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Journalist and PR-specialist: impossible and unethical connection?

KEY WORDS

journalism, public relations, media relations

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the problem of combining two professions: of journalist and PR-specialist. According to professional statutes, combining the work of journalist and PR-specialist is not permitted. However, the problem exists. The paper focuses on the relations between journalism and public relations. It presents the results of research conducted among students of journalism. Above all, students were asked whether they think working as a journalist and a PR-person is possible and ethical.

Public relations and journalism are perceived as professions in close cooperation. Still, they are often spoken of as two distant spheres which interact with each other, as a matter of fact, yet these relations are often full of tension and dilemmas. The interactions between public relations specialists and journalists are carried out at the border of two separate, individualized worlds. The article contains questions whether the relations between journalists and PR-specialists are based on dialogue or persuasive action. The definitions of both professions and presentation of the relations between them will be followed by the question whether it is possible (and ethical) to combine them. This question was asked to a group of students of journalism and social communication. The article confronts the opinions of future journalists and PR-specialists with the ethical codes of both professions.

Who is a journalist and who is a PR-specialist?

Some scholars perceive journalism as a special mission: they believe a journalist should have a vocation, like a priest, teacher, or physician, and that it is a profession demanding involvement and availability¹. In this context, journalism can be considered as a service for specific communities, an occupation demanding indefinite amounts of time and an uncompromising search for truth and objective information. On the other hand, the

¹ M. Sokołowski, *Nowe media. Nowe interpretacje* [New media: New interpretations], Warszawa 2010, p. 353–354.

journalistic profession is just like any other, and those who practise it have to show specific predispositions and interpersonal traits. “The nature of the work of journalists and persons professionally related to the media (...) involves obtaining and processing information; it is not simply the matter of purely technical skills but also an intellectual background facilitating the assessment, selection, and presentation of data”, according to Sasińska-Klas². Under the Press Law Act, a journalist is “a person involved in editing, creating, or preparing press materials, employed by the media or acting for and with the authorization of the media”³.

According to the British Institute of Public Relations, PR “is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its public”⁴. While the theory of public relations is homogeneous and uses similar methodology, there are two approaches to defining the PR activities alone: “public relations as a function of general organization management and PR as a component of a general communication strategy and system”⁵. Thus the essence of PR activities is conscious and intentional shaping of relations between economic and social players as a precondition for coexistence in the social and economic sphere, and considering two-way communication as the most important relation-building tool⁶.

The common part of journalism and public relation is informing as one of the tools for controlling the streams of outgoing and incoming information. Journalism is like a catalyst for incoming information, whereas “shaping of information streams should be indicated as the public relations area of activity”⁷.

Relations between journalists and PR-specialists

The relations between these two professions are best evaluated through their own opinions. The study conducted by the PRoto.pl website brought a more detailed description of the attitudes of journalists towards PR-specialists and the other way round. To do so, anonymous surveys were filled by 100 trade journalists, who were asked on their opinions on their everyday professional contacts with PR-specialists. Among the errors made by people employed as

² T. Sasińska-Klas, *Dziennikarz – zawód czy wyzwanie?* [Journalist – a profession or a challenge?], in *Dziennikarstwo i świat mediów* [Journalism and the world of media], ed. by Z. Bauer, E. Chudziński, Kraków 2005, p. 470–473.

³ The Press Law Act (Pol. *ustawa prawo prasowe*) dated 26 Jan 1984.

⁴ S. Black, *Public relations*, Oxford 2011, p. xxi.

⁵ K. Wojcik, *Public relations, wiarygodny dialog z otoczeniem* [Public relations, a credible dialogue with the environment], Warszawa 2008, p. 24.

⁶ E. Hope, *Etyka w zawodzie specjalistów public relations* [Ethics in the PR-specialist profession], Warszawa 2013, p. 21.

⁷ P. Bielawski, *Public relations – zarządzanie informacjami* [Public relations: Information management], PRoto, <http://www.proto.pl/node/18898> [dostęp: 07 Jan 2015].

public relations specialists, journalists pointed out obtrusiveness (30%), not being well-informed (28%), and unavailability. “For 28% of journalists participating in the survey, the most frequent error in press information is obtrusive promotion. Non-compliance with the thematic scope and trivial theme were indicated by 22% of participants each, while 13% said the most frequent error was uninteresting content, and 9% of surveyed journalists noted the bad quality of attached graphic material”⁸. When asked if materials sent by PR-specialists can inspire a journalist to write an article, the majority, i.e., “80% of journalists taking part in the survey admitted that press information they received were the spur to write 10–20% of materials they prepared”⁹.

The other side, the PR-specialists, were asked to evaluate not just their relations with journalists but the journalists as well¹⁰. Communication specialists are irritated by the journalists’ lack of professionalism (31%), lack of preparation (25%), and lateness (15%). PR-specialists also evaluated press materials prepared by journalists: “one fourth of the responders stated that the authors of media communications do not verify the facts they convey. For 23% of communication specialists filling in the survey, the greatest error of journalists was superficial treatment of the subject”¹¹. In their relations with journalists, PR-specialists often see the former work by copy–paste (29%), while one respondent in four noticed that journalists do not respect the right to authorization. The opinions on the journalists’ competence level seem to be mixed: 51% of respondents stated they rarely met competent and professional journalists, while 47% of them decided that the journalists they usually encounter show these traits. According to the public relations trade, Polish journalists most often lack subject knowledge (22%), time (20%), passion (15%), and credibility (13%).

The conflicts and differences in the reciprocal perception of both professions may stem from the differences in mutual expectations of both analysed groups. “Researchers have often pointed out the interactions and interdependencies between journalists and PR-specialists. A compromise may result from strategic actions involving a mixture of actions favouring communication and manipulation. PR-specialists and journalists, entering various interactions, should take into consideration the expectations of their partners”, as Paulina Maruszak wrote in her article analysing the mutual expectations of PR-specialists and

⁸ *Kim PR-owcy są dla dziennikarza? – raport PRoto* [Who are PR-specialists for a journalist? A PRoto report], <http://www.proto.pl/node/54983> [accessed: 07 Jan 2015].

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ *Dziennikarze – profesjonalni i etyczni? – raport PRoto* [Journalists – professional and ethical? A PRoto report], <http://www.proto.pl/node/54982> [accessed: 07 Jan 2015].

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

journalists¹². Their cooperation is often based on patterns, repeated cycles: “its course depends on the importance and position of individual groups”¹³. Wojciech Furman named three variants of mutual relations between journalism and PR:

- cooperation between independent partners, who support each other and facilitate each other's operations;
- strong public relations and weak journalism;
- strong journalism and weak public relations¹⁴.

The first case involves symmetric communication between two independent cooperating parties. Strong PR usually depends on both the reputation and economic and political strength of a company, while strong journalism conditions journalists' impact on the public opinion. In the second case, journalism is dependent on public relations, therefore the credibility of communications decreases. While in the third one, the content provided by PR-specialists can reach the recipients only with difficulty.

The mutual expectations of journalists and PR-specialists can differ radically. The study by Sławomir Gawroński shows that journalists most often require press information (85.3%) from communication specialists, followed by

ready-made thematic material (57.3%) and photographic services (30.7%). “Journalists expect that the materials delivered by PR-specialists should be complete and factually correct, supported by numerical data, current and fresh, prepared according to journalistic guidelines, ready for printing, short, and containing only the most important information”¹⁵. Whereas public relations specialists usually request the journalists to be reliable, objective, and professional, and rely on regular contacts with media representatives and daily flow of information¹⁶. Both sides agree on the form of contact and the primary channel of information flow. Both journalists¹⁷ and PR-specialists¹⁸ stated email as the most important form of contact, with mobile phones being chosen second.

¹² P. Maruszak, *Komunikacja a manipulacja – wzajemne oczekiwania PR-owców i dziennikarzy* [Communication and manipulation: mutual expectations of PR-specialists and journalists], “iNFOTEZY” 2012, No. 2, <http://www.ujk.edu.pl/infotezy/ojs/index.php/infotezy/article/view/46/148> [accessed: 04 Apr 2014].

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ W. Furman, *Dominacja czy porozumienie? Związki między dziennikarstwem a public relations* [Domination or agreement? Relations between journalism and public relations], Rzeszów 2009, p. 168–169.

¹⁵ As in: P. Maruszak, *Komunikacja a manipulacja...*, op. cit., <http://www.ujk.edu.pl/infotezy/ojs/index.php/infotezy/article/view/46/148> [accessed: 07 Jan].

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ S. Gawroński, *Idealny PR-menedżer. Oczekiwania dziennikarzy wobec przedstawicieli branży public relations w świetle badań empirycznych* [The ideal PR manager: Journalists' expectations from public relations representatives in the light of empiric studies], in D. Tworzydło, T. Soliński, *Public relations w teorii i praktyce* [Public relations in theory and practice], Rzeszów 2006, p. 66.

Relations with the media are a constant part of the responsibilities of public relations specialists. Their strategy could become ineffective and incoherent if they did not become involved in public relations. Different communication ways and goals among PR-specialists and journalists lead to conflicts on many levels, the diverging in many places mutual expectations notwithstanding. It is clear that those responsible for public relations want to convey favourable messages regarding the entities they serve, and increase their presence in media. Whereas media representatives complain of the quality of the information they receive from PR-specialists, considering them too obtrusive and unprofessional. They also accuse the latter of ignoring their expectations and forcing the publication of certain materials. Interestingly, PR-specialists also attribute the lack of professionalism to journalists, indicating their lack of factual knowledge and credibility.

The tense relations between journalists and PR-specialists seem to result from the distrust and scepticism towards the activities of both parties and the conflicts of interests between them. Regardless, as both professions depend on each other to some extent, and it will remain so, they have to rely on mutual cooperation. However, whether this cooperation will be based on dialogue or persuasive action, depends on the involved entities and adopted strategy. Also, one should not forget, especially in the case of persuasive activities, that they are often unethical.

Is it possible to combine the professions of journalist and PR-specialist?

The common animosities between these two professions, the divisions and differences described in literature in the strategy of practising might suggest that combining both professions is impossible. The practice is sometimes different, however. It was noticed by Ewa Hope¹⁹, who decided it was necessary to describe the situation, since:

- Being both a journalist and PR-specialist is a frequent occurrence in Poland.
- It is frequent enough to be almost natural.
- Since it is considered natural, it is seldom discussed as an abnormality, degeneration, or pathology of social life.
- As a pathological situation, detrimental to the journalistic circles, public relation circles, and society, it is particularly destructive for the formation process of civic society and democracy itself.

¹⁸ S. Gawroński, *Media relations: współpraca dziennikarzy i specjalistów PR* [Media relations: Cooperation between journalists and PR specialists], Rzeszów 2006, p. 225.

¹⁹ E. Hope, *Etyka w zawodzie...*, op. cit., p. 104–107.

Combining the function of journalist and PR-related activities takes place in two areas of activity. The first involves carrying out trainings, e.g., for managers, conveying the knowledge how to behave in the media during a television or radio interview, during a conversation with a press journalist, and how to formulate answers to potentially difficult questions. The experience gained by journalists during their work allows them to teach others, point out to what journalists pay attention, and how it can be diverted from troublesome subjects. It is nothing else than using the knowledge of professional secrets, methods of obtaining information, and rules of composition of journalistic materials. According to Hope, using this knowledge in media trainings is contradictory to the “fundamental concept of journalism: the priority of public good in conveying reliable, impartial information, observing the freedom of speech and responsibility for it”²⁰. “The second sphere of activity is organizing corporate events with exclusive guests and, in more general terms, using the opportunities brought by being a journalists in one’s PR work”²¹. It should also be stressed that journalists, who have the opportunity to meet well-known and popular people, can make further use of it by offering companies to invite those people, which is guaranteed to be a highlight of any such event. “It is obviously not gratuitous to guarantee the presence of such persons”²² – which is contrary to the provision of the journalistic ethical codes: “(a journalist) does not accept remuneration from institutions or private enterprises, should his/her position as a journalist, influence, and relations could be used improperly”²³.

The identification of public and media relations activities is a common error, which leads to the distortion of both the journalist and PR-specialist professions, as well as breaching the ethical codes of both. The journalistic code of ethic states that “a journalist cannot accept any benefit for him/herself or his/her family for publishing or refraining from publishing a journalistic material”²⁴. There are also clearer provisions, which preclude categorically the combination of both professions: “also, journalists should not accept jobs which undermine their professional independence, e.g., in press offices or as press officers in advertising and public relations companies”, according to the provisions of the journalistic ethical code of TVP SA²⁵. Whereas the § 18 of the journalistic ethical code of the Polish Journalistic Association (Pol. *Stowarzyszenie Dziennikarzy Polskich*) states: “a journalist must

²⁰ E. Hope, *Etyka w zawodzie...*, op. cit., p. 105.

²¹ Ibidem.

²² Ibidem.

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ As quoted in: I. Rutkiewicz, *Jak być przyzwoitym w mediach* [How to be decent in the media], Warszawa 2003, p. 83.

²⁵ As quoted in: E. Hope, *Etyka w zawodzie...*, op. cit., p. 106.

not engage in soliciting or participate in advertising or public relations”. Obviously, the other side also considers combining both these professions as culpable: the Public Relations Council of Ethics issued a statement that combining the professional roles of journalist and public relations is unethical as it incurs the risk of a conflict of interest²⁶.

Combining the jobs of a journalist and a public relations specialist breaches the ethical codes of both professions and is detrimental to journalism (as the meaning and ethic of the profession are lost) and to public relations, causing “the distortion of the idea of public relations, fulfilling its purpose in a grotesque, distorted form”²⁷. Both in the profession of journalist and PR-specialist, there is a strong need to observe ethical standards, formulated in the existing ethical codes, otherwise both professions are prone to being distorted. The question of comparing the existing provisions to reality is a different problem.

The question posed at the beginning of this section, whether it is possible to combine the professions of journalist and PR-specialist, was also asked to students of journalism and social communication at the University of Łódź. The study group consisted of first-year undergraduate full-time students (who did not choose their specialization yet), as well as second degree students of both PR and journalistic specializations. The total number of participants was 111. The second question of the survey was: “in your opinion, is it ethical to combine the professions of journalist and PR-specialist?” A yes/no answer was required for each question, with a short justification. The aim of the study was to learn the opinions of the students in the above mentioned field, and thus prospective journalists and public relations specialists. The survey was anonymous and was conducted in a number of groups with various specializations and lists of studied subjects²⁸. The division of the group into women and men (performed after the survey was taken) turned out to be justified, if for that reason only that the attitudes of female and male students to the possibility and ethicality of combining both professions differs substantially in several places.

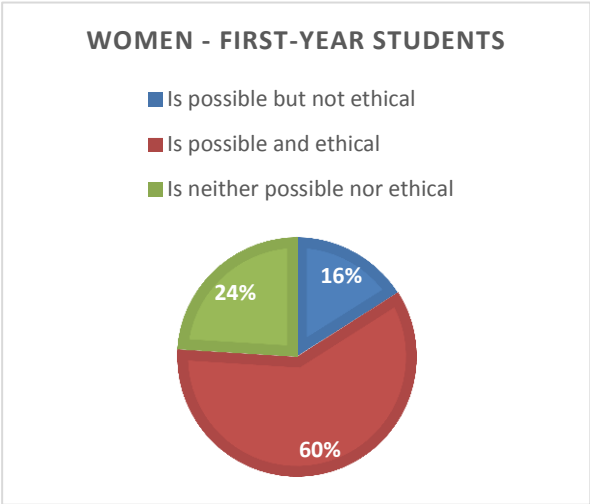
A significant majority (72%) of female first-year students of journalism and social communication considers it possible to combine the professions of journalist and PR-specialist, arguing that “these professions are not mutually exclusive”. Many of the surveyed women remarked that these are related disciplines, having much in common. Still, more than a half (58%) of male first-year students in the same field believes that it is not possible to combine the work of a journalist and PR-specialist due to “different goals of these two

²⁶ <http://radaetykipl/opinie.php> [accessed: 7 Jan 2015].

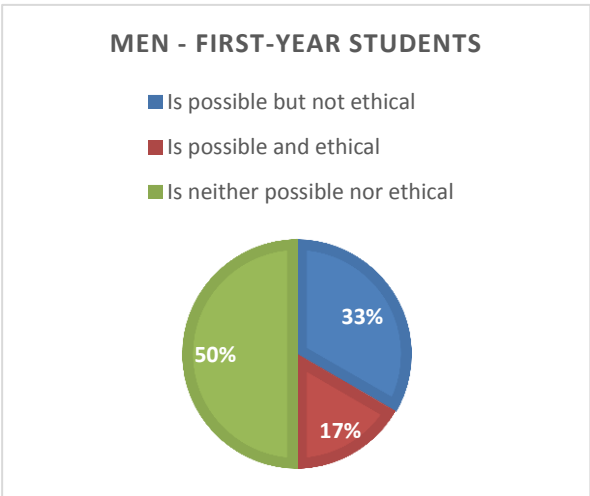
²⁷ E. Hope, *Etyka w zawodzie...*, op. cit., p. 106.

²⁸ The surveyed first-year students had not yet completed their “Ethics in journalism” course.

professions” or the fact that “the work of a PR-specialist largely involves creating an image, whiel journalists cannot create reality.” Only one female student in five decided that combining both professions was both impossible and unethical, compared to one male student in two.



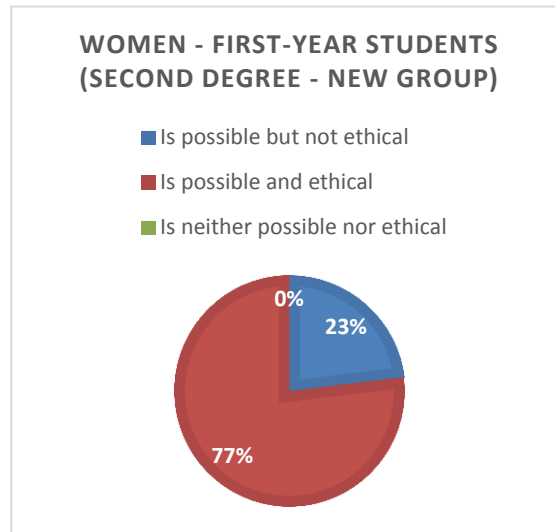
Graph 1. Answers of first-year female students before choosing a specialization
Source: own research



Graph 2. Answers of first-year male students before choosing a specialization
Source: own research

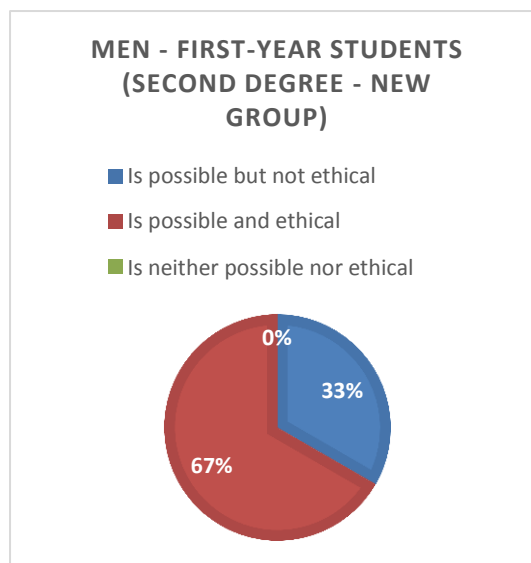
The survey conducted in a new group of advertising, “public relations and company promotion” specialization show that students agree on the question of combining these professions. There were no respondents who considered this fact as both impossible and unethical (see Graphs 3 and 4). The arguments for the combination of both functions given by byth men and women were the “close relationship between both fields” and “because

journalistic skills are very useful for a PR-specialist”. Named among the scarce arguments showing unethicity of such a combination were “different goals of both professions”.



Graph 3. Answers of the first-year female students of second-degree (Master’s) studies in advertising, public relations, and company promotion.

Source: own research

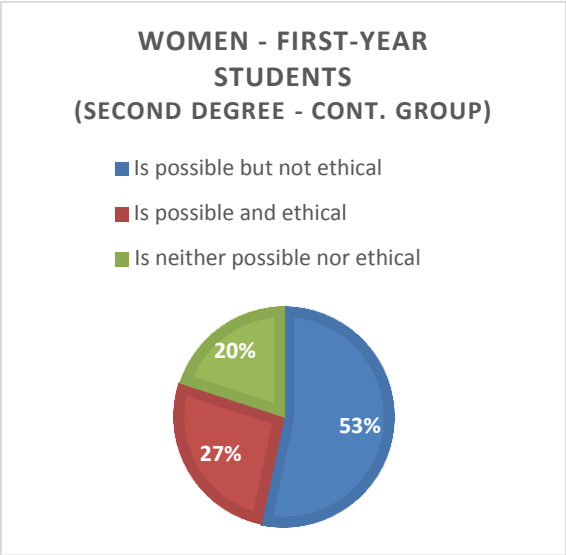


Graph 4. Answers of the first-year male students of second-degree (Master’s) studies in advertising, public relations, and company promotion.

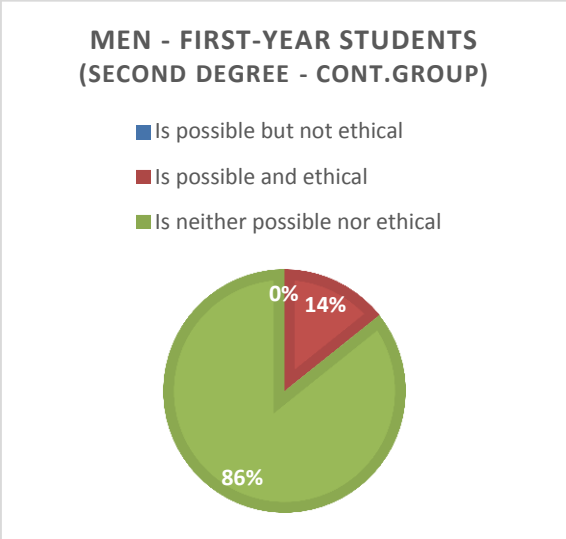
Source: own research

The survey of the group continuing the specialization of “advertising, public relations, and company promotion”, i.e., students who chose this specialization during their undergraduate studies and decided to carry on to the next degree, suggest a different conclusion. According to the data shown in Graph 5, more than half of the women considered such a combination as possible but unethical, while one in five said it was both impossible

and unethical. As many as 86% of males responded that such a combination is neither possible nor ethical, arguing, among other thing, the “conflict of interest” and “ability to use one’s connections as a journalist to work as a PR-specialist” (Graph 6).



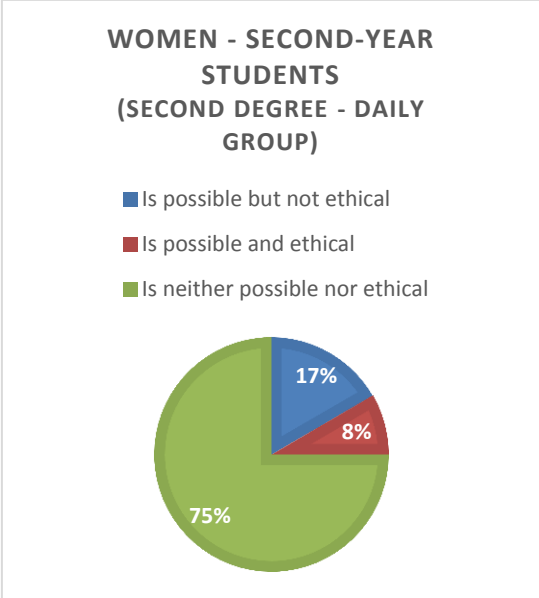
Graph 5. Answers of the first-year female students of second-degree (Master’s), continuing studies in “advertising, public relations, and company promotion”.
Source: own research



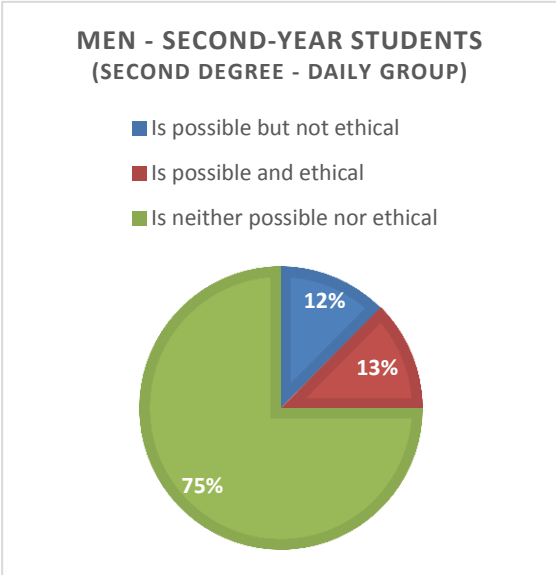
Graph 6. Answers of the first-year male students of second-degree (Master’s), continuing studies in “advertising, public relations, and company promotion”.
Source: own research

The last studied group consisted of second-year second-degree students of the specialist forms of journalism specialty. Here, the amount of male and female students who said this combination was both unethical and impossible, citing, e.g., “conflict of interest”,

“breach of journalisitic ethics”, or “capability to falsify information (Graphs 7 and 8). A significantly lower number of respondents compared to the previous groups considered the combination as both possible and ethical.



Graph 7. Answers of female second-year second-degree students continuing the “specialized variants of journalism” specialty
Source: own research



Graph 8. Answers of male second-year second-degree students continuing the “specialized variants of journalism” specialty
Source: own research

Conclusions

The question asked in the title has a complex answer. The researchers and practitioners of the professions of journalist and public relations specialist agree that the ethics is violated when the two professions are combined. Both professions judge it purely negatively as well. Whether such a combination is possible, is another question. Reality shows that it is and can be of considerable financial benefit to such a person, if we discount his/her conscience and following the rules of ethics. The characteristics of these professions, their compared opinions and expectations towards each other, and ethical codes were verified in a study carried out among prospective journalists and PR-specialists. The majority of those who followed the educational path in journalism and PR, and are now second-degree students, assess such a combination negatively. Should we include in comparison the results of the survey among first-year students and those who came from other fields and chose journalism and social communication as complementary studies, the proportions change. According to them, combining the jobs of journalist and PR-specialist is not only possible, it does not contradict the rules of ethics either. An important function of the system of higher education is made clear here, including such subjects like “journalistic ethics and PR”, introduced at the University of Łódź as well. Obviously, the reality may later verify the views of many people, yet it is important to clearly stress during the studies not only the theoretical and practical but also ethical preparation to the profession to be practised in the future.