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The co-evolution of public relations and journalism: A first contribution to its systematic review[☆]

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ABSTRACT

There are many research findings and some theoretical models regarding the interaction between journalism and public relations (PR). But only scarce research has been done so far on the historical perspective of this relationship, which is also called co-evolution of PR and journalism. The aim of this article is to make a first step into the analysis of this co-evolution with a focus on the emergence of PR in the German-language area and based mainly on German literature about the history of PR.

The analysis shows that the rise of PR in the second half of the 19th century was, amongst others, a reaction to the development of journalism that had become increasingly biased. Thus, for many societal actors and organisations, the barriers to entering the public arena were increasing. At the same time the importance of the mass media, and pressures on social protagonists and organisations to legitimise their interests in a changing society, were growing.

These results support a theoretical concept that describes the development of mass communication as a process of rationalisation of societal communication, which in addition can be linked with system theory.

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1. Introduction

The relationship between public relations (PR) and journalism is mostly conceived of as between “interdependent systems” (Grossenbacher, 1986, p. 730). In this context, Löffelholz mentions evidence of a “co-evolutionary development of journalism and public relations” that “has not to date been systematically pursued” (Löffelholz, 2004, p. 472; emphasis author’s own). To do so would require a historical perspective of the relationship between PR and journalism, a perspective largely absent from discussions thus far. This is all the more striking as there is reasonable research on PR history in the last years (e.g. Raaz and Wehmeier, 2011; Watson, 2014). But as Lamme and Russel (2009, pp. 356–357) stress, “more research (...) is needed concerning the ways in which the rise of mass media in the last half of the 19th century (...) might have influenced alone or in some combination the motivations and methods of the public relations function”. The following is intended to provide a first contribution to the systematic review of the co-evolution of PR and journalism, with particular

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emphasis on their interaction during the development of PR.¹ This is done with reference to the available discussions on the history of PR, some of which contain valuable pointers. Our contribution here is limited to the German-speaking areas.² This goes along with L'Etang's demand to explore "more deeply forms of public communication within their socio-cultural contexts" (2014, p. xiv). The initial findings gained on this basis are then, in conclusion, put in theoretical context. Furthermore, we refer to several studies regarding other than German-speaking areas that are supporting our findings. To start with, let us briefly outline the current level of professional debate on the relationship between PR and journalism.

2. Approaches to the relationship between journalism and PR

In the 1980s, the relationship between PR and journalism became a topic of sustained interest in communication science, triggered above all by the publications of Baerns (1979, 1985; see also Altmeyen, Röttger & Bentele, 2004; Raupp and Klewes, 2004, amongst others). This is especially true of the German-language area: "This research program received attention and response particularly in German-speaking countries" (Baerns, 2007, p. 43).³ The influence of PR on journalism had been discussed once before, in the 1920s, forming a major part of the 7th German Sociologists' Conference 1930 in Berlin (Brinkmann, 1931 /1985). As early as 1866, Wuttke (1866 /1875, pp. 118–124) had bemoaned the great influence on newspaper reporting of what were known as press offices (*Pressbüros*), of political parties in particular. And in 1952, in a systematic analysis of the use of (written) press releases in media coverage, Sodeikat (1953) ascertained that those were used with a high incidence.⁴ In some aspects, this study resembles the well-known investigation conducted by Baerns (1985),⁵ which triggered the controversial 1980s discussion around what became known as the determination hypothesis.

Baerns' study posits that PR exerts considerable influence on the topics and timing of journalistic reporting (Baerns, 1985). However, subsequent studies, by Grossenbacher (1986), Fröhlich (1992), Rossmann (1993), Saffarnia (1993) or Schweda and Opherden (1995), for instance, arrived at differing results. As Schantel (2000; see also Hoffjann, 2002) has clearly demonstrated by means of a meta-analysis of these and other studies (e.g. Barth and Donsbach, 1992), the determination hypothesis could not in the end be confirmed, being too unidimensional and too undifferentiated. A more recent study by Riesmeyer also refutes the hypothesis that press releases determine the topics of journalistic reporting; the study uses the term "non-determination" (2006, p. 303). A Swiss input-output analysis on the reporting by regional TV and radio broadcasters of official media conferences, however, shows that "a good half of the reporting (. . .) shows no original content provided by the media outlets" (Grossenbacher, 2007). Thus, different studies continue to lead to differing results, depending also on variables such as the type of media or editorial department.

In the wake of this discussion the head of the aforementioned Swiss study, Grossenbacher, demanded as early as 1986 that the relationship between the media and PR be characterised "as complementary systems" or "interdependent systems", and not as a unilateral determination. Grossenbacher used the concepts of "mutual processes of adaptation" and dependency (Grossenbacher, 1986, p. 730), and this is the idea that has informed the subsequent debate since the 1990s.⁶ Approaches such as the "interdependence model" posited by Westerbarkey (1995), the "interpenetration model" put forward by Choi (1995) and the "intereffication model" suggested by Bentele, Liebert and Seeling (1997) assumed mutual influences, adaptations and interdependencies between journalism and PR. Those approaches all use, to a differing degree, Luhmann's systems theory and the concept of structural coupling. According to Hoffjann (2002, p. 187), a structural coupling (*strukturelle Kopplung*) can be understood as a long-term "relationship" of a system with one (or several) environmental systems, leading to the formation of specific structures in the systems affected.⁷ The aforementioned approaches do differ however in terms of their

¹ It needs to be clarified that there are other aspects of PR, especially internal PR, which are not investigated in this paper. Nevertheless, they have been important for the emergence of PR as well (e.g. Bentele, 2015, p. 50; 2013, pp. 209–210; Bentele, 2015; Bentele, 2015, p. 50; 2013, pp. 209–210). Wolbring (2000) has retrieved some first pointers to this for the company of Krupp.

² One reason behind this limitation is technical, as the starting point of the analysis to be developed below refers to the specific situation of the history of the German press. Another is the fact that there is literature available on the history of PR in the German-language area, to be used as a basis here (for an overview see Puchan, 2006). Our contribution focuses on the genesis of PR; naturally, it would be fascinating to also follow the further development of press relations or PR from this perspective and to demonstrate the extent to which this takes place in reaction to or in interaction with changes in the media system and journalism respectively.

³ A preliminary study in Germany by Kieslich in the 1970s was not published. Baerns tracks back the methodological origin of this input-output-analysis to Tunstall 1970, Nimmo 1964, Cohen 1963 and Rosten 1937 (Baerns, 1985, pp. 39, 121). And according to L'Etang (2004, p. 7) another analysis by Tunstall as early as 1964 "demonstrated how the pressures on journalistic practice created a dependency on public relations services". For the research development in the US see Wehmeier (2004).

⁴ Sodeikat analysed the use of press releases by the Lower Saxony Economic and Transport Ministry in 32 papers and magazines overall (daily and business newspapers, business magazines): 95.1% of the releases were used by at least some newspapers. The study also includes evaluations of individual titles and topics.

⁵ This involved analysing the use of press releases in reporting (by daily newspapers as well as radio and TV news) on North Rhine-Westphalian regional politics in 1978.

⁶ This is not the place to review this whole debate, which in this guise informs mainly the German-language literature on the subject (Baerns, 2007, p. 43); see on this Donsbach and Wenzel (2002), Hoffjann (2002, pp. 181–182), Russ-Mohl (2004), various contributions (by Merten as well as Scholl) in Altmeyen et al. (2004), Saxer (2005) as well as Merkel, Russ-Mohl & Zavaritt (2007), amongst others. In these contributions we also find a critical discussion of the approaches discussed below. An overview of the American research on journalism and PR can be found in Grunig (2007).

⁷ "Interpenetration may be understood as a special case of structural coupling, where two systems have engaged with each other in co-evolutionary terms to such a degree that one cannot exist without the other" (Löffelholz, 2004, p. 480, based on Esposito). Whether such interpenetration between journalism and PR in fact exists is controversial (Hoffjann, 2002, pp. 191–192, amongst others).

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