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Communicational management of Football clubs: Analysis of communication departments from *La Liga*

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Abstracts

[ES] Introducción: Este artículo estudia la gestión de la comunicación que llevan a cabo los principales equipos de fútbol españoles. Se investigan los recursos humanos y materiales con los que cuentan para ello y se comparan con la realidad de otras organizaciones. **Metodología:** Se recurre fundamentalmente a una entrevista semiestructurada con responsables de comunicación o directivos de los 122 clubs de Primera, Segunda y Segunda División B del Campeonato Nacional de Liga. **Resultados:** El 93% de los equipos cuenta con gabinetes o estructuras internas de comunicación, al frente de los cuales ejercen profesionales titulados mayoritariamente (69%) en Periodismo. El 70% cuenta, además, con planes estratégicos de comunicación y sólo un 50% reconoce externalizar servicios de esta naturaleza. **Discusión y conclusiones:** Pese a la intensa labor comunicativa de estas organizaciones, se observa en general una importante falta de profesionalización y de formación académica específica, con grandes diferencias entre clubes y categorías.

[EN] Introduction: This article studies the communication management performed by the main Spanish football teams. The staff and material resources dedicated thereto are investigated and compared against the reality of other organizations. **Methodology:** Essentially a semi-structured interview is conducted with staff responsible of communications or managerial staff from the 122 clubs of First, Second division and the Second B Division of the National Championship of *La Liga*. **Results:** 93% of football teams have communication offices or in-house communication structures, where mostly (69%) work, professionals graduated in journalism. In addition, 70% have strategic

communication plans and only 50% recognize to outsource this sort of services. **Discussion and conclusions:** Despite the intense communicational task of these organizations, in general a significant lack of professionalization and specific academic education there is observed, with huge differences between football clubs and categories.

Keywords

[ES] departamentos de comunicación; gabinetes; fútbol; LaLiga; periodismo; relaciones públicas.

[EN] communication departments; press offices; football; *La Liga*; journalism; public relations

Contents

[ES] 1. Introducción y marco teórico. 1.1. Concepto de gabinete de comunicación, profesionalización de sus responsables y labores. 1.2. Estudios existentes en España respecto a la gestión comunicativa en otros sectores. 1.3. Estudios existentes en España respecto a la gestión comunicativa en los clubes de fútbol. 2. Método. 3. Resultados. 4. Discusión y conclusiones. 5. Notas. 6. Referencias bibliográficas.

[EN] 1. Introduction and theoretical framework. 1.1. Concept of communication office, professionalization of staff responsible and tasks. 1.2 Studies in Spain about communicational management in other sectors. 1.3 Studies in Spain about the communicational management in football clubs. 2. Methods. 3. Results. 4. Discussion and conclusions. 5. Notes. 6. List of references.

Translated by **Yuhanny Henares**
(Academic Translator, Universitat de Barcelona)

1. Introduction and theoretical framework

Football in Spain is still the main sport, both in number of followers, as well as practicing individuals and, of course, regarding generated business volume, unrivalled to any other sport. This hegemony is specially manifested in the specialised sports publications (especially, written press), but also in the informative contents of mass media or the large audiences of specific programmes about the subject. Its economic relevance is evident, and beyond the scope of sports and performance, it enables the development of a very important market.

These evidences make possible that the football business manages millions of Euros in the Spanish case, especially in the main football teams, which produce considerable currency and have a great international projection.

All this generates that the communicational management of the football industry requires gears that allow its positioning and continuity at the level of the “best League of the world” (IFFHS, 2018) like the International Federation of Football History and Statistics has often reiterated. To do so, the main football clubs potentiate the creation of communication offices or specific communication departments in their internal organization charts, that manage their positioning in the scope of marketing and media. This organization would be the main object of study of this paper, that aims to make an X-Ray photograph about the communicational professionalization of football clubs in Spain, based on whether there are specific structures to manage communication or not and using the specific education of their staff responsible as a reference.

To provide some background, we must make clear there is no prior study of similar characteristics, since resembling analyses were not identified among the main databases, from an academic and scientific perspective.

Nevertheless, there have been found some studies that analyse communicational aspects of specific Spanish football clubs. Thus, we highlight the researches conducted in this area from the perspective of sports journalism (Olabe Sánchez, 2015; Manfredi Sánchez, Rojas Torijos and Herranz De La Casa, 2015; Sugden and Tomlinson, 2007), advertising (Romero Bejarano, Simancas González, Silva Robles and Herrero Gutiérrez, 2014; Mayorga Escalada, 2014; Montemayor Ruiz and Ortiz Sobrino, 2016; Barrientos Santos, 2016), analysis of mediatic presence (Sainz De Baranda, 2013 and 2014; González Ramallal, 2014; Carriedo Cayón, 2016; Gallardo-Camacho, 2016; Jiménez Miranda, 2016), from the perspective of the history of communication (Díaz Noci, 2016; Simón Sanjurjo, 2015); studies linked to political communication (González Ramallal, 2014; Quiroga Fernández De Soto, 2015), about education and training (Viciano Ramírez, Mayorga-Vega, Ruíz and Blanco Vega, 2016) or specific case studies, such as the one about *Real Madrid* (Wang, 2014), *F.C. Barcelona* (Ortega Carneiro, 2017), as well as about different sports games, such as the championships or Olympics (Herrero Gutiérrez, Barredo Ibáñez and Oller Alonso, 2013; Pardo Gila and Calle Molina, 2016; Fernández Peña, 2014).

Despite this abundance of studies that link the Spanish football and the communicational area, we can confirm the lack of a complete analysis dealing with and analysing the organization of communication in the entirety of football teams that participate in professional competitions of the Spanish football, *LaLiga* or First Division, the maximum category, also known as its sponsored name *LaLiga Santander*, composed of 20 teams, and *LaLiga2* or Second Division, where there participate 22 teams and currently called *LaLiga 123*, due to sponsoring reasons. The same happens with the following category, already semi-professional of national football, the Second Division B, composed of 80 teams distributed into four groups of 20 football clubs each.

1.1. Concept of communication office, professionalization of staff responsible and tasks

To begin this synopsis, we must start by providing a definition of what is considered a communication department or communication office.

There are many definitions for this concept, but it is also noteworthy that the denomination itself is a result of the controversy in the communication sector, since there are organizations that opt for the nomenclature of communication department, while others prefer communication office, communication management, image department, press office, department of public relations... to refer to the structure responsible for the management of organizational communication. This disparity in terminology can be justified considering different factors: the origin of the departments/communication offices that, in their early years, restricted the activity to the intermediation between organizations and media, only performing tasks of press reporters (Simón Onieva, 2015, p. 69); together with the late development of public relations in Spain (Cárdenas Rica, 2000, p. 38), that have nurtured from journalistic sources until they started to develop in the university and business area; the prominence of other disciplines linked to communication, like journalism or marketing, in such a way that many organizations included the communicational tasks inside other departments considered related; or the fashions and trends, that changed the names resulting in nomenclatures such as the corporate department (Villafañe, 2001, p. 13), public image department, external affairs, institutional communication, organizational communication, etc. The Dircom study of 2015 gathers up to 119 different names for this structure (Dircom, 2015).

Nevertheless, we will highlight the definition provided by Ramírez (1995) about these organizational structures. For him, “communication offices are active, organized and usually stable sources of information that cover communicational needs both in-house and external, of those prominent organizations and/or individuals willing to convey a positive image of themselves to society, thus influencing in the public opinion.”

This definition can be completed with the perspective of Castro Galiana (2007, p. 26), for whom it is increasingly common to call communication offices “Communication Management”, since it must be as close as possible to the decision-making entities within the organization. However, as mentioned earlier, the huge disparity of names is still the rule. Regarding the relevance that organizations give to these structures, we must indicate that the effects of the last economic crisis have led to a reduction in the budget destined to communication, a reduction that, despite the slow subsequent recovery, has not been alleviated yet, which has also led to a reduction in the headcount of communication offices (Dircom, 2015). Even so, “in the structure of large organizations -in small-sized ones, a single individual performs all tasks- there is usually a Press Officer and when it is so, this position reports to the communication director, but the former is equivalent to the waiter serving the food, whereas the Dircom, the maximum responsible of this office, is like the chef instead, the figure who defines strategies and conducts its tactic concretion as a whole.” (Arroyo and Yus, 2011, p. 26).

Regarding this aspect, we must talk about the professionalization of the sector in Spain. Based on the Dircom study of the year 2015, the profile that consolidates as more suitable for the position of director of communication is the graduate in journalism, although it also includes the boom of graduates in Economic and Business Sciences, Advertising and Public Relations, Audiovisual Communication and Engineering and different degree studies.

Despite this disparity in the education of the staff responsible for organizational communication departments/ offices in Spain, there are many voices (Cárdenas Rica, 2000; Almansa Martínez, 2005; Mut Camacho, 2013; Navarro Ruiz and Humanes, 2014, etc.) that claim a greater protagonism for the area of public relations, since their role is to be the directors of communication between one organization and their publics, hence they perform different functions (Castillo, 2005):

- To manage, plan and conduct the communication for an organization as a whole.
- To manage the flow of messages inside the organizations through the different research methods so that, from that point on, to elaborate more adequate communicational strategies.
- To manage the circulation of a message outside the organization when they aid the management to decide the way to explain a policy or an action to the public and then try to access media to explain the activity.

Another concept to consider for the study is the one referring to communication plans, which main function is to set the general objective of communication within a specific time frame and to define the basic criteria of the organization regarding in-house and external communication (Hernández Rodríguez, 2002). The communication plan (Jáuregui, 1990, p. 18) must be like a “tailored suit” with its publics and current or potential groups of interest, namely, it must include: the X-ray photograph, the diagnosis, recipes, medications and, if applicable, the surgical procedures needed to face the problems of comprehensive communication of the organization.

The ideal is that organizations must have a strategic plan of communication dictating the bases of their activity, both in-house and external, in such a way it ranks and agilizes the communicational activity in order to improve profitability. However, as will be manifested in the following sections, there are still many business and institutional organizations lacking a communication plan and that keep improvising their actions day after day.

1.2. Studies in Spain about communicational management in other sectors

In Spain there are many studies about communication management and the professional profile of their staff responsible in specific areas, such as the large companies (Moreno and Capriotti, 2006), small and middle-sized companies or SME (Fernández-Souto, 2005; Fernández-Souto and Puentes-Rivera,

2014), polluting companies in Galicia (Fernández-Souto, Puentes-Rivera and Vázquez-Gestal, 2015), Universities and research centres (Simón Onieva, 2015), local governments (Fernández-Souto and Vázquez Gestal, 2014) or NPOs (Salvador i Peris, 1999), among others. It is also important to highlight the role of specific organizations that in journalistic studies, made an X-ray photograph about the current situation of the sector, cases like ADECEC, *Asociación de Empresas Consultoras en Relaciones Públicas* (2008) [Association of Consultancy Companies in Public Relations], Dircom (2015) or the European Communication Monitor (Zerfass et al., 2016). However, as said earlier, it has been confirmed there is no scientific study that analyses and makes an X-ray photograph about the communication landscape in the entirety of football clubs participating in the national categories of the Spanish football.

The recurrent conclusion in all these studies is that communication must be in the core of the strategy of any institution (Morató, 2011) and must be so in a planned and organized manner, even though this does not always occur.

This is often attributed to budget cuts characteristic of the last economic crisis, but it is important to consider, in addition, other aspects with which it is justified, such as the lack of specific relevance of communication within business organizations, the scarce relevance granted to strategic communication, the selection of communication directors with scarce specific education or the great differences between organizations managing a higher or lower budget. We assume that these variables will be also made explicit in the data collected and a great difference will be observed between football teams belonging to First Division (*LaLiga*), Second Division (*LaLiga2*) and Second Division B.

Among the many variables analysed by those mentioned studies and reports, we will take as reference those that will be also studied in this research:

1.2.1 About communication management

Regardless of the nomenclature preferred by organizations, what is clear is that their function must be that of creating, coordinating, disseminating and orchestrate all communication actions (both in-house as well as external) that the company /institution/association will perform with each and every one of their publics (García Orosa, 2009).

The controversy of names is still in effect, as mentioned earlier, and organizations bet for one or the other depending on their needs and interests. However, it seems demonstrated that the figure of the communication director (Cabrera Cabrera, 2015, p. 329) gains more relevance when it becomes something necessary to achieve differentiation from competitors through a good communicational management. The data shown by the report of *Estado de la Comunicación en España 2015* (Dircom, 2015) [Status of Communication in Spain 2015] support this statement and thus, more than 83% of professionals believe that the relevance of communication in the company has increased in the past years. Due to the need of a greater effectiveness and the increase of competitiveness, driven by the economic crisis, 57% of those professionals consider in addition, that even though the general budget destined to communication has reduced, there has increased the investment in the measurement and study of results of communicational tasks.

Based on the premise that everything communicates, although not in an intended manner, it seems clear that the role of communication management (under the shelter of the terminology used) is essential today, because in a company not only advertising spots or public relation campaigns communicate, but rather the whole daily activity of the company communicates, from its products and services up to the behaviour of their members (Capriotti, 2013, p. 217). All these are aspects that talk about the organization, communicating how it is, therefore they must be taken care of and planned so that they are coherent and this is the main role of the communication management: to act as an

orchestra conductor so that all elements that may contribute in a direct or indirect manner to generate an image about the organization, align in an unisonous manner and headed the same direction.

1.2.2. About strategical planning and communication plans

The strategic communication is aligned and integrated with the global strategy of the company, which promotes and improves the strategic positioning of the organization (Argenti, 2014, p. 93). This reality is reflected in the Spanish organizations and it is evidenced in data such as the position of the communication director in their organization chart, which keeps improving, or in the fact that 51% of organizations physically have a comprehensive communication plan linked to the business strategy. Therefore, it can be said that in Spain there is about 74% of entities that opt for strategical communication (Dircom, 2015).

However, there must be considered the substantial differences between the large and small size organizations, as indicated by Cabrera Cabrera (2015, p. 326) when observing that the large organizations have had the figure of the communication director for years, while SMEs (small and middle sized companies) start considering the relevance of organizational communication, integrating the Dircom quite recently and in a progressive manner.

1.2.3. About the professionalization of the sector

Based on the ideas mentioned earlier, it seems clear that organizations opting for communication must have a series of objectives set in a communication strategy that allows them to reach their goals. To do so, entities must incorporate this orchestra conductor to their organizational chart in order to coordinate all the efforts of the organization to head them in the same direction.

This need has led to the specialization of the figure of the communication director over the years (Costa, 2011; Fernández-Souto and Puentes-Rivera, 2014; Fernández-Souto and Vázquez Gestal, 2014; Dircom, 2015; Cabrera Cabrera, 2015; ADECEC, 2008) and that there keeps increasing the number of graduates or bachelors performing tasks related to communication management.

Among the different communication specialties, journalism is still prioritised over the rest (Dircom, 2015; Palacio Llanos, 2015). Apart from it, bachelor studies and most common studies among communication directors are Economic and Business Sciences, Advertising and Public Relations, Audiovisual Communication and different Engineering careers. To this education, we must add the postgraduate studies, master's degrees or doctorate studies, increasingly common among communication directors in Spain and that already represent 75% of the total, compared to 32% in 2010 and 19% in 2005 (Dircom, 2015). Despite all, these data cannot be extrapolated to small and middle size companies, where it is more frequent that staff responsible of the communicational management have another kind of studies (Tourism, History, Philology...) or that they don't even have higher level studies.

However, and following Cabrera Cabrera (2015, p. 326), we can say that we are standing before communication directors with younger ages and better prepared. The broad education of these professionals extends beyond communication and demands them (Dircom, 2015) to have strategic perspective (14.37%), communication capacity (13.16%), access to media (12.90%), influence in business management (9.09%) and management capacity (7.62%), but also leadership, objectivity, high technical knowledge about the company's products or services, teamwork capacity and creativity, among others (Dircom, 2015; Zeffass et al., 2015).

1.3. Studies in Spain about the communicational management in football clubs

As stated previously, football is the main sport in Spain. The great number of followers and mediatic spots dedicated thereto are a good example. However, this does not hinder that, even at a professional level, it is affected in general by an almost chronic state of bankruptcy and conflict, derived from an irrational management of its resources (Chadwich and Hamil, 2010). Nevertheless, football overcomes its original function of game or entertainment, shifting into a source of identity and consumption (Crawford, 2004) and it is in this area where we focus our research, since the reference considered for its elaboration are centred in the study of the strategic management of corporate communication in football clubs, in the management of its resources and intangible assets (López Triana and Sotillo, 2009; Alcoba López, 2010; Araújo, De Carlos and Fraiz, 2014; Cayora and Correia Loureiro, 2014; Coombs and Osborne, 2012; Crolley, 1999), in the planning and execution of a corporate identity (Capriotti, 2013; Sanahua Peris, 2012) and in the configuration of a specific reputation (Villafañe, 2001; Hopwoodk, 2005), besides the role of the communication director as integrator of all messages issued and as representative of publics before the organization (Mut Camacho, 2013; Boyle and Haynes: 2014; Boyle: 2013), in a long term bet based on strategical planning and a respectful development with their groups of interest.

In this framework, considering the lack of specific studies regarding communicational organization of professional and semi-professional football teams and clubs in Spain, the research labor of Olabe Sánchez (2012) is noteworthy, who states that professional football clubs in Spain, especially those participating in the maximum category, the First Division, are currently developing in a technological and business context marked by globalization, where there outstand three factors that have generated the current conception of football and that are reflected on the business functioning of these entities, according to Villega Fiengo (2003): the mediatization of cultural consumption of this sport, the influence of media in competitions, a result of its own transnationalization and the role of sponsors as drivers and consumption inducers in football teams.

The study of Olabe is focused on the relationship between football teams and communication media from the journalistic and even marketing perspective, however, part of its data can be extrapolated to this paper.

As it has been happening in other organizational fields, until the 50 and 60s, relationships between sports journalists and football clubs were governed by the cordiality between both parties, aiming for a unique and shared purpose: information and newsworthiness. This relationship got complicated (Olabe Sánchez, 2012) the moment these sports entities started to create and manage their information through in-house media, in order to reduce their dependency from information edited by traditional media (Moragas, Kennett and Ginesta, 2011), resembling the way Public Relations have been evolving historically: being born as intermediary between media and organizations until becoming, in the present, the managers and planners of communication actions of broadcasters for each and every one of their different target publics. For Olabe Sánchez (2012) the setting where football clubs act in Spain is currently characterised by the fragmentation of media, with the proliferation of informative platforms emerging from information and communication technologies (Moragas et al., 2011), the active role of followers and partners of football clubs, who demand not only information but to also increase their emotional links with these sports organizations (Llopis-Goid, 2014), the possibilities to manage their corporate messages without the intermediation of *mass media* (Ginesta Portet, 2010), and, as a consequence, to influence on the contents that journalists produce at the same time they unify corporate messages on mass media.

But, how are all these actions managed, planned and executed? It seems evident, the need of a coordinator or communications director that strategically orchestrates the tactics and techniques to be used when aiming for specific communicational goals.

This orchestration relies, ideally, on the communication department. Olabe Sánchez (2012), coinciding with Lobillo (2012), in a study about communicational management of football clubs belonging to First Division, considers that communication departments have developed as a consequence of their progressive professionalization. It is confirmed that, in the past years, the communication departments of professional football clubs in Spain have implemented a communicational strategy based on the use of their own communicational platforms, especially the corporate website and the institutional profile on Twitter, to interact with sports journalists, thus modifying the traditional behaviour of these relationships based, up until recently, in the personal contact between these and the protagonists of the sports information.

In addition, its data reveal a certain uniformity in the communicational behaviour of professional football clubs in Spain when it comes to interact in a news-related manner with information professionals, because it confirms that communicational strategies and actions developed by these organizations are targeted to generating contents through its communication mix, in order to convey a positive corporate image towards their *stakeholders*: sponsors, followers and partners. In this model, it is perceived that the main news sources of journalists are still football players, communication offices, corporate websites and social networks of these entities.

Considering the aforesaid, it is worth mentioning whether football clubs perform these actions following a strategic plan or whether they improvise. Likewise, and taking the aforesaid question into account, whether that strategic management, either planned or not, is done from any structure specialized in communication whatsoever, either in-house or external. And, lastly, the staff responsible for the communicational implementation of football teams, have any specific education to perform these tasks or they opt for improvisation instead?

In the results section, some data there will be provided that could serve as reference to envision the professional panorama on communicational management of professional and semi-professional football in Spain.

2. Methods

This study is based on a hypothesis (H1) that indicates that the organizational communication of Spanish football teams is not as professionalized as expected. The second hypothesis (H2) states that, often, education of staff responsible for the communication activities of those football teams is not the most suitable, since they are not specialized in that field. The third hypothesis (H3) is based on the fact that football clubs studied do not have a specific communication plan and the fourth hypothesis (H4) deals with outsourcing of communication services, indicating that football teams analysed outsource many of these services, they no longer can manage due to structural and/ or economic restrictions. The fifth and last hypothesis (H5) is based on the existence of great differences regarding the communicational management conducted by the different football teams depending on their income, which are essentially determined by the division they belong to (First, Second or Second B).

Besides confirming or rejecting these five initial hypotheses, the research sets the following objectives:

- a. To conduct a pioneer exploratory study that gathers data about the current situation of organizational communication among professional and semi-professional Spanish football teams (O1).

- b. To conduct a comparative study between the communication management of the football teams analysed and the communication in other sectors by different organizations (O2).
- c. To provide keys allowing football clubs and public relations professionals in this area, to evolve and innovate in this subject (O3).

To analyse this study, as a consequence, the study object considered is the knowledge of communicational management of Spanish football clubs. The selected sample involves 100% of Spanish football teams of *LaLiga*, both of First and Second Division, as well as the clubs that compose the Second Division B. Therefore, the totality of the football teams belonging to the two professional categories of the Spanish football, as well the semi-professional, including, 20 from *LaLiga* [1], 22 from *LaLiga2* [2] and 80 from Second Division B [3], respectively, from the complete last season, 2016/17.

Once the sample was selected, contact data were collected (phone number and email) from the 122 football teams composing those categories, establishing contact with all of them and conducting a semi-structured telephone interview with communication responsables, or otherwise, managerial positions of the football team aware about the communicational management of the team.

The preference for the telephone interview is justified by the facility of access to studied football teams, since due to their geographic distribution across all Spanish autonomous communities, including the city of Melilla, it would not be feasible for authors to conduct these interviews in a presential manner. Based on the data collected, a descriptive method was used to develop a narrative, numeric and graphic exposition of results obtained, with the aim of having a first knowledge about the reality investigated.

The 122 football clubs were asked about their organizational chart and organization regarding communication, if applicable, there were also asked about the academic and professional education of staff responsible for the communication activities of the football team, whether there is a specific communication plan or not and finally about the outsourcing of communication services.

Considering the objectives established at the beginning of this section, the use of a double methodology was decided, both quantitative and qualitative, in such a way that through the interviews there is direct access to primary sources of research, which in the case we are dealing with here, are the staff responsible of the communication offices object of study. The scientific production about the validation of this research technique is wide, thus, Valles (2002) indicates that interviews, a qualitative research technique, are professional conversations addressing a purpose and some objectives; meanwhile Ruiz Olabuénaga (2012, p. 165) also emphasises that this kind of conversations involve a communicational process where the interviewer and interviewee can influence each other either consciously or unconsciously during said interview.

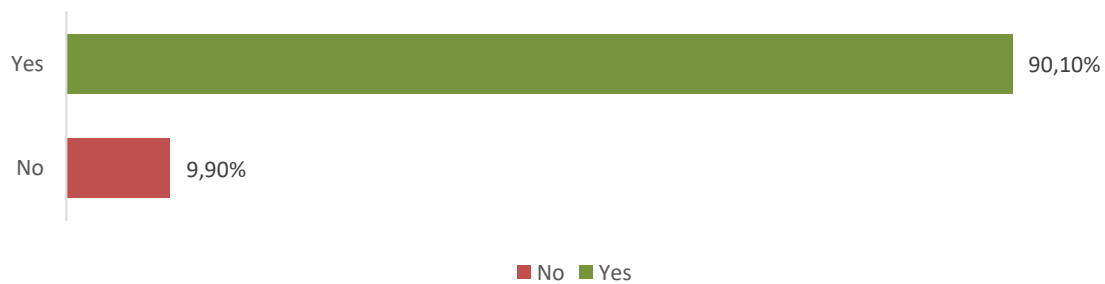
Finally, from there, an analysis of the data obtained was done, as well as graphics to facilitate the comprehension of results and conclusions using the deductive, besides the descriptive method.

3. Results

Considering the data obtained through the interviews conducted to staff responsables for communication activities of the football clubs playing in the season 2016/17 in the professional and semi-professional categories of the Spanish football, the following results are highlighted.

Regarding the organizational structure of communication in these organizations, it is worth mentioning that, considering total data, most of football teams analysed (90.1%) state having a specific configuration to meet their communicational needs.

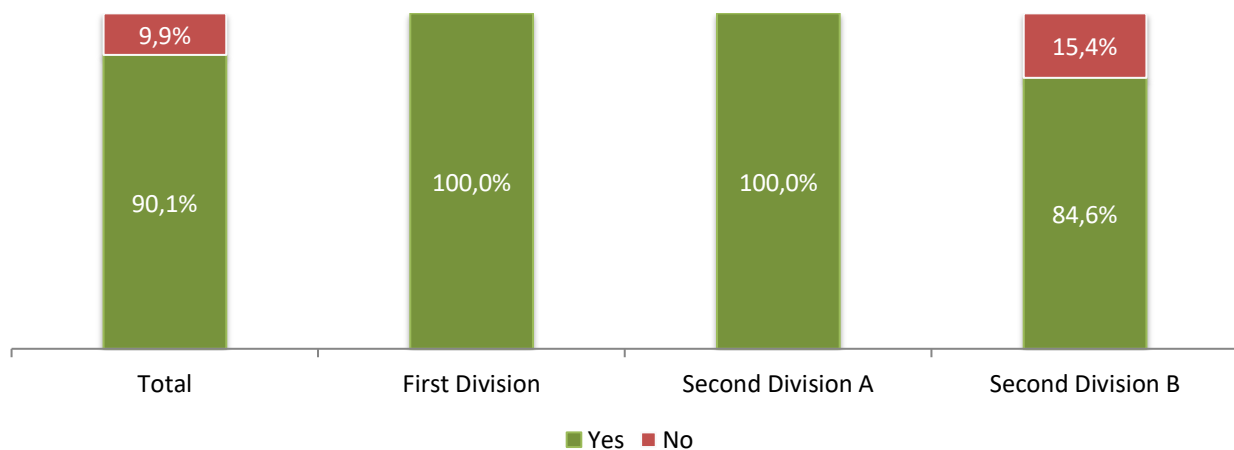
Graphic 1. Presence of in-house communication structures in football teams of *La Liga* National Championship belonging to First, Second and Second Division B



Source: Authors' own elaboration

This total datum seems rather positive from the perspective of professional management of communication, since it indicates a very high professionalization in this sector. However, when disaggregating by the division where each football team plays, there is a certain inflection between those clubs playing in First Division and the rest, as observed in the following graphic.

Graphic 2. Presence of in-house communicational structures of football teams from *La Liga* National Championship belonging to First, Second and Second Division B, by category



Source: authors' own elaboration

This discrepancy of percentage between football teams, based on the responses obtained in the interviews conducted, is motivated by two essential factors:

- a) The economic budget available. As a sample, cases like the *Fútbol Club Barcelona* are noteworthy, because for the season object of study, it had an approximate budget of 700 million Euros (*Diario Marca*, 2016) or *Real Madrid*, that also approved for that same season, a budget of 631 million Euros (Cope, 2016). Compared to this, the football teams of Second Division have much more limited resources, for instance, *Getafe*, with 18 million Euros (*AS*, 2016), *Almería*, about 13 million or *Oviedo*, *Córdoba* and *Osasuna* with somewhat more than 10 million Euros (*El Desmarque*, 2016). Finally, the football teams playing in Second Division B have an even lower budget available and tremendously dissimilar among teams.

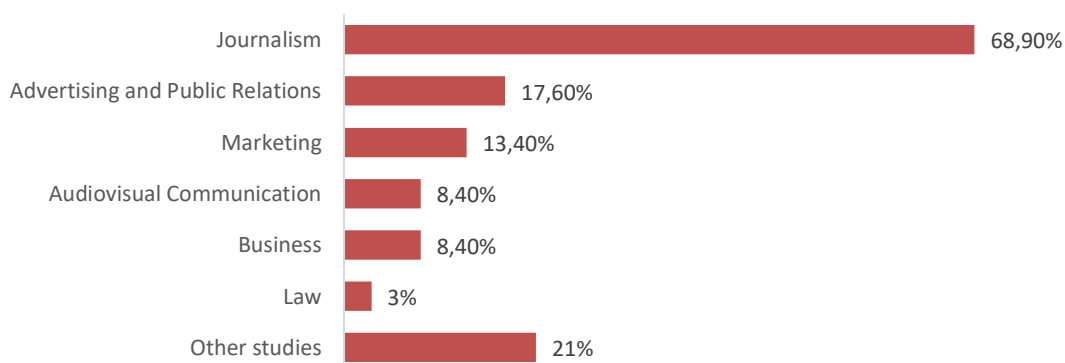
b) The option for communication from the football club management. This aspect seems rather connected to the previous factor, since the budget allows entities to establish priorities, in addition to assessing the fulfilment of objectives, therefore as a last resort, the staff responsible for the organization management are the ones making the decision about creating organizational structures focused on communicational activities or not.

But budget is not the only conditioning factor, it is also necessary that the managerial staff has a strategic perspective wide enough to consider that the creation of this structure focused on managing the communication of the club is not an expense, but an investment instead since, as indicated by Luis González Canomanuel, General Director of International Public Relations Network (Dircom, 2016), “there is no company that currently defines as leader, innovative, transparent and efficient, without a communication department”; a statement that can be transferred from the business to the sports area of first level, like the study object of this paper.

Anyways, data from the perspective of communication management are positive and match the ones obtained from other studies which study object is focused on organizations like large companies, SMEs, Spanish universities, local governments or NPOs located in Spain, since in all those studies, like the ones mentioned in the first section, the total percentage of organizations stating to have in-house departments managing communication is rather wide.

Regarding the academic and professional education of staff responsible that manage those communication departments, it is worth mentioning that the data provided by the research also confirm the data gathered from other studies about managerial positions managing these organizational units in other fields, since the bachelor or degree of reference is Journalism (Information Sciences), with a total percentage of 68.9%.

Graphic 3. Academic education of staff responsible for communication of football teams from *La Liga* National Championship of First, Second and Second Division B



Source: Authors' own elaboration

Compared to this percentage, but quite below, we find other specialties specifically linked to communication, like the case of the Bachelor studies or Graduate in Advertising and Public Relations (17.6%) or in Audiovisual Communication (8.4%), although there are also representative the staff responsible for communication with a marketing education (13.4%) and the different specialties linked to the world of business (Economic Sciences, Business Sciences or Administration and Business Management), that reach a percentage of 8.4%.

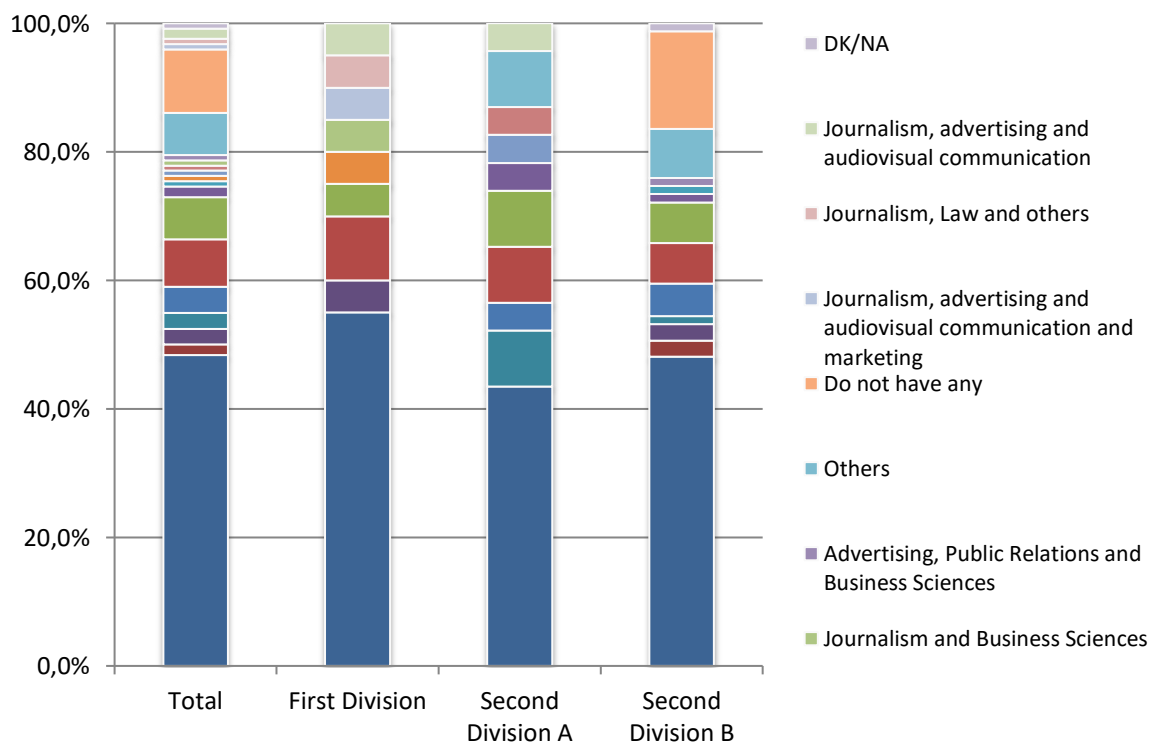
Another noteworthy data about this aspect, is the percentage regarding other study degrees, which have 21% over the total of data analysed and comprises a great variety of degrees and bachelor studies, for

instance, in History, Psychology, Tourism and even Engineering, besides different studies of professional education and high school studies. This lack of academic specialization in areas directly related to communication is justified in personal interviews through a double argument:

- a) The club does not have enough budget to include communication specialists in the headcount, therefore these responsables are either partners or amateurs that spend their spare time in performing these activities.
- b) The teams value the previous professional experience of their staff responsible for communication despite their academic background. This case is specially manifested in the football clubs of Second Division B, which responsables lack of academic education on communication, but have been or are still regular collaborators of local media. Sometimes, these responsables have attended specialization seminars about different techniques and communication tools, such as protocol or photography.

The huge disparity about the number of employees and staff responsible for communication in the teams analysed is also noteworthy, a mismatch that is also observed among the different leagues. Thus, those football clubs playing in the most relevant categories, especially in First Division, have a wider display in their communication organizational chart, integrating in their offices different individuals to whom diverse academic studies are demanded, including specialization master's degrees and broad proficiency in languages. Compared to this, there are other football teams, that essentially play in minor divisions, which communicational needs are assumed to be more limited and, as a result, have less staff in this kind of department, to the extreme that about 10% of them, 12 football clubs (all belonging to Second Division B), do not even have an area or person responsible for communication tasks.

Graphic 4. Academic education of staff responsible for communication of the football teams of the Liga National Championship belonging to the First, Second and Second Division B, by category

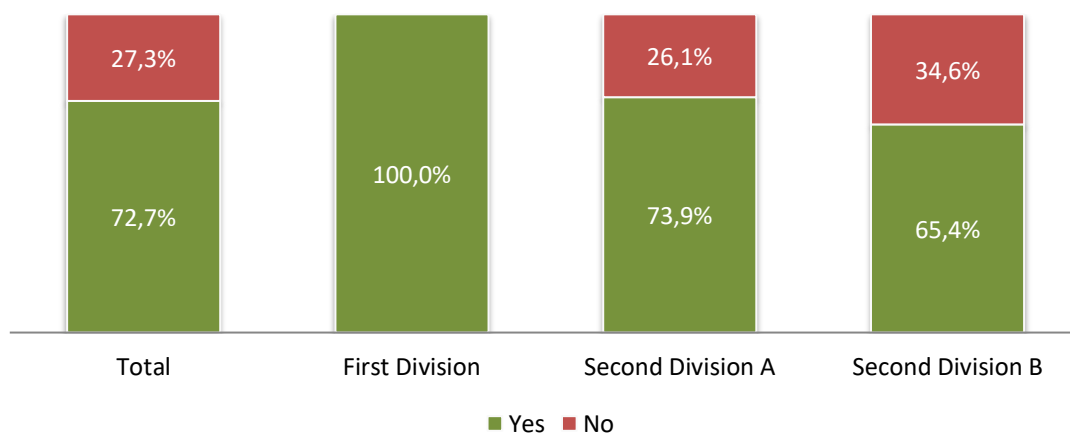


Source: Authors' own elaboration

In this sense, apart from the absolute prominence of graduates in Journalism in all categories studied, it is also interesting to expose the main combinations or tandems of academic degree studies of the staff responsible for communication in those departments where there are different individuals for the communicational management of the club and where the managerial positions of the team opt for complementary training for the employees of that office. Thus, we observe that the most common academic combinations include: Journalism with Advertising and Public Relations (5%) or Journalism, Advertising and Public Relations, together with Audiovisual Communication (4.4%).

The third thematic axis of the interview conducted to communication responsables of the football clubs is focused on whether there is a strategic and specific communication plan in their organization or not.

Graphic 5. Presence of strategic communication plans in the football teams of *La Liga* National Championship belonging to the First, Second and Second Division B, by category



Source: Authors' own elaboration

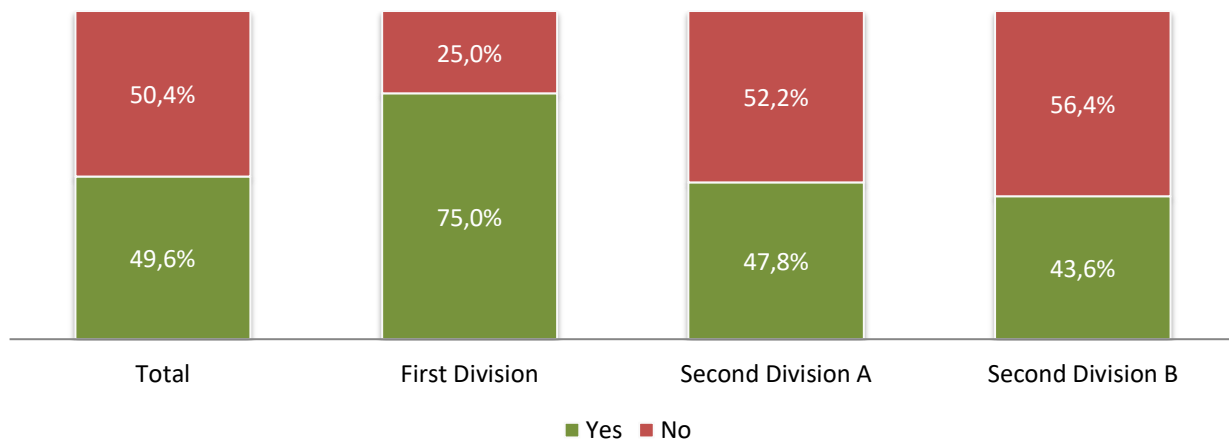
Despite most of communication directors state to have a strategic communication plan, specifically 72.7%, it is noteworthy that:

- It is alarming that 27% of entities recognize not having this strategic plan, considering their communicational needs, but it is also understandable, since some football clubs do not even have communication departments, nor specialists in the area and in others, the dedication to this task is purely amateur, rather than professional. In any case, the number of football teams without a communication plan is almost three times higher than the clubs without staff dedicated to these tasks, therefore, there are about 22 football teams with communication departments, but without a strategic plan, about 20% who have that office.
- Furthermore, the percentage of almost 70% of football clubs with strategic communication plan must be considered carefully, because in several cases through the interviews conducted the concept needed to be explained. It is a caution that must be maintained even when, after clarifying, its responsables confirmed to have said plan, since there is some evidence that in specific cases there could be a terminology-related confusion between communication plan and the strategic plan of the entity.
- Once more, huge differences have been identified between the teams of the different categories, since in the case of the First Division the percentage is broader (100%) compared to the rest, considering the structures and budgets mentioned earlier.

Regarding the comparison of this datum with other analogue studies conducted in Spain on different economic sectors, it is noteworthy that no specific statistical or significant differences have been found.

The last topic treated in fieldwork refers to the outsourcing of specific communication services. Based on the reality that the greater part of football teams analysed have communicational structures capable of assuming a great part of the tasks characteristic of the department, it is necessary to ask up to what extent the football clubs outsource specific actions or communication techniques or not

Graphic 6. External outsourcing of communication services in football teams of *La Liga* National Championship of First, Second and Second Division B, by category



Source: Authors' own elaboration

The data collected indicate that 49.6% of managerial staff recognize to outsource communication services, compared to the 50.4% that say they don't, mainly based on economic reasons. In any case, it can be said that, considering the data in general, the percentage of football clubs that outsource services compared to those that do not, is split in almost equal proportions, with a slight advantage of 'No' over 'Yes'.

Even so, as observed in the previous graphic, it is worth highlighting, once more, the disparity in this aspect between the different football teams depending on the category they play and the budget available, since those belonging to the most relevant leagues are the ones that, to a greater extent, outsource specific communication services, reducing its relevance as the category descends as well. There is a great gap between the First (75% outsourcing) and the Second Division (48% and 44%, respectively).

The percentage of respondents that answer with a certain ambiguity is noteworthy, since they indicate they do not have external services available, except for very punctual aspects and needs; namely, they state not to outsource tasks in a general or regular manner, but they recognize to exceptionally outsource some issues such as the football club's magazine, the website design, etc.

In any case, in the treatment of responses there was options for strictness in their categorization and to framework these football clubs among those who do not outsource communication tasks, but the aforesaid nuance must be kept in mind to perform a correct interpretation of results, since it is unimaginable that any organization never needs to request a communication-related service to a third party.

4. Discussion and conclusions

As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, with the research conducted the aim was to confirm or reject a series of hypotheses, that is:

H1: The organizational communication of Spanish football clubs is not as professionalized as expected. This hypothesis is confirmed and shows an immaturity in the sports sector compared to others, like the business (mostly in companies with similar budgets managed by football teams), institutional or NPOs sector in Spain. A lack of professional management which relevance in percentage is inversely proportional to that of the category where the club belongs to.

H2: Often, the education of staff responsible for communication of these football teams is not the most suitable, since they are not specialized in this field. This hypothesis is partially ratified, since it is true that it is demonstrated that most of professionals have a degree's level education in different areas of communication, essentially Journalism, but even so, in comparison, the fieldwork data also identify many cases where the communicational responsibility of these organizations relies on specialists educated in areas quite distanced from communication, such as Engineering, Law or Economy.

The scarce presence of graduates in Advertising and Public Relations is also noteworthy, a degree directly related to the professional exercise of communication in the studied departments and offices.

H3: The football clubs of professional and semi-professional categories do not have a specific communication plan. Even considering the exceptions in the corresponding section about interpretations respondents can do about this concept, the elevated percentage (superior to 72%) of clubs that confirm having a communication plan, rejects the hypothesis, at least partly. The presence of these communication plans is clearly majoritarian, but also for the record, as data are disaggregated by category, it is demonstrated that the totality of football teams in First Division have a strategic communication plan, unlike Second Division teams, and this presence is even lower in Second B teams, a category where more than a third of football clubs do not have this instrument.

H4: Spanish football teams outsource many communication services that they cannot manage due to their structural and/ or economic restrictions. Fieldwork data indicate very similar numbers between 'yes' (49.6%) and 'no' (50.4%), that even exceeds slightly the affirmative data, therefore the hypothesis must be rejected, at least partly. However, it is true that, as said earlier in the results section and based on the interviews conducted, among the football clubs that answer 'No' to this question, even though they do not outsource any services in a regular or permanent manner, they go to external companies in punctual occasions to perform specific tasks they cannot deal with. In addition, it is also worth mentioning that in First Division, there is a wide majority (two thirds) of clubs that use outsourcing in a regular manner.

H5: There are huge differences regarding the communicational management performed by the different teams depending on their income, which are determined by the division they play in (First, Second or Second B). Considering the results obtained in all thematic axes, this hypothesis is absolutely confirmed.

Besides confirming or rejecting the five initial hypotheses, it is worth reminding and commenting the three research objectives established by this paper as well:

O1: To perform an exploratory pioneer study that gathers data about the current status of organizational communication in the totality of Spanish professional and semi-professional football teams. This objective has been covered since there was a pioneer compilation of data in this area.

O2: To perform a comparative study about the management of communication in the football teams analysed and the management conducted in other sectors by different organizations. The objective was also fulfilled since there were comparisons versus similar studies in other economic areas in Spain, such as large companies, SMEs, universities, local governments and NPOs, among others.

O3: To provide keys that allow football clubs and public relations professionals in this area, to evolve and innovate in this matter. The objective will be fulfilled by transferring knowledge about data obtained to each and every one of the football clubs that participated in this study.

In short and as a sort of colophon, we can confirm that in the area of communicational management of Spanish sports entities that currently participate in *LaLiga*, in their First and Second Division, as well as Second Division B, namely, professional and semi-professional categories of Spanish football, a greater professionalization is required, both regarding communication management in general, as well as its strategic planning in particular. In addition, there is also confirmed a relevant deficit of specialized education in a good part of staff responsible for communication, specially observing an insignificant presence of professionals graduated in Advertising and Public Relations; particularly, all of this, in the two categories of Second Division.

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Dates:

- Start of research: 01/09/2017

- End of research: 31/01/2018

5. Notes

[1] Alavés, Athletic, Atlético, Barcelona, Betis, Celta, Deportivo, Eibar, Espanyol, Granada, Las Palmas, Leganés, Málaga, Osasuna, Real Sociedad, Real Madrid, Sevilla, Sporting, Valencia and Villa Real. Source: https://resultados.as.com/resultados/futbol/primera/2016_2017/equipos/

[2] Alcorcón, Almería, Cádiz, Córdoba, Elche, Getafe, Gimnàstic, Girona, Huesca, Levante, Lugo, Mallorca, Mirandés, Numancia, Oviedo, Rayo, Real Zaragoza, Reus, Sevilla Atlético, Tenerife, UCAM Murcia and Valladolid. Source:

https://resultados.as.com/resultados/futbol/segunda/2016_2017/equipos/

[3] Group 1: Boiro, Celta B, Coruxo, Pontevedra, Racing de Ferrol, Somozas, Caudal, Lealtad, Racing de Santander, Arandina, Burgos, Cultural Leonesa, Guijuelo, Palencia, Ponferradina, Valladolid B, Osasuna B, Izarra, Mutilvera and Tudelano. Group 2: Amorebieta, Arenas, Barakaldo, Bilbao Athletic, Gernika, Leioa, Real Sociedad B, Real Unión, Sestao River, Zamudio, UD Logroñés, Castilla, Fuenlabrada, Majadahonda, Navalcarnero, Sanse, Albacete, Socuéllamos, Toledo and Mensajero. Group 3: Badalona, Barcelona B, Cornellà, Espanyol B, Gavà, L'Hospitalet, Llagostera, Lleida, Prat, Sabadell, Alcoyano, Atlético Saguntino, Eldense, Levante Atlético, Hércules, Valencia Mestalla, Villarreal B, Atlético Baleares, Mallorca B and Ebro. Group 4: Atlético Sanluqueño, Córdoba B, El Ejido 2012, Granada B, Jaén, Linares, Linense, Marbella, Mancha Real, Recreativo, San Fernando, Extremadura, Mérida, Villanovense, Cartagena, Jumilla, La Hoya Lorca, Murcia, Melilla and La Roda. Source: <http://www.rfef.es/noticias/consulta-aqui-calendario-segunda-division-b-temporada-2016-17>

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