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Journalism or public relations? A quantitative survey of custom publishing editors in Germany



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ABSTRACT

Custom publishing, the production of content that is edited in a journalistic manner for organizations, is a fast-growing professional field located at the intersection of journalism and public relations. These corporate (or organizational) publications, as a form of strategic communication, assist with organizations' image cultivation and aim to communicate their particular interests. However, in their stylistic, optical, and thematic composition, they resemble journalistic publications from which readers expect unbiased, objective reporting. This article focuses on the editors of these corporate publications, who must take into account the rules and norms of two different fields of professional activity, and looks at the extent to which custom publishing is journalistic. Therefore, we analyze the self-conception of the editors' professional role, the extent to which their day-to-day work is journalistic, and the role of truth in their reporting. To this end, a quantitative survey of custom publishing editors in Germany was carried out.

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1. Introduction

While it seems that every day brings more news of the end of traditional journalistic publications, layoffs in editorial offices, and the disappearance of job security in journalism, there is one related professional field that has been experiencing the opposite trend for decades: custom publishing. Companies, but also other organizations such as unions, associations, and NGOs, publish content that is edited in a journalistic manner and make it available, generally free of cost, to specific publics. The customer magazine, which dominates the market, represents the most well-known form of custom publishing. However, the scope of custom publishing is not limited to magazines, but also includes other media channels (e.g., corporate television, books, websites, software applications), and in addition to customers it also addresses other stakeholders (e.g., employees and members, companies, state officials).

These corporate publications are located in a field of tension between journalism and public relations (PR), and therefore occupy a special position in the media (Röttger, 2002): On the one hand, as an instrument of PR they communicate and advocate the particular interests of the client in question; on the other hand, they resemble journalistic publications from which readers expect critical, unbiased, and objective reporting (Haeusermann, 2013). Editors in custom publishing must therefore take into account the rules and norms of two different professions (Röttger, 2002). This study focuses on a conspicuous research gap between journalism and PR: While both of these professional fields have been comprehensively researched, there are no specific studies on the professional field of custom publishing.

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2. Theoretical background and objective

2.1. Custom publishing

Custom publishing lies in the field between PR and journalism: On the one hand, it is a PR instrument for managing communication between an organization and its publics (Grunig and Hunt, 1984), differing from other corporate publications, such as press releases or advertising, in that it resembles a journalistic product. On the other hand, its journalistic aspects move custom publishing closer to journalism: Layout, topics, linguistic style, and the commonly periodical publication frequency all correspond to standards for journalistic publications (Weichler, 2014). Therefore, journalistic skills are required for the creation of corporate publications.

Corporate publications can be differentiated with regard to their target groups. In principle, all of an organization's stakeholders, such as customers, employees, suppliers, owners, NGOs, journalists, administrative staff, and competitors, can be addressed. There are, however, four overarching target groups for which corporate publications are produced. First, there are corporate publications *for customers*. These can be consumers or users, but also interest groups. Customer publications can also be differentiated according to whether they address customers of an entire sector or customers of a specific organization (Weichler, 2014). Second, corporate publications can be produced for *business clients or other companies*, to reach decision makers within organizations, for example. Third, corporate publications are produced for *public administration/authorities*. Whereas these first three target groups are external stakeholders, the fourth target group for corporate publications consists of *internal stakeholders*, such as employees, shareholders, or other members of an organization. This breakdown into four central target groups must not distract from the fact that, in many cases, publications address a range of stakeholders. A customer magazine, for example, can (and should) also be read by the employees of the company in question or be used to communicate with competitors or politicians.

Organizations have a variety of uses for corporate publications. To begin with, the main objectives of custom publishing are to establish and strengthen bonds with the relevant stakeholders, to communicate and legitimize particular interests, to present the organization's image in a positive light, and to influence the process of opinion forming in favor of the organization with respect to certain topics (Röttger, 2002; Weichler, 2014). In addition to this strategic benefit for the publishing organization, corporate publications should also offer some individual benefits to the recipients, as this provides motivation for recipients to engage with the media product. Although there has been little research on the benefits that recipients expect from corporate publications, it stands to reason that they are similar to those that people expect from journalistic publications: Recipients want to be informed about relevant developments within the organization and have complex issues explained to them. They also expect entertainment, relaxation and personal advice on certain topics.

2.2. Custom publishing editors

Because corporate publications resemble journalistic publications in layout, range of topics, and linguistic style, journalistic skills are essential to their production (Weichler, 2014). Hence, it seems that this professional field would have a journalistic character, because freelance journalists often rely on work in this field as an alternative source of income (Fröhlich, Koch, & Obermaier, 2013; Koch and Obermaier, 2014). This concerns, first, the professional training of editors in custom publishing and the question of whether journalistic or PR traineeships are increasingly being completed, and, second, the nature of editors' careers; that is, whether they were previously active in journalism, public relations, or both. The present study aims to analyze the professional training and careers of those working in custom publishing.

Research Question 1: How journalistic are the professional training backgrounds and the career paths of custom publishing editors?

In addition to their careers, this article also looks at custom publishing editors' professional self-conception of their role. This professional self-conception contains three relevant aspects. First, we are interested in the self-conception of *professional* roles. Besides this professional dimension, the self-conception also comprises other facets such as private self-conception (e.g., family, friends, hobbies), which is outside the scope of this study (Burns, 1979; Marsh & Shavelson, 1985). The second aspect concerns the term *role*. Custom publishing editors, like any other group of people, occupy a certain position within society, toward which other members of society have expectations. The characteristic bundles of such expectations create roles (Biddle, 1979). Different members of society can also have different expectations. From their own custom publishing editors, the CEO of a company may expect positive coverage, whereas recipients expect a critical piece. The editors are exposed to these contradictory expectations on a daily basis and learn their roles accordingly (Biddle, 1979). The third and final aspect is the *self-conception* of this role. Ultimately, the awareness of environmental expectations constitutes a subjective understanding of the role (Burns, 1979; Marsh & Shavelson, 1985). In this respect, self-conception refers to the views of individuals toward themselves, such as estimations of their own strengths and weaknesses (Burns, 1979; Shavelson & Marsh, 1986), through which this self-conception continues to develop continuously and can also be reconfigured at any time.

Little is known of custom publishing editors' self-conceptions of their professional role. Their work, lying between journalism and PR, could suggest the relevance of functions typical of both journalism and PR. The self-conception of the journalistic role is a complex construct (Cohen, 1963; Donsbach, 2008; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986). Generally, it comprises communicative intentions fundamental to the profession's practice (e.g., Hanitzsch, 2011; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996; Weischenberg, Malik, &

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