

Charting the ‘Lunar Alignment’ in today’s media landscape: Exploring perceptions of Italian strategic communicators and journalists in a mediatized world

Received
12th February 2024

Revised
07th July 2024

Accepted
10th October 2024

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Abstract

Research context: Over the past thirty years, shifts in strategic communication and journalism have altered how communicators and journalists interact. With content creation and news writing central to capturing attention and building relationships, their functions are increasingly overlapping.

Purpose of the study: This study explores how Italian strategic communicators and journalists perceive their own and each other’s identities and functions in the current Italian media landscape. It investigates how these professionals respond to mediatization and how this, in turn, has supported mutual positive relationships.

Methodology: Through expert interviews, this study adopts an exploratory approach to examine the perspectives of strategic communicators versus those of journalists on questions of professional identity, roles, working practices, relationships, and professional challenges.

Results: The perceptions of professional identities and roles in strategic communication and journalism have evolved, while the growing mediatization of practices among strategic communicators has enhanced journalists’ perceptions of relationships. There is a noticeable convergence in the skills and competencies of these professionals, alongside a mutual recognition of the importance of high-quality information.

Research limitations: This study is exploratory and conducted with a small sample size. Due to the qualitative nature of the findings, they cannot be generalized.

Practical implications and originality of the study: The study addresses a gap in research with a country-specific focus and sheds light on mediatization effects on professional identities.

Keywords: Professional identity, perceptions, media changes, mediatization, strategic communication, journalism, Italy

1. Introduction

In recent decades, a significant transformation has occurred in the field of communication, marked by the increasing integration and transboundary roles of communication across organizational functions (Invernizzi, 2000; Zerfass *et al.*, 2018). Strategic communication has become more significant, highlighting the expansion and merging of

numerous communication activities (Falkheimer and Heide, 2014). The influence of media on organizations, shaped by varied media logics, has significantly affected both internal and external communications, covering areas such as marketing, branding, public relations, community, and institutional relations (Fredriksson and Pallas, 2017; Ihlen and Pallas, 2014; Pallas *et al.*, 2016).

Digital information technologies, especially the widespread use of platforms like social media, have significantly influenced strategic communication (Luoma-aho and Badham, 2023). The democratization of communications through these platforms and the emergence of automated communication tools challenge traditional concepts of organizational control and the role of strategic communication (Badham *et al.*, 2022). Even once considered essential, media relations activities have undergone substantial changes (Tkalc Verčič and Colić, 2016; Verhoeven, 2016; Wilson and Supa, 2013; Zerfass and Schramm, 2014). Similarly, journalism has witnessed substantial changes, transitioning from print and electronic broadcasting to becoming more digitalized (Jamil, 2023). This digital transformation has affected news production and dissemination through the Internet and mobile devices, impacting public perceptions of journalism's professionalism and credibility (Zelizer, 2019). As content creation and news writing become key for capturing attention and fostering relationships, the roles of communication professionals and journalists are increasingly converging (Werder *et al.*, 2023).

Departing from the notion of increased mediatization of corporate content, the study explores how Italian communication professionals and journalists perceive their own and each other's roles in this changing media landscape. Italy was selected because the line between strategic communication and journalism is often blurred, with professionals frequently moving between these fields (Valentini, 2014). Additionally, Italy was chosen due to a lack of empirical studies on mediatization, and how these professions are viewed compared to other nations (Arqoub and Dwikat, 2023). News reporting, cultural values, informal relations, and unwritten rules, as well as the history and development of the strategic communication profession, are factors that make country-specific studies such as this very important, as findings from other contexts are not necessarily generalizable.

To address this gap, the study conducts expert interviews, providing qualitative insights into the perceptions of those working in strategic communication and journalism. It adopts an exploratory approach to examine the perspectives of communication professionals and journalists, emphasizing the significance of social representations (Moscovici, 1984) when exploring the perceptions of professionals regarding their own and other's professions. Professional and societal cultures are considered as lenses through which individuals make sense of their professional identities (Weick, 1995). While the findings may not represent the entire spectrum of these professionals, the study provides empirical evidence on how these two professions are adapting to mediatization and how mediatization is supporting mutual positive relationships.

2. Literature review

Converging professions: Strategic communicators and journalists' functions and relationships

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A classical definition of strategic communication describes it as “all types of goal-oriented communication initiated by organizations to address any kind of stakeholders and audiences” (Zerfass *et al.*, 2018, p. 488). Strategic communication has emerged in response to dynamic changes in society, organizations, and technology in today’s evolving communication landscape. Zerfass *et al.* (2018) contend that this transformation is a response to the pressing need for an aligned integration of diverse communication functions, strategically orchestrated to realize organizational objectives. Similarly, Invernizzi and Romenti (2011) advocate for a paradigm shift towards a heightened strategic phase of communication within organizations. They posit that communication is assuming an increasingly pivotal role as an intrinsic value intertwined with core organizational functions, thereby becoming instrumental in supporting essential business activities crucial for the resilience and growth of organizations. Strategic communication can also create new value for organizations, such as helping organizations align, energize, envision, and constitute their legitimacy (Invernizzi and Romenti, 2014). Yet, many strategic communicators are trained in public relations activities and start their careers in newsrooms of news media or corporate side. Thus, naturally, media relations is one of the key activities they perform but not the only one (Falkheimer and Heide, 2014; Simonsson and Heide, 2021).

There are many definitions of journalism, and agreement on what it truly is today seems to be lacking (Shapiro, 2014) due to the blurred lines between journalism and other types of public communication (Weaver and Willnat, 2012). Many consider journalism a profession that offers an accurate portrayal of the modern world, delivering new information based on facts, or opinions derived from those facts (Conboy 2013). Journalists rely on diverse information sources, including organizational communicators, resulting in regular interactions between these communication professionals.

Historically, studies across various countries highlighted tensions between journalists and these communicators-who were often referred to as public relations-, stemming from their inherent antagonism (Arqoub and Dwikat, 2023; DeLorme and Fedler, 2003) and the complex relationships between PR practitioners and journalists. Misunderstandings and stereotypes led to adversarial relationships as both professions sought to differentiate their roles (Yun and Yoon, 2011). These professionals are often distinguished by their communication “culture” (Weder *et al.*, 2023), though they are considered “two sides of the same coin” (Evans, 2010). The relationship has been described as “love-hate”, associated with the communicative difference between public relations professionals and journalists as senders or receivers, the interdependence of roles as source or reporter, incompatibility of goals as source’s advocacy or reporter’s pursuit for objectivity and consequences for each other (Shin and Cameron, 2004).

However, later research has highlighted a change in these perceptions, showing less adversarial views towards one another (Neijens and Smit, 2006; Weder *et al.*, 2023).

These perceptions result from interactions and direct experiences, besides ethics and professionalism. Changes in the relationship between strategic communicators and journalists reflect shifts in strategic communication, and journalism practices over the last thirty years. The commercialization of media markets and the competition for audience attention and advertising revenue have negatively impacted news content (McManus 2009). Market-driven news production tends to favor personalized debates, oversimplified issues, and polarized conflicts (Aalberg *et al.*, 2010; Curran 2011). Journalists frequently focus on established sources and competing policy agendas while neglecting diverse reporting (Hanitzsch and Mellado 2011). This deterioration in quality can foster public cynicism (Blumler and Cushion 2014; Jebril *et al.*, 2013), particularly in online news media under pressure to produce low-cost content with less-experienced staff (Redden and Witschge 2010). Economic pressures and the dominance of publicly owned corporations have made the industry more market-driven (Tsetsura, 2021; Curtin, 1997), prompting journalists to seek opportunities in the corporate sector and facilitating mediatization processes within organizations. A clear example of such contamination is, in fact, the increasing mediatization of corporate content (Fredriksson and Pallas, 2017; Ihlen and Pallas, 2014; Pallas *et al.*, 2016). At the same time, the demand for information services from communicators has risen in the media industry (Jo, 2003). To meet this growing need, communication professionals are producing more media-like corporate content (Fredriksson and Pallas, 2017), possibly requiring more journalists to become communicators (Viererbl and Koch, 2021). Hence the communicator's professional role as a source of information, an influencer of media agenda, and a provider of information subsidies (Shin and Cameron, 2003; Tkalac Verčič and Colić, 2016; Tkalac Verčič *et al.*, 2017) has substantially increased, in part because of journalism changes.

3. Mediatization of communications

Technological advancements have brought both opportunities and challenges to strategic communication and journalism (Jamil, 2023; Wilson and Supa, 2013). Expectations arise that these interactions may influence the institutional logic guiding the practices of communication professionals and journalists (Pang *et al.*, 2014). Strategic communications have increasingly embraced digitalization (Luoma-aho and Badham, 2023) and become more mediatized to align with the media logic necessary for gaining visibility in the public domain (Wiesenberg and Tench, 2020). Mediatization pertains to the increasing incorporation of media into society and the dependency on its intrinsic mechanisms (Hjarvard 2014). In simpler terms, mediatization explains how media transformations influence activities, organizations, institutions, and society, while also illustrating how media itself evolves via human interactions (Fredriksson

and Pallas, 2020). Mediatization studies in the context of strategic communication have addressed questions related to both the pressure media exerts on an organization and the process by which organizations adapt their communication activities to accommodate and manage these media pressures strategically (Fredriksson and Pallas, 2020; Salomonsen *et al.*, 2016). Scholars have observed that while research on this topic frequently examines mediatization's impacts, it rarely explores how agents create, maintain, alter, or disrupt it (Pallas and Fredriksson, 2013).

The extant literature on agents' contributions to the mediatization of corporate content has revolved around understanding professionals' competencies and roles in the process of strategic communication transformation (Laursen and Valentini, 2015; Poulsen, 2022). Wiesenbergh and Tench (2020), for instance, studied organizational leaders' knowledge and usage of social bots as part of the deep strategic mediatization of organizations. Poulsen (2022) studied the mediatized roles of Danish civil servants during the pandemic.

In this line of studies, media relations activities remain quite central in all these understandings of strategic communication and mediatization, and they are closely related to public relations and relationships with journalists (Broom and Sha, 2013; Tkalac Verčič *et al.*, 2017). Media relations activities today have broadened their scope (Fredriksson and Pallas, 2018; Tsetsura, 2021) by leveraging the opportunities offered by the increasing diffusion and use of digital technologies which allow communicators to mediate their content directly to target audiences and for different purposes. In a way, digital technologies have accelerated the mediatization processes within organizations. Mediatization-related changes bring important implications not just on the content creation part of strategic communication, but also on how journalists perceive and value communicators as information subsidiaries (Jo, 2003) both in terms of hard and soft skills.

While some communication professionals focus solely on digital and social media, the majority also engage in traditional media tasks (Lee *et al.*, 2015). Bernhard and Russmann (2023) argue that traditional PR abilities such as presswork, PR campaigns, and event planning are increasingly expected from PR practitioners in Austria, unlike in Germany. Journalistic skills remain relevant in both Austria and Germany but are not as prominent as they once were. The authors concluded that digitalization is reshaping job profiles in PR within these countries primarily concerning hard skills and competencies, while soft skills such as organization, leadership, and teamwork (Meganck *et al.*, 2020) remain unaffected.

It is crucial to understand that mediatization, as an adaptation to media systems' logic, must be examined within the specific context and structure of each social and media system (Eskjær, 2018). A media system encompasses the different media and outlets functioning within a specific setting, as well as the procedures, routines, and cultures that link these outlets to their surrounding context (Mancini, 2020). While many early studies on the mediatization of strategic communications in organizations have concentrated on the Nordic region and in public sector organizations (e.g., Aagaard and Blach-Ørsten, 2018; Laursen and Valentini, 2015; Pallas and Fredriksson, 2013; Poulsen, 2022; Salomonsen *et al.*, 2016), there is

limited understanding in Southern countries such as Italy. Italy's media system is often classified under the Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist Model (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), which is characterized by high political parallelism and the powerful influence of political leaders on the media agenda (Mazzoleni 2010). These factors have historically influenced journalism freedom and agenda, but it is not clear whether they also influence the relationships with strategic communicators.

4.Strategic communication in Italy

Torp (2014) contends that elements of strategic communication have existed throughout civilization, but its institutionalization and recognition in Italy began in the last two decades (Invernizzi and Romenti, 2011). The professionalization of strategic communicators and the establishment of training programs since the early 1990s contributed to this shift (Muzi Falconi and Kodilja, 2004).

Invernizzi and Romenti's national study (2011) noted a significant transformation in conceptualizing communication among large Italian companies, emphasizing strategic thinking. Media relations, once a basic tactical activity, is now contextualized as a strategy for fostering positive images and building reputation, especially within the marketing and visibility activities of organizations (Invernizzi, 2000; Valentini and Sriramesh, 2014). Functional separation is evident, with large organizations emphasizing strategy, integration, alignment, and stakeholder-oriented activities (Invernizzi and Romenti, 2014), while smaller organizations focus on basic marketing and visibility activities through social media and media relations (Valentini and Sriramesh, 2014). Recent market results (Codelupi and Palesana, 2019) indicate a growing and diverse communication market in Italy involving communication professionals, journalists, and content creators.

Italian strategic communication often overlaps with other professions. This is partly because older generations of communicators had varied educational backgrounds, as formal programs in public relations and strategic communication only emerged in the 1990s (Muzi Falconi and Ventrizzo, 2015). Many learned their skills on the job and are slowly adapting their skills to social media environments (Lovari, 2016). Additionally, the profession lacks institutional recognition, leading to professional encroachments. For instance, in public sector organizations, journalists rather than communicators handle media relations and press services. Valentini (2014) noted this problem is exacerbated by the current legislation, which allows only official journalists to take on the information duties of public sector organizations. In that study, this encroachment was found, however, to produce positive professional evaluations, particularly on the side of communication professionals.

With the changing media landscape and more mediatized corporate content essential for attention and visibility, this study reassesses perceptions of communicator-journalist relationships, which are significantly impacted by these shifts. Specifically, it aims to find out:

RQ1 - How do professionals currently view the role of strategic

communication and journalism? Additionally, what are their opinions about one another?

RQ2 - What skills and competencies define the professions of strategic communication and journalism in the contemporary media landscape?

RQ3 - How do professionals perceive each other, their relationships, and their working practices?

RQ4 - What are the primary challenges encountered by these professionals in their field?

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5. Research Design

To study strategic communicators and journalists' professional identities, a qualitative research approach was chosen. Qualitative semi-structured interviews with experts were conducted. Experts have specific knowledge about an issue, development, or event (Döringer, 2021) thus they are well-situated to provide process knowledge, which comprises knowledge about interactions, routines, or social practices in their professional field (van Audenhove and Donders, 2019). Expert interviews were used to identify the most common professional understandings that are currently circulating among their respective professional communities. To identify professional experts and strive for some heterogeneity (Patton, 2002), three main criteria were used: diversity of industry affiliation (private, public, non-profit) for the communication professionals, diversity of media affiliation for journalists (television, radio, newspaper/magazine), and consolidated work experience, meaning several years of professional experience. Less experienced professionals were excluded as they would not have had sufficient insights to reflect on past experiences and compare them with the present. Gender was not considered a relevant selection criterion nor age, as earlier studies identified no significant differences based on gender or age on questions about professional identity, roles, and relationship quality (Valentini, 2014, Valentini and Sriramesh, 2014, 2024). The recruitment process for interviewees followed a multi-stage approach. Initially, a list of potential participants was compiled based on publicly available professional profiles. Invitations were subsequently distributed via email, and informed consent was obtained from all participants before their involvement. Additional interviewees were incorporated into the sample until the point of data saturation was achieved (Glaser and Strauss, 2017). The final sample comprised 20 expert interviews including 10 senior communication professionals and 10 senior journalists. Five interviews were conducted in person, while the others were held via the Teams application. Table 1 provides an overview of the sample characteristics.

A semi-structured interview protocol was designed around the study's research questions, incorporating socio-demographic questions to better grasp the informants' viewpoints. The topics discussed included social perceptions of journalism and strategic communication, the roles and functions of both journalists and strategic communicators, their perceptions of one another, the quality of their relationships, and their professional practices. The interviews also explored emerging challenges

related to the media landscape, information quality, and the influence of social media platforms. Interview lengths ranged from 32 to 66 minutes. The interview material was then transcribed and thematically analyzed via Atlas.ti software.

Tab. 1: Interviewees' characteristics

Professional group	Gender *	Education level/degree	Years of experience	Type of Organization
Strategic communication	M	Master, humanities	27	Italian company
	M	Master, political sciences	17	Italian PR agency
	M	Master, economics	40	International PR agency
	M	Master, communication	15	Italian company
	M	High school	35	National government
	F	Master, law	15	International company
	F	High school	16	Public sector organization
	M	High school	25	International PR agency
	F	Master, economics	20	Italian company
	F	Master, political sciences	13	Not profit
	M	Master, political sciences	12	Italian lobbying agency
Journalism	M	Master, literature	22	National television
	M	Master, sociology	38	Regional radio
	F	High school	35	Regional newspaper
	M	Master, foreign languages	20	National newspaper
	M	Master, law	12	National weekly magazine
	M	Master, philosophy	30	National newspaper
	F	Master, economics	18	National weekly magazine
	M	High school	26	Italian National Press Federation (FNSI)
	M	High school	30	Weekly magazine
M	Master, philosophy	26	National television	

* Gender was not used as selection criteria but is reported to offer some indication of the interviewees' socio-demographic characteristics.

Data analysis procedure

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step- thematic analysis was used to extract meanings, opinions, and perceptions from the interview transcripts. First, the researcher familiarized themselves with the data through a close reading of the transcripts. Sentences describing each profession's function, objectives, and practices, including professional challenges and opportunities, were all noted down. Next, the researcher conducted a second reading and started creating an initial list of codes via Atlas.ti, version 23.3.0. The labeling used an inductive method, relying on the participants' own words. These codes generally reflected key social perceptions of professions, practices, and changes in the media landscape. In the third stage, the codes were refined and organized into macro thematic categories. Subsequently, themes were polished to identify coherent patterns within the data, reducing redundancy. This included regrouping and renaming the main themes. The entire dataset was reviewed against these refined themes. In the final stage, the story for each theme was linked to the research questions, with illustrative quotes selected and reported in the findings.

6. Findings

The analysis identified elements in five macro themes (the function of strategic communication, the function of journalism, communication professionals' perceptions of journalism, and journalists' perceptions of strategic communication, and professional challenges) and 7 second-level codes, of which four (skills and competencies, function, problems and relationships) are recurring sub-themes across the first four macro themes. The last three second-level codes pertain to the first-order theme of professional challenges. In each of these second-level codes, several social representations (third-level codes) emerged describing strategic communicators' and journalists' views on the five macro themes. Table 2 offers an overview of the analysis. In the following, a summary of the main findings is presented.

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Tab. 2: Thematic analysis of key findings

Macro-theme (Code 1)	Sub-theme (Code 2)	Social representations (Code 3)
Strategic communication as a profession	Skills and competencies	Capacity to create a network
		Being credible in speaking
		Having interpreting skills
		Being curious
		Having bridging skills
		Understanding others' views
		Being an active listener
		Having social intelligence in addressing complex situations
		Being detail-oriented and accuracy-oriented
		Showing knowledge/expertise on the topic
		Critical reflections of own practices
		Having team skills
		Functions
	Increasing positive organizational visibility and public understanding	
	Strategically working with the news media	
	Being an information subsidy for stakeholders	
	Being the organization's promoter	
	Problems	Handling internal and external relationships
		Lack of professional recognition
		Lack of professional institutionalization
		'Revolving door'
		Limited rigor and quality of produced information
		Poor ethical behaviors in own working practices
		Limited professional credibility
		Bribing for publications
		Lack of understanding of each other practices in media relations activities
		Possible conflicts of interests
	Limited quality training/education for professionals	
	Lying to stakeholders for organizational needs	
	Relationships with journalists	No antagonism
		Mutual professional trust
		Based on mutual respect
		Supported by maintaining distinct professional identities
Supported by correct and transparent information supply		
Enhanced by personal ethics		
Enhanced by previous journalistic experience		
Improved when recognizing own respective functions		

Journalism as a profession	Skills and competences	Being curious
		Having interpreting skills
		Being objective
		Showing intellectual honesty
		Being free and independent
		Being transparent
		Being critical and reflective
	Function	Being unbiased, without prejudices
		Searching and selecting stories
		Making the public understand complex situations
		Telling and interpreting facts and realities
		Telling the 'truth'
		Checking information sources
		Representing plurality/diversity of opinions
	Problems	Offering detailed and in-depth analyses
		Lack of freedom and independence from power
		Italian journalism system and its entanglement with economic interests
		Favoritism
		Too much dependence on information subsidies
		Poor working conditions for some journalists
Deterioration of quality of news reporting		
News media conformity		
Relationship with strategic communicators	National Council of Order of Journalists	
	Ineffective code of ethics	
	Slight animosity	
	Founded on trust through honesty and transparency	
	Supported by open, not-hidden agendas	
Strategic communication seen from the journalists' perspective	Function	Improved when communicators positively contribute to creating quality information
		Enhanced by previous positive experiences with communicators
		Communicating to the media
		Taking care of organizational visibility
		Speaking on behalf of an organization
		Promoting corporate interests
	Working practices	Being the gatekeeper of organizational information
		Communicating directly with publics
		A better grasp of the media landscape and information production system
	Relationships with journalists	Increased professionalization
		Increased information subsidy quality
		Inferiority perception by some communicators
		Positive in established relationships
		Facilitated when communicators give more attention to journalists' needs
		Reduced in situations of opacity
	Problems	Enhance news production and serve as a reliable source of information
		Publicity-oriented approach of some professionals
		Lack of transparency/honesty
		Not disclosing own interests and purposes
		Questionable professional ethics
Exerting power for news coverage		

Journalism seen from the strategic communicators' experiences	Function	Superiority perception by some journalists	
		Reality simplifier	
		Hallmark of democracy	
		Being the first to inform the public	
		A solo, individual job	
		Providing interpretations	
	Working practices	Similar tools, different finalities	
		Preference for shortcuts rather than rigorous approaches	
		Superficial coverage of issues	
		Does not always follow deontological responsibility	
		Can't always separate facts from opinions	
	Relationships with strategic communicators	Lack of consideration of communicators' priorities	
		Negative attitudes towards communicators	
		Respect is possible	
		Do not always understand communicators' standpoints	
		At times, based on negative preconditions	
		Opportunistic: Certain journalists prefer 'insiders' over building relationships with communicators	
	Problems	Journalists' appreciation of their work	
		'Revolving door'	
		Lack of diversity of opinions in the news	
Lack of independence from media ownership			
Limited freedom			
Unreliable professional code ethics			
Information quality			
Some conflicts of interests			
Superficiality and limited accuracy			
Shared professional challenges	Media landscape changes	Loss of relevance of traditional news media	
		Social media is making people users and creators at the same time	
		Increased influence of broader media over a national one	
		Increasing information amplification/dissemination across different media	
		Effects on stakeholder relationships	
		Increased speed in communicating	
		Accelerated and reshaped by technology developments	
		New approaches to managing organizational messages	
		Digital publics have become more effective and powerful communicators than official communicators	
		No real online listening or relationship	
		Multiplication of sources	
		Quality of information	Increased fake information circulation
			Superficial and banal stories
	Too many sensational stories		
	Less attention to opinion diversity (filter bubble phenomenon)		
	Loss of information credibility		
	Social media use	Shared responsibility for quality information	
		Increased reliance by journalists on digital content over content produced by professional communicators	
		Difficulties in identifying digital information origin and in screening	
		Identifying the tools, methods, and behaviors that are correct and effective in this digital environment	
		Digital monitoring, analysis of data	
		Low social media readiness of some professionals	
		More pull communication than push communication	

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Strategic communicators see their role as managing an organization's reputation and its relations with stakeholders. This involves strategically working with the media to boost external visibility and enhance public understanding of the organization's activities and values.

"In performing this function, the communicator must be a bit like a 'transmission belt', a hinge of contact and relationships between the company and its stakeholders". (Strategic communicator #3)

Communicators agree that the information subsidiary function of strategic communication remains important but today this activity is more extensive as it is directed to all stakeholders and includes addressing the digital media sphere too. They see themselves as stake- or interest-holders for their organizations and, at the same time, advocates.

"The work of a company's communicator is evidently a carrier of the company's interests. What I believe is very important is the ability to intelligently balance this role as a promoter, supporter, and positive lobbyist that we perform for our company with the sensitivities and issues of attention and criticism that come from the outside". (Strategic communicator #2)

While some journalists described their profession according to classical notions of journalism, others seem to have embraced a broader understanding of journalism as a profession in the business of informing the public, for instance, even when they work for public sector organizations.

"I believe that the profession of a journalist is a necessary one in a political, economic, and financial democracy. It serves as a guarantee for all our dynamics". (Journalist #4)

"The journalist's objective is to narrate reality as objectively as possible, and therefore, delve into, dig, and verify sources as much as possible to create a product that makes it easy for the reader to understand the surrounding facts". (Journalist #6)

Their working practices are otherwise similar, in that they both describe their working logic as driven by objectivity, rigor, transparency, and accuracy. When asked to reflect on the other profession and identify main functions, it appears there is a slightly more correct alignment between strategic communicators' perceptions of journalism and journalists' own defined professional identity, than between journalists' perceptions of strategic communication, and communicators' own defined professional identity.

"The two professions are fundamentally different but are part of the same information process. They occupy two different positions within this process and respond to different and contrasting interests". (Strategic communicator #1)

Strategic communicators often view journalism through a traditional lens, recognizing it as essential to democracy, interpreting facts, and being the first to report events. Journalists share this same opinion. Journalists, on the other hand, have a much narrower view of the strategic communication profession. They believe communication professionals are in the business of publicity for their organizations, they represent the interests of their employer -not broader stakeholders- and are gatekeepers of organizational

information. They believe strategic communication should focus more on offering interpretations.

"Communicators continuously filter information; they are the gatekeeper of information flow, choosing to withhold certain details and, at times, opting not to disclose everything". (Journalist #9)

"Today, journalists have almost all the information they need, and therefore the role of communicators should change. It should no longer be about keeping information confidential but providing an interpretation. The role of communicators is to offer an interpretation of the news that has now been released". (Journalist #1)

They are also not so familiar with the communicators' code of ethics, and those who knew about it identified certain problems. Journalists overall acknowledge an increasing professionalization of strategic communication and recognition of its value, as they all stated that current communicators are most of the time more knowledgeable of the newsroom routines and media landscape and can provide more valuable information.

"[I find communicators] possessing an intriguing quality and a deep understanding of the information and media landscapes, enabling them to navigate the timing and mechanisms for delivering their contributions effectively. Furthermore, they know how to evaluate the 'significance' of their stories for the news". (Journalist #10)

Interestingly they both complain to each other of being reality simplifiers. Overall, all experts think there are functional differences, but these are primarily related to the purpose of communicating. Their professional objectives are very different, with communicators communicating to the public for organizations, whereas journalists inform the public for the public, even when they work for public sector organizations.

RQ2: Professional skills and competencies of today's strategic communicators and journalists

Communication professionals identified several skills and competencies, including active listening and understanding others' views, critical reflections and analyses, social intelligence, interpreting and managing complex situations as well as bridging skills among others. Very interestingly, classical skills such as writing, and content production were not mentioned at all.

"Managing this complexity requires, on the one hand, a great deal of social intelligence, and on the other, an atmosphere of calm and transparency, which sometimes doesn't occur due to various interests". (Strategic communicator #1)

"If one does not know how to listen, they do not understand either organizational mechanisms or the media and therein information processes (which are distinct entities with their dynamics, and each media has its dynamics). Knowing both mechanisms and having the ability to relate to them is a must, thus, acting as an 'interpreter, translator, decoder, and often a simplifier' (our job is to simplify the complexity of the company and the relationship) is needed". (Strategic communicator #6)

Competences such as being able to speak credibly and authoritatively as well as showing knowledge and expertise on the topic have also been noted as important for this profession.

“One must always speak with these individuals as if addressing authoritative figures, always being very authoritative and rigorous, expressing and defending one’s concepts without concealing the fact that this position is being defended, with consistently serious, rigorous, and objective arguments”. (Strategic communicator #5)

Journalists described their skills quite traditionally and to some extent even similarly to those of communicators, emphasizing honesty, freedom, and curiosity as attitudes, objectivity, transparency, and ethics as values, and interpreting and writing as key skills.

“A good journalist must have a great deal of curiosity, possess the ability to analyze reality to understand it, be quick to interpret and write what they see, and maintain a constant desire to stay updated”. (Journalist #5)

Few also outline as important the competence of having a correct attitude and working approach in relating with communicators as these are perceived to provide valuable information facilitating journalistic job.

“[A journalist should possess] Precision and clarity in presenting the facts, the ability to expose more or less everything, correctness in relationships with communicators”. (Journalist #4)

RQ3: Strategic communicator-journalist relationships

Both groups agree that there is no evident antagonism between them. They generally view their relationships positively, emphasizing building mutual trust through understanding and collaboration. Some even consider their professional counterparts as friends, reflecting the high regard they have for each other.

“I maintain a collaborative relationship, particularly with those with whom I share a strong and special connection. In my interactions with journalists, I aim to identify individuals within various editorial teams who may find my messages relevant. With these individuals, I work towards building a structured and trustworthy collaborative relationship”. (Strategic communicator #8)

“Dismissing the old idea of a press office as just an information relay for communications, it’s important to highlight the role of relationship-building with journalists. Trust is built through ongoing dialogue and interactions between communicators and journalists. By engaging in conversations to understand each other’s needs, a more transparent, honest, and direct relationship can be cultivated, which ultimately enhances mutual trust”. (Strategic communicator #10)

However, conflicts may arise, particularly if both professions adopt a harsh attitude that damages relationships or if there is a lack of transparency in communication intentions. Communicators also lament the lack of consideration of communicators’ priorities.

“Antagonism exists only when it is marked by attitudes of arrogance from both sides, leading to a sterile antagonism. There should be healthy competition, but nowadays one cannot yet speak of healthy competition”.

because there is still a lack of rigor and transparency from both sides". (Strategic communicator #3)

"Journalists, especially the younger ones with limited experience and professional maturity, often exhibit a superiority complex towards communicators. For this reason, within organizations, no one wants to handle media relations with them. Objectively, at times, the relationship can be challenging". (Strategic communicator #5)

The journalist believes they are free, but they are not. They push themselves, thinking they are claiming a position of freedom, transparency, and impartiality, but in truth, they are under pressure from media companies, advertising, etc. They live with this unresolved conflict, which, in my opinion, leads to attitudes and behaviors that are not helpful" (Strategic communicator #6)

"Journalists can understand communicators' priorities, but they have other interests and therefore do not necessarily consider the priorities of communicators. Generally, it is the communicator who must align their priorities with those of the journalist, not vice versa". (Strategic communicator #8)

A common problem outlined by both professionals is related to the lack of rigor and ethics affecting relationships.

"Often, the media are not transparent about the reasons behind certain interests, and perhaps at times, communicators exert pressure or engage in lobbying that may not always be ethically acceptable. There should be greater rigor on the part of the communicator and greater independence and therefore authority on both sides". (Strategic communicator #3)

Another problem that affects their professional relationships and that was especially highlighted by communicators concerns the familiar revolving door issue, where journalists juggle "two hats" by serving as communicators for an organization while continuing to write for news media outlets. This issue is also presented both as an ethical and legal problem, but also as a problem impacting the reputation of the strategic communication field. Here are a few examples:

"Unfortunately, there have been detrimental moments of confusion in maintaining a separation between the two professions in the past. For example, I believe it is wrong that to be a communicator for a public sector organization, one must be a journalist, or the fact that thanks to the years of experience I have gained as a communicator, I can automatically become a publicist". (Strategic communicator #3)

"There are also 'field incursions' that are measurable and verifiable, and they should be punishable by both [ethics] codes: if I work as a strategic communicator, I cannot act as a journalist, and if I work as a journalist, I cannot act as a communicator for an organization". (Strategic communicator #6)

"The greatest frustration that a journalist can experience when changing profession and becoming a communicator concerns a shift in mindset. Understanding how an editorial office of a newspaper functions is valuable, but it is not sufficient for managing the relational aspects of strategic communication". (Strategic communicator #1)

Yet, the revolving door problem is less of a problem for journalists who, on the other hand, see it as an opportunity for them to broaden their function beyond news media organizations. Journalists in general do not see a problem in undertaking a strategic communication function in an organization if this new function is not occurring while at the same time working for a news media outlet.

RQ4: Professional challenges

Strategic communicators identified problems related to the lack of widespread professional recognition, the lack of professional institutionalization, the use and applicability of code of ethics, and the limited quality of training and education of certain professionals as key professional problems.

“There is a trend towards the decline of the profession [strategic communication], perhaps due to the lack of entry barriers, allowing anyone to improvise as a communicator. Meanwhile, there is a need to maintain high quality in client relations”. (Strategic communicator #7)

“The profession of the strategic communicator is still little known in Italy and, on the one hand, inadequately acknowledged and institutionalized, and on the other, insufficiently proceduralized. Therefore, defining the boundaries of the strategic communication profession is challenging since everyone sets their limits based on their ability to engage with the surrounding environment”. (Strategic communicator #1)

Journalists, on the other hand, think professional recognition of strategic communication has improved and increased while recognizing the problem related to the enforcement of professional code of ethics. Other problems are primarily related to the methods and practices utilized by certain individuals who lack rigor, and quality, and, at times, may sit in the grey zone, for instance, in circumstances when the communicator lies to stakeholders to protect their own organization's interest or pay/bribe for news coverage.

“[About gaining visibility] a communicator must not pay to obtain; that is, one must be capable of asserting themselves with the strength of their reasons and their ability to embellish these reasons, meaning to represent them in a way that they are shared”. (Journalist #4)

Journalists highlight worries over declining information quality, poor reporter conditions, lack of focus on ethics, and issues with their national council. They also mention problems stemming from elite economic and political influence that hinder media freedom and independence. Like communicators, they also find problematic some working practices, but to a lesser extent.

“The category of journalists is somewhat in crisis. Excluding the ‘cream’ that is, those who can work at a certain level, the majority, due to working hours, publisher demands, increasingly limited spaces, and newspaper formats, have less room for reports, investigations, and in-depth coverage. Therefore, they are involved more in writing work like wire services”. (Journalist #6)

"Italian journalism has had two major flaws: excessive dependence on its information sources and over-reliance on economic and political powers". (Journalist #3)

"Job insecurity can somehow impact the quality of information, in the sense that a precarious journalist may more easily succumb to the pressures of influential parties". (Journalist #2)

Communicators outlined several problems concerning journalists' working practices, including the preferences for shortcuts, rather than a rigorous process, and problems of objectivity and freedom, and these all together bring superficial coverage of the events at times.

"I follow strict internal rules and prioritize those requesting information. I'm aware of my limits and constraints. Conversely, journalists often disregard ethical or professional responsibilities and may act carelessly with a sense of 'freedom'". (Strategic communicator #2)

Both groups of professionals have concerns about the evolving media landscape. Rapid digitalization, social media, and other digital platforms are evolving too quickly to keep pace. They agree that traditional news media are losing their importance as new digital platforms become more influential. With fast communication and the rise of content creators, there is a greater need to screen digital information since anyone can become an influential voice in this ecosystem.

"Social media have opened a world that is still causing confusion, and one must still figure out how to approach it and the methods for managing this information. For us, the issue revolves around how this information originates on social media, not just concerning its use by journalists". (Strategic communicator #7)

The identification of the origin and source of digital information is also more complicated, and this means more difficulty in actively listening to publics and create relations with them.

"I have the impression that the difficulty we encounter lies with online publics. While the traditional journalist is a well-defined stakeholder, much of the communication that occurs via the Internet involves a group of individuals which is not well-defined for us". (Strategic communicator #2)

"Social media are evolving so quickly that is difficult to keep up with. They have changed information dynamics because we deal with 'listener-author' stakeholders now. The audience increasingly becomes an author, to the point where there is a partnership between media-channel and author-user". (Journalist #3)

Journalists generally view these changes as opportunities to quickly gather diverse opinions on their topics. However, communication professionals reported a few challenges, like insufficient skills for handling digital data, a still too-low social media readiness, a need for more pull communication, and difficulties in finding effective tools, methods, and ethical practices.

"Push communication remains important, but it has had its time because the relationship is increasingly 'pull,' meaning it is the user who decides when and how to hear what the company has to say. And when this happens, the company must be present and be 'connected'". (Strategic communicator #7)

“The reality of social media is evident, but my impression is that we are struggling to find tools, methods, and behaviors to manage this additional demand for information and communication more effectively. There is a bit of a delay on this issue. The problems range from basic monitoring to evaluating the quality of these sites”. (Strategic communicator #2)

While these technologies have brought opportunities to manage organizational messages more effectively, communicators lament that journalists may rely too much on digital content - whose truthfulness is questionable - while they should still check their sources.

“Many times, the information taken from the internet is not true, and journalists tend not to verify the sources of this information. The accuracy and truthfulness of information on social media require much more verification than that provided by communicators”. (Strategic communicator #6)

Among the consequences of these rapid changes, professionals indicate the increased problem of fake information circulation, the increased dissemination and attention for superficial and banal stories, including sensational ones, the problem of loss of accuracy and objectivity of information, and thus the increased biased content.

“When you search for major corporations on Google, aside from the official website, you’ll often see forums and blogs in the top results. Despite potential reliability issues, this widespread trend (and is democratic and revolutionary) is too significant to be overlooked”. (Journalist #7)

“There is too much inclination towards gossip, which tends to be based on sensationalistic information, and whose sources are not verified, probably because the structure of Italian media landscape which includes a bit of everything, and the press is not differentiated as in other countries”. (Strategic communicator #10)

Strategic communicators concur that the quality of information circulating in today’s media landscape is a shared responsibility of all those involved in communication, not just journalists.

7. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate ‘asymmetric’ opinions describing the professional identities and roles of strategic communication and journalism (RQ1). Like the findings by Werder *et al.* (2023), both groups acknowledged distinct communication roles while describing highly similar working practices. Strategic communicators highlighted a wider range of expertise beyond media relations, recognizing the use of various media and technologies, thus resonating with Invernizzi and Romenti’s (2011, 2014) early findings. Conversely, journalists had a more limited perception of the role of strategic communication. While similar working practices highlight what Werder *et al.* (2023) describe as the convergence of ‘doing,’ they might also point to the growing mediatization of strategic communication, as noted by Fredriksson and Pallas (2017) and Pallas *et al.* (2016). To add to this, journalists have observed that communication professionals are becoming increasingly adept and well-prepared in content production. Italian strategic communicators are aware of this and

describe their role as highly strategy-focused, including media relations, acting as intermediaries in various organizational activities. They describe themselves as a “transmission belt” or a bridge that links stakeholder interests, discursively constructing an understanding of their profession as one oriented to strategic mediatization (Wiesenberg and Tench, 2020). While maintaining their core news media function, journalists have shown to accept and perhaps embrace other communication functions than simply working for media organizations. This phenomenon is not new, as early studies on the journalism profession showed that many journalists leave the news industry for public relations jobs (e.g., Fröhlich *et al.*, 2013; Viererbl and Koch, 2021). However, a peculiarity is that some of these professionals still describe themselves as journalists working for public sector organizations serving the public interest rather than strategic communicators. The identity of the latter is often associated with commercial and private interests.

Interestingly, these two professional groups appear to agree on the essential skills, competencies, and values of their professions (RQ2). This trend has also been observed in other countries (Tkalac Verčič and Colić, 2016; Weder *et al.*, 2023). The revolving door problem has helped these two professions to a) know each other work better and thus appreciate it more, and b) refine and expand their value-set through their experiences with each other worlds. Thus, while the revolving door problem is criticized for being one of the main reasons for professional conflict (Shin and Cameron, 2004), the fact that many strategic communicators have had prior journalism experiences and that some journalists had some communication experiences have served the purpose of sharing and gaining similar expertise and thereby creating similar social representations of what constitutes good quality information and communication. This then has produced more collaborative and constructive relations that are important for effective media relations. In response to RQ3, thus, it is possible to conclude that antagonist relations are rather associated with the past (DeLorme and Fedler, 2003) than with modern media relations activities. Strategic communication has become more mediatized (Ihlen and Pallas, 2014), more value-driven, and highly concerned with credibility and reputation management activities, and this has resulted in better journalists' perceptions of strategic communication and appreciation of communicators' work. Increasing mediatization and increasing professionalization stemming from values such as rigor, transparency, and accuracy of information could potentially produce positive effects on the circulation of information in the media ecosystem. Both groups agree that the responsibility for the quality of information is becoming more and more a shared responsibility than a journalism one. They also acknowledged a loss of relevance of traditional news media information in public opinion formation, as publics are using more and more online content to gain information and insights, including journalists seeking stories.

Among the most important professional challenges outlined (RQ4), these professionals believe the quality of information circulating in the current digitalized media ecosystem is questionable, with journalists having more positive views than strategic communicators. These express

concern over a prevailing trend of superficial and trivial stories, along with an excessive focus on personal and subjective narratives, which is indicative of the traits seen in Polarized Pluralist media systems (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Meanwhile, journalists highlight the problem of media ownership by the economic elite and the influence of the political elite on news stories coupled with perceptions that the National Council of the Order of Journalists is not sufficiently addressing journalism-related issues are among those problems that journalists believe are affecting the quality of information circulating in the media landscape.

Nonetheless, a general optimism concerning the opportunities offered by social media and other digital media for producing, disseminating, and searching content (Luoma-aho and Badham, 2023) is particularly visible among journalists (Jamil, 2023). Journalists acknowledge that this environment can offer great prospects to address the even faster news information demand-supply chain and the increasing demand for more diversified information subsidies (European Commission, 2023). Strategic communicators seem more cautious about these opportunities. While they consider these technologies an advantage for strategically planning, creating, and distributing organizational messages, they see several challenges concerning the credibility and authenticity of the information circulating online, the problem of fake information and filter bubbles, and are still unsure of how to best use and manage different channels effectively.

8. Conclusions

This study explored how strategic communicators and journalists perceive their professional identity and role in the face of the pressures and the challenges posed by an ever-evolving media landscape and increasing mediatization of content. Early studies (Verhoeven, 2016; Wilson and Supa, 2013; Walden *et al.*, 2015) have indicated that such changes are re-configuring not only the media ecosystem where different professionals operate but they are also influencing institutional logics describing the functions and roles of certain professionals (Viererbl and Koch, 2021; Werder *et al.* 2023). Based on an explorative qualitative study of strategic communication and journalism professionals in the Italian context, this study contributed to the understanding of how these professions are responding to media landscape changes and increasing mediatization of institutional and professional work environments and how they are adapting to these. This study responds to the call for more empirical evidence on professional communication identities and practices in different cultural settings too (Werder *et al.* 2023).

Theoretically, the study enhances our understanding of the professional identities and relationships of key communication actors amidst mediatization. Despite the limitations of a qualitative approach, the results suggest that mediatization is positively impacting professionals in Italy, especially journalists' views on strategic communication. Future research could explore the perceptions and social representations of other professions working closely with strategic communicators (see, e.g.,

Falkheimer *et al.*, 2017) to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the field's evolution and value. This study also contributes to current discourses on the impact of digitalization and media changes on professional identities, outlining the important role of understanding the experiences of those working in strategic communication and journalism to identify opportunities and threats that can inform future research. Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies are, for once, changing substantially the practices of those working in communication. This is still a new phenomenon that deserves attentive monitoring and consideration as the professional identities of strategic communicators and journalists are going to be affected. Future studies could look at AI technologies in the context of professional identity and roles.

Professionally, this study provides valuable insights into the skills and competencies necessary for success in both fields and identifies those most critical for effective media relations. This information is crucial for educators in higher education and training institutions to update curricula, encourage continuous learning, and advance communication knowledge. Professional associations representing strategic communicators and journalists should leverage these findings to drive positive change. They can significantly contribute to raising professional standards and improving the transferability of competencies at an advanced level.

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9. Limitations

This study employs a qualitative approach and, as such, is subject to the inherent limitations of qualitative research, particularly concerning sample size and participant characteristics. Although significant effort was made to select interviewees with extensive and diverse professional experiences, the inclusion of younger participants may have offered alternative perspectives on the discussion of professional competencies. While comparing generational cohorts of professionals was not the primary aim of this study, it represents an avenue for future research.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that social representations of professional identities are often context-dependent and personal. There is also the potential for desirability bias in how the experts described their professional experiences. In qualitative research, the role of the researcher's subjectivity in data analysis and interpretation cannot be entirely eliminated. However, grounding the findings in existing literature has contributed to maintaining the accuracy of the analysis, though this limitation still warrants consideration.

Given the inherent challenges in replicating qualitative studies of this nature, the value of this research lies in its ability to identify key trends in the evolving fields of strategic communication and journalism within the Italian context. As such, the study should be regarded as a foundation for further exploration in this area.

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italian journal of management

ISSN 0393-5108
ISSN 2785-549X
DOI 10.7433/s125.2024.14
pp. 293-318



Italian Society of
MANAGEMENT

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