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Why Differentiation between PR and Journalism is Necessary

Selected Results from new Empirical Studies

A great deal has been written in recent years about the relationship between journalism and public relations. Three approaches have become particularly prominent in the German speaking world: Barbara Baerns' "determination theory" and Günther Bentele's "intereffication model" from the perspective of PR theory (Baerns 1985; Bentele, Liebert and Seeling 1997), as well as Stephan Russ-Mohl's (2004: 52) analysis of the interplay between PR and journalism in the "attention economy" within the sphere of journalism.

However, little has been published on the relationship between the training of journalists and of PR specialists. This is surprising since journalists have always been an important reference group for those dealing with public relations. PR experts in turn are becoming increasingly important contact persons for what some refer to as the "media horde." This article will take a look at older studies as well as current ones that address the training of PR specialists and journalists in Germany. We consider the status quo, normative goals and prospects for the future.

1. The Status Quo: Current Qualifications for PR and Journalistic Work

Let us turn first to training for PR and journalism as it exists today. In researching this area, we encounter a number of difficulties relating to methodology and the availability of data.

One major problem is to define and gain access to the target population. Just as it is difficult to determine precisely which individuals should be classified as PR professionals or journalists, it is a challenging task to contact those identified as such for the purpose of a random-sample survey¹. Many authors have used membership or address lists to identify a specific

¹ For a discussion of how to define PR experts, see Röttger 2004; for methodological information on survey procedures, see Röttger 2000: 187–203 and Wienand 2003: 223–231; for related information in the field of journalism, see Weischenberg et al. 2006: 346–347 and Russ-Mohl 2003: 21–27)

respondent population, for example within the public relations profession (Dees and Döbler 1997: 142); nonetheless, the resulting portrayal of the public-relations sector in Germany is not entirely reliable. For journalism, Weischenberg, Malik and Scholl (2006: 346–349) employed a much more precise procedure, drawing on a sophisticated sample of specific journalistic media. There was also considerable discussion of other methods, such as, for example that used by Köcher (1985).

Since our purpose here is to analyze trends, we shall include as many relevant data as possible, setting aside the methodological problems and detailed commentary on technical survey issues. The available data vary widely, particularly in the realm of PR research. Since 1973, more than 50 studies have dealt with the public relations profession, but only 10 of them have looked more generally at the basic and further training of PR professionals or at what the professionals themselves think should be taught (Sievert, Thomann and Westermann 2006: footnote 3). These ten studies, whose samples make them roughly comparable, are listed in Table 1. The results of a study in which the author was involved are also included.

Despite some notable fluctuations, a systematic comparison shows a trend toward a sizeable increase in the number of university graduates involved in PR work since the 1970s. While the first study available shows university graduates making up slightly more than 60 % of the total, four studies from the 1990s find the corresponding percentage to be about 80 %, with a similar increase during the following years. The trend toward more university graduates in public relations work seems to have continued in German-speaking countries in the last few years (Merten 1997: 44; Wienand 2003: 339).²

But what exactly did these respondents choose to study? The results of the ten selected studies for the field of economics and business administration as compared with media studies and communications differ substantially. This is related to differences in the samples - which, in the author's opinion, are not really representative - but also to differences in the studies' definitions of the various subject areas and in the interview methods they used. In six out of the

² According to an online survey this is true internationally as well. In the study that focused primarily on the original EU countries, 26% of respondents felt that the importance of academic qualifications for PR professionals would increase dramatically in the future; another 48% predicted a "moderate" increase in their importance (Klewes and Westermann 2004, figure on p. 21).

eight cases that produced significant results, the numbers are considerably higher for economics than for communications. However, the low figures for media studies recently reported by Fröhlich, Peters and Simmelbauer (2005: 88) may reflect the wide variety of possible answers in that particular study. Similar subject areas, such as public relations or journalism, were excluded in the interest of the table's uniformity and because most of the surveys allowed for multiple responses.

By comparison, what kind of academic training do journalists get to prepare for their profession? Here, too, for a long time research was limited to a few small-scale studies, with the "AfK" (1977) providing the best overview. Thereafter two pairs of studies deserve particular attention; table 2 provides an overview. The methodological restrictions mentioned above apply here as well.

The overall share of university graduates in journalism, as in PR, rises during the entire period in question - from 67 to 84% despite the fact that one of the studies shows a brief dip. Apparently journalism has also become a more academically-oriented occupation. However, while this is not shown in the table, nearly all of the studies show - in contrast to PR - a high percentage of journalists who have not finished their degrees (Schneider, Schönbach and Stürzebecher 1993: 14; Weischenberg, Malik and Scholl 2006: 353).

The most important area of study is communications, which has accounted for some 20 percent of all academic studies since the 1990s; the percentage was substantially lower only during the mid-1980s. The latter result may be, once again, due to the already criticized survey methods, but it also reflects the fact that these courses of study were not introduced on a large scale until later on. The same holds true for specific journalism studies, which were not even included in the first study cited here; their share, just 3% in the second study, rose to more than 20% in the third. However, in the twelve years from 1993 to 2005, journalism's share dropped by one-third, according to the two studies that were carried out with the participation of Weischenberg and Scholl. This, along with the increased representation of university graduates, can clearly be interpreted as indirect evidence that subject-specific training in such fields as political science, economics or business administration and the natural sciences is again gaining importance in the field of journalism.

However, if we combine the figures for “journalism”, which plays only a subordinate role in public relations training (Fröhlich, Peters and Simmelbauer 2005: 88; see also Bentele, Großkurth and Seidenglanz 2005: 29–30), with those for “media studies/communications,” an important difference becomes apparent. During the last decade, subjects related to communications in the broadest sense have accounted for a share in journalism studies that is nearly twice as large as in public relations; survey results show that between 30 and nearly 40% of journalists have studied these subjects.³ There are similarly large differences when it comes to practical, non-academic training pathways, which are not included in our two tables because the tables deal only with academic training. 62% of journalists have completed one or two years of on-the-job training called “Volontariat” (a special kind of internship) in journalism, as have 31% of PR specialists. Moreover, among public relations professionals some 15% have completed a PR-specific “Volontariat” (Weischenberg, Malik and Scholl 2006: 353; Bentele, Großkurth and Seidenglanz 2005: 33).

2. Normative Goals for PR and Journalism Training: the Status quo

But what *normative* requirements do professionals and experts identify for professional training in journalism and PR? Again, this question will be addressed separately for PR and journalism.

In the context of PR, our recent study done in 2004 focuses on the attitudes of communications experts regarding basic and further training for communications professionals. An analysis of the study results has since been published as part of a comprehensive anthology (Langen and Sievert 2006).

The survey shows that German PR professionals attach greatest importance to practical skills (89% identified them as “important” or “very important”). In contrast, aspects of business management (81%) and communications (73%) are a bit less likely to be deemed important. These attitudes indicate that professional communications experts still regard the technical aspects of the profession as paramount.

³ Other countries also report a high rate of specialized academic training in the field of journalism. A comparative overview published by David Weaver (1998: 457–458) indicates that of 14 national studies from five continents that offer the relevant information, 12 indicate positive responses by between 25 and 87% to the question of “majoring in journalism.”

This is supported by the results of other recent studies. In Zühlsdorf (2002: 312), for example, 85% of respondents classify “communications skills” as very important for PR work, while 43% mention “experience in journalism.” At the same time, a similar proportion (40%) of the study’s respondents also explicitly point to “management skills” as essential. However, they don’t necessarily think that further training should be offered in the subject area. In contrast, only 14% see a need for “knowledge of business.”

A more differentiated picture emerges in the author’s study concerning the specific practical PR techniques and business management topics that were identified as necessary curriculum components. Among practical techniques, the respondents identified training in the more complex skills required of communications experts as particularly important: the skills of drawing up conceptual plans (69%), presenting those plans (45%) and translating them into project management (63%) are sometimes ranked far above the traditional “hands-on” skills such as drafting a text (43%) or a publication (20%). The PR specialists who were interviewed are quite confident when it comes to their “basic” craft, while identifying a need for further training for the “advanced” level.

A similar picture, focused on strategy and management, emerges for the subtopics of business management. Along with marketing (71%), the top-ranked subjects include leadership (52%) and cost control (41%), which is especially important for value-based management. Purely operational topics such as financial management and commercial law are viewed as less important.

No comparable empirical study has been carried out for journalism, but a well-established “analytical grid of journalistic competence” was drawn up by Weischenberg (1990: 24) some fifteen years ago. Many of its elements were indirectly confirmed a short time later by an extensive Delphi survey (Weischenberg 1994), and even today they are helpful in establishing a skills profile for journalists (see, for example, Russ-Mohl and Sievert 2006).

Weischenberg identifies three main levels of competence in journalism: professional, communication and subject-matter competence. They are supplemented by social orientation. Along with a general grasp of communication science, specialized journalistic professional knowledge also includes media economics, media politics, media law, media ethics, media history and media technology. Furthermore, journalistic competence means instrumental

skills such as the ability to research, select, edit and organize information and to use technology adequately. Communication competence includes linguistic skills, the ability to impart information in a manner appropriate to the topic and to the intended audience, and “packaging” information in a suitable journalistic form. It also involves taking facts and shaping them into editorial content in keeping with the situation and the audience. In addition, this means overcoming barriers to communication and requires more in-depth knowledge, for example of research on how the audience receives the product.

Subject-matter competence means having a general background, but also specific knowledge of the topic of coverage, including the ability to acquire adequate knowledge of the subject at issue. The more journalists know about a given subject, the more successful they will be at translating the reality outside the media into “media reality.” To quote Weischenberg (1990: 24) once again: “Taking into account the steady rise in the level of differentiation and academization in nearly every aspect of life, as well as the increasingly complex social and technical problems, ...journalists will need to become more competent in terms of subject matter.” It is also important to have background knowledge for purposes of orientation - the ability to integrate specialized knowledge into social, political and economic contexts.

Finally, journalists need to be able to think seriously about their own actions as journalists. They should be capable of recognizing and reflecting on their function in society. This includes examining critically the role of the journalist and working conditions within the production process.

3. Possible Synergies between PR and Journalism, and the Need to Draw a Clear Line

Although Weischenberg’s approach to journalism training seems to differ dramatically from the model for the professionalization of PR experts developed by the author and others, they have something in common. The “techniques of PR work” clearly correspond to journalistic “professional competence,” and some aspects of “communication competence” are similar as well. “Elements of communication sciences” also play a major role within the area of “subject-matter competence.” And a major company’s PR specialist can certainly perceive “knowledge of business management” to be part of the “subject-matter competence” required by the job. Bearing this in mind, can and should business journalists, who certainly need sub-

ject-matter competence in business management, undergo the same training as PR professionals?

If we go more in-depth, certain differences become apparent. In Weischenberg's model for journalistic training, "professional competence" involves "tools" such as research, selection and editing, while in the world of public relations the focus is increasingly on the larger conceptual picture. For journalists, "communication competence" involves primarily media production, while media relations are only one aspect of PR work. For a journalist dealing with economic affairs, specialized knowledge of management and economics is geared to a broader picture, while specialists in corporate communications will focus to a greater degree on project management and leadership within their own organizations.

In the given framework, journalism and PR are no longer two sides of a single coin, as they may have been several decades ago. The analogy and all of the implications which go along with it may still apply to media relations. They continue to play an important role, but they neither define PR nor the relationship between PR and journalism. Though it is impossible to go into detail here, it should be noted that both disciplines have developed further, each independent of the other. Journalism can be seen as an autonomous social system that fulfills a unique function in society: to provide subject matter for the public discussion through its observation of society from the perspective of a disinterested professional. PR, however, is part of other social systems like business (or, more specifically, "companies"), politics, or culture and plays a specific role within these larger systems. Anyway, this role is also a social one: it contributes to providing more transparency.

There is an interface between the two areas as public relations has the specific task of helping to shape the aforementioned "external observation" carried out by journalists. But this is only one of its missions. Today, the contacts PR specialists maintain with individual stakeholders within and outside a given organization are at least as important as the ones they maintain with journalists, and indirectly with audiences at large. Formulated more broadly, as Grunig and Hunt (1984: 14) put it, "Public relations is the management of communication between an organization and its publics."

Thus, there are intersections between the training of PR specialists and journalists, but we can only caution against unrealistic hopes of finding areas of synergy. Particularly in the field of

media relations, curricula for PR professionals should include substantial training in journalistic skills, but the general and specific management orientation will and should be moored in other contexts. Conversely, while background knowledge of business and management may be important for a journalist, the real focus of journalism training should be on imparting professional and subject-matter competence for the journalist's work as an independent, professional and disinterested observer. Both sides have to learn the fundamental principles of communications, in particular of PR and journalism. Dialogue between the two camps certainly cannot hurt. However, only a focused course of training can provide truly professional preparation for increasingly specialized responsibilities. If these occupations are to become genuinely professional, training in preparation for them must become more professional as well.

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Tables

	<i>Survey year</i>	<i>Year of publication</i>	Survey data source	Number of respondents	Percentage of university graduates*	of those: economics and business administration	of those: media studies/communications
Wilke/Müller	1975	1979	DPRG member list	165	63	NA	NA
Riefler	1987	1988	DPRG member list**	160	58	49	NA
Böckelmann	1987	1991	Address lists: Kroll/Hoppenstedt/Oeckl	137	77	32	12
DPRG	1989/90	1990	DPRG member list	512	67	22	14
Becher	1992/93	1996	DPRG member list	374	91	19	22
Dees/Döbler	1994	1997	DPRG member list	90	86	36	45
Röttger	1996	2000	Independent institution-related survey of PR personnel in Hamburg	265	67	NA	NA
Wienand	2000	2003	DPRG member list, agency portal, VW Navigator of public life	275	82	31***	15
Fröhlich/Peters/Simmelbauer	2003/04	2005	Independent institution-related survey of PR personnel	297	73	22	8
Langen/Sievert	2004	2005/06	Address lists, among others Kroll-Verlag, Schober	265	86	35	21
Bentle/Großkurth/Seidenglanz	2005	2005	BdP [Bundesverband deutscher Pressesprecher] member list****	672	87	21	15

* = depending on survey, sometimes includes university attendees who have not completed their degrees

** = including consultant index of German Public Relations Association (DPRG)

*** = including law

****= only regular members, not including independent members, external consultants or representatives of PR agencies

Table 1: Share of university graduates and share of the subject areas business administration and communications in the field of public relations, as shown by various studies of the PR sector in Germany (source: drawn up by the author; recalculation of figures in some cases, based on the original published sources).

	<i>Survey year</i>	<i>Year of publication</i>	Survey data source	Number of respondents	Percentage of university graduates*	Percentage of those:	
						journalism studies	media studies/communications
Köcher	<i>1980/81</i>	<i>1985</i>	Media-derived three-step samples with snowball-method	450	67	NA	6
Schneider/ Schönbach/ Stürzebecher	<i>1992</i>	<i>1993</i>	“Representative sample” (not specified)	983	62	3	19
Weischenberg/ Löffelholz/Scholl	<i>1993</i>	<i>1994</i>	Independent media-derived four-step sample	1.498	79	21	18
Weischenberg/ Malik/Scholl	<i>2005</i>	<i>2006</i>	Independent media-derived four-step sample	1.536	84	14	17

Table 2: Share of university graduates and share of the subject areas journalism studies and communications in the field of journalism, as shown by various studies of journalism in Germany (source: drawn up by the author, following Röttger 2003: 112; recalculation of figures in some cases, based on the original published sources).

* = depending on the survey, in some cases including university attendees who have not finished their degrees