Exploring the relationship between public relations practitioners in local government and local newspaper editors at selected newspapers in the North West Province

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DECLARATION

I, Valerie-Anne Cilliers (7412080017080), hereby declare that this master's degree dissertation as presented for my MA (Communication Studies) at the North-West University is my own work and has never been submitted at any other university.

November 2022

DEDICATION

I would like to sincerely thank my supervisor, Dr Thalyta Swanepoel, for her support, encouragement and valuable guidance. Thank you also to the North-West University's School of Communication and its Scientific Committee of the Focus Area Social Transformation which approved my proposal for this study and the encouragement I received from them.

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Throughout this process, the Bible verse, 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me' (Phil. 4:13), echoed continually in my mind. Without Him I am nothing.

ABSTRACT

In a democratic society like South Africa, truthful, accurate and transparent government communication is crucial to an informed society, even more so when it comes to local government, where municipal programmes and initiatives greatly influence citizens' day-to-day lives. Local government media relations should be studied extensively as it effectively links municipal agendas and programmes with journalism — two fundamental institutions within local communities. Both institutions are entrenched in our societies. On the one hand local government is mandated to ensure the provision of services to communities, promote social and economic development and promote a safe and healthy environment. Local journalism on the other hand enables and empowers members of a community to make informed decisions by providing reliable information about matters that affect them directly. Effective media relations are crucial if residents are to be kept informed of the workings of local government and its political agenda and structure.

Central to media relations are strong relationships between local government communicators and community newspaper editors. A growing number of public relations (hereafter abbreviated as PR) practitioners believe that the central role of public and media relations is to work towards improving relationships with an organisation's key constituencies and interest groups, including the media.

A qualitative research study, using semi-structured interviews and qualitative content analysis, was done to determine the relationship between local government communicators, Ntswaki Makgetha from Matlosana Municipality and Willie Maphosa from JB Marks Municipality, and community newspaper editors, Salomé Kotzé from the *Klerksdorp Record* in Klerksdorp and Dustin Wetdewich from the *Potchefstroom Herald* in Potchefstroom. A literature study was used to classify good relationship outcomes. These outcomes were derived from an in-depth literature review of good relationship outcomes looking at the principles of (local) government communication and media relations in South Africa.

The literature study formed the foundation for semi-structured interviews with the communication managers and the editors. The outcome led to an evaluation of the relationship and a description of each participant's perception of the relationship pertaining to relationship outcomes namely trust; mutual control; commitment; and relationship satisfaction. In addition, a qualitative content analysis of press releases and notices used by the municipalities as part of their media relations strategy, as well as newspaper articles written about municipal issues published in the two

community newspapers in the second half of 2019, was undertaken. The data was analysed to determine the theme, tone and frequency of articles published.

Relationship building is key when it comes to gaining success in public relations. Good media relations can be a strong factor in increasing credibility and authenticity for institutions such as local governments. The empirical results of this study concur with longstanding research that PR practitioners view their relationship with editors/journalists in a more positive light, while editors/journalists are less satisfied with the relationship. It further shows that the government communicators feel they have some degree of control over the news reporting related to the municipalities, but neither party is in control to the exclusion of the other. On the other hand, editors feel they have no control when it comes to acquiring information. They believe the municipalities are more reactive to bad publicity than proactive in providing good news stories.

There is ample opportunity for the municipalities and community media to work together toward a better-informed community. Relationship building is a continuing process in which both parties should work towards maintaining their existing relationships and restoring weakened ones.

It is clear from the study that a lot more can and should be done to improve the relationship and facilitate better relationship outcomes to the benefit of the community. The study also revealed that entrenched government communication prescriptions and regulations make it difficult for government communicators to meet newspaper deadlines because of bureaucratic red tape associated with disseminating information to the media. The implications of this could be that communities stay uniformed of important matters related to service delivery, community safety and development programmes.

Key terms: Community newspaper; Journalism; local government; media relations; public relations; relationship management; systems theory; two-way symmetrical approach.

OPSOMMING

In ’n demokratiese samelewing soos Suid-Afrika, is geloofwaardige, akkurate en deursigtige regeringskommunikasie van kardinale belang vir ’n ingeligte burgery, veral wanneer dit by plaaslike regering kom waar munisipale programme en inisiatiewe burgers se daaglikse lewe beïnvloed. Mediabetrekkinge op plaaslike regeringsvlak behoort breedvoerig bestudeer te word, aangesien dit munisipale agendas en programme effektief koppel aan joernalistiek, twee van die fundamentele instellings in plaaslike gemeenskappe. Beide instellings is in ons samelewings verskans. Aan die een kant het plaaslike regering die mandaat om die verskaffing van dienste aan gemeenskappe te verseker, sosiale en ekonomiese ontwikkeling te bevorder en 'n veilige en gesonde omgewing daar te stel. Plaaslike joernalistiek aan die ander bemagtig lede van 'n gemeenskap om ingeligte besluite te neem deur betroubare inligting te verskaf oor aangeleenthede wat hulle direk raak. Doeltreffende mediabetrekkinge is noodsaaklik as burgers op hoogte gehou moet word van die werking van plaaslike regering en die meganismes van die politieke stelsel waarin dit funksioneer.

Sentraal tot mediabetrekkinge staan sterk verhoudings tussen kommunikeerders in plaaslike regering en redakteurs van gemeenskapskoerante. ’n Groeiende aantal skakelkundepraktisyns en navorsers glo deesdae dat die fundamentele oogmerk van openbare en mediabetrekkinge is om voortgesette of langtermynverhoudinge met ’n organisasie se sleutelbelangegroepe, insluitend die media, te bou en dan te verbeter.

'n Kwalitatiewe navorsingstudie, met gebruik van semi-gestruktureerde onderhoude en kwalitatiewe inhoudsanalise, is gedoen om die verhouding tussen kommunikeerders in plaaslike regering, Ntswaki Makgetha van die Matlosana-munisipaliteit en Willie Maphosa van die JB Marks-munisipaliteit, asook gemeenskapskoerantredakteurs, Salomé Kotzé van die *Klerksdorp Record* in Klerksdorp en Dustin Wetdewich van die *Potchefstroom Herald* in Potchefstroom te bepaal. 'n Literatuurstudie is gebruik om goeie verhoudingsuitkomste te klassifiseer. Hierdie uitkomste is afgelei van 'n diepgaande literatuuroorsig van goeie verhoudingsuitkomste wat na die beginsels van (plaaslike) regeringskommunikasie en mediaverhoudinge in Suid-Afrika kyk.

Die literatuurstudie het die grondslag gevorm vir semigestruktureerde onderhoude wat met die kommunikasiebestuurders en die redakteurs gevoer is. Dit het gelei tot ’n evaluering van die verhouding en ’n beskrywing van elke deelnemer se persepsie van die verhouding met betrekking tot verhoudingsuitkomste naamlik vertroue; wedersydse beheer; toewyding; en verhoudingstevredenheid. Ter aanvulling is ’n kwalitatiewe inhoudsontleding gedoen van persverklarings en kennisgewings wat die munisipaliteite gebruik het as deel van hul

mediastrategie, sowel as van koerantartikels oor munisipale aangeleenthede wat in die tweede helfte van 2019 in die twee gemeenskapskoerante gepubliseer is. Die data is geanaliseer om die tema, toon en frekwensie van artikels wat gepubliseer is, te bepaal.

Verhoudingsbou is die sleutel wanneer dit kom by sukses in openbare betrekkinge. Goeie mediaverhoudinge kan 'n sterk faktor wees om die geloofwaardigheid van instellings soos plaaslike regerings te verhoog. Hierdie studie se empiriese resultate stem ooreen met navorsing dat skakelkundepraktisyns hul verhouding met redakteurs/joernaliste in ’n meer positiewe lig beskou, terwyl redakteurs/joernaliste minder tevrede is met die verhouding. Dit toon verder dat regeringskommunikeerders voel dat hulle ’n mate van beheer het oor die verslaggewing oor die munisipaliteite, maar dat geen party uitsluitlik in beheer is nie. Aan die ander kant voel redakteurs dat hulle geen beheer het wanneer dit kom by die verkryging van inligting nie. Hulle glo dat die munisipaliteite meer reaktief optree ten opsigte van slegte publisiteit as proaktief om goeienuusstories te verskaf.

Dit is duidelik uit die studie dat baie meer gedoen kan en moet word om die verhouding te verbeter en beter verhoudingsuitkomste te fasiliteer tot voordeel van die gemeenskap. Die studie het ook aan die lig gebring dat gevestigde regeringskommunikasievoorskrifte en regulasies dit moeilik maak vir regeringskommunikeerders om koerantspertye te haal as gevolg van die hoeveelheid burokratiese rompslomp wat verband hou met die verspreiding van inligting aan die media. Die implikasies hiervan kan wees dat gemeenskappe oningelig bly oor belangrike sake wat verband hou met dienslewering, gemeenskapsveiligheid en ontwikkelingsprogramme.

Sleutelterme:

Gemeenskapskoerant; joernalistiek; mediabetrekkinge; openbare betrekkinge; plaaslike regering; stelselteorie; tweerigting- simmetriese benadering; verhoudingsbestuur.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION, CONTEXT AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

1.1 Introduction, background and context

On 27 April 1994, South Africa transitioned from white minority rule to a democracy, led by the African National Congress (ANC). The shift in government ended suppressive state regulation of the media and established a new Constitution, which includes a Bill of Rights that guarantees 'freedom of expression, media freedom and access to information' (De Beer & Wasserman, 2005:36).

The new democratically elected government saw the need to alter government communication and the South African media landscape with it, prompting the then deputy president Thabo Mbeki to task a group of communication specialists to investigate and define government communication and what the South African media looked like in 1996. The findings of the task group were summarised in *Communications 2000: A vision for government communication in South Africa: final report* (Van Audenhove, 2003:138).

This task group consulted with South African media institutions, expert bodies, and all levels of government over eight months. Consultations with nineteen governments and four international organisations also shaped the report, suggesting a way forward for government communication (South Africa - Task Group on Government, 1996). The findings relating to the relationship between the press and the government are relevant to this study.

The task team found that an uneasy relationship existed between the press and government, expressed as follows (South Africa - Task Group on Government, 1996:17):

> On the one hand, government complains that its message, its perspectives and its concrete decisions and actions do not receive adequate media coverage. Reports are often superficial, incomplete, and distorted. Important government communication is often selectively ignored. On the other hand, the media alleges that the government's communication efforts are too often incomplete, opaque, and superficial and that the way in which the government releases its news is unprofessional. There are too many delays in news releases and background information on government decisions and policy.

Despite the 1996 Constitution ensuring freedom of expression and media freedom, the government and the media continued to be at odds, resulting from a difference in opinion about what media freedom should achieve for the country (De Beer & Wasserman, 2005:43).

1.1.1 Local government

Koma (2012:67) believes that effective intergovernmental communication was essential not only on a national and provincial level, but also locally, where local economic development (LED) policies were employed at grassroots level.

One of the many recommendations made by the task group was that government should create highly focused information programmes targeted at communities with the help of community media, which includes community newspapers in all ownership categories (South Africa - Task Group on Government, 1996).

However, in researching local government administration, Reddy (2016:5) opined that a lack of accountability and poor communication with communities exist within this sphere, calling it 'the "big man syndrome" where local leaders and politicians think they have political protection and are ultimately 'untouchable'.

It is essential for PR practitioners – especially those in local government – to understand the vital role that the news media play within communities. It is further vital for these institutions to know how to implement good media relations and how external communication programmes can be implemented to advance the work and image of these public agencies (Lee *et al*., 2021:1), especially in light of the general perception of the public that local governments in South Africa are failing (Masiya *et al*., 2019:23). Building strong relationships with the media should therefore be key in any municipal communication plan.

The following municipalities were included in the research:

The **City of Matlosana Local Municipality** (previously City Council of Klerksdorp) is located within the Dr Kenneth Kaunda District of the North West Province. The municipality has a communication department with a communication manager and a PR officer. The Ngaka Modiri Molema District borders the municipality in the north, with the Free State Province in the south, JB Marks on its eastern border, and Maquassi Hills as its western border.

In its district the City of Matlosana is the smallest of the three municipalities. It consists of a quarter of the district's geographical area. It includes Hartbeesfontein, Klerksdorp, Orkney and Stilfontein (Main, 2019).

JB Marks is also situated within the Dr Kenneth Kaunda District in the North West Province. The municipality has a communication department with a PR practitioner.

Of the three municipalities in the district, JB Marks is the largest, making up almost half the district's geographical area. It was established after the amalgamation of the former Ventersdorp and Tlokwe City Council local municipalities in August 2016 (Main, 2019).

1.1.2 Community newspapers

Within the South African context, there are four different types of community newspapers with different ownership patterns. These include corporately owned and community-owned not-for-profit and independent for-profit community newspapers (Dinabantu, 2021:3).

Mabasa *et al.* (2018:106) believes that community newspapers afforded residents access to relevant information on various issues because local journalists and editors were acquainted with the needs of the communities they served. He further opined that community newspapers were aptly suited to contribute towards socio-economic development of the communities they function in and that these newspapers reflect the character and essence of a community. The role of community newspapers is to connect residents with events and issues in close proximity (Swanepoel *et al*., 2016:1192). A high percentage of these events and issues relate to local government activities. Therefore, community newspapers are an excellent platform for local governments to distribute information to local communities.

Community newspapers represent all ownership models, i.e. paid-for corporate commercial, free corporate commercial, and independent (Swanepoel & Pretorius, 2022:185-186) Another category are defined by the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) as small, independent, mostly with black ownership and serving previously disadvantaged communities who had little access to news (Swanepoel & Pretorius, 2022:188). The newspapers chosen for this study are The *Klerksdorp Record*, a paid-for corporate commercial newspapers, and *Potchefstroom Herald*, a free corporate commercial newspaper.

The *Klerksdorp Record* is distributed weekly within the Matlosana municipal area. It is owned by North West Newspapers and is a member of the Audit Bureau of Circulations of South Africa (ABC). It is also available online (northwestnewspaper.co.za). Distribution area: Klerksdorp, Alabama, Coligny, Hartbeesfontein, Leeudoringstad, Lichtenburg, Manzilpark, Orkney, Ottosdal, Stilfontein, Wolmaransstad. It is the only local newspaper in Klerksdorp and has a circulation figure of 21,000 (North West Newspapers, 2022).

The *Potchefstroom Herald* is part of MooiVaal Media which is owned by Caxton (in 2019, during the timeframe of the study, 51% of MooiVaal was owned by Media24 and 49% by Caxton). The

Potchefstroom Herald is the only local newspaper distributed in Potchefstroom. Its print order is 17 000 (Caxton, 2022).

1.2 Problem statement

With this historical context in mind and working from the premise that effective relationship management and dialogue between public relations PR practitioners/government communicators and journalists play an integral part in civil society and nation-building (Ting Lee & Hemant Desai, 2014:82), it is pertinent to explore these relationships.

With the perceived lack of accountability and poor communication that exists in local communities (Reddy, 2016:5), it is important to investigate media relations on the part of local government. The question that arises is whether local governments are working towards building strong relationships with local media.

In a study of relationships between local government PR practitioners and journalists, Hess and Waller (2008:159) found that practitioners who had a positive relationship with journalists would often have positive municipal stories published. They cited the work of Oakham and Kirby (2007) who stated that the personal relationship between the PR professional and the journalist was important in generating media coverage.

Methodological gaps in researching relationships between PR practitioners and journalists/editors remain as the majority of studies have been based on quantitative research Macnamara (2015:2). This study therefore aimed to qualitatively explore the nature of the relationship between local government PR practitioners in selected municipalities and editors at selected local newspapers in the North West Province. These are the *Klerksdorp Record*, the City of Matlosana Municipality, the *Potchefstroom Herald*, and the JB Marks Municipality.

1.3 Research questions

1.3.1 General research question

From the above problem statement, the following general research question was formulated:

What is the nature of the relationship between local newspaper editors at selected newspapers and PR practitioners in local government in the North West Province?

1.3.2 Specific research questions

To answer the general research question, the following specific research questions (SRQ) were formulated:

SRQ1: Within the framework of media liaison, how could the systems theory, relationship management theory and the two-way symmetrical communication model be reflected in the relationship between PR practitioners and local community editors?

SRQ2: What are the perceptions of PR practitioners in the City of Matlosana and JB Marks Municipalities of their relationship with local newspaper editors at the *Klerksdorp Record* and the *Potchefstroom Herald*, respectively?

SRQ3: What are the perceptions of local newspaper editors at the *Klerksdorp Record* and the *Potchefstroom Herald* of their relationship with PR practitioners in the City of Matlosana and JB Marks Municipalities, respectively?

SRQ4: To what extent is the nature of the relationship between the editors at the Klerksdorp Record and Potchefstroom Herald and the PR practitioners at the City of Matlosana and the JB Marks Municipalities reflected in the frequency and nature of the coverage the selected newspapers give to the respective municipalities?

1.4 Research objectives

The following specific research objectives were identified:

SRO1: To determine through a literature study how the systems and relationship management theories as well as the two-way symmetrical communication model, are reflected in the relationship between the PR practitioners and community editors as it pertains to media relations.

SRO2: To determine through semi-structured interviews the perceptions of PR practitioners in the City of Matlosana and JB Marks Municipalities of their relationship with local newspaper editors at the *Klerksdorp Record* and the *Potchefstroom Herald*, respectively.

SRO3: To determine through semi-structured interviews the perceptions of local newspaper editors at the *Klerksdorp Record* and the *Potchefstroom Herald* of their relationship with PR practitioners in the City of Matlosana and JB Marks Municipalities respectively.

SRO4: To determine through content analysis to what extent the nature of the relationship between the editors at the Klerksdorp Record and Potchefstroom Herald and the PR practitioners

at the City of Matlosana and the JB Marks Municipalities is reflected in the frequency and nature of the coverage the selected newspapers give to the respective municipalities?.

1.5 Theoretical argument

The following theories are relevant to the study.

1.5.1 The systems theory

The systems theory was used as meta-theory because it focuses largely on the interdependence of systems and thereby offers a good basis to study relationships. Within the framework of the systems theory, Sriramesh and Verčič (2009:38) identified five environmental factors that guide the work of PR practitioners. They are political systems, economic systems, media systems, degrees of activism, and culture. This study focused on media systems.

According to Cutlip *et al.* (2002:15), a systems perspective can be used effectively to analyse PR. Such an analysis will ultimately lead to a better understanding of PR as a function for the establishment of mutually dependent relationships between an organisation and its publics, in this case between local government communicators and local newspaper editors. The concepts of adjustment and adaptation, as advocated by the systems theory, are central to relationship management (Cutlip *et al.,* 2002). The literature further suggests that a successful PR system needs a healthy democracy where there is political stability, economic growth, and a vibrant media (Lee & Kee, 2017:263). This theory emphasises interdependence and interconnectedness and can be extrapolated to local government and community media as systems. The theory is therefore relevant to this study which endeavoured to show that building solid relationships can be mutually beneficial and that the two 'systems' are indeed interdependent.

1.5.2 Relationship management theory

Grunig (2006:155) stated that relationship management enhances PR's contribution to organisations by developing and maintaining relationships with both internal and external stakeholders. This allows an organisation (local government and community media in this study) to fulfil its role in society. The theory is concerned with successfully managing common interests, shared goals and mutual understanding in order to benefit both the organisation and its publics (Maxwell & Carboni, 2014:303).

Literature related to the relationship management theory tells us that journalists and PR practitioners who have a working relationship are more likely to trust each other and preserve the relationship (Obermaier *et al*., 2018:1039). It is also stated that journalists more readily hold

negative perceptions of PR, while PR professionals view their role in the relationship as equally important, and generally view their relationships as positive (Supa, 2014; Obermaier, 2018). Shin and Cameron (2005), as cited in Koch *et al*. (2020:3), agreed and stated that the two groups' perceptions of the relationship do not correspond, as journalists more readily assess the relationship in a more negatively light when compared to PR practitioners.

Hon and Grunig (1999:7) stated that the ultimate goal of PR was to establish long-term relationships with an organisation's main publics. They opined that the value of PR could be established by determining the quality of these relationships. Hon and Grunig (1999) sought to develop a reliable PR relationship measurement scale, and subsequently identified components of strong relationships, namely control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, and commitment, stating that strong relationships are characterised by these elements.

They further identified two types of relationships. The first being an exchange relationship, where one party gives assistance to the other due to the fact that benefits were gained in the past from that particular party or because of the expectation that benefits will be gained in the future. The second is a communal relationship where both parties are committed to see the other succeed even if it means that they themselves do not benefit.

The study set out to determine if these elements existed in the relationship between the municipal PR practitioners and the editors of the relevant newspapers.

1.5.3 Two-way symmetrical communication theory

Two-way symmetrical communication as it pertains to media relations is the third theoretical argument relevant to this study. According to Willacy (2016:27), two-way symmetrical communication is often described as a very effective model for communication with external publics. Mutual understanding of each other's perceptions and attitudes is generally established through two-way symmetrical interaction. It is also often through dialogue and employing the symmetrical model that long-term relationships are maintained (Heath, 2006:95). The researcher drew on existing literature to analyse two-way symmetrical communication between the PR practitioners and editors.

1.6 Research approach and method

In this particular study, the municipalities and community newspapers of two cities in the North West Province have been adopted as research case studies. By researching the media relations processes and problems in the relationship between the local government communicators and

the editors in these two cities, recommendations can be made for better media relations to benefit the local government, the media, and the community.

Even though the vast majority of studies of relationship management within media relations have been based on quantitative surveys, Macnamara (2015:120) stated that 'in-depth purposively targeted qualitative research is needed to look beyond the simplistic tick-a-box ratings and scores that practitioners give themselves and each other in surveys and question the rhetoric, discourse, stereotypes, and media myths that quantitative studies are unable to unpack, and even perpetuate'. In line with Macnamara's cogent observations, the present study's fundamental objective is to address this methodology gap by adopting a qualitative research methodological approach to explore the relationship between the selected PR practitioners and local newspaper editors.

Bush *et al*. (2020:334), in comparing qualitative research to quantitative research, stated that 'the qualitative research approaches offer the advantages of an emergent and fluid design, the exploration of a problem in natural settings, and the ability to capture participants' meanings via 'rich, thick descriptions'.

In this study, the researcher explored the perceptions and opinions of PR practitioners and editors related to their relationship. A qualitative approach is thus appropriate to this study.

1.7 Literature review

The importance of establishing mutually beneficial relationships within the context of media relations was determined by extracting suggestions from the literature. The literature review focused on sources relevant to systems theory, relationship management and two-way symmetrical communication.

The contribution of several scholars are relevant to this study: The work of Grunig (2002), who researched qualitative methods for evaluating relationships between organisations and publics; Avery *et al.* (2009), who studied PR practitioners' and journalists' apparent obstacles to providing quality health information; Charron (1989), who looked at conflict and negotiation in the relations between journalists and PR practitioners; as well as Furlan (2012), who researched the relationship between PR practitioners and journalists pertaining to reporting medical news.

The literature review identified several knowledge gaps. The first (also mentioned 1.2) show that most studies related to the relationship between PR practitioners and journalists used quantitative methods. It further identified that research related to local government communications in South Africa focus more on development and participatory communication and very few focus on media

relations. An example is a study by Molale (2019) who researched participatory communication in South African municipal government and looked specifically at the City of Matlosana Municipality.

Chapter 2 details the literature study related to the systems theory, relationship management theory, two-way symmetrical communication as well as media relations in general.

The following databases were considered to ensure the availability of material for the study:

- EBSCO (Academic Search Premier, Communication & Mass Media Complete, Business Source Premier)
- Ferdinand Postma Catalogue (North-West University)
- African Journals Online (AJOL)

From the literature review, concepts and constructs related to answering the general research question were extracted to be used during the semi-structured interviews and content analysis.

1.8 Empirical method

1.8.1 Semi-structured interviews

The aim of the interviews was to gain more insight into the nature of the relationship as well as to garner the editors' and PR practitioners' perceptions of their relationships

According to Du Plooy and Du Plooy (2009), the semi-structured interview comprises of standardised questions, but the interviewer is free to depart from the set questions to ask follow-up questions based on the replies and feedback from the respondents. Unlike structured interviews where questions are pre-set, the researcher can engage and interact with the participants. Kallio *et al*. (2016:13) agreed that one of the main advantages of the qualitative semi-structured interview method was that it enabled interaction between the interviewer and participant, enabling the interviewer to be more flexible and be directed by the participant's responses Semi-structured interviews also differ from unstructured interviews were neither the question nor the answer categories are predetermined (Coleman, 2021:2041).

Researchers at the University of Maryland in the USA developed a questionnaire, suitable for semi-structure interviews with the aim of gathering qualitative data about the type and quality of particular relationships (Grunig, 2002). These questions are similar to the quantitative questions, originally developed by Hon and Grunig (1999) in that they contain and reflect the same

dimensions and operational definitions of what constitutes strong relationships. This qualitative questionnaire was used as the basis for the semi-structured interviews in this study (Grunig, 2002:3).

1.8.2 Content analysis

Krippendorff (2018:24) defined content analysis as a research method to extrapolate replicable and valid data from texts. He further stated that content analysis provided new insights and increased a researcher's understanding of a particular phenomenon. The instrument is thus relevant in this study that seeks to better understand the nature of the relationship between the selected PR practitioners and editors.

This researcher undertook a qualitative content analysis of newspaper articles relating to the local municipalities published in the *Klerksdorp Record* and *Potchefstroom Herald* newspapers in the second half of 2019 (1 July 2019 to 31 December 2019). The amount of coverage as well as the theme and tone of the articles were determined. The research material included articles based on local government press releases as sources and articles related to the municipalities.

Roller (2019) described the process of qualitative content analysis as methodically reducing content to identify themes by which data could more easily be interpreted. Qualitative content analysis entails capturing and interpreting content in terms of a researcher's categories, or indicators, in a way that will produce consistent evidence.

For the purpose of data visualisation and capturing, data sheets – where categories relevant to the study are presented as column headers – were created.

From the content analysis, the researcher was able to determine the tone, theme, and frequency of the published content. Should the study show that there is an amicable relationship, this will hypothetically also be reflected in the reporting by journalists, the opposite could apply to a relationship that is not amicable. A good relationship should also show a high frequency of engagement to disseminate and obtain information either through press releases or interviews, which should be reflected in how frequently news is published. In other words: There should be a correlation between a good relationship and frequent reporting and a positive tone.

1.9 Sampling

In order to select participants for the semi-structured interviews, a purposeful sampling method was used. 'Purposeful sampling means selecting participants according to the aims of the research, and according to status and their role or function in an organisation' (Coyne, 1997:642).

Interviews were conducted with the editors of the *Klerksdorp Record* and *Potchefstroom Herald* as well as with the PR practitioners of the City of Matlosana and the JB Marks Municipalities (four participants in total). Apart from their role and function, the newspapers and municipalities under review were also chosen because of their proximity and accessibility.

The researcher chose to interview the editors of each newspaper rather than journalists as they would have the best insight into the newspapers' relationships with the corresponding municipalities. Communication from municipal communication departments is generally sent to the editor of a community newspaper. This is because, unlike national titles, community papers often do not have beats related to politics or government due to shrinking newsrooms and budgetary constraints (Jenkins & Jeronimo, 2021:1224). Salomé Kotzé, who is the editor of the Klerksdorp Record, and Dustin Wetdewich, the editor of the Potchefstroom Herald, were willing to be interviewed.

Communication managers Ntswaki Makgetha from the City of Matlosana Municipality and Willie Maphosa from JB Marks Municipality were willing to participate in the study. Written consent was given by all four participants, and they were informed of how the data collected would be used.

The researcher undertook a qualitative content analysis of newspaper articles relating to the local municipalities published in the Klerksdorp Record and Potchefstroom Herald newspapers in the second half of 2019 (1 July 2019 to 31 December 2019). Sampling was done by identifying articles published during this time that mentioned the corresponding municipality. Press releases sent out by the municipality and received by the newspaper were also included in the analysis.

Altogether 76 articles published between 1 July 2019 and 31 December 2019, including news stories, columns and editorials, were gathered. Of the 76 articles, 49 pertained to the JB Marks Municipality and were published in the Potchefstroom Herald, and 27 articles about the City of Matlosana were published in the Klerksdorp Record. The article genre and tone were analysed. The article title, date/page, type/genre, theme and tone – whether it was positive, negative or neutral (see 3.4.3) – of the articles from both newspapers were also recorded in table format (Table 5 and Table 6).

1.10 Contribution of the study

The literature study showed that research conducted about media relations and relationships between local government PR and local newspapers in South Africa is limited. The researcher could find no other study that explores the state of the relationship between local government communicators and local newspaper editors in the North West Province.

By determining the state of the relationship, PR practitioners in local government can contribute insights to the management of local municipalities and demonstrate the value of strategic PR (Hon & Grunig, 1999:32). Knowledge of the quality of the relationship will help determine future communication projects to enhance relationships and media engagement. Participants in the study could also benefit from the data collected by adjusting media relations strategies and working towards stronger relationships. Better media relations could result in better informed communities.

1.11 Limitations of the study

The study is limited to two of the 23 municipalities in the North West Province. Even though the findings cannot be generalised, this study could provide a framework for future studies related to media relations between local government and community media.

1.12 Ethical issues related to the study

Ethical research sets out to cause no harm to participants and to contribute to the subject and the wider field. Therefore, the researcher should consider the potential outcomes of the chosen research methods to assess whether they will cause injury or gain. This involves recognising what the hazards might be and implementing methods that minimise these risks and evading any disclosures that could be damaging to the participants' reputation, their dignity as well as their privacy (Walliman, 2011:48).

The study required permission and participation from local municipalities as well as local newspapers in each municipal area. All necessary permissions have been obtained via email and in person from the editors of both newspapers. These documents are in the possession of the researcher. Participants also gave their consent to have their personal identities referenced.

In terms of ethics, it is important to mention that the researcher has an insider's perspective as she has worked as a local government communicator and as a community newspaper editor. The researcher is and was, however, never in any of those positions in the North West Province. Due to her previous experience, the researcher brings certain biases and knowledge to the research, however, every effort was made to ensure objectivity. Being aware of potential biases ahead of time helped the researcher to withhold judgment.

This study has been approved by the North-West University's Basic and Social Science Research Ethics Committee (BASSREC) (Ethics number: NWU- 00976-22-S7).

1.13 Chapter layout

Chapter 1: Introduction and context. In this chapter, the background and history of media relations between the government and the South African press were outlined. The problem statement and research questions were explained and discussed. The theoretical points of departure related to the systems, relationship management and two-way symmetrical theories were also introduced.

Chapter 2: Literature review. Within the framework of media liaison, this chapter will discuss how the systems and relationship management theories as well as two-way symmetrical communication are relevant in studying the relationship between PR practitioners in local government and journalists at local community newspapers.

Chapter 3: Research method. This chapter will discuss the methods used to determine the state of the relationship between the PR practitioners and local newspaper editors. In this chapter, the researcher will explain the concepts and constructs extracted from the literature and how these will be used in the content analysis as well as the semi-structured interviews with the editors and PR practitioners.

Chapter 4: Empirical findings – semi-structured interviews. This chapter aims at summarising descriptive empirical findings related to the perceived relationship between PR practitioners at the City of Matlosana and JB Marks Municipalities and the editors of the *Klerksdorp Record* in Klerksdorp and the *Potchefstroom Herald* in Potchefstroom. The findings of the semi-structured interviews with the four participants will be discussed.

Chapter 5: Empirical findings – content analysis. Findings of the content analysis of the weekly papers and PR tools sent out by the municipalities in the second half of 2019 will be discussed.

Chapter 6: Conclusion. In this chapter, the researcher will describe how the research objectives were reached. Recommendations and suggestions for future research will be made.

In the following chapter, Chapter 2, a literature review will expound the various theoretical components related to media relations (see 1.5).

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW: MEDIA RELATIONS

2.1 Introduction

In the first chapter, an overview of the study was provided and the general research questions, as well as specific research questions and objectives, were laid out to address the nature of the relationship between government communicators and community newspaper editors.

This chapter aims to answer the first specific research question by introducing various theoretical components relevant to this study. The question is:

SRQ1: Within the framework of media liaison, how could the systems and relationship management theories as well as the two-way symmetrical communication model be reflected in the relationship between PR practitioners and local community editors?

Within the framework of media liaison, the researcher will investigate how the systems theory becomes relevant when one considers both government communication and community journalism as systems within a community and whether these systems are interdependent. The researcher will then discuss the most important premises related to the systems theory as well as two-way symmetrical communication as a communication model that promotes good media relations and relationship building. This will be followed by an investigation of the relationship management theory.

2.2 Systems theory

Organisational systems can be defined by the interactions with their environments (Gregory, 1999:256). Kittelman *et al.* (2018:521) defined systems as 'perceived wholes, composed of interconnected components, with a specific purpose in a given context'. These components are interdependent parts where a change in one part of the system has an impact on all other parts of the larger system.

The use of the systems theory in studying media relations have been criticised as over simplifying the theory. Hiscock (2017:37) argued that the assumptions related to methods, validity and scope of the systems approach make it inadequate to explain public relations. He argues that researchers such as Grunig and Hunt (1984) applied a very general form of systems theory. Heath (2006:95) observes that systems theory alone does not provide enough of a societal perspective. His understanding of public relations is rooted in incorporating communications, relationships and mutually-satisfying exchange. Despite the critique, researchers who apply systems theory to

public relations believe that the strength of the theory lies in its ability to assist researchers by developing a framework for study, which is helpful to the social sciences.

Entities such as municipalities and community newspapers can be seen as systems because they are made up of individuals and groups who want to attain numerous goals by producing and interpreting messages within multi-layered interpersonal networks. They are entrenched in an environment with complex pressures (Conrad & Poole, 2012:38). Both government communication and community media are concurrently influenced by pressure from the organisational system (national, provincial and local government in the case of municipalities, and media houses in the case of community newspapers) and the external environment (the community in which they operate).

Conrad and Poole (2012) further stated that a system was more than just a sum of its parts and that each part had its own strengths, weaknesses, and goals. Subsystems supported each other so that the whole system was ultimately stronger, while a dynamic interdependence existed between the parts of the system. Organisational systems can only function as a whole if communication flows freely between subsystems so that these subsystems are able to support and complement each other to the advantage of the whole system. Subsystems are influenced by the actions of and information from other subsystems and larger systems (Kittelman *et al*., 2018:265).

Like most systems, communication systems are characterised by dynamic interactions that lead to a balanced state (homeostasis) for the whole system (Kittelman *et al*., 2018:265). Systems can only reach homeostasis if there is effective communication between parts of the system. The flow of communication is necessary so that subsystems can adjust and adapt to each other's changes and innovations.

It is not only other systems that influence a system – every system is entrenched in an environment. Organisations must be willing to adapt to their environment to stay relevant. According to Conrad and Poole (2012), the organisation's culture may avoid and even prevent some types of change and adaptation.

Adaptation involves the system doing what is necessary to survive by adjusting to the environment following external change. Finally, self-renewal occurs when systems allow new individuals and groups into the system to avoid stagnation (Conrad & Poole, 2012:24).

Systems must be open to allow communication to flow within the system, as well as to and from the environment around the system. Kittelman *et al*. (2018) opined that PR practitioners within

organisations should fulfil a functional or management role where they were part of decision-making, vying for the establishment of open systems. These practitioners engage with external publics and preferably relay information from the environment to decision-makers.

2.2.1 Community, municipality, and community newspapers as interdependent systems

According to Lowrey *et al.* (2008:277), communities are systems in themselves. They described them as 'territorially organised systems' and as 'nodes of human activity with interconnected relationships among people'. Communities, according to Lowrey *et al*., are systems that often overlap, and have intricate communication networks and social structures.

Within this system (community) are local media outlets, including community newspapers. In researching management models for community newspapers in developing countries, Swanepoel *et al*. (2016) believe that a system's characteristics could be applied to newspapers. They wrote:

> The systems approach recognises the relationship between the organisation and its external environment, which is essential in media management.

Community journalism is defined as news media serving small geographic segments such as towns or neighbourhoods. According to Glascock (2004:31), community journalism are in most cases well suited to small-town markets. He ascribed to community media a two-fold role of journalistic enterprise and community support (Glascock, 2004:44).

Another system relevant to this study is local government. Parnell (2002) described local government as 'a democratic system that must be at the forefront of involving citizens in all aspects of governance and development by providing them with practical and effective opportunities for participation'. He described the restructuring of local government after 1994 as an opportunity for municipalities to adjust to different local circumstances to better serve their communities, as they were now given the opportunity for more excellent local decision-making.

Van der Walt (2018:94) defined a municipality as a non-linear system with multidirectional interaction and changeable outcomes. He wrote:

> South Africa has made the shift from government to governance whereby all societal actors are interacting in complex networks to address societal problems. Experience has shown that active engagement, collaboration and participation by all actors are key to uplift and improve the social fabric of communities.

According to Van der Walt (2018), municipalities should regularly engage with external systems vertically and horizontally – vertically with higher tiers of government and horizontally with local agencies, the private sector, media, and civil society organisations to achieve sustainable

development. Therefore, this study will focus on engagement and interaction with community newspapers (media liaison) as an essential element of government communication.

In their interactions with journalist and editors, government communicators have varying amounts of power. In order to make the most of that power, practitioners must gain knowledge of how journalists perceive their relationship and how they themselves can improve the status of these relationships (Waters *et al*., 2010:245). This assessment according to Waters *et al.* (2010) could include gathering information on how the municipality was portrayed in published news stories, how the journalists previously reacted to information provided to them by the municipality and to what extent the journalist plays a role in setting the agenda on a particular topic. With the knowledge gained through these assessments, practitioners will be better positioned to improve media relations and implement a communication strategy and plan to improve the municipality's credibility and image (Government Communication and Information System (GCIS, 2018:25), thereby maximising its power and reach.

Whether through press releases or other PR material, information subsidies substantially impact how organisations – in this case, municipalities – are portrayed in the media (Waters *et al*., 2010:243). Waters *et al*. (2010) further stated that 'understanding and providing what journalists wanted and needed were as important as cultivating a personal relationship with journalists who covered issues related' – for the purpose of this study – to local government.

Van der Walt (2018:93) stated that municipalities could be regarded as open systems. He further opined that systems thinking and the open-systems approach is well suited to understand the dynamics of municipalities' external communication. A discussion related to open and closed systems, as described in the systems theory, follows.

2.2.2 Open and closed systems

Heath's (1994) discussion of the systems theory distinguished between open and closed systems, where closed systems were not easily affected by changes in other parts. On the other hand, open systems take information from other parts of the system and use it to adapt to the environment. In open systems, the organisation is influenced by changes in its environment. The different parts within the system is affected by the actions of other parts (Gregory, 1999:267). Such a system receives input from the environment, which influences its ideal or anticipated goals or objectives.

An open system is necessary for effective organisational communication so that information can flow comfortably between parts of the system. Within this system, engagement and relationship

management are essential in ensuring that subsystems remain in homeostasis. Communication management becomes a symmetrical process consisting of sacrifice and negotiation (Steyn, 2000:4).

Organisations with a symmetrical worldview are open and view themselves as part of their environment. These organisations are open to interpreting systems and are free to exchange information with interest groups. In such organisations, equal opportunities are created, new ideas are born, and conflict is resolved through negotiation and coordination (Steyn, 2000:4).

Each subsystem can form the necessary networks through communication and go through the required processes to ensure the survival of the total system. Organisations can make better decisions and implement them more quickly when a process is followed where the expectations and points of view of specific interest groups are collected, understood, and interpreted (De Beer & Steyn, 2012:31).

Within an open system, the PR practitioner will work towards establishing solid relationships with strategic interest groups that form part of the system. Once strong relationships are established, communication strategies should be more effective because the outcomes of strong relationships will be present. These outcomes are trust, openness, involvement, investment, and commitment (Ledingham, 2003:185). With these dimensions, participants in the system will have access to information that will enable them to add to the efficacy and adaptability of the system.

In determining whether local government is an open or closed system, the researcher studied the ComTask Report. As stated in 1.1, the findings of the task group were summarised in *Communications 2000: A vision for government communication in South Africa: final report* (Van Audenhove, 2003:138).

The findings of the ComTask Report clearly stated that government communication should be open with channels of access, particularly at local community level. The report called for an open system that would foster a culture of accountability (South Africa – Task Group on Government, 1996:14). It found, however, that community media specifically suffered because of a lack of face-to-face sourcing and information deficiency. ‘They are isolated and not well served,’ the report read.

The organisational system, which includes the communication systems, is influenced by the worldview by which the organisation is managed (see discussion in 2.3). An organisation’s worldview largely determines the extent to which organisational communication systems are open or closed and the extent to which information can flow between subsystems and the external

environment (Kittelman *et al.*, 2018:522). The researcher will now examine what a worldview is and from the literature determine what the worldview of local governments (municipalities) and local newspapers could be and how this could influence media relations and relationship management.

2.3 Two-way symmetrical communication

Two-way symmetrical communication as it pertains to media relations is the second theoretical argument relevant to this study. The aim of concerted media relations strategies and efforts should be to establish and contribute towards strong two-way symmetrical relationships. In order to maintain these dialogic relationships with stakeholders, organisations must fully adapt and adjust themselves to facilitate symmetrical communication (Atabek & Alikilic, 2020:65).

James Grunig's models of communication which include the two-way symmetrical communication model has drawn its share of criticism (Laskin, 2009:43). "Some conclude that the models of public relations are a normative theory rather than a positive description of the industry – the way in which practitioners perhaps would like to do public relations, but in no way can actually do it in the real life."

In studying the evolution of models of public relations Laskin (2009) concludes that the attempt to translate these models into measurable dimensions failed because of a variety of conceptual and methodological flaws. He however states that the idea of developing dimensions and models of public relations is a viable and practical step in advancing public relations research. Such dimensions must however be unremitting, and measurable.

2.3.1 Worldview

The type of communication used by an organisation is often determined by its worldview. These can either be asymmetrical or symmetrical.

2.3.1.1 Asymmetrical worldview

Organisations with an asymmetrical worldview steer their PR practitioners towards unprincipled, socially negligent, and unproductive actions. They work from the premise that their publics would benefit from following its instructions as the organisation knows best. According to Siachou *et al*. (2021:6), an asymmetrical worldview often results in short-term outcomes and frequent termination of strategic agreements. In organisations with this worldview, one-way communication models that are asymmetrical in nature would be applied and PR practitioners would try to influence the behaviour of interest groups without adapting the organisation. Assumptions of the

asymmetric worldview as studied by Grunig and White (1992:43); Botan and Hazleton (1989) and Childers (1989:89-91) are described in Niemann-Struweg *et al.* (2007:4) and upheld by Grunig and Kim (2021:295) as:

- Members do not see the organisation as others do. Information flows out and not in.
- Efficiency and control are valued more than innovation.
- Leaders know best; employees should follow.
- Change is undesirable.
- Tradition provides stability and maintains culture.
- Power is centralised and in the hands of the few, with employees having little autonomy.

It is further essential to determine an organisation's worldview as it will impact its relationship with its public. Generally, researchers report that when the public views the world differently to the organisation, relational discontent could result, leading to a discontinuation of the relationship (Bruning & Lambe, 2009:139). According to Grunig and Kim (2021:290), governments who believe that powerful groups (such as the media) could dominate them, would more likely engage in asymmetrical PR.

According to Wasserman (2020:457), increased political meddling in the way in which information is disseminated between government and the media could result in a deficiency of and lack of access to information. Morudu (2017:3) stated that service delivery protests in rural areas clearly indicated how this meddling and subsequent poverty of information often lead to disinformation, rumours, exploitation and misconduct. Furthermore, despite community newspapers and other communication tools providing a communication platform for local government, communication was still not always offered by local governments, which could indicate an asymmetrical worldview and model of communication. 'There is evidence of information deficiency because of the uneven manner with which local municipalities not only implement but also publicise and disseminate information on their participatory initiatives' (Morudu, 2017).

Paradza *et al*. (2010:36) asserted that information deficiency might be due to obstacles such as language, lack of training, an inability for effective communication and feedback, and a break in communication between political and administrative leadership. They opined that information deficiency diminished the trust communities have in local government and intensified nationwide service delivery protests.

Msenge and Nzewi (2021:5) quoted Vermunt and Steensma (2016), who opined that 'when information about service delivery outcomes is missing, vague or untimely, procedural and interactional justice perceptions will serve as proxies for assessing the fairness of outcomes.' They concluded that a lack of communication and ignorance of communication tools (such as community newspapers) have fraught public trust in local government institutions. This further points to the fact that some municipalities have adopted an asymmetrical communication model in dealing with the local media and communities.

2.3.1.2 Symmetrical worldview

Symmetrical communication management can be described as a balanced process of adjustment, concession and compromise to better enable understanding between organisations and interest groups. Siachou *et al.* (2021:7) opined that highly symmetrically interdependent organisations could accomplish competitive advantages and enhance the organisations' commitment as well as partnership stability. Such an organisation would use research and dialogue to manage conflict and gain an exhaustive understanding of the needs and views of its stakeholders. This process allows relationships to be built on the foundation of shared meaning and mutual understanding. The organisation and its interest groups could then be persuaded to change their behaviour. Grunig and Kim (2021:295) offered the following presuppositions for a symmetrical worldview:

- Organisational boundaries are open to the organisation's publics as well as other organisations.
- Information flows freely between systems.
- Systems seek to be in equilibrium with other systems through collaboration, mutual adjustment and adaptation which involves the system doing what is necessary to survive by adapting to the environment following external change.
- There is an equal opportunity to provide valuable input into the organisation regardless of education and background.
- When people have autonomy and are not controlled by others, they are more innovative, constructive, and creative.
- New ideas and flexible thinking are promoted above tradition.
- The input of all people is valued. Decision making is decentralised.
- There is a concern for the consequences of actions and behaviours.
- Conflict is resolved through negotiation and compromise where necessary.

Through symmetrical communication, the organisation and its publics become partners in an ongoing process of development. This is in contrast, to asymmetric communicators who see their publics as mere objects to be influenced and manipulated (Grunig & White, 1992:43-44).

From a relational perspective, it is important that PR practitioners be more interactive with key public members. It is also important that they understand how key public members view the world (Bruning & Lambe, 2009:142). Taking this study into consideration, the opinion of Culbertson (2010:17), who stated that 'symmetrical communication may be unworkable and/or undesirable within cultures that emphasise hierarchy and have high power distance', should be noted. According to Culbertson (2010:11), some cultures uphold the idea that it is natural and acceptable to have social groups with large disproportionate amounts of power and status.

According to Beresford (2015:1), there is a huge emphasis on political authority and high power distance as it related to political positions.

> Political leaders in South Africa who occupy positions of authority in the ANC or public service, act as gatekeepers by regulating access to the resources and opportunities that they control. A politics of inclusion and exclusion thus emerges that exhibit the power and authority of the gatekeeper who can determine the fate of those who look to them for resources and opportunities.

Beresford (2015:3) explained that the ANC often uses the terms 'gatekeeping' and 'gatekeeper politics' which refer to how 'political leaders in positions of authority within the ruling party or in public office control access to resources and opportunities to forward their own political and economic ends'. From the literature, it is possible to deduce that government structures under the leadership of the ANC (such as local ANC-run municipalities) are inclined to foster an asymmetrical worldview and is thus more inclined towards asymmetrical communication models.

An organisation's worldview influences the type of communication model that the organisation will use. Relevant to this study, it is important to determine whether local government (in this case the City of Matlosana and JB Marks municipalities) prescribes to an asymmetric worldview with largely asymmetric communication models, or a symmetrical worldview with symmetrical communication models. In the next section, the different communication models are discussed in more depth.

2.3.2 Communication models

PR is often studied using models founded on the original work of J.E. Grunig to evaluate PR practices (Grunig & Kim, 2021:278). Grunig originally identified four models of PR practice, these include the press agent model, the public information model, the two-way asymmetrical model,

and the two-way symmetrical model (Laskin, 2009:36). The two-way symmetrical communication model is often described as an effective model when communicating with external publics (including the media), as both the organisation and the media benefit from the interactions. Heath (2006:94) stated that two-way symmetrical interaction is needed to establish mutual understanding of each other's perceptions and attitudes. To have better understanding of the two-way symmetrical model, it is important to also define the other models relevant to PR. They are:

2.3.2.1 Press agent model

The press agent model was practised from the middle of the 19th century (Grunig & Grunig, 2008:287). According to this model, corporate communication practitioners created and published stories of great importance, but with little value or truth (Laskin, 2009:38). The press agent model was based on one-way communication, where the truth was not very important and corporate communication management was likened to promotion and publicity (Laskin, 2009:40). The press agent model was characterised by the attitude of early communication practitioners that interest groups were naive and could be fooled. Organisations employed press agents who distributed press releases on behalf of the organisation. The statements did not necessarily reflect the truth but did have the information the organisation wanted their interest groups to believe. Communication was one-way and asymmetrical in nature and aimed at influencing stakeholders to win them over to the organisation's position, regardless of the facts (Chaka & Botha, 2007:67).

2.3.2.2 Public information model

The public information model was introduced at the beginning of the 20th century (Grunig & Grunig, 2008:288). This model was developed in response to attacks on larger organisations by journalists and the government, after which organisations appointed in-house journalists to compile documents explaining organisational actions (Grunig & Grunig, 2008:288). Thanks to investigative reporting by the media, stakeholders were able to gather what was going on in organisations and what the impact of their actions was. Thus, interest groups developed the ability to pressure organisations to provide reliable information. This model was, therefore, an improvement on the press agent model in the sense that the focus was more on the truth. However, negative facts about the organisation were simply concealed. The public information model still relied only on one-way, asymmetric communication. The organisation still had control over what type of information was provided as well as when this would happen (Chaka & Botha, 2007:67-68).

2.3.2.3 Asymmetric two-way communication model

During the First World War, the first two-way communication model developed, namely the two-way asymmetric model. According to this model, corporate communication management was regarded as a scientific attempt to persuade interest groups of the organisation's point of view (Laskin, 2009:38). This model necessitated feedback from stakeholders, but this feedback was often manipulated in such a way that it benefitted the organisation. The organisation listened to its interest groups, but the information obtained from research was used to formulate messages in such a way as to persuade interest groups that the organisation's position was correct and acceptable.

Organisations still relied heavily on the communications practitioner's ability to convince interest groups of the organisation's position. The asymmetric two-way communication model thus indicated an unbalanced relationship between the organisation and its interest groups.

2.3.2.4 Symmetrical two-way communication model

Later, in the 1960s to 1970s, the two-way symmetrical model was introduced. This model involved shared understanding and two-way communication (Laskin, 2009:39). The model enabled understanding and two-way communication, where understanding was the most important goal (Grunig & Grunig, 2008:289). The model was based on open dialogue between the organisation and its interest groups to facilitate adaptability on the part of the organisation and its interest groups (Laskin, 2009:40).

Two-way communication is necessary for a strong relationships to develop between an organisation and its interest groups (Chaka & Botha, 2007:68). Varey (1997:220) pointed out that all communication required the presence of a relationship, because it is a two-way process in which the recipients reacted to the respondent's information, attitudes and ideas by sharing their own. Symmetrical two-way communication indicated that both the organisation and its interest groups were equal, both had access to information and had an equivalent chance to persuade the other party or parties of their point of view. For this study, symmetrical two-way communication is regarded as the ideal model through which relationships are strengthened. This type of model of communication could correct erroneous perceptions held by the participants involved in this study. These perceptions were identified during the semi-structured interviews and are discussed in Chapter 4.

Although research suggests that the symmetrical two-way communication model should be the standard as it is the most ethical way of communication practice, many communication

practitioners believe that the symmetrical two-way communication model is too idealistic and does not reflect true practice. This point of view led to the fifth communication model, namely the mixed-motive model (Wiggill, 2009:37).

2.3.2.5 Mixed-motive model

The mixed-motive model is grounded in the principle of communal communication and comprises of two-way asymmetric and symmetrical elements. The interests of the organisation and interest groups are protected (Grunig & Grunig, 2008:312-313). Organisations who use this model, realise that they can potentially benefit if they leave some of their own needs unfulfilled to satisfy those of their interest groups (Grunig & White, 1992:48). Organisations and interest groups sometimes have different or conflicting interests, but despite this, a win-win situation can be attained through negotiations and sacrifices (Dozier *et al*., 1995:48-49; Grunig, 2002:355-358).

The mixed-motive model implies that both symmetrical and asymmetrical models are applied within a symmetrical worldview and therefore this model is also referred to as 'the true two-way model'. Excellent communication management leans more toward the symmetrical side of the continuum, but through the mixed-motive model, all parties can benefit from relationships (Grunig & Grunig, 2008:313). The outcome of this model is that communication is used to move interest groups and the organisation to an acceptable win-win situation (Wiggill, 2009:37). Community newspapers need strong and well-functioning municipalities for businesses to flourish in a well administrated town. These businesses as well as the municipality contribute to the advertising revenue of the newspaper. Municipalities need a successful community newspaper to communicate effectively to its constituencies.

Waters *et al*. (2010:241) stated that open two-way communication has to be present in the relationship for media relations to be effective. The nature of communication (one-way or two-way) is determined by the purpose of the communication. Therefore, organisations that want to communicate exceptionally have to implement the mixed-motive model so that communication with interest groups could take place comfortably, and strong relationships with interest groups could be established.

Theoretical statement 1: Organisations with a symmetrical worldview are more likely to adopt two-way symmetrical or mixed-motive communication models because the assumptions of a symmetrical worldview encourage the use of two-way models. Two-way communication is necessary for strong relationships to develop between an organisation and its interest groups (Chaka & Botha, 2007:68).

To further formulate an answer to the first specific research question, the researcher will now present the outcomes of a literature review of the relationship management theory.

2.4 Relationship management

According to Ledingham (2003:181), the relationship management theory is well suited to theoretical concepts such as the systems theory and the two-way symmetrical communication model. Applying relationship management theory to the media relations realm, Hon and Grunig (1999:24) wrote:

> Savvy media relations experts know … that good relationships with reporters are ones in which both [journalists and public relations practitioners] feel they have some degree of control over the reporting of the organization—neither party is in control to the exclusion of the other. Both parties trust each other to help them do their job; indeed, they have a communal relationship so each helps the other even though they may get nothing in return. They are committed to making the relationship between the organization and the media work. The bottom line is that they are satisfied with the relationship.

Le Roux (2010:22) agreed by adding that the most important contribution that a PR practitioner could make is to help organisations interpret and then adapt to the environment and establish strong, mutually beneficial relationships with interest groups.

Hon and Grunig (1999:2) as well as Bruning *et al.* (2008) stated that a growing number of PR practitioners and researchers came to accept that the principal aim of PR is to build and augment enduring or long-term relationships with an organisation's key publics and interest groups.

Grunig & Huang (2000) indicated that 'relationship management has emerged as an important paradigm for PR scholarship and practice'.

The relationship management perspective indicates that the interests of the organisation are aligned with those of its interest groups. This allows for strong organisational interest group relations (Ledingham, 2003:181). Strategic relationship management goes hand in hand with the strategic management of the organisation and contributes to the balancing of internal organisational processes with external factors (Bruning & Ledingham, 1998:56).

Shared understanding and mutual benefit is the outcome of effective relationship management. It comes down to shared interests and finding solutions to mutual problems (Ledingham, 2003:188). The relationship management theory is used to indicate the importance of two-way communication for relationship building, with various relationship-building strategies that can be used to build strong relationships, and outcomes of strong relationships to determine the quality of relationships (Bruning & Ledingham, 1998, 2000; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ledingham, 2003; Kim *et al.*, 2020).

Strong relationships, based on mutual understanding, can only be established and maintained if two-way communication between the organisation and its interest groups exists. It is essential for good relationship management that messages are communicated in such a way that it is understood by the recipients and that there is opportunity for feedback.

By focusing PR activity on relationship-building the practice of PR becomes more than just gaining publicity, it becomes a management approach, which focusses on the establishment of mutually beneficial relationships (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000:88).

In terms of media relations, PR practitioners are often guilty of using asymmetrical models of communication by simply dumping information through press releases and not focusing on their relationship with the media (Grunig & Kim, 2021:304). If the local government's PR strategy is geared towards relationship building, its actions will reflect more than just disseminating information to the newspaper. It will adapt strategies to advance the relationship symmetrically. This could include efforts such as media days where community newspaper editors and journalists meet political leaders and municipal administrators, and media tours.

Bruning *et al*. (2008:143) stated that the relational approach requires practitioners to engage more with key public members. 'Practitioners must understand (a) how key public members view the world, and (b) how key public members and organisational views are harmonic.' They opined that this type of research could assist in making members of the organisation more attentive towards the needs of key publics. This then empowers the organisation to utilise that information during decision making. In the context of this study, it is important that the government communicators and their principals are aware of what is important to the newspaper as a public. This could include knowing which news values are important, what the publishing deadlines are and in what format newspaper editors prefer to receive information.

2.4.1 Relationship-building strategies

Within the ongoing process of relationship building the organisation maintains good or existing relationships. It is sometimes also necessary to re-establish deteriorated relationships (Hung, 2007:459). Various strategies can be applied to build relationships. The choice of strategies depends on the organisation and context of the situation. The strategies below relate well to media relations, are symmetrical in nature (Grunig & Huang, 2000:36-37; Hung, 2001:15-19; Hung, 2007:459-461) and include the following:

- **Access** involves stakeholders having access to information and ways of sharing information. This strategy is especially relevant in media relations and this particular study. Regular access to information related to municipal issues as well as information related to the newspaper – deadline dates and times, etc. – are important in building relationships. It is also important to ensure that effective channels of communication exist.

- **Openness** is when the thoughts and feelings of both parties can be shared comfortably.

- **Assurance of authenticity** indicates the assurance from both parties that the other party and their concerns or issues are genuine. In terms of media relations, it is important for both the PR practitioner and editor to know that the other party is willing to engage and deem such engagement as important.

- **Networking** involves the organisation building relationships with the same groups as their interest groups, for example with unions and environmental activists. As both the local government communicator and editor work within the same community, they should have access to the same stakeholders and networks.

- **Cooperation** is when the organisation and interest groups work together to reconcile their interests so that a mutually beneficial relationship is established.

- **Unconditional constructiveness** occurs where the organisation acts in the best interests of the relationship, even if it means that they sometimes must relinquish their position of power. Win-win or no negotiation imply that the organisation and the interest group rather renounce negotiation when both parties will not benefit from it. This strategy relates well to the premise that both government communication and community journalism are systems within a community and that these systems are interdependent. The relationship will be strengthened when both parties benefit from engagements.

Theoretical statement 2: If relationship-building strategies such as access, openness, assurance of authenticity, networking, cooperation and unconditional constructiveness are successfully applied by the organisation, strong relationships should be established (Grunig & Huang, 2000:36-37; Hung, 2001:15-19; Hung, 2007:459-461).

The quality of strong relationships can further be determined by the presence of certain outcomes or dimensions. The following outcomes were determined through literature related to relationship management theory.

2.4.2 Relationship management outcomes

The outcomes of strong relationships have been identified as follows (Hon & Grunig, 1999:18; Grunig & Huang, 2000:42-47; Hung, 2001:25-30):

- **Mutual control** occurs where parties involved agree on the degree of influence or power they have over each other and how they can influence each other's behaviour. This leads to more stable relationships. This outcome can be improved by implementing relationship-building strategies such as openness, sharing of tasks, access, and collaboration. The dimension of openness of Bruning and Ledingham (1998) is related to this because interest groups can only feel that there is mutual control if they are informed about the organisation's plans.

- **Trust** is the willingness of parties to expose themselves to the other party. Trust has three dimensions, namely:

    - integrity (believing that the organisation is fair);

    - reliability (can rely on the organisation to do what they say they will); and

    - competence (believing that the organisation can do what they say they will do). This can be accomplished by using relationship-building strategies such as positivity, access, openness, sharing of tasks, assurance, unconditional constructiveness and win-win or no negotiation. This outcome relates to the dimension of trust as defined by Bruning and Ledingham (1998).

- **Commitmen**t refers to the extent to which parties feel the relationship is worth the time and effort. Relationship-building strategies such as networking, win-win or no negotiation, collaboration and positivity give rise to this outcome. It is also related to the dimensions of engagement, investment, and commitment of Bruning and Ledingham (1998).

- **Relationship satisfaction** is when the benefits of the relationship outweigh the disadvantages that can be achieved through relationship-building strategies such as positivity, assurance and win-win or no negotiation. Since the parties involved are kind to each other, they have positive expectations of the relationship.

Various researchers such as Hon and Grunig (1999:2-3), Grunig and Huang (2000:42-47), Kang and Yang (2010:479), and Xie (2019) found in their research that the quality of an organisation's long-term relationships with key interest groups could best be assessed by focusing on the extent to which the four outcomes of strong relationships are present, as well as the type of relationship between the organisation and its interest groups.

According to Hon and Grunig (1999:20) and Hung (2005:396), the two basic types of relationships that can occur, are:

- **Exchange relationships**, based on the idea that one party feels obligated to do something for the other because the other has done something for him in the past. In the context of this study an example would be if the municipality expected publicity because of the amount of money spent on advertising.
- **Communal relationships** involve parties doing things for each other because they care about the well-being of the other party. An example would be where the newspaper supports and promotes a project by the municipality for the good of the municipality and the community.

> **Theoretical statement 3:** If public and media relations are strategically managed according to the relationship management theory, the outcomes of strong relationships should be present in the relationship between government communicators and community newspaper editors, namely trust; mutual control; commitment; and relationship satisfaction (Hon & Grunig, 1999:18; Grunig & Huang, 2000:42-47; Hung, 2001:25-30).

Apart from determining whether the above relationship outcomes are present in the relationships in question, this study also set out to determine whether an exchange relationship or a communal relationship exists between the local government communicators and newspaper editors. Both PR practitioners and editors have parts to play in establishing and maintaining relationships. It is important to know the role of each as it relates to the relationship management function.

2.4.3 The role of the PR practitioner in government

Local government PR practitioners function as a link between government and society. They have a responsibility to communicate information related to municipal issues in a timely, precise, and accurate manner. To inform society, they often make use of local media to spread information (Susanti & Rahmanto, 2018).

PR practitioners in organisations are responsible for media relations which entails the management of sound relationships with journalists even if their views and values do not always correspond with that of the journalist. Comprehensive and maintained relationships with journalists will empower the work of PR practitioners and reduce unwanted issues related to media coverage. PR practitioners should have adequate knowledge of journalism and respond adequately to the inquiries of journalist in order to establish positive media relations and gain positive coverage. (Atabek & Alikilic, 2020:67).

According to GCIS (2018), local government PR practitioners should provide information to citizens to ensure that they have relevant information that can support them in becoming active citizens. This government communication policy that was approved by Cabinet on 22 August 2018, states:

> Through a more active involvement in public programmes and through access to government information and campaigns, people will be equipped and empowered to use this information for their own development, thus promoting a better life for all South Africans.

The policy suggests the following related to media relations (GCIS, 2018):

- 'The media must be given equal access to information and all interactions with them must be professional.
- Design and implement a proactive media relations strategy and plan.
- Build and maintain relations with the media.
- A government institution must respect media deadline requirements and endeavour to provide open and equal access to all news media.
- All media queries must preferably be acknowledged in a reasonable time that directly relates to the particular medium – whether print, broadcast or online.
- Agreement should be reached between the media and the government spokesperson on deadline delivery times and all changes to these agreements should be communicated.
- Communication channels should always be kept open and the media updated on any of the pending media enquiries.
- Designated government spokespersons must be available and accessible so as to deal with media enquiries and return calls timeously.
- The communication manager must timeously get approval of media statements from the accounting officer to enable achievement of deadlines.'

2.4.4 The role of the newspaper editor

Communities rely on community newspapers to inform them of and connect them to the events and issues in their immediate proximity (Swanepoel *et al.,* 2016). These authors argued that a community newspaper's content should reflect the essence of the community they serve. Community newspapers also 'play an important role as an influence over what people may deem important, as they disseminate information about issues relevant to them' (Shoenberger & Rodgers, 2017:206). Spearheading this should be the newspaper editor. They opined that editors play a vital role in ensuring that issues that were important to the public were published.

Gade (2008:370) described editors as active managers who value their work and engagement with non-news departments and external role-players, this could include local government. His research showed that editors perceived that their role was to promote a stronger business consciousness in the newsroom. Therefore, journalism skills and judgment had to be complemented with management skills as well as a greater marketing awareness.

According to Gade (2008:384), editors should advocate for journalism values, engage not only with the journalist, but with role-players outside of the newsroom, as well as promote journalistic professionalism. Editors protect the newsroom from marketing schemes that might be at odds with journalistic values.

Of value to this study is the perception that editors should engage regularly with government communicators because local government and its programmes play an important role in the wellbeing of community members (Koma, 2012:67).

According to Bryant (2021:4), community newspapers – under the guidance of the editor – could act as a watchdog and have a substantial role in the dissemination of news, promoting shared involvement and development, community incorporation and inclusion.

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, the first research question was answered, namely: How could the systems theory and relationship management theory be reflected in the relationship between PR practitioners and local community editors?

The literature study shows that the extent to which the communication system is open or closed is largely determined by the organisation's worldview. The organisation's worldview determines the type of communication model applied in the organisation.

Within a symmetric worldview, two-way symmetric communication is best suited to building strong relationships. Relationship management entails that communication must take place strategically to manage relationships with interest groups so that the outcomes of strong relationships, namely shared control, trust, relationship satisfaction, and commitment, are present. This is accomplished by applying certain relationship-building strategies, for example access, openness, positivity, assurance, networking, sharing of tasks, collaboration, unconditional constructivism, and win-win or no negotiation.

In Chapter 3, the research methodology for this study is discussed. The chosen research approach, design and methods are discussed and motivated.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY FRAMEWORK

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 1 provided background and context to the study, while Chapter 2 outlined the theoretical framework for the research to answer the first research question, namely:

Within the framework of media liaison, how could the systems and relationship management theories as well as the two-way symmetrical communication model be reflected in the relationship between PR practitioners and local community editors?

The most important literature regarding systems theory and relationship management as well as two-way symmetrical communication was discussed.

This chapter, Chapter 3, describes the research approach followed in this study, the design, as well as the empirical methods, namely qualitative content analysis and semi-structured interviews. In this chapter, the researcher will explain the concepts and constructs extracted from the literature and how these were used in the research design. The aim was to generate data that would determine the state of the relationship between local government communicators and community newspaper editors. Aspects related to ethics and reliability and validity are also discussed.

The research approach and design will now be discussed and from there the research methods that were used in this study.

3.2 Research approach

This study investigated the relationship between local government PR practitioners and local newspaper editors by following a qualitative research approach.

3.2.1 Qualitative approach

Qualitative research can explore perceptions and meanings related to respondents' experiences. Teherani *et al*. (2015:669) stated that this research approach entails 'the systematic examination of social phenomena in natural settings. These phenomena could include how people experience facets of their lives, how individuals or groups of people behave, how organisations function, and how exchanges shape relationships.' The latter is of major importance to this current study and an indication that a qualitative approach is best suited.

Qualitative research mostly uses inductive reasoning, which involves conducting research to establish patterns, and then comparing the patterns to finally make a general supposition or conclusion (Du Plooy & Du Plooy, 2009:33). Babbie and Mouton (2010:271) pointed out that qualitative research is well suited to foster understanding of other's perspectives and attitudes. Qualitative researchers were primarily interested in describing participants' actions in terms of the context (Babbie & Mouton, 2010:271). In this study, the researcher explored the perceptions and actions of the participants to form general assumptions about their relationship.

According to Flick (2009:58), qualitative research is relevant to the study of social interaction and relationship management. This approach is concerned with analysing concrete cases in their present reality and setting. For this study, the researcher visited both municipalities as well as both community newspapers.

It is true, however, that qualitative research can be limited due to sample sizes that might be too small, potential bias on the part of respondents, the researcher's own bias and questions that are poorly formulated. According to Creswell and Poth (2016:182) findings related to qualitative research cannot always be generalised. They opine that researchers should take care by ensuring that they themselves do not significantly influence the data in ways that would change the meaning. This includes steering away from personal bias when interpreting the data. Creswell and Poth (2016:182) and Hardesty *et al*. (2019:4808), stated that researchers should explore their own potential biases ahead of time. This could assist them to withhold judgment and respond appropriately.

From the above, the researcher determined that adopting a research design based on case studies will best suit this study which aims to explore the relationship between PR practitioners in local government and local newspaper editors. A discussion of the research design follows.

3.3 Research design

In this particular study, the municipalities and community newspapers of two cities in the North West Province have been adopted as research case studies.

Voss (2010:201) defined a case study as:

> A history of a past or current phenomenon, drawn from multiple sources of evidence. It can include data from direct observation and systematic interviewing as well as from public and private archives.

Voss (2010) opined that fewer case studies ensured greater opportunity for depth of observation.

The purpose of using case studies is to provide a detailed, all-inclusive description and analysis of a 'single, controlled unit positioned in a specific context to provide understanding into real-life situations' (Ponelis, 2015:536). In choosing two municipalities and two community newspapers, the reality of municipal media relations with community newspapers within a community could be researched.

Du Plooy and Du Plooy (2009:180) described a case study as 'the investigation and analysis of a single system'. This method is highly flexible and responds easily to the requirements of circumstances because there is no fixed blueprint. The goal of case studies is often to describe qualitative information (Du Plooy & Du Plooy, 2009:181). In terms of this study the qualitative information that was gathered related to the relationship between government communicators and community newspaper editors.

The case study method is used to research developments, problems, and programmes to bring about an understanding that can advance practice. By researching the media relations processes and problems in the relationship between the local government communicators and the editors in these two cities, recommendations can be made for better media relations to benefit the local government, the media, and the community.

Implementing a case study approach in research has several advantages, including the capability to use a variety of empirical research methods. For this study semi-structured interviews as well as qualitative content analysis were used.

Other strengths of case studies include the ability to establish empathy with research subjects and to obtain adequate descriptions that can be extrapolated to similar situations. Case studies could provide in-depth insight (Ponelis, 2015:537).

Voss (2010:197) cited three outstanding strengths of case research, namely:

1. Knowledge and understanding is gained through observing a phenomenon or subject in its everyday environment and perceiving true practice which points to relevant theory.

2. The case study method allows the researcher to ask the relevant questions related to the why, what, and how which provides a means of understanding the nature and complexity of the phenomenon.

3. The case study method works well where variables are still unfamiliar, the phenomenon is new and probing investigations are needed.

The research methods used in this study will now be discussed.

3.4 Research methods

A qualitative literature study was first undertaken to determine how the relevant local government communicators should manage media relations and newspaper editors should manage engagement with the municipality. Two empirical methods, namely semi-structured interviews and qualitative content analysis were chosen to gather the data.

The researcher is the main data collector when qualitative research is conducted. 'The researcher examines why events occur, what happens, and what those events mean to the participants studied' (Teherani *et al*., 2015:669). For this study, the researcher conducted the semi-structured interviews as well as the content analysis herself. The data of both these methods were also analysed by the researcher.

The methods used in this study are summarised in Table 1 that also shows the corresponding research objectives and chapters. The methods will then be discussed in detail.

Table 1: Research objectives and methods.

Research objectives	Research methods	Chapter
To determine through a literature study how the systems and relationship management theories as well as the two-way symmetrical communication model, are reflected in the relationship between the PR practitioners and community editors as it pertains to media relations	Literature study	Chapter 2
To determine through semi-structured interviews the perceptions of PR practitioners in the City of Matlosana and JB Marks Municipalities of their relationship with local newspaper editors at the Klerksdorp Record and the Potchefstroom Herald, respectively.	Semi-structured interviews	Chapter 4
To determine through semi-structured interviews the perceptions of local newspaper editors at the Klerksdorp Record and the Potchefstroom Herald of their relationship with PR practitioners in the City of Matlosana and JB Marks Municipalities respectively.	Semi-structured interviews	Chapter 4
To determine through content analysis to what extent the nature of the relationship between the editors at the Klerksdorp Record and Potchefstroom Herald and the PR practitioners at the City of Matlosana and the JB Marks Municipalities is reflected in the frequency and nature of the coverage the selected newspapers give to the respective municipalities?	Content analysis	Chapter 5

3.4.1 Population and sampling

In order to select participants for the semi-structured interviews, a purposeful sampling method was used. Local government communicators, Ntswaki Makgetha from Matlosana Municipality and Willie Maphosa from JB Marks Municipality, and community newspaper editors, Salomé Kotzé from the Klerksdorp Record in Klerksdorp and Dustin Wetdewich from the Potchefstroom Herald in Potchefstroom were interviewed.

This researcher undertook a qualitative content analysis of newspaper articles relating to the local municipalities published in the Klerksdorp Record and Potchefstroom Herald newspapers in the second half of 2019 (1 July 2019 to 31 December 2019). Sampling was done by identifying articles published during this time that mentioned the corresponding municipality. Press releases sent out by the municipality and received by the newspaper were also included in the analysis.

3.4.2 Semi-structured interviews

Within social sciences qualitative semi-structured interviews are one of the methods most often used to collect data (Evans & Lewis, 2018). This method is valuable because it allows researchers to gather in-depth accounts of respondents' experiences as well as to dive deeper into subjective viewpoints. These interviews can be used to capture the reality of the respondents' lived experiences (Flick, 2009:76). For the purposes of this study the interviews were done before the content analysis because of the objective of this study, which is to determine the nature of the relationship.

An interview schedule is generally used, because it allows the researcher to focus on a distinct topic whilst allowing the respondent to reply as they feel comfortable and to freely deliberate on issues and topics that they perceive as important (Evans & Lewis, 2018:2). These authors further explain that the schedule should 'guide the interview, but also allow other relevant themes to develop during the interview'.

To facilitate the use of qualitative interviews to explore relationships, the researcher used questions that were adapted for qualitative research but still reflect the same important dimensions and relationship indicators as the quantitative questions originally developed by Hon and Grunig (1999). Each relationship-building strategy is used as a pre-set category. These are control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, and commitment.

In their analysis of empirical studies published from 2000 to early 2011, Huang and Zhang (2013) found that 13 empirical studies out of the 40 related to relationship management, adopted and further developed Hon and Grunig's (1999) PR Relationship Measurement.

Hon and Grunig (1999) compiled a reliable and tested questionnaire to quantitatively measure the quality of relationships as well as types of relationships. This questionnaire was adapted to be used qualitatively (Grunig, 2002). This qualitative questionnaire was used in in this study to determine the quality of the relationship and the type of relationships between PR practitioners and local newspaper editors in two municipal areas of the North West Province. By using Hon and Grunig's interview schedule qualitatively, the researcher was able to obtain comprehensive responses and detailed accounts of the experiences of the participants. Flick (2009:50) opined that 'the use of semi-structured interviewing will enable the researcher to find rich information while at the same time following a natural flow of the interview conversation'.

Open-ended questions, allowed the researcher to record perceptions and accounts of experiences the participants had gone through. These questions also afforded respondents the opportunity to raise new matters that might be relevant to the study. The duration of these interviews was approximately 45 to 60 minutes each. The interviews were conducted on 30 and 31 August 2022 in private meeting rooms on the premises of either the municipality or the offices of the relevant community newspapers.

3.4.2.1 Interview schedule

The following questions were included in the interview schedule (Grunig 2002):

To assess your knowledge of (the municipality/newspaper) please answer the following questions:

- What are the first things that come into your mind when you hear the name of this municipality/newspaper? What else do you know about it?
- Do you feel that you have a relationship with the municipality/newspaper? Why or why not?
- Please describe your relationship with the municipality/newspaper.

Questions related to the six specific dimensions of relationships (Hon & Grunig, 1999):

Control mutuality

- To what extent do you believe that (the municipality/newspaper) is attentive to what (the municipality/newspaper) says? Why?

- Can you provide any examples that show (the municipality/newspaper) actually has taken the interests of (the municipality/newspaper) into account in its decisions and behaviours or that show it has failed to take those interests into account?
- To what extent do you feel you have any control over what (the municipality/newspaper) does that affects you? Why?

Trust

- Would you describe any things that (the municipality/newspaper) has done to treat (the municipality/newspaper) fairly and justly, or unfairly and unjustly? (Integrity)
- Would you describe things that (the municipality/newspaper) has done that indicate it can be relied on to keep its promises, or that it does not keep its promises? (Dependability)
- How confident are you that (the municipality/newspaper) has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do? Can you give me examples of why you feel that way? (Competence)

Commitment

- Can you provide me with any examples that suggest that (the municipality/newspaper) wants to maintain a long-term commitment to a relationship with (the municipality/newspaper) or does not want to maintain such a relationship?

Satisfaction

- How satisfied are you with the relationship that (the municipality/newspaper) has had with (the municipality/newspaper)?
- Please explain why you are satisfied or not satisfied.

Communal relationship

- Do you feel that (the municipality/newspaper) is concerned about the welfare of (the municipality/newspaper) even if it gets nothing in return?
- Why do you think so?
- What has it done to show concern?

Exchange relationship

- Do you feel that (the municipality/newspaper) gives or offers something to (the municipality/newspaper) because it expects something in return?
- Can you provide any examples that show why you reached this conclusion?
- Does (the municipality/newspaper) only want a relationship with (the municipality/newspaper) if it gets something in return?

- Can you provide examples of how this has happened in the relationship before?

3.4.2.2 Recording data

Data from the interviews were collected with the use of a voice recorder and field notes. In line with the NWU ethical committee requirements, informed consent was obtained from participants before recorded interviews were conducted. Consent was given in the form of a signed letter which is in the possession of the researcher.

The recordings are stored in a safe location to ensure confidentiality. Only the researcher has access to these recordings. The recordings were transcribed for the purpose of data analysis.

3.4.2.3 Data analysis

Following interviews, the researcher generally needs to make use of certain methods to analyse the data to obtain an accurate picture of the participant's experiences.

According to Du Plessis (2020) there are three approaches to conducting qualitative data analysis, namely a deductive, inductive or hybrid approach. Deductive coding considers a theoretical framework that the researcher previously prepared. Often the researcher will use the research questions as guidance. With inductive coding, the data guides the analysis since not much is known about the topic. The data determines the themes or categories for analysis.

For this study, the researcher used a hybrid qualitative data analysis approach. This is described by Du Plessis (2020) as using both an inductive and deductive approach for data analysis to achieve particular objectives. The researcher can, for example, first consider the study's research questions when doing a deductive analysis of the data, but also allow for themes or categories to emerge from the data afterwards with inductive coding (Du Plessis, 2020).

It is important to reduce data into categories through the coding of documents and exploration of patterns and relationships of words and phrases (Voss, 2010:212).

Corbin and Strauss (1990) proposed three steps:

1. Open coding is where data are fragmented or broken up in parts. Individual remarks, sentences, ideas, and events are identified and then rearranged into subcategories which in turn can be gathered in main categories.

2. The next step is to rearrange and link categories to each other in a coherent manner.

3. The final step is selective coding – 'selecting a central category and relating it to other categories'.

According to Bertolozzi-Caredio *et al.* (2020:132), open coding consists of 'reading transcriptions line by line and gathering fragments of text constituting possible responses to the research questions. These fragments are then listed with short and meaningful labels (open codes). Open codes identify incidents that can indicate concepts.'

They further described axial coding where the researcher seeks out links and relationships between codes. The process involves separating, excluding, refining, and incorporating open codes in order to identify and establish axial codes that are more inclusive and meaningful. These are then organised in axial categories by finding associations and connotations.

Selective coding is 'a course of organising the results of axial coding in a conceptually comprehensible manner to expansively answer the research question and explain the main aspects of the phenomenon' (Bertolozzi-Caredio *et al.*, 2020). A representation of the methodological scheme of analysis is presented in the following graphic:

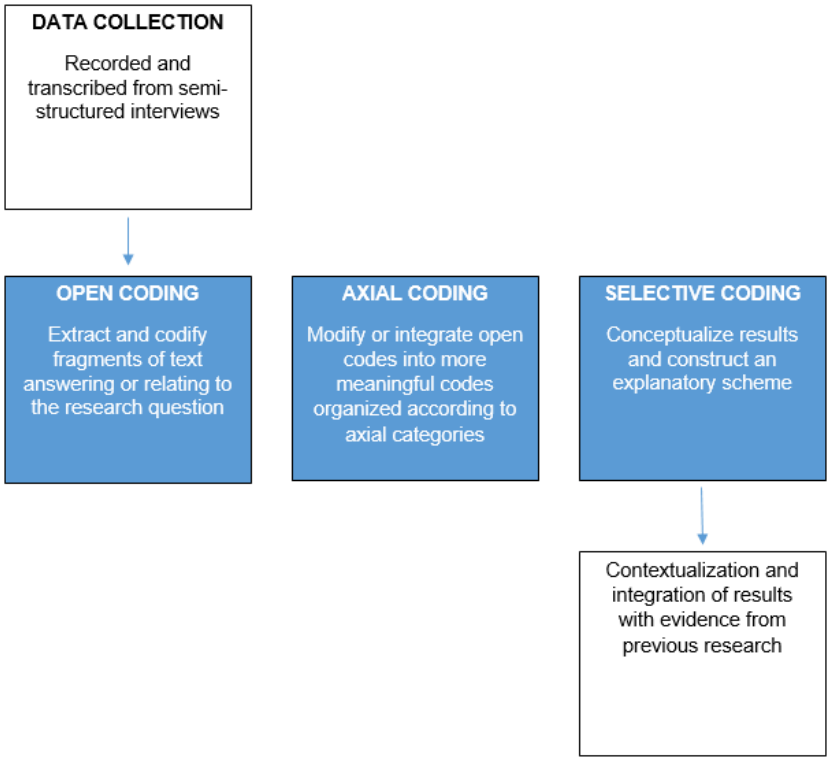

Figure 1: Methodological scheme of analysis (Bertolozzi-Caredio *et al*., 2020).

The second research method, qualitative content analysis, will now be discussed.

3.4.3 Content analysis

Researchers use qualitative content analysis to analyse texts in order to gain knowledge and better understand the phenomenon under investigation (Tareke *et al*., 2022).

For this study, a qualitative content analysis of newspaper articles about the local municipalities published in the *Klerksdorp Record* and *Potchefstroom Herald* newspapers in the second half of 2019 (1 July 2019 to 31 December 2019), was undertaken. It was found that enough material (articles) related to the municipalities could be gathered from these six months. The period was also prior to the COVID 19 pandemic, which might have had an influence on the outcome, seeing that there was little media engagement during lockdown. The content analysis included articles based on local government press releases and media advisories as sources and articles related to municipal services and projects, written by journalists at the respective newspapers.

Historically, content analysis were developed for quantitative research based on the supposition that a single traceable reality existed. Later a more value-based process characterised by numerous realities forced researchers using this method to move from a numbers outlook to a more informative and explanatory approach within the qualitative paradigm (Graneheim *et al*., 2017:29).

According to Hocking *et al.* (2003:174), 'qualitative content analysis is a qualitative and systematic description of the manifestation of communication content. Predefined categories are used to classify data'. He opined that it was best used as part of a larger study and in concurrence with other research methods such as semi-structured interviews. Qualitative content analysis is thus an important and reliable accompanying research method.

Qualitative research enables the researcher to determine underlying meanings and patterns of relationships (Babbie & Mouton, 2010). Roller (2019) defined the qualitative content analysis method as 'the systematic reduction of content, analysed with special attention to the context in which it was created, to identify themes and extract meaningful interpretations of the data'. It entails the capturing and interpretation of content in terms of a researcher's categories, or indicators, in a way that will produce consistent evidence. 'It focuses on subject and context and emphasises disparity. It offers opportunities to analyse evident and descriptive content as well as hidden and interpretative content' (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

For this study, PR tools such as press releases and media advisories used by the municipalities as part of their media relations strategy, as well as newspaper articles written about municipal issues and published in the two community newspapers, were analysed (as discussed in 1.8.2).

3.4.3.1 Newspaper articles

The study included articles related to the City of Matlosana Municipality that were published in the *Klerksdorp Record* between 1 July 2019 and 31 December 2019 as well as articles about the JB Marks Municipality published in the *Potchefstroom Herald* during that same time frame.

For the purpose of data visualisation and capturing, data sheets – where the categories are presented as column headers – were created. With the aim of determining both quantity (amount and frequency) and valence (tone and themes) of the news coverage related to the municipalities, the researcher used both inductive and deductive coding (Kaefer *et al*., 2015). For the analysis of the news articles the researcher chose the attributes: article title, date/page, genre, theme, and tone (whether a specific issue was captured and referred to favourably or unfavourably) (Kaefer *et al*., 2015).

Article genre: Here the researcher determined whether the article was a news report, an editorial written by the editor, or a statement/column by an employee/politician of the relevant municipality. The reason for identifying the genre is because a column written by the mayor, a news article written by a journalist and the editorial, written by the editor, will differ. 'Writers of different genres usually employ various rhetorical choices to persuade readers to engage in the discussion and align them with the writer's perspective on the topic.' (Shen & Tao, 2021:3).

The theme: According to Mayring (2004:2), through content analysis the researcher not only analyses the content of the material, but also themes and main ideas of the text. For this study, key words such as service delivery, finance, events and housing/land were extracted from the articles. The purpose of determining the theme was to see what events related to the municipality were deemed newsworthy/important enough by the newspapers to publish, as well as what themes the municipality adopted in their press tools.

The tone: Here the researcher wanted to determine whether the article was neutral, positive or negative. Articles with a positive tone portray the subject in a favourable light. Articles with a negative tone emphasise fewer desirable aspects of the subject and will typically include unfavourable adjectives and descriptions. Articles with a neutral tone are 'factual pieces without strong wording, personal statements, or anecdotes' (Miller *et al*., 2013). According to Jacobs and Van der Linden (2018:3), researchers in political communication highlight the importance of news

tone in influencing public opinion. They focus strongly on the role of tone in news stories and how it influences individuals' attitudes. Jacobs and Van der Linde (2018) defined news tone as the 'positive or negative valence' of news coverage. The tone ascribed to news articles is considered important as it provides a means to evaluate the texts (in this case news article) (Sheafer, 2007). According to Sheafer (2007:23) a news article can be coded as positive or negative if it presents the subject as improving or diminishing.

Table 2: Example of the data sheet used for qualitative content analysis of newspaper articles.

Article title	Date/page	Genre	Theme	Tone

3.4.3.2 Municipal PR tools

By comparing articles published between 1 July 2019 and 31 December 2019 with the PR tools that were sent to the publications during this same period, the researcher was able to determine whether content sent by the municipalities was published or not.

From the content analysis, the researcher was not only able to determine the frequency of the published content (how many articles were published), but also the frequency of PR tools such as press releases sent out by the municipality. Altogether 76 articles, which included news stories and editorials, were gathered. Of the 76 articles, 49 articles related to the JB Marks Municipality and were published in the *Potchefstroom Herald* and 27 articles about the City of Matlosana Municipality were published in the *Klerksdorp Record* from 1 July 2019 to 31 December 2019.

Altogether 26 press releases and media advisories that were sent to the *Potchefstroom Herald* by the JB Marks Municipality and 20 press releases and media advisories that were sent by the City of Matlosana Municipality to the *Klerksdorp Record* formed part of the content analysis.

Categories identified for the data sheet include title, date issued, theme, published or not as well as date and page number.

Table 3: Example of the data sheet used for qualitative content analysis of public relations tools sent out by the municipalities.

Title	Date issued	Theme	Published or not	Date and page

3.5 Validity and reliability

Qualitative research is often described as merely an assortment of personal opinions where the researcher's own prejudiced opinion is reflected in the results. That is why strategies should be implemented to promote the credibility of the study both in its design and execution. Qualitative research is further criticised for lacking scientific thoroughness with poor justification of the methods adopted as well as lack of transparency when analysing data (Noble & Smith, 2015).

Unlike researchers who use quantitative methods and apply statistical methods for determining the validity and reliability of research findings, qualitative researchers must include methodological approaches to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. Rose and Johnson (2020) suggested the following strategies:

- Admit to own biases which may have influenced findings.
- Recognise prejudices in sampling and apply methods of sampling to ensure adequate depth and significance of data collection and analysis.
- Keep careful records and ensure interpretations of data are dependable and transparent.
- Seek out comparisons and variances across accounts to ensure different viewpoints are denoted.
- Include quality verbatim accounts of participants' accounts to underscore findings.
- Data analysis and subsequent interpretations should progress logically and unambiguously.
- Consult with other researchers to minimise research bias.
- Invite respondents to give comments on the interview transcript and determine whether the final themes and concepts identified adequately reflect the subject of the study.
- Use varying methods and views to help create a more inclusive set of findings.

The researcher has taken these suggestions into account to ensure validity and reliability. For this study, the researcher has accounted for personal bias by disclosing previous experience as a local government communicator as well as a community newspaper editor. Due to this previous experience, the researcher brings certain biases and knowledge to the research, but every effort was made to ensure objectivity (as stated in 3.2.1).

3.5.1 Validity

Validity is the process of determining the accuracy of the findings as it relates to the researcher, the contributors, and those who will benefit by the research. It further captures the extent to which a study's results can be generalised (Du Plooy & Du Plooy, 2009).

According to Voss (2010), the necessary first step in ensuring validity is to capture the data collected in detail. Relevant to this study is the transcription of recordings done during the semi-structured interviews. The data was then coded with standard codes and grouped together by using construct categories reflected on the data sheet. This produced a case narrative. The precision of the documentation was increased by making draft reports available to the respondents. Rose and Johnson (2020) described this method as member checking. This allowed the researcher to test the findings, explanation and interpretations within the culture that is being studied.

3.5.2 Reliability

'Reliability is the degree to which a study's operations can be repeated, with the same results' (Coleman, 2021:2044).

Hocking *et al.* (2003:129) opined that reliability referred to the degree to which research provided data that was consistent. It can be difficult to demonstrate reliability within a qualitative study because there are no attainable statistical tests for this purpose.

Hon and Grunig (1999:27), whose questionnaire was adapted for this study, stated that the more questions the researcher askes, the more reliable the index would be. In practice this means that if the researcher asks different questions to measure the same outcome, the answers will correlate at a high level, i.e., the answers will be more or less the same.

Reliability related to semi-structured interviews could be increased by simplifying questions because the questions are heard and not seen (Hocking *et al*., 2003:135). The interviewer plays a major role in terms of reliability and consistency since questions must be asked and transcribed in the same way each time. This requires interviewers to always act professionally and conscientiously (Hocking *et al*., 2003:138).

3.6 Ethics during the research process

‘Ethics is an important part of research that extends throughout the entire research process, from the selection of a research topic to data collection and analysis, and finally, the dissemination of study results’ (Pietilä *et al.,* 2020).

Babbie and Mouton (2010:521-526) recounted the following ethical principles to consider when social research was conducted:

- No participants may be forced to participate in the study.
- Whether voluntary or not, no participant must suffer damage as a result of the study or the information that will be disclosed.
- A researcher must ensure that the study subjects are protected throughout the entire research process.
- The researcher may not hide the reason for the research.

This study has been approved by the North-West University’s Basic and Social Science Research Ethics Committee (BASSREC) (Ethics number: NWU- 00976-22-S7).

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, an explanation was given for the design of the study and the rationale provided for why a qualitative approach was used.

Each of the chosen research methods was discussed and motivated for use in this study. The reliability and validity of the study within a qualitative framework were discussed, as well as the ethical aspects of the research.

In the next chapter, the empirical findings gathered through semi-structured interviews are described, analysed and interpreted.

CHAPTER 4 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS – SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 described the research method followed to achieve the study's research objectives. It was explained that a qualitative research approach was used and that two empirical research methods were implemented, namely semi-structured interviews and qualitative content analysis. The purpose was to collect a wide spectrum of data and to increase the study's reliability and validity. The next two chapters will focus on reporting this data.

Chapter 4 thus aims at describing, analysing and interpreting empirical findings gathered through semi-structured interviews. The data reflect the perceived relationship between PR practitioners at the City of Matlosana and JB Marks Municipalities and the editors in their respective areas, namely the *Klerksdorp Record* in Klerksdorp and the *Potchefstroom Herald* in Potchefstroom.

The findings allow for the second and third specific research questions as stated for this study, to be answered. They are:

SRQ2: What are the perceptions of PR practitioners in the City of Matlosana and JB Marks Municipalities of their relationship with local newspaper editors at the *Klerksdorp Record* and the *Potchefstroom Herald*, respectively?

SRQ3: What are the perceptions of local newspaper editors at the *Klerksdorp Record* and the *Potchefstroom Herald* of their relationship with PR practitioners in the City of Matlosana and JB Marks Municipalities, respectively?

The chapter will first provide background on each respondent and will then further be organised according to the constructs identified in the literature study, which were extracted in Chapter 2 and organised in Chapter 3. These are control mutuality, trust, commitment, and satisfaction, as identified by Hon and Grunig (1999). The constructs are used as headings for the findings.

As suggested by Hon and Grunig (1999), the researcher also used the data collected in the interviews to determine whether the relationship was communal or an exchange relationship. The researcher also revisited relationship strategies expounded on in Chapter 2 to determine if any of these strategies were used by the respondents in building better relationships.

4.2 Background of respondents

Respondent 1: Willie Maphosa was the municipal communications manager at JB Marks Municipality during the time frame of this study. Maphosa obtained a communication degree from the University of Fort Hare in 1984. He joined the municipality as communications manager in 2008, where he was tasked with providing strategic management, guidance and advice to the municipality with specific reference to strategic communication as well as media and PR. He has worked with the editor of the *Potchefstroom Herald*, Dustin Wetdewich, since 2019, but he also worked with the previous editor, Hennie Stander, from 2008-2019. Maphosa retired in March 2022, but due to his longstanding relationship with the *Potchefstroom Herald*, agreed to participate in this study. The current communications manager at the municipality is Jeanette Tshite. Jeanette joined the communication department of JB Marks in May 2008 and was appointed as communication manager following Maphosa's retirement.

Respondent 2: Dustin Wetdewich was appointed as the editor of the *Potchefstroom Herald* in 2019, after starting at the newspaper as a journalist in 2014. He holds an honours degree in communication studies from North-West University. He worked with Willie Maphosa as editor from January 2019 up to Maphosa's retirement in 2022.

Respondent 3: Ntswaki Makgetha joined the City of Matlosana Municipality as the head of marketing and communications in 2008. She is responsible for media relations and has a 14-year working relationship with the editor of the *Klerksdorp Record*, Salomé Kotzé. She has a degree in communication which she obtained from North-West University as well as a post-graduate diploma in management from Rhodes University.

Respondent 4: Salomé Kotzé was appointed as the editor of the *Klerksdorp Record* in 2005. She joined the newspaper after completing her honours degree in communication studies at North-West University in 1995 – a career at the *Klerksdorp Record* spanning more than 27 years.

4.3 Relationship management outcomes

Hon and Grunig (1999) described the outcomes of effective relationship management strategies. They are control mutuality, trust, commitment, and satisfaction, as well as exchange and communal relationships (Sisson, 2017). For this study, the researcher used the above outcomes as indicators of the nature and type of relationship between the different parties.

During the semi-structured interviews, questions that were adapted from a qualitative instrument for assessing relationships by Hon and Grunig called Guidelines for Measuring Relationships in Public Relations, were used (see 2.4). The researcher asked the prescribed questions related to the six specific dimensions/outcomes of relationships.

Hon and Grunig (1999:3) described the first outcome, **control mutuality**, as 'the degree to which parties agree on who has the rightful power to influence one another'. **Trust** was defined as 'one party's level of confidence in and willingness to open oneself to the other party' (Hon & Grunig, 1999:3). **Commitment** was defined as 'the extent to which each party believes and feels that the relationship is worth spending energy to maintain and promote' (Hon & Grunig, 1999:3). **Satisfaction** was defined as 'the extent to which each party feels favourably toward the other because positive expectations about the relationship are reinforced' (Hon & Grunig, 1999:3). (See 2.3.2 for a comprehensive discussion.) The results will now be discussed.

4.3.1 Control mutuality

The following questions were formulated to determine control mutuality (Grunig 2002):

- To what extent do you believe that (the municipality/newspaper) is attentive to what (the municipality/newspaper) says? Why?
- Can you provide any examples that show (the municipality/newspaper) has taken (the municipality/newspaper's) interests into account in its decisions and behaviours or that show it has failed to take those interests into account?
- To what extent do you feel you have any control over what (the municipality/newspaper) does that affects you? Why?

4.3.1.1 Control mutuality as perceived by the government communicators

Only the communication manager at the City of Matlosana Municipality, Ntswaki Makgetha believes that the other party was attentive to their organisation's needs. The other three respondents' answers did not indicate that control mutuality existed in the relationships.

Makgetha, said that she viewed the relationship as balanced and that no one exerted power over the other. She did believe that the editor at the *Klerksdorp Record*, Salomé Kotzé, took the interests of the municipality into account. To this effect, she gave an example where the editor was willing to write an article (free of charge) from a paid-for announcement about regulations related to outdoor advertisements that had run the previous week. Makgetha saw this as an attempt by the newspaper to give the municipality more exposure and to explain the regulations to the community. Makgetha believes that this showed that the newspaper was attentive to what the municipality did and said.

In contrast to Makgetha, Willie Maphosa, former communications manager at the JB Marks Municipality, believes that the newspaper could not always be attentive to the needs of the municipality. He explained that political principals would prefer certain information to be communicated through the newspaper, but that often the information would not be deemed newsworthy enough by the editor to publish. On the other hand, the newspaper would request information because of the news value thereof, but political principals would not want to divulge such information. These principals would then delay in answering or not comment at all. Even though Maphosa was aware of the importance of media relations, building better relations would not always be of utmost importance to municipal top management and political principals. Because of this, he believes that the two parties had little control over the actions of the others as it related to them.

4.3.1.2 Control mutuality as perceived by the newspaper editors

Both editors stated that the newspapers' interests were not attended to by the municipalities. Their biggest frustration related to the municipalities' disregard for meeting deadlines in answering requests for information.

The editor of the *Potchefstroom Herald*, Dustin Wetdewich, cited a news story he wrote about financial misconduct on the part of the JB Marks Municipality as an example of the municipality not being sensitive to the needs of the newspaper. According to Wetdewich, the municipality would not divulge the information crucial to the story as requested on several occasions. The article appeared on page 4 in the 15 August edition and was titled 'Hold your horses – Municipality spends big for Durban trip' (see PH 19; Table 5 in Chapter 5). He acknowledged that he could not put the blame solely on the communications manager, Willie Maphosa, as the decision not to comment came from top management. Wetdewich believes the municipality did not take the newspaper into account when making decisions that impacted the newspaper directly, such as its need for access to information.

Salomé Kotzé, editor of the *Klerksdorp Record*, held the same view and said that after having been let down so many times, she had become reluctant to even ask for information. 'I am selective in my requests to the communication department of the municipality because it feels like a waste of time to ask for comments. These requests are often just ignored.'

She did admit that there had been initiatives by the communication department to build better relationships through media visits, where the mayor of the local municipality met with editors and journalists of local media organisations to discuss their concerns and to get a better understanding

of their needs. This was also done to give the media insight into municipal programmes and strategies.

4.3.2 Trust

The following questions were designed to determine the level of trust:

- Would you describe any things that (the municipality/newspaper) has done to treat (the municipality/newspaper) fairly and justly, or unfairly and unjustly? (Integrity)
- Would you describe things that (the municipality/newspaper) has done that indicate it can be relied on to keep its promises, or that it does not keep its promises? (Dependability)
- How confident are you that (the municipality/newspaper) can accomplish what it says it will do? Can you give me examples of why you feel that way? (Competence)

4.3.2.1 Trust as perceived by the government communicators

Both the communication managers stated that the respective newspapers treated them fairly and cited the example of giving time to respond to media inquiries and to articles that were published by the newspapers. Maphosa said that even if a response was not given in time, the *Potchefstroom Herald* would allow them to respond in the next edition. Both believe that the newspapers under the guidance of the editors had integrity and were dependable and competent. The three aspects associated to trust in a relationship, namely integrity, dependability, and competence, were thus present in the perceptions of both government communicators.

From Willie Maphosa's answers related to commitment (4.3.3) it was, however, clear that the municipality did not trust the *Potchefstroom Herald* to reach previously disadvantaged communities and voters of the ANC. According to Maphosa, the perception existed that the newspaper was critical of the ANC-run municipality and favoured opposition parties, resulting in distrust. This is discussed further in 4.3.3.

4.3.2.2 Trust as perceived by the newspaper editors

From the interviews with the editors, trust as an outcome of relationship management was not evident. Dustin Wetdewich stated that the communication department personnel wanted to act with integrity, but that the top management of the municipality and political principals did not always disseminate information truthfully. He further opined that the local government communicators were not dependable and could not be relied on to provide timely information. In terms of competence, Wetdewich believes that the communication department under Willie Maphosa was competent in disseminating information and that Maphosa understood news values that were important to journalism.

Klerksdorp Record editor, Salomé Kotzé, said that it was difficult to rely on the communication department of the City of Matlosana Municipality. 'I cannot say that they always miss their deadlines, but more often than not we do not receive the information on time.' She believes that the communication department of the municipality was too small and did not have the ability to communicate effectively. She cited local government policies related to communication and the centralisation of information as one of the reasons why the department could not always meet deadlines. Trust as an outcome of relationship management was not present in the editors' perceptions of their relationships with government communicators.

4.3.3 Commitment

As explained in Chapter 2, commitment refers to the extent to which parties feel the relationship is worth the time and effort. The question related to commitment was:

- Can you provide me with any examples that suggest that (the municipality/newspaper) wants to maintain a long-term commitment to a relationship with (the municipality/newspaper) or does not want to maintain such a relationship?

From the interviews, it was deduced that the ability to maintain a long-term commitment to a relationship was less apparent in the relationship between the JB Marks Municipality and the *Potchefstroom Herald*. Both parties in Klerksdorp seemed a bit more willing to commit to a long-term relationship.

4.3.3.1 Commitment as perceived by the government communicators

According to Maphosa, the perceptions held by both parties (JB Marks Municipality and the *Potchefstroom Herald*) made the maintenance of a relationship difficult. 'There is a perception on the part of the local government politicians that the newspaper is an institution from the past and the previous political dispensation where disadvantaged communities are ignored.' He believes that the perception on the part of local journalists was that the municipality was corrupt and incompetent. 'It is these perceptions that stand in the way of committing fully to a relationship. Overcoming these perceptions will entail hard work on the part of both parties.'

Makgetha was confident that if the City of Matlosana Municipality initiated more media engagement, such as quarterly media visits, the newspaper and its editor would be even more willing to commit to strengthening the relationship. 'It is my perception that the newspaper wants to build better relationships, and if they see that the municipality is willing to go the extra mile, they will commit to working hand in hand with local government.'

4.3.3.2 Commitment as perceived by the newspaper editors

In the interview with Wetdewich, the issue of perception (mentioned by Maphosa in 4.3.3.1) was also brought up. He believes that the newspaper was wrongfully accused of being antagonistic towards the municipality. He felt that commitment towards media relations on the part of the municipality was stronger with other media organisations such as Aganang FM, a community radio station in the area – mainly because the *Potchefstroom Herald* was viewed as the mouthpiece of opposition parties and Aganang FM as loyal to the ANC. He denied the accusation that the newspaper was a mouthpiece of opposition parties and said that the paper had scrutinised actions by the main opposition, the DA, on several occasions. The example he gave was an article about the DA ward councillors not spending allocated funds for upgrades in their wards (published outside of the time frame of this study).

He admitted that it was not easy to prove perceptions wrong when opposition political parties were eager to communicate, while corruption was allegedly so prevalent in the ANC-run municipality and communication was not always forthcoming. He did not think that there was a commitment on the part of the municipality to build a stronger relationship with the newspaper.

Kotzé stated that there was an understanding on the part of the communication department of the municipality that they needed the media. 'There is a definite willingness to improve media relations, but also a lack of commitment to this goal. An example of this is the recent cancellation of a media engagement by the mayor. Even though the mayor has met with local radio stations in the area, his meeting with the *Klerksdorp Record* had to be postponed on more than one occasion due to other commitments.'

4.3.4 Satisfaction

Relationship satisfaction is when the benefits of the relationship outweigh the disadvantages. Therefore, the researcher asked the following:

- How satisfied are you with the relationship that (the municipality/newspaper) has had with (the municipality/newspaper)? Please explain why you are satisfied or not satisfied.

Only one respondent indicated that they are satisfied with the relationship. All the parties, however, agree that more can be done to improve the relationship.

4.3.4.1 Satisfaction as perceived by the government communicators

Maphosa said he was satisfied with the relationship he had with the newspaper as they were always willing to publish articles related to municipal services, allowing even for the publication of

a column by the mayor of the local municipality as well as an opinion piece written by himself (see Table 5).

Makgetha believes the relationship could be improved by engaging more. ‘I think we can have a much better relationship if we meet every quarter.’ She further suggested that the ‘chief communicator’, the mayor, met with the newspaper editor regularly so that both could have a better understanding of the other’s needs related to communication.

4.3.4.2 Satisfaction as perceived by the newspaper editors

In terms of media relations, Wetdewich would have liked to see a more concerted effort on the part of the municipality to meet deadlines. He was not satisfied with the access to information relevant to service delivery and financial decisions on the part of the municipality. He was clear that he was not satisfied with the relationship.

Kotzé said the relationship could be better. ‘They wait for our inquiries and are not proactive in promoting the municipality and its successful projects. Community newspapers are an excellent vehicle to publish good news related to the municipality. The communication department should work harder toward engaging with the newspaper and building relationships. They could be more proactive instead of reactive.’

4.4 Type of relationship – communal or exchange

Apart from determining whether the above relationship outcomes are present in the relationships in question, this study also set out to determine whether an exchange relationship or a communal relationship exists between the local government communicators and newspaper editors.

Communal relationships involve parties doing things for each other because they care about the well-being of others (Hon & Grunig, 1999:21). The questions designed to determine whether the relationship is communal, are:

- Do you feel that (the municipality/newspaper) is concerned about the welfare of (the municipality/newspaper) even if it gets nothing in return? Why do you think so?
- How about (the municipality/newspaper)? Do you think it is concerned about the welfare of (the municipality/newspaper)? What has it done?

Exchange relationships are based on the idea that one party feels obligated to do something for the other because the other has done something for them in the past. The questions designed to determine whether the relationship is an exchange relationship, are:

- Do you feel that (the municipality/newspaper) gives or offers something to (the organisation/public) because it expects something in return?
- Can you provide any examples that show why you reached this conclusion? How about (the municipality/newspaper)?
- Does (the municipality/newspaper) only want a relationship with (the municipality/newspaper) if it gets something in return? Can you provide examples of how this has happened in the relationship before?

4.4.1 Government communicators' perception of the type of relationship

Maphosa views the relationship as an exchange relationship, where the editor would only publish stories that would sell or where the municipality bought space for a municipal announcement. He is concerned that the newspaper did not carry news stories that related to all communities. 'Obviously the newspaper is constrained by the market it serves so that it is financially viable, but as it is currently, the newspaper is seen as a vehicle whereby the municipality is scrutinised, while the misconduct of businesses in town is overlooked.' He mentioned companies not adhering to labour and environmental regulations as an example. 'Are there no other companies and institutions that the paper can report on?' he asked. 'I know, for example, of a poultry company that polluted municipal infrastructure, but this was never reported in the newspaper.'

Makgetha saw the Matlosana Municipality's relationship with the *Klerksdorp Record* as both communal and an exchange relationship. She explained that both parties needed the other to succeed and appreciated the free publicity often given to the municipality to communicate programmes and events. On the other hand, there was also the understanding that notices took up space and that the newspaper was run as a business. The municipality was therefore expected to buy space for municipal notices.

4.4.2 Newspaper editors' perceptions of the type of relationship

Wetdewich did not see the relationship as communal and suggested that the JB Marks Municipality would be happy to see the newspaper close. In terms of an exchange relationship, Wetdewich said he had never felt pressured to publish positive articles about the municipality because of the revenue stream that municipal advertisements provided. 'The *Potchefstroom Herald* is the only print newspaper in the municipal area and the municipality is forced to advertise with us. I think if they had a choice, they would not advertise in the *Potchefstroom Herald*.' He said the paper would always publish municipal news – whether it was positive or negative – if there was news value to it. It seemed that according to Wetdewich the relationship was not communal or an exchange relationship.

Kotzé viewed the relationship between the *Klerksdorp Record* and the Matlosana Municipality as not communal. ‘I get the idea that the municipality is not very concerned about whether there is a community newspaper or not.’ She described instances where the municipality reminded her that they paid for advertisements and therefore expected publicity in return. ‘Local government is a big spender in local newspapers, and municipal advertisements are a big part of our income. They expect us to publish good news, because of their expenditure. It is important, however, for them to realise that we have a watchdog role to play in the community.’

4.5 Relationship-building strategies

Apart from evaluating the relationship outcomes to measure relationships, the researcher evaluated the relationships between the local government communicators and the newspaper editors according to the symmetrical relationship-building strategies, relevant to the study and as discussed in 2.4.1.

4.5.1 Access

This involves stakeholders having access to information, which is especially relevant in local government media relations where access to information related to municipal issues is often requested by community newspapers.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the ComTask Report of 1996 established a set of communication principles that included the requirement for freedom of and access to information as reflected in the Constitution. To build better long-term relationships, the government’s communication policy, approved by Cabinet in October 2018, prescribed the following related to access to information (GCIS, 2018):

> A government institution must respect media deadline requirements and endeavour to provide open and equal access to all news media.

According to both Wetdewich and Kotzé, the municipalities in question often did not respect media deadline requirements. Open and equal access were also not always granted, as according to Wetdewich, news media such as Aganang FM was given better access to information. Comments by Kotzé such as ‘I am selective in my requests to the communication department of the municipality because it feels like a waste of time to ask for comments. These requests are often just ignored’, were indicative that access to information was a struggle for these community newspapers.

From the semi-structured interviews, it was apparent that access to information was the biggest struggle and hindrance to relationships. Both editors were frustrated with the access they had to

information. In both newsrooms it was policy to give the municipality at least 24 hours to reply, according to Wetdewich he sometimes extended it to up to two weeks. The local government communicators had their own frustrations when it came to gathering information and comments from municipal managers and political principals. Policy for government communication as approved by Cabinet in 2018 (GCIS, 2018:27) states that:

> The accounting officer/political principal or his/her designate must approve and sign all media releases. Media enquiries relating to the institution must first be brought to the attention of the Director: Media Liaison, who will engage with the HoC before comment is provided to the media.

From the interviews, it is clear that these regulations often prevented government communicators from reacting to media enquiries before the deadline. This affected access to information and had the biggest impact on the relationship.

4.5.2 Openness

The government communication policy (GCIS, 2018) stated the following related to openness:

> Government communication is driven by democratic principles of openness and participation and is guided by the basic principles of transparency, accountability and consultation.

A suggestion by Makgetha to meet with the *Klerksdorp Record* every quarter was relevant to this strategy. Visits by the mayor could also assist in facilitating open communication. Makgetha admitted that this did not happen often enough. Kotzé said they awaited the mayor's visit and were open to more engagement. It could be deduced that openness as a strategy for relationship building was considered by the City of Matlosana Municipality, but that it was not yet fully implemented.

Maphosa said the staff of the *Potchefstroom Herald* were invited to municipal functions, but they rarely attended. In response, Wetdewich said that a ribbon cutting by the mayor was not always newsworthy and did not give the opportunity to communicate with the PR team as they were often not at the events. There was, therefore, not a lot of opportunity for open communication.

4.5.3 Assurance

According to the GCIS (2018) policy document, 'effective communication can contribute positively to government endeavours – leading to good governance, improved internal staff and external citizen/stakeholder morale, and contributing towards meeting government's aims and objectives. It further builds public trust and confidence in the integrity of government and can be used to challenge any negative perceptions that might exist in the public space'.

Assurance of authenticity indicated the assurance from both parties that the other party and their concerns or issues were genuine. There was a lot of mistrust of the municipalities' integrity and competency. An example mentioned by Wetdewich was the mayoral column published free of charge by the *Potchefstroom Herald* in 2019. It was later revealed that the mayor, Kgotso Khumalo, underplayed some of the serious concerns related to service delivery to make it seem as if the municipality was rendering effective services. Wetdewich said the community complained that the mayor was not truthful in what he was writing and therefore he decided to cancel the column. The mayor's arrest on charges of theft and fraud contributed to Wetdewich's decision (Nkuyane, 2020).

According to Kotzé, there was very little assurance of authenticity when it came to media relations in the City of Matlosana Municipality. She believes that the municipality deliberately stalled when they did not want to respond to allegations. Kotzé mentioned the arrest of the municipal manager, Roger Nkhumise, and the accusation that he was hiding his criminal record (Saba, 2019) – two allegations that the municipality did not respond to when approached for comment by the *Klerksdorp Record*.

4.5.4 Networking

As both the local government communicator and editor work within the same community, they should have access to the same stakeholders and networks. Government communicators are encouraged by policy to 'establish partnerships with a range of stakeholders, including the private sector, academia, research institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), so as to broaden audience reach' GCIS (2018).

In this regard, Kotzé mentioned that the City of Matlosana Municipality networked regularly with local businesses through the Business Forum. This was an opportunity where both parties networked with the same stakeholders. Kotzé agreed that this had strengthened the relationship with the municipality. According to Wetdewich, there were very few opportunities where the municipality and the newspaper networked together. They had in the past, however, collaborated on special editions.

4.5.5 Cooperation and unconditional constructiveness

Both these strategies relate to a communal relationship. As mentioned in 4.4 only one respondent (Ntswaki Makgetha) believe that this type of relationship existed. This was when the municipality and newspaper worked together to reconcile their interests so that a mutually beneficial relationship was established. Makgetha admitted that more could be done but advocated for a

relationship that was strengthened when both parties benefitted from engagements. The other respondents did not believe that such a relationship existed.

4.6 Conclusion

Research (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Bruning *et al.*, 2008; Kim *et al*., 2020) suggested that the importance of PR could be established by measuring the quality of relationships with its strategic publics. Measuring PR outputs and outcomes is important, but even more important is to measure relationships, especially with the media.

The purpose of this study and more specifically the semi-structured interviews was to determine the perceptions of the relationships qualitatively. The relationship management theory as discussed in 2.4 determined that relationship building was an ongoing process in which the organisation not only maintained good or existing relationships, but sometimes also needed to restore weakened relationships. The outcomes of strong relationships have been identified as trust; mutual control; commitment; and relationship satisfaction. According to this study's theoretical statement related to the relationship management theory, these outcomes should be present in the relationship between government communicators and community newspaper editors (see 2.4).

Data collected through the semi-structured interviews showed that the government communicators perceived the relationship with the media in a more positive light. This is in line with research by Shin and Cameron (2005) and Supa (2014) who indicated that PR practitioners' perceptions of their relationship with the media were more positive than the perceptions of journalists (see 1.5.2).

Three out of four outcomes, namely control mutuality, trust, and commitment were identifiable in the answers given by Ntswaki Makgetha, the communicator at the City of Matlosana Municipality. Two out of four of the outcomes – trust and satisfaction – were perceived to be present in the relationship with the newspaper, according to answers given by Willie Maphosa, the communicator at the JB Marks Municipality.

None of the outcomes were present in the perceptions of the newspaper editors, indicating that they did not believe that the current relationship was strong. In terms of the type of relationship, both Maphosa (JB Marks Municipality) and Kotzé (*Klerksdorp Record*) believe the relationship to be an exchange relationship where both parties worked on the relationship to gain something from it. Makgetha (City of Matlosana Municipality) believes it to be in part communal and in part an exchange relationship, where both worked towards a common goal but gained from the

relationship as well. From Wetdewich's perspective (*Potchefstroom Herald*) there did not seem to be enough of a relationship to describe its type – according to him it was neither communal nor an exchange relationship.

Five of the relationship management strategies relevant to media relations were identified, namely access, openness, networking, cooperation, and unconditional constructiveness. Only one of the strategies (networking) was implemented (to a degree) by the City of Matlosana Municipality. None of the other strategies were at that stage being implemented by the municipalities to better media relations. Access to information seemed to be the biggest hurdle according to both editors who felt that the relationship could not be strengthened without better access to reliable information.

From the interviews, it was clear that the communicators themselves know how important access to information is. They realised that deadlines needed to be met and they understood the importance of providing newsworthy information. This knowledge, however, seemed to be lost to the top management and political principals in the municipalities, as neither communication managers seemed to be able to influence decision-makers towards better media relations. The inability to meet newspaper deadlines had a negative effect on the relationship.

Another hindrance to building a strong relationship, was the perception that the newspapers were mouthpieces of opposition parties and was out to scrutinise and criticise the municipality. Lack of engagement was also cited as a further hindrance.

In the following chapter, the researcher will summarise descriptive empirical findings related how the nature of the relationship between the editors at the Klerksdorp Record and Potchefstroom Herald and the PR practitioners at the City of Matlosana and the JB Marks Municipalities are reflected in the frequency and nature of the coverage the selected newspapers gave to the respective municipalities.

CHAPTER 5 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS – QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

5.1 Introduction

In Chapter 4, the researcher focused on reporting and interpreting the data collected through semi-structured interviews. This chapter aims to summarise descriptive empirical findings related to the perceived relationship between PR practitioners at the City of Matlosana and JB Marks Municipalities and the editors of the *Klerksdorp Record* in Klerksdorp and the *Potchefstroom Herald* in Potchefstroom. Findings of the content analysis of the weekly papers in the second half of 2019 will be discussed.

The fourth specific research question is answered in this section. The question states:

SRQ4: To what extent is the nature of the relationship between the editors at the *Klerksdorp Record* and *Potchefstroom Herald* and the PR practitioners at the City of Matlosana and the JB Marks Municipalities reflected in the frequency and nature of the coverage the selected newspapers give to the respective municipalities?

Articles relating to the local municipalities published in the *Klerksdorp Record* and *Potchefstroom Herald* newspapers from 1 July 2019 to 31 December 2019 were included in the content analysis. As explained in 3.4.3, the researcher used a combination of the inductive and deductive coding approach to determine quantity and valence (tone and themes) of news coverage. For the analysis of the news articles the researcher chose the attributes: article title, date/page, type/genre, theme and tone (whether a specific issue was captured and referred to favourably or unfavourably). These attributes are also presented in table form (Table 5 and Table 6) in this chapter. These tables can be found at the end of 5.2.3.

Several themes, namely, finance, events, housing/land, service delivery/infrastructure and environment were identified by identifying key words referring to these themes from the articles. Data sheets – where the categories (including theme) are presented as column headers – were created (see 3.4.3). The purpose of determining the theme was to see what issues related to the municipality were newsworthy/important enough to publish, as well as what themes the municipality focused on in their press tools.

Press releases and notices sent to the newspapers by the respective municipalities to generate news coverage were also included in the content analysis. Categories identified for the data sheet include title, date issued, theme, published or not as well as date and page number. This

comprehensive information was compiled in table format (Table 9 and Table 10) placed at the end of 5.3. The researcher established the theme of each press release by identifying keywords from the articles, including finance, events, land/housing, sport, and service delivery/infrastructure. It was then determined whether the information was published in the newspaper or not (see 3.4.3).

The findings related to the newspaper articles gathered, with conclusions related to genre, tone, theme, and frequency, will now be discussed for both newspapers under separate headings.

5.2 Analysis of newspaper articles: Findings

The researcher searched for articles in the *Potchefstroom Herald* and the *Klerksdorp Record* published from 1 July 2019 to 31 December 2019. Articles related to the JB Marks and City of Matlosana municipalities were identified by searching for words such as 'municipality', 'JB Marks', 'City of Matlosana' and 'local government'. The newspaper archive of the *Potchefstroom Herald* was accessed on their website. Printed copies of the *Klerksdorp Record* were obtained from the editor, Salomé Kotzé.

Altogether 76 articles published between 1 July 2019 and 31 December 2019, including news stories, columns and editorials, were gathered. Of the 76 articles, 49 pertained to the JB Marks Municipality and were published in the *Potchefstroom Herald*, and 27 articles about the City of Matlosana were published in the *Klerksdorp Record*. The findings related to article genre and tone will now be discussed. The article title, date/page, type/genre, theme and tone – whether it was positive, negative or neutral (see 3.4.3) – of the articles from both newspapers were also recorded in table format (Table 5 and Table 6).

5.2.1 Newspaper article genre

For each article the researcher determined whether it was a news report, an editorial written by the editor, or a statement/column by an employee/politician of the relevant municipality (see 3.4.3.) The genres are depicted in Figure 2 below.

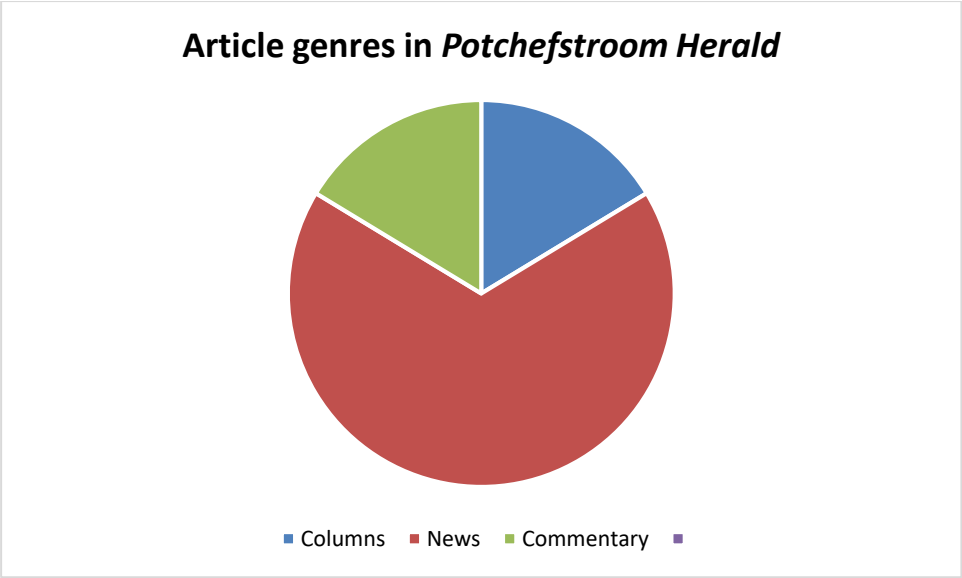

Figure 2: Genres of articles related to the municipality published in the *Potchefstroom Herald* (July 2019 - December 2019).

In the *Potchefstroom Herald* most of the 49 articles related to the municipality were news articles (33). There were 8 commentary articles and 8 columns.

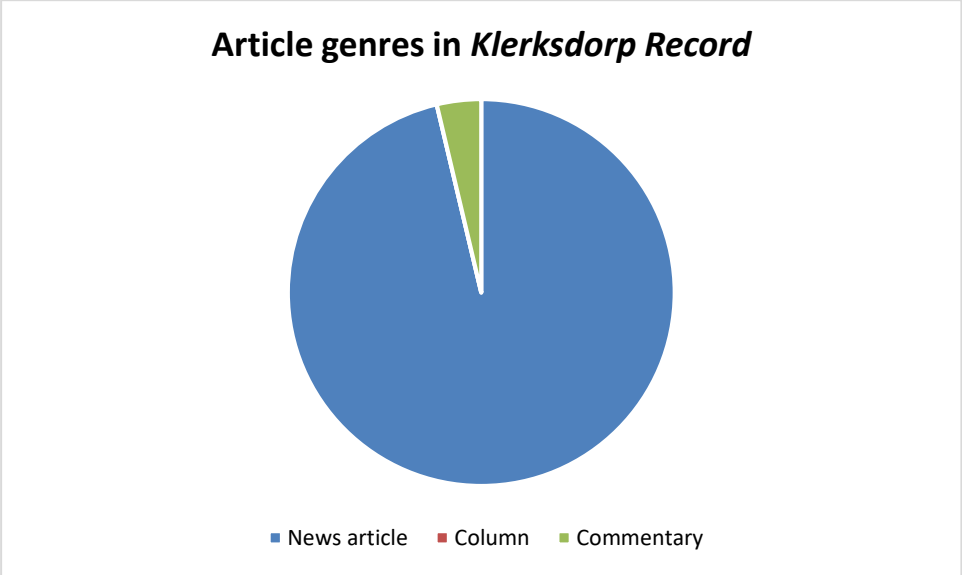

Figure 3: Genres of articles related to the municipality published in the *Klerksdorp Record* (July 2019 - December 2019).

In the *Klerksdorp Record* 26 articles were news articles and 1 was a commentary by the editor. There were no columns.

5.2.2 Newspaper article tone

By determining the tone, the researcher wanted to establish whether the article was neutral, positive, or negative. Articles with a positive tone portrayed the municipality in a favourable light. Articles with a negative tone emphasised less desirable aspects of the municipality's actions or decisions. Articles with a neutral tone were articles written factually, devoid of emotive strong wording (see 3.4.3).

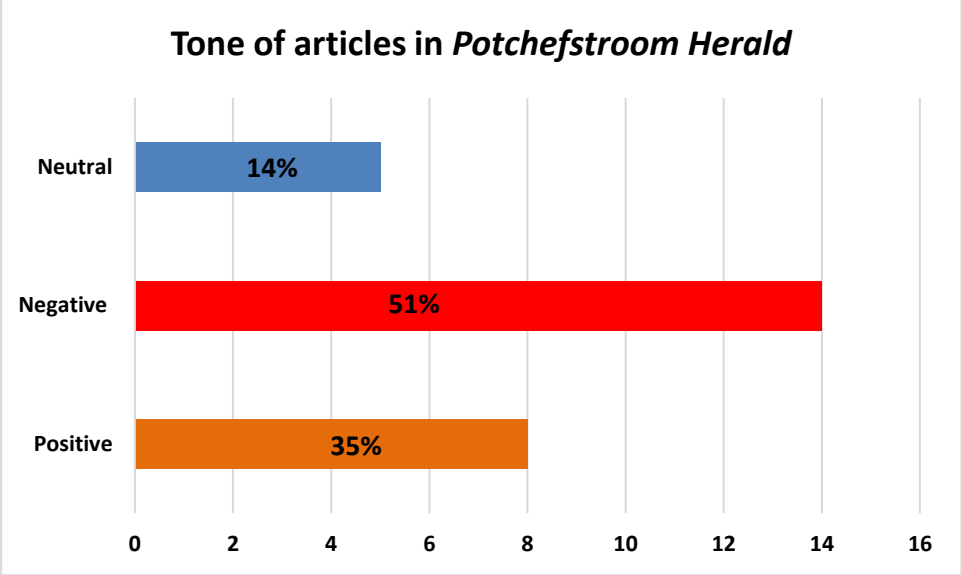

Figure 4: Tone of all articles related to the municipality published in the *Potchefstroom Herald* (July 2019 -– December 2019).

Of the 49 articles in the *Potchefstroom Herald*, 35% had a positive tone and portrayed the municipality in a favourable light. More than half of the articles (51%) had a negative tone which emphasised the things the municipality did wrong. Articles with a neutral tone amounted to 14%.

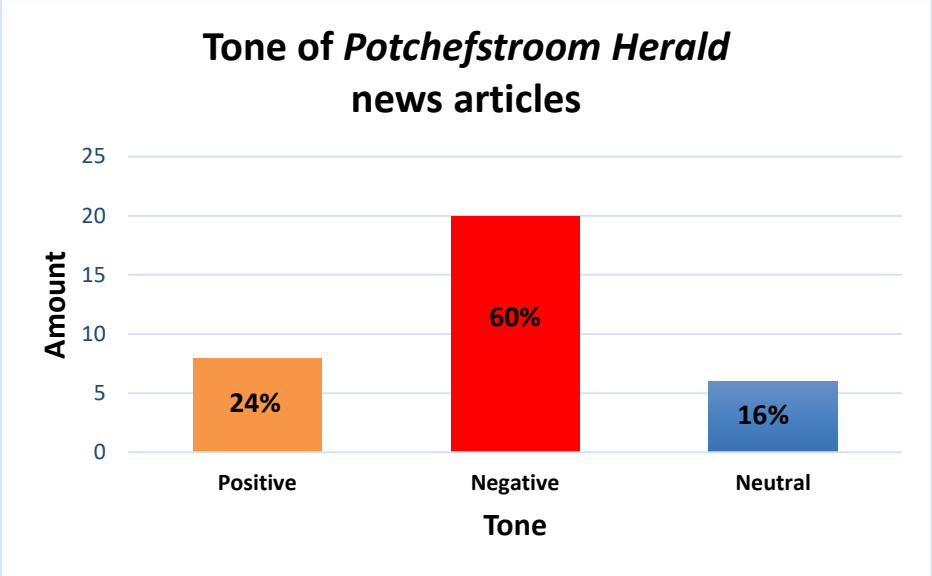

Figure 5: Tone of news articles related to the municipality published in the *Potchefstroom Herald* (July 2019 - December 2019).

Of the 33 news stories in the *Potchefstroom Herald*, 20 were negative, 8 were positive and 5 were neutral. An example of a negative news article appeared on page 4 of the 29 August edition of the *Potchefstroom Herald*. An extract from the article with the headline 'Residents fed up with inadequate sewerage system' (Table 5; PH 25) reads:

> Residents of Paryslaan are dismayed at the ongoing sewerage problems they have had to endure since the Canal Crossing centre was built in 2012.

The article highlighted the plight of residents who have struggled for years with blocked sewerage systems. At the time of writing the article, the journalist, Venessa van der Westhuizen, found that the municipality was waiting for the municipal manager's resolution to advertise tenders for the project. The problem had been ongoing for more than seven years. The article had a negative tone and pointed out that the municipality was dragging its feet in solving the issue.

Of the 8 commentary articles, 7 were written by the editor Dustin Wetdewich and one by the communication manager at JB Marks Municipality, Willie Maphosa. Those written by the editor were all negative, except for 1. The editorial with the headline 'Give credit where credit is due' (Table 5; PH 16) put the municipality in a positive light. Wetdewich wrote:

> The municipality, it seems, has finally taken note of service delivery issues that have been reported.

He wrote about better communication with the community, with the municipality even answering queries on the municipal Facebook group. He described a recent shift towards better communication related to service delivery and said it was an 'admirable step in the right direction'.

The commentary written in a letter to the editor by the communication manager, Willie Maphosa, was neutral, meaning that it was a factual piece without strong wording, personal statements, or anecdotes. In the commentary Maphosa commented on a published letter to the editor about the sewerage problem. In the commentary he admitted that infrastructure was old and needed to be maintained and upgraded. He explained that these actions would need to be budgeted for over time and that the budget allocation from the province was not adequate. He further wrote about damage to infrastructure by members of the community and efforts by the infrastructure team to keep the sewerage system in working condition. The researcher deemed the article to be neutral in that the tone was not outright negative or positive.

What further distinguished the *Potchefstroom Herald* from the *Klerksdorp Record* was that this community newspaper provided space free of charge for the mayor, Kgotso Khumalo, to publish a column from time to time. Of the 49 *Potchefstroom Herald* articles that formed part of the content analysis, 8 were columns written by the mayor. During the interview, the editor Dustin Wetdewich confirmed that the space was granted free of charge to allow the municipality to publish positive news.

The study found that the tone of all the columns written by the mayor was positive and contained promises of better service delivery and announcements of municipal programmes that would benefit the community. For example, in the 19 September edition (Table 5; PH 28), the mayor wrote:

> All residents will receive basic services like water, electricity and refuse removal as mandated by the Constitution.

In response to the mayoral column in the *Potchefstroom Herald*, the editor of the *Klerksdorp Record*, Salomé Kotzé, indicated that the City of Matlosana Municipality would be charged for messages from the mayor such as Christmas greetings, but that she, too, offered the municipality a weekly column for municipal news free of charge. The municipality, however, did not take up the offer.

The researcher found that messages by local mayors were usually published as part of the municipality's ad spend. According to Raats (2022) politicians (including mayors) should not be given free space in a community newspaper as the newspaper would then be seen as 'sold out' to a specific political party. As the owner and editor of several publications in the Limpopo

province, Raats (2022) said that the newspaper should charge for such a column and regarded the column as paid-for messages by the mayor.

Both editors at the North West newspapers indicated that they were willing to provide free space for a weekly column to boost the image of the municipality in the community and to not seem as if they only published negative articles. According to Kotzé, the offer was also to boost their relationship with the municipality.

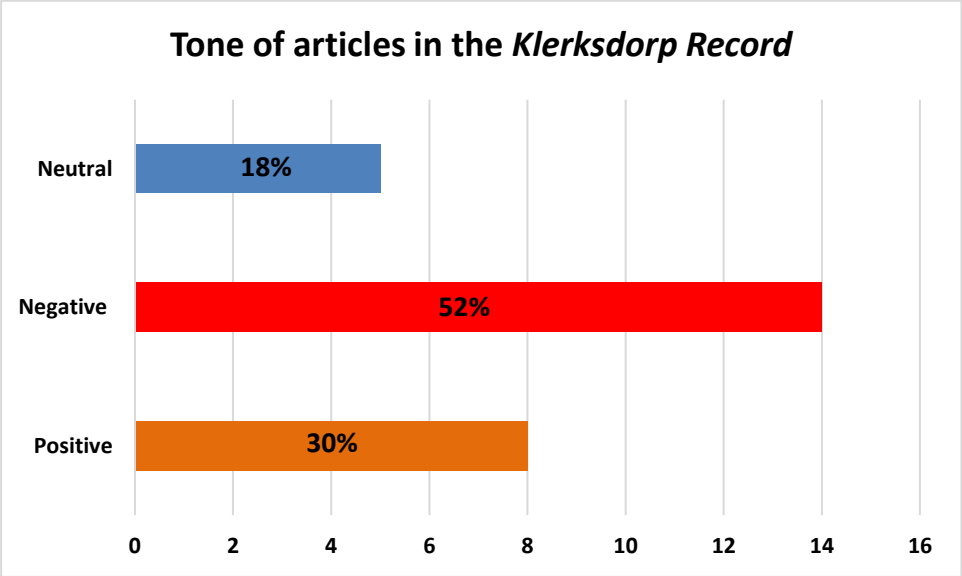

Figure 6: Tone of all articles related to the municipality published in the *Klerksdorp Record* (July 2019 - December 2019).

Of the 27 articles in the *Klerksdorp Record*, 30% had a positive tone and portrayed the municipality in a favourable light. More than half of the articles (52%) had a negative tone which emphasised less desirable aspects of the municipality. Articles with a neutral tone amounted to 18%.

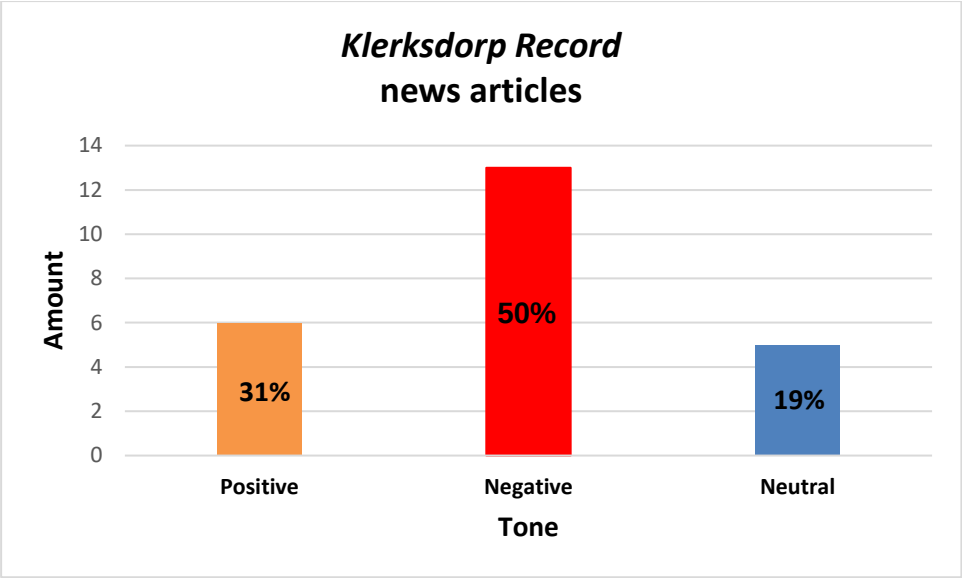

Figure 7: Tone of news articles related to the municipality published in the *Klerksdorp Record* (July 2019 - December 2019).

Most of the articles were news stories (26). Of the news stories 13 were negative, 8 were positive and 5 were neutral.

An example of a negative news story was an article that appeared in the 20 September edition of the *Klerksdorp Record*. The article 'Homes torched in anger frenzy' (Table 6; KR 13) read:

> Residents blocked roads in the township demanding better services, jobs and the allocation of housing stands.

The article described how residents of Khuma in the Matlosana municipal area were unhappy about the municipality not responding to a memorandum about housing and service delivery in the area. Words and phrases such as 'boiling point', 'angry community members' and 'serious tension' underscored the negative tone. The article stated that eight homes, six belonging to City of Matlosana councillors, were set on fire. The article put the municipality in a bad light as it was alleged that the community was not getting any feedback after they handed over a memorandum with their grievances. This is in line with research done by Morudu (2017), who stated that 'service delivery protests in rural areas clearly indicated how a lack of access to information often lead to the rapid spread of rumours of favouritism, exploitation and misconduct and angered communities'.

A news article related to service delivery, ‘Municipality maintains roads’ that was published in the 18 October edition, is an example of an article with a positive tone. An excerpt of the article (Table 6; KR15) reads:

> Matlosana Municipality’s infrastructure department is busy with an ongoing road maintenance project.

According to editor Salomé Kotzé, members of the community often complained about the state of the roads in Matlosana and then requested the newspaper to write about the conditions of the roads. In this article some good news about repairs to potholes was a more positive spin on the story. The article was written from a press release sent out by the communication department of the municipality and was newsworthy enough to use as a source.

Of the 27 *Klerksdorp Record* articles related to the municipality that were included in the content analysis, only 1 was a commentary (editorial) written by the editor. The tone of the commentary was negative. The commentary headline read ‘Disgrace’ (Table 6; KR2), and Kotzé wrote:

> The report shows that Matlosana incurred R52 million in fruitless and wasteful expenditure over the past three years.

The commentary painted a negative picture of the financial workings of the municipality and gave statistics provided by the auditor general’s report. The tone was clearly negative.

5.2.3 Newspaper article themes

Table 4: Number of articles categorised by theme in the *Potchefstroom Herald* and *Klerksdorp Record*.

Theme	*Potchefstroom Herald*	*Klerksdorp Record*
Finance	13	5
Housing/land	5	4
Service delivery/ infrastructure	24	9
Environment	1	3
Events	5	3
Politics	1	3
Total	**49**	**27**

It is evident from the content analysis that service delivery/infrastructure was the most covered theme, as 49% of the *Potchefstroom Herald* articles related to the municipality were about service delivery and infrastructure. In the *Klerksdorp Record*, service delivery/infrastructure was also

covered the most with 33% of the articles addressing the subject. This is in line with information gathered from the semi-structured interviews that editors were interested in service delivery news and that they required more information from the municipalities in this regard (see 4.3.4.2). Finance was also an important theme for both newspapers, 28% in the *Potchefstroom Herald* and 19% in the *Klerksdorp Record*. Housing/land was the third most covered theme for both newspapers.

5.2.4 Frequency

The above findings focused on the nature (theme and tone) of the coverage of stories related to the respective municipalities. When looking at the frequency, it is important to note that in the *Potchefstroom Herald*, an average of 2 articles about the JB Marks Municipality were published per weekly edition. In the *Klerksdorp Record*, the average is 1 article about the City of Matlosana per weekly edition.

This study explored the assumption that a strong relationship will equate to more frequent publication of positive news. Even though the City of Matlosana and the *Klerksdorp Record* are perceived to have a stronger relationship as evident in the data gathered during the semi-structured interviews with especially Ntswaki Makgetha (City of Matlosana) and to a lesser degree, Salomé Kotzé (*Klerksdorp Record*), fewer articles were published, and a slightly higher percentage was negative compared to the articles in the *Potchefstroom Herald*. (See conclusion in Chapter 4.)

The study also shows that frequent coverage relates more to the number of press tools used by the municipalities. This will now be discussed.

The analysed news articles and their comprehensive attributes are now presented in table format:

Table 5: Articles relating to the JB Marks Municipality published in the *Potchefstroom Herald* (July 2019 - December 2019).

Code	Article	Date and page	Genre	Theme	Tone
PH 1	New budget approved	4 July, page 4	Column	Finance	Positive
PH 2	Municipality second worst irregular expenditure culprit	4 July, page 4	News	Finance	Negative
PH 3	Tourism award winners for 2017/18 announced	4 July, page 13	News	Event	Neutral
PH 4	Honderde bou onwettige huise	11 July page 3	News	Housing/land	Negative

Code	Article	Date and page	Genre	Theme	Tone
PH 5	New trucks for refuse removal	11 July, page 5	Column	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Positive
PH 6	New trucks to tackle refuse removal crisis	11 July, page 5	News	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Positive
PH 7	Waste management workers thrown to the wolves	11 July, page 5	News	Finance	Negative
PH 8	Vulstasie besoedel glo omgewing	11 July, page 10	News	Environment	Positive
PH 9	Die hoender of die eier?	11 July, page 4	Commentary	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Negative
PH 10	Buiteperspektief is soms nodig	18 July, page 4	Commentary	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Negative
PH 11	Illegal occupants refuse to move	18 July, page 2	News	Housing/land	Neutral
PH 12	Honour Madiba	18 July, page 4	Column	Event	Positive
PH 13	Historiese huismuseum word verniel	18 July, page 4	News	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Positive
PH 14	Tax season is open	25 July, page 4	Column	Finance	Positive
PH 15	JB Marks overlooks granny's loo plea	25 July, page 4	News	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Negative
PH 16	Give credit where it is due	1 August, page 6	Commentary	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Positive
PH 17	Ons stel sake reg	1 August, page 4	Column	Finance	Positive
PH 18	Community tired of long wait for promised stands	1 August, page 4	News	Housing/land	Negative
PH 19	Hold your horses – Municipality spends big for Durban trip	15 August, page 4	News	Finance	Negative
PH 20	Beter Bult vir Aardklop en Potch	15 August, page 4	News	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Positive
PH 21	Ons geld word op gemors spandeer	15 August, page 5	Commentary	Finance	Negative
PH 22	Water leakages fixed in part of Ikageng	22 August, page 7	News	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Neutral

Code	Article	Date and page	Genre	Theme	Tone
PH 23	Magspel het impak op dienslewering	29 August, page 3	Commentary	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Negative
PH 24	Besigheid wag vergeefs op water en riool	29 August, page 4	News	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Negative
PH 25	Residents fed up with inadequate sewerage system	29 August, page 4	News	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Negative
PH 26	Confusion on stands set straight	5 September, page 4	News	Housing/land	Neutral
PH 27	Overkill on overtime could cripple municipality	5 September, page 5	News	Finance	Negative
PH 28	Court case to go ahead	19 September, page 4	Column	Finance	Positive
PH 29	Administration tug of war continues unabated	19 September, page 4	News	Politics	Neutral
PH 30	What's the plan, JB Marks?	19 September, page 5	Commentary	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Negative
PH 31	The council claims fraud by administrator	3 October, page 3	News	Finance	Negative
PH 32	Durban July debacle being investigated	3 October, page 3	News	Finance	Negative
PH 33	Good things coming	3 October, page 4	Column	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Positive
PH 34	Construction owner indignant about alleged delay in payment	3 October, page 4	News	Finance	Negative
PH 35	Local municipality and School of Intelligence celebrate the importance of tourism	3 October, page 11	News	Event	Positive
PH 36	Infrastruktuur by begraafplase verwaarloos	3 October, page 11	News	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Negative
PH 37	DA lays charges against local municipal manager for alleged negligence	17 October, page 4	News	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Negative
PH 38	Municipality denounced illegal dumping	17 October, page 4	News	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Positive
PH 39	Best wishes to our matriculants	17 October, page 4	Column	Event	Positive

Code	Article	Date and page	Genre	Theme	Tone
PH 40	Sewage crisis	17 October, page 6	Commentary	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Negative
PH 41	Sewer difficulties are indeed communal issues	17 October, page 6	Commentary	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Neutral
PH 42	Palissade sal huismuseum teen vandaliste beskerm	24 October, page 4	News	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Positive
PH 43	Primary school without water for two weeks	31 October, page 4	News	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Negative
PH 44	Residents retaliate after shacks demolished	31 October, page 4	News	Housing/land	Negative
PH 45	Onwettige storting neem toe	7 November, page 4	News	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Negative
PH 46	Municipality hosts dialogue on gender-based violence	7 November, page 10	News	Event	Positive
PH 47	Primary school still has no water	28 November, page 5	News	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Negative
PH 48	Duisende verloor oor verkeerde rekeninge	12 December, page 5	News	Finance	Negative
PH 49	Several areas without water for the past three days	18 December, page 4	News	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Negative

Table 6: Articles relating to the City of Matlosana Municipality, published in the *Klerksdorp Record* (July 2019 - December 2019).

Code	Article	Date and page	Genre	Theme	Tone
KR 1	Court order against Tigane squatters	5 July, page 5	News	Housing/land	Negative
KR 2	Disgrace	5 July, page 10	Commentary	Finance	Negative
KR 3	Stilfontein land grab continues	2 August, page 4	News	Housing/land	Neutral
KR 4	Municipal accounts late	2 August, page 6	News	Finance	Neutral
KR 5	Factions in ANC bring council to halt	16 August, page 4	News	Politics	Negative
KR 6	Municipal offices closed	16 August, page 5	News	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Neutral

Code	Article	Date and page	Genre	Theme	Tone
KR 7	Teens caught drinking, smoking in public	23 August, page 7	News	Event	Positive
KR 8	Water bombs disrupt council meeting	30 August, page 6	News	Finance	Negative
KR 9	Less water losses for the city	30 August, page 6	News	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Positive
KR 10	New homeowners in Alabama	30 August, page 7	News	Housing/land	Positive
KR 11	Municipal worker killed, driver arrested	13 September, page 3	News	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Negative
KR 12	Matlosana celebrates Arbor Day	13 September, page 13	News	Environment	Positive
KR 13	Homes torched in anger frenzy	20 September, page 3	News	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Negative
KR 14	Anger about burning waste	4 October, page 4	News	Environment	Negative
KR 15	Municipality maintains roads	18 October, page 5	News	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Positive
KR 16	US embassy visits Matlosana	18 October, page 8	News	Finance	Positive
KR 17	Plants in potholes	1 November, page 1	News	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Negative
KR 18	City honours sports stars	1 November, page 20	News	Event	Positive
KR 19	Dead fish stinking up Stilfontein	8 November, page 4	News	Environment	Negative
KR 20	Matlosana cannot account for irregularities	15 November, page 4	News	Finance	Negative
KR 21	Mayor reshuffles chamber	15 November, page 4	News	Politics	Neutral
KR 22	New payment plan for Eskom	29 November, page 3	News	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Negative
KR 23	Matlosana needs more taxi ranks, says DA	29 November, page 8	News	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Negative
KR 24	Matlosana Mayor reinstates reshuffled MMCs	29 November, page 8	News	Politics	Negative
KR 25	Property valuations underway	29 November, page 14	News	Housing/land	Neutral

Code	Article	Date and page	Genre	Theme	Tone
KR 26	Walking in their shoes	6 December, page 6	News	Event	Positive
KR 27	Load shedding headaches	13 December, page 4	News	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Negative

5.3 Analysis of press tools: Findings

PR tools (press releases and media advisories) that were sent to the media were obtained from the communication departments of both municipalities. Altogether 22 press releases and 4 advisories were sent to the *Potchefstroom Herald* by JB Marks Municipality (October 2019 to December 2019[1]) and 15 press releases and 5 advisories from the City of Matlosana were sent to the *Klerksdorp Record* (July 2019 to December 2019).

Each instrument was analysed according to the heading, the date issued, the theme, whether it was published or not, and the date published. The related information was captured in tables and can be found in Table 9 and Table 10 at the end of 5.3.

The JB Marks Municipality sent out on average double the number of press releases (7,6 press releases per month) than the City of Matlosana Municipality (3,3 press releases per month). This is in line with the statistics that show double the coverage the JB Marks Municipality received in the *Potchefstroom Herald* (2 articles per weekly edition), compared to the City of Matlosana Municipality (1 article per weekly edition). This could indicate that PR tools such as press releases enhance coverage, but more research (with a bigger sample) is needed to firmly establish this assumption. This assumption is, however, in line with research by Sissons (2012) who opined that overwhelmed, understaffed newsrooms often repurposed press releases and used quotes from politicians and that well-written, newsworthy press releases would enhance chances for coverage.

Tam (2015) found that information subsidies such as news releases, accounted for as much as 50% of CSR-related news content in newspapers. Tam further found that news releases based on journalistic norms and values, were more likely to be reported on positively if they were covered in the media. During the semi-structured interviews, both editors indicated that they often used press releases as sources but did not publish them verbatim. An example of this is the article "*Duisende verloor oor verkeerde rekeninge*" published on 12 December on page 5 of the

[1] Press releases and notices sent by JB Marks in July, August and September 2019 could not be located. The 23 include those sent from October to December 2019.

Potchefstroom Herald. The article was written using information provided by the JB Marks Municipality from a press release titled “Faulty water meters” which was sent to the newspaper on 4 December. The information was not used verbatim.

5.3.1 Findings – JB Marks municipality

Table 7: Number of press releases categorised by theme in the *Potchefstroom Herald.*

Theme	Number sent to newspaper	Used as source
Housing/land	1	0
Service delivery/ infrastructure	16	9
Events	5	1
Total	22	10

In this section, the researcher determined whether information gathered from the press releases was published in the respective newspapers and the themes of these press releases.

Of the 22 press releases sent out by the JB Marks Municipality (October 2019 - 31 December 2019), 10 were used as sources, equating to 45%. Some of the advisories and press releases were quoted on the newspaper’s online platform (*www.potchefstroomherald.co.za*) and were not included in the equation.

All but 1 of the press releases that received coverage were about service delivery and infrastructure. Most of the press releases (76%) were written in response to questions submitted by the *Potchefstroom Herald*. This shows that JB Marks Municipality was more often reactive than proactive.

Examples of press releases written as answers to questions posed by the *Potchefstroom Herald*:

- The press release titled ‘DA’s charges against the MM’, sent to the newspaper on 15 October 2019, was used as source of information in an article published in the 17 October edition with the headline ‘DA lays charges against local municipal manager for alleged negligence’. The article related to charges against Lebu Ralekgetho, the municipal manager, for ignoring raw sewage pollution of Poortjie Dam.
- The press release titled ‘The Goetz Fleischack Museum’, sent on 9 October 2019, was used as source of information in an article published in the 24 October edition with the

headline ‘Palissade sal huismuseum teen vandaliste beskerm’. The article was about the upgrading and fencing of the Goetz Fleischack Museum to protect it against vandals.

- The press release titled ‘Baipei service delivery protests’ sent on 30 October 2019 was used as a source in an article published in the 31 October edition with the headline ‘Residents retaliate after shacks demolished’. The article focused on unrest following the removal of shacks due to unlawful occupation of land and the lack of bulk services in Extension 11.
- The press release titled ‘Illegal dumping’ sent on 6 November 2019 was used as a source in an article in the 7 November edition with the headline ‘Onwettige storting neem toe’. The article related to illegal dumping of waste due to damaged roads that lead to the Phelophepha landfill site and residents’ inability to access the site.
- The press release titled ‘School’s water crisis’, sent on 28 November 2019, was used as a source in an article in the 28 November edition with the headline ‘Primary school still has no water’. The article was about the Keotshepile Primary School that was left without water because of low levels of water at the reservoir.
- The press release titled ‘Faulty water meters’, sent on 4 December, was used as a source in an article in the 12 December edition with the headline ‘Duisende verloor oor verkeerde rekeninge’. The article focused on the backlog with regard to the installation of meters in new developments and the replacement of faulty meters.

These responses to queries by the *Potchefstroom Herald* mostly related to service delivery/infrastructure, an important theme according to the content analysis (see 5.2.3). These press releases therefore contained enough news value for the newspaper to use as sources. Even though the relationship at question is not perceived to be strong, the municipality responded to these specific queries and the newspaper generated articles from the information provided.

5.3.2 Findings – City of Matlosana

Table 8: Number of press releases categorised by theme in the *Klerksdorp Record*.

Theme	Number sent to newspaper	Used as source
Finance	1	1
Housing/land	3	1
Service delivery/ infrastructure	5	2
Events	5	3
Sport	1	0
Total	15	7

Of the 15 press releases by the City of Matlosana (July 2019 - December 2019), only 7 were used as sources in the *Klerksdorp Record*. That equates to 47%. The themes of the press releases included finance, service delivery/infrastructure, land/housing and municipal events. None of the press releases was written in response to questions submitted by the newspaper, indicating again that the City of Matlosana has a more pro-active approach to generate news coverage.

An example of a press release that was used as a source for a news article is titled 'Title deeds distribution'. It was sent to the *Klerksdorp Record* on 27 August 2019 and was used as source for an article published in the 30 August edition with the headline 'New homeowners in Alabama'.

The *Klerksdorp Record* was invited to the event and journalist Mohanoe Khiba attended and took a photo. The article used much of the information given in the press release and explained that the Directorate of Planning and Human Settlements in the City of Matlosana distributed about 50 title deeds on Friday 23 August 2019 at the Alabama Hall. The press release resulted in positive news coverage for the municipality. Because of protest action related to housing and land, the press release would have had a lot of relevance and news value. The assumption could be made that this is the reason why it was used as a source for an article.

Another example of the City of Matlosana communication department proactively seeking coverage, is a press release about road maintenance sent out on 8 October 2019. The information was quoted in an article published in the 18 October edition on page 5 with the headline 'Municipality maintains roads'. (See discussion about the news value in 5.2.3.)

Press releases and media advisories that formed part of the content analysis and their attributes are now presented in table format:

Table 9: Press releases and advisories sent out by the JB Marks Municipality (October 2019 - December 2019).

Title	Date issued	Theme	Published or not	Date
Press releases:				
Sewer problems within the municipal areas	9 October 2019	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Yes	17 October
Sewer difficulties are indeed communal issues (opinion)	15 October 2019	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Yes	17 October

Title	Date issued	Theme	Published or not	Date
Meeting called by DA	9 October 2019	Event	No	
The Goetz Fleischack Museum	9 October 2019	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Yes	24 October
Council legal challenge on the invocation of section 139	10 October 2019	Event	No	
DA's charges against the MM	15 October 2019	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Yes	17 October
Baipei service delivery protests	30 October 2019	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Yes	31 October
Disaster management and electricity supply	30 October 2019	Service delivery/ infrastructure	No	
Water shutdown for Sonderwater reservoir feeder areas	30 October 2019	Service delivery/ infrastructure	On website	
Water supply at Keotshepile School	30 October 2019	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Yes	31 October
Illegal dumping	6 November 2019	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Yes	7 November
Land occupation	11 November 2019	Land/housing	No	
Position of council regarding the administrator	12 November 2019	Event	No	
Road signs	20 November 2019	Service delivery/ infrastructure	No	
School's water crisis	27 November 2019	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Yes	28 November
Death of young child in Ikageng	27 November 2019	Event	Yes	28 November
Faulty water meters	4 December	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Yes	12 December
Trim Park Festival	18 December	Event	No	
Advisories:				
Notice: Power outage	9 October 2019	Service delivery/ infrastructure	On website	
Notice: Water supply downtime	30 October 2019	Service delivery/ infrastructure	On website	
Notice: Localized flash floods update	12 December 2019	Service delivery/ infrastructure	On website	
Notice: Access to water update	18 December 2019	Service delivery/ infrastructure	On website	

Table 10: Press releases and advisories sent out by the City of Matlosana Municipality (July 2019 - December 2019).

Title	Date issued	Theme	Published or not	Date
Press releases:				
The City of Matlosana go big in celebrating Mandela Day	23 July 2019	Events	Yes	26 July, page 12
Incorrect communique circulation	30 July 2019	Finance	Yes	2 August, page 5
Roads maintenance in the city of Matlosana	13 August 2019	Service delivery/ infrastructure	No	
Schoolchildren found with alcohol on municipal premises	20 August 2019	Event	No	
Jourberton hostel residents receive lease agreements	27 August 2019	Land/housing	No	
9 More cars bought by the city of Matlosana	27 August 2019	Service delivery/ infrastructure	No	
Arbor day celebrated in the City of Matlosana	7 September 2019	Event	Yes	13 September, page 13
Operation Khokha on the move!	1 October 2019	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Yes	11 October page 12
Anti-gangsterism dialogue in Kanana	1 October 2019	Event	No	
Roads maintenance continues in town	8 October 2019	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Yes	18 October, page 5
City of Matlosana's sport merit awards	29 October 2019	Event	Yes	1 November, page 20
The City provides housing services to the people	4 November 2019	Land/housing	No	
Housing subsidy	26 November 2019	Land/housing	Yes	29 November, page 14
Matlosana festive water splash	3 December 2019	Sport	No	

Title	Date issued	Theme	Published or not	Date
The City of Matlosana launches mobile library	3 December 2019	Service delivery/ infrastructure	No	
Advisories:				
Notice: Closing of municipal offices	17 December 2019	Service delivery/ infrastructure	No	
Notice: Interruption in Electricity supply	12 July 2019	Service delivery/ infrastructure	No	
Notice: Title deeds distribution	27 August 2019	Land/housing	Yes	30 August page 6
Notice: Closing of municipal offices	12 August 2019	Service delivery/ infrastructure	Yes	16 August, page 5
Notice: Distribution of title deeds	21 August 2019	Land/housing	No	

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter set out to answer the fourth specific research question:

SRQ4: To what extent is the nature of the relationship between the editors at the *Klerksdorp Record* and *Potchefstroom Herald* and the PR practitioners at the City of Matlosana and the JB Marks Municipalities reflected in the frequency and nature of the coverage the selected newspapers give to the respective municipalities?

Contrary to the argument of Hess and Waller (2008:159) that the personal relationship between the PR professional and the journalist was important to generate media coverage, this study found that despite perceiving their relationship as weak, the *Potchefstroom Herald* was more likely to use municipal press releases as sources for articles compared to the *Klerksdorp Record,* whose relationship according to the data from the semi-structured interviews was perceived as more positive. Data from the semi-structured interviews showed that both Willie Maphosa (JB Marks Municipality) and Dustin Wetdewich (*Potchefstroom Herald*) perceived that they did not have a strong relationship (see 4.7). It can therefore be deduced that relationships do not always play a role in media coverage. It certainly did not in the case of the editor of the Potchefstroom Herald and the government communicator at the JB Marks municipality.

The study found that providing relevant, and newsworthy information equated to publicity. This is in line with Waters *et al.* (2010:243) who wrote that press releases substantially impacted how organisations were portrayed in the media. They stated that ‘understanding and providing what journalists wanted and needed were as important as cultivating a personal relationship with

journalists who covered issues related to the organisation'. Government communicators should therefore realise the importance of providing timely, relevant and accurate information to journalist.

Most of the press releases submitted by the JB Marks Municipality were written in response to questions and were not the municipality's initiative, making the information relevant to what the editor required for newsworthy articles (see examples in 5.3.1). This was also confirmed by the fact that most of the press releases were related to service delivery/infrastructure, which was an important theme for the newspaper (see section 5.2.3).

Fewer of the City of Matlosana's press releases were used as sources. Examples of press releases that were not used as sources are about school children found with alcohol on municipal premises, the municipality's holiday programme (Matlosana festive water splash) and the launch of a mobile library.

Press releases that were used as sources due to their news value included housing subsidies, as housing/land was an important issue to the community (see discussion in 5.3.2), as well as road maintenance as service delivery was the most covered theme related to municipal issues.

A total of 30% of the press releases contained information about service delivery, which was an important theme for the *Klerksdorp Record* (see Table 6). This was compared to the JB Marks Municipality whose press releases were mostly about service delivery (73%).

The City of Matlosana also submitted half the number of press releases compared to JB Marks, strengthening the argument that more press releases could equate to more coverage. This further showed that despite their poor perception of the relationships, the editors were willing to use the information, provided that the information was newsworthy and relevant.

In Chapter 6 the researcher will give an overview of the study, describe how the research objectives were reached and discuss research challenges and limitations as well as recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER 6 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

This study was conducted to answer the general research question: 'What is the nature of the relationship between local newspaper editors at selected newspapers and PR practitioners in local government in the North West Province?'

With this goal in mind, the researcher explained the background and history of media relations between the South African government and the press in Chapter 1. Within the framework of media relations, Chapter 2 investigated how the systems and relationship management theories as well as two-way symmetrical communication are relevant in studying the relationship between PR practitioners in local government and journalists at local community newspapers. Chapter 3 expounded on the research methods used and explained how the concepts and constructs were extracted from the literature. Chapter 4 summarised the descriptive empirical findings related to the semi-structured interviews with the four participants. Results of the content analysis of the weekly papers and PR tools sent out by the municipalities in the second half of 2019 were discussed in Chapter 5.

In this concluding chapter, the researcher will give an overview of the study, describe how the research objectives were reached, and discuss research challenges and limitations. At the end of the chapter, the researcher will make a few recommendations for further research on the topic.

6.2 Study synopsis and review: research aim and objectives

The literature study (Chapter 2) showed that the value of PR can be established by measuring the quality of relationships. Against the general research question above (also see 1.3), the main aim of this study was to investigate the nature of the relationship between local government PR practitioners and local newspaper editors in the North West Province by using a qualitative research design.

To this end the researcher formulated research questions that formed the basis for the research objectives applicable to this study.

Table 11: Research questions and objectives linked to the chapters in the study.

Research question	Research objective	Chapter reference
SRQ1: Within the framework of media liaison, how could the systems theory,	SRO1: To determine through a literature study how the systems and relationship	Chapter 2

relationship management theory and the two-way symmetrical communication model be reflected in the relationship between PR practitioners and local community editors?	management theories as well as the two-way symmetrical communication model, are reflected in the relationship between the PR practitioners and community editors as it pertains to media relations.	
SRQ2: What are the perceptions of PR practitioners in the City of Matlosana and JB Marks Municipalities of their relationship with local newspaper editors at the *Klerksdorp Record* and the *Potchefstroom Herald*, respectively?	SRO2: To determine through semi-structured interviews the perceptions of PR practitioners in the City of Matlosana and JB Marks Municipalities of their relationship with local newspaper editors at the *Klerksdorp Record* and the *Potchefstroom Herald*, respectively.	Chapter 4
SRQ3: What are the perceptions of local newspaper editors at the *Klerksdorp Record* and the *Potchefstroom Herald* of their relationship with PR practitioners in the City of Matlosana and JB Marks Municipalities, respectively?	SRO3: To determine through semi-structured interviews the perceptions of local newspaper editors at the *Klerksdorp Record* and the *Potchefstroom Herald* of their relationship with PR practitioners in the City of Matlosana and JB Marks Municipalities respectively.	Chapter 4
SRQ4: To what extent is the nature of the relationship between the editors at the *Klerksdorp Record* and *Potchefstroom Herald* and the PR practitioners at the City of Matlosana and the JB Marks Municipalities reflected in the frequency and nature of the coverage the selected newspapers give to the respective municipalities?	SRO4: To determine through content analysis to what extent the nature of the relationship between the editors at the *Klerksdorp Record* and *Potchefstroom Herald* and the PR practitioners at the City of Matlosana and the JB Marks Municipalities is reflected in the frequency and nature of the coverage the selected newspapers give to the respective municipalities?	Chapter 5

Three central theoretical statements were formulated and the following table shows in which chapters the central theoretical statements received attention.

Table 12: Central theoretical statements linked to chapters in this study.

Central theoretical statement	Chapter reference
Theoretical statement 1: Organisations with a symmetrical worldview are more likely to adopt two-way symmetrical or mixed motive communication models because the assumptions of a symmetrical worldview encourage the use of two-way models. Two-way communication is necessary for a healthy relationship between an organisation and its interest groups (Chaka & Botha, 2007:68).	Chapter 2 Chapter 4
Theoretical statement 2: If relationship-building strategies such as access, openness, assurance of authenticity, networking, cooperation and unconditional	Chapter 2

constructiveness are successfully applied by the organisation, strong relationships should be established (Grunig & Huang, 2000:36-37; Hung, 2001:15-19; Hung, 2007:459-461).	Chapter 4
Theoretical statement 3: If public and media relations are strategically managed according to the relationship management theory, the outcomes of strong relationships should be present in the relationship between government communicators and community newspaper editors, namely trust; mutual control; commitment; and relationship satisfaction (Hon & Grunig, 1999:18; Grunig & Huang, 2000:42-47).	Chapter 2 Chapter 4

Chapter 1 provided the context and motivation for the study. In this chapter, the researcher investigated media relations on local government level against the background of media development and transformation in South Africa (see 1.1.1). The chapter provided historical background and highlighted the vital role both community newspapers and local government play in society (see 1.1.2 and 1.1.3). The researcher also outlined the integral role of government communicators and editors in civil society and highlighted concerns about the state of media relations in local government. The chapter also contains the research objectives and central theoretical statements in light of the problem statement and explained the research methodology and methods (1.4, 1.5 and 1.6) as well as the central theoretical arguments (see 1.7), research approach and scientific contribution of this study (see 1.10).

The objective in this chapter was to review literature related to the background relevant to the study of media relations in local government. The conclusion of this chapter is that the relationship between journalists and government communicators are not perceived as strong, even after 1994 when South Africa moved towards a democracy. This study, through the semi-structured interviews, found that in 2019, more than 25 years after the ComTask Report was tabled, government communicators and the community newspaper editors still perceive their relationship as weak.

Chapter 2 expounded on how the systems theory and relationship management as well as two-way symmetrical communication are relevant in studying the relationship between PR practitioners in local government and journalists at local community newspapers.

The literature review determined that an open system is necessary for effective organisational communication so that information can flow comfortably between parts of the system. The researcher showed that both local government and community newspapers function as interdependent systems within a larger system called community (see 2.2). Within this system, engagement and relationship management play an important role in ensuring that subsystems

remain in homeostasis. The researcher found that communication management becomes a symmetrical process, which consists of sacrifice and negotiation (see 2.3). The researcher identified relationship-building strategies and outcomes to be able to determine the relationship between the local government communicators and editors relevant to this study (see 2.4).

This study showed that the municipalities and the community newspapers realise their interdependence to a certain extent, but that the overall perception is that they would be able to function without the other. The literature study found that ANC-run municipalities often hold asymmetrical world views and communicate asymmetrically. Regulations for government communication as promoted by the ANC centralise information. It was further possible to identify aspects of the relationship management theory to determine whether relationship building strategies and outcomes are present in the relationship and media relations initiatives. The researcher was able to determine through the literature study to what extent the systems and relationship management theories as well as the two-way symmetrical communication model could be used to describe the relationship between the PR practitioners and community editors as it pertains to media relations. The researcher thus reached the first research objective of this study.

Chapter 3 explained how the researcher designed and carried out the research to answer the specific research questions as well as the general research question. The researcher explained why a qualitative research approach was the appropriate choice for the study. The research methods, namely the literature study, semi-structured interviews and qualitative content analysis, were explained and motivated as correct choice of method of data collection for this study. The researcher outlined each of the chosen research methods and motivated why they were used in this study. The reliability and validity of the study within a qualitative framework were discussed, as well as the ethical aspects of the research.

Chapter 4 described, analysed and interpreted empirical findings gathered through semi-structured interviews. The data reflected the perceived relationship between PR practitioners at the City of Matlosana and JB Marks Municipalities and the editors of the *Klerksdorp Record* in Klerksdorp and the *Potchefstroom Herald* in Potchefstroom. It provided background on each respondent (see 4.2) and data were organised according to the constructs identified, namely control mutuality, trust, commitment, and satisfaction (see 4.3). The researcher was able to determine the perceptions of the four respondents in the study through semi-structured interviews. It is evident that the government communicators' perceptions were slightly more positive than that of the editors (see 4.7). Almost none of the relationship outcomes are evident in the perceptions held by the editors. Very few of the relationship management strategies found

in literature are implemented in the media relations and communication plan of both municipalities (see 4.5). The researcher found that not enough access to timely information was the biggest hindrance to the relationship. By determining the PR practitioners' and editors' perceptions, the researcher reached the second specific research objection of this study.

To answer the general research question pertaining to the nature of the relationship between the selected local newspaper editors and PR practitioners in local government, the following is a summary of the data collected through the semi-structured interviews and presented in the form of an apt summary of the outcomes of strong relationship management by Hon and Grunig (1999:24). They wrote:

> Good relationships with reporters are ones in which both [journalists and public relations practitioners] feel they have some degree of control over the reporting of the organisation—neither party is in control to the exclusion of the other.

During the semi-structured interviews, it was found that only Ntswaki Makgetha (Matlosana Municipality) opines that the communication department has some measure of control over what is published in the newspaper. The other three respondents do not perceive that they have any say or any measure of control in the relationship.

> Both parties trust each other to help them do their job;

When it comes to trust, both government communicators say that they can trust the newspaper whose editors they believe have integrity and are competent to do the job. Both editors said they do not trust the municipality and its communication department to help them do their job.

> Indeed, they have a communal relationship, so each helps the other even though they may get nothing in return.

Again, only Magetha (City of Matlosana) perceives the relationship with the newspaper as communal. Kotze (Klerksdorp Record) and Maphosa (JB Marks Municipality) believe the relationship to be an exchange relationship. Wetdewich (Potchefstroom Herald) says the relationship is too weak to define.

> They are committed to making the relationship between the organisation and the media work.

Both communicators perceive some degree of commitment on the part of the editors to make the relationship work. In contrast, the editors do not believe that the municipalities are committed to such.

> The bottom line is that they are satisfied with the relationship.

Maphosa is the only respondent who is satisfied with the relationship. The other three respondents indicated that they were not satisfied with the relationship.

In **Chapter 5**, the findings of the content analysis were discussed in depth. Articles relating to the local municipalities published in the *Klerksdorp Record* and *Potchefstroom Herald* newspapers from 1 July 2019 to 31 December 2019 were included in the content analysis. The content analysis also included press releases and media advisories sent to the newspapers by the respective municipalities to generate news coverage. Through content analysis, the researcher was able to determine if the relationship between the *Klerksdorp Record* and the City of Matlosana Municipality and the *Potchefstroom Herald* and the JB Marks Municipality is reflected in the frequency and nature of the coverage the selected newspapers gave to the respective municipalities. The study found that in both newspapers more than 50% of the articles related to the municipalities were negative (see 5.2.2). From the interviews it was determined that the perceptions of both editors are that the relationship is not strong, this could have an influence on the tone of the articles and could be the reason why the percentage of negative coverage is at 50%.

In terms of frequency, the researcher found that the JB Marks Municipality sent out double the number of press releases compared to the City of Matlosana Municipality (see 5.3). The *Potchefstroom Herald* published twice as many articles related to JB Marks, when compared to the *Klerksdorp Record*'s coverage of the City of Matlosana. Even though this perception is in line with Waters *et al*. (2010), more study is needed to validate the researcher's conclusion that more press releases equate to more coverage in community newspapers (5.4) and that relationship played a smaller role. By determining that most of the article have a negative tone and that the relationship is to a lesser degree reflected in the frequency of coverage, the researcher met the fourth specific research objective.

6.3 Research challenges

Because the study is a case study of two specific municipalities and two corresponding community newspapers, the findings cannot be extrapolated to other organisations in South Africa with similar structures. The logistics of interviewing more government communicators and editors in more

cities were not possible due to the geographical distances. The researcher chose Klerksdorp and Potchefstroom because of their location and proximity.

It would have been ideal to involve more government communicators (including provincial government) and editors (of community and daily newspapers) to determine the state of media relations pertaining to government in all spheres.

The researcher was advised that it would be difficult to collect data from the municipalities but found instead that both communicators were very willing to be interviewed and provided PR tools for the content analysis. A challenge in this regard was the fact that press releases sent out by the JB Marks Municipality in July, August and September 2019 could not be located. The 22 press releases included in the study were sent from October to December 2019.

6.4 Suggestions for further research

In terms of the observation by Kittelman *et al*. (2018) that PR practitioners within organisations should fulfil a functional or management role where they are part of decision-making, it is suggested that further research be done on the influence government communicators have/could have on communication policy within government structures. Further study could determine whether government communicators are part of top management and what the factors are that have an impact on how much influence government communicators have to steer the municipality/government agency towards better public and media relations.

This specific study found that in both municipalities, the communicators did fulfil management roles. It was found, however, that neither had much influence in directing the communication of top management and political principals that could lead to better media relations. Both communicators had been schooled in communication and journalism (see 4.2) and knew what news values are and how important deadlines are to newspapers. However, this knowledge did not translate to the rest of the municipality as the communicators were seldom able to advise top management accordingly (see 4.3.1.1). Further study related to these two municipalities could look at why this was the case and determine what the barriers were that prevented communicators from functioning as communication strategists and decision-makers.

Further research could be done on how these findings compare to other municipalities in other provinces. It can also be extended to other spheres of government, provincial and national. Are communicators fulfilling management roles in those spheres of government? What does the relationship between government communicators and commercial daily newspapers look like?

6.5 Recommendations

From the study it was evident that local government needed to implement media relations strategies where the community newspapers had timely access to information that had news value. On the other hand, newspapers should counter the perception that they were overly critical of the municipalities and biased towards opposition parties and that they did not cater for all communities (see discussion in 4.3.3). Further recommendations relevant to improved relationships between local government PR practitioners and newspaper editors will now be discussed.

- The findings illustrate the need for better media relations on the part of selected municipalities. There needs to be a culture shift within these establishments to move away from an asymmetric communication model towards a two-way symmetric or mixed model of communication. Government communication regulations that centralise authority, not allowing communicators to take responsibility for the communication that is sent out and which delays information, should be reviewed.
- Government communicators should take on the roles of strategists and decision-makers within the municipality with the aim of improving media relations and informing communities about successes and achievements.
- There should be greater access to information for editors and journalists and a concerted effort on the part of the municipalities to meet deadlines.
- More engagement, not only between communicators and editors, but also with political principals and top management, could lead to a better understanding of each other's needs.
- It is clear from the study that PR tools such as press releases and media advisories are effective in gaining publicity for municipalities. The recommendation is that the communicators in local government should be proactive in sending out information related to the successes achieved by the municipality. These press releases should contain information with enough news value, be well-written and be as print-ready as possible.
- It is also recommended that the editors meet regularly with communicators as well as top management of the municipalities. Community newspapers should be seeking out and covering the stories that concern their readers. In this endeavour they should include a variety of voices and political sentiments and opinions to offer the most comprehensive reporting possible.

6.6 Final conclusions

The literature review determined that local municipalities, as well as community newspapers, should function as interdependent systems, working towards the betterment of the local community. The systems theory describes how an open system is necessary for effective organisational communication so that information can flow comfortably between parts of the system. Within this system, regular engagement is important in ensuring that subsystems remain in homeostasis. Communication management becomes a symmetrical course of action, which consists of a give-and-take approach (Steyn, 2000:4).

The municipalities in question do not have a symmetrical worldview where they freely exchange information with interest groups (both internally and externally), as described by Steyn (2000:4). Two-way symmetrical communication is therefore seldom part of their engagement with publics (including the media). This study determined through the literature review that the real success of media relations came when it contributed to a two-way symmetrical relationship. It appeared that from a theoretical perspective, a more symmetric and open media relations strategy was necessary for local government to ensure that the outcomes of strong relationships were present in relationships between government communicators and editors.

Even though the findings cannot be generalised, it can be deduced from the literature and the data gathered in this study that some municipalities under the leadership of the ANC were more inclined towards asymmetrical communication models. In the case of this study, it was found that even though the communicators advocated for better media relations, top management and political principals were less concerned with building solid relationships with the press. Organisational culture played a role in facilitating two-way communication when no formal relationship building strategies were implemented. The culture at ANC-run municipalities was found to be top-down and closed off. Information was centralised and the establishment of better media relations was not high on the agenda. Government communicators have a difficult job in running the communication department effectively within this culture. Organisational communication regulations make it difficult for them to build stronger relationships with the media.

The semi-structured interview data showed that very little of the relationship-building outcomes were perceived to be present in the relationships studied. This could indicate that the media relations strategies followed by the municipalities were not effective and that the relationships were not strong.

One of the biggest issues related to relationship-building strategies was the perception that the municipalities did not provide timely access to information. This study's findings aligned with Paradza *et al*. (2010:35), who asserted that information deficiency was often due to a breakdown of communication between political principals and administrative leadership. A lack of communication and ignorance of communication tools (such as community newspapers), as well as the adoption of an asymmetrical communication model in dealing with the local media and communities, could hamper public trust in local government institutions.

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ANNEXURES

DECLARATION BY PARTICIPANTS

Declaration by participant

By signing below, I Ntswaki Makgetha agree to take part in a research study entitled: "Exploring the relationship between public relations practitioners in local government and local newspaper editors at selected newspapers in the North-West Province".

I declare that:

- I have read and understood this information and consent form and it is written in a language with which I am fluent and comfortable.
- I have had a chance to ask questions to both the person obtaining consent, as well as the researcher (if this is a different person), and all my questions have been adequately answered.
- I understand that taking part in this study is **voluntary** and I have not been pressurised to take part.
- I understand that what I contribute (what I report/say/write/draw/produce visually) could be reproduced publically and/or quoted, but without reference to my personal identity.
- I consent to an audio and/or audio-visual recording of the … (study).
- I am aware of the fact that I may request that the researcher does not continue with said recording if I request it.
- I may choose to leave the study at any time and will not be penalised or prejudiced in any way.

Signed at (*place*) Klerksdorp on (*date*) 04/04/2022

Signature of participant **Signature of witness**

- You may contact me again ☑ **Yes** ☐ **No**
- I would like a summary of the findings of this research ☑ **Yes** ☐ **No**
- I would like feedback on my functioning/wellbeing as reflected in the questionnaires I completed ☑ **Yes** ☐ **No**

The best way to reach me is:

Name & Surname: Ntswaki Makgetha
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Email: ndphele@gmail.com
Phone Number:
Cell Phone Number:

In case the above details change, please contact the following person who knows me well and who does not live with me and who will help you to contact me:

Name & Surname: Ntswaki Makgetha

Phone/ Cell Phone Number /Email: 0794650980

5

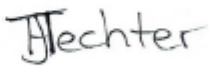
Declaration by participant

By signing below, I _____S. Kotzé___ agree to take part in a research study entitled: "Exploring the relationship between public relations practitioners in local government and local newspaper editors at selected newspapers in the North-West Province".

I declare that:

- I have read and understood this information and consent form and it is written in a language with which I am fluent and comfortable.
- I have had a chance to ask questions to both the person obtaining consent, as well as the researcher (if this is a different person), and all my questions have been adequately answered.
- I understand that taking part in this study is **voluntary** and I have not been pressurised to take part.
- I understand that what I contribute (what I report/say/write/draw/produce visually) could be reproduced publically and/or quoted, but without reference to my personal identity.
- I consent to an audio and/or audio-visual recording of the … (study).
- I am aware of the fact that I may request that the researcher does not continue with said recording if I request it.
- I may choose to leave the study at any time and will not be penalised or prejudiced in any way.

Signed at (*place*) ____Klerksdorp_____ on (*date*) _____4 April__ 2022 _____



_____ _____

Signature of participant **Signature of witness**

- You may contact me again x☐ **Yes** ☐ **No**
- I would like a summary of the findings of this research x☐ **Yes** ☐ **No**
- I would like feedback on my functioning/wellbeing as reflected in the questionnaires I completed x☐ **Yes** ☐ **No**

The best way to reach me is:

Name & Surname: Salome Kotze_____
Postal Address: _____
Email: salome@klerksdorprecord.co.za___
Phone Number: 079 876 7616_____
Cell Phone Number: _____

Declaration

Declaration by participant

By signing below, I D. William Maphosa agree to take part in a research study entitled: "Exploring the relationship between public relations practitioners in local government and local newspaper editors at selected newspapers in the North-West Province".

I declare that:

- I have read and understood this information and consent form and it is written in a language with which I am fluent and comfortable.
- I have had a chance to ask questions to both the person obtaining consent, as well as the researcher (if this is a different person), and all my questions have been adequately answered.
- I understand that taking part in this study is **voluntary** and I have not been pressurised to take part.
- I understand that what I contribute (what I report/say/write/draw/produce visually) could be reproduced publically and/or quoted, but without reference to my personal identity.
- I consent to an audio and/or audio-visual recording of the … (study).
- I am aware of the fact that I may request that the researcher does not continue with said recording if I request it.
- I may choose to leave the study at any time and will not be penalised or prejudiced in any way.

Signed at (*place*) KLERKSDORP on (*date*) 05-04-2022

Signature of participant

Signature of witness

- You may contact me again ☒ Yes ☐ No
- I would like a summary of the findings of this research ☒ Yes ☐ No
- I would like feedback on my functioning/wellbeing as reflected in the questionnaires I completed ☒ Yes ☐ No

The best way to reach me is:

Name & Surname: DILINDILE WILLIAM MAPHOSA
Postal Address: 9 ROTTANBURG STR, FLAMWOODS, KLERKSDOR
Email: willie.maphosa@gmail.com
Phone Number: 081 208 3821
Cell Phone Number: 083 379 9177

In case the above details change, please contact the following person who knows me well and who does not live with me and who will help you to contact me:

Name & Surname: Dimakatso Mzphosa

Phone/ Cell Phone Number /Email: 082 440 1483

Declaration by participant

By signing below, I Dustin Wetdewich agree to take part in a research study entitled: "Exploring the relationship between public relations practitioners in local government and local newspaper editors at selected newspapers in the North-West Province".

I declare that:

- I have read and understood this information and consent form and it is written in a language with which I am fluent and comfortable.
- I have had a chance to ask questions to both the person obtaining consent, as well as the researcher (if this is a different person), and all my questions have been adequately answered.
- I understand that taking part in this study is **voluntary** and I have not been pressurised to take part.
- I understand that what I contribute (what I report/say/write/draw/produce visually) could be reproduced publically and/or quoted, but without reference to my personal identity.
- I consent to an audio and/or audio-visual recording of the … (study).
- I am aware of the fact that I may request that the researcher does not continue with said recording if I request it.
- I may choose to leave the study at any time and will not be penalised or prejudiced in any way.

Signed at (*place*) Potchefstroom on (*date*) 4 April_ 2022 _____

_____ _____

Signature of participant **Signature of witness**

- You may contact me again .x☐ **Yes** ☐ **No**
- I would like a summary of the findings of this research x☐ **Yes** ☐ **No**
- I would like feedback on my functioning/wellbeing as reflected in the questionnaires I completed x☐ **Yes** ☐ **No**

The best way to reach me is:

Name & Surname: _ Dustin Wetdewich
Postal Address: _____
Email: dustin.wetdewich@media24.com_____
Phone Number: _____
Cell Phone Number: 0845378427_____

In case the above details change, please contact the following person who knows me well and who does not live with me and who will help you to contact me: