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Two Faces of the Same Coin: Analyzing PR Professionals' and Journalists' Perspectives on the Ethics of Press Trips

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Abstract

Press trips represent a practice in which organizations, aiming to secure positive publicity, invite journalists on trips funded by companies, institutions, or various clients. Although they are one of the most widely used public relations techniques, they remain among the least researched practices in media relations. They provide journalists with access to information, locations, and sources that would often be impossible to obtain otherwise, but at the same time they raise questions concerning professional autonomy, transparency, and the boundaries between earned and sponsored media. This study explores the ethical dimensions of press trips through the perspectives of both public relations practitioners and journalists/editors in Croatia. The analysis is based on ten semi-structured interviews conducted with five senior public relations practitioners and five experienced journalists and editors who regularly participate in press trips. The findings indicate that neither professional group perceives press trips as inherently unethical. Instead, ethical dilemmas arise through more subtle mechanisms, including gratitude, long-term professional relationships, and the structural realities of contemporary journalism. Participants consistently identified shrinking newsroom resources, rather than direct pressure from public relations practitioners, as the primary factor shaping journalists' dependence on sponsored travel. Based on these findings, the paper proposes practical ethical guidelines for both public relations practitioners and news organizations aimed at strengthening transparency, professional autonomy, and responsible media relations.

Keywords: press trips; media relations; journalistic independence; media transparency; communication ethics; public relations

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1. Introduction

Both journalists and public relations practitioners juggle their loyalty every day. They have duties to their employer or client, their profession, and the ethical codes of their field. They also have responsibilities toward society, and finally, toward themselves and their personal values (Parsons, 2016). Therefore, it is not surprising that they encounter many ethical challenges in their daily practice. In the European public relations context, research by Zerfass et al. (2020) showed that two-thirds of European practitioners face at least one ethical issue in their daily work. Compared to earlier years, this number is going up. Notably, Croatian public relations practitioners face ethical challenges in their daily work to the highest extent compared to their European colleagues (62.2%).

Such challenges do not necessarily imply illegal actions, but rather situations that are morally questionable. Journalists face similar ethical challenges in their everyday work. Operating in an environment characterized by declining public trust, growing political attacks on journalism, and increasing scrutiny of media practices (Egan et al., 2026), they are frequently exposed to different forms of external pressure that may affect their professional autonomy. The significance of these challenges is further reflected in the Council of Europe's report *Journalists under Pressure*, which emphasizes that ensuring an environment in which journalists can work free from fear, intimidation, and unwarranted interference is one of the fundamental responsibilities of democratic societies (Clark & Grech, 2017).

Ethical challenges in public relations vary from classic, traditional ones present since the beginning of the practice to new challenges marked by digital communication and AI tools. Within the category of traditional ethical issues, concerns such as professional competence, objective counsel, and conflicts of interest remain highly relevant today (Parsons, 2016). Ethical codes explicitly oblige practitioners to rigorous self-assessment, requiring them to operate strictly within the boundaries of their expertise and resources (CIPR, n.d.; CPRA, 2023; PRSA, n.d.). In media relations in particular, practitioners constantly face challenges that put their integrity to the test—from hidden commercial influence and protecting source independence to suppressing bad news during organizational crises. They must also navigate the ethical complexities of subsidized media travel, which will be examined in detail in subsequent sections of this paper.

Alongside these enduring issues, the digitalization of the media landscape over the past two decades has institutionalized ongoing ethical concerns. These established digital practices include the profiling and targeting of audiences (Barbu, 2014), motivating organization employees to spread corporate messages through their private social media accounts (Bowen, 2013), using social bots to generate feedback and followers on social media, and social media influencer communication (Hagelstein et al., 2021). Similarly, native advertising, defined as sponsored posts on news websites that look like regular content, has become a persistent ethical concern regarding media transparency and disclosure (Trbušić et al., 2024; Zerfass et al., 2020). More recently, these ongoing digital challenges have been compounded by newly emerging technologies, most notably the use of generative artificial intelligence tools (Bowen, 2024) for social media management (Huang & Zhou, 2025) and internal communication (Yue et al., 2024).

Many of these ethical dilemmas are further intensified by the structural transformation of the contemporary news industry. As Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch (2019, p. 11) argue, "political pressures buffeting the institution of journalism have been accompanied by economic pressures that have only intensified over the past decade", substantially affecting journalists' working conditions. At the same time, changing newsroom routines and increasing pressure to innovate have transformed the organizational context of journalism (Westlund & Ekström, 2019). Combined with intense competition for audience attention and the need to "chase the clicks" (Herzog, 2022), these developments have further strengthened commercial pressures on news organizations. They also coincide with declining audience interest in news and persistently high levels of news avoidance (Egan et al., 2026). In such circumstances, the relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners becomes increasingly important, as both professions are required to balance professional independence with the practical realities of everyday media production. One of the most illustrative examples of this relationship is the practice of press trips, where the interests of journalists, media organizations, and public relations practitioners directly intersect.

The objective of this paper is to examine and confront the perspectives of public relations practitioners and journalists/editors regarding press trips. The primary research focus is on the ethical dilemma potentially caused by press trips (RQ1), since this is a

practice in which organizations, aiming to secure positive publicity, invite journalists on trips funded by companies, institutions, or various clients. Accordingly, the paper explores how these potential dilemmas affect their perception of professional responsibility and independence in their work (RQ1a). Furthermore, the analysis seeks to determine how PR professionals in Croatia approach the organization of press trips and the building of relationships with journalists, and what expectations they have of journalists in this process (RQ2). Finally, the paper addresses the future of the financial and organizational sustainability of press trips (RQ3).

Therefore, this study contributes to literature in three ways. First, theoretically, it addresses a persistent scholarly gap by shifting the analytical focus away from macro-level public relations abstractions toward the specific ethical mechanics of a concrete public relations technique. Second, methodologically, the study rejects a one-dimensional approach; by examining the perspectives of both the public relations practitioners who organize these trips and the journalists who attend them, it provides a complete look at the mutual pressures involved in subsidized media travel. Finally, practically, the study provides clear ethical and disclosure recommendations for both public relations practitioners and journalists involved in press trips.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Public Relations Tactics and the Conceptual Context of Press Trips

Public relations techniques and tools remain an underresearched topic among scholars within the field. Although recognized as a crucial aspect of media relations, specific communication tactics are rarely examined as dominant standalone literature but are usually treated as mere components of larger strategic agendas. In this regard, contemporary scholarship indicates that research in this area heavily focuses on macro-level concepts and overarching categories, such as general public relations strategies, state-media relations, or agenda-setting, rather than on the ethical mechanics of daily tactical execution (Arqoub & Dwikat, 2023; Tsetsura, 2021). Consequently, there is a distinct lack of direct scholarly focus on how individual tactics operate within interactive, co-dependent processes that rely on mutual trust and transparency.

This theoretical gap is particularly visible at the intersection of public relations and tourism, a sector that has historically received very limited attention. Tourism is frequently marginalized in academic public relations literature because it is traditionally viewed as a social phenomenon related only to individual leisure and "soft news" (L'Etang et al., 2007; Tilson & Stacks, 1997). A critical perspective uncovers that when media relations tactics within this field are examined, they are almost exclusively folded into broader, non-marketing contexts such as political public relations, international diplomacy, risk society, or crisis communication (Gonzales-Herrero & Pratt, 1998; L'Etang et al., 2007).

This specific dynamic of theoretical fragmentation is even more evident in the case of press trips. The existing research consists almost entirely of isolated, local case studies or practical, step-by-step handbooks that consistently fail to address underlying ethical concerns (Blake, 2019; L'Etang et al., 2007; Shure, 1994; Wilcox et al., 2015). While press trips are recognized as a legitimate technique, providing tours or favors in exchange for news coverage directly compromises the traditional function of mass media and undermines the role of journalists as independent gatekeepers (Craig, 2007; Tsetsura & Kruckeberg, 2017). When these tactical influences lack disclosure, the practice shifts toward media opacity and non-transparency, leaving a wide conceptual space to examine how press trips impact the overall integrity of media relations.

2.2. Operational Typologies and Transparency Boundaries of Press Trips

To analyze the conceptual and ethical boundaries of this practice, it is first necessary to delineate its operational typologies. Wilcox et al. (2015, pp. 415–416) distinguish three primary types of media tours: first, the junket, where editors and reporters are invited to "inspect an organization's manufacturing facilities" or participate in inaugural flights; second, the familiarization trip (fam trip) offered to travel writers by the tourism industry, a format alternatively conceptualized as place-based public relations or "PR for places" (Blake, 2019); and third, high-level tours where corporate executives "travel to key cities to talk with selected editors". Since the empirical phase of this study does not differentiate between these structural sub-types or nuance their operational differences, the umbrella term "press trips" will be utilized uniformly throughout the research.

As previously noted, public relations practitioners encounter numerous ethical challenges in their daily operations. While certain ethical pitfalls are common across all aspects of the discipline, others are highly specific to particular public relations specialisms. These isolated challenges span across various sectors, including the manipulative risks of political public relations, internal communication conflicts, and the integrity of corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. However, they are uniquely pronounced in general media relations, and more specifically, in fashion and travel public relations, a specialized domain where press trips fundamentally operate (Morris & Goldsworthy, 2021).

While ethical media relations should ideally rest upon four foundational pillars, namely honesty and accuracy, judiciousness, responsiveness, and respect (Parsons, 2016), the daily practice of the profession continuously encounters more overt structural challenges. Specifically, Wilcox et al. (2015) identify three critical areas where these ethical pillars are most frequently tested: (1) providing gifts to journalists, (2) the transactional linkage between purchasing advertising and securing editorial news coverage, and (3) systemic transparency and disclosure issues. All three identified challenges directly correspond to the organization and execution of press trips. First, it raises the fundamental question of how the comprehensive coverage of travel and accommodation expenses by the hosting organization impacts a journalist's objectivity. Second, it questions whether such financial hospitality implicitly guarantees positive publicity. Finally, from a strategic media perspective, it challenges whether the resulting content genuinely qualifies as earned media or if it shifts toward paid media within the PESO framework (Luttrell, 2014), thereby legally and ethically requiring formal disclosure.

To mitigate these ambiguities, global professional associations have established strict regulatory frameworks. The IPRA Charter for Media Transparency explicitly mandates that editorial content must appear solely because of journalistic judgment, and not due to any "payment in cash or in kind, or barter" (IPRA, n.d.). While IPRA permits the "sampling" of services to help journalists form an objective opinion, it requires that any sponsored travel or promotion be clearly identified as advertising. Similarly, the PRSA Code of Ethics demands that practitioners preserve the free flow of unprejudiced information by ensuring that gifts remain "nominal, legal, and infrequent" (PRSA, n.d.). Furthermore, the CIPR Code of Conduct reinforces these boundaries by prohibiting any inducements, gifts, or "excessive entertainment", while strictly banning the promotion of a cause under the guise of a disinterested party. In the context of Croatian public relations practice, CPRA mandates that practitioners must support a clear distinction between editorial and promotional content. This includes the explicit labeling of public relations materials that mimic media formats to prevent covert advertising across all communication channels (CPRA, 2023). The previous 2013 code was even more rigorous and definitive; under its "zero tolerance for corruption" principle, it obligated members to ensure that the value of gifts, rewards, donations, hospitality, and other expenditures did not exceed 500 HRK (approximately €70),

matching the statutory limit defined by Article 11 of the national Act on the Prevention of Conflicts of Interest (CPRA, 2013).

However, there is a clear gap between these ethical codes and real-world practice. Local public relations practitioners openly describe subsidized travel as a powerful tool to get valuable media space that regular advertising cannot buy (e.g., Penić, 2015). This mindset shows in everyday media content, where highly positive articles, such as reports from factory tours and testing laboratories (e.g., Filipović, 2023; Krstić, 2022; Tašler, 2022), regularly hide who paid for the trip.

2.3. Journalistic Autonomy and Public Relations Influence

The ethical concerns surrounding press trips extend beyond questions of transparency and disclosure. They also raise broader questions about the relationship between journalism and public relations, particularly regarding the extent to which financial support and privileged access may influence journalistic autonomy. Unlike many other public relations techniques, they simultaneously provide journalists with privileged access to information, events, and sources while involving the coverage of travel and accommodation expenses by organizations seeking media visibility. This dual nature has positioned press trips among the most ethically debated practices in media relations. Within travel journalism, Hanusch (2010) identifies the relationship between complimentary travel, advertising, and the use of public relations material as one of the central ethical dimensions of the profession, highlighting the constant need to balance access to valuable information with professional independence.

However, the ethical dilemmas surrounding press trips cannot be understood separately from the broader relationship between journalism and public relations. Although the two professions pursue different normative objectives, they have long coexisted and undergone what Schönhagen and Meißner (2016) describe as a process of co-evolution. Public relations practitioners rely on journalists to communicate organizational messages to wider audiences, while journalists depend on institutional sources for access to information, expertise, events, and interviews that would often be difficult to obtain independently. Consequently, journalism and public relations have developed a relationship of continuous interaction, shaping each other's professional routines and expectations over time.

This interdependence has become even more pronounced amid the economic and organizational transformation of contemporary journalism. As Macnamara (2019) notes, the relationship between journalism and public relations is considerably more complex than the traditional "love-hate relationship" often portrayed in professional discourse. Shrinking newsroom resources, increasing workloads, accelerated news production, and financial constraints have strengthened journalists' reliance on institutional information subsidies and professional communication networks (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2019; Westlund & Ekström, 2019). At the same time, maintaining editorial independence remains one of the fundamental principles of journalism. Thus, the central ethical question is where the boundaries of that cooperation lie and under what circumstances it may begin to compromise journalistic autonomy.

Although the relationship between journalism and public relations has received considerable scholarly attention, existing research over the past decades has largely focused on broader issues such as source relationships, agenda-building, information subsidies, and media influence (Macnamara, 2019; Sallot & Johnson, 2006). Considerably less attention has been devoted to individual communication tactics through which these relationships are enacted in everyday professional practice. Press trips represent one of the clearest examples of such interactions, yet research examining their ethical implications from the perspectives of both journalists and public relations practitioners remains scarce. This gap

provides the rationale for the present study, which explores how both professional groups negotiate questions of autonomy, professional responsibility, and ethical boundaries within the specific context of press trips.

3. Materials and Methods

For the purpose of a qualitative analysis of the practices and perspectives of public relations practitioners and journalists/editors regarding press trips, the study relies on semi-structured interviews. The research is based on a purposive sample. Specifically, it comprises five public relations practitioners (PR1-PR5) aged 35 to 50, holding positions as executive directors or key account managers in Croatian public relations and public affairs agencies. All participants possess extensive experience in the strategic planning, organization, and execution of press trips, alongside more than 10 years of professional experience in the field.

The second group consisted of five journalists (J1–J5) who also hold editorial positions in Croatian news organizations. Participants were between 35 and 60 years of age, and all had more than ten years of professional experience in journalism. All were affiliated with established Croatian legacy print media organizations that also operate substantial online news platforms. Their areas of journalistic work included technology, automotive journalism, travel and lifestyle, foreign affairs, and general news and current affairs, thus representing several fields in which press trips remain a recurring professional practice. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling based on their regular participation in press trips, defined for the purposes of this study as attending such trips multiple times per year.

The interviews were conducted in person and subsequently transcribed using HappyScribe software (version 1.0.18). Once the participants' responses were gathered and analyzed, the authors adopted an inductive approach to coding. Under this approach, codes and categories emerged directly from the empirical data and the participants' authentic statements, rather than from predetermined theoretical frameworks. Finally, these codes and categories were synthesized into five key thematic areas that directly address established research questions (Figure 1).

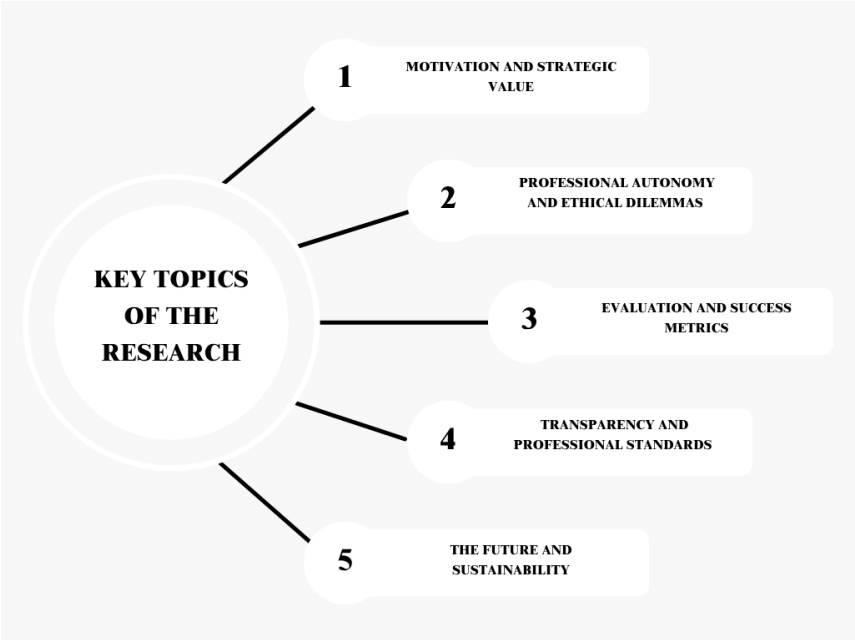


Figure 1. Five Key Research Topics regarding Press Trips. Source: Authors.

4. Results

4.1. Motivation and Strategic Value of Press Trips

An overview of how the concept and value of press trips are understood is summarized in Table 1. Public relations practitioners do not perceive press trips as an isolated, ad hoc tactic aimed solely at securing publicity, but rather as a long-term investment in building relationships and trust. The primary strategic objectives are education, generating an immediate and authentic experience of a product or service, and the so-called humanization of the company through direct, informal contact between journalists, corporate management, and decision-makers. Furthermore, public relations practitioners are fully aware that contemporary newsrooms face significant human and financial resource constraints. In this context, they view press trips as a win-win situation where the client invests funds to enable the journalist to conduct fieldwork and gain a deeper insight into a story. Without this support, limited resources would otherwise prevent journalists from ever experiencing or covering the topic beyond a dry press release.

Table 1. Perceptions of the motivation and strategic value of press trips: PR practitioners vs. journalists.

Theme	Example Quote (PR Perspective)	Example Quote (Journalist Perspective)
Motivation and strategic value	"The point of a press trip is to gather journalists in one place and offer them a type of content that cannot be delivered in any other way: bringing them directly to the location." (PR4)	"The biggest advantage is that you're there where things are happening. You get access to information, new products, and people from the industry before almost anyone else." (J5)
	"It creates a solid foundation for building longer-term relationships because brands are quite aware of this and know they need to nurture it." (PR5)	"What matters most is the opportunity to meet people you normally wouldn't have access to. That's where the real value of a press trip lies." (J2)
	"Today, newsrooms have extremely few resources and very few people . . . What you actually manage to do is show something that a journalist would otherwise never see." (PR1)	"Newsrooms simply don't have the money to pay for these trips. In the end, it's a choice between being there or not being there at all." (J1)

Journalists and editors largely shared this perspective, although they emphasized the practical rather than strategic value of press trips. Rather than viewing them primarily as a relationship-building tool, they described them as an opportunity to access information, people, products, and locations that would otherwise remain inaccessible due to financial and organizational constraints within contemporary newsrooms. Participants also highlighted that press trips often generate considerably more editorial value than the event itself, providing opportunities to develop additional stories, establish professional contacts, and produce more diverse and higher-quality content. Several respondents stressed that such trips enable journalists to witness developments firsthand, thereby improving both the depth and quality of their reporting. Finally, some participants emphasized that press trips should not be viewed solely through the relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners. They also reflect broader organizational relationships between media companies and their commercial partners, where maintaining professional cooperation may have implications for future advertising partnerships and other forms of collaboration.

4.2. Journalistic Autonomy and Ethical Dilemmas in the Organization of Press Trips

Public relations practitioners are fully aligned in their view that press trips do not pose an inherent ethical dilemma, as any form of positive publicity or pre-written content

cannot and should not be explicitly mandated. However, a subtle awareness of the psychological mechanism triggered by these trips is evident in their responses: public relations practitioners openly admit that it is significantly harder for a journalist to write a highly negative or critical piece about an individual they have met in an informal setting and with whom they have developed a personal connection. Interestingly, the primary challenge for public relations practitioners does not stem from their relationship with journalists, but rather from their relationship with the clients who fund the press trips and often hold unrealistic expectations. Misunderstandings usually arise when clients fail to distinguish between public relations tools and paid advertising space, thereby assuming *a priori* that a press trip will automatically result in extensive and positive publicity.

Journalists and editors acknowledged that press trips may give rise to ethical dilemmas, although they generally viewed them as manageable rather than inherently compromising journalistic autonomy. Several participants emphasized that the ideal solution would be for news organizations to finance such trips independently. However, as previously noted, contemporary newsrooms rarely possess the financial or human resources to finance such trips independently, making participation in sponsored press trips an unavoidable aspect of professional practice. Under such circumstances, preserving editorial independence largely depends on the journalist's own professional integrity and ability to distinguish between access provided by a source and the obligation to report objectively. At the same time, none of the respondents reported direct pressure from public relations practitioners regarding the content, tone, or framing of their reporting. Instead, the ethical dilemma was described as considerably more subtle. Some participants openly admitted that accepting hospitality may create a sense of gratitude, making it psychologically more difficult to write a highly critical article. Others pointed to indirect commercial pressures, arguing that repeatedly declining invitations or failing to provide coverage may negatively affect long-term relationships with organizers and, consequently, reduce future advertising opportunities or access to exclusive content. Participants also noted the absence of formal newsroom guidelines governing participation in press trips, suggesting that clearer institutional standards could reduce the ethical burden currently placed on individual journalists (see Table 2).

Table 2. Comparative overview of perceptions regarding journalistic autonomy and ethical dilemmas in press trip organization.

Theme	Example Quote (PR Perspective)	Example Quote (Journalist Perspective)
Professional autonomy of journalists and ethical dilemmas in organizing press trips	"It is one thing to write about an unknown name and claim they are doing something wrong, but when you meet someone personally, you will think twice about the tone of that text." (PR1)	"The ideal situation would be for news organizations to pay for these trips themselves. But newsrooms haven't been in that position for a long time. (...) The ethical dilemma is unavoidable because someone has paid for the trip. The real question is whether the journalist can remain independent." (J4)
	"My task is not to correct the journalist or, God forbid, create the newspaper content myself. (...) I always explain this to the client right at the start and say, 'Look, this is a potential risk'—you cannot guarantee or condition what the journalist will write." (PR5)	"It's all about how the journalist approaches it. We are not their employees. They paid for the trip, not for the content. In twenty-five years, no one has ever called me asking why I wrote something negative." (J2)

Table 2. *Cont.*

Theme	Example Quote (PR Perspective)	Example Quote (Journalist Perspective)
	"... the client needs to understand that the final text is ultimately the journalist's choice." (PR3)	"Ethical dilemmas would exist if they asked us to write in a certain way or hide something, but I have never experienced that." (J1)

4.3. Evaluation and Success Metrics of Press Trips

Public relations practitioners evaluate the success of press trips using a combination of quantitative and qualitative metrics. They deliver measurable KPIs to their clients, such as the total number of clippings, reach, Advertising Value Equivalency (AVE), audience engagement, and sentiment. On the other hand, two-way feedback is considered an exceptionally important metric. A press trip is deemed successful when the client is satisfied with the depth of inquiries and media interest, but equally when journalists return satisfied, reporting that the trip was constructive, pleasant, and useful for their long-term work.

Journalists and editors similarly evaluated the success of press trips primarily through their editorial value rather than the trip itself. Participants consistently argued that a successful press trip is one that results in original, high-quality journalistic content that could not have been produced otherwise. Beyond the expected coverage of the event or product itself, respondents particularly valued opportunities to develop additional stories, establish long-term professional contacts, gain first-hand experience, and acquire a deeper understanding of the topic. Several participants also emphasized the importance of well-balanced organization, noting that successful press trips should provide sufficient time not only for the official program but also for independent reporting and conversations with relevant sources. Conversely, tightly scheduled itineraries focused exclusively on promotional activities were perceived as significantly less valuable from a journalistic perspective. Interestingly, participants consistently rejected the perception of press trips as a form of leisure travel, emphasizing that the destination itself is of secondary importance. Instead, they described such trips as intensive work assignments, where the value lies not in the location but in the access to information, sources, and stories that cannot be obtained remotely (see Table 3).

Table 3. Comparative overview of PR practitioners' and journalists' perspectives on evaluation and success metrics.

Theme	Example Quote (PR Perspective)	Example Quote (Journalist Perspective)
Evaluation and success metrics of press trips	"I evaluate the success of a press trip based on the client's feedback—how satisfied they were with the journalists' interest and inquiries . . . But I also evaluate it based on the journalists' feedback because it is very important to me that they are satisfied, that it was pleasant, professional, constructive, and that they returned happy." (PR2)	"The real value of these trips is seeing things first-hand. That's the best way to truly understand a story, and at the same time you build long-term professional contacts." (J4)
	"A press trip shouldn't just be an end in itself (...) If you have nothing substantial to offer to a journalist . . . it really leads nowhere." (PR4)	"A successful press trip is one where you come back not only with the planned story, but also with additional stories that you otherwise wouldn't have had and that nobody else has." (J3)

4.4. Communication Transparency

Regarding transparency and content labeling, a uniform set of written rules does not exist within the public relations industry. Instead, boundaries are often determined individually or through internal agency guidelines that ensure clear, direct, and timely communication about the press trip. Public relations practitioners encounter varying standards across different media outlets: some note that certain newsrooms enforce strict internal policies where journalists can only participate if the editorial board covers the travel and accommodation costs itself—a rule that agencies respect and accept without exception. Interestingly, a portion of practitioners openly supports the idea of transparently and ethically disclosing who funded the trip within the finalized journalistic pieces, emphasizing that they have no issues with such professional standards and that it would be entirely fair to the readers.

Journalists and editors expressed considerably more diverse views on transparency than public relations practitioners. While some participants argued that readers should be informed when a story results from a sponsored press trip, considering such disclosure an important element of transparency, others questioned its practical value, arguing that it provides little meaningful information to audiences. Regardless of their position on disclosure, participants consistently emphasized that transparency alone cannot guarantee journalistic independence, which ultimately depends on the way the reporting is conducted rather than on whether the trip was financed by the organizer. Interestingly, similar to the findings regarding ethical dilemmas, participants reported the absence of common newsroom standards governing transparency and disclosure. As a result, decisions are made on an individual basis, producing inconsistent practices and, in some cases, uncertainty about what should be considered the most appropriate professional approach (see Table 4).

Table 4. Comparative overview of PR practitioners' and journalists' perspectives on transparency and professional standards.

Theme	Example Quote (PR Perspective)	Example Quote (Journalist Perspective)
Transparency and professional standards	"Perhaps it would be fair if they explicitly stated within the text that they were at a certain location or that a specific company took them there . . . Personally, I would have absolutely no problem with that. I think it would be ethical." (PR5)	"Maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea if readers knew. They might then read the story a bit differently and keep a certain distance." (J5)
	"Transparency is defined by clear, direct, and timely communication with all parties involved. I have internal rules that I defined and strictly follow when planning and executing press trips." (PR2)	"I don't think it means much to the reader. We always make it clear in the story where we are and why we're there, so readers already know we attended the event. Saying who paid for the trip or the accommodation wouldn't really add anything." (J3) "I'm not sure readers would even understand what a press trip is. They'd probably just think it's a promotional article." (J2)

4.5. The Future of Press Trips

The respondents confirm that traditional press trips are gradually becoming less frequent and more challenging to organize; however, the primary cause is not ethical in nature but rather rooted in the structural crisis of the media market. Due to the drastic reduction in the number of journalists, the disappearance of specialized beat reporters, and the rise of

general assignment reporting within newsrooms, agencies find it exceptionally difficult to assemble specialized journalists who can afford to be away from their workplace for several days. Concurrently, there is a recognized trend of partially shifting budgets toward influencers and content creators who communicate sponsorships and travel more directly, rapidly, and straightforwardly. Despite these challenges, public relations practitioners believe that the press trip format will not become obsolete, particularly in industries such as tourism, technology, fashion, and the automotive sector.

Journalists and editors shared a similarly cautious outlook regarding the future of press trips. Most participants observed that such trips have become less frequent over the past decade, primarily due to shrinking newsroom resources, reduced staffing levels, and the increasing difficulty of leaving everyday editorial work for several days. Several respondents also pointed to a gradual shift in communication strategies, with companies increasingly prioritizing influencers and social media creators over traditional journalists. Nevertheless, participants did not perceive press trips as an outdated communication practice. On the contrary, they argued that certain fields, particularly technology, automotive journalism, tourism, and travel reporting, continue to rely on first-hand experience and direct access that cannot be fully replaced by virtual communication or press releases (see Table 5).

Table 5. Comparative overview of PR practitioners' and journalists' perspectives on the future and sustainability of press trips.

Theme	Example Quote (PR Perspective)	Example Quote (Journalist Perspective)
The future and sustainability	"In the past, you had highly specialized journalists for specific industries . . . Now everyone does a bit of everything. This media pool is shrinking, and that is currently a bigger challenge for press trips than their actual effectiveness." (PR3, PR4)	"I don't think newsrooms are abandoning press trips because of ethics. It's because there are fewer journalists, and it's becoming increasingly difficult to spare someone for two days. That's the real reason." (J4)
	"Too much is happening online now, but for journalists, I still believe . . . face-to-face contact remains crucial. Our industry is quite specific and heavily connected to emotion as such . . . and to truly convey a story, you need to experience what lies beneath it." (PR3)	"I think there will be fewer and fewer press trips for legacy media. From what I hear from PR professionals, social media have become the priority, and brands are increasingly choosing influencers, who work in a completely different way." (J1)

5. Ethical Recommendations for the Organization and Execution of Press Trips

5.1. Guidelines for Public Relations Practitioners

Above all, it is crucial to clearly communicate the expectations of press trips to two key stakeholders: journalists and corporate superiors or clients. Communication with journalists must be entirely free from any pre-conditioned positive press coverage prior to the trip, narrative control during the event, or subsequent pressure regarding the publication of the story. While the empirical results of this study indicate that public relations practitioners generally respect journalistic autonomy, there is a prevailing impression that this respect remains implicit—treated merely as an assumed byproduct of established professional practice. However, within professional ethics, nothing should be left to assumption; therefore, it is highly advisable to explicitly verbalize and transparently present these boundaries. The same standard applies to communication with corporate superiors or clients who fund the press trip, as they frequently struggle to distinguish between paid and earned media. Practitioners must actively educate their clients on the true strategic purpose of press trips,

framing them as a long-term investment in building relationships and trust, rather than an ad hoc tactic aimed at short-term visibility.

Secondly, public relations practitioners should move away from the practice of excessive hospitality. Although practitioners might not always have the final say because the client controls the budget, they still have a responsibility to warn clients that over-hospitality is counterproductive. While lavish hosting, where companies pay for all travel, luxury hotels, and extra perks, presents a bigger ethical challenge for journalists, this does not clear public relations practitioners of responsibility. Instead of organizing overly luxurious trips, practitioners should focus the itinerary on meaningful fieldwork and direct access to information. By setting these clear professional boundaries, public relations practitioners can keep the focus on the actual story and reduce the psychological mechanism of obligation that luxury hosting naturally creates.

Finally, the respondents' answers highlighted the use of the AVE metric to evaluate the success of press trips. Using AVE to measure the effectiveness of press trips, or any other public relations campaign, is inappropriate. In fact, the International Association for the Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC) has repeatedly emphasized in its Barcelona Principles that AVE is not, and cannot be, a metric for communication (Noble, 2017; Watson, 2013). This practice is also condemned by professional associations such as the CIPR (2017), whose members found to be using AVEs thereafter may be liable to disciplinary action. Therefore, as recommended by the Barcelona Principles (AMEC, 2025), public relations practitioners should evaluate communication based on outcome and impact, rather than exclusively focusing on outputs. While outputs should not be completely dismissed, they must never be presented as the sole and exclusive metric for assessing communication effectiveness.

5.2. Guidelines for Journalists and Newsrooms

First, news organizations should develop clearer internal policies regarding participation in press trips. The findings indicate that decisions about accepting invitations, disclosure practices, and the management of potential ethical dilemmas are currently left largely to individual journalists and editors. While professional autonomy remains essential, the absence of common newsroom standards places the ethical burden almost entirely on individuals. Establishing transparent editorial guidelines would reduce uncertainty, promote consistency across newsrooms, and provide journalists with institutional support when making decisions about participation in sponsored travel.

Second, news organizations should encourage greater transparency regarding the funding of press trips. Although the findings reveal no consensus among journalists on whether sponsored travel should always be disclosed, the discussion itself demonstrates the need for clearer editorial policies. Rather than prescribing a single disclosure model, news organizations should define their own transparent and consistent standards, enabling audiences to better understand the context in which journalistic content is produced while preserving editorial independence.

Third, journalists should establish clear professional expectations before accepting participation in a press trip. Whenever possible, the purpose of the trip, editorial independence, and the absence of any obligation regarding the scope, tone, or publication of coverage should be explicitly understood in advance by both journalists and public relations practitioners. Such transparency helps distinguish professional access from editorial obligation and may reduce the subtle psychological pressures associated with sponsored travel, including feelings of gratitude or expectations of future reciprocity.

Finally, news organizations should develop internal mechanisms that enable journalists to participate in press trips without creating additional professional pressure. The

findings suggest that the greatest challenge is not the ethical nature of press trips themselves, but the shrinking capacity of newsrooms, where journalists often feel reluctant to leave their daily responsibilities for several days. Rather than treating each invitation as an exceptional case requiring individual negotiation, news organizations could establish clearer planning procedures that allocate a realistic amount of time for field reporting each year. Such organizational support would help preserve first-hand reporting while reducing the personal burden currently placed on individual journalists.

6. Conclusions

This study examined one of the most common yet least researched public relations techniques by exploring how public relations practitioners and journalists perceive the ethical implications of press trips. While previous scholarship has predominantly focused on the broader relationship between journalism and public relations, this study shifted the analytical focus to a specific communication practice through which these professional relationships are enacted in everyday work. By incorporating the perspectives of both public relations practitioners and journalists, the research provides a more comprehensive understanding of the opportunities, tensions, and ethical boundaries associated with press trips.

The findings suggest that press trips are not perceived as inherently unethical by either professional group. Instead, both practitioners and journalists recognize their considerable professional value, particularly in providing access to information, locations, sources, and experiences that would otherwise be difficult or impossible to obtain. At the same time, the study demonstrates that ethical dilemmas do exist, although they rarely arise through explicit pressure or direct attempts to influence journalistic content. Rather, they emerge through more subtle mechanisms, including feelings of gratitude, long-term professional relationships, and the structural realities of contemporary journalism.

Perhaps the most important finding is that the greatest challenge surrounding press trips is no longer primarily ethical but structural. Shrinking newsroom resources, declining numbers of specialised journalists, and increasing financial constraints have made sponsored travel an increasingly common way of enabling field reporting. In many cases, the question is no longer whether journalists should participate in press trips, but whether they would be able to report from the field without them. At the same time, one of the study's most notable findings is the absence of clear newsroom policies governing participation in press trips, disclosure practices, or the management of potential ethical dilemmas. The practical guidelines proposed in this paper therefore seek to address this gap by offering a framework that may support more consistent editorial decision-making and reduce the ethical burden currently placed on individual journalists.

Beyond its practical utility, this study advances public relations and media relations theory. Historically, scholarship on the relationship between journalism and public relations has largely focused on macro-level concepts, such as source dynamics, agenda-building, information subsidies, and media influence (Macnamara, 2019; Sallot & Johnson, 2006). This study bridges the gap between broad PR theories and everyday tactics. Specifically, it shows that ethical challenges arise not from direct pressure, but through subtle dynamics like personal gratitude, reciprocity, and professional closeness. Furthermore, it advances the PESO framework (Luttrell, 2014) by highlighting how sponsored travel occupies an ambiguous, hybrid space between earned and paid media, demanding clearer parameters for disclosure and transparency.

This study is not without limitations. The empirical findings are based on a qualitative sample of ten senior practitioners (five PR professionals and five journalists/editors) operating within the specific context of the Croatian media landscape. Croatia represents a

relatively small, concentrated, and economically constrained media market where practitioners report higher exposure to daily ethical dilemmas than the European average (Zerfass et al., 2020). Consequently, the high interdependence and close professional ties observed in this sample may reflect these specific structural conditions. While this qualitative design prioritized analytical depth and contextual richness over statistical generalizability, future research should expand upon these insights. For instance, scholars could expand the analysis through comparative international studies, quantitative surveys, or audience-based research examining how readers perceive transparency and disclosure related to sponsored journalistic travel.

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