

Sports Federations of Spain, communication resources and impact of Covid-19

Federaciones deportivas de España, recursos comunicativos e impacto de la Covid-19

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Abstract

Sports federations are considered public utility in Spain. Their functions include communication and the organization of events, so the emergence of the pandemic, as in other sectors, meant a structural adaptation and communication management that test these organizations. This article proposes to analyze this reality in national and regional sports federations operating in Spain, making a study of their organizational reality and understanding the impact that Covid-19 has had on their communication. A questionnaire has been designed addressed to the communication directors and those responsible for it and a series of in-depth interviews have been carried out through which an analysis will be made on the communicative panorama of the sports federations in the post-Covid era. After analyzing the data collected, it will be concluded that the reality of national and regional federations is quite different in the field of communication; their resources (human and economic) are very different, and this is transferred to their internal structures to manage communication. On the other hand, the impact of Covid-19 has been overwhelming in these institutions, not only in terms of changes in communication management formats, but also in the use of tactics, techniques, and tools.

Keywords

Federations, sport, Spain, communication, public relations, dircom, organization chart, Covid-19.

Resumen

Las federaciones deportivas son consideradas de utilidad pública en España. En sus funciones tiene un peso especial la comunicación y la organización de eventos, por lo que la aparición de la pandemia, al igual que ocurrió en otros sectores, supuso una adaptación estructural y de gestión comunicativa que puso a prueba a estas organizaciones. En este artículo se propone analizar esta realidad en las federaciones deportivas de carácter nacional y regional que operan en España, haciendo un estudio de su realidad organizacional y comprendiendo el impacto que la Covid-19 ha tenido en su comunicación. Se ha diseñado un cuestionario dirigido a los directores/as de comunicación y responsables de la misma y se han llevado a cabo una serie de entrevistas en profundidad a través de las cuales se realizarán una radiografía sobre el panorama comunicativo de las federaciones deportivas en la era post-covid. Tras el análisis de los datos recabados se concluirá que la realidad de las federaciones nacionales y regionales es bien distinta en el ámbito de la comunicación; sus recursos (humanos y económicos) son muy diferentes y esto se traslada a sus estructuras internas para gestionar la comunicación. Por otra parte, el impacto de la Covid-19 ha sido contundente en estas instituciones, no solo en cuanto a cambios en los formatos de gestión de comunicación, sino también en lo referente a uso de tácticas, técnicas y herramientas.

Palabras clave

Federaciones, deporte, España, comunicación, relaciones públicas, dircom, organigrama, Covid-19.

Introduction

Sports federations are public utility entities whose main functions are the organization of official competitions and the promotion of the various sports disciplines. To carry out these functions, it is necessary to have internal structures for strategic planning and management of communication.

This research aims to analyze the communicative reality of national and regional federations in Spain, reflecting on their needs in terms of communication and the main limitations and challenges they face. Similarly, the study will provide comparative data on the reality at national and regional level that is remarkable in terms of the existence or not of specific communication departments, the training of their managers, the possible structural changes brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic or outsourcing communication services.

Spanish sports federations are defined as legal-private associations with public administrative functions and, therefore, are considered as entities of public utility (López and del Arco Juan, 2014). As public utility entities, they are intended to perform service tasks that involve communicative actions.

Hence, this paper aims to analyze the Spanish landscape of sports federations, starting from their reality at national and regional level. According to the Superior Sports Council (2022), there are 66 sports federations operating in Spain at the national level, 937 autonomous federations and 184 territorial delegations (Consejo Superior de Deportes, 2022). This set of federations has a multiannual budget of 187 million, approved by the Council of Ministers (Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte, 2022), and have been recording profits for four consecutive financial years (Palco23, 2022).

Knowing the internal management structure of these organizations allows us to glimpse the weight given to communication, both in its internal and external character. There are few studies that analyze the communicative reality in sports entities and those that are usually focused on specific teams or clubs (Castillo *et al.*, 2016; Ginesta, 2010; Lobillo and Muñoz, 2016; Sotelo, 2012; Fernández-Souto *et al.*, 2019; Lobillo and Guevara, 2018; Quintela, 2020; González Redondo *et al.*, 2018), in the presence of specific sports media such as women's soccer (Castro Hernández *et al.*, 2019) or their impact on social networks (Pérez Dasilva, 2015) and information technologies at the service of sports communication (Rojas Torrijos, 2019). On the other hand, those investigations that are broader and analyze the federal realities

are practically residual, as happens with Fernández-Souto *et al.* (2022) in Spain and Eiró-Gomes and Nunes (2018), in Portugal.

Therefore, we will reflect on the communication management of the federations in Spain from the point of view of their current internal organization.

The structures of the communication departments and the training of their professionals

Having an internal structure to meet the communication needs of organizations contributes to the success of their policies. If there is strategic planning that captures the communication objectives of the institutions and a team and staff specifically trained to meet these goals, they are more likely to be achieved positively.

The format of these internal structures varies and their location within the organization chart is also very variable. Thus, there are organizations that have very large internal departments, where they identify subareas of communication and to which they assign specialized professionals and, in contrast, others are limited to small groups or even a single person who assumes all the tasks related to the area. This variability is largely determined by the size of the organization in terms of its human and budgetary resources.

In any case, these internal structures, more or less extensive, are created to assume communication management functions that allow to establish a relationship between the organization and its different audiences, through the creation of a plan and strategic objectives that must be aligned with the corporate values of the institution.

Considering the strategic objectives and the need of organizations to take care of the links with their stakeholders, it is understandable that after the emergence of Covid-19 the role that communication and public relations should play in today's society has become even more visible. There are many authors that indicate this (Van der Meer *et al.*, 2017; Vujnovic *et al.*, 2021; Almansa-Martínez and Fernández-Souto, 2020; Xifra, 2020) and provide research that coincides with the data provided by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022) that predicts employment in this sector to increase by 11% in this decade, and which contributes to the latest edition of the study carried out by Dircom (2022) on communication in Spain, which shows this positive trend towards the consolidation of the directorate of communication and an increase in the positive evaluation of the performance of communication,

although this study also collects data on the structure of the departments in terms of personnel and indicates a decrease in the reduction of the human resources attached to them.

In any case, it is necessary that sports federations, as entities declared to be public, should have specific structures dedicated to the field of communication and, therefore, one or more people who meet these needs and do so with the necessary training to achieve success. In this sense, it is assumed that workers in this field must have different professional competences that allow them to adapt to changing scenarios, combining transversal skills and soft skills, such as creativity, teamwork or passion for constant learning (Álvarez-Flores *et al.*, 2018), as well as leadership, coordination and leadership skills (Almansa-Martínez and Fernández-Souto, 2020).

It is interesting to mention the article by Del Toro-Acosta *et al.* (2022) about the profile of these professionals in Spain. In his study, a professional is outlined who declares himself very competent in general and specific issues, such as strategic planning and vision, critical thinking, general culture, flexibility, adaptability, capacity for change, innovation and creative thinking, teamwork, empathy, curiosity and learning ability, in addition to written communication. On the other hand, he speaks of a professional who declares himself to be incompetent in very specific technical matters, such as audiovisual editing and creation, graphic design, digital advertising management and data analysis. In short, it could be summarized that there is a sector in which professionals declare high competences in flexibility, capacity for change, empathy, knowing customer needs, written communication, writing and team work, co-creation capacity, collaborative work (Álvarez-Flores *et al.*, 2018; Meganck *et al.*, 2020).

Not intending to discuss where communication experts acquire these competences and skills, in the Spanish case Dircom (2022) insists that 99% of professionals have university studies (26.5% graduated, 62.5% have a master's degree and 10% a doctorate), according to the data of its latest study on the State of Communication in Spain.

Despite this general organizations data in the country, it is also worth noting the existence of studies that show a high degree of intrusiveness in the profession, especially evident in those institutions with fewer economic and human resources, as reflected in the research of Vázquez-Gestal and Fernández-Souto concerning this reality in the Galician municipalities (2014), or those of Fernández Souto *et al.* (2016) on the most polluting companies in Galicia Spanish clusters (2018) and provincial councils (2019).

The professional profiles that assume responsibility in the internal communication structures of the organizations must establish functions that allow to achieve the strategic objectives, being the most common according to Dircom (2022), online and social media communication (57.5%), media relations (55.3%), internal communication (30.8%) and strategy and coordination of the communicator function (27%). This study raises a positive vision about the immediate future of the profession in terms of specific tasks, such as those related to internal communication, *lobbying*, communication crisis, corporate social responsibility, financial communication, *sponsoring* or monitoring, as shown in Figure 1. On the other hand, it foresees some regression in terms of fundamental functions for sports federations, such as organizing events or relations with the media.

Table 1
Comparison of communication departments functions today and over the next three years

	ACT	2024
Online communication, social media	57.5%	53.4%
Media Relations	55.3%	21.3%
Internal communication, change management	30.8%	42.5%
Strategy and coordination of the communication function	27.0%	13.8%
Marketing, Branding, Consumer Communication	19.5%	18.5%
Government relations, public affairs, lobbying	17.8%	26.0%
Communication Crisis	15.0%	20,0 %
Corporate social responsibility, sustainable development	14.8%	42.0%
Events	14.2%	4.0%
Corporate design, graphics, photography	9.0%	3.3%
Relations with the community	8.0%	14.8%
Consulting, coaching, key client account management (internally/externally)	7.8%	5.8%
Monitoring, measurement, evaluation	6.8%	14.8%
International Communication	6.5%	5.8%
Sponsoring, sponsorship and patronage	1.8%	2.8%
Financial communication, investor relations	0.8%	4.9%

Note. Dircom, 2022.

Sports federations and their communication structures

As indicated above, there are few studies referring to sports federations in Spain in terms of their communication management. Academically, some scientific articles have studied certain federations but only at the regional level, such as the case of Murcia (Martínez Nicolás, 2015) and other contributions on specific aspects related to communication in federations, such as online communication (Fernández Souto *et al.*, 2022), but the rest of the research focuses on the analysis of specific sports, mainly soccer (Salas Luzziaga, 2019; Cano Tenorio, 2019; Rojas-Torrijos, 2012; Thrassou, 2012).

There are contributions closer in terms of subject matter but remote in time, as is the research of Manuel Damián Martín García (2011), with his doctoral thesis of the press departments of Spanish sports federations. This dissertation concludes that a large number of Spanish federations did not have a director of communication at that time and the head of the press assumed most of the specific functions of communication; a reality that seems to have been overcome, since the departments of communication assume much broader tasks, including managerial character and strategic planning that go beyond the roles in the organization, in this case the Federation, and the media. Martín García's doctoral thesis already includes virtual tools, but the social reality of 2022, especially with the changes implemented since the pandemic in terms of tools and communication strategies, is very different and does not allow to assimilate the data to the present day.

On the other hand, research on the Portuguese reality (Eiró-Gomes and Nunes, 2018) indicates that few federations have press offices or any professional with specific training in public relations and most of them do not have a budget specifically dedicated to communication. The Portuguese reality shows 32 sports federations, of which 62.5% have fewer than 15 employees. In terms of the functions assumed by the departments, the relations with the media and the commitment to social networks stand out, as well as the need to be in direct contact with the public, without the intermediation of the media. Most sports federations are in the digital world, all of them have a website but few of them systematically develop public relations strategies.

In any case, despite this background, the communication of federations at national or regional level in Spain has not been analyzed in terms of the structures that assume these tasks, which will be the main objective of this study.

Materials and methods

The methodology used in this research is mixed, being quantitative through the use of questionnaires and qualitative through the use of in-depth interviews.

In order to carry out the study, a questionnaire addressed to the communication managers of the Spanish sports federations at the national level has been carried out, according to the data collected by the Superior Council of Sports (2022); this questionnaire was distributed via email and was conducted between August 24 and October 5, 2021, for the national federations, and between June 15 and October 5, 2022, for the regional federations. In order to narrow down the universe of regional sports federations, a random selection criterion was used, given the impossibility of addressing 100 % of them. Thus, data have been collected from 46 national and 52 regional federations, with the total universe being 66 national and 937 regional federations. These data indicate that:

- For data collected on national federations, 95 % confidence level and 5 % margin of error are used.
- In the case of the compilation of regional federations with a confidence level of 95%, we have a margin of error of 13%.

The questionnaire addressed issues on internal communication structures, training, and gender of respondents, as well as the main functions of these departments since the outbreak of the pandemic, as well as organizational changes by Covid-19.

To complement the questionnaire, a series of in-depth interviews were planned with the communication officers of the federations at the national and regional levels. The selection of communication directors to be interviewed was based on a double criterion, firstly, the number of federates per organization, establishing three groups: small federations (less than 10 000 federations at national level), medium-sized federations (between 10 000 and 70 000 federations at national level) and large federations (more than 70 000 federations at national level), in order to include federations with different potential in terms of economic and human resources in the sample. Secondly, for each of these three groups, two communication officers are randomly selected to integrate the sample. With this criterion, the following interviews were conducted:

Large federation group:

- Spanish basketball federation, responsible: Victor Charneco.
- Catalan handball federation, responsible: Jordi Latorre Pérez.

- Group of medium federations:
- Royal Spanish Gymnastics Federation, responsible: Florencia Vaccara.
- Galician archery federation, responsible: José Teijeiro Lamigueiro.
- Small Federation Group:
- Spanish Federation of blind sports, responsible: Jaime Mulas.
- Catalan Badminton Federation, responsible: Eduard Mateos Vidal.

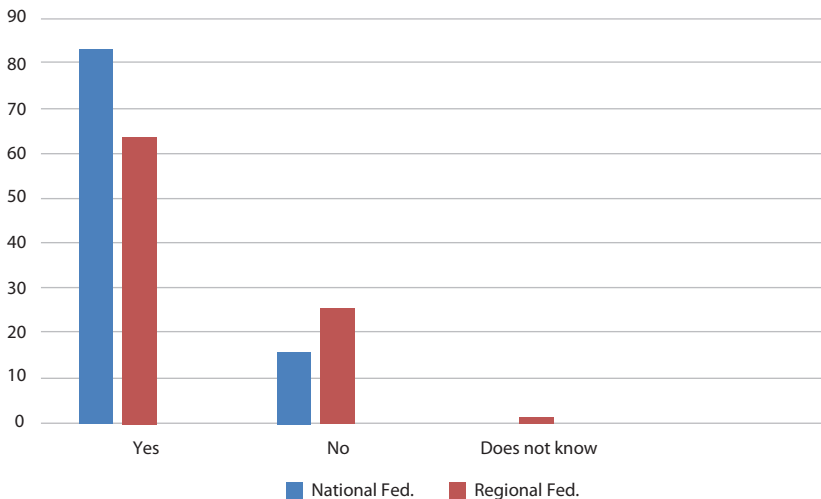
Results

The results obtained are shown below, according to the proposed research objectives.

Firstly, as shown in Figure 1, it should be noted that almost 90 % of the national federations have their own internal communication department, compared with 64 % of the regional federations, which include different variants, including those with the collaboration of external companies or the provision of a single person who provides this service, a task that in many cases they perform jointly, with other entities or companies, and in very few cases exclusively.

Figure 1

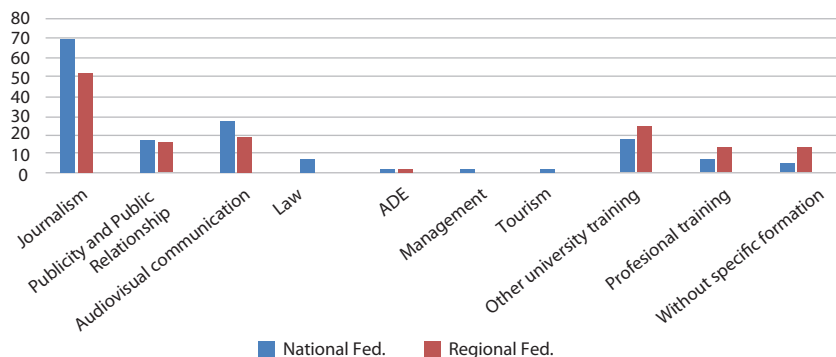
Internal communication departments in sports federations



These results represent a clear evolution in the progressive professionalization and stabilization of communication during the last decade, where the number of press and communication departments existing by the national federations barely exceeded half of the cases, according to data provided by García (2011), which identified the existence of 54% of national federations that did have a press and communication department. This is stated by the communication officer of the Catalan Handball Federation, which indicates that before the Covid-19 crisis they had a department of three people (with a press chief, a communication director and an administrative one), but the pandemic forced the organization to reduce the number, so that all the communication responsibility falls on only one person. In this regard, we would like to point out that those responsible for federations with fewer federations, such as Archery in Galicia and Badminton in Cataluña, do not have any specific structure to meet these needs and it is the members of the federation's board or collaborators of the entity itself, often sportsmen, who help in the development and execution of communication activities.

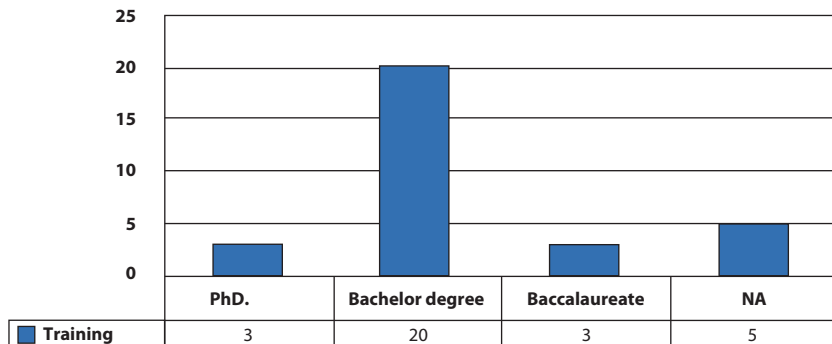
Regarding the training of those responsible (Figure 2), it is noted that the presence of graduates in journalism continues to be the majority in the communications department (70% in the national federations and 51.4% in the regional ones), followed by those in Audiovisual Communication (27.5% and 18.9%, respectively) and Advertising and Public Relations, with only 17.5% and 16.2%, almost the same proportion as those accrediting another university education, other than the field of Communication, highlighting, in this sense, graduates in law (7.9%). From these data, it is striking that the number of members of the communication department that do not have specific training is quite high. The cases of members of the communication department who do not have training directly related to this field (other university education, professional training and no specific training) are also relatively high and is justified, to a large extent, by the federations, especially regional, that rely on their athletes and collaborators to carry out certain communication tasks, such as social networks, updating the web or photography.

Figure 2
Training of communication managers in sports federations



The sector does not seem to have evolved much, since García’s doctoral thesis (2011) showed that 20 graduates, three doctors, three people with baccalaureate and five who did not answer worked in the national federations, as seen in figure 2.

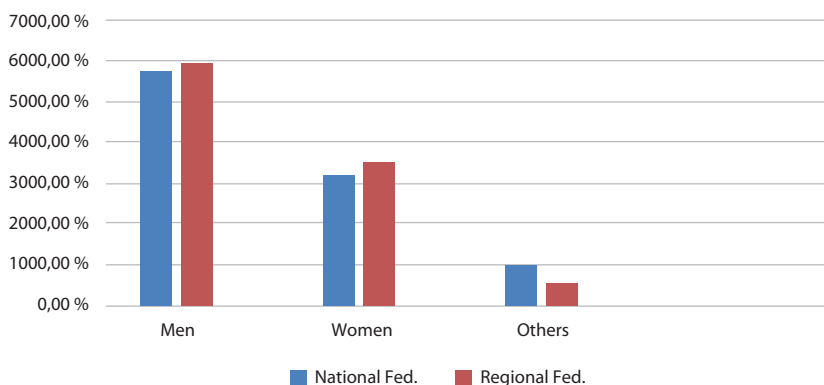
Figure 1
Training of communication and press officers in Spanish sports federations in 2011



Note. García, 2011.

Regarding gender (Figure 3) of the members of the communication departments of sports federations, it is noted that there are more men than women both nationally and regionally. The percentage of “other” answers justifies those federations that do not have a communication department or a stable organization board that leads a single person. This figure is striking in the field of sports, since if sticking to the general data compiled by the study on the State of Communication in Spain 21-22 (Dircom, 2022) the profession is mainly occupied by women (56.5% versus 43.5%).

Figure 3
Gender of communication officers in sports federations

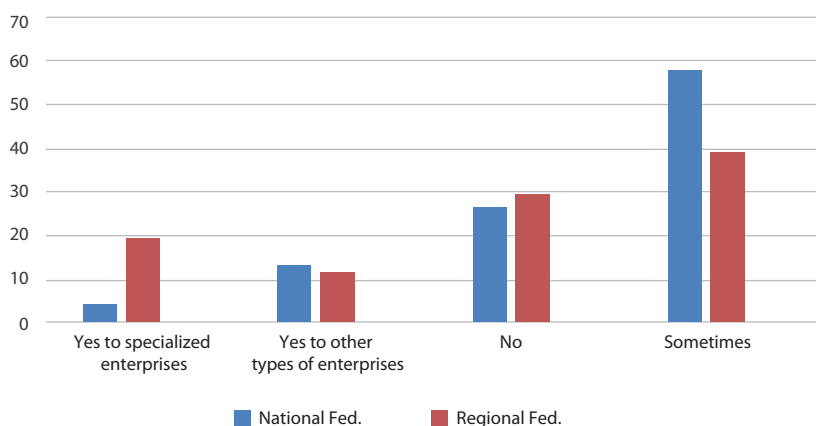


One aspect that is very striking is the use of outsourcing (Figure 4), since 26.7% of the national federations and 29.4% of the regional federations indicate that they never outsource communication services outside the organization. Considering that many of the institutions analyzed do not have an internal department specifically dedicated to communication and that, moreover, many of those that do not have it are not made up of personnel with specialized training in the field, it is difficult to understand that the outsourcing of this type of services is not higher.

It is true that the pandemic, by conditioning the organizational structure of the federations, made this aspect of outsourcing become more important, especially online, given the needs of the organizations in adapting and eliminating the physical barrier imposed by Covid-19. Hence, the management of the web pages of the federations and their social networks was contracted

(case of the Catalan Federation of Handbol). Another justification for this fact may be because, in many cases, the staff of the communications departments of the federations are employees or self-employed, who are not part of the staff, an aspect that makes it more necessary to resort to external reinforcement and support in the communication tasks every time a championship or competition is held at national or international level.

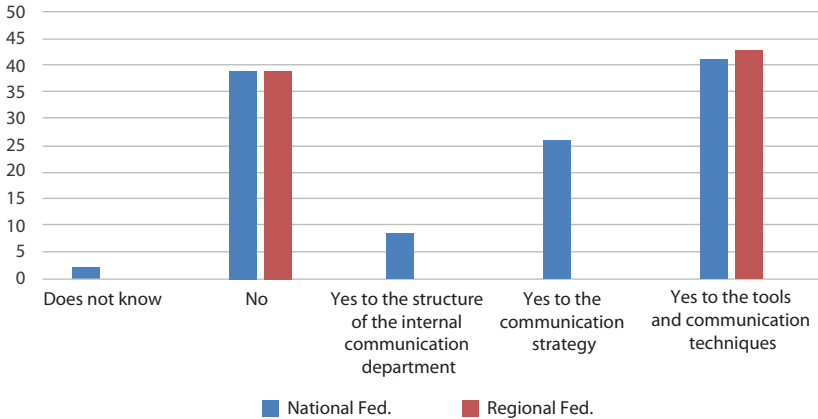
Figure 4
Outsourcing of communication services



Finally, the fieldwork shows that the pandemic has changed the structures, strategies, habits, tools and communication techniques (Figure 5) in almost all the communication departments of sports federations:

As seen, the regional federations provide less data regarding the type of changes imposed by the pandemic in their departments. This is dictated by the fact that, in most cases, these federations do not have internal departments for these functions (39.2%) and in those cases where they do have internal organization, 13.5% of the staff that make up them do not have any specific training in communication. In this regional scenario, talking about communication strategies in the medium-long term becomes practically impossible, hence the lack of data.

Figure 5
Changes imposed by Covid-19 in federation communication



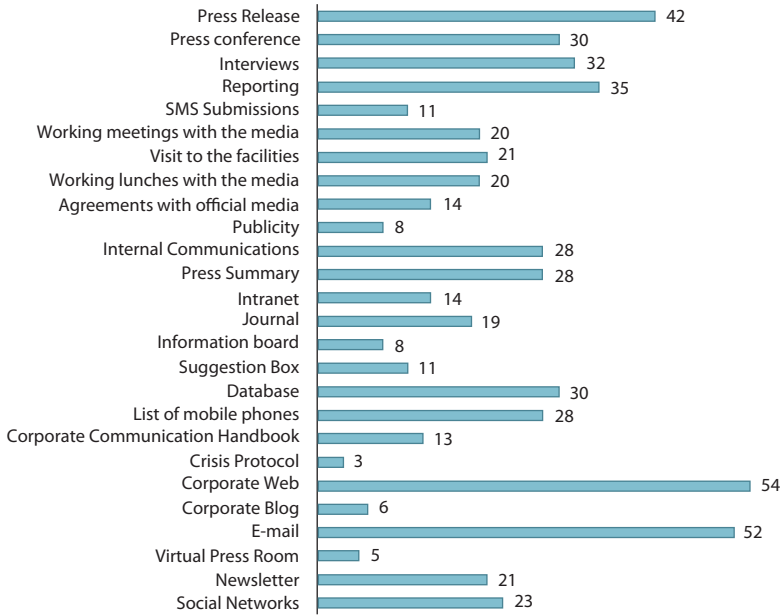
Finally, it highlights that the joint percentage of federations that confirm that they have changed the communication tools during Covid-19 is very high and even in the national and regional case. As indicated, the adaptation to the pandemic necessarily required online, which forced the federations to devote more resources to this field, since, after the first months of lockdown and absolute halt in the organization of events, the federations resumed the events in online or hybrid format and, in the meantime, generated content to supply the media through social networks and their websites. In parallel, the federations organized press conferences, conferences, round tables, meetings, training events always in online or hybrid format, which justifies this change in the tactics and techniques used until the onset of the pandemic.

Going back to García's thesis (2011), it can be seen (Figure 2) that during the confinement, post-confinement and up to the present day, the federations studied have bet on changes in format in many of the tools that they had been using regularly, such as press conferences, interviews, reports, or work meetings, a list to which should be added the live broadcasts (especially put into value by the Spanish basketball federation, the Catalan handball federation or the Spanish gymnastics federation), which confirm that today, once the social health barriers imposed by the governments have been overcome, they continue to organize events of all kinds in both areas - *On and off line*. It is worth mentioning the sports federation for the blind, where *e-*

sports and streaming broadcasts, or social networks, are a great *handicap* for their athletes.

Figure 2

Use of communication tools by Spanish federations in 2011



Note. Garcia, 2011.

Conclusions and discussion

According to the results presented, we consider that this research has met the objectives set out in the methodological section.

First, the SO1 aimed to observe whether the pandemic has directly affected the communication structures of sports federations and it has been shown that the outbreak of Covid-19 has modified organizational structures in the federations under study and has done so in several ways:

- Altering its composition, with the elimination of jobs, in some cases and, in others, with the hiring of staff taking on new tasks, usually linked to social networks and the online work environment imposed by the pandemic.
- Changing strategic communication plans in those federations that had it before the emergence of the coronavirus, generally those of national scope and, within these, those with a greater number of federations and, therefore, with more budget and specific departments that managed the communication.
- Forcing the implementation of new communication tools and techniques, since the mandatory confinement imposed by the Spanish government made organizations move their activity to the online, initially, and later, in a hybrid way (*on and off line*).

Related to this aspect, we collect the SO2, whose objective was to check whether the reality of the communication structures of regional federations compared to those of a national nature is very different. According to field-work data, most federations (more than 60%) have an internal department to meet their communication needs; however, the specific percentage of national federations is almost 20 points higher than that of regional ones, confirming that those operating at the national level have more human and budgetary resources, allowing them to have their own structure to meet this field.

The SO3 was designed to detect whether the communication departments of the analyzed organizations are headed by men or women. Overall data on the communication direction in Spain give more weight to women, however, in the case of sports federations, both nationally and regionally, the male weight is higher, up to 15 points above women. Therefore, the direction of communication in sporting bodies is usually given to men.

This research shows, from a comparative perspective, an overview of the presence and professionalization degree of communication managers in sports, national and regional federations in Spain (OE4) that, in general, is greater, compared to what was indicated in previous studies and offers an encouraging panorama to graduates in the field of communication, who face a labor market in which non-specialization and intrusiveness are losing ground.

Finally, as for the analysis of the possible outsourcing of communication services (SO5), the results show that it is high and affects almost 2/3 parts of the federations (less at a regional level, but equally estimable), leaving

the door open to discussion and to the conduction of other subsequent analyzes focused on this aspect, in order to deepen on the stability and/or precariousness degree of the personnel assigned to the communication functions in sports federations. This is largely justified by the pressure imposed by the pandemic, which has reconfigured internal structures and forced to bet on the generation of content at a time of a halt in public activity and has led organizations to manage tools and services that needed specific qualification and, not having it, have been forced to outsource it (online services).

Finally, it should be noted that this research has limits and conditions. Firstly, the time frame in which surveys and interviews were conducted, for two consecutive years, provides data on a different view on the part of the communication managers, since data concerning national federations were collected in an early phase of the recovery towards post-covid normality while those of regional federations were collected later. On the other hand, the lack of resources has not allowed to address the whole universe, so both the questionnaire and the in-depth interview have been planned following a random sampling. Beyond these two determinants of research, alleviating these limitations could become a future line of research in which, simultaneously, data from both national and regional realities are collected, seeking to cover a greater number of responses.

In any case, and despite the limitations indicated, the data provided by this research represents a first rigorous approach to a field of study characterized by the absence of previous work that collected the communicative reality and its management in Spanish sports federations and, much less, that studied the impact that Covid-19 has had on their structures, communication strategies and the commitment to concrete tools and techniques.

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