

POLICE MEDIA RELATIONS ACTIVITIES IN THE LIGHT OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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Purpose: In order to establish the applicable principles for the practical implementation of police media relations activities, a survey was conducted among all press officers of the Silesian garrison in 2022. The results obtained were then compared with the results of a project carried out on the same research field in 2017. The result was to identify trends in the management of police information policy and to obtain data on the selection and use of communication tools.

Design/methodology/approach: A survey questionnaire was addressed to all press officers of the Silesian police garrison. The questions concerned, among other things, the tools used in media relations activities, perceptions of the communicative effectiveness of individual mass media or the methods preferred by journalists for obtaining information. In order to determine the nature of transformations in media relations activities, the results obtained were compared with data obtained during a similar survey, but carried out five years earlier.

Conclusion: An overwhelming proportion of officers responsible for maintaining relations with the media continued to declare traditional forms of contact such as a telephone call (52 per cent of indications), which is probably related to the high attractiveness for journalists of information held by the police press service. In contrast, awareness of the importance of social media has increased among officers (from 22 per cent to 30 per cent), although this has not been followed by an increase in the level of their use in media relations practice. There has also been a drastic increase in the level of approval (from 53 per cent to 75 per cent) of the use of rectification as an effective method of responding to publications containing inaccuracies, misrepresentations or manipulations.

Practical implications: The results obtained are of implementation significance due to the possibility of applying in practice the public relations activities of both the uniformed services and other organisations implementing communication strategies based on the use of mass media, and this particularly concerns media relations activities.

Originality/value: Conducting research into the management of police communication allows for scientific reflection on methods of information distribution and at the same time creating the image of both the formation itself and forming opinions about the level of security among media audiences. The analyses described above also allow further areas of research to be identified and actions to be taken to implement innovative methods of improving the process of social communication of the police and other uniformed services.

Keywords: media relations, press officer, police information policy, communication tools, press officer survey

1. Introduction. Managing the information policy of the Polish police

The basis of the management system of the information policy of the Polish police is constituted by the press officers of district and city police headquarters. The manner, scope and form of the implementation of press and information activities in the police are defined by Order No. 1204 of the Police Chief Commandant of 12 November 2007, supplemented by Decision No. 220 of 2010, and amended by Order No. 41 of 6 October 2014 and Order No. 12 of 27 January 2018. The Police Chief's Notice of 3 September 2018 contained the consolidated text of the Order prior to the amendment introduced by Order No. 3 of 26 January 2023. Prior to that, Order No. 13 of the Police Chief Commandant of 25 September 2000 was in force, and the first act normalizing the 'media' aspect of police functioning was Order No. 11 of the Police Chief Commandant of 16 August 1995.

Pursuant to the regulations in force since 2023, press and information activities are carried out within the scope of their jurisdiction by the Commander-in-Chief of the Police, the Commander of the Central Bureau of Investigation of the Police, the Commander of the Bureau of Internal Affairs of the Police, the Commander of the Central Bureau for Combating Cybercrime, provincial police commanders, the Commander of the Capital City Police and district commanders (city, district). On behalf of the above-mentioned commanders there are press officers employed on separate posts, and on behalf of the district commanders there are press officers who may also perform other official duties.

Press officers are to inform journalists about the activities of the municipal or district commanders to whom they report and the units they manage. In the case of regional media, in consultation with the press officer of the territorially competent provincial headquarters, they prepare and transmit to journalists press releases, multimedia materials (management specifics: photographic, film and audio) and disseminate them on police websites,

Pursuant to the quoted regulations, press officers respond to questions raised, react to press criticism, provide support in transmitting information to the mass media by other organisational units, participate in shaping information policy related to solving problems of social pathologies, criminogenic phenomena, as well as preventive measures. For the proper performance of their tasks, they are obliged to participate in training courses that teach them how to interact with the mass media.

In carrying out media relations projects, they maintain constant contact with journalists from sub-local, local and regional media, and incidentally also with national or international media. The group of recipients of the messages created by these officers and those who interact with them also includes administrators or users of content media distributed to Internet users or so-called citizen journalists. For the media environment, press officers are the main keepers of news about events or phenomena related to the functioning of the police, as well as a source of knowledge allowing verification of the accuracy of rumours concerning this sphere obtained by

journalists from other informants. In 2017 and 2022, the described project covered research areas that had not been previously analyzed among police officers in Upper Silesia.

2. Methodology. A study of the communication activity of press officers

In a research project addressed to press officers of police headquarters in the Silesian Voivodship, activities relevant for planning, organising, coordinating, implementing and evaluating the effectiveness of the process of communication through the mass media were verified. The aim was to determine the forms of media relations activity preferred by press officers and regarded as the most ergonomic and effective.

The survey of press officers' media relations activities conducted from 25 August to 14 September 2022 involved 100 per cent of the assumed respondents, i.e. officers entitled to participate in the police information policy. The research field was the Silesian police garrison, which in autumn 2022 consisted of 19 city commands and 13 district commands located in the following towns and cities of the Silesian Voivodship: Będzin, Bielsko-Biała, Bieruń, Bytom, Chorzów, Cieszyn, Częstochowa, Dąbrowa Górnicza, Gliwice, Jastrzębie Zdrój, Jaworzno, Katowice, Kłobuck, Lubliniec, Mikołów, Mysłowice, Myszków, Piekary Śląskie, Pszczyna, Racibórz, Ruda Śląska, Rybnik, Siemianowice Śląskie, Sosnowiec, Świętochłowice, Tarnowskie Góry, Tychy, Wodzisław Śląski, Zabrze, Zawiercie, Żory and Żywiec.

Respondents were asked to identify the methods of distributing content to journalists and, in particular, to indicate the communication tools used, the predominant ways of contacting mass media employees or the principles of maintaining a feedback relationship, both in technological and functional terms. Given that the respondents' constant professional contact with the media environment shapes their opinions on the mass media, another aspect to be analysed was the officers' perceptions of the effectiveness of particular news dissemination media in the sphere of social communication.

Daily service allowed the participants of the research project to obtain data on the specifics of the journalistic community by its size, typology of media, level of professional specialisation of journalists, assessment of professional preparation for reporting on the described events and phenomena. Frequent contacts with employees (or co-workers) of editorial offices in individual cities or districts and verification of the content of media messages also influenced the formation of an opinion on the social prestige of the journalistic profession. Therefore, determining the level of reputation that respondents believe journalists enjoy was also the subject of the analyses conducted.

Press officers in the 32 units forming the Silesian garrison located in the southern part of Poland received a survey questionnaire by e-mail. After typing in their answers to the questions, the respondents returned the questionnaire to the e-mail address provided. The questionnaires

were filled in by all police officers who performed press officer duties in the Silesian Voivodship during the study. The course and conclusions of the research project are presented in detail in the article "Managing Social Communication. Analysis of Media Relations Activities of Polish Police Press Officers" published in *Management Systems in Production Engineering*, vol. 31, no. 3 of 2023.

In order to grasp the directions of transformations in media relations activities, the results obtained were compared with data obtained during a similar survey, but carried out five years earlier. In the Silesian garrison of the police, a survey of the techniques and tools of information distribution most frequently used by press officers was conducted from 10 October to 15 November 2017. Ninety-four per cent of press officers involved in maintaining contact with the mass media took part. The results of the survey are described in the article 'Organisation and scope of media relations activities of press officers of police units', published in *Studia Politicae Universitatis Silesiensis* No. 22 of 2018. The juxtaposition of the effects of the two programmes made it possible not only to document the actual state of affairs at the time of the analyses, but also to reveal trends of change in the activity of police media relations specialists.

The weakness of the research tool was the possibility of insight or interference by the superiors of the surveyed police officers in the answers provided. This is due to the specificity of organizations with a hierarchical structure.

3. Results of the research project

The most popular communication tool used by press officers to contact journalists in 2022 was the traditional telephone call (52 per cent). The next most popular methods of communicating a message to a specific addressee were email correspondence (9 per cent), sending text or multimedia messages (5 per cent), and holding face-to-face meetings (4 per cent). None of the respondents indicated remote meetings or content disseminated on social media as a form of contact with media professionals. Among the ways of making information available to all interested parties, on the other hand, publishing data on the official website of the police headquarters was popular (28 per cent). At the same time, according to respondents, the mass media belonging to online broadcasters (33 per cent of indications) and social media (30 per cent of indications) are the most effective in providing information to residents. Television and radio were, in the opinion of press officers, of much lesser importance (15 per cent each), and the printed press played only a complementary role (6 per cent).

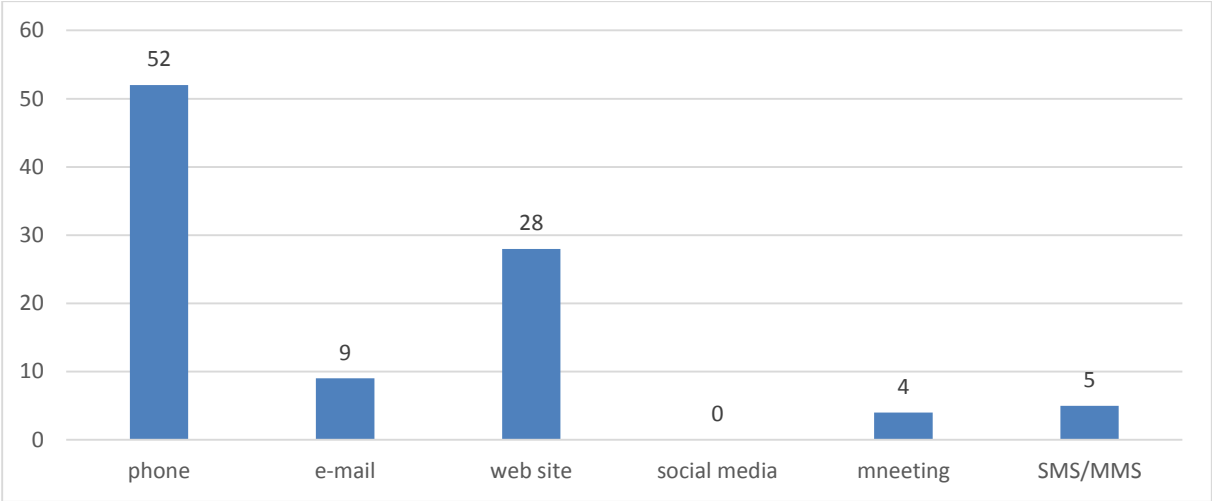


Figure 1. Ways of communicating information to journalists preferred by press officers in 2022. Shot in percentage terms.

When choosing the form of news communication preferred by journalists, according to police officers, press officers in 2022 unequivocally indicated individual contact (83 per cent) whether through traditional means of communication, email, internet communication or a meeting. None of the respondents mentioned group contact, e.g. during a briefing or press conference, as a formula enjoying a higher level of approval among journalists. However, one in ten police officers surveyed did not have an articulated view on this topic in 2022.

When asked to specify the size of the journalistic community with which they maintain regular contact, respondents most often cited a number between 5 and 10 reporters (47 per cent, indications). A relatively small circle (up to 5 people) of interested media representatives was declared by 36 per cent of respondents, with the remainder (17 per cent) reporting that they work with a group of more than 10 journalists on a regular basis.

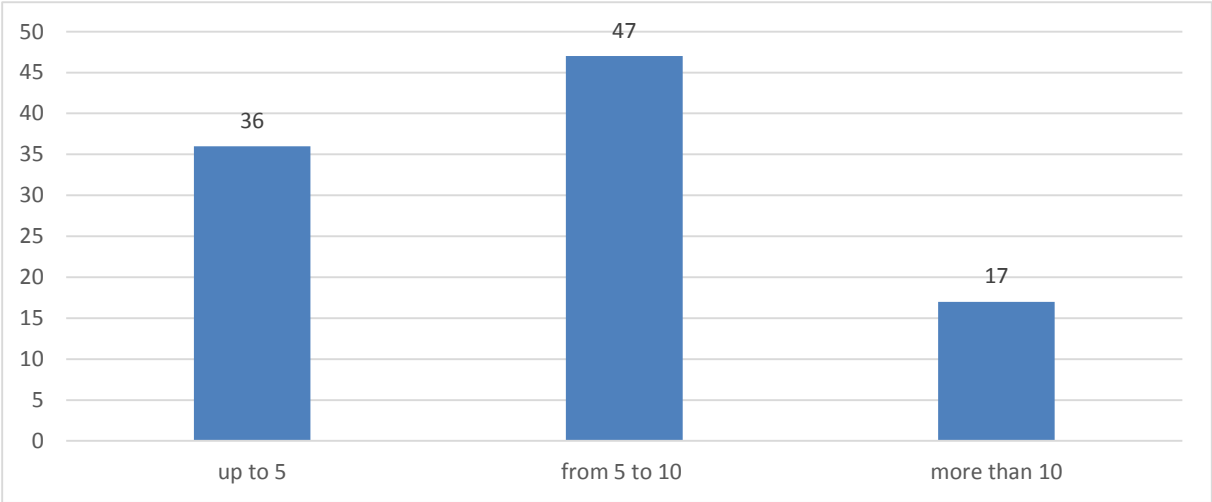


Figure 2. 2022 press officers' declarations on the number of journalists with whom they have regular news coverage. Shot in percentage terms.

The press officers were also asked to attempt to verify reporters' expertise in the activities of the law enforcement apparatus, the procedures used or the applicable legislation governing the police. The journalistic community with which the press officers maintained communication relations was, in their opinion, dominated by casual employees or associates of specific editorial offices (38 per cent of indications). They perform journalistic tasks reporting on police work on the same basis as they prepare other press materials. The second most numerous group are journalists with a reputation among police officers as specialised investigative or police reporters (32 per cent of indications). The remaining press officers (30 per cent) did not feel competent to categorise the level of specialisation of the journalists with whom they worked. However, it was most often pointed out that, taking into account the typology of the mass media, in terms of the type of individual media, the best prepared in terms of content (in terms of knowledge and experience of police operations) were representatives of television (41 per cent), followed by the press (27 per cent) and radio (24 per cent). The lowest level of this type of qualification was observed by press officers in the group of representatives of internet broadcasters (8 per cent).

Press officers were further asked about their preferred tools for responding to inaccurate, untrue or misrepresented news published in the media. As many as 75 per cent of respondents cited getting a correction published as the appropriate form of action to be taken by a media relations professional.

In contrast, an analysis of police officers' perceptions of the prestige of the journalistic profession found that the majority (61 per cent) of respondents considered it to be average. Among the remaining officers, respondents identifying the level of authority of the profession as high (27 per cent) predominated. Low public esteem was indicated by the smallest group of respondents (11 per cent).

4. Discussion. Breakdown of results by specific police unit

The research project involved officers from district police headquarters (KPP - County Police Headquarters) and city police headquarters (KMP - City Police Headquarters). Their working conditions are differentiated, among other things, by the nature of the area served. In the case of the first units (KPP), these are usually smaller localities, i.e. rural or urban-rural municipalities located around a single centre, which is a medium-sized city. On the other hand, larger units (KMP) either focus exclusively on serving a large city with poviat rights or combine this with service in nearby municipalities. The specificity of the locality where the surveyed police officers perform their duties undoubtedly influences the assessment of the perception of different aspects of media relations activities. For example, police officers from smaller units were much more likely to prefer a telephone conversation with journalists

(63 per cent) than press officers from larger units (42 per cent). On the other hand, officers from KMP were more likely to use SMS or MMS messaging than police officers from KPP (11 per cent vs. 5 per cent). A more numerous group of press officers from larger units perceived the importance in media relations activities of newspaper editorials (12 per cent in KMP against no indication in KPP) and television editorials (18 per cent in KMP against 12 per cent in KPP), and the effectiveness of social media was rated significantly higher by police officers from KMP than from KPP (35 per cent against 25 per cent). KMP had a higher (89 per cent vs. 77 per cent) number of responses noting that journalists prefer face-to-face contact. The difference was mainly offset by more frequent declarations of having no formed opinion on the subject (15 per cent KPP vs. 5 per cent KMP). It is also clear that respondents from KPP indicated a lower size of the journalistic community than respondents from KMP (answer: more than 10 people - 8% KPP vs. 26% KMP), and less frequently characterised journalists as specialised investigative or police reporters (23% KPP vs. 42% KMP). The disproportion in the identification of the substantive preparation of journalists of the various media can testify to the condition of the local press in smaller localities, where, in the case of magazines, the level of positive indications was only 20 per cent in district commands and as high as 35 per cent in city commands. The level of specialised preparation of press officers, on the other hand, is reflected in the significantly higher percentage of responses expressing disapproval of the publication of a rectification among police officers from KMP (21 per cent) than officers from KPP (8 per cent), which indicates a desire to maintain partnership relations with journalists. Instead of resorting to a 'repressive' tool, such as having a rectification published showing the journalist's mistakes, they prefer an influence based on dialogue, presenting arguments or persuasion. Among municipal police officers, there was also a greater polarisation of opinions on the social prestige of the journalist's profession. More often, respondents from KMP considered it high (31 per cent vs. 23 per cent of KPP) or low (16 per cent vs. 8 per cent of KPP), and less often perceived it as average (53 per cent vs. 69 per cent of KPP).

4.1. Benchmarking performance and identifying trends of change from 2017 to 2022

During the survey carried out in 2022, the conviction was confirmed that - as five years earlier - the press officer, due to the complexity of the duties performed, should be characterised by "multitasking". This implies the need to have expertise in various aspects of police activity (substantive competence) combined with the ability to establish and maintain interpersonal contacts. There is also a requirement for knowledge of the principles of mass media (media competence) and the ability to operate modern media distribution tools (technological competence). Conclusions from the study mentioned in Chapter II carried out in the Silesian garrison in 2017 compared to the results of 2022 have not lost their relevance.

The comparative analysis made it possible to grasp the most important trends in terms of changes in media relations activities in the same research field, which became apparent during the five years separating the two projects. It is characteristic, however, that despite the

transformations taking place in the technological environment (e.g. the development of communicators using the potential of cyberspace or the constant improvement of methods of recording, editing and making multimedia materials available), no radical transformations were noted in the field of news communication techniques themselves.

In 2022, as in 2017, the telephone call still held the top spot, which, interestingly, received the same number of indications as five years ago (52 per cent).

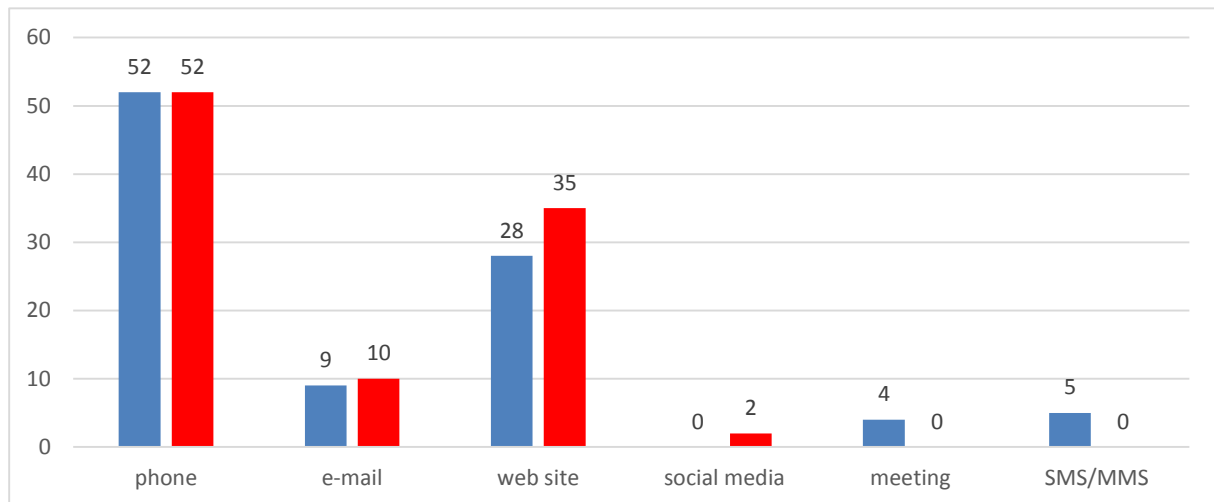


Figure 3. Summary of changes in the most frequently used tools of communication with journalists by press officers (blue - 2022, red - 2017). Percentage breakdown.

In 2017, the second dominant way of maintaining relations with journalists was no longer a form of face-to-face communication such as a phone call, but posting information on a website (35 per cent), a position it retained in 2022, but with slightly fewer indications (28 per cent). So did emailing, which was in third place (2017 - 10 per cent and 2022 - 9 per cent). On the other hand, there was a slight increase (to 4 per cent) in the number of police officers declaring meeting journalists as a form of contact used, while the use of social media, which reached 2 per cent in 2017, was abandoned, which, moreover, indicated the incidental nature of the use of this method.

More serious transformations were, however, noted in the perceptions of the press officers surveyed regarding the social reach and communication effectiveness of the various media. In 2017, television (43 per cent) was the media most appreciated by officers, followed by the media available in cyberspace: online portals (22 per cent) and social media (22 per cent). The list was closed by traditional mass media such as newspapers (6 per cent) and radio stations (6 per cent). After five years, online broadcasters (33 per cent) and social media (30 per cent) have achieved a dominant position. Television saw a major decline (to 15 per cent), newspapers maintained their position (6 per cent) and radio was more popular (up to 15 per cent).

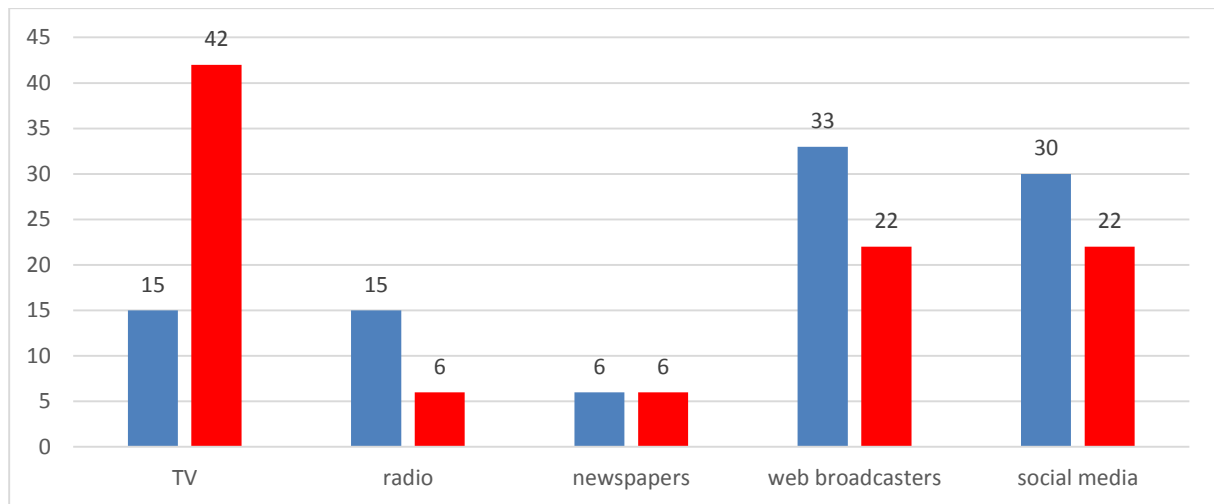


Figure 4. Transformation of press officers' opinions on the media providing the most effective outreach to residents (blue - 2022, red - 2017). Shot in percentage terms.

When asked about the type of contact they thought journalists preferred, press officers were still overwhelmingly convinced that face-to-face coverage was the most expected form (90 per cent in 2017 and 83 per cent in 2022). In 2022, the number of responses expressing a lack of competence of press officers towards identifying journalists' preferences increased to 10 per cent (five years earlier, no respondent indicated an answer of 'I have no opinion'), while the number of declarations of the lack of importance of the type of contact form decreased to 6 per cent.

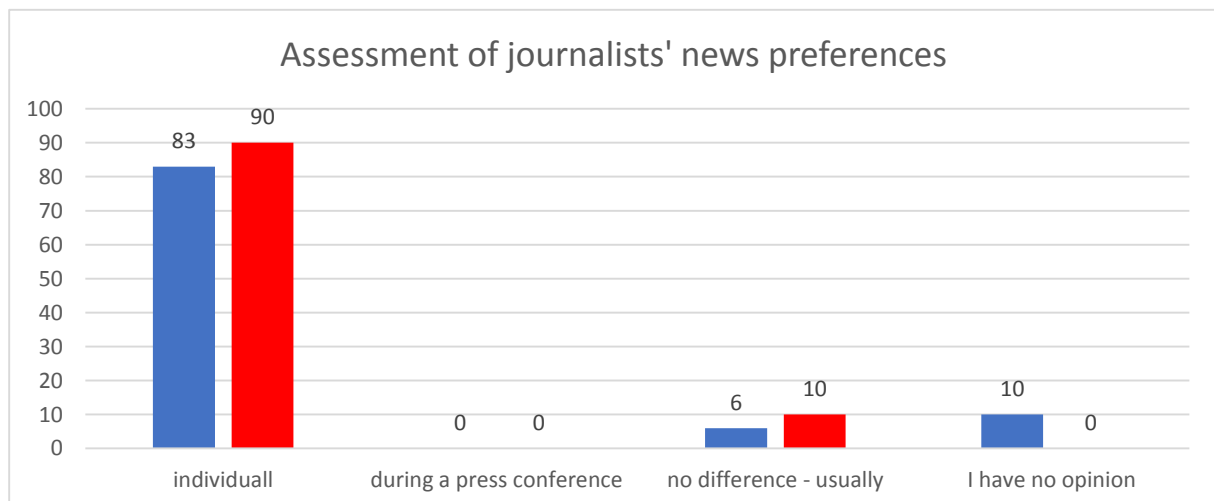


Figure 5. Press officers' opinions on journalists' preferred methods of obtaining information (blue - 2022, red - 2017). Percentage capture.

In contrast, when considering the level of approval towards press officers' use of rectification as an adequate form of response to errors and misrepresentations disseminated in the mass media, the survey revealed a sharp increase from 53 per cent in 2017 to 75 per cent in 2022. Disapproval was expressed by respectively: 37 per cent and 14 per cent, with a similar proportion of responses (10 per cent each) indicating that they did not have an educated view on the subject.

When assessing the professionalism of mass media professionals, television journalists scored highest (with an increase from 35 per cent in 2017 to a status of 41 per cent in 2022). In contrast, the largest decrease was revealed for print journalists (from 38 per cent to 27 per cent). Minimal differences were also noted for radio staff (from 24 per cent to 22 per cent) and online broadcasters (from 5 per cent to 8 per cent).

4.2. Information policy management

The proper shaping of information policy has a significant impact on the reception of communicated content. Information is an important component of shaping a security culture (Kuzior, Lobanova, 2020; Kuzior, 2014). According to media scholars, there is also a growing role for public administration communication both at the centre and on the ground. This is due to the direct 'feel' of administrative decisions by citizens. In the administrative system, there are press officers at all levels, generally professionally trained to perform their functions. In addition to providing information, their main task is to explain to local and regional public opinion specific decisions and problems that have a bearing on citizens' lives (Michalczyk, 2020, p. 238; Kuzior et al., 2021). To a large extent, this also applies to the police. Moreover, the police, as a state administration body, are obliged to create the necessary conditions for media representatives to perform their functions and to provide information on their activities (Stawnicka, 2013, p. 165).

One of the important elements of conducting communication activities is to build and consolidate the assumed image and develop partnership relations with the police community. The media activity of press officers also serves this purpose. It must be admitted, however, that on the one hand the formation strives for the trust of citizens and the creation of permanent structures of cooperation with the public, on the other hand, when it is necessary to suppress certain (negative) social phenomena quite quickly, it applies the so-called destructive strategy, disregarding the disappearance of social support for the activities carried out (Fuks, Fus, 2023, p. 44). As a consequence, the police currently face a number of serious organisational, personnel and public trust deficit problems. Among the changes that could increase the efficiency of the institution, positively influence its independence and improve its image, decentralisation could be considered. However, politicians are not interested in this direction (Nyzio, 2022, p. 220). Meanwhile, rebuilding lost credibility also requires strenuous work at the grassroots, i.e. at the level of district and city commands. This task then falls more heavily on press officers.

Among the numerous actors in the media relations sphere, the police information service certainly enjoys a privileged position. Such a situation is due to the nature of the information that press officers are in charge of. Events handled by officers involved in combating broadly defined crime against life, health, property or road safety easily attract the interest of the mass media. The same is true of news concerning, for example, drug crime, economic crime or crime of manners. A press officer in possession of news sought by journalists does not have to make special efforts to publicise it. This is because reporters themselves apply for access to this data.

This is probably the reason for the continued use of the most popular content distribution tool, the telephone call, at 52 per cent over a five-year period. It can also be assumed that the lack of need for marketing management of contacts with the media environment aimed at maintaining mutually beneficial relations is also one of the sources of the high level of approval for the use of the rectification (up from 53% to 75%), which, after all, unequivocally demonstrates an error by the journalist or editorial office. Spokespersons for commercial entities tend to be more cautious about automating the process of revealing a misstatement and the subsequent demand for a rectification in favour of educational, popularisation or even lobbying activities.

Unlike the spokespersons of institutions or public administrations, and especially commercial companies, the situation prevailing in the media market does not usually necessitate measures to increase the public reach of the content presented. The press officer may focus more on their selection, which is appropriate from the point of view of police operations. However, officers are aware of the communication preferences of journalists, knowing that individual contact is most often of higher value to them (indications of 8 to 9 police officers out of 10 officers in both research projects) than participation in a press conference.

5. Conclusions

The police, like other authority structures, in order to achieve their goals and interests, create a network of communication and dialogue within social structures, using the available communication channels - the local media. The conditions for the effectiveness of communication are two-wayness, i.e. dialogue; attractiveness of the sender, i.e. the degree of sympathy that the sender evokes in the recipient, e.g. by means of a media or direct image of a representative of the authorities; the communication channels used; the characteristics of the message, i.e. the form of the message due to its accuracy, emotionality, which are intended to exert a specific social influence on the recipient's decision-making process (Batorowska, 2020, p. 284) The result of the process is an attempt to influence the audience. Recipients may recognise the arguments given, succumb to the persuasive techniques used or, in extreme cases, fall victim to disinformation activities. It is therefore necessary to define and respect the limits of what is desirable, e.g. in the interest of an investigation, to 'filter' the data. But this does not justify manipulation or confabulation, as the person giving false data is no longer an interlocutor. Lying to journalists, giving them little factual information or even restricting their access to police findings can have negative consequences - and very quickly (Szwejkowski, Śmiałek, 2014, p. 175). It should always be borne in mind when dealing with representatives of the mass media that it is they who create the company's image in their publications, and the press service must ensure that it is as good as possible. Lack of cooperation in this respect, or cooperation based on the company's ad hoc information policy, will certainly

not bring benefits (Sokolowski, 2014, p. 224). Therefore, the press officer should be characterised by knowledge of the functioning of the media market. Sometimes the source of mutual hostility or dislike may be a lack of knowledge of the specifics of the profession. For a journalist, information is a basic commodity (Bekulard 2018, p. 104), and an officer implementing an information policy may not provide full access to it. Bias, although criticised from the point of view of ethics and journalistic professionalism, is inherent in the operation of the media (Szostok-Nowacka, 2023, p. 96). This is also something that the press officer should be aware of.

The management of police information policy must furthermore include a risk aspect. The training of press officers, as well as motivation and integration measures, certainly have an impact on reducing the possibility of adverse events. All the more so as the achievement of image goals should be treated in long-term terms, and the risk is greater the longer the period planned to achieve the goal is due to internal (e.g. unqualified management, employee turnover, inadequate organisational structure) and external factors that may arise (Kochańczyk, 2019, p. 269). Moreover, from the point of view of public relations theory, responding to media demands and providing information in relation to events that have taken place is an insufficient activity. An important task of uniformed services press officers in their cooperation with journalists is to use them for educational and preventive purposes (Gawronski, 2011, p. 133). All the more so as press officers can be a source of verified, reliable and credible information, which is of great importance in view of the threat of disinformation and dissemination of factual news. Unfortunately, many publications contain false or unverified information. The editors of these sites hold journalists accountable not for the quality of the publication in terms of content, but for the number of clicks and page views (Ciarka, 2021, p. 11). It is also worth highlighting at this point the crucial importance of media audience education. The role of the media in shaping the image of every institution and individual is indisputable, but it is the recipient of this content who should apply the appropriate filters and be aware to shape their own opinion and perception of the social world (Żak, 2018, p. 124). Including, of course, the functioning of the police, which requires the keepers of information, i.e. the press services, to be more involved in its dissemination taking into account the media used by the media audience or, in a broader sense, the social environment. In the five years separating the two studies, press officers have undergone an evolution in their perception of cyberspace. Both online broadcasters and social media are rated highly in terms of the effectiveness of data communication. However, the state of awareness is not followed by the practice of daily service. Social media are neglected in it. Perhaps the use of social media for communication purposes depends on the police having a proper understanding of how social networks, interest groups and community organisations function (Fielding, 2023). Then again, due to the nature of this type of media and especially its interactivity, there are also concerns on the audience side about lack of access, bureaucracy and lack of trust in the police's knowledge of social media (Howlings, Solymosi, 2023, p. 25).

By reliably providing journalists and, consequently, readers, listeners, viewers or users of Internet media with verified news, press officers can support the effectiveness of the communication process and create a positive image of their formation. Training and an efficient internal communication system in the police should serve this purpose. Meanwhile, a study of recognition and readership among officers of periodicals addressed to them showed little interest in the message conveyed by professional publications. They are more often read by civilian and police office employees than by other officers' (Łaski, 2021, p. 157). This points to internal communication as one sphere for further media studies and, at the same time, an area that requires intervention for police information policy managers.

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