

# Communication cabinets and media: an unequal struggle that impoverishes information

## *Gabinetes y medios de comunicación: una lucha desigual que empobrece la información*



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### Abstract:

This article aims to analyse the transformation of relationships between press offices and media professionals, especially concerning the strategies of institutional communication departments to convey their messages while bypassing journalistic quality filters. The study explores how this occurs and the challenges in preventing it within media newsrooms. To achieve this, twelve in-depth interviews were conducted with industry professionals who have held or currently occupy key positions in institutional communication offices and have prior experience in the news media or have even returned to media roles. The results highlight the demanding immediacy and precarious working conditions faced by many journalistic newsrooms. These conditions contribute to a greater ease for institutional messages to be initially published without any filter or in-depth analysis

### Resumen:

*El presente artículo tiene como objeto analizar la transformación de las relaciones entre los gabinetes de prensa y los profesionales de los medios, especialmente en lo que se refiere a las estrategias de los departamentos de comunicación institucional para trasladar sus mensajes eludiendo los filtros de calidad periodística; la manera en la que ocurre y las dificultades para evitarlo en las redacciones de los medios. Para ello, se ha realizado una docena de entrevistas en profundidad a profesionales del sector que han ocupado (u ocupan) puestos de referencia en gabinetes de comunicación institucional pero que, además, pasaron previamente por medios de comunicación o incluso ya han regresado a ellos. Los resultados señalan la exigente inmediatez y las condiciones de precariedad que sufren gran parte de las redacciones periodísticas, lo que se traduce en una mayor facilidad para que los mensajes institu-*

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by journalists. This paves the way for communication offices to effectively place their messages in the public domain and achieve the desired impact.

**Keywords:**

Institutional Communication; Dircom; immediacy; press release; precariousness; working conditions.

*cionales se publiquen, al menos en primera instancia, sin ningún filtro o análisis detallado por parte de los periodistas, lo que allana el camino a los gabinetes de comunicación para colocar sus mensajes en el espacio público y conseguir el impacto deseado.*

**Palabras clave:**

*Comunicación institucional; Dircom; inmediatez; nota de prensa; precariedad; condiciones de trabajo.*

## 1. Introduction and theoretical framework

The relationship between institutional communication cabinets and the media is constantly evolving and changing. These changes are often driven by technological innovation but are also subject to the precarious nature of the sector, particularly in light of the 2007-2008 economic crisis. This crisis also affected news organisations due to the overall decline in advertising revenues, notably from the real estate sector, which had been injecting significant investments into the media. In addition, the loss of advertisers from traditional print publications to online platforms and social media channels (López García, 2015). This scenario, coupled with digitalisation, led to the often unsuccessful pursuit of sustainable business models across various phases, from initial failed attempts at digital subscription models by some major media outlets to the widespread adoption of free subscriptions. More recently, since 2020, there has been a trend towards implementing various paywall strategies among the most powerful publications (Iranzo et al., 2022).

According to the latest annual report on the journalistic profession (Madrid Press Association [APM], 2023), 15% of surveyed professionals identified “general job precariousness” as the main issue, followed by “poor remuneration for journalistic work” (13%), “lack of political or economic independence of the media where they work” (12%). “lack of rigour and neutrality in professional practice” (12%) and “increased workload and lack of time for information gathering” (11%). These data contribute to our understanding of the migration of journalists from media outlets to communication cabinets and changes in young people’s preferences when choosing their university studies. In fact, the report highlights the loss of nearly 1000 enrolled students in Journalism and Information and Audiovisual Techniques and Media Communication bachelor’s and master’s degrees compared to the previous academic year.

In recent years, factors such as workforce downsizing, loss of specialisation within teams and job instability, among others, combined with the imperative of immediacy in most media driven by digital evolution and competitiveness, have contributed to a growing disparity between communication offices and the media outlets, particularly the smallest ones. Communication cabinets, equipped with more tools and benefiting from the need of news organisations to publish in record time, have gained an advantage over media outlets, which have fewer human resources available to verify and fact-check information.

To a certain extent, some characteristics of the relationships between communication cabinets and media outlets resemble the scenario described by George Ritzer in the McDonaldisation of Society (1993). Ritzer identified four features of the fast food chain-efficiency, calculation, predictability and control- that echo contemporary lifestyles. Other authors have already associated this theory with the media, particularly highlighting that their abundance does not necessarily result in

informational pluralism, given that “the criteria for producing information (...) continue, in the vast majority of cases, to come from the same sources and data, presented in a standardised way in the structuring of news, following the pattern established by news agencies” (López García, 2006, p. 44).

In this context, by applying Ritzer’s four pillars of McDonaldisation, institutional communication cabinets have evolved into an effective tool for rapidly “feeding” the media with abundant food (information) at low cost (often free) and served immediately and predictably (ensuring certainty in reception and distributed across various required formats) and under centralised and uniform control for all media outlets. This systematic and methodical information dissemination process contrasts with the significant challenges faced by newsrooms, where journalists grapple with the incessant ‘bombardment’ of stimuli, hindering their ability to conduct thorough and measured analyses of the received impacts.

For over a decade, various academic studies have analysed the changes within the field of journalism and the dynamics of information following the emergence of digital media platforms or the online versions of traditional print newspapers, radio broadcasts and television programmes. Indeed, several publications had forewarned years earlier about certain risks for journalism stemming from these changes: less street reporting, overreliance on institutional sources, reduced information verification or the decline in the initiative to explore new topics (López Hidalgo, 2006). Ultimately, a scenario emerged in which media outlets exhibited a growing dependence on the agenda set by information sources, especially those of greater relevance in the political, economic, social and cultural hierarchy (Vázquez Bermúdez, 2006, p. 9). These developments have occurred against the backdrop of relevant changes and profound transformations that have reshaped work practices within newsrooms and redefined the very essence of the profession. “The networked and digital world is reshaping professional relationships and practices and altering the routines of information gathering, processing and disseminating” (Baldessar, 2007, p. 112).

One of the most relevant issues amidst the profound changes within both the profession and the treatment of information is the immediacy stemming from those above digital ‘boom’, which prioritises speed over reflection and interpretation, thereby compromising quality, as evidenced by the excessive presence of wire news (Sandoval Martín, 2005). Furthermore, this circumstance also exacerbates the pressure on journalists, resulting in neglecting a fundamental principle of the profession: verifying the news. This trade-off for immediacy also involves replicating other media outlets’ reports, leading to a sort of “mad race” (Ufarte Ruiz, 2012, p. 7).

Many authors acknowledge the effects of digitalisation on journalistic quality. The “bombardment” of information that a writer receives today through multiple and diverse channels from various interested sources was similarly cautioned against some years ago by different researchers at the dawn of the digital era. “The immense flow of information that newsrooms receive is opening up an important space for the old danger of serving, not the public, but the creators of news (newsmaking): instead of controlling the established power, they prop it up (Diezhandino, 2005, p. 1). However, this ‘bombardment’ has become increasingly evident within newsrooms, particularly in a society where information overload (Cornella, 2000), or the excess of information, has become entrenched. This reflection extends to the pawns within news organisations, whose attention is claimed by various channels and stakeholders –many of them communication cabinets– which makes it difficult for them to delve into the issues they cover, as various subsequent investigations have shown. According to Franco and Gértrudix (2015), in a context of information saturation, working within the parameters of immediacy and instantaneity prevalent in digital

media heightens journalists' feelings of insecurity and overwhelm (p. 154). These authors reflect precisely on this information overload and conclude that being overwhelmed with information does not equate to power or knowledge. "This idea should permeate the fabric of journalistic companies to abandon the model of immediacy, whose priority is to saturate the front page with news 24 hours a day, regardless of whether it is a wire agency bulletin" (p. 157). This approach related to promoting so-called "slow journalism" (Greenberg, 2007), is yet to gain traction in the vast number of media outlets dedicated to daily news, at least in Spain, where professionals exhibit lower levels of reflexivity regarding their journalistic practices compared to that of German and British journalists (Rivas de Roca et al., 2020).

This situation is compounded by another prediction outlined in numerous studies focusing on the increasing precarity of journalists within the media sector. The adoption of cost-saving information policies, such as the removal of controls and the distribution of work outside the scope of specialisation, results, among other consequences, in an increase in news retractions stemming from inadequate verification and documentation errors (Soengas Pérez et al., 2014, pp. 112-113). In fact, it is common to observe the transformation of previously published content in digital-native publications and online editions of major media outlets. These modifications extend beyond mere expansions, encompassing data corrections, removing erroneous text segments, or even headline modifications motivated by various reasons.

At the same time, communication cabinets, which have experienced substantial growth since the emergence of private television in the 1990s (Almansa, 2004), have been expanding their staff and resources, along with their level of journalistic professionalism. This trend has been influenced by the generally better salaries and working conditions offered by communication cabinets compared to those provided by media outlets. As a result, journalists frequently migrate from newsrooms to communication cabinets, as observed in most interviewees in this research. This leads to an increase in institutional knowledge, given these professionals' experience regarding the dynamics of news production.

In this "perfect storm", communication cabinets affiliated with significant political institutions enjoy a particular advantage in disseminating messages that benefit their interests, especially if they employ strategies to conceal such messages from plain sight (Aguar and López, 2021) or exploit the prevailing pressure within the media driven by the culture of immediacy and the lack of specialised journalists in newsrooms, stemming from organisational changes, which often include task diversification and a decrease in experienced professionals.

Thus, communication cabinets have continuously refined their strategies to influence the media, leveraging digitalisation and the pressure for immediacy that newsrooms face. However, the notion of influencing these departments has always existed. "Communication cabinets no longer content themselves with delivering news drafted in concise terms but also introduce narratives or complete articles into the market that newspapers can purchase as such" (Bohére, 1985, p. 51). These practices have progressively gained influence within the productive routines of news organisations. As Ufarte Ruiz (2011) highlighted, journalists' responsibilities extend beyond merely providing information to different media outlets. "Beyond these competencies, there is the potential for these organisations to have the 'power' to shape the media agenda. This action diminishes the creative work of the journalist" (p. 166). In essence, institutional communication cabinets seek to dictate the issues journalists address, preventing or curtailing time available for reflection, whether through press releases, the mass and constant distribution of official communications or tailored information that may interest specific media outlets. These

measures contribute to fueling the disparity between the reality of the newsworthy event and the perceived truth presented in the news (Lozano, 2021, p. 279).

Moreover, as some researchers point out, this trend of communication cabinets actively shaping agendas has been intensifying in recent years, reaching its peak during electoral campaigns (Valera-Ordaz, 2019). “The public sphere is conceived as a space of competition among agendas, wherein each social actor strives to maximise its presence and ensure that its proposals and objectives are embraced by the media” (Valera-Ordaz, 2015, p. 117). This scenario manifests in the relationships between cabinets and media outlets, with the former intensifying their efforts to influence the information process of the latter. Dader (2014) asserts the following:

“Several decades ago, the proactive strategies of sociopolitical and economic elites began to accompany or even replace defensive approaches. An increasingly voluminous army of press cabinets, communication advisors, and public relations agencies began to occupy the field, overwhelmingly outnumbering, in social capital and logistical resources, the light infantry –often mere guerrilla-fighters- of press officers, even if they now adorn themselves with iPads and other state-of-the-art digital resources” (p.640).

## 2. Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative methodology, wherein data was gathered through twelve in-depth interviews with communication professionals who have held (or currently hold) key positions in institutional cabinets. These professionals have prior experience in media outlets; some have returned to them after working in cabinets. Selection criteria primarily targeted profiles generally consistent with active journalists who have held prominent roles in cabinets of institutions governed by diverse political ideologies between 2011 and 2022. Ensuring a minimum gender balance in participant selection was a priority; some profiles have been chosen from politically significant institutions and influence, while others work in institutions less involved in major decision-making processes. Furthermore, the diversity in profiles has been ensured regarding the type of competencies and scopes of action within national, European, regional, or local institutions where the interviewees work or have worked to observe whether, in their opinion, the functioning and interaction of cabinets with the media has similarities or differences across various contexts.

Specifically, the sample consists of a dozen active professionals with an average age of 45, comprising 59% men and 41% women. In all cases, the interviewees had prior experience as journalists within media outlets and later joined institutional communication cabinets, motivated by diverse reasons. Currently, 66% of them remain in these roles, while two have returned to media outlets, and two others work in different jobs within the journalistic field.

On average, the interviewees have seven years of experience in institutional communication cabinets. In comparison, they have an average of 15 years of experience in their careers in media outlets, resulting in a cumulative average of 22 years of professional experience. Notably, they have worked in both environments (media outlets and cabinets) over the past decade.

On the one hand, the interviewees have held positions such as communication directors or press advisors within institutional offices, while in the media, they have fulfilled functions as –or are currently functioning as– editors, reporters, or middle

management. Regarding the institutions, 50% of the interviewees have experience in regional institutions. The remaining 50% have worked in national and European institutions or relevant municipal bodies (provincial or major city councils).

Regarding data collection, all interviews were conducted between May 2022 and April 2023. Each interview lasted between one and two hours and was recorded once permission was obtained from the interviewees following assurance of their anonymity. The recordings were subsequently transcribed for analysis. Emphasis was placed on transcription as a fundamental tool for documenting and analysing the interviewees' discourse (Requena, 2014).

Most of these encounters took place in public settings to foster a relaxed atmosphere. All professionals were contacted prior to the interviews and provided with a broad understanding of the interview's objective. At the same time, virtually no knowledge of the specific content of the questions to be asked was conveyed. This approach aimed to ensure spontaneous responses to the greatest extent possible. Moreover, the interviews adhered to a pre-prepared thematic script, serving as a framework for the interview. However, it was a flexible script that did not impose a predetermined order of questions or a specific formulation. Instead, it functioned as a comprehensive catalogue outlining topics to be addressed in each interview, as is typical in semi-structured interviews (Corbetta, 2007; Alonso, 2016).

This interview format was chosen because it allows "ample freedom for both the interviewer and interviewee while ensuring that all relevant topics are discussed and necessary information is gathered" (Corbetta, 2007, p. 353). This flexibility is particularly convenient when interviewees handle sensitive information, such as developing communication strategies within the cabinets of significant political institutions, as in this study.

Furthermore, as an initial step, each interviewee was asked to provide a brief self-introduction and an overview of their career. Subsequently, questions related to various thematic blocks were introduced, maintaining an atmosphere conducive to open dialogue and allowing space for the interviewee to offer insights and interpretations of reality, share anecdotes or introduce other topics that might diverge from the predetermined script. This approach aligns with the model of "informal open interview" where "questions, their sequence and wording are not established and closed beforehand" (Alonso, 2016, pp. 391-392), aiming to ensure contextual relevance for each situation, integrating them into the conversation so that they could be answered easily.

The conclusions drawn in this study pertain to the thematic block of the script, referring to the evolution, in recent years, of communication channels used by communication cabinets to convey their messages to the media and the effectiveness of new technological tools within this complex relationship between communication directors and the media.

### 3. Results

This study aims to gain insight into how journalists conceptualise and interpret recent transformations between institutional cabinets and the media, how these transformations impact industry professionals and the quality of information reaching the public. Specifically, the research aims to investigate how institutional cabinets often intend- and usually succeed- in 'selling' the institutions' positive messages without passing through the necessary filters of journalistic quality, how this occurs, and the challenges media newsrooms face in preventing it. Consequently, the selected sample prioritises profiles of professionals

who have occupied roles in both positions (cabinets and media), aiming to analyse their impressions on the evolution and transformation in the relationships between these professional cohorts, which, in their opinion, have been taking place in recent years.

In this context, one of the primary overarching impressions conveyed by the interviewees is that both technological innovation and precariousness in the media industry result in an unequal struggle between institutional communication cabinets and professionals within newsrooms. The required immediacy in a digital society, coupled with the lack of adequate human resources, allows cabinets to propagate “their truth” without often undergoing a thorough analysis of official communications by the media, thereby heightening the risk of fueling disinformation or biased information. Simultaneously, the temptation for media professionals to migrate to cabinets, generally better paid and often with enhanced work-life balance, increases, weakening the strength of journalistic enterprises in overseeing the management of public institutions as they contend with smaller and less experienced staff with worse economic and working conditions. These aspects are broadly shared among the interviewed professionals, who also offer various insights into understanding the current state of affairs in the relationship between cabinets and the media, especially regarding integrating institutional messages into the operational practices of news organisations.

Thus, various institutional communication directors who have previous experience in the media or have subsequently returned to it acknowledge that they currently find it easier, at least, to initially ‘place’ the desired message. Several of them concede that press releases are occasionally crafted with the unequivocal intention of impeding media verification or thorough analysis, exploiting the imperative for immediacy prioritised in newsrooms, which facilitates the dissemination of the intended positive perspective. Additionally, they underscore the precariousness- a staff shortage- and a lack of specialisation often favours their interests.

### *3.1. Less verification in official information*

Regarding the capacity of newsrooms to critically assess information in recent years compared to the present, several interviewees highlighted the prevailing circumstances: “There used to be more journalists in the media. They were far more informed, and the information was more thorough. It wasn’t as easy for them to buy into the message” (Woman, 47 years old).

In this vein, another professional stresses what he refers to as “accommodation to the official discourse”. “Nowadays, the advantage of the press release is that, due to lack of resources, it is often reproduced verbatim in all media outlets; there is no filtering. It has gone from being a complement to being a dogma of faith, someone’s dogma of faith who has an interest in selling you reality in a certain way. And this is not verified” (Man, 54 years old), who adds a caveat, however, that this occurs less “in larger media outlets”. “There are countless small media outlets that end up reproducing that press release exactly as it is. Politicians like that”, he asserts, concluding: “It is a battle that politicians are winning against the media, spreading their dogma of faith to the public without any filtering carried out by professionals”.

### 3.2. *Lack of Human Resources in Newsrooms*

Another interviewee vividly illustrates this issue, indicating how the reduction in newsroom staff has changed their approach to information from communication cabinets in just a few years. “The media have completely accommodated themselves to institutional sources. When I was at the newspaper, we never used the headline from the press release” (Woman, 41 years old). Along these lines, she explains how strategies have changed, using an example from when she began to work in cabinets in 2016. “I always said never to include the headline we wanted to be published in the press release. Put the idea we want to get out in the subheader. Never in the headline”, she explained. This decision stems from her experience that journalists did not want to copy the press release’s headline and preferred to search for other, more interesting information in the official statement. Thus, by providing the desired news in the subheader, she believed there were more chances that the media would use the desired message as the headline. “You give the journalist the idea in the subheader and ensure it gets published. Because if it’s in the headline, the journalist and the newspaper you want won’t pick it up”, she says, explaining her approach at that time. “All that’s gone now, it has disappeared”, the interviewee concludes, noting how more press releases appear in the media with the original headline.

Several interviewees also acknowledge this gap in the media’s first-line filter, attributing it to factors such as the lack of human resources and specialisation in newsrooms. “There are not enough people in the newsrooms” (Woman, 41 years old). “The media “swallow” (publish) many things because they come ready-made from cabinets and because newsrooms have increasingly fewer resources” (Man, 59 years old), a sentiment echoed by another interviewed professional: “Cabinets have more resources than the media, and find it is easier to ‘score’ goals” (Man, 41 years old). “The newsrooms have much fewer personnel and journalists with much less experience” (Man, 47 years old). These responses allude to publishing institutional information without undergoing thorough analysis or reflection by the media. “There are journalists who, out of routine, prefer to publish rather than verify. Many journalists publish without being edited by anyone: in the past, that was unheard of” (Man, 49 years old).

The repeated comparison between the “before” and “now” is a recurring theme among the interviewees. Their observations consistently highlight factors such as journalists’ heightened knowledge and specialisation or the role of figures in the newsroom who acted as filters in previous stages but either no longer exist or have assumed different roles in contemporary journalism. Collectively, these testimonies allow us to establish a “narrative configuration” (Conde del Álamo, 2009) that demonstrates how the immediacy brought about by digitalisation, coupled with the precarity in newsrooms, has led to the sidelining of specific fundamental tasks of journalistic practice, such as thoroughly verifying or analysing information, even when sourced from institutional channels. This circumstance raises questions about the nature of journalistic work within the public sphere, as diminished rigour in this process jeopardises the quality of journalistic information and, by extension, the public service that journalists theoretically provide.



### 3.3. *The Constant Pressure of Mandatory Immediacy*

If the downsizing of newsrooms and the decreased number of specialised professionals are two causes of this phenomenon, no less important is, according to the interviewed professionals, the hegemony of the immediacy in today's journalism and the excess of informational stimuli to which journalists in media outlets are subjected, intensifying competition and affecting the quality of information. "Nowadays, immediacy compels you to use whatever is available so that a digital platform or whoever doesn't beat you to it" (Woman, 47 years old). "If you don't have time to ask questions or think critically about what they're sending you... suppose they send you a bunch of press releases over a summer weekend. In that case, you need the website to be constantly updated, and they're giving you that material for free... that material goes forward without filters" (Woman, 39 years old), describing the current operation in her newsroom. This illustrates how information arrives at media outlets around the clock, conveniently drafted and in various formats, facilitating the journalist's work who, "due to lack of time, job insecurity, or simply for convenience, limit themselves to copying or 'plagiarising' the content of press releases verbatim" (Aira, 2012, p. 92). As another interviewee points out, all of this leads to "competitiveness among media outlets to see who can disseminate the message first, leading to an absolutely irrational race" (Man, 47 years old).

In this context, other interviewed professionals further emphasise the lack of time resulting from immediacy when explaining why many press releases from institutional cabinets are published without alterations. "It's due to the lack of time journalists have and the need to quickly feed everything digitally. So, you kill two birds with one stone. You feed your website and Twitter with the information you're releasing, and you also feed the person's ego" (Woman, 41 years old). This reflection not only accentuates the mandatory immediacy journalists in the media face but also underscores the significance of these publications for institutional leaders. Indeed, it is not uncommon, especially in instances of substantial international or national impact, for leaders to choose to personally disseminate news through their social media accounts rather than through a media outlet. Sometimes, this becomes a continuous strategy, as seen with the team of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who, instead of focusing their communication on the war with Russia through press releases and media briefings, decided to provide information equally to both the media and citizens through social media platforms (Olivares *et al.*, 2022).

### 3.4. *The "bombardment" of journalists, another factor that affects the quality of information*

In this context, the element of immediacy, along with what some interviewees describe as a "bombardment" on journalists-many press releases, communications or information received through various channels-intersects with the previously mentioned variables to create a "perfect storm"- (Man, 47 years old). This convergence contributes to the media's publication of institutional information without verification. The message traverses from its original sender to the audience, devoid of any filtering or questioning by the journalist. "The excess of information is another major problem. More information is being produced than ever, and there are fewer mediators than ever" (Man, 49). He uses a metaphor to describe the situation: "We produce more rubbish when there are fewer rubbish trucks. The function of journalism is to mediate and try to provide a certain depth to things, but now there is more information and fewer people in the newsrooms having to contend with a thousand press releases, a thousand inquiries, etc."

Regarding this, most of the interviewees employed in notable institutions prioritise communication with journalists from the media by leveraging social media platforms such as WhatsApp or Telegram, either for personalised individual messages or via groups or broadcast lists created for this purpose. One of the interviewees, currently working in a media outlet, criticises this practice, considering that it hinders digital disconnection. “They have overloaded us so much with WhatsApp broadcast lists that I, for example, muted them” (Woman, 39 years old). She assures that if something relevant were to happen and it was notified through that channel, she possibly would not know about it. “I wouldn’t find out because they send me so much rubbish daily; I have it muted because otherwise, my phone would buzz every day: Saturdays, Sundays...” This illustrates one of the risks associated with technological overuse, as warned by Jiménez-Marín (2019), who pointed out the danger of workers automating their work as they may disengage from their tasks or what they are being communicated (p. 190).

Most interviewees working in an institutional cabinet are familiar with this situation. Indeed, some highlight that not too long ago, there was considerable debate surrounding this issue within their field of action. “Four years ago, many journalists said that this was an invasion, using WhatsApp, my personal mobile... and now I think it’s the best thing, and nobody questions it; you create a list, and everyone joins because it’s the most convenient” (Woman, 41 years old). This interviewee admits, however, the potential risk of becoming “spam” for professionals. Nevertheless, there is a consensus among the interviewees regarding the usefulness of these tools. “They greatly facilitate journalists’ tasks, as they convey to us” (Woman, 40 years old). At the same time, there is a shared acknowledgement among the interviewees regarding the saturation it represents for media professionals: “The tools used are also much more invasive” (Woman, 34 years old years old).

Undoubtedly, regardless of the appropriateness of this method used by communication cabinets to engage with media journalists, what is undeniable is the effectiveness of these tools for institutional communication departments. These tools serve not only for informing and disseminating official messages but even as mechanisms for influencing the agenda: “With the WhatsApp group that I have of a hundred journalists, I communicate things that I know will immediately be circulating in all newsrooms and will be seen by all editors”, (Man, 47 years old). He also describes how he obtains confirmation through these channels of which media outlets will attend their events or press conferences, allowing him to anticipate and better prepare the institutional representative for possible eventualities.

### *3.5. Strategies for Official Press Releases to be Published Intact in the Media*

Beyond the previously discussed channels and circumstances, there are also active strategies employed by institutional cabinets to ensure that the media disseminate their message in a manner closely resembling how it was crafted within the institution without going under the “microscope” of the media outlet. This is elucidated by another professional, who acknowledges that one of the objectives achieved “often” by their cabinet is to have the media publish their information with a desired institutional focus. “Your press release can come out ‘clean’, unchanged, with the same headline- in a news wire and on the radio because they are the most immediate, and then the next day, in print or digital media, they may be turned around,” (Woman, 40 years old). On this matter, the same interviewee emphasises the importance of promptly sending out the press release to be ‘bounced’ by agencies since, from her perspective, it increases the likelihood of it being initially disseminated in the same manner by the media. “That’s why it’s so important for us to quickly send out press releases. To try... to minimise the time for reflection”. Consequently, the initial positive impact on the institution, mainly if it originates from a prestigious media

outlet, is often leveraged by cabinets for dissemination on social media. “Of course, you have the URL there to distribute it through your channels with the headline you wanted” (Man, 41 years old).

Another interviewee echoes this strategy, considering it a priority to ensure that the news agency uses the press release to create the wire service. “For me, the press release only makes sense if you manage to send it before it comes out on the wire service” (Woman, 34 years old). An objective is to have the media “use the headline of the press release”, which is also shared by other professionals in this study. “That’s the ticket” (Man, 47 years old). As indicated by another interviewee, this goal is easier to achieve if the official communication is disseminated before the wire service is released, either because the wire services rely on the press release sent by the cabinet or because a journalist from a media outlet uses it. In any case, the ultimate goal of all these actions is always the same: to have the media publish the headline or focus crafted by the institutional communication department.

In this line, another typical action carried out by institutional cabinets nowadays, as mentioned by several interviewees, is to ask the media to publish one of their press releases even if it is not featured on the front page of the respective digital newspaper: “I ask a media outlet. ‘Please, publish this for me.’ Then the media outlet tells me, “I will publish it, but it won’t be on the front page. But here’s the link. So, I pass it on to my boss, who is already happy: his message has been published, and he tweets it. It’s good for the journalist because, hey, the more visits, the better. And my boss’ ego is satisfied. So everyone’s happy” (Woman, 41 years old).

At this stage, another strategy mentioned by one of the professionals is to send the press release during or immediately after a critical speech or intervention by an institutional leader: “The media’s tendency will be to copy and paste until they have time to digest what the institutional leader has said and interpret or modify it. During that time, with my press release and my headline, I take charge” (Man, 54 years old). In addition, he acknowledges other strategies such as “recycling” information during weekends and public holidays. This involves reformatting institutional announcements with data that went unnoticed initially. Another interviewee also acknowledges this practice, noting that they do not resend a press release in such cases. Instead, they focus on trying to persuade specific media outlets to cover the information by informing them that it was previously published by institutional resources but received little attention, “I’m selling it to you, and I’m telling you, ‘Look, this has already come out,’ but I’m warning you because otherwise, I’m risking my credibility with that” (Woman, 41 years old).

Therefore, from the interviews, a scenario emerges in which cabinets, favoured by various factors, seek to capitalise on the weakened state of many media outlets. “In part, we work intending to bypass the filters. The greatest triumph is that they don’t even touch a comma, and journalists can even sign off on a communication in which they haven’t written even one word or asked anything. That’s the ultimate triumph, because sometimes you even laugh about it, you know? and discuss it with the politician: ‘Look at how we’ve pulled it off, we’ve pulled it off completely!’”. They put their name on something that wasn’t theirs and gave it the same headline without changing anything. And that journalist knows perfectly well that twenty or thirty other media outlets have the same information, and they’re putting their name to something that hasn’t gone through any filter. The information isn’t necessarily false but reflects our perspective, and sometimes it’s not very high quality” (Man, 47 years old).

### 3.6. *Doubts about the Effectiveness of these Practices*

Another interviewee agrees that they do not manage to get many press releases published in various media outlets. Still, she reflects on the real impact of these publications. “Our bosses are happy about that; for example, a communication agency can sell to its clients: “Look, it’s been featured in 10 places, right? And you sell them the links. But what effectiveness does that actually have? Does it reach the public more? Honestly, I don’t think so” (Woman, 41 years old). However, the same professional acknowledges the positive impact of this on institutional cabinets. “Seeing it in the media gives your information more credibility, and I can sell it better, especially to my audience, so they can share it on social media”.

At this point, several interviewees working for the institutions criticise news organisations concerning the multifaceted factors underpinning this unequal battle between cabinets and the media. “There is indeed this unequal battle, but I don’t think it is our fault. I do my job; they are the ones who should do theirs” (Woman, 34 years old).

Not all aspects favour the communication cabinet, as several interviewees emphasised. Several professionals consulted lament the absence of suitable interlocutors- either due to time constraints or a lack of specialisation- to ‘sell’ information they consider to be of quality, “There are days when you feel like you’re getting the message across, and others when you encounter frustration because there’s no one who knows... and you say, “Damn it, no one bought it, and this topic is very good’. Both things happen. Sometimes there’s a lack of skill to interpret things with the ‘bad attitude’ that a seasoned journalist would have” (Man, 59 years old).

Another interviewee also emphasises this aspect, pointing out that the media situation and the unequal battle between cabinets and newsrooms sometimes negatively affect them. “We suffer from it sometimes. The media have got used to just publishing the press release, and that’s it. There’s very little interpretation and analysis now” (Woman, 41 years old). This lament is expressed considering that, at times, their institution could benefit from more comprehensive coverage of some issues by journalists compared to the arguments presented by the opposition.

## 4. Discussion and conclusions

In the early 2000s, several academic investigations underscored some of the challenges confronting journalism due to the expansion of the internet and its repercussions on new organisation’s operational practices. The acceleration of the flow of news, the emergence of digital newsrooms, the diversification of professionals themselves, and the subsequent downsizing of personnel triggered by the economic crisis of 2007-2008, which severely impacted advertising revenues, have resulted in a weakening of major journalistic centres and also a fragmentation of the media landscape (López García, 2015).

Hence, the predictions of those studies, which in some cases already indicated the preeminence of wire services information and the diminishing emphasis on in-depth news elaboration or analysis, have materialised in recent years. This trend has been exacerbated by the emergence of social media, which has further complicated factors like immediacy, greatly hindering media outlets’ capacity to provide broader perspectives and in-depth coverage in their reporting.

An uneven battle emerges between communication cabinets and media outlets in terms of producing information in this global context. The interviews undertaken demonstrate the recognition of this struggle by institutional players and the

vulnerability of the majority of news agencies, especially smaller and local ones, in light of the convergence of three concurrent factors: a.) fewer human resources within newsrooms, b.) lack or scarcity of journalists' specialisation and c.) the imperative of immediacy driven by fierce competition in the digital landscape.

The precarious situation of journalists in media outlets contrasts not only with the more significant resources of communication cabinets but also with an increase in their professionalisation and a heightened understanding of productive routines in news production, often attributed to the incorporation of journalists from media backgrounds. This phenomenon, as evidenced in several examples, even leads to 'negotiation' regarding the publication of content and approaches between the editor and the communications director, entailing systems of reciprocal benefits or rewards between both parties, which can alienate the journalist from their original work and result in a deterioration in information quality. On the other hand, it is also noted in the interviewees' discourse that communication professionals encounter their own pressures from leaders or institutions to leverage their knowledge and expertise to maximise the dissemination of their messages or bolster their presence in media and social networks.

Based on the findings in this study, it is evident that an increasing volume of information reaches the public without the historical mediators, namely journalists, fulfilling their role as filters and verifiers regarding the publication of content. Consequently, these unverified publications fuel "the collateral model" characterised "by the prevalence of political parallelism" (Casero, 2008, p. 115), whereby journalists act as "spokespersons for viewpoints similar to those held by political parties and institutions", thereby championing ideas and positions advocated by actors within the political system. Although, in this case, the media serves to amplify messages, the effect of this mechanism is a decline in informational quality, either due to bias or lack of critical interpretation of the reality depicted by institutional communication cabinets. Therefore, cabinets successfully convey a specific narrative about reality to the public space that serves the interests of the institution they represent. Furthermore, this situation leads to a departure from the verification process, which journalists are tasked with applying "without cutting corners or deficiencies" as it is the "most distinctive" aspect of their tasks (Dader, 2012, p. 40).

Therefore, all interviewees agree that there is a notable increase in the number of press releases published by various media outlets featuring the desired idea, focus, or headline from the communication cabinet, often without the critical perspective of the media. In the best-case scenario for the information receiver, the media may develop more in-depth content or perspectives hours or days after the official press release is published. However, unless in exceptional cases, this subsequent coverage will have less impact than the initial message issued by the institution, as it will have already been disseminated unchanged by a more significant number of media outlets and amplified through various channels and social media platforms affiliated with the institution, institutional leaders (political parties, supporters, sympathisers etc.) and even by the media themselves from their official accounts.

Thus, we observe that institutional communication cabinets exploit the weakened state of media outlets, with varying degrees of subtlety, particularly to benefit from the aforementioned initial wave of publications (news wires, digital newspapers, print newspapers' websites, radio, or television). This ensures the desired initial media impact, making it difficult for journalists to conduct thorough fact-checking once a news story has been published by themselves and other media outlets. Similarly, even if journalists pause to analyse the official press release or wire service from agencies and identify another angle closer to reality

or more attractive to the reader, they are faced with the dilemma of either modifying the already published article- thus risking credibility- or publishing it afterwards with a different perspective. In the worst-case scenario for the communication cabinets, their desired focus will have already been initially disseminated and amplified. Consequently, their goal of achieving better positioning in online search engines will have been accomplished in most cases.

Clearly, one of the primary objectives of institutional communication cabinets is to circulate their messages with the desired focus. To achieve this, it is crucial that significant newspapers publish their press releases, or at the very least, that news agencies do so, as the media can then pick up their coverage. This allows the institutions themselves to amplify their message through social media under the credibility umbrella provided, a priori, by a reputable news company. Institutional leaders also leverage publishing their message by media outlets to repost it on social networks, often resulting in further amplification by the institution's official accounts. The digital course of action demonstrates "the eagerness to make the actions of certain political figures in the government of the entity visible through retweets from the institution, or posts aimed more at other administrations rather than citizens" (Vázquez Sande 2016, p. 502). This approach underscores how "unidirectional persuasive communication logics prevail, closer to the field of political communication rather than institutional communication". Consequently, public administrations "use and leverage their communication resources to project different brands associated with their management. This promotion is achieved through different attributes, specific markers, or a viral communication strategy online (Llorca-Abad, 2019, p. 284).

In this whirlwind, journalists find themselves caught in a conundrum. Firstly, they are confronted with the pressure of immediacy. If they do not initially release the unverified or at least thoroughly analysed news, they risk "losing traffic", as verifying official information often requires time they typically do not have. However, if they publish without verifying and analysing, "they buy" and thus endorse the institutional discourse. Secondly, staff cuts brought about the precariousness in media outlets and reduced specialisation in the media. It is very likely that the writer best equipped to resolve the issue no longer works there (in fact, they may have been hired by an institution), may be unavailable, or is simply occupied with other tasks. Journalists must set aside what they are doing to analyse institutional communication, which can take hours without being productive. As a result, it is typical to give up and prioritise their original story, which can enhance both the media outlet's reputation and their own personal brand.

In this context, we must also consider the proliferation of channels through which communication cabinets can disseminate their information to the media and the speed at which this occurs. This results in a 'bombardment' of journalists, which sometimes results in saturation and, subsequently, a reduced capacity to pay attention to or analyse the content from official sources. As Aira (2012) highlighted, the press departments of political parties and institutions "know perfectly well that if a journalist has abundant information, they will be less inclined to seek it out on their own, so they inundate them with the content that political leaders want to highlight" (p.92).

On the contrary, professionals working in communication cabinets defend their role of conveying desired messages within ethical boundaries and attribute responsibility to media companies for failing to retain adequate staff capable of fulfilling the oversight role expected of journalistic newsrooms. Indeed, the precariousness in the media industry is directly contributing to the transition of professionals towards communication cabinets.

The analysed sample indicates that the ongoing struggle between the communication cabinets and journalists has been tilting in favour of the former. The neglect of journalistic functions by media professionals in the face of communication cabinets has been a noted trend for years: “There are media outlets, there are journalists (with honourable exceptions) who have fallen into the trap of turning their professional activity into a mere task of adapting the information that comes to them through the technical devices of the platform (Galán Gamero, 2011, p. 140). The author attributes this phenomenon to various factors such as the “strong pressure” on journalists to produce information “at the lowest possible cost”, the lack of independence of media outlets, and their transformation into “just another piece of a business and political conglomerate whose aims differ from those of journalists”.

Another factor, according to Galán, that facilitated this situation was “the improvement in the quality and intensity of the information provided by official sources.” One way to “directly and openly seduce the media counterpower and in broad daylight” (Dader, 2014, p. 640) by the cabinets, as described by this author, involves the widespread dissemination of biased versions through multiple formats and platforms and the meticulous understanding of journalistic logic to exploit the unstoppable trends of the profession, ensuring that media outlets perceive the information they promote as undeniable news which external promoters want to place on the public agenda.

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The author declares that there is no conflict of interest contained in this article.

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