has identified the personal influence model in India, Greece, and Taiwan (Grunig et al., 1995). With this model, practitioners attempt to establish personal relationships -friendships, if possible -with key individuals in the media, government, or political

and activist groups. Practitioners in the three countries referred to relationships with these key people as "contacts" from who favors can be sought.

This role has also been analyzed in other countries. In her research on media relations in Croatia, Taylor (2004) highlighted the important role of relational communication in that country and others in Eastern Europe. In Russia, for instance, practitioners cultivate personal relationships with the media to ensure that their campaign gained media coverage. Taylor (2004) refers to research by Tsetsura (2003), according to which local journalists prefer "to base their stories on face-to-face communication with public relations practitioners" (p. 316). The same happens in other countries in the region, such as Bulgaria (Karadjov et al., 2000), because in Eastern Europe countries "personal relationships between public relations practitioners and journalists, government officials, and others in positions to influence their organizations are crucial for organizational survival" (Taylor, 2004, p. 150). This type of media relations is also found in Asian countries, such as South Korea (Kim and Bae, 2006).

This idea of personal relationships is framed within the co-creational approach to public relations (Botan & Taylor, 2004), which differs from the functional approach. Indeed, the functional perspective is organizational-outcome oriented. In this approach, public relations is only the instrument through which the organization accomplishes its goals so media relations and information subsidies are central areas of practice.

In the co-creational perspective, on the other hand, publics are seen as cocreators of meaning and communication, as that which makes it possible to agree to shared meanings, interpretations, and goals. This perspective emphasizes the building of relationships with all publics. Dialogue theory is an example of co-creational research.

"The co-creational perspective places an implicit value on relationships going beyond the achievement of an organizational goal. That is, in the co-creational perspective, publics are not just a means to an end. Publics are not instrumentalized but instead are partners in the meaning-making process" (Botan & Taylor, 2004, p. 652).

From this standpoint, media relations practiced according to the personal influence model differ from the press agency model. However, a co-creational practice of personal influence is possible.

As Grunig et al. pointed out: "A personal influence model does not have to be asymmetrical, however. A symmetrical model of personal influence may exist—or it could be

created—that would be a valuable component of excellent public relations. Symmetrical personal relationships can be as important for individual public relations practitioners as are symmetrical organizational relationships with publics. For example, practitioners and their organizations benefit from trusting relationships with reporters or leaders of activist groups such as environmental or consumer organizations” (1995, p. 174).

The research in this article aims to show that things are changing, as similar studies in other countries and nations have demonstrated (e.g., Sallot & Johnson, 2006a; FAPE, 2006). The co-creational perspective is also being introduced in traditionally functional fields of public relations like media relations. Thus, our analysis and discussion of the results will allow us to show whether the situation in Catalonia is typical of a Western country in a globalized world where journalists and public relations professionals share similar routines. Or whether, on the contrary, Catalan media relations have their own individual characteristics.

2. MEDIA RELATIONS IN CATALONIA

The evolution of Spanish public relations to its current situation has been marked by the country's political evolution (Tilson & Pérez, 2003; Xifra & Castillo, 2006). One of the signs of this evolution was the advent of democracy in 1975 and, with it, the re-establishing of fundamental freedoms and rights, among which, the right to information stands out for its symbolism. This element has meant the growth of the information market and the development of gabinetes de comunicació (communication offices) as primordial sources of current information and primary parties in relations with the media (Ramírez, 1995). Catalonia has been the paradigm in this situation, especially since the 1992 Olympic Games were organized and held in Barcelona (Ramírez, 2007)..

It is clear to see the current importance of communication offices in Catalonia given that any information they provide fits with journalistic forms of production (Almansa, 2004). The use of these techniques has facilitated the placement of subsidies originating from communications offices. In this regard, a 1983 Swiss study compared the input of information at press conferences with the output of information that appeared in the media. The author of the study, René Grossenbacher, noted that the primary function of the media was reduced to compressing the input, a situation that allowed him to declare that anything that reaches “the media system via communication offices can have high ex-

pectations of being published without its message being altered, although it may be trimmed down” (Bentele 1992, p. 40) due to issues of space.

If we analyze media messages, we therefore find that a large part of its content comes from or is related to communication offices. This is proven by various studies conducted in Spain, which use the Catalan case as a model (e.g., Túnez, 1996; Castillo, 2001). These studies highlight the importance of communication offices in the communication efforts of any association, organization, public body, NGO, political party, union or corporation. Groups that wish to instigate effective communications policies will have to have their own communication office or contract the services of one.

Such a situation means that numerous journalists are able to take communications posts in this expanding industry. In short, organizational communication and communication offices have become “the active, organized and habitually stable sources of information that meet both the internal and external communications needs of those prominent organizations and/or persons who wish to transmit a positive image of themselves to society, thereby influencing public opinion” (Ramírez, 1995, p. 27-28).

In Spain, the main activity of public relations professionals, both in firms and in organizational departments, is media relations. According to the ADECEC report (2008), media relations is a key activity for 95.2% of Spanish professionals, and a complementary activity for 2.9%. Catalonia is no exception, as almost half of the practitioners interviewed of the ADECEC report are based in Catalonia.

3. HYPOTHESIS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study starts out from the hypothesis that there are no specific idiosyncratic features of Catalan culture to indicate that the situation of media relations is different to that of other nations and states, and therefore Catalan journalists' assessments of public relations subsidies and contact preferences are similar to those of other countries, in where the co-creational paradigm predominates. In order to validate or refute this hypothesis we have used the quantitative and qualitative questionnaires from the FAPE study (2006) for Spain and the indicators from the studies by Sallot and Johnson (2006a, 2006b).

In their research into journalist's assessments of public relations subsidies and contact preferences, Sallot and Johnson (2006a) established that there were principally two categories of data: perceived deficiencies in practitioners' subsidies,

and how journalists preferred to be contacted by public relations practitioners. Using this as a basis, we established the research questions listed below.

With regard to perceived deficiencies in practitioners' subsidies:

- *RQ1: What volume of public relations subsidies is received and how does this affect news values?*
- *RQ2: What is the quality of the received information?*
- *RQ3: What does the journalist do with the information received?*
- With regard to how journalists preferred to be contacted by public relations practitioners:
- *RQ4: Through which channels do journalists receive public relations subsidies from practitioners? And how many do they receive?*

4. METHODOLOGY

Over a period of two years, the author of this article and two research grant holders interviewed journalism professionals holding positions of responsibility in the mass media. That is, gatekeepers were interviewed with regard to their relationships with media relations professionals, understanding gatekeepers to be "journalists who routinely make decisions about content in news columns or on the air and who subsequently have regular contacts with public relations practitioners, review public relations subsidies for their usefulness and decide whether to use subsidies or not" (Sallot & Johnson, 2006b, p. 153).

The data gathering technique used was the computer aided telephone interview with a structured and closed questionnaire (multiple choice questions). Stratified random sampling was used on a database created exclusively for the purpose of selecting the sample. The stratification criteria were media type (newspapers, radio, television and news agencies) and geographical scope (national or local).

Sixty-eight interviews were conducted during the period from September 2006 to June 2008. Interviews were assigned proportionally. Thus, with regard to geographical area, we interviewed 48 (71%) journalists from the Catalan national media and 20 (29%) from the local media. In terms of mass media type, we interviewed 30 (44%) journalists from the printed media, 16 (24%) from radio, 13 (19%) from television and 9 (13%) from news agencies.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. Perceived deficiencies in practitioners' subsidies

• *RQ1: What volume of public relations subsidies is received and how does this affect news values?*

The volume of information subsidies received by one media varies according to its geographical scope, national or local, and also on the type of media.

With regard to press releases, the journalists interviewed declared that they received an average daily volume of 76. Distribution is not equal, however: newspapers and radio journalists receive fewer, an average of 69 and 56, respectively, whilst television and news agency journalists receive 87 and 101, respectively. However, the greatest difference is found in the geographical scope: the national media receive an average of 143 press releases from public and private organizations daily, whereas this figure falls to 57 for local media.

As Hong (2008) pointed out, writing and distributing news releases is considered to be one of the most frequently used public relations activities, with the goal of achieving publicity, communicating messages and influencing the media's agenda. Yet, not all news releases distributed to the media get published. Even among the news releases that are selected by journalists for publication, some receive more and more prominent coverage than others.

Research shows that the main reason editors and journalists reject news releases is due to the releases' lack of newsworthiness (Aronoff, 1976; Turk, 1986,). In addition, Hong (2008) has shown that among the selected news releases, the ones that are more newsworthy also receive greater amounts of coverage. In contrast, the newsworthiness of the selected news releases is not related to the prominence of their coverage. In the Hong's research, the lack of relationship found between the newsworthiness of news releases and the prominence of their coverage may be explained by journalists' predisposition to mistrust public relations practitioners and the information they provide (Cameron & Blount, 1996). Journalists' negative view of public relations could be preventing highly newsworthy news releases from getting the prominent coverage they deserve.

This speculation receives some support from Aronoff's (1976) study. His findings show that while almost half of the locally generated items came from public relations sources, only about one-fourth of the space in the newspaper devoted to locally generated news was accounted for by public relations material. He concluded that if space devoted to news stories is indicative of the importance of those stories,

then it would appear that journalists do not perceive news items from public relations sources to be important enough to receive prominent coverage as other news items do.

There is a difference between the number of press releases received and the number a journalist considers publishable. One journalist commented that “the higher the volume of press releases received, the higher the number rejected due to their not being considered usable for publication.” The percentage of press releases considered usable varies by media type. Radio journalists consider one in five subsidies they received to be usable, while television professionals only consider one in ten for publication.

Although it is not possible to conclude from this that the subsidies have a poor quality of writing, as demonstrated by Sallot and Johnson (2006a) in their study on the United States, we do observe a lack of messages being adapted to the type of media to which they are sent. One journalist said: “[Practitioners] draft one single press release which they then send to the different mass media, without considering that writing in audiovisual media is different to in the written press”. Another declared that “[Practitioners] always think of the written media when they write a story ... and visualize their message in the pages of a newspaper or magazine ... never on the radio or television”.

There are also significant differences with respect to geographical scope. Journalists in the national media only consider one in ten of the press releases they receive to be publishable. Other media receive far fewer press releases, an average of 57 per day, although these journalists state that one in every five has sufficient news value to be published.

These data provide evidence that it is easier to place stories in local rather than national media. As one local media journalist put it: “A local event with a high news value is not going to have any value for the national media, unless it has space available for news from that particular local community”.

• *RQ2: What is the quality of the received information?*

Several researches have shown that while journalists believe practitioners lack credibility because they are motivated by self-interests, there are surprising similarities between journalists and practitioners, such as shared news values (Aronoff, 1975; Kopenhaver, 1985; Kopenhaver et al., 1984; Sallot et al., 1998) and skills both groups must master (Curtin, 1999). The next results validate, from a general point of view, this.

The main complaint made by journalists with regard to information subsidies sent by public relations practitioners is related to the way in which the content is presented. Twen-

ty-six percent ($N = 18$) of those interviewed are of the opinion that information subsidies are not written with a journalistic mentality; 25% ($N = 17$) say that they are very “publicity-minded”; 22% ($N = 15$) state that they do not include sufficient information, and the same number of interviewees (15) says that they contain too much background. One journalist declared that “press releases are long and repetitive”. Another stated that “they are not sent to the right gatekeeper”. Another interviewee explained that “they are of little interest to the journalist... they lack objectivity and credibility... and they arrive late”. This last point is particularly cited by television journalists, especially local televisions, who have smaller news teams and need more time to plan their news coverage of a story which will need to be illustrated with images.

The principal defect highlighted by news agency journalists (significantly more than by journalists from other media) and journalists from the written press is the way in which press releases are written. The main complaints made by television journalists, on the other hand, are related to their excessively publicity-minded character and the scarce amount of information they provide. As one television representative interviewee explained: “I do not understand how some [media relations practitioners] send us press releases where the history includes a contact telephone number, as if it was a commercial”.

With respect to the stories that public relations practitioners communicate, 59% ($N = 40$) of the journalists stated that the most relevant element was its news value, 26% ($N = 18$) said that the organization that sent the information was most important, 9% ($N = 6$) said that source was the most important element, and just (6%, $N = 4$) cited that the context in which it occurred was most relevant.

These data suggest that if the information is in itself of real interest to the journalist, little importance is attributed to the person who sent it. This is related to the fact that when information is requested from an organization, the rigor and accuracy of the information received is the most important consideration, above and beyond the speed with which it is received and the quantity of information provided. During our in-depth interviews with journalists, we asked the question “Based on your recent experience and using a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is of no importance and 10 of maximum importance, what do you value most when you request information from private corporations or public institutions?” 76% ($N = 52$) of the journalists gave “rigor/accuracy” of information the maximum score (9 or 10).

If we look further into the importance of quality of information, most interviewees prefer rigor and accuracy to the information being hypothetically exclusive. One gatekeeper remarked: "In this situation, [rigor and accuracy of information compared to its being exclusive but with less rigor], rigor is always preferable, regardless of how important the exclusive might be for our newspaper". Another journalist said: "We cannot risk our credibility with public opinion in order to be exclusive... that would make us the gutter press".

Another aspect relating to the quality of the information that professionals receive from public relations practitioners is that of the credibility of the organization as a source of information. Interviewees were read out a series of possible sources from which they habitually obtain their public relations subsidies, in order for them to say which they believed to be most credible. As occurs in other countries (e.g., Sallot & Johnson, 2006a, 2006b), the responses obtained clearly demonstrate: 1) that journalists trust their personal contacts above all, and 2) the validity of the personal influence model.

After personal contacts, it is also clear that official sources and spokespeople have greater credibility when supplying stories relating to an organization than sources external to said organization. Many journalists agree with that stated by one of the first interviewees: "The higher the position occupied by the interlocutor, the greater credibility we award them."

With regard to possible errors, whether in the transmission of the information subsidy or in its publication, the ideal solution for the journalist is to attempt to resolve the problem in the most informal way possible. In answer to the question "When your media publishes an erroneous news item or data, how do you prefer to be approached with an explanation of the error and an attempt to find a solution?", 84% (N = 57) of journalists said "informally by telephone".

Despite the fact that much of the source-reporter American literature portrays journalist-practitioner relations as adversarial (Cameron et al., 1997), the data from this part of the study suggest that the idea of an ontological controversial relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists must be clarified. A series of co-orientation studies found that conflict tends to arise in these relationships in cases of journalists who are more conflict-oriented than practitioners (Shin & Cameron, 2004), and that journalists hold generally negative attitudes toward public relations practitioners and denigrate their , news values and professional status. The data of this research show that the situation is changing, at least in countries other than the United States..

RQ3: What does the journalist do with the information received? Following the structure of the FAPE report (FAPE, 2006), in this section of the study we address the following very diverse aspects: how journalists act when they receive an information subsidy that was not meant for them; newsworthiness of meetings with the press (in particular press conferences); journalists' opinion of press meetings, or how they decide whether or not to make the trip to cover a news item. The results of this section also confirm the idea that public relations practitioners-journalists relationship is not controversial by nature. Nevertheless, this relationship has to be adjusted in order to satisfy the professional needs of both parts of the relationship.

The journalists we consulted understand it is possible that an organization unintentionally sends them information that competes with another person or department. When this happens, almost all of the journalists consulted (96%, N = 65) declare that they do not leave the information "in the drawer", but rather make sure it reaches the appropriate gatekeeper. What is more, this is not a cause of annoyance, 93% (N = 63) stating that this hardly annoys them or does not annoy them at all.

A usual practice in Catalan organizations is that in addition to sending press releases to the media for their publication, journalists are invited to press meetings. However, the journalists do not always find these meetings to be of interest. In fact, one of every three meetings they are invited to is not perceived as being useful for their work. Among television journalists this percentage rises to half, which suggests how ill-prepared rooms and spaces where press conferences are held are for television cameras to capture images with the minimum quality criteria for their broadcast by television channels. This is another clear example of how Catalan public relations professionals focus primarily on journalists from the written press. As one television reporter commented: "It's not only that my cameraman can't find the right place to take the best shot, but in many press conferences we don't have a table prepared to record the sound." With respect to this, another journalist stated: "It is incredible that even today some spokespeople appear before journalists practically hidden behind a multitude of microphones."

Whether or not important figures are present at the event was not highly valued. The journalists interviewed were asked to imagine a hypothetical invitation to a press conference with four possible situations. The journalists were then asked to rate the importance of each on a scale of 1 to 10.

The situations were: 1) they would be allowed to obtain statements from the main parties; 2) they would be allowed to obtain complementary public relations subsidies to further develop the information; 3) they would be receive preferential treatment by either receiving more subsidies or a different perspective than the other journalists would, and 4) interesting and important figures would be present.

There was little difference in the importance attributed to the different situations, and it is difficult to conclude whether any one is significantly more important than another. Nevertheless, according to the scores obtained, the presence of important figures at the meeting was of the least interest (8/10). Quality of information once again stood out, measured here by the possibility of obtaining declarations from the main parties (8.6/10), complementary information (8.4/10), and more information or information from a different perspective from their colleagues (8.4/10). These data suggest that what journalists expect to obtain from a press meeting are quality subsidies, whether received directly from the main parties being provided different perspective than those received by other journalists.

We also asked the journalists whether they felt that they should always attend a press conference or only when they considered the subsidy to be supplied would be worth it. Sixty-six percent (N = 45) believed they should go to meetings only when the story was worth it, although we must not underestimate the 35% (N = 24) who believed that they should always go. The group with the highest percentage of journalists who responded that they should always go were from newspapers (40%, N = 12), and the lowest percentage corresponded to those who work in news agencies, with only 22% (N = 2). This is logical, given that the news agencies' role of primary information source obliges them to discriminate less among the stories they receive. One journalist from the EFE agency told us: "We cannot allow ourselves the luxury of selecting information, as this function must be carried out by the media gatekeepers to whom we supply stories."

Finally, we also the journalists to rate a series of conditions from 1 to 10 that might increase their interest in attending a meeting when it involves travel: 1) when the trip would be completed the same day (6. 1/10); 2) when the trip would take more than one day (4. 5/10); 3) when the trip would include free-time activities (4. 3/10); and 4) when the trip would takes place on the weekend (3. 1/10). The data obtained demonstrate that none of the four conditions we suggested resulted in a decisive increase in interest to attend.

Only the possibility of returning on the same day might en-

courage attendance at the press meeting. Including free-time activities, and particularly taking place on a weekend, appear to have the opposite effect, as one local journalist commented: "We cannot invest much time in attending meetings with organizations, as the media structure does not allow it." However, this also appears to be a problem that affects the national media. "We cannot invest more than one day in covering information that satisfies an organization's publicity needs," stated a gatekeeper from a national newspaper. "Stays of more than one day are reserved for journalists from the specialized media," said another.

This study also took an interest in the errors that public relations practitioners tend to commit when holding one of these events and the importance of different types of information subsidies offered at them.

From the journalists' point of view, there is no unique and principal error committed by public relations practitioners when inviting them to news conferences. A great variety of responses were obtained, depending on the type of media. For example, one of the most frequently mentioned problems was the "insistence/pestering" of journalists by public relations practitioners. However, although this error was mentioned by one in four journalists working for news agencies, it was not a problem for those who worked in television, as only 4% (N = 3) mentioned it, once again confirming that Catalan public relations practitioners only, or basically, think of the written press. It is not a case of treating written press media differently than journalists from the audiovisual media, but rather that very often the audiovisual media are not even considered for invitations press conferences. As one national radio journalist put it, "If we received the same number of invitations to press conferences as our colleagues in the newspapers and magazines, we wouldn't be able to cover even half of them."

Television journalists cite the organization of the event as a principal error, which is coherent with their complaint about the lack of preparation of the press rooms for filming. Regardless of the differences among the mass media, however, journalists' main criticism is that they offer "information lacking in news value." This was the opinion of 22% (N = 15) of those interviewed, while 13% (N = 9) considered "insistence/pestering" the worst aspect of their relationship with public relations practitioners, the same percentage as those who consider it to be "quantity of information."

Finally, we turn our interest to the materials and press kits supplied at press meetings, especially during press conferences. Journalists were asked what importance they awarded the following materials: audiovisual material, statistics,

statements, graphs or historical documentation. The most important are statements; the least important, graphs, as they do not interest the audiovisual media. Once again, there are differences according to the type of media. Thus, as could be predicted, audiovisual material is considered important (quite and very important) by 77% ($N = 10$) of television professionals, compared to 33% ($N = 3$) of agency journalists. Another clear example is found in graphs. Whilst they are important for 83% ($N = 25$) of press journalists, they are only important for 31% ($N = 5$) of radio journalists.

5.2. Preferred channels for receiving public relations subsidies (RQ4)

• RQ4: *Through which channels do journalists receive public relations subsidies from practitioners? And how many do they receive?*

The first point gatekeepers were asked for information about was the usual channel through which they received subsidies from public relations practitioners. The results show that although there was no single channel through which a mass media receives these subsidies, there was one that was dominant. Of all the channels used by media relations practitioners, the one they tend to use most is email—96% ($N = 65$) of those interviewed indicated this response.

Taking the importance of email into account, we asked journalists if they preferred to receive public relations subsidies to their own email address or at the department's generic email. The majority preference (60%; $N = 41$) leans towards the department's generic email.

Telephone calls and fax, surprisingly enough, considering its rapidly approaching obsolescence, are other channels media relations practitioners often use to send their news to the media (74% [$N = 50$] and 66% [$N = 45$], respectively). Sixty-eight percent ($N = 46$) of journalists also mentioned personal conversations, and 54% ($N = 37$) stated that one of the most common channels is the organization's website.

As Hiebert pointed out, "the new communication technologies can save democracy by restoring dialogic and participatory communication in the public sphere, thus reserving a role for public relations as two-way communication rather than propaganda and spin" (2005, p. 1). The results of this research show a new co-creational perspective in media relations, fostered by the growth in new technologies and bidirectional channels.

In their study on building dialogic relationships through the Internet, Kent and Taylor affirmed: "A dialogic loop allows publics to query organizations and, more importantly, it offers organizations the opportunity to respond to questions, concerns

and problems" (1998, p.326). In order to be able to develop a dialogic corporate website, organizations should dedicate sufficient resources for communication and feedback to facilitate dialogue between the organization and its publics.

This appears to be the situation facing Catalan journalists, as, although one in every three considers the websites of the organizations they have relationships with to be of little or no use, the rest are of the opposite opinion and believe that corporate websites are very or quite useful. News agency journalists are found to be the most critical in this regard (44% [$N = 4$] award it little or no utility). This suggests that corporate websites are slow to update, something clearly supported by one journalist from Spain's principal news agency, EFE: "As a traditional source of information, news agencies must access information as quickly as possible. This speed is achieved through communication [information subsidies] via the traditional channels, rather than by Internet."

Institutional websites from the public sector were considered the most useful for professional, according to 35% ($N = 24$) of those questioned. After this sector, but far behind, the next most useful were the "economic/financial" websites, which were mentioned as useful by 13% ($N = 9$) of journalists. As one journalist remarked, "a high degree of news transparency is demanded of this industry, and this can be seen when you look for them [information subsidies]."

With regard to the usefulness of the on-line press rooms some organizations include on their website, only television journalists agree by majority that they are of little or no use. For most of the other professionals they are useful or very useful for obtaining public relations subsidies (61%, $N = 42$). These data are a reflection of the lack of downloadable audiovisual materials in these online press rooms. One journalist said: "Only the large corporations include videos in their press rooms, although these are not VNR, but rather commercials or product videos".

Finally, we also asked journalists to declare their preferences and the credibility they award four different ways of transmitting information: press releases, press conferences, telephone conversation and personal interview. The personal interview is the preferred channel and the one awarded most credibility (one in every two journalists prefers it and awards it more credibility), followed by the press conference (35% [$N = 24$] and 24% [$N = 16$]), the press release (10% [$N = 7$] and 3% [$N = 2$]) and the telephone conversation (4% [$N = 3$] and 22% [$N = 15$]). Once again, the bidirectional dimension of press conferences is an element of the

journalists' need to maintain dialogic and co-creational relationships with media relations practitioners.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In their analysis of media relations in Korea, Kim and Hon (1998) pointed out that Korean practitioners using one-way models mainly focused on media relations because of the tradition of source-media collaboration under authoritative regimes in the country's developmental period. In Spain, however, despite the 40 years of the Franco dictatorship, the above reasons do not appear to affect Catalan practitioners who, as is true in other countries, make characteristic errors of the one-way practice of media relations. Despite this, however, Catalan journalists did not perceive practitioners to lack professionalism or to be deficient in the quality of subsidies on a number of counts, particularly when we compared this with similar studies conducted in other countries (e.g., Sallot & Johnson, 2006a).

The results and opinions arising from our research offer a more dialogic dimension of media relations in Catalonia than in other countries and nations. The relevance of one-way channels and the effectiveness of online press rooms demonstrate a trend to foster dialogic and interactive channels that form part of the public (media) relations co-creational perspective. This trend is also observed in the needs expressed by journalists, all of which are based on a mutually beneficial personal relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists.

Some media relations studies have related personal relationships with the idea of power distance (Hofstede, 1984). As Taylor pointed out in her research on Croatian public rela-

tions, a "related factor that may influence the development of personal relationships in the nations of the former East Bloc is the development of strong, personal relationships" (2004, p. 157). From this standpoint, personal influence may best characterize this relational strategy. The personal influence model proposed by Sriramesh (1992, 1996) is an example. Personal influence is based on a cultural variable of power distance. According to Hofstede (2004), Spain displays high levels of power distance in its social systems. The mean score for 39 countries on power distance is 51, and the score for Spain is 62. No studies have been done on the level of power distance in Catalonia, nor are there any specific features that would lead us to believe that this score would be very different.

The data suggest that journalists require a co-creational perspective of media relations. They demand media relations practiced through personal relationships and rich communication channels. These personal relationships may be based on long-standing friendships between journalists and public relations people or they may be cultivated over time through frequent and rich face-to-face communication and reciprocity.

Finally, the data also show that organizations practice a version of Sriramesh's personal influence model. Nevertheless, and this is also relevant, there is no significant evidence of any distrust existing between media relations parties. Journalists consider the primary mistakes made in public relations subsidies to be errors and not attempts at manipulation. This study has presented a new dimension that is more characteristic of the co-creational paradigm and this type of public relations practice, and therefore has extended public relations theory.

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