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MUTUAL PERCEPTION AND COOPERATION OF JOURNALISTS AND PUBLIC RELATIONS PROFESSIONALS WORKING IN CROATIAN PUBLIC AND STATE INSTITUTIONS

ABSTRACT

Over the past decades, journalists and public relations (PR) professionals have had a challenging relationship. In their work, journalists rely on PR practitioners to provide them with accurate information on time, while PR professionals count on journalists to report information objectively. This mutual dependence raised questions regarding their perception and cooperation. Even though many studies have been conducted to determine and analyze their relationship, they covered the PR field in general. This study focuses on political communication; more precisely on PR professionals working in state and public institutions in Croatia, and observes their mutual perception and cooperation with journalists. Quantitative research was conducted in March 2023 among journalists and PR professionals working in state and public institutions. An online questionnaire measuring twelve aspects of their mutual perception and cooperation was completed by 75 journalists working in different media institutions and 50 PR professionals employed in state and public institutions. The results showed significant differences between the two samples in terms of their mutual perception and cooperation. The results contribute to the existing literature on the PR-journalist relationship by pointing to a specific group of public relations professionals, observing and analyzing their cooperation with journalists.

Keywords: public relations professionals, journalists, media, public and state institutions.

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INTRODUCTION

Public relations specialists and journalists have an inseparable bond, even though their collaboration can be challenging due to differing interests and professional principles. This dynamic relationship is often further influenced by external factors, such as the interests of other superior groups, which may hinder the establishment of a truly cooperative partnership (Larsson, 2009). A lack of mutual understanding and trust can complicate matters, as both sides may struggle to grasp the intricacies of each other's work. To bridge this gap, both professions should work on creating better relationships based on mutual understanding. "In addition to the fact that modern public relations practitioners need to understand the media and the way they operate (a window to the world), public relations professionals should also familiarize themselves with the principles of modern journalism" (Tomić & Tomić, 2021). Developing better relationships with journalists and achieving fruitful outcomes requires PR professionals to perceive journalism as a dynamic and open profession and familiarize themselves with journalist tasks and responsibilities (Tomić & Tomić, 2021). On the other hand, journalists need to overcome the negative perceptions they often hold of PR practitioners in seeing them as frequently concealing information, having hidden agendas, or demonstrating compromising integrity (Sallot & Johnson, 2006).

The relationship between journalists and PR professionals working in state and public institutions can be particularly intricate and demanding since PR practitioners in the public sector face bigger challenges than those operating in the private sector (Aertsen & Gelders, 2011). A study conducted on 976 corporate and government communicators in the USA showed that government communicators manage their daily tasks in a more complex environment (Liu et al., 2010). They also experience larger pressure to meet the demands of the public, while at the same time being criticized more often than their colleagues working in the private sector. They also face greater political pressure

that regularly constrains their job creativity (Aertsen & Gelders, 2011). Their communication is frequently decentralized, which means that several local or state entities often speak with multiple or contradictory opinions on certain issues, which all need to be taken into account and managed by PR professionals; having in mind their primary goal, which is to serve the citizens (Liu et al., 2010). For those reasons, maintaining good relationships with journalists is crucial for transferring verified and accurate information to the public.

Since journalists are assigned to investigative reporting on state and public institutions, their tasks sometimes clash with the objectives of PR professionals. Effective journalism relies on public relations for truthful and verified information (Kanižaj & Skoko, 2010). At the same time, journalists remain cautious about the potential influence of PR activities driven by client interests, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a critical distance from public relations (Tomić & Tomić, 2021). Frequent disputes arise as journalists expect quick responses from PR practitioners, given the accelerated flow of information due to the advancements in the internet and modern technologies. Time has become a critical factor for both parties, affecting media content quality and impacting their cooperation as both PR and journalism professionals face time constraints and pressures. The general relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners is often linked to a game where the final result is perceived to be equal to zero, as empowering PR experts may weaken the influence of journalists (Kanižaj & Skoko, 2010).

Even though an extensive number of studies have been conducted to understand the relationship between the two professions (Stegall & Sanders, 1986; Shaw & White, 2004; Yun & Yoon, 2011; Tkalac Verčić & Colić, 2016), most of them have dealt with the PR field as a whole, indicating a need for comprehensive research on making a distinction between PR specialists working in the private and public sector. The mutual dependence of both professions raises questions

regarding their relationships and common evaluation. This study aims to fill the identified gap by examining this particular relationship; i.e., by realizing the mutual perception and cooperation between journalists and public relations professionals working in state and public institutions. As such, it represents the first comprehensive and publicly accessible study of this kind in Croatia. Through this research, valuable insights will be gained, allowing for the identification of key issues and potential areas for enhancing their cooperation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In terms of institutional structure, the Croatian public sector encompasses various entities responsible for executing the essential functions of the State (Kastelan Mrak & Vašiček, 2011). This includes both central and local government bodies, along with their agencies, as well as other legal entities primarily established and funded by the State. Broadly speaking, the public sector extends beyond specific institutional actors to encompass activities or services of public interest, proprietary relationships between the government and local authorities, public finance, provision of public goods, and state legislation. The Croatian public sector comprises two main subsectors: (1) the general government, and (2) public institutions and corporations (Kastelan Mrak & Vašiček, 2011). The general government encompasses three levels of government, together with social funds, as the fourth type of entity:

1. The central government, which includes all institutional units of public administration and those primarily financed and controlled by the government
2. Regional (county) government, comprising all special county institutional units and those primarily financed and controlled by counties
3. Local government, consisting of all special local institutional units and those primarily financed and controlled by them.

Public institutions and corporations in Croatia perform various state tasks and execute financial transactions at the request of the owner, i.e., governmental units (Bejaković et al., 2011). They are divided into financial and non-financial public entities, and financial ones are further categorized as monetary and non-monetary. Non-financial public corporations in Croatia provide services of special state interest and particular importance for the implementation of the economic policy of the Government of the Republic of Croatia (Bejaković et al., 2011). They cover areas such as transportation, infrastructure, and other services of general economic and social interest, which are subject to regular monitoring, control, and business audits by the state. Both state and public institutions are obliged to operate transparently toward the public, which is defined by the Act on the Right of Access to Information (Narodne novine, 2015). The goal of the act is to make sure that the public has the right to access the information and re-use that information through open and transparent communication by public authorities' bodies. To make it possible, the public authority body has an obligation to assign a special person responsible for managing issues relevant to the right of access to information who then communicates with the public and the journalists.

Croatian media operate within the territory of the Republic of Croatia, but also within the area of the unified European market (Republic of Croatia, Ministry of Culture and Media, 2022). Therefore, their fundamental principles are formed within the broader contexts of their social role, but also under the circumstances dictated by digital technology. Distribution of media content in Croatia is carried out through television, radio, print, internet, and digital channels, with their structure presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Information on the number of providers and the number of programs/publications (2021)

	Radio	Television	E-publishing	Print	SAT/CAB/Internet
Number of providers	129	23	423	176	78 31 radio 47 TV
<i>Number of programs/ print materials</i>	133 (without public providers)	27	481	770	152 54 radios 98 TV
<i>Commercial</i>	128 MSP 128 programs	27 pro- grams	176 PEP 228 publications	0	62 MSP 135 programs 43 radios 92 TV
<i>Non-profit</i>	9 MSP 13 programs	0	130 PEP 129 publications	0	16 MSP 17 programs 11 radios 6 TV

Source: Republic of Croatia, Ministry of Culture and Media (2022). *Analiza medijskog sektora u Republici Hrvatskoj*. Zagreb, p. 22.

Note: Data does not include Croatian Radiotelevision (HRT).

MSP – media service provider; PEP - provider of electronic publications

As is visible from the table, in 2021, 23 television providers were operating in the Republic of Croatia, broadcasting 27 commercial (general and/or specialized) programs. They carried out their activities through the production and broadcasting of content at the national, regional, and local levels, which is regulated in the terrestrial distribution through a system of concessions (Republic of Croatia, Ministry of Culture and Media, 2022). There were no non-profit television stations in the terrestrial distribution in Croatia. The public media broadcaster - Croatian Radiotelevision (*Hrvatska radiotelevizija*), whose founder is the Republic of Croatia, is structured following the European cultural heritage to promote Croatian national and cultural values.

Radio publishers carry out their activities through the production and broadcasting of content at the national, regional, and local levels, which is regulated in the terrestrial distribution through a system of concessions (Republic of Croatia, Ministry of Culture and Media, 2022). In 2021, 129 FM radio publishers were operating in the Republic of Croatia, with 133 programs (not including the public broadcaster). Among these

radio publishers, three had national coverage, of which one was non-profit, and two were commercial. The largest number of FM radios had a local scope (at the city level or lower) with a total of 115 such stations.

When it comes to electronic publishing, in 2021 there were 423 providers with 481 publications registered in Croatia (Republic of Croatia, Ministry of Culture and Media, 2022:24). Among them, there were 130 non-profit providers with 129 publications. The majority of e-publications (73%) are exclusively online editions, followed by e-publications whose providers also engage in print media (22%), FM radio (3%), and television (2%) activities. The largest number of e-publications are owned by commercial companies known for traditional printed media.

The print media in Croatia have undergone a turbulent transformation and privatization process. Following Croatia's independence in the early 1990s, they experienced significant changes, and many state-owned or state-controlled newspapers and magazines went through privatization (Republic of Croatia, Ministry of Culture and

Media, 2022). In Croatia, on average, 200,000 daily newspapers are sold each day. The average daily readership of newspapers is 25%, and the reach is approximately 50%. Local and regional informative newspapers still have a significant influence in certain communities.

Mutual perception of journalists and PR specialists working in public and state institutions

Scientific and professional literature consistently emphasizes the prevailing animosity between journalists and public relations practitioners (Sallot et al., 1998). Studies have shown that journalists often negatively perceive PR professionals, and underestimate and trivialize their influence on journalistic work (Davis, 2000; Wright, 2005). They also hold stereotypes that PR specialists cover up the truth (Wright, 2005). On the other hand, PR professionals often accuse journalists of fake news, publishing unverified information, and over-dramatizing events to increase ratings (Hrnjić, 2008). Commercial interests also call into question the problem of credibility because the interest of the advertiser is being protected.

However, recent studies show that the relationship between the two professions is changing, indicating that the perception of PR professionals toward journalists is improving (Shaw & White, 2004; Nejeins & Smit, 2006) and that the journalistic views of their mutual relationships are moving in the positive direction (Sallot & Johnson, 2006), indicating they share similar values and opinions (Mellado & Hanusch, 2011). On the other hand, a study conducted on Croatian journalists and PR practitioners in 2016 showed that both professions perceived each other negatively, by giving themselves and the other professions below-average grades (Tkalac Verčič & Colić, 2016). Taking into account that the indicated study observed the PR field as a whole and this study is focused on a specific group of PR specialists, the first research question is posed as:

RQ1: How do journalists and PR professionals working in state and public institutions perceive each other and how do their perceptions differ?

Influence of PR content on journalistic work

Journalists and public relations practitioners share a common understanding that public relations have a significant impact on shaping the news (Sallot et al., 1998). However, their perspectives diverge when it comes to assessing the extent of this influence. Public relations practitioners perceive their influence as a means of enriching the media content, as it allows them to strengthen the voices of their clients and interest groups. As such, PR practitioners offer “raw material” that is used to create news, but through that material, they transfer their own opinions and points of view (Tkalac Verčič & Mueller, 2007). In this way, they shape the views of the public and create a certain picture of the organization they represent. On the other hand, journalists are concerned that these influential parties might use their power to constrain the diversity and openness of the media marketplace (Sallot et al., 1998).

There are many unanswered questions about how public relations practitioners demonstrate power over journalists and how these attempts may affect news coverage (Koch et al., 2020). The literature presents distinctive approximations of the effects that PR materials have on shaping the newspaper agenda, and these estimates range from 35 to 59% (Tkalac Verčič & Mueller, 2007). Research conducted on 45 Croatian journalists and 60 PR practitioners showed that both professions believe that press releases influence media agenda to a large extent (Tkalac Verčič & Mueller, 2007). The same study showed that 36 out of 45 journalists wrote 10 articles a month based on the press releases they received, and an additional 9 journalists wrote 10 to 20 articles based on the received press releases. But even though they believed press releases have an influential role on the media agenda, 21 out of 45 journalists perceived them as an attempt to manipulate the media. However, studies observing solely the influence of PR content coming from the state and public institutions are obsolete. Taking into consideration that daily print media and web portals are still often filled with polit-

ical content (Elezović, 2012), another research question is formed:

RQ2: How do journalists and PR professionals working in state and public institutions perceive the influence of PR work on journalistic content and how do these perceptions differ?

Mutual cooperation

The relationship between journalists and PR professionals is burdened with mistrust and pressure, but it still represents one of the most interesting topics in the field of communication (Hrnjić, 2009). Journalists believe good relationships with PR practitioners are important, but hold the practitioners responsible for them (Salot & Johnson, 2006). The relationship between the two groups is often perceived as a type of negotiation in which the first level includes an exchange of resources (Charron, 1989). This first contact between the two professions is usually informal and involves a form of “tacit coordination” in which the PR side provides the information and fills out the needs of journalists. Both sides are at the disposal of certain resources they use to impact and influence each other. During the negotiation of exchanging resources, they are often called “opponents” but, from an objective standpoint, they cannot function autonomously and depend on each other (Shin and Cameron, 2005). Aware that the cooperation between these two professions requires more than a press release and a phone call, the third research question is posed:

RQ3: How do journalists and PR professionals working in state and public institutions perceive mutual cooperation and how do these perceptions differ?

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

This study aims to explore the perception and cooperation of journalists and PR specialists working in public and state institutions. To obtain the research objectives, the survey was conducted

among journalists and PR professionals in which both groups had to fill out questionnaires of the same kind. Data were collected through a web-based survey created in Google Forms. Two questionnaires were created for each group and were distributed during February and March 2023. The selection of respondents included both public relations professionals and journalists. It is estimated that in Croatia there are around 4000 journalists (Republic of Croatia, Ministry of Culture, 2015) and 900 public relations specialists (Vuković, 2016). The exact number of PR specialists working in public and state institutions is unknown. Even though the Act on the Right of Access to Information requires all state and public bodies to have an Information Commissioner (*Narodne novine*, 2015), not everyone has a PR professional for communication with the media. According to the Croatian Public Relations Association, 220 PR professionals working in the public sector are registered as their members (Croatian Public Relations Association, personal communication, April 24, 2023).

PR professionals working in public and state institutions were contacted through several channels: 50 emails were sent through the private press cut lists, which were followed by messages on social media - WhatsApp messages, based on the list of private numbers, and Facebook posts on the Croatian Public Relations Association’s site that was posted for their members. In the post, it was emphasized that only PR professionals working in public and state institutions may participate in the survey. Journalists were contacted mostly through social media, based on personal acquaintances and recommendations. At the same time, the invitation to fill out the survey included messages on WhatsApp and Facebook posts, which are the characteristics of the snowball sampling method. Snowball sampling, as a non-probability method of survey sample selection, was selected due to its advantages of locating a hard-to-reach population (Johnson, 2014). It is also a low-cost and efficient method through which it is possible to collect data very fast. The choice of respondents for the survey is not appropriate for generalization, but it is a solid starting point for future studies.

The questionnaires comprised three parts. In the first part, the respondents had to answer demographic questions. The second part contained questions regarding mutual perception, while the third part contained questions regarding the influence of PR content on journalism, followed by questions about their cooperation. The questionnaires were designed following the concepts and scales that were previously used in the academic and professional literature. The version for reporters had 8 demographic questions, while the version for PR specialists had 7 demographic questions. The remainder of the questionnaire had the same questions in both variations, with adjusted questions to match the group characteristics. The mutual perception was measured with four questions from the Verčič & Colić study (2016), the influence of PR work on journalistic work was measured with three questions from the Koch et al. (2020) study, while the mutual cooperation was measured by three questions from the Hrnjić (2008) study, and two questions were created by the study authors based on personal work experience and issues that frequently arise in the PR-journalist cooperation. A five-point Likert-type scale was used to measure the items. All the respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and notified that their answers were anonymous.

RESULTS

Results of descriptive statistics

A total of 75 journalists and 50 PR professionals working in public or state institutions completed the questionnaire, and their demographic characteristics are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Characteristics of the respondents

Construct	Characteristic	Journalists (n=75)	PR specialists (n=50)
Gender	Women	54 (72 %)	42 (84 %)
	Man	21 (28 %)	8 (16 %)
Age	18- 25	2 (2.7%)	0
	26-30	16 (21.3%)	7 (14 %)
	31-40	30 (40%)	19 (38 %)
	41-50	20 (26.7%)	20 (40 %)
	51-60	6 (8%)	3 (6%)
Education	61-67	1 (1.3 %)	1 (2 %)
	Elementary school	0	0
	High school	5 (6.7 %)	1 (2 %)
	Undergraduate Graduate	10 (13.3 %) 60 (80%)	4 (8 %) 35 (70 %)
Professional experience	Postgraduate	0	10 (20 %)
	1-3	4 (5.3%)	10 (20 %)
	4-5	8 (10.7%)	6 (12%)
	6-10	20 (26.7 %)	8 (16 %)
	10 -15 16 +	16 (21.3) 27 (36 %)	17 (34 %) 9 (18 %)
Work area	TV	36 (48 %)	
	Print	12 (16 %)	
	Internet Radio	17 (22.7 %) 10 (13.3 %)	
	Public institutions		21 (42 %)
	State institutions		29 (58 %)
Sector	Private	56 (74.7 %)	
	Public	17 (22.7 %)	
	Non-profit	2 (2.6 %)	
Topics covered	Internal affairs	48 (70.7 %)	11 (22 %)
	Economics	26 (60 %)	21 (42 %)
	Education and science	29 (37.3 %)	12 (24 %)
	Labor issues	11 (36 %)	8 (16%)
	Culture	23 (32 %)	8(16 %)
	Social problems	42 (56 %)	10 (20 %)
	Tourism	19 (26.3 %)	8 (16 %)

Of the 75 journalists, 72% of respondents were female and 28% were male. Most of them fell into the age group of 26-40 years old (71.3%), have completed higher education (80 %), and have more than 10 years of work experience (57.3 %). They cover different media and topics. In terms of their communication with PR specialists, all of the respondents marked business e-mail as a primary means of communication (100%), followed by mobile phone - calls and texts (70%), and work phone (50.7%). Only 8% of the respondents indicated they use a contact form to communicate with PR professionals.

Of the 50 PR professionals working in public or state institutions, 84% of respondents were female and 16% were male. Among them, 42 % work in public institutions, while 58% of PR specialists work in state institutions. Most of them fell into the age group of 26-40 years old (88 %), have completed higher education (90 %), and have more than 10 years of work experience (52 %). In terms of their communication with journalists, all of the respondents marked their business e-mail as a primary means of communication (100%), followed by mobile phone calls (72%) or texts (66%), and work phones (64%). Only 8% of the respondents indicated that they use a contact form to communicate with journalists.

Results of inferential statistics

Since the research data did not have a normal distribution, the Mann-Whitney U test was used to test the difference in the answers between the journalists and PR professionals working in public and state institutions. Mann-Whitney U test is a non-parametric method that compares two independent samples (Corder & Foreman, 2009) and statistically tests the difference between their medians (Milenović, 2011). The application of the Mann-Whitney U test showed statistically significant differences between the two samples both in terms of mutual perceptions and cooperation. It also showed significant statistical differences in the perceived influence of PR on journalistic work. Data were analyzed using SPSS software and results are presented in Tables 3, 4, and 5 in the sections below.

Mutual perceptions of journalist and PR professionals

Table 3 shows the questionnaire items that measured RQ1. The results show that mutual perceptions of the two professions significantly differ only in terms of satisfaction with the work of PR professionals employed in public and state institutions (Q2) ($M_{PR} = 3$, $M_{journalists} = 3$; $U = 1199.00$; $p = 0.000$)

Table 3. Mutual perceptions of journalists and PR professionals working in public and state institutions

QUESTIONNAIRE ITEM	PR professionals Median (SD)	Journalists Median (SD)	Mann-Whitney Mann-Whitney U	U-test Wilcoxon W	Z	p
Q1. How satisfied are you with the work of journalists in the Republic of Croatia?	3 (0.68)	3 (0.76)	1736.5	3011.5	-0.81	0.417
Q2. How satisfied are you with the work of PR professionals employed in public and state agencies? *	3 (0.77)	3 (0.88)	1199	4049	-3.66	0.000
Q3. How strong is the journalists' influence on the reputation of the organization they report on?	4 (0.61)	4 (1.08)	1734	4584	-0.76	0.446
Q4. How strong is the influence of PR professionals in public and state institutions on the organization they work for?	4 (0.89)	4 (1.03)	1813	3088	-0.32	0.743

Note: * significant difference for items in the questionnaire; $p < 0.05$

In order to realize the strength of the perceived difference, the effect size is calculated (Karadimitriou et al., 2018):

$$r = \frac{Z}{\sqrt{n}}$$

Using the formula, the effect size is obtained as $r = 0.33$, which indicates a moderate effect (0.1 = small effect; 0.3 = moderate effect; 0.5 = large effect) (Karadimitriou et al., 2018).

Perceived influence of PR on journalistic work

Journalists and PR professionals working in public and state institutions also share differences in their perception of the influence of PR content on journalistic work. Table 4 shows statistically significant differences in all questionnaire items, indicating mostly that PR professionals agreed more strongly with the statements regarding the influence of their PR content on journalistic work.

Table 4. Perceived influence of PR content sent from the public and state institutions on journalistic work

QUESTIONNAIRE ITEM	PR professionals Median (SD)	Journalists Median (SD)	Mann-Whitney Mann-Whitney U	U-test Wilcoxon W	Z	P
Q5. PR materials sent from state and public institutions strongly influence journalistic work. *	3 (0.86)	3 (1.02)	1057.500	3907	-4.31	0.000
Q6. Journalists use PR materials every day. *	3 (0.93)	3 (1.10)	1149	3999	-3.81	0.000
Q7. Journalistic work would be much more difficult without the materials coming from the PR department. *	4 (1.07)	2 (1.17)	746	3596	-5.81	0.000

Note: * significant difference for items in the questionnaire; $p < 0.05$

In order to realize the strength of the difference, effect sizes were also calculated as: $r = 0.30$ (moderate effect) for Q5, $r = 0.34$ (moderate effect) for Q6, and $r = 0.52$ (strong effect) for Q7.

Perceived mutual cooperation between journalists and PR professionals in public and state institutions

The results in Table 5 that relate to the answers for RQ3 show that journalists and PR professionals working in public and state institutions perceive their cooperation differently. Results of the Mann-Whitney U test show statistically significant differences in all questionnaire items.

Table 5. Perceived cooperation between journalists and PR professionals working in public and state institutions

QUESTIONNAIRE ITEM	PR professionals Median (SD)	Journalists Median (SD)	Mann-Whitney Mann-Whitney U	U-test Wilcoxon W	Z	P
Q8. I believe that journalists follow the negative rather than positive events in public and state institutions. *	4.4 (1.00)	4 (1.03)	1275.5	4125.5	-3.17	0.002
Q9. Journalists objectively represent the organization/institution they report on. *	3 (0.98)	5 (0.75)	489	1764	-7.30	0.000
Q10. Public relations representatives respond to journalist inquiries in a timely manner. *	5 (0.64)	3 (1.08)	234.5	3084.5	-8.47	0.000
Q11. The content journalists receive from the PR department is always published in the same form as received (no additional changes are made). *	4 (0.90)	2 (1.26)	1019	3869	-4.43	0.000
Q12. I have enough time to prepare the answer after a journalist sends a question. / When the response from the PR department arrives, I have enough time to prepare the report. *	3 (0.95)	3 (1.03)	1790	4640	-4.44	0.000

Note: * significant difference for items in the questionnaire; $p < 0.05$

The calculated effect sizes are $r = 0.28$ (small effect) for Q8, $r = 0.65$ (large effect) for Q9, $r = 0.72$ (large effect) for Q10, $r = 0.40$ for Q11 (moderate effect), and $r = 0.40$ for Q12 (moderate effect).

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to analyze the perception and cooperation between journalists and PR professionals working in public and state institutions. Since the results of previous studies on both professions were contradictory, this research focused on a specific group of PR specialists, to better understand several aspects of their mutual collaboration as well as to reach more definitive results. As no other similar studies were found that tested the mentioned connection between the same two groups, the findings of this research shed light on their relationship. This study aimed to answer three research questions, which were defined based on professional literature that indicated a need for a more thorough understanding of this topic.

The first research question was concerned with the mutual perception of journalists and PR professionals working in public and state institutions. The results of the Mann-Whitney U test revealed that their perception only differs in terms of satisfaction with the work of PR professionals employed in public and state institutions (Q2) ($MPR = 3$, $M_{journalist} = 3$; $U = 1199.00$; $p = 0.000$). The effect size of the perceived difference was $r = 0.33$, which indicates a moderate effect. The other questions measuring perception did not show a significant difference between mutual perceptions, meaning that even though their mutual perception might not be positive, both groups are aware of the important roles their professions entail, and understand the strong influence they have in their organizations and institutions.

Similar results and insights were gained in research by Shaw and White (2004) and Mellado and Hanusch (2012). On the contrary, another study conducted on journalists and PR professionals in Croatia showed a negative mutual perception of both professions (Tkalac Verčić & Colić, 2016).

The study took into account the PR professionals working in other sectors as well. An additional qualitative study (focus groups) that observed only journalists who report on economic issues in major Croatian media showed that journalists perceived PR professionals as untrustworthy sources that try to “sell” only the good news, and cover the bad ones (Žlof, 2007). Some journalists pointed out that they had better communication with PR specialists in the private sector, rather than the ones in state or public institutions. The results of this study conducted on PR specialists in public and state institutions indicate that progress has been made over time, even though their mutual perception is still quite low.

The second research question observed the perceived influence of PR content on journalistic work. The results showed significant differences for all questionnaire items, with a moderate size effect on the influence of PR materials on journalistic work (Q5) ($MPR = 3$, $M_{journalists} = 3$; $U = 1057.50$; $p = 0.000$) ($r = 0.30$), and for the questionnaire item stating that journalists use PR materials every day (Q6) ($MPR = 3$, $M_{journalists} = 3$; $U = 1149.00$; $p = 0.000$) ($r = 0.34$). The largest difference was found in the statement that journalistic work would be more difficult without the materials coming from PR professionals working in public and state agencies (Q7) ($MPR = 4$, $M_{journalists} = 2$; $U = 746.00$; $p = 0.000$), and the calculated effect size of 0.52 indicates a large difference in perception between the two samples. This shows that the journalists do not perceive press releases or other reports coming from the PR department to influence their work to a large extent, while the PR specialists believe the opposite. Similar results can be found in other studies conducted so far (Tkalac Verčić & Mueller, 2007; Koch et al., 2017). On the contrary, qualitative research performed by Iturregui-Mardaras et al. (2020), based on the answers of discussion groups consisting of journalists and PR professionals, showed that the lack of time and resources in editorial offices caused an increase in dependence of reporters on public relations materials, which was emphasized by both the PR specialist and journalists. The discrepancy in this study could be found in the fact that the mentioned study covered the PR field as a whole,

while this study observed only the influence of press releases of public and state institutions, so its influence is expected to be smaller.

When interpreting results related to RQ2, it needs to be taken into account that they could be shaped by perceptual biases where respondents tend to evaluate their own importance more positively than others perceive it (Koch et al., 2017). The same applies to journalists who underestimate the PR influence to appear to be fully in charge of their roles and job demands. Similar results were obtained in a study by Tkalac Verčič & Mueller (2007), which showed that both professions believe that the other side has a great influence on the media agenda, but do not agree on the importance of the indicated influences where the journalists believe that the influence of PR is lower than the PR specialists estimate. For that reason, the actual degree of influence of PR materials on journalistic work should be observed somewhere between the two indicated assessments (Koch et al., 2017). One other explanation for the results in this study is that since the PR work is mostly evaluated through media presentation and the number of press releases, by indicating high influence in the survey, PR specialists emphasized the value and significance of their work (Tkalac Verčič & Mueller, 2007). On the other hand, journalists could feel that if they admit a large influence of PR materials on their work, their profession may lose credibility.

The third research question dealt with mutual cooperation. The Mann-Whitney U test showed significant differences for all questionnaire items. Both groups shared similar opinions in believing that journalists follow rather the negative than positive events in public and state institutions (Q8) ($MPR = 4$, $M_{journalists} = 4$; $U = 1275.50$; $p = 0.002$), with the effect size being $r = 0.28$, indicating a small effect. All the other questions showed large significant differences in the perception of mutual cooperation. As such, PR professionals are neutral in responding to a question of journalism objectivism (Q9), while journalists strongly agree on them being objective when reporting on public or state institution institutions ($MPR = 3$, $M_{journalists} = 5$;

$U = 489.00$; $p = 0.000$), with $r = 0.65$ indicating a large effect. The same conclusion was reached in a study by Hrnjić (2008). Moreover, this study also showed a disagreement in whether the PR specialists respond to journalist questions in a timely manner (Q10) ($MPR = 5$, $M_{journalists} = 3$; $U = 345.50$; $p = 0.000$), with $r = 0.72$ showing a large effect. The disagreement was also found in the statement that the content that journalists receive from the PR departments is always published in the same form as received (no additional changes are made) (Q11) ($MPR = 4$, $M_{journalists} = 2$; $U = 1019.00$; $p = 0.000$), $r = 0.40$ (moderate effect). The results are contradictory to the results gained by Hrnjić (2008), whose study showed that most reporters check the PR materials only in certain situations before publishing them. In terms of deadlines, both groups gave similar answers in terms of whether they had enough time to prepare the answer/report when they received the question/statement from one another ($MPR = 3$, $M_{journalists} = 3$; $U = 1370.00$; $p = 0.000$), $r = 0.40$ (moderate effect), and the same result was reached in a study by Hrnjić (2008).

These results indicate that the two professions do not see the common issues in the same manner, thus displaying significant misperceptions and disagreements. One of the possible reasons for the results obtained in this study could be connected to the ways audiences consume news, which has changed and switched from traditional paper to virtual online versions of newspapers and magazines, social media, and blogs (Rieis et al., 2015). The interactivity and the immediate news placement create a competitive environment for the media houses where they have to create effective strategies for catching the attention and generating more clicks. Moreover, studies have shown that negative news and dramatic headlines generate more clicks and receive more comments (Rieis et al., 2015). That is also the reason why reporters expect a fast response from the PR specialists. The deadline for the public and state PR specialists to resolve a request is three working days (Narodne novine, 2004), and they need the time to collect all the facts (sometimes from several people within their organizations) and to prepare a valid report that can

be sent to journalists to be published. On the other hand, journalists expect instant answers, because the audience expects instant news (Van Hout & Van Leuven, 2016). It seems that the issue with deadlines is a common stumbling block for both professions, which was also proven in a study by Hrnjić (2008), who showed that only 2% of reporters are satisfied with the speed of response and the quality of answers coming from the PR departments, while 70% of PR practitioners believed journalists do not give them enough time to answer their inquiries. Solutions could lie in more frequent communication, mutual workshops, education, briefings, or other social gatherings to encourage cooperation and understanding. Knowing each other's point of view could be a starting point for successful future collaboration and reconciliation (Tkalac Verčič & Mueller, 2007).

Theoretical and practical contributions

Several theoretical and practical contributions emerge from this research. On the theoretical side, this is one of the first studies in Croatia that observes mutual perception and cooperation between the journalists and PR specialists by focusing only on the PR specialists working in public and state institutions, which can bring more insights into their relationship and clarify their common points of view. This research showed that even though both groups are aware of the important roles each of their professions attain, their mutual perception is not entirely positive, which adds to the first contribution of the theory. Secondly, the research has shown that there are misperceptions between the perceived influence of PR content on journalistic work, where the journalists evaluate a low to mild influence, and the PR specialists that their influence is larger. Since there is a disbalance in mutual opinions, in the future it would be useful to conduct a content analysis to quantify the influence of PR content coming from public and state institutions and to realize what the actual impact on a journalist's work agenda is. The third contribution is visible from the results that test the mutual cooperation, which showed that the two professions do not

see common issues in the same way, wherein the three categories particularly stand out: negativity of journalists, lack of objectivity, and the ability to adhere to deadlines by both sides, which was particularly emphasized with the PR specialists not responding in a timely manner. From the practical point of view, the research brings novel insights into the relationship between the two professions by pointing out the specific elements that need improvement so that the two professions can work on them regularly to avoid future misunderstandings and ameliorate their mutual relationship. By identifying and addressing the misperceptions, both professions would be able to look for solutions to reach an agreement for their disputes.

CONCLUSION

Journalists and PR specialists have different roles in their professions which often cross paths, requiring their intense cooperation. Their relationship has been long described as difficult and complex, which is why a large number of studies have been conducted to better understand all the dimensions of their mutual collaboration. This study focused on political communication and observed the relationship between journalists and PR professionals working in public and state institutions. The results show that the mutual perception and cooperation of journalists and PR specialists working in public and state institutions is still very complex and needs improvement, especially in terms of dealing with the deadlines by both sides and the perceived journalistic subjectivity when reporting about the public or state institution.

The main limitation of the study is the small sample size. Thus, future recommendations go in the direction of collecting more answers to reach more definitive results. The online questionnaire also has its limitations and can pose a challenge for some respondents due to technical problems, lack of skills, or other issues that may arise when trying to complete it. Moreover, the results of the study are based on self-report data, which can produce biased answers (Donaldson & Grant-Vallone, 2002). Snowball sampling, as a

non-probability sampling method, also has several disadvantages, the main being that the degree of confidence in interpreting the data cannot be determined (Berndt, 2020).

Recommendations for future research go in the direction of conducting a qualitative study to gain a deeper insight into the reasons for each grade and to better explain the main points of understanding from the point of view of both professions. To better understand the impact of PR content on journalistic work, it would be useful to run a content analysis to quantify the effect of PR work on journalistic content. Future studies could also focus on exploring demographic differences between the two professions to understand whether there are any major differences in mutual perception and cooperation based on gender, age, or education of the two professions, or based on the type of media that the journalists cover. Future studies could include PR professionals in other fields to get a complete picture of their relationships and mutual work. Since this study covered only the impact of PR content on journalistic work, future studies could explore the influence of journalism on the work routines of PR specialists to understand in what manner they impact their regular workday.

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MEĐUSOBNA PERCEPCIJA I SURADNJA NOVINARA I STRUČNJAKA ZA ODNOSE S JAVNOŠĆU U HRVATSKIM JAVNIM I DRŽAVNIM INSTITUCIJAMA

SAŽETAK

Tijekom proteklih desetljeća novinare i stručnjake za odnose s javnošću (PR) karakterizira izazovan odnos. U svome radu novinari se često oslanjaju na stručnjake za odnose s javnošću kako bi im pružili najnovije informacije u pravodobnome roku, dok stručnjaci za odnose s javnošću očekuju objektivnu objavu informacija od novinara. Njihova međusobna ovisnost postavila je i određena pitanja vezana za njihovu percepciju i suradnju. Iako je provedeno mnogo istraživanja s ciljem analize i definiranja njihovih odnosa, većina se istraživanja uglavnom bavila područjem odnosa s javnošću kao općenite grane. Ovo istraživanje usmjereno je na političku komunikaciju, preciznije na stručnjake za odnose s javnošću koji rade u državnim i javnim institucijama u Hrvatskoj te prati njihovu međusobnu percepciju i suradnju s novinarima. U ožujku 2023. godine provedeno je kvantitativno istraživanje među novinarima i stručnjacima za odnose s javnošću koji rade u državnim i javnim institucijama. *Online* upitnik koji mjeri 12 aspekata njihove međusobne percepcije i suradnje ispunilo je 75 novinara koji rade u različitim medijskim institucijama i 50 stručnjaka za odnose s javnošću zaposlenih u državnim i javnim institucijama. Rezultati su pokazali značajne razlike između ta dva uzorka u pogledu njihove međusobne percepcije i suradnje. Provedeno istraživanje pridonosi postojećoj literaturi o odnosima između stručnjaka za odnose s javnošću i novinara tako što ukazuje na specifičnu skupinu stručnjaka za odnose s javnošću te promatra i analizira njihovu suradnju s novinarima.

Ključne riječi: stručnjaci za odnose s javnošću, novinari, mediji, državne institucije, javne institucije.