
Changes in the Journalist's Profession Caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Context of Relations with Representatives of the Public Relations Industry

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Abstarct:

Purpose: The purpose of this article is to analyze the changes that occurred in the journalism industry during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Design/Methodology/Approach: This analysis was conducted based on the results of quantitative research carried out on a sample of 316 journalists working in Poland. The research was designed and implemented under the scientific direction of the author of the publication with the participation of experts representing the Polish Press Agency and the Institute for Development of Information Society.

Findings: The article presents selected areas of cooperation between journalists and public relations practitioners and changes in this area.

Practical Implications: The research used in the article was conducted in the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the view of the problem has a point dimension. Subsequent in-depth research on this topic is therefore definitely warranted and will be continued.

Originality/Value: The results of the study reflect the applicability and effectiveness of the proposed indicator. Consequently, the fundamental strength index may constitute an alternative to the existing methods of assessing the bankruptcy process in enterprises.

Keywords: Coronavirus, COVID-19, journalists, media, public relations.

JEL codes: D83, L82.

Paper type: Research article.

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1. Introduction

Changes in the journalist's profession and the industry as a whole are closely correlated with what is happening in the economy and society. In the first months of 2020, we faced a unique situation, when the whole world was confronted with the COVID-19 pandemic. The role of journalists in the face of the public health crisis was significant at that time, as they were the first to report on its development (Perreault and Perreault, 2021). In a short period, societies and companies had to adapt to new living conditions limited by the restrictions. These changes had a significant impact on many industries, especially the media and journalists, which is described in detail in this article. Of course, what happened in the world did not remain without influence on the relationship that occurs between the media, journalists, and representatives of the public relations industry (Tworzydło *et al.*, 2020).

Media relations are still a key element of activities carried out by public relations practitioners. Everyone who wants to lead a company, institution, larger team, be an expert or an authority in any field must be aware of the need to build and maintain relations with the media (Łaszyn, 2017). To achieve optimal results, it becomes essential to build mutually beneficial relationships. These, in turn, depend on several variables, but above all on compliance with the rules that are closely related to the work of a journalist or editorial office (Tworzydło, 2020). On the one hand, these are determined by the goals that a journalist wants to achieve. On the other hand, there are goals of a representative of an institution or company (Gawroński and Jakubowski, 2018). The changes that take place in the area of relations between these two interest groups result largely from the development of information technology and a tool that serves as an added value in the communication process. But these did not have such an impact on these relationships as the global crisis related to the SARS-COV-2 pandemic. It has caused such significant transformations that its effects will be observed for years. Many processes have also been accelerated or altered, and these changes have happened overnight. One of the many changes COVID-19 has brought about is also the widespread increase in news consumption (Fleming, 2020; Merchant and Lurie, 2020).

The media act not only as entities that provide reliable and objective information, they are allies of the organization (Gawroński, 2006) but are recognized as crisis generators (Podraza, 2009). They can also influence the moment a crisis ends (Tworzydło, 2019). This aspect is especially analyzed from the perspective of the public relations industry, because the media can, on the one hand, support the processes of building relationships, but also have the power to destroy the image very quickly. This is due to the strong influence of the media on public opinion, which is no longer questioned by anyone today (Żbikowska, 2005). It is even acknowledged that the process of managing crises must be carried out based on proper contact between the company and the media (Tworzydło, 2001). Besides, it should be noted that the media provide information that has become a commodity, is

treated as an intangible good, often more valuable than material goods (Kaczmarek, 2011). Thus, relations with the media in the area of product, idea, service, or information communication become equivalent and are treated in this way by all partners involved in building and maintaining relations with the media.

Literature indicates three basic techniques of cooperation with the media. These are sending press releases, answering questions from journalists, and organizing press conferences (Kadragic and Czarnowski, 1997). Therefore, in the analyzed research project, which became the basis for this article, from the three areas indicated above, the issue of press releases and the very relations that occur between journalists and specialists responsible for media relations were thoroughly analyzed.

A very significant element that affects the assessment of the situation in the context of the relationship between public relations and journalism is also the issue of social media, which have spontaneously become content carriers for everyone, and in this way, everyone can become a journalist (Kapoor *et al.*, 2018). From March 2020, the distribution of information, the range, and the speed of sharing in social media channels have undoubtedly increased. The speed with which information spreads on social media is unimaginable (Brindha, Jayaseelan, and Kadeswara, 2020). Their development and importance accelerated also in connection with the pandemic (Pingree *et al.*, 2018). Through social media, everyone can not only express their opinion on any topic at any time but also reinforce their message and share it in a very simple way (Czaplicka, 2014). From the company's point of view, social media enables dialogue, however, companies themselves are not able to control the conversation, but they can influence it. The impact in question is the foundation on which all real business relationships are built (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2011). Social media is therefore becoming a place of building relationships, but also the place of generating crises, which more and more often begin precisely in this area where everyone can be an active participant in events, initiate and moderate them (Mirbabaie *et al.*, 2020). Public relations can therefore be a tool aimed at building a positive image of the organization in the environment, increasingly using social media in this area (Kietzman *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, it is a free alternative to communication and promotion, which is crucial for the functioning of entities in the time of a pandemic (Chan, Nickson, Rudolph, Lee, and Joynt, 2020).

Social distancing during COVID-19 deprived journalists of ways to connect with industry professionals, but at the same time generated new opportunities and a whole new potential for remote communication (Alyaqoub *et al.*, 2019). Conferences, briefings, and other opportunities for direct obtaining of information and networking have disappeared as most meetings of this kind have been canceled (Windelspecht, 2020). Access to information became limited and virtual press briefings did not allow for a more open discussion between journalists and the organization (Bernadas and Ilagan, 2020). Due to social distancing restrictions, many editorial offices were closed (Olsen, Pickard, and Westlund, 2020), and many journalists suddenly had to start extremely intensive work from home. This sudden change of work environment

required journalists to have a completely different approach to time management than before. Working from home requires high self-discipline and commitment to its performance (Cellini *et al.*, 2020; Kothgasser, 2020).

This article contains an analysis of the data obtained in the course of the research project, which was prepared and carried out by a team led by the author of this publication. This research concern the relations that take place between journalists and representatives of the public relations industry. They cover many thematic areas that have been verified in terms of changes taking place under the influence of COVID-19, among which are the issues of relations between the analyzed professional groups, including factors that have a limiting impact on them. The issue of fake news and trust towards journalists and representatives of the public relations industry was also raised.

2. Methodological Assumptions of the Research and Research Sample

The research in the area of methodology development, tool design, implementation of the adopted assumptions, and preparation of the report was carried out by a team of experts composed of employees of the Polish Press Agency and analysts of the Institute for Information Society Development, with the significant participation of the authors of the article. The research activities were carried out in May 2020 among 4,500 journalists included in the databases of the Polish Press Agency. The project resulted in 316 surveys carried out in one of the most difficult periods of the COVID-19 pandemic, i.e., when Poland and many other countries in the world introduced *lockdown*. Assuming a 95% confidence level, the estimated maximum error was 5%. The maximum error was estimated at 5.3%, with the following assumptions, confidence level for the results $\alpha = 95\%$, fraction size, $f - 0.5$, N_{\min} - sample size, and N_p - population size. The research was done using the quantitative research method - CAWI technique (*Computer Assisted Web Interview*). The set of factors based on which the statistical and diversification procedures were carried out, co-create the following variables: gender, age, seniority in the industry, place of employment, range of the medium, number of cooperating editorial offices, and the number of PR specialists known personally. When analyzing the gender of the respondents, men slightly outnumber women in the research sample 57.6%. Thus, the percentage of women amounted to 42.4% of the total sample. Taking into account the age of the respondents, the most numerous group were journalists over 45 years old 37.3%.

The age range of 36-45 years was indicated by 29.8% of respondents. Moreover, every third respondent (32.9%) was under 35 years old. When it comes to seniority in the journalistic industry, the respondents' answers were divided. Nevertheless, the most numerous group were respondents with experience in the industry not exceeding 10 years 35.5%. On the other hand, 11-20 years of experience was indicated 31.3% of respondents. Moreover, 33.2% of respondents work as journalists for over 20 years.

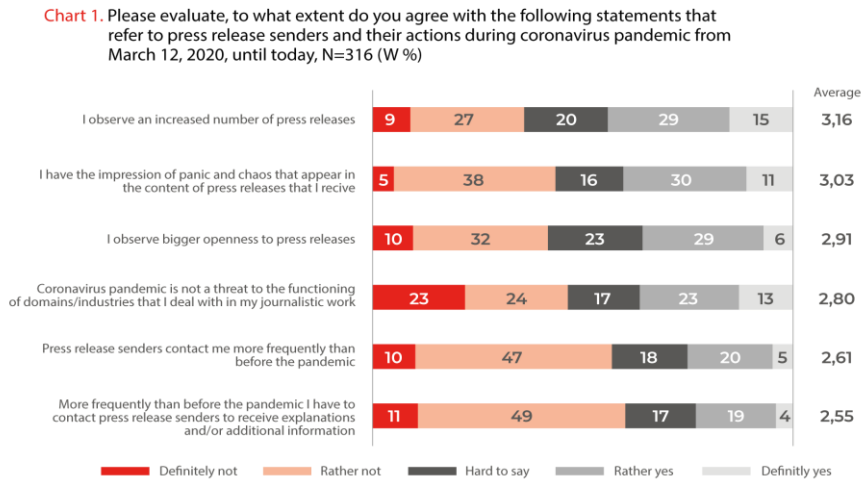
Almost three-quarters of journalists worked for the internet portal at the time of the survey 73.7%. Employment in the printed press was declared by almost half of the respondents (48.1%). Radio journalists (21.8%) accounted for over one-fifth of the research sample, while TV journalists (10.1%) accounted for one-tenth. Respondents working in Internet TV constituted 4.7%, and in Internet radio 4.1% of the total sample. Taking into account the main type of medium for which the respondents were working at the time of the survey, the largest percentage of them indicated a website 43.7%. As for the areas in which the participants of the research specialize in their professional expertise, the highest percentage indicated social issues 45.7%. Almost three out of ten respondents specialized in culture/lifestyle (32.1%) and the area of general information on economics and business (30.5%). Almost one-fifth of the responses were related to education and ecology 19% and 18.7%, respectively. The above-described group of respondents, who completed the questionnaire, contributed to the construction of many dependencies and the development of conclusions, which are presented in the analytical part of the article. In addition to the analysis of the results of scientific research, a query was made of the available resources in the area described in this material.

3. Research Results Analysis

In the case of all aspects analyzed in the course of the study, the respondents' answers were strongly divided, so that the average scores on a scale of 1-5 ranged between 2.55 and 3.16. Nevertheless, the highest percentage of respondents declared that they observe an increased number of press releases 44% of indications. More than two out of five respondents admitted that they have the impression of panic and chaos in the content of press releases they receive. 47% of respondents believed that the coronavirus pandemic is a threat to the functioning of the fields/industries they deal with in their journalistic work. As many as 57% of respondents admitted that senders of press releases do not contact them more often than before the pandemic. Three out of five journalists participating in the survey declared that they do not have to contact the senders of press releases to obtain explanations and/or additional supplements more often than before the pandemic.

When analyzing the information about the press release senders and their activities during the coronavirus pandemic, statistically significant relationships were observed due to the reach of the medium. It turns out that journalists employed in international editorial offices significantly more often admitted that during the coronavirus pandemic they observe an increased number of press releases (average 3.39 compared to 3.00 in nationwide editorial offices). They also more often than before the pandemic, have to contact the senders of press releases to obtain explanations and/or additional information (average 2.78 compared to 2.42 in nationwide editorial offices). On the other hand, respondents working in local/regional editorial offices significantly more often declared that they observed greater openness to press releases, an average of 3.17 compared to 2.39 in international editorial offices (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Research questions analysis

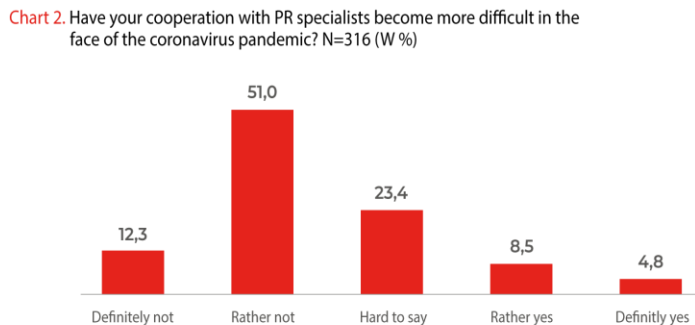


Source: Own elaboration based on a survey of journalists.

Journalists specializing in management, consulting, media, and advertising most often admitted that during a pandemic they observed an increased number of press releases received and that senders of press releases contact them more frequently than before the pandemic. On the other hand, the impression of panic and chaos in the content of press releases was most often declared by respondents professionally dealing with the subjects of construction and energy issues. Journalists specializing in the issues of state issues, politics, and society most often admitted that during a pandemic they more often have to contact the senders of press releases to obtain explanations and/or additional information. Respondents specializing in the management, consulting, media, and advertising professions most often declared that they were more open to press releases. On the other hand, journalists specializing in health and medicine most often stated that the coronavirus pandemic is not a threat to the functioning of the fields/industries they deal with in their journalistic work.

4. Relationships between Journalists and Public Relations Specialists during the Pandemic

Almost two-thirds of the respondents (63.3%) declared that due to the coronavirus pandemic, cooperation with PR specialists has not become more difficult for them. Some difficulties in this aspect were reported by 13.3% of respondents. Almost every fourth respondent (23.4%) was unable to answer this question and indicated an undecided answer. As can be seen from the table below, journalists employed in at least three editorial offices reported significantly greater difficulties in collaboration with PR specialists 21.2% of affirmative responses (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Research question for PR specialists

Source: Own elaboration based on a survey of journalists.

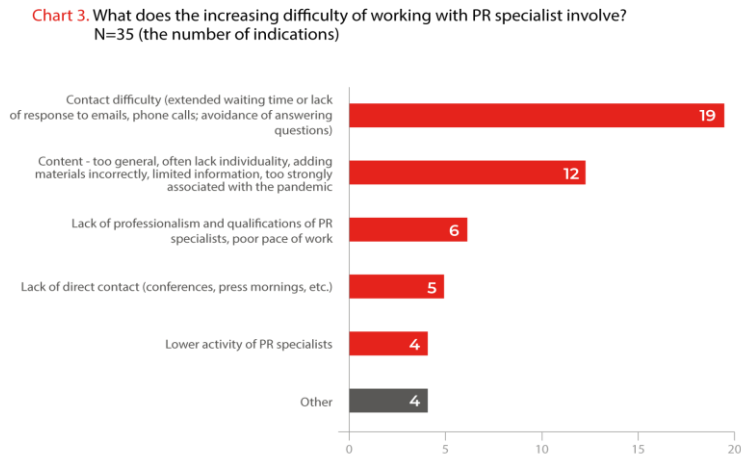
In the question regarding the cooperation of journalists with PR specialists, respondents specializing in education, economics, and finance as well as automotive and transport most often declared that due to the coronavirus pandemic, working with PR specialists became more difficult. The opposite opinion was expressed mainly by the respondents specializing in new technologies, industry, IT, management, consulting, media, and advertising, as well as health and medicine.

Respondents declaring that cooperation with PR specialists has become more difficult due to the coronavirus pandemic were asked to explain why they think so. As many as 35 journalists used the opportunity to answer this question. Most respondents indicated problems in contacting PR specialists, such as long waiting time, no response to e-mails, or impossible telephone contact 19 responses. Respondents mentioned “frequent delays in e-mail contact, difficulties in getting in touch, extended waiting time for responses”. “Worse availability. The vast majority of PR specialists is always hard to access, they do not call back, do not reply to e-mails, and now they have additional excuses like ‘I’m sorry but I work from home and I do not have access to everything’ or ‘there is a pandemic, you have to understand or ‘I will not answer because my boss is not here’, etc., etc.”. Slightly fewer objections were indicated by respondents regarding the content of messages and information that PR professionals provide (12 people). They felt that these articles are often too general, limited, lack individuality, and are too strongly linked to the pandemic topic (Figure 3).

“We receive many more messages in which some information is repeated and it takes more effort to capture the actual news. Also, the information is superficial and more time is needed to clarify it. PR specialists focus on messaging and it is harder to get an individual comment”. “[...] there is no interesting information, mainly information noise about the epidemic”. Six respondents also indicated the lack of competencies of PR specialists and unprofessional and slow general performance of work. “They lack professionalism, the poor pace of work”. They are closed-minded,

fight for guidelines from their 'masters' (employers), do not have their opinion, you can see their incompetence, timidity, (often) ignorance, lack of competence to work in PR”.

Figure 3. *Research question for the difficulty working with PR specialists*



Source: *Own elaboration based on a survey of journalists.*

Moreover, in five cases, the lack of direct contacts, such as during organized conferences or morning briefings, was indicated. “No possibility of live meetings, conferences, meetings, morning briefings, etc.”. “Limited contact opportunities and fewer events”. In contrast, the lower activity of PR specialists was indicated by four respondents. “The pandemic has significantly reduced the number of projects and investments made”. “They are less active, they do not promote their events, they do not invest time in communicating content outside the network”. Besides, individuals pointed to other examples of difficulties encountered, such as disregard for journalists, increased activity, new forms of work, and conflicts due to the reduced number of free publications.

5. The Phenomenon of Fake News

During the research, the problem of sending false information to the media was also analyzed. Fake news is defined as rumors, disinformation, post-truths, alternative evidence, or just lies as false representations of reality are usually disseminated on social media for benefit social or control (Mohsin, 2020). They have become a plague on social media. However, journalists pay more and more attention to the need to verify the data they receive. According to the conducted research, more than two-thirds of the surveyed journalists (69%) declared that as soon as they suspect that information is fake news about a company, they often or very often verify it with the source (company). Only 5% of respondents never do so. Almost half of the respondents (48%) admitted that as soon as they suspect that a press release contains

or refers to fake news, they often or very often reject it without further verification. Furthermore, 36% of respondents never use fact-checking sites. Every fourth respondent rarely practices it. On the other hand, 62% of the surveyed journalists never report fake news to fact-checking websites. Only 8% of the respondents often or very often do so. As can be seen in the table below, no statistically significant correlations were observed between the groups due to activities relating to the phenomenon of fake news during the coronavirus pandemic (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Research question for fake news



Source: Own elaboration based on a survey of journalists.

Journalists specializing in agriculture, natural environment, environmental protection, sports, tourism, recreation, as well as management, consulting, media, and advertising most often declared that during the coronavirus pandemic one can talk about the plague of fake news, which companies refer to in press releases. What is more, due to the risk of fake news, companies verify the content of press releases more carefully. On both issues, the opposite position was presented primarily by journalists dealing with economics and finance, automotive and transport, as well as health and medicine.

Considering the claims about fake news during a pandemic, it is worth noting that preventive measures are most often used by respondents specializing in education, agriculture, natural environment, environmental protection, as well as health and medicine. It is also worth noting that fact-checking websites are the least frequently used by journalists dealing with the construction and energy sector, economics and finance, automotive and transport, as well as sports, tourism, and recreation.

6. Social Trust in Journalists and Public Relations Specialists during the Coronavirus Pandemic

In the course of the research, respondents were asked to take a position on how, in their opinion, social trust towards journalists and PR specialists is changing in the era of the coronavirus pandemic. The responses were divided, as 31% of respondents

said that social trust in journalists was increasing, while 26% of respondents believed that it was falling. On the other hand, in the case of social trust in PR specialists, its increase was declared by 4% of respondents, while 36% of journalists participating in the survey supported its decrease. As can be seen in the table below, no statistically significant relationships were observed between the groups due to changes in social trust in the time of the coronavirus pandemic concerning journalists and PR specialists.

Journalists specializing in management, consulting, media and advertising, health, medicine, and education most often admitted that in the era of the coronavirus pandemic, social trust in journalists increases. The opposite position was presented mainly by the respondents professionally involved in automotive, transport, agriculture, natural environment, environmental protection, as well as sports, tourism, and recreation. The second part of the question concerned changes in social trust towards PR specialists. Its increase was most often indicated by journalists specializing in the automotive, transport, new technologies, industry, IT, culture, art, and entertainment. On the other hand, respondents professionally dealing with the issues of education, agriculture, natural environment, environmental protection, sport, tourism, and recreation most often believed that this trust was declining.

7. Summary and Conclusion

The research carried out as part of the analyzed project provides a lot of interesting information in the field of relations between journalists and media relations specialists. Several important subjects were discussed, important for both groups. One of the elements of the research was the analysis of the activities of news broadcasters during the coronavirus pandemic. Journalists often emphasized the issue of observing an increased number of press releases sent (44%, significantly more often in local/regional and international editorial offices 50%) and the impression of panic and large chaos in the content of press releases they receive (41%). It is also worth noting that 57% of respondents admitted that senders of press releases do not contact them more often than before the pandemic, while three out of five journalists participating in the survey declared that they do not have to contact the senders of press releases to obtain explanations and/or additional information more often than before the pandemic.

An important part of the study was questions related to the phenomenon of fake news spreading during the coronavirus pandemic. As many as four out of five journalists admitted that due to the threat of fake news, they verify the content of press releases more carefully. Moreover, it was significantly more often declared by radio journalists (86%) and those working in local/regional editorial offices (90%). On the other hand, almost half of the respondents (45%) observed the plague of fake news, mentioned by companies in their press releases. This position was significantly more often presented by women (53%), people over 45 years old (53%), and employed in at least three editorial offices (56%). Taking into account

activities related to the phenomenon of fake news, as many as 69% of respondents declared that as only they suspect that information is fake news about a company, they often or very often verify it at the source (company). In the survey, respondents were also asked about their attitude to fact-checking sites. It turns out that 36% of the respondents never use them, while one rarely does. Importantly, as many as 62% of journalists never report fake news on such websites.

The last part of the research process concerned the cooperation between journalists and PR specialists. Almost two-thirds of respondents (63%) said that cooperation with PR specialists has not become more difficult for them due to the coronavirus pandemic. On the other hand, difficulties in this respect were reported by 13% of the respondents, and significantly more often they were indicated by journalists employed in at least three editorial offices. Taking into account the forms of communication between journalists and PR specialists, the respondents believe that the frequency of using press conferences organized on the Internet as well as webinars and podcasts will increase the most 71% and 64% of responses, respectively.

On the other hand, communication through traditional press conferences (52%) and direct contacts in the form of meetings (58%) will decrease. Social trust in these two groups also plays an important role in the time of the coronavirus pandemic. In the case of social trust towards journalists, its increase is forecasted by 31% of respondents. On the other hand, in the case of social trust in PR specialists, its increase was declared by 4% of the respondents.

The research used for this article was conducted in the first phase of the pandemic. Therefore, looking at the problem has a spot dimension. It does not provide comprehensive knowledge about the journalists themselves and the persistence of changes in the functioning of the mass media. Subsequent, in-depth research on this topic is therefore definitely justified.

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