

The Role of Communication Professionals in Sports Organizations: where are we?

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ABSTRACT: *In spite of the importance of their missions, the total lack of research and the opacity (from a communication point of view) of the National Sports Federations in Portugal led researchers to focus their attention on them. Directing their interest in these specific kind of organizations enabled to fulfill a double mission, understand how the civil society organizations see Public Relations (PR) functions and simultaneously understand how sports organizations tend to consider the scope of the PR professionals (L'Etang, 2013). From a research design perspective the approach taken in the empirical study that is being presented here, is included in the framework of what is, in general, designated as a mixed methodology of sequential explanation (Creswell, 2014). The study highlights the lack of a consistent work in the communication area as well as the total absence of any kind of a strategic thinking when communication aspects are being considered, in the great majority of the sports federations in Portugal. The PR (communication) professionals seem to be seen only as performing operational tasks that do not belong to the realm of the strategic thinking of these organizations. Moreover, the understanding of what belongs to the realm of "communication" or "public relations" seems to have stopped somewhere in the middle of the twentieth century as media relations continue to be the only relevant aspect that is said to be developed.*

KEYWORDS: *Sports Public Relations; Professional Practice; Organizational Contexts; Mixed Methods Research.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

It's quite common nowadays, we would even say trendy, to speak about Sports Public Relations but not exactly in the same sense as it is being presented here. This research is not interested in sport as a medium; we are not speaking about sponsorships, retention or recruitment communication for great international brands, or even about fusion communication. Sport is seen here not as a medium, but as the object of our research.

The specific research question that this paper addresses may be summarized as an interrogation about the role that the Public Relations (communication) professionals are called to fulfill in non-for-profit sports institutions. The object of the research that is being presented here are the Portuguese sports federations. Do the communication professionals have technical, tactical and strategic responsibilities in the Portuguese sports federations? (Dozier, 1992) How do these organizations understand the concepts of "communication", "corporate communications" or Public Relations? Are Public Relations still understood as a function that belongs exclusively to the realm of the private companies (for-profit sector)? Under the umbrella concept of strategic responsibilities the authors have considered aspects as the definition of the communication priorities in a strategic and planned way, the management of the institutions reputation or the capacity to determine the style and the tone of the communications throughout the organization. Questions as the existence of a media relations plan or a risk and crisis communication plan were also addressed. Belonging to the realm of the tactical level communication programs that have some kind of continuity were considered, as well as, proactive actions. Under the idea of a more operational approach we've considered aspects that have to do with events and actions that are dealt in a merely responsive or casuistical way and all the technical and administrative Public Relations work as the elaboration of promotional materials, the managing of websites or writing media releases.

The International Sports Federations are international non-governmental organizations recognized by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) that are responsible for regulating, promoting and developing one or more sports at a global level. They have their counterparts in the national sports federations and in general, both at a national and an international level, when representing Olympic sports, have their statutes, practices and activities conform with the Olympic Charter. In the case of some mind sports as some authors call them, like chess or draughts, for instances, they are recognized as sports by the IOC in spite of not being Olympic sports. Today, as never before, another group of sports have emerged: those that are usually considered as lifestyle or adventures sports. Maybe that one of the most famous sports from this group is surf already accredited for the

2020 Games in Tokyo. According to the Portuguese Institute of Sports and Youth, the entity of the Portuguese Government that regulates sports activities, there are, in Portugal, fifty-six (56) recognized national sports federations from which 24 represent non-Olympic sports.

II. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

From a research design viewpoint this approach is included in what we may call a pragmatic perspective of investigation. The foundations of this vision of the world find their greatest expression in the work of three philosophers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Pierce, James and Dewey. From these authors we must essentially retain the idea that any study occurs at a certain historical moment, in a certain geographical and political situation, in a certain context. It is also important to understand that the whole research design emerges from the many problems, which both the organizations and the researchers are confronted with. Another feature of the pragmatist worldview is its concern with the application of research results. One of the words we hear most often in the context of this theoretical paradigm is that of consequence; how our research will impact the context, how we will be able to help find solutions for the problems detected. Contrary to other perspectives, some methods of analysis are not privileged here before others, as for example in the case of the positivist school where total preference is given to quantitative methods. If you want we can say that the most important thing is how we cut the problem, how we try to collect as much information as possible in order to understand, in the best possible way, the whole situation.

The design of this study emerged from the total lack of knowledge that the different actors have - from the sports federations themselves to the Portuguese Olympic Committee, from the communication professionals to communication researchers - about communication processes, about the role of communication professionals - if they exist - in these institutions, or even how in these organizations is understood what fits under the leverage of the vague and polysemous concept of Public Relations or "organizational communication". In the framework of what is, in general, designated as a mixed methodology of sequential explanation (Creswell, 2014) in a first moment quantitative methods were used to collect information concerning descriptive aspects of the organizations. Afterwards, and in order to get a deeper understanding of these organizations, researchers moved to a qualitative approach.

The 56 federations were contacted both by phone and by email. Four of these federations do not appear as existing in any of the addresses (postal and electronic) indicated. Of the 52 that the researchers were able to contact, only 32 agreed to be interviewed for this study. To gather the data, interviews were conducted, in person, in all the sports federations surveyed (32). The interviews were carried out, always by the same researcher, to the person in charge of communication or the person considered by the federations in charge of that sector in their respective organizations. In the absence of who corresponded to one of these descriptions, the person indicated in the organizations was interviewed. According to the existence, or not, of communication (PR) professionals and (or) of formal communication structures, as sections or departments, the interviews were exclusively of a semi structured type (pre-planned) or these were supplemented with informal interviews to actors not necessarily identified in the first moment but that, for example, are responsible for the production of supporting and dissemination materials in the framework of some sports projects or events (Berger, 2014). Interviews enabled the researchers to gather new information as well as to validate already collected information through other sources such as the documentary analysis.

Interviews were the research method chosen as they are a useful form of data collection allowing the exploration of the perspectives and perceptions of various groups, of various audiences (Daymon and Holloway, 2002). Researchers used this kind of data collection method precisely in order to gather information about all the aspects concerning Public Relations (communication) work in these organizations. A great interest was put on understanding how these actors saw the role of the communication professionals, their competences and capacities, how decision-making processes were conducted in relation to the design of the Communication strategies (tactics, programs or mere punctual actions) as well as, to the development of specific communication instruments for different publics.

The collected data were analyzed with the help of a qualitative classifying (this notion is preferred to the one of coding as this is a qualitative study) analysis procedure. The method used was the qualitative thematic analysis, since it allows to develop a systematic description of the material under examination, through its association with categories. The main purpose was to reduce and shape the material in order to be able to interpret it and afterwards, to share it. As Seidman (2013) has put it "(...) in reducing the material interviewees have begun to analyze, interpret and make meanings of it". Researchers read and transcribed the interviews and afterwards classified it according to the research objectives.

In this research, the organizational categories (or topics) were constructed taking into account the literature review and all the data collected, that is, the content of the interviews carried out and previously transcribed. Researchers chose a strategy that combines the knowledge acquired, in this case information collected and analyzed in the literature review, and in the previous documentary analysis, as well as the data

collected in the interviews. The main aspect in qualitative analysis is not to count a certain occurrence but to arrange information in topics that enable researchers to separate the material bearing on a given topic from other data and compare different positions from different organizations (Maxwell, 2014). In order to be able to organize and interpret the data six main topics were used: a) PR or Strategic Communications Plans are designed yearly according to the organization strategic plan; b) a scientific approach to communication is taken (example: environmental scan, research and analysis); c) evaluation of the communication strategies/tactics/instruments for the prosecution of the organizations aims; d) planification and development of strategies/tactics/plans according to publics and strategic aims (example: existence of a crisis communication plan or a sponsoring plan); e) planified definition of strategic publics (example: employee relations, media relations, communication with athletes); f) existence of actions / tools and instruments (example: events, press releases, social media).

III. FINDINGS, DATA ANALYSIS and INTERPRETATION

It's relevant to highlight that from the 24 sports federations that weren't available to take part in the qualitative research only 5 represent sports, or groups of sports, that belong to the Olympic Games, namely: the karate, badminton, shooting, modern pentathlon and equestrian federations. After all efforts made by the research team to interview all the sports federations and due to time constraints, the decision to work with the 32 organizations who accepted to participate in the study, was made. After the documental analysis that took place in October 2017, all the interviews took place between the 2nd November 2017 till the 30th January 2018. During February they were all transcribed and the data analyzed.

Considering the aim of this research, first of all the size of these organizations was studied, considering, on the one hand, the number of employees and on the other the number of federated athletes in each sport discipline. With regards to the number of employees, half of the sports federations have between 1 and 9 employees; 6 of them between 10 and 19 employees and 3 have between 20 and 29 employees. 4 have more than 30 employees and only one sport federations has more than 100 employees, the Portuguese Football Federation.

Being the purpose of this study to understand the role of the communication professionals in the sports federations in Portugal, it was essential to know who performed the role of Public Relations in the organization. From the 32 sports federations in the study, 18 have a "Communication / Public Relations" department and 14 don't have any structure or specific employee to manage the communication issues. Under this broad designation we accepted all the structures that were presented as dealing with Public Relations issues or themes as they are usually understood in this area of research (Wilcox et al., 2006, L'Étang, 2013).

Focusing on those organizations who have a specific communication department, only one has an employee with higher education degree in Public Relations – the Portuguese Basketball Federation. In the majority of the organizations the employees who are part of the Public Relations department have academic training on communication sciences generic disciplines. Moreover, 23,53% of these professionals don't have any specific training in communication. On the other hand, there is a relevant percentage of them with specific skills in specific areas as audio-visual communication (11,76%), journalism (17,65%) or marketing (17,65%), but not in corporate communication.

The Portuguese Football Federation has 15 people in the Public Relations department and is an exception comparing to all other studied organizations. In 7 of them there is only one person to deal with all issues related to Public Relations, in 4 organizations there are 2 employees in this specific department, 4 of them with 2 people and 6 with 3 employees.

Taking in consideration the high number of organizations that don't have a specific structure to manage the communication functions (43,75%) and also the small size of the majority of the communication teams, the researchers tried to evaluate if the communication function could be performed in outsourcing, totally or partially, as a complement to the in-house work. Here the results showed that the majority of the organizations (63%) don't work in an outsourcing model in what concerns communication and only 9% hire suppliers regularly in this area. Additionally, 28% of the sports federations interviewed occasionally hire these kind of external services, in a very punctual way, and specially when they have to deal with international events.

Twenty organizations, when asked directly, said, however, that "communication/public relations" is part of the annual strategic plan, but what seems to happen is that in few cases the communication in the sports federations, is understood as more than having a website or write some press releases. As can be verified by the data collected in this research, just a small exception of these organizations have a clear notion about the role of communication in the organization, as a constitutive role and not merely as discursive one. Only in two or three cases there seems to be a coherent and scientific approach to the communication issues as, for instances, some kind of concern about environment research, stakeholders mapping or finding out the best way to build and manage relationships with their different publics or even with the community.

At this time it could be interesting to share some excerpts of the interviews conducted, that became relevant to the study due to the number of times that were repeated and that allows us to conclude that there is still an instrumental vision of the public relations function in these organizations. In some cases the concept seems to be reduced to the digital context “(...) everything is on our website. Our aim with people is to motivate them to visit our website, that is being updated.” or to information disseminated through the mass media “(...) we need to communicate and inform the public (...) when there are competitions, we always send a press release”.

As in many other organizations, also in the sports federations the importance given to the communication is totally disproportionate from the real importance that they seem to give to it. Then, in a systematic but not detailed way, more results will be introduced. Starting with the communication objectives, when questioned about the communication aims, interviewees put the emphasis on the promotion of the sports discipline and on the increasing number of practitioners.

Many organizations declare: “in fact, our main goal is to promote the sport discipline in the country...and attract more people to this sport, we want to have more people.” This concern is not surprising, as is a requirement from the regulatory body that monitors this sector to all federations with the public utility status to promote the sports discipline and to ensure the participation of the national teams in national and international competitions.

Concerning the communication strategy implementation, only two communication materials are reported by all the organizations in study: the website and the Facebook page. In future researches it would be relevant to analyze what are the objectives of these materials, what is their relevance, with which frequency they are updated and what kind of information is presented. Like in many other organizations, here is also evident the importance given to media relations, from the 32 sports federations that were interviewed, 27 of them declared to do regularly media relations, meaning by that, in general, that they tend to send generalistic press releases whenever there are competitions involving their athletes.

On the other hand, the internal or employee communication is completely ignored by all organizations, once again, with exception to the Portuguese Football Federation. One area that is quite relevant in sports communication, mainly in private sports clubs, is the merchandising area but this aspect seems to have very little importance in the context of the majority of the sports federations. Actually, in terms of communication materials, only the digital media, namely the websites and Facebook pages, as well as the rollups and the leaflets appear to be used and thought as informative or communication instruments by the great majority of the organizations that have been interviewed in the context of this study.

The researchers tried also to understand in a detailed way the issue of the public/stakeholders definition, as well as the research and evaluation of communication processes, nevertheless after the interview content analysis it was only possible to highlight that there seems to exist a very tenuous understanding of the concepts of “publics” or “stakeholders” and the ideas of research or evaluation are no more than embryonic ideas in two or three organizations and with no expression in all of the rest. One of the sports federations stated: “Recently we created a media relations office to manage media relations and we want to communicate not only with the federated athletes, but also to inform the general public. As we intend to increase the number of federated athletes, we need to communicate with everyone.” It is possible to identify in this answer an intuition that much more is needed in this level, but in an amateur or not so professional way. We moved from a limited group of people to an “everyone” perspective or as we use to refer to an intention to reach the “general public”. There is an absence of basic concepts and notions about Public Relations or Communication and an inability from the sports federations to identify and to define in a strategic way the preferential groups of stakeholders.

Notions about research and how to reach the main publics through specific messages, seems to be out of the interviewees vocabulary. This is only one of the features that point to the instrumental notion of communication held by organizations targeted in this study. It does not seem to exist any strategic thinking or efforts in terms of research and analysis, a basic requirement when we want to have more than a mere technical work in Public Relations.

With regards to the specific areas or fields of Public Relations, only 4 of the 32 organizations invest in sponsorship or patronage. Maybe this is the most unexpected result in the research. One organization even said: “We made lots of investments in this area, but we are kind of hopeless due to the number of negative answers that we had. We tried to change something and improved the institutional documents, we even hired external services to look for sponsors, but it isn't easy. Even with a segmentation of the sponsors we had no success.”

When asked about who is the person responsible for the media relations, half of the organizations answered that it is the responsibility of the communication department/structure. The same happens when we asked who was in charge of managing the social media and the website; 65% of the sports federations said this was a role of the communication department.

Although, when questioned about the existence of a risk/crisis communication plan, 19 of the organizations said that they didn't have a plan in this area and two of the organizations said that they were still defining this plan. Here it's also relevant to refer one specific case, where an interviewee said: "The plan exists in my head. One day, when I have time for it I will write it down, but prior to it, I have many other things to do. More important things to do."

In general terms, we can observe that while sports federations can define in their plans, what we could call communication actions, a true strategic planning of communication, or a true understanding of the concept of "communication" or PR, is not a reality in these organizations. The notion of "communication" that we find in these institutions, is all about dissemination of information and media relations. Regarding this diffusion function, it is maintained especially in the importance given to a presence on the web, although in most of cases, as merely informative.

The few organizations that have press offices or a professional with PR training, are those that not only understand better the potentialities of a better Public Relations strategic plan but those that also note the lack of specific budgets for communication. A very illustrative example of this reality is the testimony of one of the entities interviewed: "Our department works hard in communication of events, international events organized by us. In these cases, we have some tools that are used by external services, since for this type of events there are other sources of funding and of course we have more resources to work with. If we had more resources on a day-to-day basis, we could do more. "

We realized how far we are from being able to say that PR is a regular presence in the world of sports. The prevailing vision is that of promotional activities, clearly instrumental, and very far from a vision of communication as an essential dimension, or a constitutive one, of these organizations. Even if in recent years almost all the interviewed federations started to have an online presence, we are however confronted with a more or less amateur way of doing digital communications. The football sports federation is the only real exception to this scenario, but even here we can still agree with L'Etang that within the sports field "a limited notion of the scope of PR tends to dominate" (L'Etang, 2013, p. 168).

Among the 32 sports federations interviewed in this research project, we would like to highlight three: Football, Surf and Padel, because, in one way or another, each one of these organizations emerge as a special case that deserves particular attention.

Let's start with the one that has the most impact in terms of the number of people employed: 100. Only in their press office do they have more employees than the vast majority of the other federations. Actually 62.5% of the federations have less than 15 employees, which is the number of professionals working only in the press office of the Portuguese Football Federation. With regard to the number of federated athletes, the Portuguese Federation has more than 170,000 athletes. Note that the second federation in number of federates, has less than a third of this number. This federation is also distinguished by other funding sources, since only 1% of its budget comes from public financing. The remaining 99% come mainly from sponsorships and television broadcasting rights. The fact of having more than 100 employees, can justify the fact of being positioned as an exception in what refers to investments in internal communication, with an intranet as the pillar of that same communication. In terms of communication actions, the interviewee highlighted media relations and also the commitment to social media, special as a way to be able to have a direct contact with the public, without the intermediation of the formal media.

A different reality is what is experienced in the Portuguese Federation of Padel, newly created, that celebrated its first anniversary in May 2018. Despite the few months of activity, this organization has more than 4,500 federated athletes and already has three people working in the Press Office, a number that surprised us compared to other federations that are much older. This is a young organization that, not having yet, due to its recent creation, the possibility of benefiting from public funds such as those attributed annually by the Portuguese Institute of Sport and Youth, has bet a lot on its private financing sources, namely: the income earned in the games or another type of sports events and in the leasing of padel tennis courts, without neglecting other more promotional aspects, such as the sale of advertising space or sponsorships. In collaboration with local clubs, a little around the country, they have built tracks for this sport and multiplied the number of practitioners of all ages. This federation emerges as a special case due to its capacity to get funding from private sources as well as the importance given by its directors to issues as sponsorships or digital communications. This might be due to a more business driven approach that this Federation has been taken in accordance, for instances, to some of its homologous as, for example, the Spanish padel federation. What many consider as the sport of the moment, a trendy sport, is clearly a sport that can be considered as lifestyle sport, but that contrary to the generality of these sports, is likely to be practiced in urban areas, as it is not expensive, or need large relocations around the world, such as surfing.

The surf federation is the third organization that deserves some special remarks. Surf has been considered Olympic and will take part, for the first time, at the 2020 Olympic Games, at a moment were Portugal has begun to be recognized worldwide as a destination that offers unique conditions for surfing. In

agreement with the results of this work, it becomes relevant to make some considerations about the content of the interview that took place in the Portuguese Surf Federation. With 29 years of activity and 2,500 federated athletes, a small number in our perspective, taking into account the facts presented above, the federation has begun to gain prominence in the Portuguese news scene. The head of the organization recognizes the lack of investment in a more planned communication. The lack of budget has made it difficult to be able to have a press officer, and hasn't made it possible for the federation to focus in other aspects beyond the promotion of sporting events. This is however a special case where the organization recognizes both the need of a better understanding of the role of a communication professional as well as already feeling the need to have one among its employees.

IV. FINAL REMARKS

Even though we agree with Seideman (2013) that compliance is needed due to uncertainty both of the results the researchers have arrived to, as well as the way they are being shared, it seems important to reflect upon the fact of such a small presence of communication, Public Relations, professionals in the sports federations as well as in general in the Portuguese NGO in Portugal (cf. Eiró-Gomes and Neto, 2017). Moreover it seems that it is not only a question of having or not employees that are experts in the communication field, but a lack of relevance that communication seems to have in these organizations. It would not be a social problem if these institutions, in the case of the research that is being presented here, responsible for the promotion of sports among the Portuguese population, that are seen as having public utility, and, as so, receive public funding were fulfilling their missions. The point is precisely that they've shared some of their problems and worries and in general they have to do with aspects that if there was not a lack of understanding of the role of the Public Relations functions could be, at least, partially overcome.

The organizations studied have a very instrumental idea of the Public Relations (corporate communications) field. To be fair to the results we must say that, in general, for these organizations communication is no more than reporting. Under the concept of Public Relations, or of Corporate Communications or even of Organizational or Institutional Communication, or "communication management" concepts that we don't feel the need to define in their specificities for the sake of the argument being made, we find a great number of functions that - without intending to be exhausting - we'd like to enounce: monitor the public opinion, manage the organization reputation, organizational communication in strict sense, financial communication, employees and other collaborators communication, suppliers communication and other stakeholders communication, public affairs, governmental and supra governmental relations, advocacy and lobby, media relations, social media management, risk and crisis communication, public interest communication or communication for the social change, community relations, and of course, it goes without saying all the tactics, programs, campaigns, actions that belong to the realm of the quoted areas as well as the unique area that seems to be represented in the organizations under study, the divulgation or reporting area, or as it is usually understood the aspects that in the Public Relations work is considered as technical or administrative (White and Mazur, 1995; Cutlip et al., 1999; Tench and Yeomans, 2006; Wilcox et al., 2006; Cornelissen, 2008; Eiró-Gomes and Nunes, 2012 and 2013; L'Étang, 2013).

As it has been defended (Eiró-Gomes, 2006) it is mandatory that in the civil society organizations the role and scope of the Public Relations professionals should be understood. It seems that these professionals are always seen as belonging to the realm of the for-profit enterprises and don't seem to fit in the mind setting of the non for profit organizations. As bridge builders, as mediators, as relationships constructors the communication professionals might have big ideas to offer better solutions to some of the problems felt by these organizations as well as fulfill some of the wishes that have been expressed during the interviews with the researchers. The community relations is always one of the most quoted worries among the civil society organizations (not-for-profit and non-governmental entities) and the sports federations are no exception, but it seems that it never occurred to its directors that this is a main area of activity for the communication professionals be we speaking about real or virtual, local or global, communities. Even if the majority of these federations might not know what is at stake when speaking about managing the relationships with their stakeholders, about being able to have a voice and identity in the public spheres, to use the words of L'Étang (2013) some, however, have expressed their worries about the adequacy of the messages, the need to have outreach programs, to engage schools and other stakeholders in order to fulfill their mission as sports promoters, to manage in a better way their relations with government, both at local and national levels, as well as to be able to find financial resources beyond public (governmental) support.

At the end of this article maybe we should - as researchers, as professors, as public relations professionals - following Muniz Sodr  (2014), ask about how and why is the concept of "communication" one of the most used and less conspicuous concepts in our contemporaneity. The conceptual ambiguity as well as the proliferation of designations that seem to represent more or less the same professional practices, a complete lack of definition of professional competences as well as a lack of understanding of the social relevance of the Public

Relations professional continue to be pervasive in the non for profit sector in Portugal (Eiró-Gomes and Neto, 2017). If the authors of this study haven't managed to find great ideas they have, at least, fulfilled some of the desiderata of the pragmatist approach to research that is to be able to affect in a positive way the object of their research. Bridges have been built between academia and some of the main actors in the civil society organizations in Portugal both at the development and cooperation area (Neto et al., 2017) as well as in the field of sports federations. Some important issues have been highlighted with this research, and some solutions have already been offered. Internships for communication students are being promoted as well as meetings with the sports federations fomenting a better understanding of the communication professionals functions and social role have been organized. At last, it might be relevant to remember, using Wolton (2009 and 2015) words, that information is a word that we use to speak about the message, "communication" is the concept we use when we want to refer to the relationship.

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