

# COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY

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## Conception and strategic management of publics in the energy companies in Spain

### Abstract

The notion of publics as specifics and segmented groups has been a paradigm shift in public relations and corporate communication. This change in the way of understanding the receiver in the communication process allows communicate function to manage the relationship between the organization and those groups more effectively. For this reason, organizations should implement processes of identifying and prioritizing publics to communicate and be engaged with these groups in a strategic and effective way. The aim of this paper is to know what conception of “publics” prevails in the communication departments of natural gas and electricity companies in Spain, and on the other hand to assess the level of coherence /correlation between the identification and prioritization of strategic publics and the design of communicative actions to strategically manage the relationship between the organizations and these groups. The methodology of the quantitative study was aimed at Spanish energy companies and implemented through a questionnaire in an online platform. The results indicate that there is a dichotomy in the idea of publics in energy companies: on the one hand, they are conceived as specific groups, and on the other hand, they are considered as a massive collective. Nevertheless, it is observed that there is a methodological consistency between the importance assigned to the publics and the implementation of communication actions towards them.

### Keywords

Energy sector enterprises, public relations, publics, identification, segmentation prioritization, corporate communication

### 1. Introduction

The publics comprise one of the objects of the study and of the implementation of the public relations and corporate communication. This is thus expressed by many researchers of the discipline (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Xifra, 1999; Cutlip et al., 2001; Grunig et al., 2002; Míguez González, 2010). In this sense, Míguez González (2010: 11) points out that most public relations and corporate communication reference texts

demonstrate that the publics, along with the organisations are the main cornerstones of the activity.

One of the main changes in the field of public relations has been the concept of "publics" to the detriment of the idea of the "general public", in other words, to incorporate the premise of the segmentation of the population into groups whose members bear a greater similarity among themselves than with the members of other segments (Grunig, 1989). Seitel (2002: 15) asserts that the public relations and corporate communication professionals should communicate with "many different publics [...] as each public has different needs, thus requiring different types of communication for each one". However, this mainstream conception of the recipient subject is not the only one, as one can also find other ways of understanding it, as the "audience", "general public" or even the "environment".

In the practice of public relations and corporate communication, the conception that an organisation may have on the recipient subject may influence the way in which it identifies, segments and ranks the groups with which it relates and which may therefore condition the management of the communication with each one of them. The recognition that the organisation relates itself with multiple publics obliges companies to perform a process of identification and ranking of these groups, as each one of them has different communication needs and characteristics and that therefore the organisations will have to design different communication messages and activities for each one of these groups (Xifra, 2003; Kim et al., 2010).

The aim of this study is to analyse the concept of the publics that prevail in the communication departments of the energy companies in Spain and know what are the most important or strategic publics for this type of companies, studying how they identify and classify them in order to manage their communication with them. Moreover, it is sought to evaluate the degree of coherence between: (a) the publics considered as being strategic for the energy companies and (b) the undertaking of communicative actions with these publics. The purpose of linking both aspects (strategic publics and communication actions) is marked by the fact that the assignment of importance to the publics is related to the declarations of "intentions" or "purposes" of the organisations, whereas the undertaking of communicative actions with the publics can be considered as an effective and real "communicative conduct" towards the said collectives (Capriotti, 2009). Therefore, this comparison will allow us to assess whether effectively the energy companies transcend from the intentions onto the behaviours in the management of the relationships with their publics.

The Spanish energy sector was chosen because the production, distribution, transport and supply of energy are strategic activities for the functioning and the competitive and economic development of any country. Secondly, Spain is a country with very limited conventional energy reserves (characterised by its dependence on imports for its provision of energy), so that its commitment to renewable energies is a crucial issue. Thirdly, it is a sector that is linked to a topic of general interest, such as climate change, as this issue is usually directly or indirectly linked to the energy sector, which attracts the interest of researchers (Nisber & Kotcher, 2009; Moser, 2006) in order to discover communicative formulas that allow climate change to be addressed, with the purpose of involving the different publics in the change of the behaviour patterns of the users and the civilian society that bolster the collaboration and interchange of information and services between the different actors of the energy sector (Jaegersberg & Ute, 2011). Finally, the identification and prioritization of the publics within the organisations is an issue that attracts attention both in Spain (Oliveira & Capriotti, 2013) as well as in other countries (Kim et al., 2010) although the said study has not been applied up until now to the energy sector in Spain.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. *The notion of publics in public relations and corporate communication and its importance for the management of communication within organisations*

In the academic field of public relations and corporate communication, to refer to the collectives or groups that the organisations relate with, have used (with more or less regularity) different expressions such as "audience" (Oliver, 2001), "environment" (Long & Hazelton, 1987; Black, 1994), "general public" (Marconi, 2004) or "publics" (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig, 1989; Broom et al., 1997; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Hallahan, 2000; Davis, 2004; Bruning et al., 2006; Matilla & Marca, 2012).

The term "general public" implies the idea of a broad and heterogeneous grouping of individuals, characterised by the absence of any specific delimitation (Cutlip et al., 2001). Price (1994: 55) holds that the thinking of Allport (1937), in which the public identifies with the populace as a whole, has influenced research in the field of social psychology, a discipline that in turn, has influenced public relations and corporate communication. However, currently many authors of the discipline (Simon, 1986; Harris, 1988; Cutlip et al., 2001) point out the importance of clarifying that in the field of public relations and corporate communication the idea of a "general public" does not really exist.

At the same time, the term "audience" would mean a collective grouping whose members are users of a specific means of communication (Webster, 1998; Hallahan, 2000; Xifra, 2003; Smith, 2005; Choo, 2006), which also appears in the specialised literature: on one side as a synonym for "publics" (Bread, 2001) and on the other hand as a collective that is different from the "publics" due to its passive nature (Newsom et al., 2004). However, the audience can not be defined as a group that accepts and responds passively to the contents of the communications media as among other aspects, the audience can actively manifest itself through the reading and interpretation of the contents of the communications media, which play a role within the cultural and social environment within which the said audience lives (Webster, 1998; Choo, 2006; Haridakis & Whitmore, 2006). Similarly, some authors (Grunig & Repper, 1992; Hallahan, 2000) discuss passive or inactive publics. Likewise, to consider the groups that relate to the organisations as solely being the users of the communications media would mean limiting the exercise of public relations and corporate communication exclusively to the supply of information of organisational interest through the media, without considering the communication from the two-way mutually influential perspective between organisations and their publics as advocated forth by Grunig (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

On the other hand, the term "environment", as a concept, is linked to the notion of forces, conditions or general and multiple elements that can affect the organisation in its businesses (Pearce & Robinson, 1982; Robbins, 1987). Thus, the notion of environment does not refer directly to people, to individuals or the populace, as pointed out by Xifra (2003: 21-22) when criticising the exclusive aspect of the recipient subject in the definitions of public relations that use the "environment" as an object of study and practice of the discipline. The reason for the use of this concept could be linked to the fact that the analysis of the environment is crucial for understanding the behaviour of organisations, their publics and their relationships with these within a specific context (Holtzhausen, 2005).

Finally, the term "publics" is usually linked to the notion of groupings that relate to the organisation (Oxley, 1989; Hallahan, 2000; Newsom et al., 2004; Capriotti, 2009). This is currently the mainstream conception in the academic field. The notion of "publics" suggests that, within the general population, there are multiple groups that communicate in different ways with the organisations and at the same time interpret its messages in different ways. This way of understanding the publics involves two ideas that are usually recurrent in the

definitions of publics in public relations and corporate communication: the existence of a common interest among the members of the publics and the idea that these collectives are capable of positively or negatively affecting the organisation (Míguez González, 2010). In this sense, the publics could be defined "as a set of individuals or organisations that have a similar relationship and a common interest with an organisation and that can exercise an influence on its success or failure" (Capriotti, 2009: 73-74).

Many authors (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Harris, 1988; Broom & Dozier, 1990; Bruning & Ledinghan, 1999; Xifra, 1999; Newsom et al., 2004; Míguez González, 2010) hold that identifying groups or specific collectives by means of segmentation is highly useful to enable the professionals to plan and manage the strategic relationships between the said collectives and organisations, as it allows for researching and learning about these groups in a detailed manner.

Thus, we can ask ourselves in these terms: can this conceptual variety of the recipient subject in the theoretical field also be found in professional practice? The concept or notion of "public" which predominates in an organisation may condition the way of identifying, segmenting and ranking these, as well as influencing the way of managing the communication in the day-to-day management of communication?

## ***2.2. The process of identification and ranking of the publics and their importance for the management of communication***

In the field of public relations and corporate communication the fact of assuming that organisations are linked and related to multiple and diverse publics implies that the identification and ranking of these collectives is crucial. The importance of applying these procedures is based on the fact that the different publics have different interests, needs, perceptions and behaviour patterns (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, Grunig, 1989, Capriotti, 2009; Míguez González, 2010) and it is necessary to know them properly so that the organisations strategically and effectively manage the relationships with these groups.

For the companies to implement communication strategies with their publics in a personalised manner, it is vital to previously identify these (Broom & Dozier, 1990; Newsom et al., 2004, Hutt, 2010), as this process serves as a basis for the definition of the media and messages to be drawn up in accordance with the characteristic of each type of public (Wilcox & Cameron, 2006). Thus, Grunig (1989) points out that the identification of the publics by means of a segmentation process is one of the required conditions for the success of communication campaigns. The author explains that, on segmenting the population, one attains that the communication actions have greater effect. For Grunig (1989: 202) segmentation is the division of the population into groups whose members have a greater similarity with each other than with the members of other segments. And for such a division to be feasible within a public relations and corporate communication campaign it will be necessary to establish a segmentation criterion that will ensure a choice that is strategically appropriate and effective for the groups and consequently, an effective and efficient campaign.

As mentioned by some authors (Xifra, 2003; Capriotti, 2009; Míguez González, 2010), the situational theory of the publics by Grunig (Grunig, 1978; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig & Repper, 1992; Grunig, 1997; Grunig et al., 2002) represents a before and after in the research of the publics in the field of public relations. With these contributions, it will be the first time that the publics are studied in depth and this is so attested by many authors (Vasquez, 1993; Hallahan, 2000; Harrison, 2000; Xifra 2003; França, 2004; Austin, & Pinkleton, 2006; Míguez González, 2010). Grunig's situational theory constitutes a sophisticated method for identifying and segmenting the publics through the analysis of the communicative behaviour and the perception of the consequences of the actions of the organisation as

situations that affect the members of the publics. In other words, theory helps to explain the degree of activity or passivity of people when faced with a problem that affects them.

However, despite its importance in the history of public relations, this situational theory by Grunig is far removed from building a sufficient body of knowledge to explain all the problems that pertain to the activities (Xifra, 2003). From another point of view, the greatest drawback of this theory revolves around the fact that the publics emerge as mere reactions to the organisation's actions (Vasquez, 1993; Kalberg, 1996; Botan & Soto, 1998). Finally, Míguez González (2010) stresses that this approach of the publics has not fundamentally affected the way in which the authors define the publics today. These ways of identifying these collectives continue to be linked to the "idea of the common interest as a bonding element between the members, as a reference to the capacity of the public to exercise influence on the organisation, elements that have already been raised before the situational definition of the public", (Míguez González, 2010: 51).

One of most common systems for identifying the public in public relations and corporate communication is based on the position that they bear as related to the organisation. This system allows for identifying the individuals who have a similar interest or link within the organisation (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Rawlins, 2006; Míguez Gonzalez, 2010). This type of identification of publics will vary depending on the type of organisation, its nature and its business situation, moreover being useful for the providing of a general cataloguing of the collectives with which the organisation relates and communicates itself (Grunig & Repper, 1992; Matilla, 2009; Míguez González, 2010)

On the other hand, Black (1994) stresses that it is impossible for organisations to communicate with all the identified publics simultaneously and therefore the ranking of these collectives is an important requirement for the formulation of an effective communication plan. Not all the collectives that organisations may identify have the same degree of importance for the companies and therefore when deciding which groups shall be given priority in applying the communicative effort, the hierarchical organisation to the publics according to the degree of importance, in other words, it will select its strategic or key publics, as its financial and time resources are limited (Oxley, 1989; Smith, 2005; Gaos & Zhang, 2006; Capriotti, 2009).

This delimitation is set either because these groups may have an influence on the targets or the operation of the organisation, either because they are involved in different issues or situations that are important for the organisation at different times (or as these may be affected by them). Or as asserted by Cutlip et. al., (2001), the ranking of the key publics is based on the potential of a public to place the organisation in a situation of greater vulnerability. The prioritisation of these publics is not fixed but will vary according to the situation at each point in time, with the issue at hand or with the behaviour patterns of the publics (Kunsch, 2003; Hendrix & Hayes, 2010).

These identification and ranking procedures enable organisations to optimise their resources and orient their communicative efforts, developing different communication actions for each of these groups, in a specific manner (Harrison, 2000; Seitel, 2002; Xifra, 2003; Kim et al., 2010; Park & Jeong, 2011; Hon et al., 2012) and thus expanding the possibilities of success of their communication programmes.

Thus, how do the Spanish energy companies identify and rank their publics? Do these processes influence the management of the communication of the organisations towards these publics?

### **3. Methodology**

The study was carried out on the electricity and gas companies operating in Spain, both in the production as well as the distribution/marketing of "traditional" energies (gas, nuclear,

etc.) and of “renewable” energies (solar, wind turbines, etc.). The corpus of the research were the 1,284 companies that comprised the databases of three organisations responsible for the regulation, supervision or control of the energy sector in Spain: the National Energy Commission (CNE), the Operator of the Iberian Energy Market (OMEL) and the Technical Manager of the Unique Gas and Carrier System of the primary natural gas backbone network (ENAGAS).

The chosen sample was of 689 companies. A priori, 5 companies were selected (Endesa, Iberdrola, Gas Natural Fenosa, E.ON-España and HC Energía) due to their relevance and market share in Spain, as together they represented about 80% of the total production, distribution and marketing of electrical energy and natural gas in Spain. The other organisations that configured the sample were selected due to their affiliation with associations of companies in the electricity and gas sectors (ASEME, APPA, AEE, SEDIGAS, UNESA, APECYL, APREAN, CIDE, ARPYDECAL, Cogen España, ASIF, APREN and AEF).

To attain the objectives of the study, three research questions were set:

- RQ<sub>1</sub>: What is the prevailing conception of publics in Spanish energy companies?
- RQ<sub>2</sub>: What are the most relevant or strategic publics for the companies of the energy sector?
- RQ<sub>3</sub>: On which publics do Spanish energy companies centre their communicative?

To answer these questions a methodology of a quantitative nature was selected, which was implemented by means of a questionnaire, addressed email to the managers of communication of the selected sample of the natural gas and electricity companies in Spain.

RQ<sub>1</sub> aspired to know what was the prevailing notion of publics among the companies in the sector. Therefore, they were requested to indicate the option that was closest to their point of view. As possible answers, options were given that used terms that alluded to the different concepts of the recipient subject appearing in the theoretical framework: "general public", "audience", "environment" and "publics".

RQ<sub>2</sub> sought to know the identification and ranking of the publics done by the energy companies, which makes it possible to establish the main collectives with which they are related and the significance assigned to the different groups. For this purpose, two questions were posed, in which the pollsters were first asked to indicate what were the publics of their company and then to indicate which of those publics were deemed as the most relevant collectives.

RQ<sub>3</sub> sought to find out with which publics the Spanish energy companies carried out communication actions most frequently or intensively. For this purpose, the poll respondents were asked to indicate the groups with which they had held communicative actions over the past 2 years.

The relationship between the results of RQ<sub>2</sub> and RQ<sub>3</sub> would allow us to establish the level of coherence between the relevance assigned to the publics and the communicative action done with these.

The study was carried out between January 2011 and April 2012, through an online questionnaire, whose link was given to the 689 companies in the sample. The first personalised email was sent in January 2011. Six reminder emails were sent up until April 2012. Once the period for the receipt of replies was closed, the received data was coded and processed using Excel. The analysis was performed using the SPSS v14 statistics software package.

#### 4. Results

Ninety-four replies were obtained, representing the 7.32% of the companies in the electricity and gas sector in Spain and 13.64% of the chosen sample, although these represented an average of 26% of the distribution/marketing of gas and 53% of the production and

distribution/marketing of electricity in Spain, according to the data of the Spanish National Energy Commission (CNE)<sup>1</sup>.

With regards to the profile of the companies that responded, for slightly more than half of the cases the profile of the participating companies was that of energy distributors or marketers (56.4%). Slightly less than a quarter part of the companies (24.5%) were in the dual activity of the production and distribution or marketing of energy, whereas less than a fifth (19.1%) was solely in the energy production business. Similarly, almost three quarters of the participating companies predominantly carried out their activities in both the sectors of renewable energies as well as in the traditional ones (70.2%), whereas slightly more than 20% (22.3%) was exclusively in the renewable energies business sector and a markedly lower percentage, which does not reach 10% (7.4%), is solely in the traditional sector.

#### 4.1. *Conception of the public in the energy sector*

With regards to RQ1, the results obtained (Table 1) indicate that almost half of the respondents indicated the option: "Society in general/public opinion". On the other hand, one-third of the respondents answered that in their company, this concept was related to "Different groups or specific collectives that have the capability of affecting the company". These two options represent the vast majority of the responses obtained: 80.9% of the responses to the survey.

**Table 1.** Consideration of the concept "receiver subject" by communication departments

	Total N. of responses	Percentage of companies
Society in general/public opinion	45	47.9%
Different specific collectives that can affect the business	31	33.0%
General forces that may impact on the business	13	13.8%
The audience of the communications media	5	5.3%

With a significant difference with regards to the two first options, less than one-sixth of the participants of the survey (13.8%) considered that the idea of the receiver subject is related to "General and multiple forces that may have an impact on the company". Thus, it can be seen that there is a small group of energy companies that associate the idea of publics to multiple and general aspects or forces (social, economic, legal-political, competitive and technological) that may have an impact on the organisation and not as much as groups or collectives of people or organisations. Finally, an almost irrelevant percentage of the respondents (5.3%) answered this question with the option: "The audience of the communications media".

It is relevant to point out that around one-third of those responsible for communication linked to the notion of the receiver subject to the principle of segmentation of the population into several different and specific collectives with which the organisation related.

However, it is remarkable that almost half of the respondents linked the notion of publics to "society or the general public" when this concept does not respond to the idea of segmentation of the population into different groups, which is a crucial procedure for the preparation elaboration of an effective communication strategy. Moreover, it should be

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.cne.es/cne/contenido.jsp?id\\_nodo=279&&keyword=&auditoria=F](http://www.cne.es/cne/contenido.jsp?id_nodo=279&&keyword=&auditoria=F)

pointed out that on the basis of the overall results obtained, one observes that the majority percentage of respondents (67%) associates the receiver subject to concepts relating to general and passive homogeneous groups (the "general public", the "environment" and the "audience") and not with a perspective of publics as being groups identified from the segmentation of the general population and with a capacity to affect the business.

#### 4.2. Identification and ranking of the publics

With regards to RQ2, one can see in Table 2 (Column 2) that there is a group of nine publics that have been identified by a large number of companies (around 70% or more). This group of publics is comprised of the public administration (89.4%), the employees (89.4%), the household/family users (80.9%), the business/industrial users (79.8%), the journalists (78.7%), the public opinion in general (75.5%), the business associations (75.5%), the suppliers (75.5%) and the collaborators/partners (69.1%).

**Table 2.** Identification, ranking and communication with the publics

PUBLICS	Identification performed (%)	Ranking performed (%)	Communication actions (%)
Public Administrations	89.4	72.3	79.8
Employees	89.4	74.5	63.8
Domestic Users	80.9	68.1	69.1
Industrial Users	79.8	69.1	67.0
Journalists	78.4	40.4	48.9
Suppliers	75.5	10.6	13.8
General Public opinion	75.5	53.2	47.9
Business associations	75.5	52.1	21.3
Collaborators/Partners	69.1	4.3	6.4
Social and educational entities	47.9	-	6.4
Local Community	47.9	16.0	27.7
Shareholders/Investors	44.7	36.2	27.7
Trade unions	41.5	3.2	13.8
Environmental groups	38.3	21.3	-
Distributors/Brokers	30.9	5.3	2.1

On the other hand, a second group of six publics has been identified by a lower number of companies (between 50% and 30% of the companies). Within this group, slightly less than half of the respondents (47.9%) answered both the local community option as well as that of social, cultural and educational entities, whereas the shareholders/investors are publics for 44.7% of the respondents. Similarly, the trade unions (41.5%), environmental groups (38.3%) and distributors (30.9%) form a part of this grouping.

On the other hand, if one analyses the publics that the companies in the Spanish electricity and gas sector consider as important or key for the entity (Table 2, Column 3), one can clearly identify 4 key publics. For the majority of the companies (more than 65% of them), their main publics are basically their employees, the public administration, as well as the industrial and household users.

A second group of strategic publics was selected by more than half of those surveyed and includes the general public opinion (53.2%) as well as business associations, which are considered strategic publics 52.1% of those surveyed.

Similarly, a third block of strategic publics for these companies (between 40% and 35% of the respondents) were comprised by journalists, identified by a 40.4% of the respondents



and the shareholders/investors, which were one of the strategic collectives for 36.2% of the participants in the survey.

Finally, a group of publics identified as strategic by less than one third of the companies were comprised of environmental groups (21.3%), the local community (16%) and the suppliers (10.6%). Similarly, this group of publics would be comprised of the distributors/brokers (5.3%), the collaborators/partners (4.3%) and the trade unions (3.2%). The response option for social, cultural and educational entities did not obtain any score for this question.

#### **4.3. Communication with the publics**

With regards to RQ<sub>3</sub>, the results relating to the undertaking of communication actions by the energy companies (Table 2, Column 4), these allow one to observe that the publics with whom communication actions were mainly made were the public administration, household users, industrial users and employees (around 65% of the entities).

Slightly less than half of the respondents (48.9%) asserted that in the past two years they had undertaken communication actions aimed at journalists, who comprise the most noteworthy collective fifth, whereas 47.9% indicated the general public opinion option.

Finally, less than a third of the companies had communication actions with the shareholders/investors, the local community, business associations, trade unions, suppliers, social, cultural and educational institutions as collaborators/partners and the distributors/brokers.

### **5. Discussion and conclusions**

#### **5.1. Dichotomy in the conception of publics in the companies in the energy sector**

In general, there is a prevalence of a dichotomy in the conception of publics within energy companies: on the one hand, these are considered as a general collective, as the "public opinion" or the "audience", understood as a global and massive population. And on the other hand, they are considered as specific and concrete groups with capacity to affect the organisation.

It is thus evident that when defining their idea of publics, the companies preferably do this in two ways: on the one hand, there is an older or more traditional conception of the receiver subject, related to the passivity of the publics, the asymmetry and massive audiences (the concepts linked to the "general public", to the "audiences" and to the "environment"). And on the other hand, a more contemporary conception that understands the receiver subject as being specific and active collective, with the ability to influence the objectives of the organisation (the concept linked to the "publics").

The dichotomy of views on how to conceive the receiver subject reveals a breach between the current theories on public relations and corporate communication (with a majority view of the concept of "publics" as segmented groups) and the professional practice within the companies analysed in the energy sector, where the said perspective is not yet well consolidated and there is understanding the companies' publics, at least from a conceptual point of view.

Thus, in general, in professional practice, we could discuss two profiles for communication managers in the Spanish energy sector: one that sees the publics as groups identified based on a process of identification, segmentation and ranking and therefore of a more strategic and current nature and one that understands the publics as a massive collective, like society in general and of a more traditional and less strategic nature.

## 5.2. *The proper performance of the process of identification and ranking of the publics*

On the other hand, is observed that the companies in the Spanish electricity and gas sector largely carried out the processes of identification and ranking of the publics. The companies acknowledge a multiplicity of groups as publics (up to 15 collectives), whose interests are varied for the entities.

The energy companies mainly identify 9 collectives as publics, based on a wide range of criteria. There are publics whose interest is, for example, the proper functioning of the institutions within the legal framework of a sector that is extremely regulated (public administration), the usage/consumption of the products and services offered by companies (household/family users, business/industrial users), in the creation of favourable or unfavourable opinion currents of organisations and their activities (journalists) and the optimal operation of companies (employees) or to influence through their opinion the potential users of the activities of the companies (public opinion). To a lesser extent of identification, a significant group of these entities (approximately between 30% and 50%) recognise other collectives that have a deeper and more detailed interest in knowledge about the sector and the institutions that comprise it and that may even financially collaborate with the organisations and in their activities.

Thus, in their large majority, the Spanish electricity and gas companies make use of a significant variety of criteria in determining their publics, although we can recognise that there is a significant group of energy companies (between 30% and 50%) that expand and further diversify the criteria in order to undertake their identification thoroughly and in-depth.

The fact that the companies disperse into many groups the identification their publics is consistent with the specialised literature on the matter. The identification enables the organisation to structure to the publics in a global manner and configure what some authors (Villafañe, 1993; Kunsch, 2003; França, 2008) refer to as the map or directory of publics. This map should be as broad as possible, in order to avoid any public being relegated to oblivion (Kunsch, 2003) when considering these for the ranking and implementation of communicative actions, i.e., an organization can only communicate with a collective that it has previously identified. It is therefore and predominately recognised that the energy companies broadly and thoroughly prepare a map comprised by a diversity of publics with which they are related and/or communicated.

It is evident that, currently, as the method of identifying the publics as groups, whose members have an interest or similar link with an organisation is useful and remains in force, as it allows the professionals to develop different communication programmes of a usual nature intended for the members of a group with common characteristics. It is not ultimately necessary to apply the fundamentals of the situational theory of publics by Grunig as a criterion for identification of these groups. It should be noted, however, that the idea of publics as a situational collective can also be advantageous, as it makes it possible for those responsible for communication of organisations to identify their publics based on specific situations or problems (Míguez González, 2010), which facilitates the design of strategies of public relations and corporate communication for specific circumstances.

As for the ranking of the identified publics, it is remarkable to indicate that the publics considered as being key do not entirely coincide with the groups that most energy companies mainly identified on their "map of publics".

There is thus a majority tendency within the energy companies to use a small number of criteria (such groups as are capable of directly affecting the inner operations of the company, the legal undertaking of the business activity and the usage/consumption of its goods and services) to define their strategic publics.

Although the ranking has the object of delimiting towards which groups the companies should focus their communication efforts, it should be noted that restricting the number of criteria to three of these may limit the vision of energy companies to recognise opportunities, as well as any potential problems for their activity. For example, the environmental groups, which the companies would like to take into account as a strategic public, either due to their possible conflicts or due to banking on a collaborative effort for the development of clean and renewable energies (Moser 2006; Nisber & Kotcher, 2009; Jaegersberg & Ute, 2011). However, there are indications of the increase of the ranking criteria of the publics towards collectives that can influence the operation of companies based on their opinions and assessments (such as journalists) or that can contribute or boycott the action of the entity (such as the local community, environmental groups or activist groups).

### ***5.3. Coherence between the definition of the strategic publics and corporate communication management***

Finally, there is a high degree of coherence between the ranking of the publics and communication with these, as the communicative behaviour of these entities towards their publics is largely linked to the relevance assigned to them. Thus, when the coherence is evaluated between the importance given to the publics and the communicative action done with them, it is noteworthy that there is a clear communication coherence in the case of the public administration, the employees, the household/family users and the business/corporate users (due to their high degree of relevance); the shareholders, the journalists, the public opinion and the local community (due to their intermediate relevance) and in the case of the distributors/brokers, collaborators/partners and suppliers (due to their low degree of relevance).

Only in a small number of analysed publics (20% of them) has an incoherence been observed between the assigned importance and the communication undertaken, either as a negative incoherence (the percentage of companies that perform communication actions with a particular public is less than the percentage of institutions considered as the relevant public) as well as positive incoherence (the percentage of companies that perform communication actions with a public is greater than the percentage of entities considered relevant). For example, an incoherence is observed in the case of business associations, as a significant number of entities considered them as key publics, whereas those that carried out frequent communication actions with them were irrelevant.

Thus, one can appreciate that the assignment of relevance to the publics (ranking), subsequently translates into a communicative behaviour that is coherent with the said key publics. This indicates that the passage of these declarations of intent (the publics deemed to be of relevance) to the effective conduct with the publics (the communicative action) is consolidated within a relevant group of the analysed energy companies. This entails a clear benefit of procedures for the identification and ranking of the publics in the subsequent effective management of communication and the relationships with their strategic publics.

Finally, these pieces of evidence suggest that the Spanish energy companies are in a consolidation phase in the adoption of the strategic of communicative management model with their publics. Although it can be pointed out that in their majority the companies in the energy sector still focus their relationship management on few publics, it is also true that there is already a trend towards positive change, as the number of energy companies that are starting to adopt new management approaches with their publics, is relevant.

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