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# The Turncoat Phenomenon: Role Conceptions of PR Practitioners Who Used To Be Journalists

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## ABSTRACT

For a long time, Dutch parliamentary journalists have shown an interest in migrating to the “other side” and becoming political PR professionals or spokespersons. The Dutch term used by journalists for colleagues who make this switch is “overloper” (turncoat). It is a term with a clear negative connotation, which says a lot about how journalists view the field of public relations. The relationship between journalism and public relations has received much academic attention, revealing a rather strong antagonism. Research also shows an increased blurring of boundaries between the two professions. However, there is little research on the lived experience and role conceptions of former journalists who now work in public relations. For our study, we interviewed eleven “Turncoats”. Our research focussed on their perception of their past profession as journalist, their motivation to switch to public relations and their views on the relation between public relations and journalism. We found that both intrinsic and extrinsic motives played a role in their career switch. Most notably they construct a permeable boundary by importing journalistic skills and roles in their new profession. They also have clear opinions on what those boundaries should be and are critical about the current state of journalism.

## KEYWORDS

Political journalists;  
journalism; public relations;  
spokespersons; boundaries;  
motivation; role conception

## Introduction

It is not uncommon for journalists to decide—at a certain point in their career—to become a PR practitioner, information manager or spokesperson. In the Netherlands, where 20% of the PR practitioners are former journalists, the Dutch term used by journalists for colleagues who make this professional career switch is “overloper”, which means traitor, defector or turncoat. It is a term with a clear negative connotation, which says a lot about how journalists view the field of public relations.

This particular phenomenon of “Turncoats” in journalism is not new, but has been largely ignored; only recently has it received some attention from journalism studies scholars (i.e., Fisher 2014, 2017; Viererbl and Koch 2019). We use the term Turncoats as a

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shorthand for this particular group of professional boundary crossers and “migrators” (Palm and Sandström 2014). Not because we endorse the negative connotation, but because the negative connotation and discourse surrounding the Turncoats informs our research as well as research questions.

The phenomenon of Turncoats is set against the backdrop of two professions that are to a certain extent mutually exclusive and—at the same time—mutually dependent. They are deemed mutually exclusive since journalists have to contribute to the “public duty” which journalism performs in a democratic society, whereas PR practitioners have to represent their client’s particular interests (Obermaier and Koch 2015). These two roles are predominantly portrayed as antithetical (McNair 2004; Salter 2005; Shin and Cameron 2005; Moloney 2006; Moloney, Jackson, and McQueen 2013). At the same time, PR practitioners and spokespersons possess inside information that journalists want and need, while journalists (still) have the power to frame and disseminate this information to a large public. This makes them mutually dependent (Larsson 2009; Macnamara 2014, 2016).

In light of these two divergent viewpoints, it is not surprising that the perception of their relationship is largely normative and oscillates between mutual trust and distrust. In this normative framework, PR practitioners are usually perceived as the bad guys, reigning over the “Dark Side” (McCrystal 2008; Macnamara 2012, 2014). No wonder, as the discourses surrounding this relationship are to a large extent dominated by journalism scholars who work with idealized conceptions of journalism and mainly focus on the perception of journalists rather than on the point of view of PR professionals (Macnamara 2014; Fisher 2014).

Their research reveals how journalists perceive themselves vis-à-vis PR practitioners. Quite dominant is the “discourse of denial” (Macnamara 2014, 2016). Journalists deny or rarely acknowledge the influence public relations has on their media content, although research has shown that between 30 and 80% of media content is sourced from or significantly influenced by public relations (Sallot and Johnson 2006; Davies 2008; Reich 2010; Macnamara 2014, 2016; Koch, Obermaier, and Riesmeyer 2017). Even when journalists admit being dependent on PR practitioners, they blame this to a lack of time and other pressures in the newsroom, thus viewing themselves as victims. This decrease in journalistic autonomy is, of course, problematic in the light of the public duty of journalism, which adds to the journalists’ negative perception of public relations.

Although the relationship between the two professions is dominated by this antagonistic frame and can at best be described as a love-hate relationship, for some journalists public relations is an attractive option to turn to at a certain moment in their career. This border crossing is not appreciated by everyone, the sentiment being that as a journalist you are not supposed to switch sides to join “the enemy” and take “the Judas silver of a subsidized pen” (DeLorme and Fedler 2003, 11). To quote Fisher: “Once [journalists] crossed-over the boundary to public relations they could be accused of betraying the faith, giving away trade secrets and using their journalism skills ‘against journalism’” (Fisher 2014, 101).

Given this normative perception and discourse, why would journalists want to cross the line? How do Turncoats perceive their (former) professional ideology of journalism? And does crossing over affect their perception of the relationship between journalists and PR practitioners? It is relevant to research this phenomenon, as it can help us understand the (changing) relationship between both professions beyond the dominant normative

paradigm. In this exploratory study, we want to research what motivates journalists to switch to public relations and how they relate to both professional fields.

Our focus is mainly on (Dutch) parliamentary journalists who have become political communication practitioners, be it as spokespersons, media advisers or information managers. Political PR is an important field to study in light of its role in democratic society. Additionally, parliamentary journalists who have become part of the field of political public relations form a special group of Turncoats, because even though they have switched sides, they generally remain in the same institutional location in The Hague, the seat of Dutch parliament, and work the same “beat” as their former colleagues. One day they are a political journalist, confronting and dealing with spokespersons of ministries, the next day they are a spokesperson themselves, often for a ministry they used to cover as a journalist. Thus, they have literally “switched sides”. This makes them an intriguing group to study.

## From Journalism to Public Relations

Changing professions and moving from journalism to public relations is, to a certain degree, not a very big step when considering the skill set that is necessary for performing well in both fields. As Koch and Obermaier (2014) note, the skills required of journalists—writing and reading comprehension, a news sense, critical thinking, and knowledge of the structures, routines, and selection criteria in news rooms—are also important for PR practitioners. Former journalists not only know how to produce noteworthy press releases and other PR material, they also often have contacts with journalists that can be very useful in generating successful public relations. Hence they are sought after by PR departments and companies (Sinaga and Callison 2008; Fröhlich, Koch, and Obermaier 2013; Moloney, Jackson, and McQueen 2013; Macnamara 2014; Fisher 2014).

Switching from journalism to public relations is not a recent phenomenon (DeLorme and Fedler 2003). But it is unclear how many journalists have migrated and whether their numbers are increasing, as research on this topic is fragmented. What is clear is that there are large national differences, even amongst countries with similar journalistic cultures. In Finland, 43% of the PR professionals work or have previously worked in journalism (alongside with doing PR work), but only 6% of them used to work solely in journalism before switching to public relations (Niskala and Hurme 2014). In Sweden, a survey of communication officers showed that 25% of the respondents have a background in journalism (Palm and Sandström 2014). And in the Netherlands, a survey conducted among Dutch PR professionals revealed that 20% of the PR practitioners are former journalists (Corner-Stone 2018).

There is little research on the lived experience of former journalists who now work in public relations, but there are a lot of assumptions about why they make this career move. Generally, it is assumed that they do this for financial reasons and better career perspectives, especially as the working conditions in journalistic media have been deteriorating in the past two decades (Fengler and Russ-Mohl 2008; Valentini 2014; Jackson and Moloney 2016). What the scattered empirical research reveals is that a combination of extrinsic and intrinsic motives seem to play a role (Viererbl and Koch 2019).

Extrinsic motives are better pay, more enjoyable and stable working conditions, and the possibility to better complement a personal and family life (Mellado and Hanusch 2011;

Valentini 2014). These reasons seemed certainly prevalent for American journalists who left their jobs in the late 80s: a study by Fedler, Buhr, and Taylor (1988) showed that half of the journalists who changed careers to move to public relations did so primarily because of low salaries and bad working conditions. Thirty years later, highly competitive working situations, difficult wage conditions and poor career opportunities were found to be important factors that motivated German journalists to move to public relations (Viererbl and Koch 2019). And in her qualitative research on Australian journalists who changed professions and became parliamentary media advisers, Fisher (2014) cites financial reasons as well as a solution to personal and family issues as motives for the transition—at least for some of the former journalists. But other journalists made the leap from journalism to parliamentary media advising because they were restless and looking for a change in direction.

That brings us to the intrinsic motivations, which generally have to do with the intrinsic qualities and attractions of the new job. Fisher found that a sense of curiosity about the inner workings of government and politics played an important role for the former journalists who became parliamentary media advisers. Other researchers, such as Koch and Obermaier (2014), discovered that half of the freelance journalists who also work in public relations do so because they find PR work pleasurable (Mathisen 2018). For these journalists public relations means a change and a challenge. Likewise, journalists who have become PR practitioners find their new job interesting, with a lot of variation (Viererbl and Koch 2019).

## **The Ideology and Role Conceptions of Journalists and PR Practitioners**

Both professions—journalism and public relations—see it as their goal to disseminate accurate, clear, true and prompt information, but their professional ideology and role conceptions differ (Valentini 2014; Viererbl and Koch 2019). Much has been written about the professional ideology and identity of journalists. The definition of journalism and its professional practices are in flux (Grubenmann and Meckel 2017), but there is a recognition that, particularly in western democracies, a set of shared values form the occupational ideology of journalism. Deuze (2005) described these principles in terms of five discursively constructed “ideal-typical values”: public service, objectivity, autonomy, immediacy, and ethics. This ideology of journalism serves as the “social cement of the professional group of journalists” (Deuze 2005, 455; Schudson and Anderson 2008; Spence et al. 2011); it holds journalism together in an increasingly changeable environment and distinguishes journalists from other professions. Journalists are conceived to be members of the idealized Fourth Estate and have a role as democratic “watchdogs”. This normative conceptualization has been criticized on various levels (e.g., Zelizer 2013, 2017), as the range of journalistic roles is much broader, certainly in non-Western societies. Hanitzsch and Vos (2018) for instance differentiate between 18 roles, which they cluster into six functions, ranging from critical-monitorial roles, in which journalists act as detectives and watchdogs, and informational-instructive roles, where the main goal is to inform the public, to collaborative-facilitative roles, whereby journalists act as partners of the government. Still, the dominant discourse in the Western world is that the role of journalists is to inform the public objectively, and in doing so they should be autonomous and free from governmental or other interests (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2014; Hanitzsch 2007).

PR practitioners, in contrast, do not primarily serve the interests of the public or society at large but have to heed and serve the interests of their employers or clients (Fröhlich, Koch, and Obermaier 2013; Koch and Obermaier 2014; Macnamara 2016). PR professionals see it as one of their main roles to cultivate and sustain strategic relationships with diverse publics and stakeholders in support of an organization's positive reputation (Neijens and Smit 2006; Valentini 2014). PR practitioners also have a more fluid and hybrid professional identity than journalists (Mellado and Hanusch 2011).

In view of these differing role conceptions, Viererbl and Koch (2019) researched inter-role conflicts experienced by former journalists who now work in public relations. Their study shows that some feel that the journalistic skills of critical research and thinking conflict with the goals of public relations. At the same time, Viererbl and Koch found a hybridization of the professional self-concept of the former journalists in which their journalistic role perception dissolves over time. Interestingly enough, once journalists have made the transition to public relations, it seems to affect their views on journalism and journalism's professional values. Fisher (2014, 2017) found that some of the former journalists in their new position as parliamentary media adviser were shocked by the poor standards of reporting practices they encountered. This challenged their idealized role conception of journalists as truth-seeking, objective professionals. In reaction, the former journalists revised their commitment to the concept of the "public's right to know", a value connected to the public service ideal of journalism. Not only did they become more cautious and less trusting of journalists, they were also less willing to disclose information, even if the information was in the public's interest, for fear of inaccurate reporting.

## The Relationship Between Journalism and Public Relations

The relationship between journalism and public relations has been examined in over 200 studies, but a conclusive or coherent picture of the complex interaction between both professions is difficult to draw (Koch, Obermaier, and Riesmeyer 2017). Many studies show that there are negative perceptions on both sides. PR practitioners are critical of journalism practice and journalists are especially negative about public relations: they consider PR practitioners to be manipulative, one-sided and unethical (Charron 1989; DeLorme and Fedler 2003; Sallot, Steinfatt, and Salwen 1998; Sallot and Johnson 2006; Niskala and Hurme 2014; Fredriksson and Johansson 2014; Palm and Sandström 2014). The studies also reveal that journalists generally have a limited understanding of what PR practitioners do, equating public relations with media relations, which forms only a (small) part of the job responsibilities of PR professionals (Macnamara 2014; Verčič and Colić 2016). Other research implies that the two groups of professionals share similar values and that their mutual differences are not fundamental (Neijens and Smit 2006; Yun and Yoon 2011; Mellado and Hanusch 2011; Valentini 2014). Nonetheless, the relations fluctuate from adversarial and antagonistic to co-operative and symbiotic (Fisher 2014).

The love-hate aspect of the relationship hinges partially on the growing dependency of journalists on the information that PR practitioners provide, due to the downsizing of newsrooms in combination with the pressure on journalists to provide more media content on various platforms (Lewis, Williams, and Franklin 2008). But it also has to do with the fact that journalists evaluate personal relationships with PR practitioners they

deal with on a daily basis more positively than the relationship between the two professional fields in general (Sallot and Johnson 2006; Larsson 2009; Koch, Obermaier, and Riesmeyer 2017).

What seems clear is that over the years the adversarial stance has diminished somewhat and the professional appreciation of each other's roles has increased (Koch, Obermaier, and Riesmeyer 2017). The internet and social media have, amongst others, changed the role and position of journalism as well as public relations (Fengler and Russ-Mohl 2008; Dinan and Miller 2009; Lloyd and Toogood 2015; Macnamara 2014, 2016). Disseminating information through a variety of media channels is no longer the exclusive domain of journalists. The increased blurring of the division between public relations and journalism seems to affect the way these professions perceive themselves and the other (Valentini 2014; Macnamara 2014, 2016).

The scant research available on former journalists who now work as PR professionals gives little insight into how they perceive the relationship between journalism and public relations. But it does show that their perception of public relations changes after their move, in part because they still use journalism skills as well as its ethical codes to guide their current work. For them, the simple antithetical conceptions of the two professions do not match the reality of practice (Fisher 2014; Sherwood and O'Donnell 2018).

Based on the literature review, four research questions have been formulated for this exploratory study:

RQ 1: What motivated journalists to switch to public relations?

RQ 2: How do Turncoats perceive the professional ideology of journalism and public relations?

RQ 3: What is the role conception of Turncoats?

RQ 4: How do they perceive the relationship between public relations and journalism?

Answering these questions is relevant for understanding this occupational boundary-crossing, the blurring of boundaries between journalism and public relations, and the perception of this transition from the perspective of the Turncoats. It also provides valuable insight and a fresh perspective on the much debated relationship between journalism and public relations.

## Method

In order to answer the research questions about the motivations and perceptions of Turncoats we compiled a dataset of 88 Dutch political PR professionals. All of them have a professional background in journalism and work or have been working as political spokespersons, speech writers or information managers in governmental institutions such as ministries. The dataset was compiled on the basis of an internet search for members of this particular group of PR professionals. We searched for all the information or communication managers and spokespersons who worked at the Dutch ministries and checked their professional resume mainly through LinkedIn and other social media. The dataset of Turncoats we thus compiled consisted of 66% male and 34% female Turncoats; 39% of them previously worked as newspaper journalists, 35% as TV journalists, 15% as journalists at a press agency and 11% as journalists for various other news outlets.



We selected fourteen interview subjects from this dataset. After we conducted about eight interviews saturation was reached and we decided to keep it to eleven interviews. In the compilation of a shortlist of potential interviewees, we mirrored the ratios of the dataset. Accordingly, seven male and four female Turncoats were interviewed of which five previously worked as a newspaper journalist, four as a TV journalist, one worked for a press agency, one (also) as a radio journalist and one worked for a digital born news site. At the moment of the interview, seven of our interviewees were active as spokespersons for ministers or state secretaries and four of them were working as communication advisers, information managers or speech writers at various ministries, although they have been active as spokespersons in the past. Furthermore, the interviewees started their new career at different points in time, ranging from 1989 to 2014, and were chosen proportionally in accordance with the dataset (Table 1).

The interviews were conducted during a period of six months in the summer and autumn of 2017. We contacted the potential candidates via email or directly by phone. A few declined, but most of them were eager to collaborate. In most cases, we met with the interviewees at their offices. On average the interviews lasted between 60 and 80 min. Every interview was recorded with the interviewees' consent. They also signed a letter of informed consent indicating that everything shared in the interviews would be anonymised and used for academic purposes only. This was also meant to prevent socially desirable answers.

The interviews were semi-structured, based on a theoretically informed topic list covering our main themes such as their motives for shifting to public relations, their (previous and current) role conception and their view on the relationship between journalism and public relations. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed. We conducted a qualitative thematic content analysis of the transcripts by open and thematic coding (Braun and Clarke 2006; Boeije 2010). In this article, we focus on the resulting themes directly related to our research questions.

## Main Findings

### Profile

Based on the information we have gathered in our dataset of 88 political spokespersons and information managers who were former journalists, we can draw a general profile of the Turncoats. On average they switched professions during their mid-forties; were

**Table 1.** Respondents' profiles.

Respondent	Gender	Journalistic background	Years worked as journalist	Years working in PR
1	Female	National newspaper	>10	5–10
2	Male	National newspaper	>10	10–15
3	Male	National newspaper	>10	25–30
4	Female	Local newspaper	>10	5–10
5	Male	Local newspaper	>10	25–30
6	Female	Online news organization	<10	5–10
7	Female	National news agency	>10	5–10
8	Male	National TV News	>10	20–25
9	Male	National TV News	>10	15–20
10	Male	National TV Current Affairs	>10	10–15
11	Male	National TV Current Affairs	<10	10–15



active as a journalist for about twelve years; and did not come from one particular medium type. More male journalists (66%) than female journalists (34%) switched professions, but this can be a reflection of the gender imbalance in (political) journalism in general. Research in countries which have a similar journalistic culture, such as Denmark and Germany, has shown that more than two-thirds of the political journalists are male (Van Dalen, De Vreese, and Albaek 2012).

## **Motives**

Previous research shows that both extrinsic and intrinsic motives play a role in the decision to switch from journalism to PR. In our analysis of the interviews, we identified four themes concerning the motives for the transition to public relations: two related to extrinsic motives and two related to intrinsic motives. Amongst the extrinsic motives, we could distinguish a push and a pull factor. The first was represented by the “diminishing quality of journalism” and the second by “being offered the job”. With regard to the intrinsic motives, we also distinguished a push and a pull factor: the longing for a “change of scenery” and aspiration “to look behind the scenes”.

The first extrinsic motive to leave journalism was a combination of deteriorating working conditions and perceived diminishing journalistic quality. For some journalism had become a rush job:

I couldn't do what I would have liked to do anymore [at the news agency]. In the beginning I was still able to write a good background story, but the pressure on the news agency was increasing [...]. You were forced to do your work very fast with little time to interpret or contextualise. Too much of a rush job, quickly churning out articles. It didn't fit me anymore. Fast and dynamic, okay, but I also think it must be thorough. Thorough and good fell victim to the pressures of the market. If you see that deterioration slowly occurring, it is difficult.

The second extrinsic motive was the fact that in many cases the former journalist was approached by a (communication) manager from a particular ministry asking them to apply for a vacant position of spokesperson. Not every potential Turncoat immediately responded with enthusiasm to such a request, but it did make them think about the possibility to work outside of journalism. After repeated requests and due consideration regarding age, regular work hours and more, they ended up responding positively.

With a family it is pleasant to work at more regular times than is usual in parliamentary journalism. In my specific case, it offers the chance to do something else – make a new career move. That is more difficult in journalism.

This last remark brings us to an important intrinsic motive: the feeling that journalism did not offer sufficient career opportunities. As journalists in their early or mid-forties, the interviewees experienced a feeling of stagnation whilst they also felt the need for change and personal growth. They longed for new opportunities and challenges, to learn new skills or apply their skills in different ways. The most important motive for the career switch, according to a former journalist, was: “Something new! I really wanted something different.” As another former journalist, who was 44 years old at the time, remarked: “I was done with journalism, I can pretty much do it, I don't look at it from a fresh perspective anymore.” Consequently being offered the opportunity to switch to the “other side” was a welcome step forward.

I was wondering what my skills really are, and I realized that I had a huge network that I could capitalize on. Then I realized that I wanted to work on the other side; a new challenge. I wanted personal growth.

A second intrinsic motive was the aspiration to look behind the scenes. Almost all journalists we interviewed had been parliamentary or political journalists. Obviously, they had a great interest in the business of politics, but they also took the position of outsiders. As journalists, they would never know exactly what was happening behind the scenes. This sometimes led to wild speculations about the apparent political or strategic deliberations or manipulations that were supposedly taking place behind the closed doors of the ministries.

Substantively it seemed interesting because as a journalist you do not know what is really going on in the engine room. How does it work exactly? Are there all sorts of secrets in that building that they are covering up or is the truth less shocking?

Being given the opportunity to look behind the scenes was therefore often seized with both hands. It gave them the chance to move away from the position of outsider and become insiders.

My principal motive was: for fifteen years I have been seeing what is happening from the outside. I have a lot of contact with organizations and I am very curious about what actually happens inside those organizations.

## Perception of Journalism versus Public Relations

In order to answer our second research question, about how these former journalists perceive the professional ideology of journalism and public relations, we asked the interviewees what they considered to be good, high quality journalism. In other words, what does ideal-typical journalism look like according to the Turncoats?

All of them adhered to the classical journalistic ideology. They all highly valued the journalistic standard that includes values such as providing the public with facts and information, having an investigative mindset and working from an independent position. Most of them also went beyond these expected answers by elaborating on the qualities and attitudes journalists should have. In their view, a good journalist is first and foremost an inquisitive and open-minded person, who is always prepared to ask critical questions and not too easily satisfied with the answers. In addition, he or she should be able to clarify, interpret and contextualize facts and figures, enabling the public at large to understand the complexities of (inter)national politics. Moreover a good journalist, according to the PR professionals, is someone who consults more than two (opposite) sources in order to be able to construct a comprehensive picture of reality. When we asked them what kind of journalist they themselves had been, it came as no surprise that they more or less fitted their own picture of the ideal journalist.

At the time they all loved being a journalist, which generally meant being a news reporter. One of the things they appreciated the most was the autonomy they experienced as journalists.

As a journalist I had a lot of freedom. Obviously, editors demanded things from you, but there was also room to share ideas and develop stories which you initiated yourself. In that sense there is a lot of freedom, also to express your opinion, as long as you're not telling nonsense.

When talking about their lives as journalists, this sense of freedom was often mentioned in conjunction with adjectives such as dynamic, challenging, varied and adventurous.

Nevertheless, the former journalists often used critical terms when elaborating on the state of affairs in journalism (see also below). The Turncoats showed a mixture of compassion and annoyance towards journalists. Their criticism is mainly related to work pressure, which is the result of shrinking newsrooms, less budget and too little time to do the allotted work. The workload has increased, causing journalists to become more hasty in performing their job. As a result, according to the Turncoats, journalism has become more superficial and journalists less inquisitive. Some felt that journalists increasingly have become scoop-hunters to the detriment of investigative and critical in-depth reporting. In their opinion, this shift started when they were still working as journalists and has since gotten worse.

When we asked the interviewees what they considered to be important characteristics of their new profession, relating to their current job, a common thread was that the interviewees generally considered their work at governmental departments to be in the interest of the public and that they were thereby contributing to the general public good, similarly to what they had been doing as journalists. For some, being genuinely interested in the public good made the move from journalism to public relations easier.

You are serving the public interest, I felt that as a journalist as well. Ultimately it's about the public, about the people at home who have a right to know what's going on, that's what we're here for.

There are also several clear differences when comparing journalism to working as a PR professional within a governmental ministry. For one, the interviewees felt that they had more responsibility in their new position. They operate on behalf of their ministry and there is less room to make mistakes, certainly when it comes to dispensing facts and figures. Providing the media or public with insufficient or wrong information can create problems for their minister, who can be called to account by Parliament.

Another major difference is the fact that as a PR professional they find there is a bigger necessity to cooperate with others, especially in comparison with journalism, which is generally perceived to be a profession where one operates individually. The interviewees spend a relatively large amount of time conferring with their colleagues and superiors before an announcement or press release is published, sometimes even testing the information and intended message on focus groups. "All words are weighed carefully", a PR professional noted. "Things are a lot less spontaneous than I thought it would be as a journalist."

But by far the biggest difference, pointed out by virtually all interviewees, is that as PR professionals they serve the interests of their ministry. As one interviewee put it: "You are the eyes and ears of the department, but to the benefit of the department." In that sense, they are guarding the powers that be instead of monitoring those powers. This position is perceived to be fundamentally different from that of a journalist.

The difference is that as a spokesperson you are there primarily to tell the story of the organization you work for, to serve the interests of that organization.

As a consequence, they are less autonomous than they were in their role as journalists. This takes some adjustment.

A journalist is accountable to no one and of course reasonably independent. That is difficult in an organization. You have to learn to deal with that. You have to try to hold on to your independence, but ultimately the minister, the politician decides: this is how we are going to do it.

## Role Conception

When talking about their position and role within their ministries, we found that the interviewees delineated an internal role, having to do with how they operate within their department, and an external role, concerned with providing information to the public and the media. In both roles, their past experience as a journalist comes to good use.

For many, their internal role in many respects does not differ much from their former profession. As an interviewee stated: “I am and remain a journalist”. This has to do with several factors. In the first place, the Turncoats are expected to look at their ministry through the same critical lens as they have done as journalists, constantly questioning things.

Also internally we are outsiders, so to speak. As in: ‘Okay, but why are we doing this?’

This critical stance and their ability to challenge and question proposed policies was according to some interviewees one of the reasons they were asked for the job. And they generally have a large degree of autonomy to ask critical questions.

There is a lot of room to—as I think good Turncoats should—initiate discussions within the organisation.

In the second place their journalistic skills come in handy when searching for facts and background information within their ministry. Governmental departments are complex organizations and it takes skill and expertise to know how to retrieve the right information. At the same time, the Turncoats have the expertise to recognize what type of information is newsworthy and can be turned into a news story.

A good spokesperson is in my opinion also a journalist within his own organization. He searches for news and puts it out there.

Thirdly, since they know how journalists work and how news can be framed, they have the ability to anticipate how the media will cover certain stories.

You always have an antenna for: Is this right? Will it withstand scrutiny? Or will it, if I would write about it as a journalist, cause public outrage?

This strategic insight helps them in providing advice to their minister and colleagues on what to publicize and how to avoid certain pitfalls which might harm the reputation of their department. Their knowledge of journalism practice also means that they know what journalists want. As one PR professional put it: “You know how to keep them happy.” Many interviewees emphasize that not only do they know how the media work, they also take pride in serving the press as best as they can. At the same time, they talk about journalists as “intermediaries” who enable them to bring the message of their department to the general public. In order to control the message and determine the (news) agenda, they have to, in the words of an interviewee, “feed the beast” and make sure journalists are provided with news.

I remain a news broker, where I look at what's on offer, what the demand is and how I can bring everything together. By cultivating my network of journalists I know what they're interested in and then I make a match.

In their external role, certainly, if they are spokespersons or information officers, their task is to some degree similar to that of journalists.

In both functions it is about being able to translate a complex reality in an accessible language that a larger audience can understand and find interesting.

The difference lies largely in the fact that, since they serve the interests of their organization, they are also concerned with the image of their department and its policy and publicity goals. Hence, they focus more on the positive aspects of the information they are providing than they would have as journalists. Many Turncoats stress that the truth can be told in different ways.

My rule is: you should never tell a journalist nonsense, never lie. But you don't always tell the whole story, you focus on the things you want to highlight.

As another interviewee stated: "I am honest, but not always totally complete." On the whole the journalists they deal with understand that as spokespersons they cannot always tell everything they know. But there is an apparent tension between providing information and framing that information in a specific way. Most Turncoats acknowledge that tension, speak about trying to be objective, and at the same time justify the need to (occasionally) frame. They do that by pointing out that journalists also frame and by stressing that other parties involved slant their information.

Reliability is the main resource of the spokesperson. At the same time he has to counterbalance the political powers and other players in the field who flood the press with their version of reality. As a government spokesperson you have to provide a counterweight. That means that sometimes you have to 'counterframe'.

## Relationship Between Journalists and PR Professionals

When it comes to their current perception of the relationship between journalists and PR professionals, it is striking to see, as already stipulated above, how critical most of the interviewees are about the current state of journalism. For one, they criticize the perceived laziness of journalists, commenting on how many of them are satisfied with just getting information from the government websites, more or less copy-pasting the press releases they put out as PR practitioners or accepting and relaying the specific frame they put forward without asking questions. "That's not good journalism", according to an interviewee. They can see that journalists are in a difficult position due to increased competition, time constraints, lack of people and money, and other work pressures, but feel journalists should try harder and not succumb to the need to produce short, snappy productions with sound bytes and a clickable headline.

Often journalists get a few quick quotes from members of Parliament, don't really read the report, add a sentence or two with a reaction, that's it. And then that's their cover story. I'm stunned.

Some Turncoats explain that the more informed and prepared a journalist is and the better his or her questions, the more they are willing to provide background information. As an interviewee stated: “It may be a subconscious thing, but then you have the feeling that you are sparring with someone, that you are on the same level.” At the same time, the PR practitioners are wary of journalists whose article or news item turns out different than what they said it would be, often because copy editors rewrite the headlines or slant the news story. In that sense, there is an element of constant alertness and mistrust towards their former colleagues perceivable among the Turncoats.

This mistrust also continues to play a role on the other side. The Turncoats point out that the generation of “old school” journalists who were extremely critical of journalists who became PR professionals has died out. But they signal that the new generation of journalists, when trained in journalism schools, is still told that spokespersons should be treated as professional liars. This antagonism plays less of a role with the political journalists they deal with on a daily basis—in their case in The Hague, which is the seat of Dutch parliament.

In the daily contact with the journalists in The Hague we have some kind of mutual respect for each other. You are part of the same ecosystem, you eat the same food, you are dependent on each other.

In their role as PR professionals, they are “an accepted and respected necessary evil” for most of the journalists they work with, as one interviewee summarized the relationship. Journalists cannot do without them. As spokespersons, they can provide journalists with information, help them interpret what is going on and give them tips on what to expect and where to look for news. The Turncoats talk in terms of mutual dependency, “wheeling and dealing”, “giving and taking”, being allies and using mutual trust to get things done.

As a journalist I also dealt with spokespersons who gave you things ‘under the table’: a scoop, a bit of gossip, ‘check out this or that’. You get that kind of information if they trust you.

Some take their role as an ally even further and see it as their task to create support and understanding for journalists and journalism’s role in society within their organization. It is interesting to note that their perception of themselves as an ally can also cause internal conflicts, as the Turncoats sometimes feel torn between two loyalties.

Being a spokesperson can often be a lonely occupation within an organization. The journalist sees you as an extension of the system—which the crappy spokespersons are. But they are especially lonely because they are caught in the middle between the journalist who wants to know everything and the organization that says: you can’t say anything.

## Conclusion and Discussion

Our research questions focused on the motivations of former (political) journalists to switch to public relations, their perception of the (professional) ideological differences and similarities between public relations and journalism, their role conception and the perception of the relationship between journalism and public relations.

What the results of this exploratory study show, is that a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motives played a role in the career switch, either as push or pull factors. Contrary

to findings in other research (Koch and Obermaier 2014; Fisher 2014) it should be noted that nobody mentioned better pay as a motive to change professions—most interviewees had well-paid jobs and good employment contracts as political journalists. Some motives for the career switch, such as more enjoyable working conditions, a sense of curiosity and the need for change, have also been mentioned in other research (Mellado and Hanusch 2011; Koch and Obermaier 2014; Fisher 2014; Viererbl and Koch 2019). An important intrinsic motive which our study highlights lies in the fact that journalism did not offer sufficient career opportunities and chances for personal growth. At the same time, the diminishing journalistic quality and increased work pressure generally played a role in the decision of the Turncoats to switch jobs. They lamented the declining time and space—and thus autonomy—to do in-depth journalism when they worked as journalists. The signaled lack of career opportunities and decline of autonomy and in-depth journalism point to critical developments within the news industry that are worth further scrutiny.

That the Turncoats consequently chose to work in a profession which is perceived to be less autonomous than journalism does not seem paradoxical to them. With regard to professional ideology, we conclude that our interviewees construct a permeable or rather “soft” boundary between public relations and journalism by importing or accentuating journalistic skills and values in their job as PR professionals. What they appreciated in their function as journalist was autonomy. This autonomy was rather reduced in their new role as spokespersons. Nevertheless, they make a distinction between their internal role as PR practitioners, in which they experience sufficient freedom of movement and room to express themselves critically—thereby having a large degree of autonomy—and their external role, in which they experience a rather low degree of autonomy. Thus internally they more or less act as they did when they were journalists, externally they take the interests of the department they work for into account. This illustrates the process of hybridization discussed by Viererbl and Koch (2019).

The Turncoats hold back information if they think that it serves the interests of their department. This kind of practice shows how their new position and role conceptions seems to affect the Turncoats’ commitment to the principle of the “public’s right to know”, as Fisher (2017) also pointed out. There is a clear willingness to frame (or counter-frame) information, if needed. In the view of the interviewees this is justified, certainly if it provides a—according to them—necessary balance. In their opinion, this is not only in the interest of their department, but also in the public’s interest.

That they now also serve an organization’s interest is considered to be the biggest and clearest difference between public relations and journalism. In that sense, the Turncoats acknowledge some differences in professional values. At the same time, they accentuate the overlap in professional skills and point out other similarities between both professions, such as contributing to the general public good. Thus, rather than adhering to antithetical conceptions of the two professions and constructing a distinctly different role from journalists (McNair 2004; Moloney 2006; Macnamara 2016), they make a distinction between the variety of roles they have. Internally they perform critical-monitorial roles, externally they have roles which could be equated to the informational-instructive as well as collaborative-facilitative roles of journalists (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018). As such, the “inter-role conflicts” (Viererbl and Koch 2019) get solved by distinguishing between roles, as well as justifying their actions in light of best serving the public’s interest.



Their current relationship with journalism and its values is a complex one. The interviewees are proud of how, with their knowledge of journalism practice, they manage to get the right message across and thereby to a certain degree control the news agenda. Yet at the same time, they are critical of journalists who just copy–paste and publish their press releases and frames without asking questions. This is perceived to be sloppy journalism and all of our interviewees used critical terms when talking about the current state of journalism. This is compliant with the results of the research done by Fisher (2014, 2017), who found that former journalists were shocked by the poor standards of reporting practices they encountered in their position as parliamentary media advisers.

It is striking that Turncoats make the boundaries of journalism permeable and thereby blurry them, but at the same time have clear opinions on what those boundaries and accompanying values should be. Their new professional role is to manage the news, yet they criticize journalists for being “fed” and managed too easily. Indeed, they show greater levels of trust and a larger willingness to help journalists who are better informed and ask critical questions. In that sense, they consider it their role to stimulate “good” journalism and strengthen its position. This, together with their role conception of being internal watchdogs, causes a dual loyalty. Although the Turncoats are part of an organization and heed their interests, they tend to view themselves as outsiders. Instead of having their journalistic role perception dissolve over time (Viererbl and Koch 2019), we found that the Turncoats still adhered to specific journalistic values and roles, be it in a different setting. Even though they jokingly call themselves “Turncoats”, rather than having switched sides, their professional identity is that of a go-between and ally. These findings call for a reevaluation of the normative framing of PR practitioners, notably with respect to Turncoats.

Concerning the study’s limitations, the data is based on the self-reported perceptions of the interviewees. These might have been biased and influenced by the normative discourse surrounding Turncoats and journalists’ negative perception of public relations, causing the PR professionals we interviewed to highlight certain topics and downplay others. This is unavoidably the drawback of interviews as a research method. Additionally, research shows there is a difference between role conception and role enactment (Tandoc, Hellmueller, and Vos 2013), which—applied to the Turncoats—could mean that what they preach is not always what they practice. And finally, an element of self-justification is inevitable when talking about switching careers, which could make the interviewees more liable to critique their former profession and laud their current one. We have tried to minimize these types of distortions by guaranteeing our respondents total anonymity. At the same time, they form part of the discursive repertoire of the Turncoats and as such are part of our study.

Further research is, of course, necessary to see to which extent Turncoats in other fields than politics and governmental organizations, as well as in other countries and journalistic cultures, share the same motives and perceptions. Future research could also focus more on the role Turncoats play in drawing the boundaries between journalism and public relations. In reaction to the ongoing processes of hybridization and convergence it is argued that journalists must establish clear demarcations towards other professions and hybrid forms of journalism (Moloney, Jackson, and McQueen 2013; Fredriksson and Johansson 2014). As Carlson (2016) has pointed out, the “metajournalistic discourse” that constructs meaning around journalism and its larger social place arises from

journalistic as well as non journalistic actors and occurs in journalistic and non journalistic sites. The question is what role PR practitioners have in this metajournalistic discourse and the resulting boundary work, especially if those practitioners are former journalists.

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