Public Relations' influence on websites news flow & quality journalism: an applied study on six UAE local newspaper websites

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Abstract: This study aims to investigate how public relations agencies and departments can influence the news flow, journalism, and content quality on six newspaper websites in the United Arab Emirates. The variables of "the influence of PR on news websites, news content, and quality journalism" were chosen in view of their importance in terms of publishing on digital platforms at present and the fact that they are gradually becoming a major form of publishing in local and global societies. They were also chosen to discuss how PR departments and private agencies influence journalism and news articles to produce balanced, comprehensive, and accurate news content. Two methodologies were used for collecting data and reaching results: the quantitative methodology with a purposeful coding sheet designed to analyze 587 items published on six UAE newspaper websites, in addition to the qualitative methodology with a set of 9 intensive interviews conducted with specialists and senior journalists and managers in the fields of publishing, journalism, and PR in the country. The data was analyzed based on descriptive analysis using SPSS Software. The findings of this study showed that PR news accounts for almost 50% of the news published on UAE news websites. The results also revealed that there is a relationship between PR news and the quality of news content and journalism. The study uses the framing theory to investigate how PR practitioners and agencies influence the news flow on newspaper websites and the quality of content and journalism.
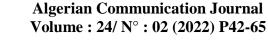
Keywords: Public Relations, Quality journalism, News websites, News flow, Press releases.

1. Introduction

The recent digital transformation has had a great impact on the news industry and PR communication techniques. With the advent of digitization, PR practices have changed, and this carries a potential for spreading diversity and understanding the new requirements of the field, which can be used to become more effective and active (Etike, S., 2021).

In the past few decades, many printed newspapers in the Middle East have begun to create digital versions of their printed newspapers and use digital media platforms to widen their audience (Vincent, 2021, p. 40). The digital change has affected the news style and content with a wide range of multi-formats of news (Peña-Fernández, S., Casado-del-

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Río, M. Á., & García-González, D., 2021). By shifting to online news, people can access news websites through social media platforms. Many news organizations post their content on social media platforms to track their audience's interests (Shamsan, R. M., & Otieno, D. M., 2015).

The digital transformation and the growth of information have affected the roles played by PR agents. They have empowered PR agencies to have more impact on news content and on journalists. PR goals have focused on informing or persuading journalists regarding a topic. They have provided PR with several tools to become the main source for news and information. Public relations practitioners believe that PR material makes journalism workflow easier as journalists rely on it for their news. Public relations has a strong influence on the flow of news of a press organization by paying for advertising space and putting pressure on administrations, which affects the quality and accuracy of news content (Hanusch, F., Banjac, S., & Maares, P., 2019).

The content produced by a PR agency on behalf of a client usually uses several techniques to convince the client about the opinion or the services provided. Thus, "while the content produced by PR agencies may not contain false information, it does not conform to the journalistic values of fairness, balance, and presenting both sides of the story" (Zaid, D. et al., 2020). With the rise of various types of platforms as the dominant model of the social web, most news organizations have shifted to these online platforms, and thus digital news has become an essential component in the field of the news industry (Helmond, A., 2015). Globalization and the growth of information and internet users through different platforms have changed news content. Therefore, people seek entertainment, and the news has started to be more softened (Vincent, R. C., 2021, p. 40).

In the UAE, most printed newspapers (English or Arabic) have either shifted to digital news websites or have both printed and digital versions. They are trying to keep pace with the global change in digital transformation. Several reports show that most of the audience in the UAE is following the news through social media platforms (*Global Media Insight*. 2022). On the other hand, most private and government organizations tend to hire PR agencies to be their communication officers, connecting them to their stakeholders and to the public audience. The dependence of most private and government organizations on outsourced agencies has a lot of impact on the news flow process and the quality of the content published by news organizations (Alhadid, A., & Qaddomi, B., 2016).

2. Research Problem

PR in the Arab world is strongly connected to government institutions, and it has been used as a tool of propaganda and manipulation. Most PR departments can be described as one way communication. However, over the past decade, PR has dominated various sectors in the Arab World, including the economic, political, and social sectors

(Bekhit, E., 2009). Several studies have been carried out to investigate the effects of PR on the quality of journalism and how the media depends on PR agencies for news globally and in the Arab world. However, no local study examined the impact of PR on the news flow and the quality of news published on UAE news websites. In addition, no study has examined the quantity of PR news published on local news websites in the UAE.

In this respect, this research investigates the context of the UAE's local news websites and focuses on understanding the relationships between PR and news websites. The study examines how PR agencies influence the news flow on newspaper websites and the quality of news content and journalism on six local UAE news websites.

3. Theoretical Framework

Pavleska, T., Školkay, A., Zankova, B., Ribeiro, N., & Bechmann, A. (2018) show how having news on websites has affected the content and shape of the news articles. According to Morgan, S. (2018), journalism is facing a fundamental challenge in terms of online news. In many cases, technology has been used to manipulate news for political purposes, so disinformation and fake news have become widespread. Thus, this study uses the Framing Theory to examine the impact of PR on the news flow and the quality of journalism and content in terms of affecting the writer's attitude and source.

4. The Framing Theory

The theory was first put forth by Goffman under the title of "Frame Analysis". The Framing Theory suggests that when something is presented to the audience, it can frame and affect their thinking. It can also influence their decision to choose through organizing and processing the information presented to them. The Framing Theory is a widespread theory used in news and media to project information or structure the messages sent to the public (Goffman, E., 1974). Framing can also be used to reshape public thinking about an issue through the way it is presented to them in terms of manipulating what it stands for (Chong, D. et al., 2007). Using this theory aims to examine how PR agencies can frame and control the news flow and the type of content sent to the local news websites, which can have an effect on the values of journalism. A study carried out by Ninan, J. et al. (2022) pointed out that there are seven models of framing, and one of them is framing the news.

5. Research Objectives

This study attempts to investigate the effect of PR departments and agencies on the content flow on UAE news websites. It also seeks to find out their effect on the quality of news content and journalism on six selected local UAE news websites. Moreover, it tries to find out the dominant attitudes in the news published and the most prevalent news types on the selected newspaper websites, as well as the main news sources of the news articles published on the six local newspaper websites.

6. Literature Review

6.1. Media history and press practice in the UAE

In the nineties, the media in the Arab world witnessed great developments. It was the era of the information and communication revolution, with the introduction of television, satellite, and the World Wide Web. The UAE witnessed the media developments as well. It possessed the most advanced media and telecommunication environment in the region. In 2003, the UAE had almost eight satellite channels, five terrestrial television broadcasters, and two local cable systems. It also had eleven local radio stations and fifteen daily and weekly publications (Ayish, M. I., 2003). Until 2020, the UAE has experienced huge changes with media free zones and more advanced digital technology (Ayish, M., 2021).

90% of the population in the UAE is literate, and most of them have the habit of reading daily newspapers and a variety of periodical publications. With digital media and the World Wide Web, there has been a noticeable shift to the online platforms in the UAE. The youth are most likely to use this new way of finding their favorite news and stories. This has had an impact on traditional publications, which are now facing new challenges with the E-newspaper mode (Cherian, J., & Farouk, S., 2015).

6.2. The impact of shifting to news websites and social media platforms on news content

Several studies examined the impact of news websites and social media platforms on content, in terms of communicating with consumers faster and more frequently. For example, Erdoğmuş, İ. E., & Çiçek, M. (2012) stressed that this impact helps to build a positive and interactive relationship between the two parties, namely, the companies and the consumers. Companies can promote their products and provide immediate support to consumers through these platforms. Social media also enables consumers to share information about the company with others, as in re-sharing news. Erdoğmuş, İ. E., &

Çiçek, M. point out to the fact that engaging content is a primary reason for content sharing across platforms and for brand spread. However, according to Stareva, I. (2014), online news creates a credibility gap and promotes incomplete and inaccurate information, which becomes a major concern for most public relations professionals and those speaking on behalf of organizations.

A study conducted by Park, S., Fisher, C., Flew, T., & Dulleck, U. (2020) explained that digital technology has made access to content published online easier, but concerns about the credibility of the information on the internet and social media have become an issue.

6.3.How digital transformation of news affects news quality

Several researchers have also argued that the digital transformation shift has affected the quality of news on these platforms due to the difference in the delivery of information on digital platforms compared to printed newspapers. In their study, Ahmad, A. R., & Murad, H. R. (2020) indicated that social media platforms have participated in spreading information and misinformation globally at the same time. Alshehri, F. (2001) highlighted the fact that digital media users are likely to choose information and news based on their wishes. Other researchers have agreed that reading on websites can be a tool that makes users more interactive with news directly and able to access the information that they choose and that suits them. In this way, the audience may find what they prefer to read whenever they would like to read it (Kruikemeier, S. et al. 2018, p. 75).

In their study, Peters, Chris and Broersma, M. J. (2013) they discussed how important it is for journalists to adopt new technologies in publishing news content on digital platforms. These technologies transform the process of news production in the newsroom and help journalists attract more audience. However, journalists need to be more skilled in terms of writing for digital platforms.

6.4.How PR reshapes news flow

Several studies investigated various aspects of the impact of PR on the performance of news organizations. A study by Obermaier, M., Koch, T., & Riesmeyer, C. (2018) pointed out that dealing with PR needs to be balanced in order to collect information in a limited time and from limited resources. However, PR serves their interests during information exchange. Therefore, there might be a conflict in the interests

of both sides. Another study conducted by Moreno, A., Tench, R., & Verhoeven, P. (2021) indicates that PR professionals or organizations are always striving for a positive public image, but, in some cases, journalists criticize PR for the lack of transparency of information needed to cover all sides of a story. A third study conducted by Follis, L. (2013) revealed that most news articles published in newspapers are issued by PR professionals who promote the products and services of their businesses. Hong, H. (2007) emphasized that the press releases issued by PR sources help journalists a lot in filling gaps and sending news quickly due to tight deadlines. He noted that PR firms influence the flow of news stories by providing journalists with news stories that reflect their organizations' interests. In this way, PR firms affect and control the content of news.

Another study carried out by Kim, Y., & Bae, J. (2006) revealed that, in recent years, news publication and reporting have become mainly dependent on PR sources due to a lack of sources or the difficulty of obtaining them, whereas the relationship between journalists and PR has become complicated and can be seen as a love-hate relationship. Journalists like to use PR sources and materials, but they hate to depend on them as reliable sources (Niskala, N., & Hurme, P., 2014).

6.5.Quality journalism and Public Relations News

According to Lacy, Stephen and Rosenstiel, T. (2015), journalism makes information transparent in society, as it provides people with facts and opinions. Quality journalism "represents the ability of journalism to fulfill its functions, then improving quality of journalism would improve the ability of citizens to use the journalism to make better decisions and provide a check against abuse and malfeasance by people in power." Ricchiardi, S. (2012) pointed out that journalists should remain objective when writing about subjects and be guided by ethics codes and behavior to produce factual and accurate news.

Public relations news is one type of the information disorder model which can be explained as follows: "PR journalism: this content produced on behalf of a client by a public relations agency with the purpose of persuasion. The article may not contain false information, but it does not conform to the journalistic values of fairness, balance, and presenting both sides of the story" (Zaid, D. et al., 2020).

7. Research Questions

After reviewing the literature and the previous studies on this topic, the researcher developed the following main research questions:

1. How do PR departments and agencies affect the content flow on the UAE news websites?
2. How can PR news affect the quality of news articles' content and journalism?

To answer the main research questions, the researcher developed these sub-questions to better guide the research:

1. What are the most prevalent news types on the local newspaper websites?

2. What are the main news sources for the articles on newspaper websites?

3. What are the dominant attitudes in the news published on newspaper websites?

4. What is the percentage of PR news on the local news websites?

8. Research Design

The study aims to measure the effect of PR departments and agencies on the news flow of the local news websites and also on the quality of news articles' content and journalism. To collect accurate data that can serve the main purpose of this research, the study used quantitative and qualitative analysis to examine the influence of PR on the websites of six local Emirate's newspapers.

In the first part of the study, the researcher used content analysis methodology to examine 587 articles published on the front pages of the 6 selected local newspaper websites. 50% of these local news websites are Arabic publications, whereas the other 50% are English publications. The publishing dates of the selected items were from 20 to 27 January 2020. The researcher designed a structured coding sheet to study the selected published articles. The selected articles focus on political, economic, and social news. The six local news websites are: The Gulf News, Khaleej Times, The National, Al Bayan, Al Khaleej, and Al Rooiah. The selected newspaper websites are affiliated with the three main Emirates in the UAE: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharjah.

In the second part of the study analysis, the researchers used qualitative research methodology. The study conducted a set of in-depth interviews with nine interviewees to measure the main variables of the research questions. The interviews

yielded some statements, facts, and thoughts that helped to investigate the variables of the research questions. The study population involved five PR practitioners and four professional journalists. All of them have practiced their professions for 7 to 20 years and have experienced the shift to online news. They work as senior journalists, PR managers, and news website editors. The interviews were semi-structured, with some demographic questions to get the conversation started. Then, a set of questions were asked in a raw in order to investigate the main variables of the study.

8.1. The First methodology: Content analysis

Content analysis is a technique used to study and analyze information contained in the textual data in order to make sense of it. It can include quantitative and qualitative methods (Forman, Jane and Damschroder, L., 2007). A coding sheet was created by the researcher, and it contained three main parts based on the main research questions. The first part included four variables that focused on demographic information. The second part sought to identify the dominant news types and sources. The third part sought to examine the attitudes of the selected articles and content quality. The primary data collected for the purpose of this research and the coding sheet were used especially for this study. The researcher used the coding sheet to examine each selected article item separately. They used the Statistical Package for Social Science by IBM (SPSS), which is a quantitative analysis program used by researchers to do analysis in any study. The analysis in this study is based on the facts of the collected data using SPSS. The Chi-Square in all the tables that study the relationship between variables under study indicates that there is a strong relationship between them, which supports the validity and reliability of the results.

8.1.1. Results

Table 1 presents the main demographic information about the news article frequency on each news website.

Table 2: News article frequency in each news website

News Website	No.	%
Al Bayan	105	17.9
Gulf news	104	17.7
Al Khaleej	104	17.7
The National	102	17.4
Khaleej Times	89	15.2
Al Rooiah	83	14.1
Total	587	100

Table 1 shows that Al Bayan, Gulf News, Al Khaleej, and The National newspapers have the largest number of published items (70%). The study analyzed 105 items from Al Bayan, 104 from Gulf, 104 from Al Khaleej, 102 from The National, 89 from Khaleej Times, and 83 from Al Rooiah newspapers. These items dealt with several political, social, and economic issues. The researcher used SPSS to examine the relationship between several factors and their impact on the news flow on the websites of the Emirates newspapers.

- **News Types**

Table 2: Article types presented on the news websites

News websites / Article type	Al Bayan No.	Al Bayan %	Al Khaleej No.	Al Khaleej %	Al Rooiah No.	Al Rooiah %	Gulf News No.	Gulf News %	Khaleej Times No.	Khaleej Times %	The National No.	The National %	Total No.	Total %
Investigative report	3	2.9	0	0.0	2	2.4	4	3.8	1	1.1	2	2.0	12	2.0
Interview	8	7.6	0	0.0	4	4.8	4	3.8	3	3.4	2	2.0	21	3.6
Feature	5	4.8	2	2.0	0	0.0	11	10.6	4	4.5	5	4.9	27	4.6
News Reports	27	25.7	51	49.0	42	50.6	39	37.5	42	47.2	64	62.7	265	45.1
Press release	62	59.0	51	49.0	35	42.2	46	44.3	39	43.8	29	28.4	262	44.7
Total	105	100	104	100	83	100	104	100	89	100	102	100	587	100

Pearson Chi-Square = 57.312	Contingency Coefficient =
0.298	df = 20
	Approx. Sig = 0.01

Table 2 shows the article types presented on the news websites. The news reports and press release types ranked first, as they represented almost 90% of all the types of published items on the news websites. The results indicate that the news websites are more interested in publishing press releases and news reports than other kinds of articles on their websites. In addition, the table shows that English newspaper websites rely on news reports more than press releases only, whereas the Arabic news websites do rely on "press release" article types, which are mostly sent by PR agencies and departments and sourced by governmental sources.

Chi-Square indicates that the value of Chi-Square was 57.3. This is greater than the tabular value of Chi-Square (31.41) at a degree of freedom (20) and a level of significance (< .05), and this indicates that there is a strong relationship between the news types and news websites.

- **News sources**

Table 3: News sources

News websites / Type of news sources	Al Bayan		Al Khaleej		Al Rooiah		Gulf News		Khaleej Times		The National		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Using news sources	**1**	**1.0**	**22**	**21.2**	**3**	**3.6**	**0**	**0.0**	**0**	**0.0**	**0**	**0.0**	**26**	**4.4**
	104	**99.0**	**82**	**78.8**	**80**	**96.4**	**104**	**100**	**89**	**100**	**102**	**100**	**561**	**95.6**
	105	**100**	**104**	**100**	**83**	**100**	**104**	**100**	**89**	**100**	**102**	**100**	**587**	**100**
Unidentified	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	2.5	1	1.0	2	2.2	4	3.9	9	1.6
International agency	16	15.4	4	4.9	21	26.2	24	23.1	28	31.6	6	5.9	99	17.6
WAM	14	13.5	6	7.3	8	10.0	0	0.0	2	2.2	0	0.0	30	5.4
Journalist	30	28.8	7	8.5	16	20.0	33	31.7	38	42.7	78	76.5	202	36.0
PR agency/department	33	31.7	18	22.0	21	26.3	20	19.2	17	19.1	13	12.7	122	21.7
More than one source	11	10.6	47	57.3	12	15.0	26	25.0	2	2.2	1	1.0	99	17.7
Total	104	100	82	100	80	100	104	100	89	100	102	100	561	100
Pearson Chi-Square = 257.012 df = 25									Contingency Coefficient = 0.561 Approx. Sig = 0.01					

Table 3 shows the news sources and their relationship to the websites. 95.6% of the news published on the 6 local news websites has an identified source. Al Khaleej news website has the lowest percentage of source availability at 78.8%, whereas the National, Khaleej Times, Gulf News, and Al Bayan almost all have identified sources of news in relation to all the published items on their websites. This can show that most of the news that is unsourced comes from PR agencies or PR government departments because they are the only sources of official information that can be published on local news websites or newspapers in the country.

The percentage of news with the journalist as an identified source has the highest percentage, 36%, followed by the PR agency/department, 21.7%, which shows that online news relies more on scoops by their journalists and also on PR news as a second source for their news items.

Table 3 shows that all English news websites rely on their journalists at the first stage of their news coverage, with percentages of 76.5% in The National, 42.7% in Khaleej Times, and 31.7% in Gulf News. On the other hand, only one Arabic newspaper, Al Bayan, relies on its journalists as a source of online news, at 28.8%. Another noticeable figure was that four of

the six news websites rely on PR agencies as a second source of their online news. Table 3 also shows that three out of the six websites depend on international agencies as a second source for their online news, and two of them are English news websites (Khaleej Times & Gulf News), which is logical based on their segment market and readers who are foreigners living in the country.

It may be noticed from Table 3 that quality journalism and content are still playing an important role in electronic and digital media. At the same time, the fact that the PR agency/department ranks second shows how PR can affect the news flow in the local online media.

- **News attitudes**

Table 4: News attitudes

News websites / Stance of writing	Al Bayan		Al Khaleej		Al Rooiah		Gulf News		Khaleej Times		The National		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Neutral	30	28.6	13	12.5	18	21.7	20	19.2	16	18.0	29	28.4	126	21.5
Anti	27	25.7	55	52.9	30	36.1	32	30.8	39	43.8	43	42.2	226	38.5
Pro	48	45.7	36	34.6	35	42.2	52	50.0	34	38.2	30	29.4	235	40.0
Total	105	100	104	100	83	100	104	100	89	100	102	100	587	100

Parson Chi-Square = 29.442
df = 10
Contingency Coefficient = 0.219
Approx. Sig = 0.01

Table 4 shows news attitudes. 40% of the news published on newspapers' websites supported the issue they have tackled. 38.5% was against them. This finding can lead us to conclude that the PR press has an influence on the news content on the local news websites because the news covers the positive side of the story only. (PR news definition, see p. 9)

Two of the news websites which had the highest percentages of pro stances or attitudes of writing style are published in Arabic (Al Bayan, 45.7%, & Al Rooiah, 42.2%), whereas two of the English news websites (Khaleej Times, 43.8% &The National, 42.2%) had highest percentages of anti-stance of writing style.

- **The percentage of PR News published on selected news websites**

Table 5: The quality of news content on news websites

News websites / Content quality	Al Bayan		Al Khaleej		Al Rooiah		Gulf News		Khaleej Times		The National		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Cover only one side of the story	18	17.1	2	1.9	0	0.0	0	0.0	7	7.9	20	19.6	47	8.0
Cover more than one side of the story	31	29.5	45	43.3	39	47.0	55	52.9	39	43.8	44	43.1	253	43.1
The story gives certain information only	56	53.4	57	54.8	44	53.0	49	47.1	43	48.3	38	37.3	287	48.9
Total	105	100	104	100	83	100	104	100	89	100	102	100	587	100

Parson Chi-Square = 59.330
df = 10

Contingency Coefficient = 0.303
Approx. Sig = 0.01

As it was explained earlier, PR news covers the positive sides of the story only, gives certain information, and does not cover all sides of the story, which affects the content quality of the news (Zaid et al., 2020). Table 6 shows the quality of news content on news websites. The results also reveal the percentage of PR news published on the selected local news websites.

Table 5 shows that 48.9% of the news websites provide their readers with specific and targeted information, which means that the news published on the websites is PR news. This had the highest percentage compared to other styles. Four out of six news websites used this style: Khaleej (54.8%), Al Bayan (53.4%), AL Rooiah (53%), and then Khaleej Times (48.3%). Three of the four news websites are Arabic news websites. This result shows that most of the Arabic news websites' content quality is influenced by PR. On the other hand, two of the six news websites provide their readers with one-sided coverage of the story. Both are English news websites (Gulf News, 52.9% & The National, 43.1%). This demonstrates the effects of PR on online news.

8.2 Second methodology: in-depth interviews

The study conducted qualitative analysis by using in-depth interviews with five PR practitioners and four senior journalists working for the main local newspapers in the UAE. The interview questions sought to explore the variables of this research in terms of the role of public relations in news flow, and the effects of PR on the quality of news content and journalism. The interviewees revealed to the researcher the percentage of the press releases sent by PR departments to the media sectors. They also provided sincere answers and genuine opinions in relation to PR and journalism practice, and

they also allowed the researchers to use their real names. The table below shows the list of the interviewees. The nine participants were divided into two groups: the PR practitioners' group and the journalists group, and this was done in order to facilitate analyzing the findings.

Interviewee	Function	Years of Practice	Location
Interviewee 1 Mr. Braa Fouad	Founder of Writer Media PR Agency	7 +	Dubai& Abu Dhabi
Interviewee 2 Abdul Hafeez Jamal	General Manager of Al-Madar Network for PR and Media	7 +	Sharjah, Dubai & Abu Dhabi
Interviewee 3 Naima Al-Zarouni,	PR & communication expert - Sharjah Private Education Authority	12 +	Sharjah
Interviewee 4 Walid Muhammad	Head of the P.R Department in Sharjah Municipality	10 +	Sharjah
Interviewee 5 Yaqoub Saleh	PR Officer - Sharjah Local Government Authority	20 +	Sharjah & Dubai
Interviewee 6 Fahd Al Amiri	Director of electronic publishing at Al Roya Newspaper	15 +	Abu Dhabi & Dubai
Interviewee 7 Nora Salim	Journalist - local news sector Al Bayan Newspaper	20 +	Sharjah & Dubai
Interviewee8 Khawla Ali	Journalist – local and culture sector AL Ittihad Newspaper	20 +	Sharjah, Dubai & Abu Dhabi
Interviewee9 Aghadeer Ali	Journalist – local- economic sector Gulf News	12 +	Sharjah & Dubai

8.2.1 Results

It was found that the interviewees were aware of the role of PR in the local UAE news websites, as was indicated by their opinions and thoughts. As expected, PR practitioners had almost the same point of view, whereas journalists and news editors agreed together on other views. Thus, the researcher decided to divide them into two main groups in order to be able to examine the results and analyze them thoroughly.

- **The role of public relations in content flow on local news websites**

To start with, the researcher had short conversations with the interviewees about their work in the media field, the role of PR in general, and the criteria for selecting or writing news content for publishing. The PR practitioners group admitted that most of the news reports issued are positive and supportive of the efforts of the contracting company or sector. They said that the government department might inform the company that it desires to publish specific news. They added that "most of the news that is issued is positive." As PR agencies, they cannot publish any information about the firms without their permission. They also admitted that the majority of the news they issue focuses on the accomplishments of the

government sector or organization they represent. They stressed that the organizations and private PR companies complement each other in publishing news and sending it to the media. The PR practitioners group stressed that PR companies are considered mediators between the institutions they represent and the public and media.

However, the journalists group agreed that when selecting or writing news content, certain criteria should be followed in accordance with the goals of their media organization and the newspaper editor's policy. They considered that government newspapers always tend to publish the official news related to the government and ministries. The journalists group indicated that, in some cases, PR agencies can provide them with all the information they need. However, in some cases, their role as journalists prevents them from conducting direct and better interviews.

- **The role of PR in influencing the quality of the content and journalism on local news websites**

The second part of the interviews was about the role of PR in affecting the quality of the content and journalism on local news websites. The PR practitioners group indicated that most PR companies have become part of their sector's working system. They stated that any information that comes out must be known to the company it represents and must get approval to be published. The PR group also agreed that PR departments and private PR companies send lots of press releases to the media. Both PR agencies/departments and the media have mutual interests in filling their pages with news and meeting deadlines to publish news regardless of whether the content meets all the journalism values or not, as long as it does not contain wrong information. They stated that press releases are more widely published on the local newspaper's websites. PR practitioners indicated that although most of the news on the websites and newspapers are press releases, there is still some special news content written by the newspaper reporters themselves. They pointed out that journalists will not bear any responsibility in the event of error in the information published and asserted that PR departments control the process of sending information and news to media organizations. They also indicated that journalists sometimes ask for more details, and they provide them with details only if they get approval from the head office.

The journalists argued that it is useful to depend on PR. However, they need to add some journalism values to the published news reports so that they can enhance the quality of

the news content. The journalists agreed that having new information added to the regular news report is one of the challenges that reporters face. Not all organizations accept adding further information to their press releases. The journalists described the relationship between public relations and media outlets as a work relationship based on mutual interest. They agreed that their relationship should involve the journalist's ethical side, thus reflecting the power of the media institution and not only what the PR agencies or departments demand in the publishing aspect. They also mentioned that PR companies and administrations, in general, are working on cutting off the relationship between journalists and institutions indirectly. They become the only bridge through which the reporters can reach the information and write quality content. They ensure that PR has an impact on having direct and truthful information from the main source.

They said that the presence of PR departments and agencies as mediators had forbidden them from meeting with the managers of the organizations who were willing to be interviewed directly. Currently, PR departments determine the answers sent to the journalists in order for them to be official and within a specific framework. The journalists commented on that strategy, saying that it affects the quality of the news content they produce. They complained that some organizations may be late in responding to their questions and providing them with the information they need on time, which prevents them from producing good quality news items and making scoops.

The PR practitioners group indicated that journalists could overcome the difficulties of finding scoops through their intelligence and common sense. They indicated that the PR department sometimes communicates directly with journalists and responds to their inquiries if the journalist resends the news report back to them for proof checking before publishing it in order to verify the information. PR practitioners argued that the presence of PR companies has accelerated the full access of information to the press and media. They are convinced that PR agencies and departments give journalists two options: publishing their news or reformulating it by making qualitative additions through special interviews. They agreed that the primary responsibility of the journalist is to investigate and search for new details and try to enrich the news.

- **The percentage of PR news on the local news websites**

All the interviewees agreed that the number of press releases sent to media organizations is enormous. Still, each media organization chooses some of them to be published according to its trends, editorial policy, and target audience. The journalists group said that news varies when it comes to publication. In the printed version of newspapers, the percentage of press releases may reach around 30%, while it may reach around 60% on local news websites. Press releases from well-known and accredited PR sources have the priority to be published on local news websites. Their percentage may reach between 45% and 60%. The journalists group agreed that they could not ignore the press releases which contain important information or cover official occasions.

PR practitioners stressed that most of the news issued by government organizations is about events and occasions and has the nature of press releases. Compared with the number of exclusive news reports sent to journalists, press releases rank first. They pointed out that the percentage of press releases sent by PR to media organizations might reach about 70%. They said: "If we compare private news sent to media, with their press releases, the private news will be much less than their public relations press releases."

9. Analysis of the Findings

The following section presents the collected data from the two methodologies in order to answer the main research questions and sub questions about how PR departments and agencies affect the UAE news websites' content flow and how they affect the quality of news articles' content and journalism.

RQ1: How do PR departments and agencies affect the content flow on the UAE news websites?

The results revealed that there is a significant relationship between PR and the mechanism of information flow to media organizations. The study found that PR agencies/departments ranked second as the source of the content published on the most news websites, which indicates that PR agencies and departments have remarkable control over the content flow on the local news websites. This result is consistent with the result of a study conducted by Follis, L. (2013), who pointed out that most news articles published in newspapers are issued by PR professionals who promote the products and services of their businesses.

RQ2: How can PR news affect the quality of news articles' content and journalism?

The results of this study revealed that 40% of the news presents the positive side of the story only, which indicates that PR's news has an impact on the content quality of the websites. 48.9% of the news published on the websites was PR news that provided the readers with a specific point of view only. These findings are consistent with the findings of a study done by Zaid, D. et al. (2020), who mentioned that the content of PR news may not contain wrong information, but it does not conform to the journalistic values of fairness, balance, and presenting both sides of the story. The results of the interviews pointed out that PR might control the news, but they have not undermined good and trustworthy journalism. The results also showed that there is some sort of information control in relation to the amount and quality of the information released to the media. Moreover, journalists should work harder to come up with news and journalistic facts that are far from the framework of press releases through investigative reports and news stories. The results also showed that two of the six news websites that used a mechanism based on covering more than one aspect of the news ranked first (Gulf News, 52.9% & National, 43.1%). This indicates that the style of real journalism is still in its early stages and needs more time to create solid ground. The results of content analysis show that real journalism is still there and trying hard to regain its role.

RQ2.1: What are the most prevalent news types on the local newspaper websites?

The study also revealed that both news reports and press release types ranked first by almost 90% among all types of published items on news websites. Press releases accounted for 44.7% of articles, which is a dramatic percentage that well agrees with Kim, Y., & Bae, J. (2006), who revealed that news publication and reporting have become mainly dependent on PR sources due to the lack of sources or the difficulty of obtaining them. It also agrees with the study conducted by Niskala, N., & Hurme, P. (2014), who explained that the relationship between journalists and PR is complicated and can be acknowledged as a love-hate relationship. Journalists love to use PR sources and materials but hate to depend on them as a reliable source.

RQ2.2: What are the main news sources for the articles on newspaper websites?

The results showed that 95.6% of the news published on the 6 local news websites has an identified source. The news sourced by the PR agency/department ranked second. The findings also show that the press releases sent by well-known and accredited PR sources have the priority to be published on local news websites. Their percentage may reach between 45% and 60%, as the results of the interviews revealed. The results of this study are consistent with the results of a study done by Bekhit, E. (2009), who said: "Public relations in the Arab world is strongly tied to government institutions and is regarded as a tool for publicity, propaganda, manipulation and protocol."

RQ2.3: What are the dominant attitudes in the news published on newspaper websites?

The results of this study show that PR controls the news flow, as 40% of the news published on local newspapers' websites were supportive of the issues they tackled and covered one side of the story. They acted as mediators between these organizations and the media, and most of the press releases sent to media outlets were written by them. This indicates that the tone and attitude of the press releases are important. PR departments decide what information is sent to the journalist in order for it to be official and within a specific framework. The results of this study are consistent with the results of a study done by Moreno, A., Tench, R., & Verhoeven, P. (2021), who pointed out that PR practitioners always seek a positive public image and frame for the news style of writing.

Correlation with the Theoretical Framework

The results correlate with the theoretical framework that was set as the foundation of this study, namely, the Framing Theory, which assumes that when something is presented to the audience, it can sort and affect their thinking. It can also influence their decision to choose through organizing and processing the information presented to them. The results of the content analysis and interviews indicate that PR departments and agencies try to direct the news by providing media outlets with certain kinds of information. This type of practice concurs with the Framing Theory. Chong, D., & Druckman, J. N. (2007) stated that journalism is facing a huge challenge because of the massive organizations that own the information. The results of the interviews showed that the main objective of the PR company is to present a positive image of organizations and give journalists certain pieces of information that must be reviewed by the organization's administration. The role of the Framing Theory appears in defining and directing news through various media platforms, and

local news websites are one of these platforms. According to this study, 45% to 60% of the news sent to local news websites are press releases issued and sent by PR. The study revealed that these PR press releases rank second as a news source on the six local news websites.

10.   Discussion of the Findings

Based on the two methodologies used in the study, many ideas and facts were used to answer the research questions. Five essential elements were discussed in them, which are the influence of PR departments and agencies on the UAE news websites' content flow, their effect on the quality of news content and journalism, the dominant attitudes of news published, the most prevalent news types on the selected newspaper websites, and the main news sources for the news articles published on the six local newspaper websites. This study aimed to provide an insight into the role of PR departments and agencies in affecting the UAE news websites' content flow and the quality of news content and journalism. It is quite clear that people working in the fields of PR and journalism are aware of the relationship between PR news releases and local websites' news. According to Morgan, S. (2018), journalism is facing a fundamental challenge related to online news.

In many cases, technology has been used to manipulate news for political purposes, and thus disinformation and fake news have started to become widespread. 21.7% of local website published news is PR-sourced, as two of the six news websites rely on PR agencies as their first source and four of them rely on PR as their second source of online news. Thus, PR agencies/departments ranked second, as news websites rely on them and this can affect the news flow in the digital media. The results show that providing the readers with certain pieces of information had the highest percentage compared to the other styles, 48.9%, which indicates that their source is PR agencies/departments. Many news organizations post their content on social media platforms, which helps them track their audience's interests and promote their content (Shamsan, R. M., & Otieno, D. M., 2015). In terms of the quality of content and journalism, the results show that the media field highly depends on PR news releases as most of them serve government sectors. Their editorial policy encourages government news content as it is an official source of news, whereas journalism practices still need time to have more freedom and power. According to Bebawi, S. (2016), the role and power of journalism continue to be limited in the Arab

world, and the media are mainly state controlled. Bebawi, S. pointed out that governments in the Arab world play a major role in shaping the media message.

Study Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is that some websites published their content twice in two different places on the front page with two different titles, and this confused the researcher when selecting articles for the study. Conducting the study during the spread of COVID-19 was also an obstacle to meeting the journalists and the PR practitioners face-to-face. The sample size of the interviewees was also one of the limitations of the study, as it was supposed to be larger, but due to COVID-19 and based on their working hours, the number was reduced. In addition, no studies were conducted on local UAE news websites, making recommendations for further studies difficult.

11. Conclusion

This study investigated the effects of PR news on the content flow for 6 local news websites in the UAE and the quality of news content and journalism. UAE news websites are witnessing a new transformation in the field of online journalism, which could help in improving the quality of media practices in the UAE. However, those news websites must make greater efforts in terms of changing the current practices. Creativity and innovation must also be combined with the mechanism of presenting digital news. Reliance on traditional forms of press releases is something that must be changed. Journalists should adopt the techniques of investigative reporting in publishing their work in an objective way in order to convince people who are in charge of private and public organizations to depend on them to publish their entities' news and information. PR news influences the news flow, but quality journalism and media outlets are still struggling to set a balance. Local news websites should do more to attract their audience to their websites. They should recruit more professional journalists who could produce high-quality journalism that fits with the requirements of online news. There is a real need for more research about the impacts of digital transformations on PR practices and journalism quality in the UAE. Finally, there should be permanent and continuous discussions to develop and strengthen the relationship between public relations representatives in government organizations and private agencies and media representatives in order to facilitate the news flow between these entities.

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13. Appendices:

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">Write the number in the next column to indicate the information about each article under the study:</td></tr>
<tr>
<td>

A) News website:

1. Al Bayan
2. Al Khaleej
3. Al Rooiah
4. Gulf news
5. Khaleej Times
6. The National
</td>
<td>

B) Region of the story:

1. Local
2. Regional
3. International
</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>

C) Scope of the story category:3 choices

1. Social issues
2. Political issues
3. Economic issues
4. Cultural issues
5. Others
</td>
<td>

D) Source:

1. Yes
2. No
</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>

E) Source type:

1. WAM
2. International agency
3. Journalist
4. Unidentified
5. More than one source
6. PR agency/department
</td>
<td>

F) Type of the news:

1. News
2. News Report
3. Interview
4. Feature
5. Investigative report
6. Mixed (more than one type)
</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>

G) Style of the news coverage:

1. The story gives certain information only
2. Covering more than one side of the story
3. Covering only one side of the story.
</td>
<td>

H) Stance of the story writing:

1. Pro
2. Anti
3. Neutral
</td>
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