

Article

Strategic Communication: Journalists' Role Amid the Rise in Digital Influencers

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Abstract

Journalists have a long-standing presence in strategic communication, seen as a “transitory” mediating stakeholder that can influence other key audiences within organizations. However, their role is increasingly being challenged by the rise in alternative information disseminators—mainly digital influencers (DIs) who possess considerable persuasive power and command extensive reach across diverse audiences. Using a qualitative methodology, this study aims to analyze the perceptions of brand and strategic communication professionals regarding the role of journalists in the context of the emergence of influencer marketing within the field of strategic communication. To this end, the views of 24 communication professionals were gathered, including individuals from communication agencies and communication departments in both public and private sector organizations. The findings were discussed in light of the conceptual framework of media relations and digital influence. Results indicate that, although DIs are now well-established within the field of strategic communication, their rise has not diminished the importance of journalists in communication strategies.

Keywords: strategic communication; public relations; media relations; journalists; digital influencers (DIs)



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1. Introduction

In 2016, Portuguese historian José Pacheco Pereira warned of the “enormous risks” posed by the digital revolution to the media and the functioning of society, arguing that there was a “decline in the importance of journalism work” (Pereira, 2016). Three years later, in 2019, the Portuguese weekly newspaper Expresso published a column entitled “Tired of journalists? You will love influencers” (Oliveira, 2019). In it, the author reflected on the implications of the rise in DIs and the evolving role of journalists within strategic communication, given the rise of these new “broadcasters” of content. The author’s perspective was that, in communication efforts aimed at managing image and reputation, organizations were increasingly favoring these new actors in the media space: “Instead of rebutting in newspapers or on TV, they call on a few dozen instagrammers who reach millions of young people and adults in a single post, but who in aggregate are worth many tens of millions of posts” (Oliveira, 2019). In the same vein, Rachel Tashjian, a journalist for the Washington Post, in her article “Shein, the fast-fashion giant, encounters obstacles,” addressed the wave of negative criticism of the company after it resorted to the same strategy of using DIs for an open-door action at its factories in China (Tashjian, 2023).

The genesis of this article lies in the research gap identified through journalistic chronicles (Pereira, 2016; Oliveira, 2019; Tashijan, 2023), which address the rise in DIs and their impact on media relations. While the relationship between organizations and the media has been historically grounded, and the emergence of DIs has increasingly attracted academic attention, little has been said about the implications of their coexistence within the strategic communication practices of organizations and brands, which can be framed within the broader debate on the evolution of Gatekeeping Theory (GT).

These reflections stem from the exponential growth in social media usage by organizations as part of their communication strategies. In this context, social media plays a prominent role, serving as spaces where individuals interact with brands and one another, sharing opinions and experiences (Carvalho, 2018). Within this dynamic of exchange and engagement, DIs emerge as a strategic resource for disseminating content aligned with the communication goals of organizations and brands.

The challenge of this paper is to problematize these new relationship dynamics. To do so, we have outlined the historical relationship between journalists and organizations, emphasizing the importance of journalistic intermediation in disseminating information to organizational stakeholders within traditional public relations. It then examines the rise in DIs as a new ally in the communication strategies of organizations and brands. The purpose of the investigation is to analyze the perceptions of communication professionals regarding this transformation. Specifically, it seeks to address two core objectives: (1) to understand the respective roles attributed to journalists and DIs in strategic communication; and (2) to assess whether communication professionals are replacing journalists with DIs in their strategic choices.

Given the importance of understanding corporate practices, the analysis of the results aims to highlight the perspectives of communication professionals regarding the role of journalists and DIs in their strategies. In turn, the discussion interprets these findings in light of theoretical frameworks.

2. Theoretical Framework

From a theoretical standpoint, the continued relevance of GT has been increasingly debated considering the digital environment, where anyone can create, publish, and share content. The central question is whether GT, once instrumental in framing the role of mass media in the public sphere, remains adequate to explain the influence of new communicative actors such as DIs and algorithms. Traditionally, GT positioned journalists as the primary custodians of information, controlling what entered the public sphere and shaping how social reality was framed. Yet this paradigm has become insufficient to capture the complexity of news selection, distribution, and interpretation in the digital era. Wallace (2018) shows that journalists no longer hold a monopoly over gatekeeping, as DIs, platforms, and algorithms play decisive roles in shaping visibility, legitimacy, and engagement. Durani (2024) also highlights non-institutional actors, including prosumers and online communities, who actively influence how information is framed and circulated. Voinea (2025) advocates for a reconceptualization of GT in the era of artificial intelligence, where algorithms and automated recommendation systems serve as opaque yet powerful gatekeepers. Collectively, these contributions illustrate a profound transformation. Gatekeeping has shifted from a linear process dominated by journalists to a multidirectional, hybrid, and contested practice shaped by multiple human and non-human actors. Against this backdrop, it becomes relevant to examine both the historical relationship between journalists and organizations and the rise in DIs as new players in strategic communication.

2.1. Journalists and Organizations: A Relationship with History

The relationship between journalism and strategic communication is a long-standing one, having been widely debated, particularly regarding the distinctive nature of public relations (PR). According to [Schudson \(1981\)](#), PR and journalism share a deeply rooted historical connection that appears inescapable. For the author, PR is an emanation of journalistic activity ([Schudson, 1981](#)). While this may seem provocative, the invention of modern PR is associated with a former journalist—Ivy Lee—who, upon establishing his first PR agency at the beginning of the 20th century, clearly positioned it with the aim of “disseminating news to newsrooms and not distributing advertisements to the commercial departments of these media” ([Cutlip, 1994](#), p. 45).

The affirmation of PR is, thus, associated with journalistic attributes, in which truth, facts, and transparency are core values for modern PR ([Schudson, 1981](#); [Schönhagen & Meissner, 2016](#); [Clementson, 2019](#)). Over the 20th century, this relationship led to the development of specific activities, including media relations, press officer roles, and media consulting. The relationship between PR professionals and journalists has been widely debated, particularly since the 1960s and 1970s. Within this debate, organizations are positioned as “professional,” “promoting,” “organized,” and “interested” sources of “subsidized” information, capable of producing content that is newsworthy, readable, credible, timely, and aligned with journalistic deadlines ([Ribeiro, 2016](#)). However, a particular dichotomy persisted in this discussion. On the one hand, PRs value the importance of journalistic intermediation for the success of communication programs and, consequently, organizational goals ([Zerfass et al., 2016](#); [Waters et al., 2010](#); [Adams, 1995](#); [Aronoff, 1975](#)), highlighting the convergence of ethical values, credibility, and the symbiotic and cooperative nature of the relationship ([Schönhagen & Meissner, 2016](#); [Sallot & Johnson, 2006](#)).

However, in contrast to the perspective of a symbiotic relationship, there is also evidence of controversy, misunderstanding, mistrust, and even contempt toward the work of organized sources ([MacNamara, 2014](#); [Ribeiro, 2014, 2016](#); [Lamme & Russell, 2009](#); [Sallot & Johnson, 2006](#); [Kopenhaver, 1985](#); [Aronoff, 1975](#)).

This somewhat tense and paradoxical dynamic unfolds within a constantly shifting media environment and an ever-evolving online landscape ([Sobreira & Arriscado, 2025](#)). In this scenario, traditional media relations strategies (such as preparing and distributing press releases and press kits) are being adapted to practices more suited to the logic of social media platforms ([Zerfass et al., 2022](#); [Waters et al., 2010](#)). PR is evolving due to the Internet’s potential and the new dynamics it brings. According to the 2022 European Communication Monitor (ECM), this evolution appears to signal emancipation from its historical roots, where strategic communication takes on a more digital matrix and DIs emerge as a trend in contemporary communication management ([Zerfass et al., 2022](#)). However, does this new context imply a diminishing relevance of relationships with traditional media, as suggested by [Ribeiro and Jorge \(2019\)](#)?

2.2. The Rise of Digital Influencers (DIs)

Digitalization has become ubiquitous in organizations’ communication departments and the communication services offered by their respective communication agencies ([Ribeiro & Jorge, 2019](#)). According to [Brockhaus et al. \(2022\)](#), digitalization appears to have become both the trigger and the backbone of the rapid transformation of communication departments, consultancies, and communications agencies. Expressions such as “influence marketing”, “influencer marketing”, “digital influencers,” and “affiliate marketing” demonstrate the growing role of these new communicative profiles within communication strategies. They also reflect the commitment of organizations to collaborate with, develop, and build relationships with DIs to market their products and services, or simply to enhance

brand and product recognition (de Brito Silva et al., 2025; Alsaadi et al., 2024; Liao & Chen, 2024; Allen & Wanjugu, 2024; Moreira et al., 2021; Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019; Kolo & Haumer, 2018; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014).

DIs are commonly described as individuals who build and maintain relationships with a broad audience of followers on digital platforms and who possess the ability to inform, entertain, and potentially influence the thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors of their followers (Navarro et al., 2020; Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Kim & Kim, 2021). They have come to occupy the role once held by traditional celebrities from radio, television, and cinema in promoting products and engaging people with specific brands (Almeida et al., 2018; Carvalho, 2018). They are opinion makers who share their lifestyle, experiences, and viewpoints through narrative and visual formats. To this end, they utilize video, blogs, websites, and social media to publish content that engages and persuades their followers virtually. Their influence, however, also extends into the offline sphere, through their participation in brand events (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Abidin, 2016).

Recognizing the potential of this type of collaboration for disseminating content, Peres and Karhawi (2017) argue that DIs have become trusted figures and reflections of their followers. Followers tend to accept their suggestions and engage in interactions, often viewing them as role models due to their visibility, versatility, popularity, and credibility. However, questions have also been raised about the implications of the nature of such collaboration, whether paid or unpaid, since, according to Sng et al. (2019), organic content is increasingly being replaced by sponsored content. Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández (2019) acknowledge the growing interest in DIs yet caution that the phenomenon still requires further exploration to understand how bonds with followers are built and how these relationships shape brand perceptions and consumer behavior. In this regard, Kim and Kim (2021) research shows that when content is relevant and reflects the author's "self", the post conveys authenticity and genuine intent. On the other hand, when a publication is clearly "advertising" and involves compensation, it may be perceived as driven purely by calculated intent.

Unlike journalists (who tend to adopt a broader focus and maintain a certain distance from the subjects they report on), DIs address topics that are closer and more meaningful to their followers, engaging in direct conversation and seeking a relationship based on proximity (Vasconcellos, 2020). This emotional matrix, created by these new information mediators, is particularly appealing to organizations aiming to foster closeness, especially with new generations of consumers, who value brands that embody values such as proximity and brand activism (Leung et al., 2022; Munsch, 2021; Parracho & Santos, 2023).

This analysis reveals a complex ambivalence. On the one hand, despite the long-standing relationship between journalism and strategic communication, it is evident that increasing efforts are being directed towards DIs. On the other hand, journalism appears to exhibit a certain discomfort with the rise in these new plays. Nevertheless, does this necessarily imply, as suggested by Pereira (2016), Oliveira (2019), and Tashijan (2023), a devaluation, on the part of strategic communication professionals, of the role played by these traditional gatekeepers?

3. Methodology

To understand this somewhat paradoxical dynamic, this paper aims to analyze the practices and perceptions of communication professionals regarding the relevance of journalists in light of the rise in DIs within strategic communication. The guiding research questions are as follows: (1) What is the role of journalists and DIs in strategic communication? (2) Are communication professionals replacing journalists with DIs?

This exploratory research employs a qualitative approach, collecting data through a Qualtrics questionnaire that includes both qualitative and quantitative data, as well as two face-to-face interviews. The questionnaire was structured into three main sections. Following an initial section dedicated to characterizing the sample, the second section focused on the relationship between brands and journalists, comprising questions designed to explore the nature and perceived importance of this relationship, as well as the contribution of journalists' work to organizations, based on participants' experiences and perceptions. The third section of the questionnaire applied the same analytical structure to assess the perceived relevance and contribution of DIs.

Data collection occurred between 1 February 2021 and 3 February 2022. Participants were explicitly selected based on our knowledge of their experience for this investigation and within the context of our professional network. Accordingly, each prospective participant was first approached by telephone, in person, or via email to emphasize the importance of their contribution. A total of 24 communication professionals, from 30 identified, participated in the questionnaire, comprising 17 from private companies and public organizations (Education, Technology, Transport, Retail, Culture, and Consultancy), and seven from communication agencies. Participants were between 25 and 64 years old; 50% held leadership responsibilities, and 50% occupied technical roles. Regarding educational background, 12 held a bachelor's degree, 7 had a master's degree, and 1 had a PhD. Of the total, 15 worked with journalists and DIs, while seven were exclusively dedicated to media relations. The selection of participants for the interviews followed the same criteria that guided the sampling of respondents to the questionnaire. Given that two distinct types of organizations were involved, each adopting different approaches in their interactions with journalists, two interviewees were purposefully chosen. One represented an in-house media relations department, responsible for promoting the organization, while the other represented a specialized agency providing media relations services. The interviews were conducted with two female professionals: a head of a Public Relations and Communications department at a public organization, with prior experience as a journalist, and the founder of a communications agency with 21 years of experience, specializing in media relations and strategic content. The research followed established ethical principles, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

The content analysis followed the approach outlined by [Bardin \(2011\)](#), which enabled the interpretation of responses and facilitated the identification of categories, patterns, and meanings within the collected material. The procedure was structured in three conventional stages: (i) pre-analysis, consisting of a preliminary and comprehensive reading of the corpus to gain overall familiarity with the data and to organize the material for subsequent analysis; (ii) exploration of the material, during which responses were coded—Identification Code in database (IC)—and context units were categorized according to both predefined objectives and themes emerging inductively from the material; and (iii) treatment and interpretation of the results, where the coded data were organized into analytical categories, allowing for the identification of regularities, as well as convergences, divergences, and complementarities among participants. At this stage, particular emphasis was placed on preserving participants' direct speech, thereby bringing the richness of their 'voices' to the center of the analysis and preserving the uniqueness of their reported experiences. This methodological choice, grounded in [Bardin \(2011\)](#), [Demo \(2001\)](#), and [Kleinheksel et al. \(2020\)](#), proved adequate for capturing perceptions and statements, as it allowed qualitative data to be systematized rigorously and interpretatively while maintaining the depth and integrity of the original content.

4. Results

The online questionnaire collected direct testimonials regarding participants' practices and perspectives, as well as their evaluation of relationship dynamics, using a 6-point Likert scale. This allowed the study to enrich and complement its qualitative approach with quantitative data, without producing generalized results, as is often expected in quantitative research.

The results were systematized into three tables. Two of them differentiate between the testimonies of professionals from private companies, public organizations, and representatives of communication agencies regarding the importance of both types of information mediators (Tables 1 and 2). The third table combines the results of the 7 participants from private companies and public organizations with those from agencies that work exclusively with journalists, highlighting the importance of journalists in communication strategies (Table 3). All participants were assigned an identification code (IC).

The 11 participants from private sector companies and public organizations rate the importance of journalists in communication strategies more positively than DIs. On a 6-point Likert scale, where one is "not at all important" and six is "very important," journalists received an average score of 5.5, compared to an average of 5 for DIs. In both cases, the ratings are always in the positive quadrant of the scale.

Table 1. Importance of Journalists and DIs for Communication Professionals in Private and Public Organizations. Source: Author's Own Work, 2025.

IC *	Rate **	Justification of the Ratings of Journalists	Rate	Justification of the Ratings of DIs
1	6	"(...) are one of the most important vehicles (...) with particular importance in terms of awareness and prestige."	6	"(...) a very important vehicle in a brand's communication strategy (...) quite effective and relatively low-cost compared to other media."
2	6	"(...) one of the most important channels for promotion (...) in terms of brand awareness and prestige."	5	"(...) are important as an alternative and innovative approach (...) "
3	6	"It's very important to maintain a good relationship (...) so that they are more understanding/cooperative."	5	"(...) an alternative and innovative way of delivering information to their target audience."
8	4	"Given the context is more complex, the relationship becomes even more important."	5	"(DIs are) essential but should be used with discretion and balance."
9	6	"It's important to develop this relationship well to build a bond that encourages the journalist's engagement with the topic (...)."	5	"(...) a closer, more human, and creative approach."
11	6	"(Journalists are) essential contributors to building a brand reputation."	4	"(DIs) do an excellent job and deliver results for the brand, but the practice has become overused."
14	5	"(...) because of image and credibility. Positive media coverage (...) helps to spread that image."	5	"(DIs bring) alternative approaches to conventional ones for reaching micro-audiences."
15	5	"(...) a company that does not communicate (with journalists) does not exist!"	5	"(DIs) are still not used with strategy, although micro-influencers are relevant."

Table 1. Cont.

IC *	Rate **	Justification of the Ratings of Journalists	Rate	Justification of the Ratings of DIs
16	6	“(Journalists are) one of the main channels for external communication. They will always be among the most relevant because they improve awareness (and) add credibility and relevance. (...) Having a journalist telling the same story makes it even more impactful (...). When one recommends a product or service, it must be good (...). The vast majority (of journalists) are impartial in what they write. (...) It is crucial to have a close relationship to get something published.”	6	“(DIs) are an excellent option for promoting products and/or services due to the reach of their networks and their ability to influence the opinions of their followers.”
17	6	“Only what is communicated happens. Having good access to/relationship with journalists is critical, as they are major vehicles/channels of information.”	5	“They can influence decision-making and shape followers’ views of a brand, product, service, or organization. (...) The influencer’s community sees them as people who, in principle, give an honest opinion about what they talk about. (...) But they are being paid to say something that was previously agreed upon. The relationship (...) is significant (...) because the digital channels currently in use allow for a wide reach.”
20	4	“Journalists remain a key driver of exposure.”	6	“(DIs) have become a new communication channel for brands to reach external audiences, allowing access to a broader target that, in many cases, we could not reach through traditional mass media or the brand’s channels.”

* IC: Identification Code in database; ** Rate: “1” is “nothing important” and “6” is “very important” 6.

In terms of justification for the rating, journalists are associated with concepts such as “awareness and prestige,” “reputation,” “image and credibility,” and “relevance.” They are described as “one of the most relevant external communication channels,” with whom it is essential to “maintain a good relationship,” “build a bond,” and ensure “closeness,” mainly because—as one participant stated—“when one recommends a product or service, it’s because it must be good”.

For their part, DIs are also seen by the participants as “a significant vehicle in a brand’s communication strategy”, associated with “reach” and a “relatively low cost compared to other media”, as well as with a “humanized”, “alternative and innovative” way of capturing attention from targets. However, among the testimonies, some claim that the “concept has become overused” and describe influencers as a “paid media” that reports what has been “previously agreed”, unlike journalists, who are associated with “impartiality” by those involved in the study.

Four of the six participants from communication agencies work with journalists and DIs. Regarding the rating given, there is a clear advantage for media professionals, with all participants placing them at the top of the scale (6 points) in terms of their importance in communication strategies. In contrast, DIs received an average rating of 4.25, with two participants scoring 3, placing them in the negative quadrant of the scale.

Table 2. Importance of Journalists and DIs for Communication Agency Professionals. Source: Author's Own Work, 2025.

IC *	Rate **	Justification of the Ratings of Journalists	Rate	Justification of the Ratings of DIs
1	6	"They can influence public opinion and, as such, impact the organization's reputation. At the same time, PR professionals rely on journalists to amplify the positioning and actions of their respective companies."	3	"Nowadays, the use of this type of ambassador has been somewhat excessive."
2	6	"Building relationships with journalists is essential, especially when managing a brand with national and international relevance."	5	"(DIs have) greater engagement"
3	6	"The relationship should always be nurtured and never forgotten. Journalists remain excellent channels for conveying information about companies and are usually seen as credible sources. It is always better to have third parties, like the media, speak positively about us than to do it ourselves."	6	"DIs communicate with a particular target they can influence."
8	6	"For a brand to reach public opinion with the message it intends to deliver to its target, it must establish fluid communication channels with journalists. If the journalist understands the message, they could convey it to the public with greater credibility and accuracy."	3	"For B2B brands, only in the tech sector, DIs have a lot of influence. In B2C, they are very important for giving visibility to brands."

* IC: Identification Code in database; ** Rate: "1" is "nothing important" and "6" is "very important" 6.

Agency professionals consider the traditional media necessary because of the "impact" they have on the "organizational reputation" and because they help to "amplify the positioning and action of their companies". One participant pointed out that journalists "continue to be excellent vehicles for transmitting information" and are seen as "credible". Maintaining strong and ongoing relationships with these mediators was repeatedly valued, especially for brands "with international and national relevance".

Regarding DIs, agency professionals were more critical and even sparse in their comments. Pointed out as being more suited to B2C businesses, some considered "the use of this type of ambassador to be excessive", despite acknowledging their ability to generate "greater engagement".

Seven participants in this study work exclusively with journalists, so their perspectives and evaluations were presented separately in a specific table (Table 3). Five of these participants are from private companies and public organizations (participants IC: 4, 6, 12, 18, and 19), while two work in communication agencies (participants IC: 10 and 21).

In this case, the importance of journalists in the communication strategies of organizations and brands is also highlighted by an average score of 5.28 points. These seven respondents also emphasized the need for "a solid strategy", capable of "nurturing" a "good" and "fluid" relationship with traditional information mediators, who were described as "essential" for transmitting "messages" and "image", as well as the "brand's attributes". Associated with synonyms of "credibility", "reputation", "freedom and democ-

racy”, journalists are seen as having “a direct impact on the brand’s visibility among end consumers and opinion makers”.

Table 3. Journalists’ Importance in Communication Strategies of Private and Public Organizations and Agencies. Source: Author’s Own Work, 2025.

IC *	Rate **	Justification of the Ratings of Journalists
4	6	“Journalists are fundamental in linking the messages and image of organizations and brands to society in the right way.”
6	6	“They are essential (...), and credible instruments of freedom and democracy.”
10	6	“A good relationship with journalists is essential for a brand’s reputation in the market. At the same time, there is a mutual sense of usefulness in this relationship: the journalist gains access to our information, and we can convey our message more effectively and in a personalized way, provided we maintain good relations with them.”
12	4	“They play a key role in extending communication reach and fostering engagement on specific issues (...).”
18	5	“Many projects with the agency’s clients depend on fostering and nurturing a good relationship with journalists.”
19	6	“They directly impact the brand’s visibility among end consumers and opinion leaders. They are crucial in shaping public opinion about the brand’s attributes.”
21	4	“It is important to maintain a fluid relationship with journalists, but it is equally crucial to have a solid strategy and a good relationship with the media where the journalist works.”

* IC: Identification Code in database; ** Rate: “1” is “nothing important” and “6” is “very important” 6.

In addition to the questionnaire data collected via Qualtrics, two participants chose to contribute in a face-to-face, semi-structured interview. This option, conducted later in the research, enabled a deeper exploration of some of the results previously described and presented in earlier tables. These two interviews provided a deeper understanding of the present importance of journalists in communication strategies, particularly at a time when DIs are gaining ground in brand strategies and budgets. Given the richness of the insights gathered, these results are presented separately (Table 4).

These two interviews reinforced the previous findings. The interviewees were peremptory in stating that the journalists and DIs are not comparable realities, nor are they competitors. These results highlight the distinct nature of the relationship and purpose associated with each, clearly distinguishing journalists from DIs. They disseminate various types of content, resulting in different impacts on their respective audiences. These are seen as “more short-lived”, but “not a fad” that will pass. They focus on achieving more immediate results (such as clicks and sales), while journalists are committed to long-term and deeper goals, such as building reputation and credibility.

The interviewees agreed that DIs “have not diminished the importance” of journalists, even though “clients” (brand managers) “love the idea of working” with these new mediators. The testimonies reveal that we are dealing with “different communication strategies”, and, therefore, it is not advisable to “mix” DIs and journalists at brand events, as this could lead to a “loss of credibility” among media professionals. One of the interviewees acknowledge that some newspapers are “trying to imitate the ‘style’ of DIs by “doing direct, unedited livestreams”. Journalists, however, seek “more detailed information” and to “edit” the content provided to them. They are the ones who influence the “reputation”, “building of a public image”, and “decision-making on serious matters”.

Table 4. Key Insights from Interviews on the Relationship and Type Content of Journalists and DIs.
Source: Author's Own Work, 2025.

IC *	Journalists Versus DIs	Content Differences Between Journalists and DIs
Interview A	"DIs are not comparable to journalists (. . .)." "They (DIs) may simply be a trend (. . .)." "I do not think DIs will reduce the importance of journalists". "The relationship with DIs can be more relaxed." "The impact of DIs cannot be the same as that of journalists (. . .). The type of message is different."	"Journalists develop topics more deeply. Their work is more elaborate, and they seek out additional content." "Some newspapers are trying to imitate the 'style' of DIs, doing short live streams at events, but I do not think it works, because editing the information is important." "Journalists try to keep the information more detailed." "We, as press officers, are interested in getting our version of the story published. It is up to journalists to fact-check and conduct further investigations. (However), due to time constraints, they might end up publishing what a press officer sends them word-for-word, when they should edit and complement the content provided by brands."
Interview B	"I do not think DIs are competitors (. . .)." "My agency's clients love working with DIs, but those are different communication strategies and come with specific costs (. . .). And that is not media relations." "I advise brands not to mix journalists and DIs in the same events, because they lose credibility (for journalists)." "DIs should not be seen as sources for journalists." "(Journalists say), do not come to me with storyboards like I am a DI. To my magazine, it is not just about taking pretty pictures." "I think there is space for everyone, but they (DIs) are not the same thing." "The results (from DIs) are more short-lived." "Still, DIs are not a fad. They are here to stay (. . .)."	"When you hire a DI, you're buying clicks. It's pure sales, and it works!" "Working with journalists means working on reputation (. . .)." "Companies gain visibility, reputation, and strength through journalists. Digital presence is important, but when it comes to building a public image, journalists are still the professionals who deserve that role. I feel that despite the importance of social media, journalistic information has also gained strength (. . .)." "The average citizen wants something deeper, more grounded than what pops up in their feed. A feature in a good newspaper or on television has a much greater impact when making serious decisions." "DIs work well and have impact, but it's more immediate. It's a spark, it flares up and fades!" "During the pandemic, the need for credibility became even more evident, and journalism gained prominence. That's when media relations became especially important." "There's a real desire from brands to reach the public in a serious way (. . .)." "The content I prepare for journalists is also reused on social media to be shared by DIs."

* IC: Identification Code in database.

To conclude this analysis, we create a word cloud illustrating the roles of journalists and DIs in communication strategies (See Figures 1 and 2, below).



Figure 1. Word cloud about the role of journalists in communication strategies. Source: Author's Own Work, 2025, supported by wordart.com.



Figure 2. Word cloud about the role of DIs in communication strategies. Source: Author's Own Work, 2025, supported by wordart.com.

If there were one word to capture the role of journalists best, it would be “relationship” that generates “credible” and “public” information, which promotes good “reputation”, a term that emerged consistently in the statements of interviewees and the 24 participants in the previously analyzed questionnaire. About DIs, an “innovative” and “important” way to engage the targets is highlighted during this research.

5. Discussion

The concerns raised by [Pereira \(2016\)](#), [Oliveira \(2019\)](#), and [Tashijan \(2023\)](#) regarding a possible devaluation of journalistic work within the context of strategic communication, considering the rise in DIs, served as the starting point of this exploratory study. The results indicate the effective institutionalization of DIs within strategic communication practices. Nevertheless, the importance of journalists has not faded. Participants consistently positioned them more favorably when compared to DIs. According to the data, journalists are considered more valuable within the specificities of communication, being seen as more aligned with traditional public relations. In contrast, DIs are more associated with a brand's marketing goals, given that much of their content is “paid” or “prearranged”.

Therefore, in response to the first question of this study (What is the role of journalists and DIs in strategic communication?), we conclude that the role of journalists in strategic communication is both relevant and recognized by participants. While media relations may undergo a process of emancipation, as proposed by [Zerfass et al. \(2022\)](#), the value and historical linkage that public relations with journalists' relationships have not disappeared, as previously advocated by [Cutlip \(1994\)](#), [Kopenhaver \(1985\)](#), [Schudson \(1981\)](#), and [Aronoff \(1975\)](#).

The keywords associated with the role of journalists include the building of “prestige”, “visibility”, “credibility”, and “reputation”, stemming from their “impartiality”, and “ability to influence public opinion”. A “close relationship” and “care” in the information they send is still essential, because it is up to them to “go deeper” and “check its veracity” and relevance. The perspectives of the study's participants align with multiple studies on the nature of the relationship between public relations and journalism ([Yang et al., 2016](#); [Schönhagen & Meissner, 2016](#); [Clementson, 2019](#); [Sallot & Johnson, 2006](#); [Schudson, 1981](#)).

The second guiding question of this study ought to determine whether communication professionals, in their efforts to disseminate content, are replacing journalists with DIs. The results indicate that this is not the case. However, they also help explain why DIs have gained ground in the communication strategies of organizations and brands. The importance is associated with “effectiveness”, their role as an “alternative and innovative” medium, as well as delivering a more “humanized” and “creative” message, producing “impactful” results, reaching a “broader target”, generating “greater engagement”, and offering “visibility for brands”. While a close relationship with DIs is also required, it has a different nature, often grounded in “exchange” and complicity with their followers.

The results show that DIs are also recognized as opinion makers regarding brands and products, as described in the literature (Brockhaus et al., 2022; Sng et al., 2019). Therefore, further reflection and future studies are warranted, considering Gatekeeping Theory (Wallace, 2018). According to the participants in this study, the success of DIs is linked to their ability to create an imaginary of “proximity”, as reported by Vasconcellos (2020), or to foster “emotional connections to gain proximity”, particularly with younger generations, as highlighted by Leung et al. (2022) and Munsch (2021).

At the core of DIs’ strategies lies the potential for “interaction”, “identification”, and “engagement” between them and their community of followers, as described by Navarro et al. (2020), Dhanesh and Duthler (2019), and Kim and Kim (2021). Due to their characteristics, centered on “reach”, “creativity”, and “lifestyle”, DIs may be replacing traditional celebrities, rather than journalists, in their role of promoting products and engaging audiences (Almeida et al., 2018; Carvalho, 2018).

When we enter the realm of journalism, “credibility”, “freedom”, “truthfulness”, and “impartiality” emerge as key constructs. Based on these findings, we would venture to argue that journalistic content is aimed more at the “citizen” than at the consumer or the citizen that every consumer represents. This perspective aligns with the attributes identified by Ribeiro (2016) and resonates with a statement from one of the fieldwork interviews (B): “The average citizen wants something deeper, more grounded than what pops up in their feed. A feature in a good newspaper or on television has a much greater impact when making serious decisions.”.

As Vasconcellos (2020) notes, paradoxically, journalists may even seek the “imaginary of proximity” with their readers, much like DIs. However, as also pointed out in the interviews (Interview A): “Some newspapers are trying to imitate the ‘style’ of DIs, performing short live streams at events, but I do not think it works, because editing the information is important”. Therefore, we can conclude that communication professionals do not expect the same results from journalists as from DIs. Moreover, above all, one does not replace the other within strategic communication practices.

6. Conclusions

Considering the results, the chronicle of a “death foretold”, which served as the starting point for this work, proves to be, at the very least, controversial. The professionals who took part in this research do not conflate the work of journalists with that of DIs, and they recognize visible differences in their respective *modus operandi*, the outcomes they generate, and their targets.

For brand communication professionals, journalists remain relevant to the relationship between organizations and their stakeholders. While both are described as opinion makers, journalists are placed within the realm of strategic reputation management. They are viewed as allies of organizations that serve the public interest and ensure transparency. On the other hand, DIs are more closely associated with entertainment-driven content, marketing, and consumer behavior objectives. Therefore, while they may be complementary in communication strategies, their nature is fundamentally distinct.

The results show that DIs are considered important “content carriers” in communication strategies, but they do not replace journalists. Their purpose is fundamentally different, as in many cases, the dissemination of information is subject to financial compensation (or material incentives), which is incompatible with the practices and ethical standards of professional journalism.

Based on the testimonies of the professionals in this study, it is argued that there is no reason to stop feeding newsrooms or to abandon the strategic exploration of media agendas. Journalists remain a valid and advisable option for brands and organizations seeking to

leverage the processes of “mediation” traditionally associated with gatekeepers to gain media visibility for their organizations, brands, products, and services simultaneously.

Independent and impartial journalism remains a cornerstone of society and democracy, which are increasingly relevant in corporate sustainability strategies aimed at ensuring transparency.

The explosion of DIs is viewed as another marketing strategy or tactic. There is room for disseminating contracted content through DIs, but also for content that requires journalistic “mediation” as a safeguard for the public interest. This distinction is frequently referred to as a defining element between the two realities and professions.

A study of this nature inevitably presents limitations. Among them, the most notable are the limited number of participants, the inherently qualitative methodology of the research, and the use of digital tools for data collection. Consequently, the findings cannot be generalized for brand and communication professionals, nor are they used to extrapolate possible attitudes and perceptions. Furthermore, digital data collection lacks the richness of face-to-face interaction, which is more characterized by authenticity and allows for the observation of verbal and non-verbal cues. These elements are difficult to detect through a screen and are even less present in written responses. Nevertheless, we believe this study has illustrated the coexistence of both players—journalists and DIs—within communication strategies. Therefore, it offers several meaningful contributions to both theory and practice, providing valuable insights that stimulate future research.

The knowledge generated through this analysis can support communication professionals, academics, journalists, and DIs in recognizing key characteristics and trends in influence, guiding relationship strategies, and encouraging the development of new communication practices. Both DIs and journalists play a crucial role in promoting organizational goals, yet they operate through different dynamics, produce distinct impacts, and often target different audiences. From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that strategic mediatization is not about eliminating journalists but redefining their role within an increasingly digital ecosystem. Successful communication strategies must, therefore, balance direct and mediated approaches, integrate the immediacy and reach of DIs with the credibility and interpretative capacity of journalists.

This reconfiguration aligns with the description provided by GT, which has evolved from positioning journalists as exclusive custodians of information to recognizing a more complex, distributed process involving multiple human and non-human actors, as we mentioned in the theoretical framework. For communication professionals, this shift requires strategies that navigate an ecosystem where influence is shared across multiple gatekeepers. While the human filter of journalism remains essential for ensuring credibility, accountability, and transparency, DIs introduce new layers of mediation that organizations must strategically manage. Although both journalists and DIs are described as opinion makers, their functions diverge: journalists are situated within the realm of strategic reputation management, serving as allies of organizations in upholding transparency and the public interest, whereas DIs are more closely associated with entertainment-oriented content, marketing objectives, and consumer behavior.

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Abbreviations

DI's	Digital Influencers
ECM	European Communication Monitor
GT	Gatekeeping Theory

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