

Do Public Relations and Journalism's converging roles affect how they perceive each other? An Italian Outlook

¿Cómo perciben los Relaciones Públicas y los Periodistas sus profesiones? Una mirada desde Italia

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Abstract

Media relations is historically a core activity qualifying public relations from other communication-related professions and is widely practiced in many organizations. Despite the increasing use of digital media to directly communicate with publics, journalists are still key stakeholders for organizations. Also communications by organizations have become more and more mediatized and at the same time more and more journalists are switching to a public relations career. Yet, if more journalists are becoming public relations practitioners and more public relations practitioners are adopting journalistic working practices, does this change the way these communicators perceive themselves and the other profession? The aim of this study is to provide some insights from a southern, Latin country, Italy, on how Italian public relations practitioners and journalists perceive their and the other profession, roles, practices and relationships. A mixed method, including face-to-face interviews and an online survey, was used to collect and analyse the data. Results indicate that public relations and journalism's converging roles is affecting how these communicators perceive each other in a favorable manner. Furthermore, the impact is more evident in public relations practitioners since their opinions of journalism and journalists correspond to journalists' self-evaluations.

Keywords: Public relations, journalism, Italy, perceptions, relations, mixed methods

Resumen

Las relaciones con los medios es históricamente una actividad central de las relaciones públicas que la diferencia de otras profesiones relacionadas con la comunicación y es una práctica generalizada en muchas organizaciones. A pesar del aumento en el uso de los medios digitales para comunicarse directamente con los públicos, los periodistas siguen siendo actores clave para las organizaciones. Además las comunicaciones de las organizaciones son cada vez más mediatizadas y, al mismo tiempo cada vez más periodistas se están cambiando a la carrera de relaciones públicas. Sin embargo, si cada vez hay más periodistas que trabajan como profesionales de las relaciones públicas y más profesionales

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de las relaciones públicas están adoptando las prácticas del trabajo periodístico, ¿cambia esto la forma en que estos profesionales de la comunicación se perciben a sí mismos y a los de la otra profesión? El objetivo de este estudio es proporcionar algunas ideas sobre Italia, sobre cómo los profesionales italianos de las relaciones públicas y los periodistas se perciben a sí mismos y a los de la otra profesión, roles, prácticas y relaciones. Hemos utilizado un método mixto, que incluye entrevistas cara a cara y una encuesta en línea. Los resultados indican que las funciones convergentes de las relaciones públicas y del periodismo están afectando a cómo estos comunicadores se perciben entre sí de una manera favorable. Por otra parte, el impacto es más evidente en los profesionales de las relaciones públicas ya sus opiniones sobre el periodismo y los periodistas se corresponden con las autoevaluaciones de los periodistas.

Palabras clave: Relaciones públicas, periodismo, Italia, percepciones, relaciones, métodos mixtos

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1. INTRODUCTION

Media relations is historically a core activity qualifying public relations from other communication-related professions and is widely practiced in many organizations (cf. for example Hallahan, 2010a, 2010b; Miller & Dinan, 2008; Moloney, 2000; Neijens & Smit, 2006; Sallot & Johnson, 2006). Effective media relations are often the results of consolidated relations between journalists and those public relations practitioners handling external communications on behalf of organizations. A research study on European communication managers' perceptions of the development of their profession seems to point that establishing mutual and beneficial public relations-journalist relationships is less relevant today than in the past due to an increased disintermediation of organizational

communications as result of an increasing use of social and digital media by organizations to communicate directly to their key publics (Zerfass, Tench, Verčič, Verhoeven & Moreno, 2014).

Yet, communications by organizations are still influenced by journalistic standards. Organizations are gradually adopting media logics in the way they communicate directly to their publics, for example by using journalistic style and format in their corporate news (Bajkiewicz, Kraus, & Hong, 2011; Ihlen & Pallas, 2014; Zerfass & Schramm, 2014). This process is at the core of mediatization theory and deals with organizations, other than the media, adjusting to the logic of media institutions and adopting the working practices and preferences of the media (Ihlen & Pallas, 2014; Strömbäck, 2011). This process has accelerated in the last ten years because of the increasing professionalization of public relations which resulted in having in-house more media skilled professionals, but also because several trained journalists switched to public relations profession to work for corporations as media relations specialists (DeLorme & Fedler, 2003; Valentini & Falconi, 2008).

The practice of moving from a journalism position to public relations is rather common and many corporate public relations practitioners have a journalism education or training (DeLorme & Fedler, 2003; Valentini & Falconi, 2008). Changes in media markets and journalism practices have boosted this phenomenon of journalists turning to public relations. Journalism has become more market-driven in response to economic pressures on its industry and because of the increasing concentration of ownership in publicly owned corporations together with a decline in profit margins (Curtin, 1999; McManus, 1994). Among other reasons for journalists' turning on public relations, Valentini and Falconi (2008) indicated the general higher salary of public relations practitioners, more stable contracts, and overall a higher market demand for such profession than for journalists. Ihlen and Pallas (2014) and Sinaga and Callison (2008) noted similar trends in other countries indicating that several organizations have in-house former journalists to precisely exploit journalistic news conventions and be more effective in their media relations.

This, while not new, has exacerbated in the last years due to current financial crisis and the diffusion of digital media, which have changed to some extent the way publics seek for and

consume information and consequently impacted the work of journalists. Yet, if more journalists are becoming public relations practitioners and more public relations practitioners are adopting journalistic working practices, does this change the way these communicators perceive themselves and the other? To which extent these changes are affecting the role of public relations and journalism? And above all, how does this change public relations-journalist relationships?

Literature on media relations and public relations-journalist relationships is rather outdated and has not yet captured whether this phenomenon of switching practices among journalists and public relations practitioners is affecting these communicators' perceptions. Also previous research, with some exceptions (Berkowitz & Lee, 2004; Neijens & Smit, 2006; Shin & Cameron, 2003; Mellado & Hanusch, 2011; Valentini & Falconi, 2008; Xifra, 2009) is rather dominated by an Anglo-Saxon perspective (Bajkiewicz et al., 2011; Kopenhaver, 1985; Kopenhaver et al., 1984; Ryan & Martinson, 1988; Turk, 1985, 1986) and generalization beyond Anglo-Saxon contexts may not be possible. Culture is an important factor influencing media relations practices, especially relationships between public relations practitioners and journalists (cf. Berkowitz & Lee, 2004; Mellado & Hanusch, 2011; Sriramesh & Vercic, 2012). News reporting, cultural values, informal relationships and unwritten rules, as well as the history and development of public relations, are factors that make studies on public relations practitioners and journalists and on their respective professional perceptions highly contextualized and not necessarily generalizable.

The aim of this study is to provide some insights from a southern, Latin country, Italy, on public relations and journalism professions by investigating Italian public relations practitioners and journalists' opinions on their professions, roles, practices and relationships. This study was conceptualized to fill a knowledge gap in media relations by providing a different, non-Anglo-Saxon perspective on current issues public relations-journalist relationships and by doing so contributing to the body of knowledge of global public relations. This study also provides some preliminary insights and related implications on the phenomenon of 'blurred professional identities' between public relations and journalism.

The choice for studying Italy is driven by three primary reasons: compared to other European countries, studies in media relations in Italy are few and have dealt primarily with

journalists' agenda versus other sources' agenda or the effectiveness and management of media relations activities (Cavalli & Pivetti, 1997; De Vincentiis, 1999; Mazzoni, 2005; Valentini & Falconi, 2008; Veneziani, 1999) but have not studied the relationships between journalists and public relations or their respective social representations on their professions. Hence, there is a lack of understanding on what and how public relations and journalists think of each other. Second, early studies indicate that the practice of journalists' switching to public relations careers is rather common (Falconi & Valentini, 2009; Valentini, 2013; Sriramesh & Valentini, 2014) thus the choice of Italy as a case study was considered suitable to explore whether this phenomenon may affect professional perceptions. Finally, the choice was also of pragmatic nature due to the proximity of the author with the context of Italian public relations. This has facilitated both the data collection and the analysis of the data.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Media relations and public relations-journalist relationships

Despite the increasing relevance of citizen journalists reporting online, 24/7 and thus the consequent erosion of journalists' role of informing society on what's going on (Allan & Thorsen, 2009; Rosenberry & St. John, 2010), news media are still perceived as credible source of information and thus have a central role for organizations seeking visibility and legitimacy (Ihlen & Pallas, 2014). To seize alternative sources of information, journalists need more and more and high quality news material to cope with their daily workload. Public relations practitioners are considered useful information providers for inside, undisclosed issues (DeLorme & Fedler, 2003). For public relations, news media as one of the key stakeholders have still an important role in affecting corporate reputation (Carroll & McCombs, 2003; Deephouse, 2000), investor relations (Romenti & Valentini, 2010; Pollock & Rindova, 2003), crisis management (Liu, 2010; Verhoeven, 2009; An & Gower, 2009; Coombs, 2012) and civil litigations (Robbennolt & Studebaker, 2003).

Several studies have been conducted on the role of public relations practitioners as a source of information, as influencers of the media agenda through the provision of information subsidies to journalists as well as on the role of journalists as reporters or on their dependency on public relations for news information and on public relations practitioners

setting the media agenda (Aronoff, 1975, 1976; Belz, Talbott & Starck, 1989; Cameron, Sallot & Curtin, 1997; Cutlip, 1962; Shin, 2003; Shin & Cameron, 2003, 2004). There is a long tradition, especially in the USA, of studies on relationships between public relations and journalism and their perceptions of one other that dates back to the sixties (DeLorme & Fedler, 2003; Sallot & Johnson, 2006). Previous investigations on public relations-journalist relationships show different, sometimes contradicting, results. Early studies indicate the existence of a certain level of tension between these two professions (Baskin & Aronoff, 1988; DeLorme & Fedler, 2003) as a consequence of a pre-determined professional antagonism due to difference in news interests and communication purposes (Ryan & Martinson, 1988; Kopenhaver, Martinson, & Ryan, 1984). Others, more recent ones, show a more neutral relationship and point to a more blurred division between journalism and public relations professions (Mellado & Hanusch, 2011; Neijens & Smit, 2006; Shaw & White, 2004).

Research by Stegall and Sanders (1986) revealed that misunderstandings and stereotypes arose as journalists and public relations practitioners tried to define their roles, causing their relationship to become adversarial. Perceptions of others and own perceptions play a key role in the way relationships are formed and on the way people respond to others' expectations (cf. Kopenhaver, 1985; Ryan & Martinson, 1984; Sallot, Steinfatt & Salwen, 1998; Vercic, Vercic & Laco, 2006). Individuals' opinions are what Moscovici (1984) labels social representations of how we think and what we think about an issue or person. Social representations, Moscovici (1984) argues, can influence the behavior of individuals in their society. There seems to be a general consensus that what and how journalists think about public relations and the type of relations they have with them can affect press coverage, press attention and consequently organization's effectiveness in media relations (Bollinger, 2001). Factors that influence social representations include, for example, personal experiences, values, beliefs, environments and cultural norms.

An education and journalism training for public relations practitioners does not seem to play a key role in journalists' social representations of public relations, but attitudes and perceptions of public relations practitioners as well as public relations practitioners' perceptions of journalists are shaped by professional circumstances rather than similar educational background (Mellado and Hanusch, 2011). The love-hate relationship between

these two professions seems, thus, to be a socially constructed representation based on socialization practices in the newsroom, but also in their personal experiences with each other. When professional disagreements occur they are recognized in the inherent communicative nature of being the sender and the receiver of message. They are also caused by the interdependence of roles between source and reporter and the incompatibility of goals between the source's advocacy and the reporter's pursuit for objectivity (Shin & Cameron, 2004).

To overcome professional tensions, a relational approach towards news media has been found to be feasible, particularly in those cultures where informal relations are very important (Berkowitz & Lee, 2004; Sallot & Johnson, 2006; Shin & Cameron, 2003; Valentini, 2010). In these countries, informal relations are essential to build trust and thus to increase the number of public relations information subsidies published by journalists. The more that this relationship is based on trust and mutual collaborations, the more it is likely that journalists use public relations practitioners' information material. Yet, trust between public relations practitioners and journalists can be undermined if practices are perceived not to be transparent (DeLorme & Fedler, 2003). Literature so far has not uncovered how the phenomenon of adopting other professions' competencies and/or moving to a different professional career is affecting social representations that public relations and journalists have of each other's.

2.2. Italian public relations

Italian public relations have a long history. Early practices dealing with image management and rhetorical traditions were already employed by Roman emperors to influence publics, control masses and impact international relations thousands of years ago. Strategies to cultivate relationships with influential princes and lords during the medieval times were common too. The Roman Catholic Church via its *Propaganda Fide* and process of evangelization of people has also contributed to the development of Italian public relations practices (Valentini & Sriramesh, 2014). Yet, as organized and recognized profession public relations has a much younger history than well-established USA and UK professions. Falconi and Kodilja (2004) noted that the expression "public relations" was initially used during the years preceding the Second World War, when a propaganda machine was developed and

largely implemented by the Italian dictator, Mussolini. The early years of Italian public relations were strongly shaped by on the job practice and influenced by the United States Information Service (Bini, Fasce, & Falconi, 2011; Falconi & Kodilja, 2004). Outside the political sphere, the first professional public relations agencies were established in the 1950s to support primarily marketing activities and publicity goals. These early public relations activities dealt with the promotion of a mass consumerism on products and services of large Italian companies such as the Olivetti, Pirelli, Piaggio and Fiat (Bini et al., 2011). In those years larger multi-national companies, such as the Italian oil and gas company ENI, started to open public relations departments that were also in charge of social and cultural activities. The first Institute for Public Relations was founded in 1952 by a journalist converted to advertising, Gino Pestelli, who also established the Italian Association for Public Relations in 1954 (Bini et al., 2011). An important event that signed the beginning of a process of professional institutionalization was the foundation of FERPI (Italian Federation of Public Relations) in 1970 that represents, still today, the interests of Italian public relations practitioners (Scarpulla, 2006).

Besides the American influence, a key role in the development of public relations profession in Italy was played by at that time Italian intellectuals, writers and artists (Bini et al., 2011). These intellectuals gave a specific imprint to early public relations practices which have been defined as having a “humanistic” approach characterized by a great interest in enhancing beauty, style and human relations in any public relations initiative (Bini et al, 2011, p. 216). Yet, until 1980s the main function of public relations was supporting marketing and helping organizations, mostly larger corporations, to bolster their corporate image and reputation (Falconi, 2009; Valentini, 2009). Specific public relations initiatives for not-profit and public sector have emerged only during the last twenty years, due to the increasing need of professional communicators in promoting the interests of these diverse organizations. Especially in the last ten years, there has been an increasing demand for public relations, including governmental agencies and public sector organizations (Valentini, 2013). Mazzoni (2005), Valentini and Falconi (2008) estimate that today about 100,000 individuals operate professionally in public relations in the public, private and nonprofit sectors in Italy.

Regarding the practice, public relations in Italy is mostly perceived as a technical/operative function, but indications of strategic management are visible among the more senior

practitioners of corporations and non-profits (Valentini & Sriramesh, 2014). In larger organizations, the managerial and strategic roles are present, whereas the reflective and educational roles are not so common (Invernizzi & Romenti, 2009). In this respect, media relations is one of the primary activities of public relations, and the capacity of public relations practitioners to be influential within the national media context is regarded by organizations as one of the practice's most important skills (Valentini, 2009).

First graduate programs in public relations were established in 1990s, yet in some large universities courses on public relations were available already from 1960s (Falconi, 2009). The educational background of practitioners who graduated from universities before 1990s is diverse ranging from Modern Literature and Foreign Languages to Business degrees. While the level of knowledge and awareness of public relations profession has increased especially in the last ten years, Italian public relations is still surrounded by "a professional ambiguity," partly because, outside of professional associations, consistent information on the boundaries and contents of public relations is lacking. Furthermore, Valentini and Falconi (2008) reported that several journalists have turned to public relations in recent years while continuing to working as freelance journalists as a consequence of increasing economic difficulties. This professional ambiguity is exacerbated by an existing Italian law, law n. 150/2000, that state that only journalists in Italy who are members of the Italian Journalism Guild are allowed to work in media relations departments of public organizations, such as the press office of municipalities (Valentini, 2013). The growing switching of professional role among journalists suggests possible changes in the way public relations practitioners and journalists perceive their and the other profession.

Based on the above literature review, this study seeks to investigate how public relations practitioners and journalists perceive themselves and each other's profession, how they consider their professional roles, practices and relationships. Specifically, this study explores:

- whether Italian journalists' perceptions of Italian public relations practitioners correspond to public relations practitioners' self-perception of their role, profession and practices;
- whether public relations practitioners' perceptions of journalists correspond to journalists' self-perceptions of their role, profession and practices;

- whether public relations practitioners and journalists share a similar opinion on the status of their relationships.

3. METHODOLOGY

To study the perceptions and self-perceptions of public relations practitioners and journalists in Italy a mixed method was used. The qualitative method was used to explore current opinions and professional concerns of Italian public relations practitioners and journalists whereas the quantitative method was used to validate the findings of the qualitative investigation and identify the level of mutual professional understanding in both communication professions.

3.1. Data collection and analysis methods

For the qualitative data, twelve face-to-face interviews with six senior public relations practitioners and six journalists were conducted. Purposive sampling was used to select the interviewees based on years of professional experiences, gender, and diverse organizational functions and diverse media outlets. All interviews were conducted in Italian language, taped with permission from interviewees and later transcribed. Interviews lasted between forty minutes to one hour each. Copies of the transcripts were sent to interviewees to verify the correctness of information. Confidentiality was assured across all data collection and analysis.

From the analysis of the interviews, six core themes emerged that dealt with interviewees' opinions on: 1) role of public relations, 2) role of journalists, 3) public relations and journalism professions, 4) public relations and journalists' working practices, and 5) quality of public relations-journalists relationships. Based on these five themes, an online survey was elaborated. The indicators in the survey were similar for both groups. This helped assessing to which extent self-evaluations matched counter-parts' evaluations. Respondents, after completing an introductory section that requested demographic information, were asked to indicate their level of agreement across different statements in relation to the five identified themes. A 7-point-Likert scale (1= strongly disagree with the statement, 7= strongly agree and 0= don't know/no response) was used to measure the level of agreement for each statement.

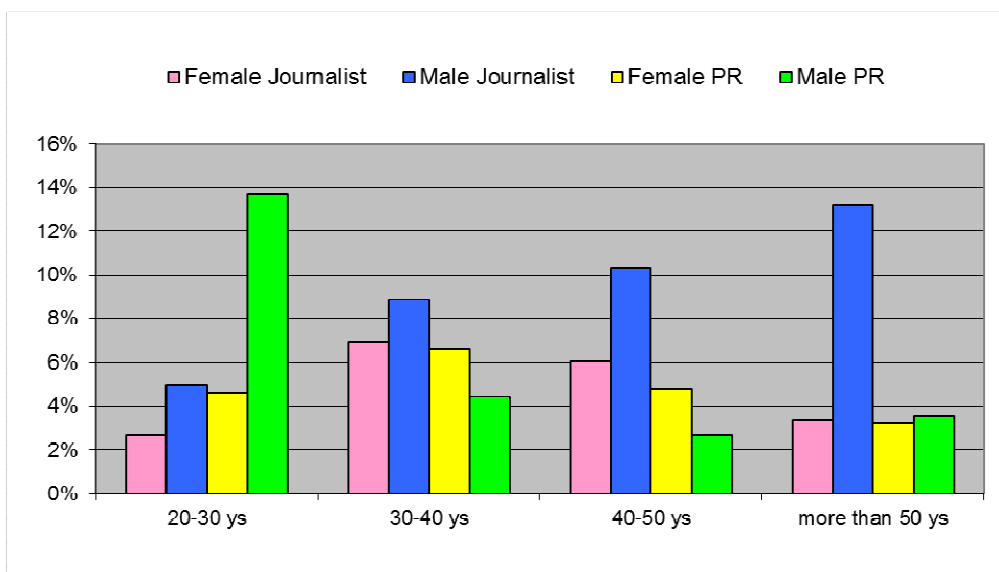
The questionnaire was posted on FERPI (Italian Federation of Public Relations) and FNSI's (Italian National Federation of Press) web pages as well as in other communication-related online magazines and was additionally sent to both groups as a link via mailing list. The data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 18 for Windows. Descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviations and Pearson's Chi-square test for testing differences were examined for all statements among the two groups across the five main themes.

3.2. The respondents

The quantitative sample included complete answers from 317 journalists and 245 public relations practitioners. Respondents from the journalist group work for radio and TV, newspapers, print and online magazines, in permanent and temporary positions, such as external consultants and freelancers. Respondents from the public relations group work for communication/public relations agencies, consultancy agencies, private or public organizations, public administrations and not-profit organizations in permanent and temporary positions.

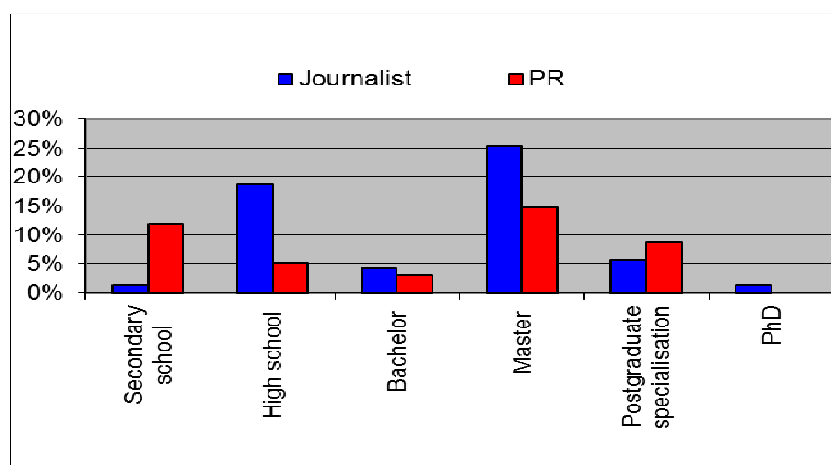
Figure 1 and 2 shows demographic characteristics such as age, sex, and education among the two groups. The average age for respondents of both groups was 30 - 40 years old. Most respondents across both groups were male and held a university degree (bachelor, master or other postgraduate specialization).

Figure 1. Respondents by profession, sex and age group



Source: own elaboration

Figure 2. Respondents by profession and education



Source: own elaboration

Almost half of the public relations sample was woman whereas only one third of the journalist sample was woman. More journalists (36.5%) than public relations practitioners (26.7%) obtained a university degree, while the rest of the sample had only a high school or secondary degree². Respondents from the journalist group were the most experienced with the majority having either 10-20 years of professional experience (30.95% of journalist sample) or 20-30 years (26.74% of journalist sample), while more than half of the public relations sample (51.43%) had only 1-5 years of professional experience.

² According to the Italian educational system, a secondary degree corresponds to 8 years of education.

4. RESULTS

The results of this investigation show several differences, but also some common opinions between the two groups. The theme with the most disagreement was that on the role of public relations, showing that a common understanding of the role of public relations is not yet achieved.

4.1. Role of public relations

Public relations practitioners have a different opinion of their profession than journalists have of them. Public relations practitioners believe that their first main role is cultivating and sustaining strategic relationships with diverse publics on behalf of organizations (M=6.11, SD=1.12), while journalists think that the first public relations role is to take care of media relations activities (M=5.14, SD=1.51). Journalists disagree (M=3.61, SD=1.81) that the role of public relations is to influence public behaviors and opinions by helping organizations in implementing policies. Pearson chi-square test at 95% of confidence was conducted to compare answers among the journalist group with those of the public relations group. In all statements, p-value is below .05, indicating substantial difference between the answers of the two samples (see table 1). The difference of perceptions of the two groups is not a surprise. In Italy, media relations is still a core public relations activity, and journalists tend to know public relations practitioners mostly when these are doing media relations, promoting products or services and organizing events and not so much when public relations practitioners are dealing with managerial decisions for the organizations they work for.

Table 1. The role of public relations

<i>Indicators</i>	<i>Journalists</i>		<i>Public relations</i>		<i>Difference between groups (p-value)</i>
	M	SD	M	SD	
The role of public relations is to create and provide information that promotes the interests and policies of organizations.	4.49	1.44	5.24	1.37	<.001
The role of public relations is to create and provide information on products or services on behalf of an organization.	4.86	1.37	5.37	1.27	.001

The role of public relations is to manage an organization's relationships with public institutions and opinion leaders	4.49	1.36	5.59	1.25	<.001
The role of public relations is to increase the positive image of organizations and to reduce possible reputational risks	4.48	1.63	5.45	1.44	<.001
The role of public relations is to influence public behaviors and opinions by helping organizations in implementing policies	3.61	1.81	4.58	1.63	<.001
The role of public relations is to create, cultivate and sustain diverse relationships with publics on behalf of organizations	4.63	1.38	6.11	1.12	<.001
The role of public relations is to take care of media relations activities for organizations	5.14	1.51	5.82	1.18	<.001
The role of public relations is support organizations in improving the quality of decision-making by listening and understanding publics' expectations	4.76	1.44	5.99	1.17	<.001
The role of public relations is to create and organize events that can attract the attention and participation of publics	4.87	1.37	5.51	1.31	<.001

Mean scores (M) of 7 point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree; 7= strongly agree), standard divisions (SD) and Pearson's Chi-square test: significance at $p < .05$

Source: own elaboration

4.2. Role of journalists

Results indicate a general agreement between the two groups in relation to the perceived role of journalists, as there is no relevant statistical difference across answers of both groups (all p-values except for two are above .05). Public relations practitioners (M=6.12, SD=0.99) agreed more than did journalists (M=5.97, SD=1.13) that the role of journalist is to carefully control the information provided by different sources. Both groups concur that the role of journalist is not about entertaining news publics with curious stories (public relations practitioners, M=3.32, SD=1.39; journalists, M=3.31, SD=1.35) but providing publics with relevant information in real time (public relations practitioners, M=5.48, SD=1.30; journalists, M=5.69, SD=1.13) (see Table 2).

The statement "to balance editorial interests with public interests and source interests" ($p < .001$) shows a statistically difference between the responses of the two groups. Public

relations practitioners are rather neutral in relation to the role of journalists in balancing editorial interests with public interests and source interests (M=4.17, SD=1.75) whereas journalists disagree on this (M=3.14, SD=1.72). This result seems rather odd as journalists are trained to pay attention to represent all possible interests in equal manner. Journalists have a neutral opinion on whether journalists should disclose the names of their sources of information (M=4.02, SD=1.98) whereas public relations practitioners tend to be slightly more in agreement (M= 4.48, SD=1.89). Paerson chi-square test indicates some statistical differences between the responses (p=.04).

Table 2. The role of journalists

<i>Indicators</i>	<i>Journalists</i>		<i>Public relations</i>		<i>Difference between groups (p-value)</i>
	M	SD	M	SD	
The role of journalist is to provide publics with relevant information in real time	5.69	1.13	5.48	1.30	0.13
The role of journalist is to analyze and interpret situations and complex events on behalf of publics	5.31	1.41	5.30	1.32	0.93
The role of journalist is to carefully control the information provided by different sources	5.97	1.13	6.12	0.99	0.22
The role of journalist is to entertain news publics with curious stories	3.31	1.35	3.32	1.39	0.92
The role of journalist is to attract public attention by playing a critical role in reporting information about influential leaders	4.79	1.56	4.66	1.58	0.48
The role of journalist is to be objective as much as possible by telling publics what it is believed to be the truth	5.87	1.31	5.74	1.26	0.39
The role of journalist is to balance editorial interests with public interests and source interests	3.14	1.62	4.17	1.75	<0.01
The role of journalist is to disclose the names of their sources of information	4.02	1.98	4.48	1.89	0.04

Mean scores (M) of 7 point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree; 7= strongly agree), standard divisions (SD) and Pearson's Chi-square test: significance at p < .05

Source: own elaboration

4.3. Perceptions on public relations and journalism professions

When respondents were asked to give an opinion on both professions, the answers of both groups varied depending on whether the statement was about public relations or journalism. Agreement between the two groups is visible for the statements related to journalism, at the exclusion of the statement dealing with the importance of journalism. For this statement a significant number of journalists believe their profession is more important for society than is public relations ($M=4.88$, $SD=1.66$), but this opinion is not shared by public relations practitioners ($M=3.96$, $SD=1.60$). Overall, journalists display a higher self-esteem when asked to compare their profession with public relations. The statement on having a good opinion on public relations profession shows the highest level of disagreement ($p<.01$) between public relations practitioners' opinions ($M=5.01$, $SD= 1.20$) and journalists' opinions ($M= 3.77$, $SD= 1.12$) (see Table 3).

Table 3. Opinions on public relations and journalism professions

<i>Indicators</i>	<i>Journalists</i>		<i>Public relations</i>		<i>Difference between groups (p-value)</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
I have a good opinion of public relations profession	3.77	1.12	5.01	1.20	<0.01
I have a good opinion of journalism profession	4.24	1.36	4.57	1.24	0.04
Journalism is extremely important because it is one of the hallmarks of democracy	6.08	1.06	6.00	1.10	0.54
Journalism is more important for society than public relations	4.88	1.66	3.96	1.60	<0.01
Public relations profession can help improving the quality of relationships among organizations and publics	4.87	1.10	5.85	1.03	<0.01
Public relations profession can help improving public awareness about important matters	4.59	1.16	5.56	1.09	<0.01
Public relations and journalism professions are different, although sometimes they share similar competences and they use similar tools	5.26	1.36	5.46	1.40	0.24

The goal of both professions is to disseminate accurate, clear, true and prompt information, but the activities they take care and the receivers of those activities are different	4.48	1.70	5.30	1.22	<0.01
Public relations practitioners have a lot of influence on the type and quality of information in news media	4.40	1.28	4.29	1.36	0.50

Mean scores (M) of 7 point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree; 7= strongly agree), standard divisions (SD) and Pearson’s Chi-square test: significance at p < .05.

Source: own elaboration

Interestingly, both groups (public relations practitioners, M=5.30, SD=1.22; journalists, M= 4.48, SD=1.70) agree that the goal of both professions is to disseminate accurate, clear, true and prompt information, but the activities they take care and the receivers of those activities are different, yet, public relations practitioners tend to agree the most on this statement. Both groups of respondents (public relations practitioners, M=5.46, SD=1.40; journalists, M= 5.26, SD=1.36) agree that public relations and journalism professions are different, although sometimes they share similar competences and they use similar tools. Journalists (M=4.40, SD= 1.28) slightly more than public relations practitioners (M= 4.29, SD=1.36) believe that public relations has a lot of influence on the type and quality of information in news media. Paerson chi-square test indicates a significant difference in their answer of p<.01. However, it is not possible to assess whether for both groups this equally means a positive or negative perception of public relations profession. Public relations practitioners could have seen their influence on the type and quality of information as a positive assessment (i.e. being effective) of their profession, while journalist may have thought that this influence is negative.

4.4. Evaluations of public relations and journalists’ working practices

In general, results indicate that self-evaluations have a higher level of agreement than does the counterpart’s opinion. In other words, communicators tend to perceive their working practices better than the other groups believe they are. Despite this, journalists overall are rather neutral when assessing whether public relations practitioners manipulate information (M=3.93, SD=1.35) whereas public relations practitioners disagree on this statement (M=2.98, SD=1.30). Journalists disagree that public relations practitioners try to be transparent (M=3.19, SD=1.20) whereas public relations practitioners have a neutral opinion

on this statement ($M=4.12$, $SD=1.14$), indicating that transparency is not fully practiced in Italian public relations. In both statement, Paerson chi-square test indicate statistical differences in opinions between respondents ($p<.01$).

Journalists seem to be more critical towards public relations practitioners' working practices than are public relations practitioners towards journalists' practices. Both professions tend to be critical on journalists' working practices, yet public relations practitioners are slightly less critical in their judgments of journalists ($M=3.74$, $SD=1.14$) than journalists' self-evaluation (journalists, $M=3.69$, $SD=1$). Interestingly both public relations ($M=5.66$, $SD=1.01$) and journalists ($M=5.75$, $SD=1.20$) agreed that journalists need to be more independent from economic and editorial interests and should also listen more their public expectations (public relations practitioners, $M=5.28$, $SD=1.25$; journalists, $M=5.55$, $SD=1.33$). At the exclusion of the statement related to journalists manipulating information ($p<.01$), the other statements on journalists' working practices do not show a significant difference of opinion between the two groups (Table 4), confirming that public relations practitioners' social representations of journalists' working practices correspond to what journalists think of their own practices.

Table 4. Evaluations of public relations and journalists' working practices

<i>Indicators</i>	<i>Journalists</i>		<i>Public relations</i>		<i>Difference between groups (p-value)</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Public relations practitioners manipulate the information	3.93	1.35	2.98	1.30	<0.01
Public relations practitioners try to be transparent	3.19	1.20	4.12	1.14	<0.01
Public relations practitioners should make sure that their client's interests are not in contrast with public interest	4.68	1.47	5.46	1.29	<0.01
Generally public relations working practices are good	3.46	1.07	4.23	1.26	<0.01
Public relations practitioners are often too unclear and confused in explaining the interests they represent and the objectives they pursue	4.51	1.31	4.21	1.19	0.05
Journalists manipulate information	3.54	1.51	4.22	1.09	<0.01

Journalists should be more autonomous and independent from the economic and editorial interests	5.75	1.20	5.66	1.01	0.50
Generally journalists' working practices are good	3.74	1.14	3.69	1.00	0.73
Journalists should verify the accuracy of the information they receive from their sources more carefully	5.56	1.32	5.85	1.05	0.06
Journalists should be more attentive to their audiences' expectations and less guided by the interests of their directors and sources	5.55	1.33	5.28	1.25	0.09

Mean scores (M) of 7 point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree; 7= strongly agree), standard divisions (SD) and Pearson's Chi-square test: significance at $p < .05$.

Source: own elaboration

4.5. Evaluation of public relations- journalist relationships

Neither profession was extremely enthusiastic about their relationships with the other profession (see table 5) but did not perceived as antagonist as previous studies indicated (Baskin & Aronoff, 1988; Shin & Cameron, 2004). Both professions disagreed that the two professions are antagonist toward one another (public relations practitioners, $M=3.67$, $SD=1.37$; journalists, $M=3.65$, $SD=1.58$), yet, they do need perceive there is trust (public relations practitioners, $M=3.58$, $SD=1.14$; journalists, $M=3.20$, $SD=1$). Both professions, to certain extents, conveyed, at least at a normative level, a similar degree of accordance on what could help to improve their relationships. Improving transparency on the objectives pursued (public relations practitioners, $M=5.12$, $SD=1.33$; journalists, $M=5.12$, $SD=1.38$) and increasing professional rigor and respect of rules (public relations practitioners, $M=5.50$, $SD=1.22$; journalists, $M=5.58$, $SD=1.22$) are the working practices that both groups agreed could help improving public relations-journalist relationships.

Respondents in both groups tend to be rather neutral in their opinion on whether it is possible to find some common agreement (public relations practitioners, $M=4.22$, $SD=0.99$; journalists, $M=3.85$, $SD=1.21$) and in considering overall their relationships as good (public relations practitioners, $M=4.02$, $SD=0.91$; journalists, $M=3.76$, $SD=0.97$). Journalists are slightly more skeptical. Both groups agree, yet with some variance in their answers ($p=.02$) that the two professions should remain distinct, i.e., public relations practitioners should not work as journalists while at the same time practicing public relations and journalists should

not work as public relations practitioners while practicing journalism (public relations practitioners, $M=5.13$, $SD=1.93$; journalists, $M=5.69$, $SD=1.77$).

Table 5. Evaluation of relationships between public relations practitioners and journalists

<i>Indicators</i>	<i>Journalists</i>		<i>Public relations</i>		<i>Difference between groups (p-value)</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
There is mutual trust	3.20	1.00	3.58	1.14	0.01
It is not difficult to find common agreements	3.85	1.21	4.22	0.99	0.01
Some conflicts between the two professions may occur because of the divergent interests	4.87	1.21	4.58	1.21	0.06
The two professions are antagonists	3.65	1.58	3.67	1.37	0.92
Relationships between public relations practitioners and journalists are generally good	3.76	0.97	4.02	0.91	0.03
Relationships between public relations practitioners and journalists could improve if public relations practitioners learn to understand more journalists' needs	4.54	1.45	4.09	1.41	0.01
Relationships between public relations practitioners and journalists could improve if both professions would be more transparent and explicit in their objectives and represented interests	5.12	1.38	5.12	1.33	0.98
Relationships between public relations and journalists could improve if there would be more professional rigor and respect of rules	5.58	1.22	5.50	1.22	0.58
The two professions should remain distinct, i.e., public relations practitioners should not work as journalists while at the same time practicing public relations and journalists should not work as public relations practitioners while practicing journalism	5.69	1.77	5.13	1.93	0.02

Mean scores (M) of 7 point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree; 7= strongly agree), standard divisions (SD) and Pearson's Chi-square test: significance at $p < .05$

Source: own elaboration

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to investigate Italian public relations practitioners and journalists' perceptions on their own and the other profession, as well as their perceived roles, working practices and relations. Considering that more and more journalists are switching to a public relations career and that public relations professionalization has meant an increased adoption of media logics, the study explored whether this phenomenon has affected the social representations held by these two groups of communicators. This study shows some similarities with previous studies (Mellado & Hanusch, 2011; Neijens & Smit, 2006) in that it confirms the existence of some differences in social representations, but also some similarities. The major difference concerns journalists' opinion on the role and function of public relations. Journalists' social representations of what constitutes public relations are somehow different than what public relations practitioners believe. For journalists public relations is mostly about media relations and promoting the interests of their clients, sometimes not in a transparent manner, whereas public relations practitioners perceive themselves as strategic function in support of organizations stakeholder management and reputation. However, all respondents agree on the main roles and functions of journalists.

A similar trend of responses is also visible in the statements about public relations and journalism as professions. Journalists tend to be more critical of public relations than public relations practitioners are of journalism (Shin & Cameron, 2004, DeLorme & Fedler, 2003). Interestingly, journalists do not portray public relations as a manipulative as other previous studies indicate (cf. DeLorme & Fedler, 2003) but they question their level of transparency.

Journalists' criticism is also observable both on their evaluation of public relations practitioners' practices and on their own practices. Both professions exhibit a common understanding of the main principles and rules governing their activities. Despite the different opinions of the respective professions, relationships between public relations practitioners and journalists are commonly considered satisfactory by both groups, and, thus, these findings preliminary indicate that a pre-existing professional antagonism between journalism and public relations may not be so significant in influencing these two communicators' social representations (Aronoff, 1975; Cameron et al, 1997; Sallot et al., 1998; Turk, 1986). Respondents from both groups highlight that some conflicting situations

are possible, but that they should not be considered as a pre-determined feature of their respective professional relationships, but rather as the cause of individual misbehaviors. The conflict starts when one of the two parties perceives that the behavior of the other is neither transparent nor as clear or ethical as it should be, e.g., when journalists perform public relations activities while still working as journalists and when public relations practitioners perform journalists' work while being in a public relations position. Public relations practitioners seem slightly less happy with their relationships with journalists than are journalists with them. The reason for this discontent seems to be the different levels of professional understanding held by both groups. Because more journalists are switching to a public relations career (cf. Valentini & Falconi, 2009) and thus impact the level of mediatization of public relations practices, it appears that prior professional experiences is affecting the social representations of public relations towards a more realist view on journalism and journalists. Hence, understanding the activities of the other profession is mostly a prerogative of public relations practitioners. As almost all public relations interviewees stated, the appreciation of each other's profession is still unbalanced and this underlines, above all, journalists' general lack of knowledge of the functions of public relations activities.

While this study gives support for a mutual dependency, it also shows that antagonism between these two professions is not so common in Italy and that their relationships are sufficiently good and in line with the findings of a study conducted in the Netherlands and in Chile (Mellado & Hanusch, 2011; Neijens & Smit, 2006). Overall, this study preliminary indicates that the increasing professionalization and specifically mediatization of public relations practice coupled by the increasing blurring division between public relations and journalism professions has somehow changed the way these communicators perceive themselves and the other towards a less critical and more positive evaluation. There seems to be a common understanding of one another's practices, indicating that public relations practitioners have adopted a certain level of media logics (Ihlen & Pallas, 2014).

This study contributes to the body of knowledge on global public relations by providing some insight on Italian public relations and journalism professions and their relations. Most of the international studies on relationships between public relations practitioners and journalists and on their professional perceptions have dealt with American culture, norms and

environment, and, consequently, similar studies conducted in other countries may result in different findings. In this respect, nation-based studies representing different cultures are worthy to be undertaken to broaden our knowledge of the media relations dynamics in different international contexts.

5.1. Limitations

The results of this study cannot be generalized. Since precise data on the population of the two professional groups were not available, the statistical significance of the sample was based on previous findings (Mazzoni, 2005, Valentini & Falconi, 2008; Valentini & Sriramesh, 2014), which estimated approximately 70,000 journalists and 100,000 public relations practitioners in Italy. Due of the sampling method and the imprecise knowledge of the population, it was calculated that the final sample has a level of confidence between 90-95% with a margin of error between \pm 5%- 10%. Yet, respondents represent a great variety of professionals by occupation, education and experience and thus could be argued the results are close to represent the current situation on the field in Italy. Taking into consideration these limits, the value of this study is the possibility of identifying relevant trends on relationships between public relations practitioners and journalists in the Italian context, which can serve as a starting point for further research.

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