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# Public Relations' Influence on Croatian Media

## Is There a Difference Between the Opinions of Journalists and Public Relations Professionals?<sup>1</sup>

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### SUMMARY

*The relationship between public relations professionals and journalists has been a questionable one since the very beginnings of both professions; it is clear that they depend upon each other but at the same time lack mutual trust. Both sides believe that their professional standards differ considerably from other side's professional standards. Although a great number of researches into this relationship have been conducted in the world, this field has not been adequately researched in Croatia yet.*

*The main goal of this study was to analyze the relationship between Croatian journalists and public relations experts. Two questionnaires of the same type were used to assess the opinions of both sides and compare them to each other. The purpose of the research was to compare the points of view the two professions have on the influence of press releases on the media agenda – the major assumption being that both sides believe that this influence is considerable. However, the results revealed a somewhat different situation.*

*Although the journalist surveyed agreed that press releases have a certain influence on media agenda, in their opinion this influence is significantly lower than according to public relations professionals. Since the two professions*

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*surveyed are undeniably connected, it would prove useful to inform them more on the opinions of the other side in order to achieve better future collaboration.*

Key words: Croatian media, public relations experts, influence of public relations

## **Introduction**

The relationship between public relations professionals and journalists is historically referred to as a relationship of hatred and love, as well as of mutual dependence on one side and distrust on the other. Both sides believe that the other side has different standards when it comes to media agenda (Shin and Cameron 2005).

Numerous studies of this kind conducted in the world point to the fact that journalists agree with the public relations professionals on the assumption that their profession influences the media agenda (Sallot, Steinfatt and Salwen, 1998). It is however not entirely clear whether the two professions agree on the degree and normative aspects of this influence. Public relations professionals believe that by giving their voice to the client or to various interest groups they expand the market of ideas. At the same time journalists worry that in that way financially powerful clients could additionally limit the media space.

Interestingly enough, the mutual agreement on the degree of public relations influence on the media agenda would be of great use both to the public relations practitioners and the journalists. The first could use this demonstration of their power while explaining their contribution to the client, whereas the latter could lay additional stress on their role in asserting the rights of the general public to accurate information.

Although there has been a great deal of researches into different aspects of the interaction between the two professions (journalists and public relations professionals), such studies in Croatia are quite scarce. Therefore, the authors of this study considered it might be interesting to examine the relationship between Croatian journalists and public relations professionals. The study examines the questionnaire results whose purpose was to compare the opinions of journalists (i.e. editors) on one side, and public relations professionals on the other, on the public relations influence on press releases. The main purpose of the research was to compare the given opinions of both sides on the relationship mentioned in order to see whether they are in line with the existing stereotypes.

## **Media relations as a part of public relations**

The growing influence of the public opinion in shaping different social processes can be assigned to a considerable extent to the mass communications development. The mass media direct the public attention towards the global and local problems and issues, exposing the government institutions and commercial or-

ganizations to a thorough public analysis. The number of different media and media releases has increased in recent years to the extent that the competition for the audience attention is greater than ever, which encourages journalists in their constant search for interesting and sensational news and information (Cutlip, Center and Broom, 1999).

In a modern environment packed with different kinds of information, the public relations professionals are trying to convey their message by getting the attention and the interest of the general public and the possible audiences. One of the crucial elements in the process are the relations that communicators have with the media representatives, who convey the majority of messages. Since media relations are the basic part of public relations, the misconception that the public relations are nothing but media relations is quite common. Although the historical development of the discipline was based on attempts to have the organizations or individuals appear in the media as frequently as possible, today the media relations are considered to be only a part of the whole range of public relations programs (Grunig and Hunt, 1984).

According to Grunig and Hunt (1984), the central position of the media in public relations is connected to the "gatekeeper's role" that the media have earned in different social systems by controlling the information flow to the public. The gatekeeping theory represents one of the oldest theories of the mass communications research field. The psychologist Kurt Lewin (according to Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim and Wrigley, 2001) introduced the concept of the gatekeeper in his studies on social changes after the Second World War. According to the simplest conceptualization, the gatekeeping theory explains the process in which a great amount of potential news is filtered, shaped and distributed in the final form precisely by the mass media. This process is frequently referred to as a series of decisions used either to stop or to allow the flow of media messages, going from the source through journalists on to the editors through newspaper channels. However, the gatekeeping concept encompasses more than the mere choice of news, including both shaping and conveying the message. The gatekeeping concept in the mass communications can be defined as the overall process used to shape the social reality (Shoemaker and associates, 2001).

Even though the media, in other words journalists, do not represent the general public in the typical sense (the organizational procedures do not affect them with the same mechanisms as they do other audiences), Grunig and Hunt (1984) suggest that they should be approached as a specific audience. In other words, journalists, exactly like other audiences, receive and process information and pass it on to others, in this case to their own audience. Journalists' communicational behaviour therefore sets the limits of information available to other audiences, and in doing so it limits the possibilities of the general public to search and process the information. The assumptions mentioned lead to the conclusion that media relations are one of key functions of public relations, so their basic purpose can be brought down to helping the media inform the general public on an organization.

### **Influence of media relations on newspaper agenda**

Today scientists generally agree that media messages to a certain extent define the programme of the general public. In other words, with the help of media messages the relevant is distinguished from the irrelevant (Golan and Wanta, 2001). In doing so, public relations professionals try to define the media agenda contents; they try to influence the choice of newsworthy issues and the way in which the issues are shaped. Public relations professionals offer "raw material" necessary to journalists for creating news, but while doing so they choose the material that expresses their own point of view.

This role of practitioners provides them with a significant share in shaping the media picture of particular organizational issues or the organizations themselves, which makes it particularly important. The media presence affects the way in which the general public perceives some issues as important rather than the others. By doing so, as well as through public relations function, the public is "advised" on what to think about, so the relative importance on certain issues is established. Ignoring certain issues in the media is also a demonstration of public relations power, suggesting that those issues are not newsworthy (Katz, 1987). What the actual degree of public relations influence on the media agenda is remains unknown and as such it lays ground for numerous studies.

In literature there is a whole range of statistical estimates (or more commonly speculations) of the effects that public relations has on the newspaper agenda. Cutlip estimated in 1962 (according to Sallot, Steinfatt and Salwen, 1998) that 35% of the newspaper agenda comes from public relations. The same authors examine the results of the research into the influence of information brochures from Louisiana state agencies on daily newspapers in the state. Turk estimated that 51% of press releases end up published in the news. Martin and Singletary established that 59% of press releases linked to a certain organization find their way through newspaper articles (according to Sallot, Steinfatt and Salwen, 1998).

Morton (1995) quotes studies according to which less than a half of media releases sent were used in the creation of the media agenda. At the same time other authors sustain that this share is only 3% (Morton, 1995). Sallot, Steinfatt and Salwen (1998) quote the pilot study conducted in Minneapolis in which Schabacker found that the public relations sources were used in 24% to 51% of cases as press reports sources, in 12% to 13% as television reports sources, and in 10% to 16% as radio reports sources. Sandquist established that percentages of newspaper agenda created as a result of public relations vary from 40% to 46% in newspapers, from 9% to 12% on television and from 9% to 14% on the radio ( according to Sallot, Steinfatt and Salwen, 1998).

Sallot and Johnson (2006) established, while examining the relationship between journalists and public relations professionals, that according to journalists 44% of the media agenda in the United States of America is under the public relations influence.

However, all the studies mentioned emphasize the methodological problems in measuring "the influence" on journalists. Qualitative studies are yet to offer the reliable measures of public relations influence. Moreover, the empirical research

has to examine the qualitative aspects of ways in which the “informational support” is used by the print media.

The discussion on the public relations power and influence is important for all sides. At the root of the question as to how big the public relations influence on newspapers media and consequently on public opinion is, lies the journalists and public relations professionals' mutual relationship and perception of each other. A good example is Wright's research in 2005 in which he obtained relevant proofs of professional discrimination within public relations. 56.6% of public relations professors interviewed said that the presidents of their universities created certain stereotypes about the public relations. The results of the research also show that stereotypes are most strongly present among journalism professors.

The research conducted within the framework of the coorientational model (Shin and Cameron, 2005) showed a great degree of disagreement between the two professions. The coorientational analysis established that public relations professionals have a tendency towards cooperation, whereas journalists are more directed towards the conflict. Kopenhaver (1985) established that the estimates by journalists and public relations professionals of the newspaper articles value range coincide. However, journalists believe that public relations professionals deceive the general public to a greater extent than it is really the case. The research mentioned also showed that public relations professionals respect journalists more than journalists respect them.

Baskin and Aronoffu (1998) say that journalists have mostly negative attitudes towards public relations professionals. In a research they cite, a majority of journalists considered the journalism status to be superior to the public relations status. While ranking 16 different professions according to their status, journalism was placed on the first place, while public relations was on the last place. These research results mostly reflected the common attitude that public relations professionals manipulated the media, and that they were generally considered to be unreliable information source.

Morton (1995) mentions research results in which journalists, in 54% of cases, consider the media releases to be badly and nonprofessionally written. 75% of journalists believe that public relations professionals promote products that do not deserve to be promoted, while 62% of journalists believe that public relations draws attention to irrelevant and trivial events. At the same time public relations professionals (again) look at their relation with journalists far too optimistically. In other words, as many as 89% of public relations professionals believe that when it comes to spreading public information they have a partner-like relationship with journalists, whereas only 59% of journalists support that idea. The estimate of the public relations contribution is quite different in a lot of other questions as well (for example 84% of journalists mostly consider media releases to be hidden publicity against the 29% of public relations professionals who agree with that statement).

Therefore, although the number of studies directed towards the mutual relationship between journalist and public relations professionals is great, studies of this kind lack in Croatia. Public relations is a very young profession in this part of the world, but it is developing at a great speed. Since there is a substantial lack of

qualified professionals, public relations professionals are often recruited from the journalists' ranks. This is why we thought it would be interesting to assess the attitudes of public relations professionals and journalists towards some common issues.

### **Study goals and methodology**

The main goal of the study was to examine the journalists and public relations professionals' opinions on the influence of press releases on the media agenda. The research had both groups of subject fill in respective questionnaires of the same kind. The initial assumption was that both groups believed that the public relations influence on the newspaper agenda was great. The hypothesis of the research thus read:

Ho: There is not a significant difference in journalists and public relations professionals' estimates as to how much the press releases influence the contents of the media agenda.

The research was conducted by two questionnaires distributed through email during the January of 2006. People surveyed answered to one of the two variants of the structured questionnaires designed precisely for this study – a questionnaire for public relations professionals, and a questionnaire for journalists. The questionnaire prepared for public relations contained 17 questions, while the questionnaire for journalists contained 12 close-type questions. The questions used in questionnaires were chosen according to the concepts and scales used in academic and professional literature.

The choice of survey subjects was intentional (appropriate) and it included the public relations professionals on one side and journalists on the other. Currently in Croatia there are 4,000 active journalists (according to the Croatian Journalists Syndicate data), while there are 700 people working in public relations (according to the Croatian Public Relations Association data). The framework of the public relations survey subjects included all members of the Croatian Public Relations Association. The framework of journalists surveyed included all editor's offices of the print media in Croatia (according to the Press Cut list). The subjects' choice does not allow for generalizations, but it offers the starting point for further studies.

The questionnaire was sent out to email addresses of all the Croatian Public Relations Association members, as well as to all the print media editor's offices, according to Press Cut list. The questionnaire was placed on a special Web page, and the subjects were sent the page address and its code through electronic mail. In this way the people surveyed were guaranteed anonymity. 60 people employed in the public relations management of organizations throughout Croatia (a response rate of 8.5%) replied to the public relations professionals questionnaire. 45 journalists employed in different print media in Croatia (8.8%) responded to the journalists' questionnaire.

### **The research results among the public relations professionals**

Among the public relations professionals surveyed, 14 of them have been working in the public relations for less than 3 years, 18 of them for 3 to 5 years, 22 people for five to ten years, and 6 of the public relations professionals surveyed have been in this business for over than 10 years.

As many as 17 people surveyed think that public relations absolutely affects the contents of the media agenda. Additional 38 people surveyed think that public relations is more likely than unlikely to affect the contents of media agenda, while 13 of them believe that its influence is neither relevant nor irrelevant. The percentage of those who think that public relations is more unlikely than likely to influence the media agenda is merely 3%, (only 2 out of 60 people surveyed). None of the people surveyed thinks that there is no influence whatsoever on the media agenda. These claims are based on the media monitoring which is being carried out by as many as 58 people (97%).

Out of these 58 people surveyed, as many as 50 people monitor the media daily, 4 of them do it weekly or through projects. The ways of media monitoring are different; out of a total of 58 people who answered the question affirmatively, 28 of them say they monitor TV, the press, the Internet and radio, while 10 of them monitor TV, the press and radio, but not the Internet. 6 people surveyed monitor all the media except for radio, and additional 6 people monitor only TV and the press.

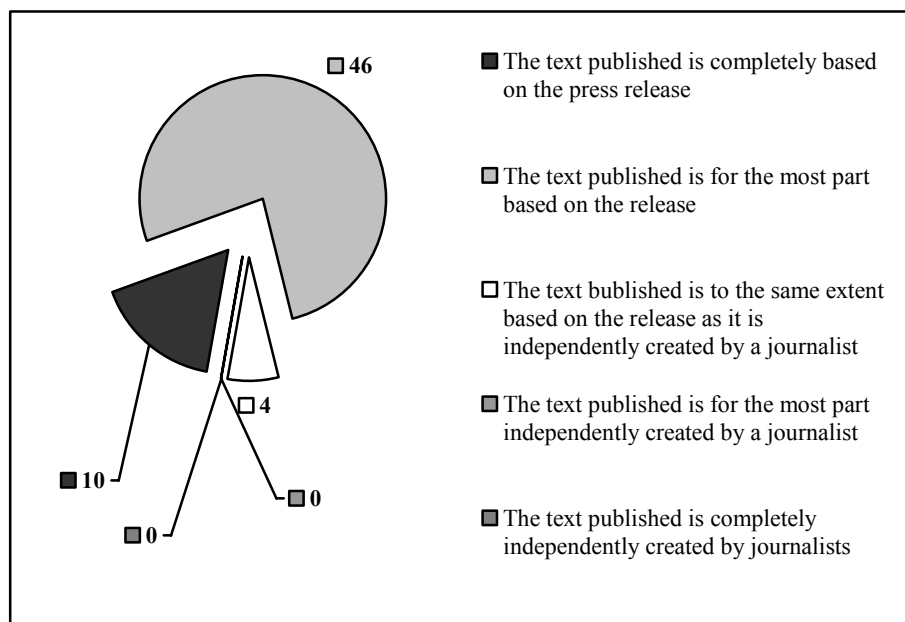
To the question whether they financially evaluate media releases, 40 of them say answer affirmatively, while others (18 people) answer in the negative. Out of the 40 people who stated they monitored media and evaluated them financially, 27 of them do it through projects, 8 of them do it on a half-year basis, a 5 people do it monthly. 12 people financially evaluate TV, the Internet, the press and radio, whereas 8 of them financially evaluate only TV and the press, and 6 of them evaluate only the print media.

To the question which media they achieve presence most easily in, the majority people surveyed, 39 of them, answer that it is the press; 12 say the Internet, 7 say the radio stations, while 3%, i.e. 2 people surveyed claim that they achieve broadcasting most easily on television.

To the question about the print media whose goal was to establish the most common extent to which the text of the press release sent and the text published afterwards in the same media coincide, most of the people surveyed answer that the texts are mostly based on the release, while as many as 10 people say that the texts are usually completely based on the release (Graph 1). The interesting remark is that none of the people surveyed think that the text published is completely or at least in part independently written by journalists.

Graph 1: Frequencies of the answer to the question "What is the extent to which the text of your press release sent and the text published afterwards in the print media coincide?"

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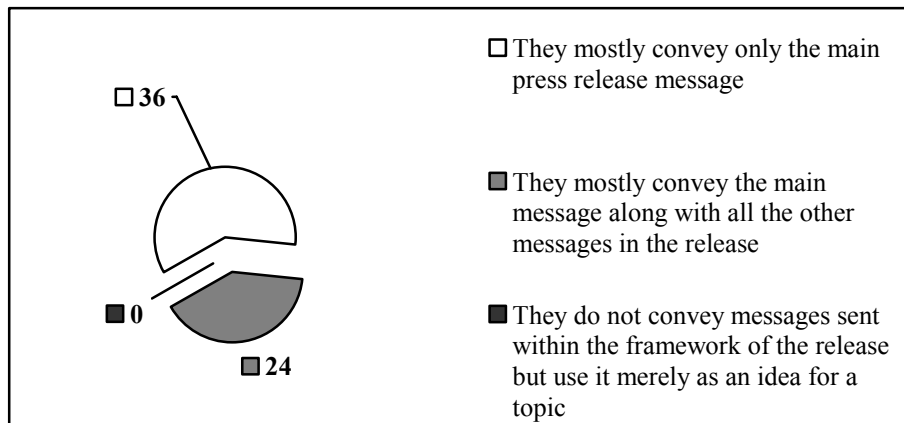
Most of the people surveyed think that media convey main messages distributed through press release, whereas a smaller number believe that they convey the main message together with everything else that was stated in it (Graph 2). Nobody considers that journalists use it merely as a good basis for a topic.

Public relations professionals see the contents and the clearness of the press release text as the top criteria for issuing press release information; at the second place they put exclusiveness of information within the release, the distribution time and the media choice. 39 people surveyed claim that it is by sending out the press release that the greatest presence in media is achieved. 8 of them mostly issue releases after briefings with journalists, while 6 of them issue press releases after informal meetings with journalists or after a press conference.

Of all the press releases that come out in the press, the public relations professionals are most pleased with those that come out in daily papers (40 people think so). 14 of them are most pleased with releases in weeklies, while 6 of them are most pleased with those in the monthlies. 40 people surveyed distribute one to two press releases a week; 13 of them distribute 3 to 5 releases a week. The people surveyed unanimously agree that press release is a useful information source for writing newspapers articles, and view it as public relations professionals' routine tool for informing the media on the organization news.



Graph 2: Frequencies of the answer to the question: "To what extent do the print media convey messages distributed through press releases?"



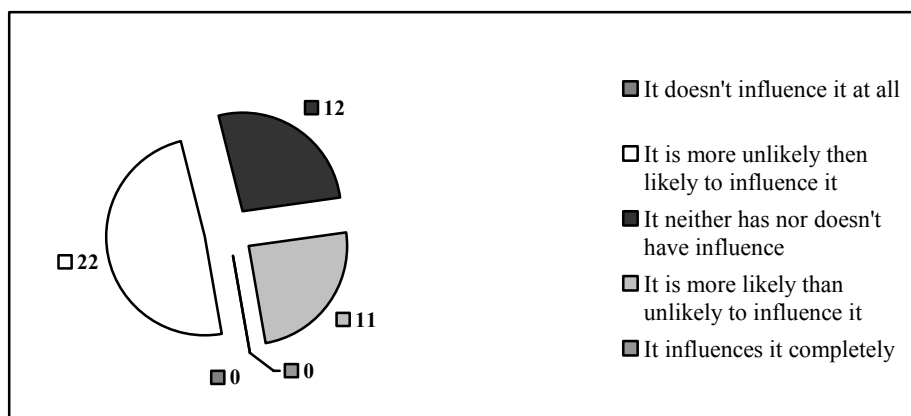
### Research results among the journalists

Among the journalists surveyed, most of them (24) have worked in journalism for over 10 years, 8 journalists have been in the business for five to ten years; 9 of them have worked in journalism for 3 to 5 years, and 4 of journalists have worked for less than three years.

To the question about the extent to which public relations influences the media agenda contents, none of the journalists surveyed think that public relations has no influence whatsoever on the media agenda or that it has all the influence for that matter (Graph 3). The largest number of journalists think that public relations influences the media releases contents more strongly than not.

To the question: "In what way do you shape the contents of your newspaper articles based on the received press releases?", journalists have responded in the following way: 31 of them say that they convey only the main message of the release, as few as 3 journalists say that together with the main message they convey all the other messages, while 11 journalists claim that they do not convey the message sent in the release but use it only as an idea for the newspaper article. Journalists use press releases primarily because it provides a good ground for the newspapers article idea (15 journalists surveyed). 14 people surveyed use the press releases at the marketing request in order to meet the requirements of the advertisers; 10 journalists use the press releases in the absence of other better topics. Only 6 journalists use press releases because of the exclusiveness of information that they offer.

Graph 4: Frequencies of the answer to the question: “To what extent does public relations influence the contents of a media release?”



In a press release, journalists appreciate contents and the clearness of the release text as the most important characteristics. Moreover, journalists also view the way of the release distribution as an important characteristic. The majority of journalists create newspaper articles based on an informal meeting with public relations professionals (25 of them do so). 12 journalists write the articles based on the press release received, while 8 do it after a press conference.

Table 1: Frequencies of public relations professionals' and journalists' responses as to what the influence of media releases on the media agenda is

	They don't influence at all	They are more unlikely than likely to influence it	They neither have nor don't have the influence	They are more likely than unlikely to influence it	They influence it completely	Total
PR professionals	0	2	12	32	14	60
Journalists	0	22	12	11	0	45
<b>Total</b>	0	24	24	43	14	

As many as 36 out of 45 journalists surveyed write 10 articles a month based on the press release, while additional 9 write from 10 to 20 of such articles. As far as the number of press releases is concerned, 21 journalists receive from 4 to 7 press releases a day. As many as 9 journalists receive over 15 releases a day. 24 journalists surveyed believe that press release is a useful information source for

making newspapers articles and consider it to be public relations professionals' routine tool for informing the media on the organization news. Nevertheless, a significant number of 21 journalists believe that it is linked to the attempt of manipulating the media.

In order to find an answer to the hypothesis put forward, an  $\chi^2$  test was conducted in order to establish the possible difference between the journalists and public relations professionals' estimates of how much the press release influences the forming of the media agenda.

From the results of the  $\chi^2$  test conducted a conclusion can be drawn that there is a statistically relevant difference between the estimates of the public relations professionals and journalists' as to how much media releases influence the media agenda; therefore the null hypothesis is rejected.

## Discussion

The main goal of this study was to examine the opinions that journalists and public relations professionals have on the influence of the public relations on the media agenda in Croatian media. The atmosphere of antagonism which exists between journalists and public relations professionals is implicit in the majority of technical and scientific literature in both areas. Both sides believe that that the other side exercises (unjustifiably) a great influence on the media agenda, while the standards of the media contents differ considerably between journalists on the one side and public relations on the other. Research of this kind conducted in the world established that the two groups of professionals agree on the fact that public relations exercises influence on the media agenda. The thing they do not agree on is the importance and normative aspects of this influence. (Sallot, Steinfatt and Salwen, 1998).

The research conducted replicates to a certain extent the similar researches conducted in the world. Although the journalists surveyed agree that public relations influences the media agenda, their estimate of the degree of this influence is considerably lower than the estimate of public relations professionals. Apart from the disagreement in this key issue, the survey pointed out to some other important disagreements between the two professions. To the question "To what extent do print media convey the messages distributed through press releases?", almost half the public relations professionals say that "they mostly convey the main message, but they also convey all the other messages in the release", while at the same time only three journalists agree with this statement. It is also interesting that almost half the journalists surveyed consider that press releases are an attempt to manipulate the media.

There are several possible explanations for these responses. Even though the tasks of public relations include much more than strictly media relations, Croatian practice shows that media relations are still the most "visible" part of the job. This explains why it is important for public relations professionals to show their employers the results of their own work, and they usually do so through the successful media presentation of their clients. By admitting their over exaggerated reli-

ance on public relations, journalists, on the other hand, admit their own lack of commitment to the tasks of their own profession.

Journalism and public relations are historically tied from the very beginnings of the public relations development. Today they often share the educational institution, but also their professional origin (in Croatia it is still quite common for former journalists to work in the public relations). The contiguity mentioned places even greater stress on the difference in the points of view between the sides. Journalists downplay the importance of their former colleagues, considering that they "have passed to the other side", while public relations professionals justify their work by claiming that they too inform and thus serve the general public.

The relationship between the journalists and public relations professionals (although this may not seem so at the first sight) actually represents the relationship of mutual dependence. Although journalists like to consider themselves independent of the information they get from public relations professionals, economic reality forces them to behave differently. According to Baskin and Arooffov (1988), numerous studies have established that the share of public relations in the total media coverage is more than 50%. In this research 80% of journalists stated that they write up to 10 articles based on press releases monthly; the other 20% stated that they write from 10 up to 20 such articles monthly. From the data cited it is possible to draw a conclusion that public relations in certain situations saves time and energy by offering information that would otherwise be unavailable.

The data mentioned stress that journalists and public relations professionals operate in a mutually dependant and reciprocally useful relationship, occasionally as collaborators who take part in the relationship each out of their own interest. Sometimes there is a possibility of the media manipulation by public relations, since they are the ones with resources and access control to the news source. On the other hand, a situation in which the media limit public relations professionals in their attempts to inform the public, are if anything as common. In short, between the two professions there is a dynamic tension, which is deeply rooted in the culture of both professions. Unfortunately, it is quite common that neither journalists nor public relations professionals' employers understand the role of the mediator that public relations possesses (Cutlip, Center and Broom, 1999).

According to this study, the communication between the public relations professionals and journalists turned out to be very intensive. The research conducted established that two thirds of public relations professionals distribute one to two press releases a week, while a fourth of them distribute 3 to 5 press releases a week. The connection between the one and the other seems obvious; then where does the disagreement about the role of public relations and their press releases in the media agenda come from? Like in some previous researches which this study follows (Sallot, Steinfattand and Salwen, 1998; Shin and Cameron, 2003; Shin and Cameron, 2005), it seems that two groups of professionals do not look at the common problems in the same way, i.e. there is a significant misperception between them. Getting to know each other's points of view could be useful for reconciling the media values they respect and might improve their further collaboration.

## Conclusion and future research

Journalists and public relations professionals share more than it seems at the first sight without even knowing it. Therefore it would be useful to present both sides with the exact values of the other side in order to avoid misunderstandings. This task also implies the suggestion to continue the research of this field. The research conducted within the framework of coorientational model which examines the both sides' attitudes, as well as the opinions that both sides have on one another, could help to reduce the misunderstandings. Assessing the opinions of a third, impartial side could also give better insight into the situation. Finally, it would be interesting to try to objectify the problem, i.e. to compare the journalists and public relations professionals' opinions with the real situation (defined through the comparison of the press releases sent and the media agenda).

## ENDNOTES:

- <sup>1</sup> This article is a revised and shortened version of the master's thesis "The influence of public relations on the contents of media releases" published in December, 2006 at the University of Economics in Zagreb.

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**Ana Tkalac Verčić**  
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## **Utjecaj odnosa s javnošću na hrvatske medije** **Razlikuju li se mišljenja novinara od mišljenja stručnjaka za** **odnose s javnošću?**

### **SAŽETAK**

Odnos među stručnjacima za odnose s javnošću i novinarima pun je problema od samih početaka razvoja obje profesije; jasno je da ovise jedni o drugima, no istovremeno među njima nedostaje povjerenja. Obje strane vjeruju kako se njihovi profesionalni standardi značajno razlikuju od profesionalnih standarda druge strane. Iako u svijetu postoje brojna istraživanja međusobnih odnosa novinara i stručnjaka za odnose s javnošću, takvih istraživanja u Hrvatskoj gotovo da i nema. Osnovni cilj ovog istraživanja bio je analizirati dinamiku odnosa između hrvatskih novinara i stručnjaka za odnose s javnošću. U tu svrhu korišteni su istovrsni anketni upitnici kojima su ispitani uzorci obje populacije, te su rezultati međusobno uspoređeni. Problem istraživanja bio je usporediti stajališta dvije profesije o utjecaju koji objave za medije imaju na medijske sadržaje – pri čemu je polazna hi-

poteza bila kako je prema mišljenju obje strane spomenuti utjecaj značajan. Rezultati su međutim ukazali na nešto drugačiju situaciju.

Iako su se ispitani novinari složili u mišljenju da objave za medije imaju određeni utjecaj na formiranje medijskih sadržaja, taj su utjecaj procijenili znatno manjim no što su to učinili stručnjaci za odnose s javnošću. Budući da su dvije ispitane struke neupitno povezane, bilo bi korisno bolje ih upoznati s mišljenjima druge strane u svrhu bolje buduće suradnje.

Ključne riječi: hrvatski mediji, stručnjaci za odnosi s javnošću, utjecaj odnosa s javnošću