

Spokespersons to explain the world: analysis of their relevance, competences and instruction

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Abstract

This research aims to understand the figure of the spokesperson in institutions such as governments and companies, in order to communicate the entities they represent (Rojo, et al., 2020; Capurro et al., 2022;. Bart W. Édes, 2000), and to identify the geographical distribution of universities worldwide that offer specific training in this area, in order to gain insight into the current state of spokesperson training in the field of communication studies and to identify areas that require improvement. The main findings indicate that only 19 universities appearing in the 2023 Times Higher Education rankings, based on their programme offerings, offer courses that touch on facets of spokesperson training, including topics such as communication skills. The majority of these universities are located in the Americas. However, this lack of specific training on the subject should be addressed to produce generations of students capable of assuming the significant communicative responsibility of presentation.

Keywords: *Spokesperson Training, Public Relations Practicioners, University, Education, Master Spokesperson*

1. Introduction

Effective communication is crucial for building trust, managing crises, and maintaining a positive image for public and private organizations. One of the most important aspects of communication is the role of a spokesperson. Regular training is needed for spokespersons, especially the ones from “companies that are at greater risk of facing critical situations (transportation companies, chemicals, oil companies, health)” (García-Santamaría, *et al.*, 2020).

National and supranational governance institutions and private corporations have, for a long time, their spokespersons that lead communication in these organizations. However, despite the critical importance of spokespeople, in the top 100 universities with communication studies, not

much content is taught about this issue. In this article, it is explored the importance of spokesperson, and the needs for training programs to prepare future spokesperson.

In European countries, private corporations and private universities endorse and promote all kinds of courses to train spokespersons for companies and institutions. Professional associations also promote courses to provide this type of training, for example, Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA) from the United Kingdom. There are industry associations and organizations that offer guidance and best practices for spokespersons.

The majority of these organizations, like Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) and International Public Relations Association (IPRA), provide a Code of Ethics that outlines ethical principles and guidelines for public relations professionals, including spokesperson. Therefore, it is clear that there is a gap in the public university system that social reality is trying to fill with tailor-made training, of various durations, contents and trainers, and also of different credibility.

For all these reasons, the main objective of the research is to understand the role exerted by the spokesperson in organizations, analyse the content related to spokesperson training in the curricula of the top 100 universities with communication studies, according to the THE Ranking (2023), and understand the view of spokesperson on this matter and identify its main features.

2. Theoretical Approach

The current situation in the world leads us to observe many situations where the public and citizens often need explanations to understand the dimension of events that affect governments, countries or companies or institutions. This is the job that a spokesperson should do: explain and give context in order to guarantee the transparency in democratic societies and in companies in these environments. "My job is to be the messenger between the commissioners and the outside world. Politicians cannot spend 24 hours a day explaining their policies. This is what we are for" (Runchina, 2015), commented Mina Andreeva, one of the three main spokespersons for the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, since November 2014. According to Arceo (2012), the figure of the spokesperson explains to the world what a company, public institution or political party is like, and in this way, the spokesperson becomes the public image of the organization: "The spokesperson is an individual empowered to publicly express documents and official viewpoints of the institution that he/she represents" (Constantin & Petrucă, 2019, p. 261).

In a theoretical review of the spokesperson role, the authors highlight the dichotomy between "expert" and "political" spokesperson (Fumanal, 2020; Peytibí, 2020). Peytibí (2020) argues that if the spokesperson is an expert has more credibility than a politician who only comes out

at key moments. Fumanal (2020) believes it is not possible to choose one model: the decision will depend on the objective, the analysis of the scenarios and the communication strategy.

The recommendation is usually to choose a single spokesperson to avoid contradictions in public appearances (Crespo & Garrido, 2020; Rojo, *et al.*, 2020). However, this approach has not been followed by the organizations, as it happened during the Covid-19 crisis (Rojo, *et al.*, 2020). A technical and institutional spokesperson allows organizations to be proactive in their messages but multiplies the risks of contradictions (Costa-Sánchez and López-García, 2020).

“Spokespersons should devote attention to their nonverbal communication in times of crisis, because it impacts their credibility, and consequently, also the attitudes and behaviour of the public towards the organization”, affirm De Waele, *et al.* (2018, p. 457). The authors also give some guidelines for spokespersons that can be addressed with media and vocal training. Their competences should include telegenic qualities, protocol, knowing how to master visual (background, posture, eye gaze, appearance and hand gestures) and verbal cues. Build key messages and repeat them into short quotes. Its characteristics entail leadership, crisis communication and risk management, management of negotiation processes and lead meetings. Its professional characteristics should entail communicative skills to express effectively, ability to speak in public, mastering the voice pitch, demonstrate trust, management of non-verbal communication, emotion management and ability to make effective public presentations and showing empathy (Álvarez & Arceo, 2018); (Capurro *et al.*, 2022); (Moreno, Tench & Verhoeven, 2021); (De Waete *et al.*, 2020); (Bilan & Netreba, 2022).

For the oratory expert, Josep Maria Brugués, the key is the rehearsal since "a good spokesperson must manage to be credible and be himself" (Carvajal, 2022). Speaking confidently, exciting the audience with whom you need to empathize by transmitting information that makes the most abstract messages understandable is one of the keys to the success of Ted Talks speakers. A good spokesperson must speak with passion, use good stories, and use novelty (Gallo, 2016).

“The first quality of a spokesperson is to know the institution for which they work very well, to really know it beyond its rules”, explained Jaume Duch, Spokesperson and Spokesperson and General Director of Communication of the European Parliament (personal communication, July 12, 2023). Moreover, according to Duch, the spokesperson should feel a true identification with this institution; this is not a job that has to be done automatically. Regarding journalists and media, according to the interviews, it was necessary to know the journalists who work on the correspondent topics of the organization or institution, have a close and permanent relationship with them, preferably have experience as a journalist and know the dynamics of operation and needs of the media. In addition, not only knowing the topics you are going to talk about but also the needs of the people you are going to talk to, be journalists, professors or representatives of European civil society organizations (Duch, personal communication, July 12, 2023).

"It is recommended that the director of communication can also perform the functions of spokesperson, although we must be certain that he/she has all the necessary characteristics," said Patrícia Plaja, Spokesperson for the Government of the Generalitat de Catalunya (personal communication, June 5, 2023). This is the case of Jaume Duch, who acts as Spokesperson and General Director of Communication of the European Parliament. According to him, the main advantage of being the same person is that they do not have to be coordinated, since "the same person who heads the house's communication services is the one who later represents the house abroad on issues that are not clearly politicians". In some organizations, the communication director acts as spokesperson for the organization on a regular basis; but, in crisis situations, there is another person who acts as a spokesperson (Matilla, personal communication, March 22, 2023).

2.1. Instruction of spokesperson: a worldwide view

Rojo, *et al.* (2020) show that there is no robust academic corpus of publications on the spokesperson area. In public universities where degrees or master's degrees about spokesperson are not detected, the study of this subject, paradoxically, is found as a research corpus of academic articles, doctoral theses or research papers of a different nature, frequently linked to the field of crisis communication (Capurro *et al.*, 2022). It was found that in Spain only four universities offer a specific optional subject for training spokespersons in the degree of Advertising and Public Relations (Álvarez & Arceo, 2018). This country has 33 public and private universities offering Advertising and Public Relations degree. Thous (2011) revealed the little training in Spain for spokespersons. At that time, many of the spokespersons of her investigation admitted to being afraid of journalists.

3. Methodology

The following research questions (RQ) were formulated:

- RQ1: How are the communications world's universities integrating spokesperson-related subjects into their undergraduate and graduate curricula?
- RQ2: What subjects related to media training are most often included in the curriculum?
- RQ3: How is it considered that a degree or master's degree teaches students about the figure of a representative and how to perform their functions?

The methodology to reach the questions of research combines a quantitative and qualitative approach. We developed a content analysis through the online publications about each university from the THE ranking. We were guided by the university selection criteria of this ranking, which includes 1,799 universities from 104 countries, making it the largest and most diverse university ranking to date (Baty, 2013; Hazelkorn, 2015; Marginson, 2014). Among this

university's universe, we selected those that offer communication studies. So, the analysis unit is formed by 100 universities and its approximately 500 web pages from which we examined its contents of both the bachelor's and master's degree programs in communication and also reviewed its PDFs to find subjects related to the spokesperson profile. As for the qualitative approach, we sent a questionnaire to different spokesperson to know their impressions about their profession and the training they received to do it.

4. Main Results

In accordance with the research methodology, that the curricula of courses related to "spokesperson training" were only found in 19 universities. We added the point of view of the professionals who answered our questionnaire, to obtain a global understanding of the situation in their job area. The first area analysed was that of the Degree programmes. Among the 100 universities included in the ranking, a mere 10 institutions offer bachelor's programs specifically tailored for the training of spokesperson.

The University of California is the only institution with a program dedicated to the study of media training. The distribution of bachelor's programs in the top 10 ranked universities, indicates that the majority (70%) of these universities are in America, while a modest proportion (20%) are in Europe, and a mere 10% represent Asia.

In the United States there are two main areas of study, according to National Wildlife Federation Press Secretary for Spanish Communications and National Campaigns, Maria Luisa Rossel: strategic communication and political communication. In both areas, according to her, topics such as crisis situations, digital communications and the use of social networks are discussed. In addition, the interviewee adds that "there is still room to develop the role of the spokesperson and its professionalization" (Rossel, personal communication, April 11, 2023).

"The Spanish degrees are mostly called Advertising and Public Relations (inherited from the old degrees prior to the EHEA) and in them, it is common for the PR's to have less teaching content -quantitatively-, more tactical than strategic and even purely instrumental -qualitatively- and be taught by specialists in other disciplines (journalism, advertising, marketing...)" (Matilla, personal communication, March 22, 2023). Out of the 100 ranked universities, only 9 offer programs in press secretary training. Among the top communication universities worldwide, only 9% offer courses related to media training. Interestingly, none of these universities use the keywords "spokesperson" or "spokespeople" to name their courses.

Table 1. Selection of world universities of undergraduate and master’s programs with the designation of the position in the ranking THE. Source: Own elaboration (2024).

Bachelor Programs				Master Programs			
Ranking THE Position	University name	Country	Bachelor Program name	Ranking THE Position	University name	Country	Master Program name
9	University of California, Berkeley	United States	Media Studies	11	Columbia University	United States	Strategic Communication
14	University of Pennsylvania	United States	Communication	26	Northwestern University	United States	Communication
18	University of Toronto	Canada	Communication, Culture, Information and Technology	26	University of Washington	United States	Communication
21	University of California, Los Angeles	United States	Communication Studies	43	Universität Heidelberg	Germany	Communication and Society in Ibero-America
32	University of California, San Diego	United States	Communication	44	Monash University	Australia	Strategic Communications Management
36	Nanyang Technological University, Singapore	Singapore	Communication Studies	51	Fudan University	China	Journalism and Communication
50	University of Texas, Austin	United States	Communication and Leadership	51	Fudan University	China	Communication, Media and Creative Industry
69	University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill	United States	Communication Studies	56	Seoul National University	South Korea	Journalism and Communications
75	University of Groningen	The Netherlands	Media Studies	71	Boston University	United States	Public Relations
90	Sorbonne University	France	Sciences, Communication and Journalism	78	Yonsei University (Seoul Campus)	South Korea	Media Cultural Studies

5. Conclusions

In tracing the provision of spokesperson training within the academic sphere, it has come to light that only 19 universities across the world, from the THE ranking, include elements related to spokesperson training. These universities are majority located in North and South America. According to this ranking, the first communication university interested in spokesperson studies

is University of California in Berkeley (United States) and it boasts the 8th position in the ranking. No university has established a comprehensive official program solely dedicated to the preparation of spokespersons. This discernible gap in formal training within universities involves a potential area requiring attention in the forthcoming years. Spokesperson is one of the most important figures in the field of communication and one of the least studied by academia. Paradoxically, being a reputable spokesperson requires personalized training in several fields, such as Media training. As a result of the research we see that this only occurs, and in the form of a course, in private companies such as political consultancy.

In addition, the study provides an overview of the state of the media-training curriculum in the best world's universities and aims to further stimulate debate on this topic, not only in academia, but also more broadly among policy makers. In Spain, the Director General of Management and Communication Strategies Consultants, Kathy Matilla, highlights the limited presence of Public Relations subjects in university curricula, with spokesperson training often integrated into crisis communication subjects. Knowledge of journalists, their topics, and a strong relationship with the media are deemed essential. Jaume Duch, the Spokesperson and General Director of Communication of the European Parliament, emphasizes the importance of a spokesperson's genuine identification with the institution. We highlight the need for serious training in this field of PR from public universities. A possible limitation of this research could be a limitation of interviews related to the profession under study. It would also be interesting to obtain the perspective of the few academic authorities of the degrees where subjects related to spokespersons are taught. It is Spanish academics who have published the most papers in this field. However, the authors consider that this will undoubtedly be a line to continue in future research.

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