

## Perception of Journalists on the Role of Public Relations

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**Abstract:** The relations with the media are the main activity performed by the public relations specialists for maintaining a positive image of the organization they represent. This relation between public relations and journalists can become, sometimes, a conflicting one, but both of them admit that they need each other. On the one hand, communication specialists try to satisfy journalists' information needs, and on the other hand, the journalists satisfy PR-ists needs to put in a favorable light the organization they represent. In this study we intend to identify the opinion of journalists on public relations and spokesperson in relation to the work of the journalist and also to identify the reasons of journalists for not trust the profession of media relationist. The questionnaire was applied in the range 1 to 20 March 2014. The sampling was non-probabilistic one, the only criterion for selection of respondents being the status of journalist. The questionnaire answered 50 journalists from central and local press. In terms of the positions held by the respondents, the sample is as follows: 12% are director, 24% have editor function, 14% are editors and 34% are reporters.

**Keywords:** public relations; journalists; survey; relationship

### 1. Introduction

The relations with the media is the main activity performed by the public relations specialists for maintaining a positive image of the organization they represent.

In some cases, the relationship between journalists and public relations specialists can become a conflicting one because of different interests that the two actors manifested. On the one hand, the main interest of journalists with respect to public relations specialists is that these latter satisfy their information needs, and on the other hand, the interest of the PR-ists is to put in a favorable light the organization they represent, even at the cost of missed truth. Nevertheless, the Public Relations

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specialists remain the primary and the most credible information source for journalists about the activities of the organization.

In all studies focused on the relationship between journalists and public relations specialists, there is a constant idea: it is a complex and ambiguous relationship.

Thus, in a study already become classic, Jean Charron (1991, p. 17), defines the relationship between journalists and public relations specialists as one which is based on a double negotiation:

- a) the exchange of resources (the journalists are given access to information, the communicators and political leaders whom they represent, are given access to the public);
- b) the rules governing these exchanges.

The Canadian researcher returns to this theme a few years later, stressing: *"This relationship can be defined as a game of negotiation between interdependent actors; This game involves a relation of influence joining cooperation and conflict. The journalists are looking for information in addition to representatives of politics, and they seek the visibility it gives journalists the same time, each player tries to exert influence on the behavior of others, to gain and maintain control mechanisms for building political timeliness. (...) Therefore, we can distinguish two levels of the negotiations: the foreground actors negotiate the exchange of resources (information and visibility) and on to second plane they negotiate the rules that coordinate the exchanges."* (Charron, 1994, p. 12)

In another approach, Michael Ryan and David L. Martinson (1988, pp. 131-140) defined this relationship as one love / hate type, showing that this configuration exist early in the practice of public relations. The actors involved in this game are in a relationship of interdependence which is based on the interest shown by each of the participants in mutual cooperation. However, the dependence of journalists to those skilled in public relations vary depending on the available alternatives:

- a) public relations specialists are less dependent on journalists if they can be connected to other means of communication: letters, posters, brochures, Internet etc.;
- b) the journalists are less dependent on public relations specialists if they are able to find multiple sources, so to obtain information from other parties.

In this context, both participants want to have control over the production and distribution of information, but despite this aspiration, certainly none of them can hold a monopoly on this process.

The previous research devoted to this problem (Kopenhaver, Martinson, Ryan, 1976; Craig Aronoff, 1975; Caroline Cline, 1982; Susanne Bovet, 1992; Gabriel Vasquez, 1996; Bill Patterson, 1994) consistently highlights that relationship between the two occupational categories is based on the ambiguity of roles.

The relationship of interdependence is explained as follows: on the one hand, the journalists assigns public relations specialists the role of source, which, most often, they not check (as it would require the rules with sources entrenched in journalism information tradition); on the other hand, they do not trust public relations specialists, because they believe that they introduce elements of self-promotion in their messages. However the journalists have the advantage that they can verify the information from parallel sources, but when they are not available, they depends entirely on public relations specialists.

The Public relations specialists accept their role as distributors of information, but they accuse journalists that, most often, those publishes information incomplete compared to that they have submitted, selecting them on subjective criteria. Despite this bias, we note that PR-ists have an advantage: the competition between media companies make to increase the importance of the news taken from a media institution so others will take their in order not to seem less informed. Thus the mechanism offers many possibilities of placing the messages and gives some strategic advantages for PR-ists. But should not omit that, under the avalanche of messages sent by many existing press offices, the media organizations can ignore a lot of information disseminated by public relations specialists.

In other news, as asserted by Cristina Coman, “*to achieve good communication with the media, public relations specialists should know the specifics of media and adapt its*” (Coman, 2004, p. 31). Thus the PR-ists should be aware that there are differences between the local media and the central press institutions, the differences between the journalism of written press, radio and television, and both the message structure and especially its style, need to be adapted to these characteristics. Moreover, depending on the specific of the communication channel, the specialist must take into account the editorial policy, the nature of presented topics, and the proximity of the news.

Regarded through the prism of the relationship, Cristina Coman asserts that the two professions *"are not in conflict, but in cooperative relations"* (Coman, 2004, p. 34). Moreover, there are certain rules that PR-ists must meet in order to build and maintain a cooperative relationship with the media. First, the communication specialist should be flexible and adapt to the demands of professional journalists. Secondly, this cooperation should be based on trust and mutual respect, that the recognition of professionalism partner.

On the other hand, according to the results of several studies conducted in 1990 (Coman, 2004, p. 34), the journalists expected the press office representatives to be sociable, patient, affable, uninhibited, honest, have ease of oral and written expression, to have good memory and capacity for analysis and synthesis, to be good organizers, to know how to quickly assess a situation and take immediate decisions, have good knowledge of the media world and how it functions, to have a sense of "news", to know well the organization they represent etc.

### **1.1. Research Objectives**

1. Identification the opinion of journalists on public relations and spokesperson in relation to the work of the journalist.
2. Identify the reasons of journalists for not trust the profession of media relationist.

### **1.2. Assumptions**

1. It is assumed that journalists from Romania have very little confidence in spokespersons especially, in the press offices in general.
2. It is assumed that journalists are less dependent on the spokespersons, compared with spokespersons which depend to a greater proportion of journalists.

### **1.3. Methodology**

The cooperation between journalists and public relations specialists becomes absolutely necessary not only in times of crisis but also in everyday experience of any organization. The topic has been addressed by communication, given the options of the new technologies facilitated the communication, the authors

considered useful to investigate the relationship between journalists and spokesmen. The premises from which we started our research are based on limited climate of trust of journalists in public relations in general, but especially in spokespersons but also on dependence of journalists of public relations specialists.

The research method we chose to achieve those objectives was the online questionnaire. The questionnaire was applied online at the initiative of PR agency Plus Communication, on [www.pluscommunication.eu](http://www.pluscommunication.eu) website.

The questionnaire included a number of 12 questions corresponding to set targets. In order to shorten the time of completing the questionnaire predominated the questions with multiple scales where respondents had to choose one option, the number of possible responses ranging from 2-5. We have also included closed questions where we wanted to highlight the firm opinion of journalists on the confidence it gives on public relations. In addition to closed questions and the scaled one was introduced into the questionnaire an open question where the respondents mentioned the causes for the journalists have or not have trust on public relations.

The questionnaire was structured according to two dimensions:

- The opinion of journalists on public relations specialists: Question 1. What is your attitude towards the spokespersons?; Question 4. Do you think the relationship between journalists and the spokespersons is one of collaboration, conflict, other; Question 5. Do you think that the spokespersons are manipulators of the media ?; Question 6. Do you think that the spokespersons are a credible source ?; Question 9. To what extent do you think that PR-ists are dependent on media? Question 10. To what extent journalists are dependent on public relations?; Question 11. In your view, journalists have confidence in public relations? question 12.a. What are, in your opinion, the reasons why some journalists have confidence in public relations ?; question 12.b. What are, in your opinion, the reasons why some journalists are not confident public relations?

- Investigation of journalists' awareness on specific PR activities: Question 2. Which of the following spokesperson tasks you seem to be the most important ?; Question 3. In your experience, how many spokespersons carry out their duties set out above ?; Question 7. Do you think that you are well informed by the press offices with which you work?; Question 8. Do you think that in times of crisis there is some information that organizations do not want to disclose, but distorts their contents.

The questionnaire was applied in the range 1 to 20 March 2014. The sampling was non-probabilistic one, the only criterion for selection of respondents being the status of journalist. The questionnaire answered 50 journalists from central and local press. In terms of the positions held by the respondents, the sample is as follows: 12% are director, 24% have editor function, 14% are editors and 34% are reporters.

The sample was made up of journalists from several counties, thus, most respondents were from Bucharest (22%), followed by those from Constanța (16%), Pitești (10%), Craiova (8%) and Târgu Jiu (6%). The remaining sample was made up of approximately equal numbers of journalists from Botoșani, Iași, Galați, Târgu Mureș, Zalău, each of the counties representing 4% of the total sample. Equal percentages of 1% were collected by responses of journalists from cities such as Cluj-Napoca, Târgoviște, Brăila, Piatra Neamț, Sibiu, Suceava, Focșani.

Looking at the sample structure we can say that is one representative for the historical regions of Romania, despite the fact that in terms of numbers, the authors do not arrogate the claim of representativeness nor claim to generalize the results to the whole community of journalists from Romania. The research was hampered by the fact that we haven't an updated database that provides information on public relations specialists, departments or existing press offices throughout the country. Therefore, we cannot say that the study was conducted on a representative sample, but we believe that were chosen institutions that extensive work with media and communication specialists known journalists, so that the data obtained to have as much relevance.

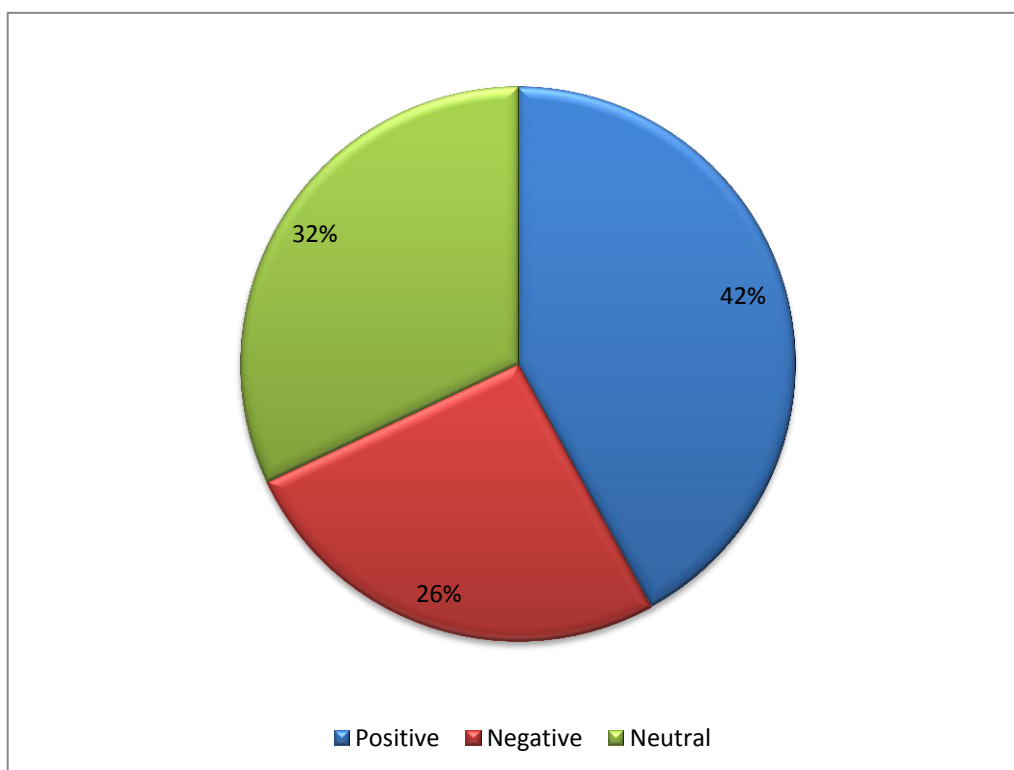
The survey was voluntary and not based on awards or objects for journalists, the link of the questionnaire was also sent by e-mail to a consistent number of editors and journalists in Romania and in the time were filled as shown in the above by 50 people.

Journalists who completed the questionnaire come from the following media outlets: Gazeta de Constanța, Realitatea TV, Digi 24 TV, Botoșeneanul, Gorj Exclusiv, Săptămânalul Gherila, Incomod Media, Crai Nou, Mesagerul de Neamț, Radio România, Radio Transilvania, Ziu de Cluj, TVR, Monitorul de Vrancea, Bitpress, Obiectiv argeșean, Jurnalul de Argeș, Replica de Constanța, Mesagerul de Sibiu, Business Review, Curierul Național, Gazeta de Sud, Timpul de Vâlcea, Monitorul, România TV ș.a..

The survey participants have an experience in the press an average of 11.8 years. The sample reported by sex is as follows: 46% of the male respondents and 54% women. Another representative aspect of the study sample is the age, after aggregating all responses and a simple calculation we found that the average age of the respondents is approximately 36 years.

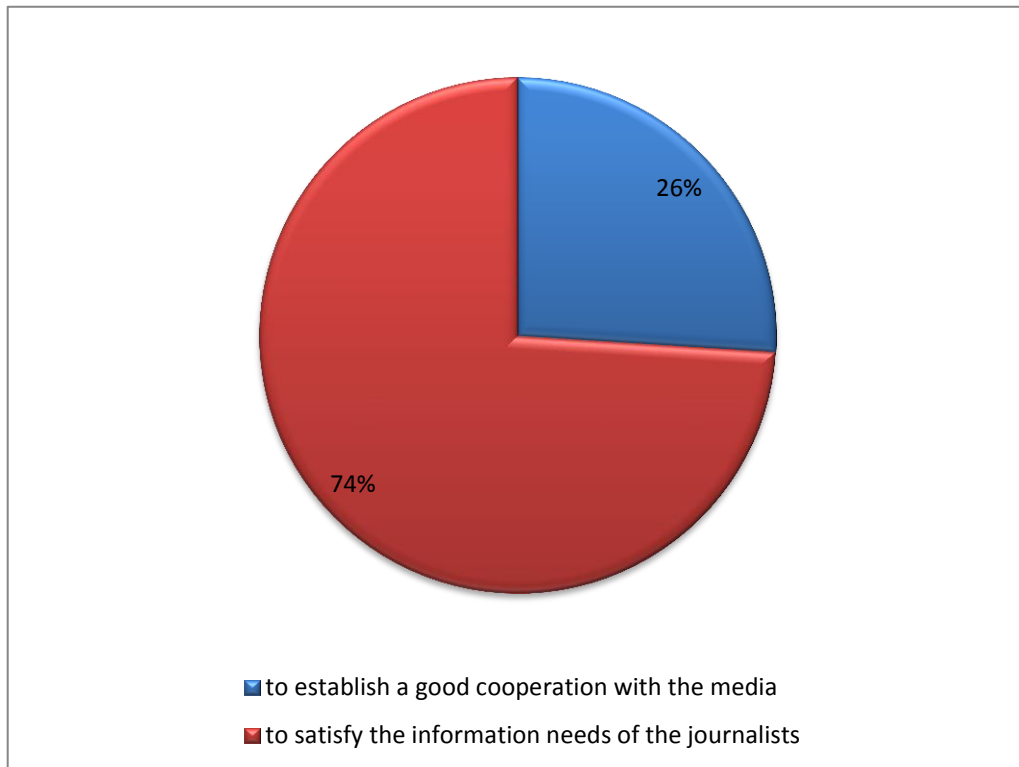
#### 1.4. Research Results

Interpretation of the results was performed by analyzing each individual item with the frequencies. From the analysis of frequencies showed that most respondents have a neutral attitude towards spokespersons (42%), 32% have a positive attitude and 26% have a negative attitude.



**Figure 1. Question 1: "What is your attitude towards the spokesmen?"**

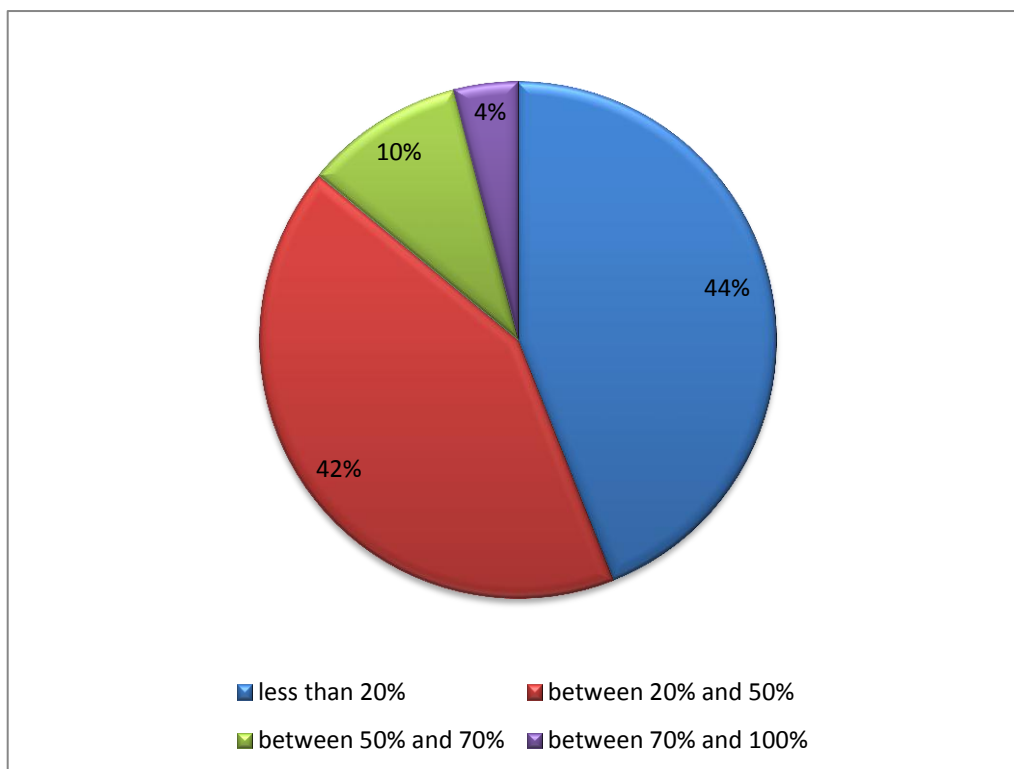
The respondents consider that the main task of the spokesperson is to meet the information needs of journalists (74%) while 26% think the spokesperson task should be to establish a good cooperation with the media.



**Figure 2. Question 2: “Which of the following spokesperson tasks you seem to be the most important?”**

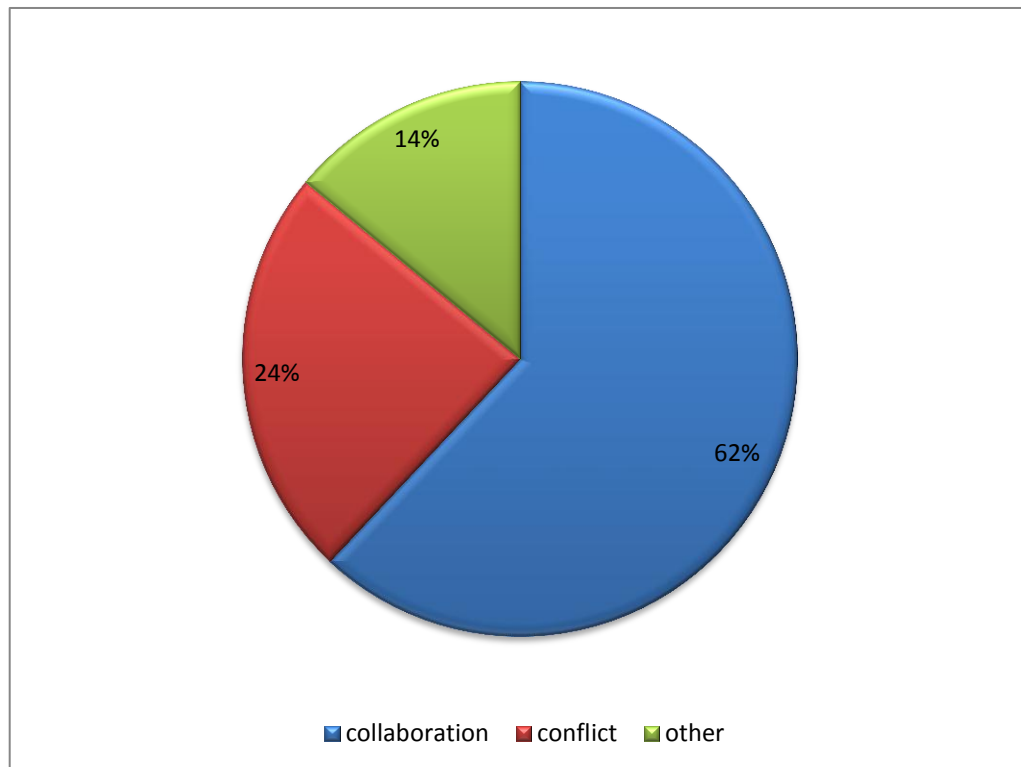
Regarding the tasks, 42% of respondents believe the spokespersons fulfill their tasks in 20% -50%, but a much higher percentage of 44% is recorded by aggregating the opinions of journalists who believe that less than 20% of public relations specialists perform their duties. Numerically, we find that very few respondents, respectively 4% consider the spokespersons meet their duties to 70% or even 100%.





**Figure 3. Question 3: “From your experience, how many of the spokespersons carry out their duties set out above?”**

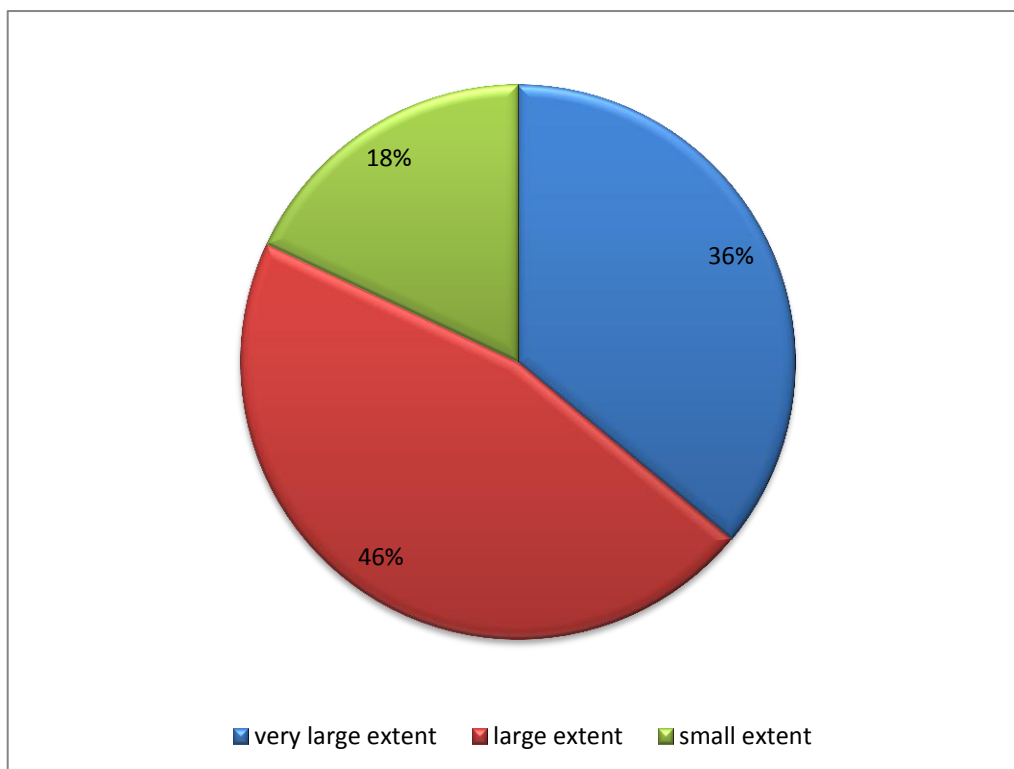
In line with the previous replies are the answers to the question “How do you think is the relationship between journalists and spokesmen?” question to which most respondents (62%) responded that has a working relationship with spokespersons, these being a credible source (40%), other respondents (24%) saying that their relationship with the spokespersons is one of conflict because they consider them manipulators of the press (54%) and are not considered a credible source (46%). Notice also 14% of those who consider that the relationship is one of apparent collaboration, challenge, lie or a difficult one.



**Figure 4. Question 4: "Do you think the relationship between journalists and spokesmen is one of?"**

Also, 62% of respondents believe they are not well informed by the press offices they working and believe that in times of crisis there is information that organizations are unwilling to disclose (68%) or disclosed but distort their content (32%).

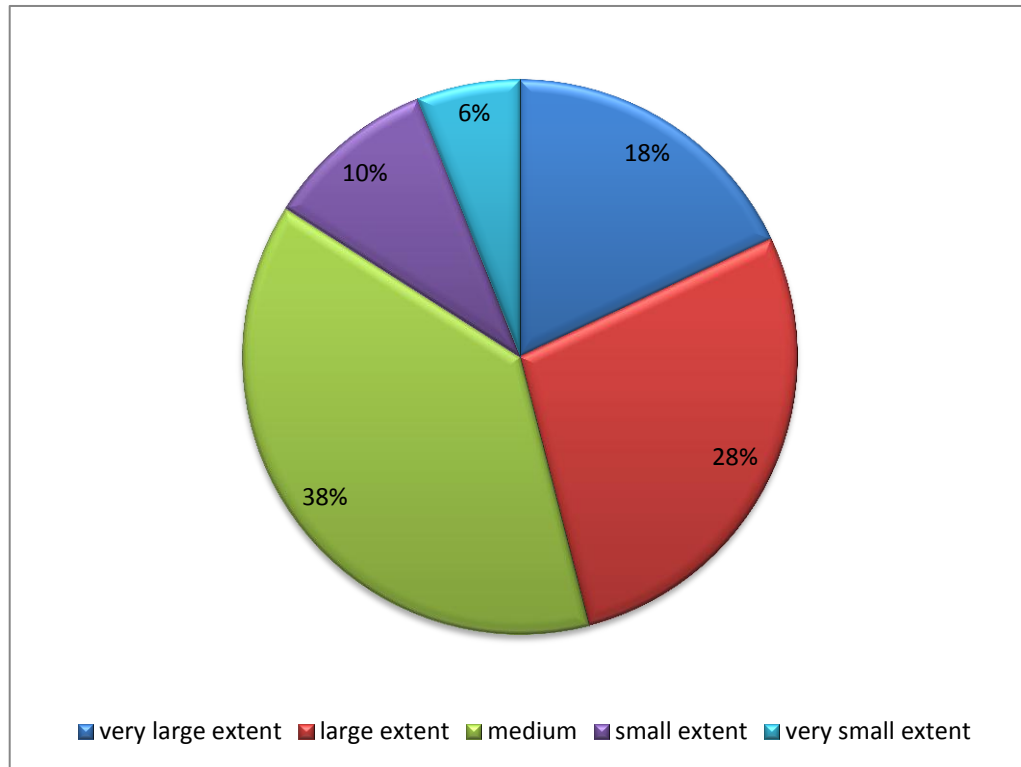
The high percentage (46%) of respondents believe that PR-ists are largely dependent on the media, 36% believe that they are heavily dependent and only 18% of respondents believe that the PR-ists are small extent dependent on mass-media.



**Figure 5. Question 5: "To what extent are the PR-ists dependent on the media?"**

We conclude that there is an average degree of dependence between journalists and public relations as the opinion of 38% from investigated journalists, while 28% consider that the dependence is average.

To the same question, 18% of respondents believe the dependence between journalists and public relations is very high, and only 3% consider that the dependence is very small.



**Figure 6. Question 6: "To what extent do you think journalists are dependent on public relations?"**

Nevertheless, when it comes to trust that journalists have in public relations, 46% answered affirmatively and 54% negative.

At question. 12 we registered a variety of answers concerning the reasons why they consider that the journalists have no trust in the public relations also in spokespersons. Among them are: "receiving incomplete of the information", "deliberate concealment of the truth", "lack of objectivity of spokespersons", "beautification of truth", "the desire of companies to get free publicity", "lack of transparency", "appointment the spokesman on political considerations", "representing the interests of the company they work for and not correctly informed the public opinion", "lack of professionalism, lack of public relations specialists", "arrogance of spokespersons and failure to apply the law 544/2002" etc.

The reasons why some journalists trust the spokespersons and public relations are “official source”, “providing accurate information”, “official intermediary between the institution and the media” etc.

## 2. Conclusions

Therefore, the study reveals that most journalists have a negative attitude when it comes to relationships they have with the spokespersons. Moreover, they claim that the spokespersons are hiding, most often intentionally the truth, presenting truncated information, are politically appointed and also are more interested in free advertising, distorting the truth to the detriment of the public presentation of truth. On the other hand, some journalists recognize the importance of press offices in the activities they engage in, saying that they are an official position of the institution and provide correct information to the press.

However, the vast majority of journalists responded that the role of PR is to satisfy the information needs of journalists and most of spokespersons fulfill these functions in very small proportions (below 20%) and small (between 20 and 50%) . Striking is the percentage of 14% of the journalists who are not hiding to say that the relationship is one of apparent collaboration, defiance and deception or a difficult one. In this context, we consider that 62% of those deemed are not well informed by the press offices they work, is one worrying for an effective relationship between journalists and PR-ists.

Although we didn't plan to highlight the negative aspects of this relationship, we cannot fail to notice also the opinion of journalists who believe that in times of crisis there is information that organizations are unwilling to divulge or disclose them but distorts their content.

The analysis of the relationship between journalists and public relations specialists also revealed that most journalists, i.e. 46% of our survey respondents believe that the PR-ists are largely dependent on the media. 38% of the investigated journalists believes that there is an average degree of dependence between journalists and public relations. Perhaps the most important conclusion of this study comes from the responses to an elementary question about the analyzed relationship, only 46% of journalists have confidence in public relations, while 54% are not trusting at all the public relations and all that it involves.

In this context, it is clear that it is very difficult for a working relationship based on trust to develop, because the public relations representatives feel betrayed on how journalists “process” and transforms the information they received from communication departments with the media. This creates a situation of uncertainty regarding the efficiency of communication with specific public through the media.

The research registered critical assessments of journalists to the address of public relations specialists and though we didn't insisted on this, it seems difficult to establish a climate of trust and professional respect between journalists and PR-ists in this context.

The study reveals that journalists have a better opinion about PR-ists they come in contact more often, which suggests the need for a professional and moral behavior of every public relations specialist, so these positive values to be reflected on the perception of public relations, as a whole.

Regarding the future of the relationship between journalists and public relations specialists we consider relevant the opinion of Renate Roca-Rozenberg: “The disappearance of a significant part of the media will compel PR-ists, I think, to become much smarter, more frequently to seek other ways to communicate about those strictly related to the transmission of information through this channel. For a long time sending a press release or organize a press conference was the key to everything and everyone. The managers can now see if they have a really good PR man in his own yard or just a writer communicated. I hope that the financial situation will not make journalists become too <<sympathetic >>. The temptation to be kind to those who provide advertising budgets has always existed in the management of the press. The despair to remove your newspaper tomorrow might bring that feeling to the extreme and then wouldn't speak about the real press. Real journalists should ignore the fact that the marketing department is ready to sell all at 99% discount and make all sorts of promises. If we fail to maintain our professionalism, both us and journalists, even this time, we will be very hard and things will go back to normal even when the money will not be a problem” (Bindeanu, 2010).

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