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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, &

Scholl, 2006): Does a journalist, for instance, want to inform, entertain, or address grievances? Weaver and Wilhoit (1986, 1996) identified three clusters of professional self-conceptions: a disseminator, an interpreter, and an adversary. Journalists who see themselves primarily in the “disseminator” role try to spread relevant news to a large audience and do little to interpret or comment on the news. The second cluster, the “interpreter,” does precisely this: They deal with complex problems and search for solutions. They do not only report neutrally; rather, they also interpret events and bring them into context. Finally, the “adversaries” see themselves as critics and controllers of the elite. Through their work, the adversaries aim to address grievances and serve as a kind of representative and mouthpiece for the disadvantaged. Deuze (2002), Neijens and Smit (2006), and Weischenberg et al. (2006) proposed a fourth type who want to provide service and entertainment. This type acts as an advisor for recipients, offering counseling and also distraction and relaxation. Comparative studies show that this self-conception of journalists exists in a similar form in many countries (van Dahlen, de Vreese, & Albæk, 2012; Hanitzsch, 2011).

The self-conception of PR professionals, in contrast, has not been thoroughly researched. We know that on the one hand, PR professionals serve the particular interests of their clients; however, on the other hand they also have certain obligations toward the public (Lewis, Williams, & Franklin, 2008; Reich, 2010). Hence, the few studies that have considered PR professionals' self-conception have categorized the actors between the two poles of client and societal orientation. First, PR actors work to provide the public with (organization-related) news (Röttger, 2010; Neijens & Smit, 2006). In this role, much the same as journalists, PR professionals see themselves as disseminators of relevant news that could be interesting for stakeholders. Second, PR actors have an image function: They want to present the organization in a positive light and convince stakeholders of its opinions (Neijens and Smit, 2006; Reich, 2010; Wienand, 2003). Thus, they see themselves chiefly as representatives of the client's particular interests. Third, PR actors can perceive themselves as interpreters and disseminators, who—again, much the same as some journalists—explain complex issues to recipients, seek to give an understanding of certain ideas, and operate as mediators between the organization and its stakeholders (Bentele, Dolderer, Fechner, & Seidenglanz, 2012; Röttger, 2010; Wienand, 2003).

The self-conception of custom publishing editors could be influenced either by the client organization or by the journalistic work. This study therefore considered both of these possibilities. The aforementioned functions, which describe the self-conception of journalists and PR professionals, partially overlap. Thus, we find both (1) the informative and (2) the explanatory function for both occupational groups. Although offering (3) service and entertainment, and (4) acting as a critic are known functions of journalists and rarely apply to PR professionals. Finally, (5) the persuasive, or image-building, function is a component that applies in particular to PR actors and to a lesser extent to journalists. Thus, we have five overarching functions that could be relevant to the self-conception of professional roles for custom publishing editors. These functions are not mutually exclusive: The professional self-conception of a custom publishing editor can be multifaceted. This study seeks to assess which of the functions is the most distinct and examines the degree to which the self-conception is journalistic in nature.

Research Question 2: Which self-conception of their professional role do custom publishing editors have, and to what extent does this differ from that of journalists?

The proximity of custom publishing to journalism also raises the question of how closely custom publishing editors' day-to-day work and working conditions resemble those of journalists, and the relevance of truthfulness to the product. So far, this question has been dealt with only by means of content analyses: One non-representative content analysis comparing customer magazines with corporate publications shows that the layout, structure, and focal points of the content vary only slightly; however, customer magazines are limited to a positive representation of the content, and there is generally no critical discussion (Bätjer, Frese-Otto, Josipovic, & Tauschmann, 2011). Based on a content analysis of Swiss customer magazines, (Eicher, 2009; quoted by Weichler, 2014, p. 769–770) showed that, as a rule, customer magazines have a positive or neutral tone toward the client organization and seldom include criticism or negative statements. In her content analysis, Kramer (2005) saw contentual parallels that were aligned much more closely to PR than to journalism. Although these analyses attempt to draw conclusions regarding the communicators, the working conditions and conceptions of professional norms have remained largely unexplored.

Research Question 3: How journalistic is the day-to-day work of custom publishing editors, and how important is truthfulness in their work?

3. Method

3.1. Procedure and sample

We conducted a quantitative survey of custom publishing editors to answer our research questions. The sampling was performed using a three-step selection process. First, we conducted Internet-based research to identify companies and agencies that employ custom publishing staff. The second step was to contact the custom publishing employees within the organizations we identified. In this way, we recruited a total of 1250 potential respondents. In the third step, on 14 January 2015 we sent these potential respondents personalized emails and asked them to take part in the survey. After five days, we sent a reminder. After excluding respondents with incomplete data, as well as those who were not employed in the custom publishing sector, a working sample of 197 people remained.

Of the editorial staff surveyed, 51.3% were men and 48.7% were women. The average age of respondents was 41.27 years ($SD = 10.01$). In terms of education, 81.2% had completed a university education, 15.2% had obtained a general or subject-linked university entrance qualification. Companies employed 48.7% of the respondents, 43.1% worked for agencies, and 8.1% were self-employed or worked for other organizations.

3.2. Questionnaire

To check whether the editors tend to perceive themselves and their occupation as characterized more strongly by journalism or by PR, we asked participants directly if they feel more like journalists or PR actors while at their job. They rated themselves on a five-point scale from “more like a journalist” to “more like an employee in the PR department”. To analyze self-conception according to the five categories we derived above, we asked respondents about the objectives they pursue as professionals. To enable comparisons of our findings with statements from German journalists, we used, as far as was practical, items from Weischenberg’s (2006) journalistic self-conception scales. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from “completely disagree” to “completely agree”. The “*informative function*” was measured with the items “The purpose of my work is to inform the public as precisely and neutrally as possible” and “The purpose of my work is to report on issues that interest a wide public”. The extent to which “*disseminating and explaining*” are considered central functions of the job was determined by asking respondents if they agreed with the following: “The purpose of my work is to explain and disseminate complex issues” and “The purpose of my work is to uncover new trends and disseminate new ideas”. “*Service and entertainment*” was measured from the degree to which respondents agreed with the statements “The purpose of my work is to offer entertainment and relaxation to the public” and “The purpose of my work is to offer counseling to the public and act as an advisor”. Agreement with the “*critical/monitoring*” function was determined by responses to the statements “The purpose of my work is to critically address grievances” and “The purpose of my work is to keep tabs on politics, the economy, and society”. Finally, we measured the “*persuasion/image*” function using the statements “The purpose of my work is to show the company favorably” and “The purpose of my work is to present the company’s opinion to the target group”.

In another block of questions, we asked about how editors see their day-to-day work in comparison with journalists. Respondents were asked to express on a five-point scale their agreement with the following items: “My day-to-day work is very similar to that of journalists,” “In general, journalists can work more independently than I can,” “I often have a longing for greater journalistic freedom,” “Other people in the company often interfere with the content of my work,” and “For the same pay, I would prefer to work as a ‘classical’ journalist”.

To measure the relevance of truthfulness in corporate publications, we asked respondents how important they considered thorough research, truthful reporting, realistic representation, and critical reporting. Respondents answered on a five-point scale from “not at all important” to “very important”. Furthermore, we asked editors whether they agreed with the statements “We also publish negative reports about the company” and “Most of our articles present the company in a positive light” (each on a five-point scale).

4. Results

4.1. Careers of custom publishing editors

Our first research question focused on the careers of custom publishing editors: How journalistic are the professional training backgrounds and careers of custom publishing editors? Overall, 38% of respondents completed a trainee program in the field of journalism, whereas only 16% completed a similar program in PR. Therefore, custom publishing editors’ education seems to be more of a “classical” journalistic than a “classical” PR nature. However, the data assessing previous work experience paints a different picture, as 27% of respondents had worked in both journalism and (other) PR areas prior to their current position. An equal number (27%) had previously worked only in PR and not in journalism, and just 18% had worked only in journalism. Taken together, the data show that 54% of respondents had gained (other) PR experience before working in custom publishing ($M = 9.58$ years, $SD = 6.87$), and 46% had previously worked in journalism ($M = 8.93$ years, $SD = 8.64$).

4.2. Custom publishing editors’ self-conception of their professional role

We are interested in finding out whether custom publishing editors see themselves more as journalists or as PR workers. There is a very clear trend here: two-thirds (68%) of the respondents saw themselves as PR actors, and only 13% saw themselves more as journalists; 19% saw themselves in the middle of the two professional roles. The respondents therefore seldom perceive themselves as journalists, but tend rather to place themselves toward the PR end of the hypothetical continuum ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.26$).

In particular, the respondents consider the purpose of their work to be the dissemination of information and the explanation of issues (see Table 1 for the following results). Indeed, the greatest agreement was expressed for the statement “The purpose of my work is to explain and disseminate complex issues” (89% agreed). This seems, therefore, to be a function of custom publishing with which practically all editors could identify—only 5% of respondents did not agree with this

Table 1
 Self-conception of professional roles of custom publishing Editors.

<i>The purpose of my work is to...</i>	<i>Agreement</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>Function</i>
... explain and disseminate complex issues.	89%	4.31 (0.86)	Dissemination & Explanation
... uncover new trends and disseminate new ideas.	69%	3.82 (0.98)	
... show the company favorably.	87%	4.38 (0.80)	Persuasion & Image
... present the company's opinion to the target group.	70%	3.86 (1.03)	
... offer entertainment and relaxation to the public.	46%	3.04 (1.38)	Service & Entertainment
... offer counseling to the public and act as an advisor.	32%	2.75 (1.35)	
... inform the public as precisely and neutrally as possible.	41%	3.22 (1.15)	Information
... report on issues that interest a wide public.	52%	3.48 (1.22)	
... critically address grievances.	3%	1.64 (0.82)	Criticism & Monitoring
... keep tabs on politics, the economy, and society.	2%	1.52 (0.78)	

Note: Agreement to items is defined here as a response of 4 or 5 on a five-point Likert scale.

statement. In addition, the majority of respondents considered it important to concentrate on issues that are of interest to recipients (52% agreement, 21% disagreement). Thus, the self-conception relating to dissemination and explanation is key for employees in custom publishing.

The function of “persuasion and image” also found broad agreement. In total, 87% of the respondents agreed that the purpose of their work was to show the company in a positive light, and only 2% disagreed with this statement. Furthermore, 70% considered the purpose of their work to be the presentation of the company’s opinion to the target group. In addition to the disseminator role, the data indicate an equally high importance of the role involving the representation of particular interests: Custom publishing editors considered one of their central tasks to be reporting positively about the organization for which they work and sharing with stakeholders the opinions and attitudes of this organization.

Not all respondents consider the purpose of their work to be offering service and entertainment to recipients: Less than one-third agreed that their work should offer counseling and advice to the public (32% agreement, 45% disagreement). Nearly half of the respondents (46% agreement, 37% disagreement) agree that they would like to offer service and entertainment to the public. The above-average standard deviations for these items, along with the even spread of responses across all points on the scale, suggest a broad discord: Some editors certainly see themselves in this role as an advisor and entertainer, while an equal number reject this role.

There were similar differences in responses regarding the informative function. Informing the public neutrally and precisely was considered an important function of their work by 41% of respondents, whereas 27% disagreed. The item regarding the purpose of their work being to report on issues of wide interest to the public found greater agreement from respondents: More than half (52%) agreed, compared with only 21% who did not. Therefore, although the informative function is important to editors in custom publishing, it does not occupy a central position.

The role that is by far the least widespread is the critical role. Only 3% of respondents stated that the purpose of their work was to address grievances, whereas 86% disagreed with this statement. Only 2% of the editors in custom publishing saw it as their job to monitor politics, economics, and society, whereas 87% rejected this role. Hence, the self-conception as a critical reporter was not found among employees in custom publishing.

The professional self-conception of custom publishing editors can, at least to some extent, be compared with that of German journalists. To this end, we compared the items of four of the five functions with the findings of Weischenberg et al. (2006) for German journalists (the study by Weischenberg et al. does not include the function “persuasion and image”). An overview of the results (Table 2, below) shows few or no differences between the professional groups in some respects, but marked differences in others. The self-conceptions are highly similar with regard to dissemination and explanation: both journalists and custom publishing editors understood this to be one of their key tasks, and the latter tend to agree even more strongly on this point. There are also strong similarities for the item “service and entertainment”. Custom publishing editors tended to see themselves in a role in which they reveal new trends and ideas, while journalists took on a role as advisor more frequently.

There were serious discrepancies for three items. In terms of the statement regarding the function of neutrally and precisely informing the public, 89% of the journalists saw this as part of their job, compared with only 41% of the custom publishing editors. Considering the dimension “persuasion and image,” custom publishing editors did not consider it part of their job to report information *neutrally*, but rather to present the company in a positive way. There were also remarkable differences for the critical dimension: While the majority of journalists saw it as one of their central tasks to address grievances critically, only 3% of custom publishing editors saw this as the purpose of their work.

Moreover, whereas one-quarter of journalists felt that they should monitor politics, the economy, and society in their work, there were few custom publishing editors who felt that this function was part of their professional self-conception.

Table 2
 Comparison of professional self-conceptions of custom publishing Editors and journalists in Germany.

<i>The purpose of my work is to...</i>		<i>agreement</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
...explain and disseminate complex issues.	CP editors	89%	4.31 (0.86)	2.65	713	.008	0.21
	Journalists	79%	4.13 (0.89)				
...uncover new trends and disseminate new ideas.	CP editors	69%	3.82 (0.98)	5.95	708	<.001	0.46
	Journalists	44%	3.36 (1.01)				
...offer entertainment and relaxation to the public.	CP editors	46%	3.04 (1.38)	-1.02	480	.310	0.07
	Journalists	37%	3.13 (1.11)				
...offer counseling to the public and act as an advisor.	CP editors	32%	2.75 (1.35)	-5.56	502	<.001	0.40
	Journalists	44%	3.25 (1.13)				
...inform the public as precisely and neutrally as possible.	CP editors	41%	3.22 (1.15)	-18.62	391	<.001	1.21
	Journalists	89%	4.41 (0.78)				
...report on issues that interest a wide public.	CP editors	52%	3.48 (1.22)	-1.71	595	.089	0.13
	Journalists	60%	3.63 (1.13)				
...critically address grievances.	CP editors	3%	1.64 (0.82)	-24.14	1031	<.001	2.06
	Journalists	58%	3.63 (1.09)				
...keep tabs on politics, the economy, and society.	CP editors	2%	1.52 (0.78)	-9.87	1308	<.001	0.90
	Journalists	24%	2.46 (1.26)				

Note: Agreement to items is defined here as a response of 4 or 5 on a five-point Likert scale. The five-point scale used by Weischenberg et al. was recoded. For the calculations, their data were given an average sample size of n = 1527 (the authors describe their sample size as being between 1518 and 1536). The corrected values for each category are listed in this table.

Table 3
 Working conditions of custom publishing Editors.

	<i>agreement</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
My day-to-day work is very similar to that of a journalist.	23%	2.58 (1.24)
In general, journalists have more independence in their work than I do.	52%	3.34 (1.18)
I often long for more journalistic freedom.	26%	2.53 (1.29)
For the same pay, I would prefer to work as a "classical" journalist.	20%	2.16 (1.32)

Table 4
 Assessments of content characteristics.

	<i>(very) important/agreement</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
How important to you is thorough research?	92%	4.56 (0.74)
How important to you is a realistic depiction of contents?	92%	4.43 (0.79)
How important to you is truthful reporting?	86%	4.39 (0.89)
How important to you is critical reporting (also with respect to your own company)?	28%	2.81 (1.24)
We also publish negative reports about the company.	14%	2.27 (1.13)
Most of our articles portray the company in a positive light.	86%	4.17 (0.83)

4.3. Working conditions and content

The third research question focused on how custom publishing editors perceive their day-to-day work and working conditions compared with journalists (see Table 3 for the following results). We found that the majority of respondents (51%) considered their day-to-day work to be quite dissimilar from that of journalists: Only around a quarter of respondents (23%) agreed that there are great similarities in this regard. The majority of respondents (52%) believed that, in general, journalists have more independence in their work than they enjoyed themselves. Although one-quarter of the respondents disagreed with this statement, the majority (52%) longed for more journalistic freedom in their jobs, but two-thirds (67%) stated that they would not prefer to work in classical journalism for the same pay.

Finally, we wanted to assess the relevance of truthful reporting to the work of the respondents, and to what extent this is implemented in their publications (see Table 4 for the following results). There is a clear picture here: Almost all respondents stated that thorough research and a realistic depiction in terms of content are (very) important. The vast majority of respondents (86%) also valued truthful reporting; a mere 6% of respondents stated that truthful reporting was only somewhat important or very unimportant. Reporting critically on one's own company, in contrast, was not considered to be very important. It was important or very important to only 28% of editors to report critically about their own companies, and 42% saw this as unimportant. Furthermore, only 14% of editors agreed that they also publish negative reports regarding the company, as 86% of respondents stated that the majority of articles published show the company in a positive light.

5. Discussion

How much journalism, then, is there in custom publishing? The data show that the editors' professional socialization was largely journalistic. Many of them had, for instance, completed a journalistic trainee program, and nearly half had worked

(also) in journalism before moving into custom publishing. However, only a minority saw themselves professionally either more as journalists or as between the roles of journalist and PR worker—most considered themselves to be PR actors. This does not mean that custom publishing editors are extremely dissimilar to journalists in their self-conception. There are close similarities between the two occupations in this regard: Both consider it part of their job to disseminate and explain, and to offer service and entertainment. However, there is another factor that determines the professional self-conception of custom publishing editors: the representation of the organization's particular interests, communicating persuasively to relevant stakeholders, and portraying the organization in a positive light. Although respondents stressed the importance of thorough research and truthful reporting, the results of our survey also indicate that custom publishing is not generally characterized by neutral, critical reporting. The positive portrayal of an organization is a priority. Nevertheless, this finding is not valid for all respondents; there are also editors who report critically, and sometimes also negatively, about their own organization.

The main differences between the self-conceptions of custom publishing editors and journalists lie in the neutral, critical function: The majority of journalists emphasize the importance of reporting critically and neutrally, whereas custom publishing editors are less neutral and critical, and stress the relevance of their work to representing the interests of the organization in question. Informing the public in a totally neutral way would seem impossible, as the goal of showing the organization in a positive light dominates. In addition, the critical function, which is often central to the journalistic self-conception, is hardly relevant for custom publishing editors. Neither of these findings should be especially surprising, but they do show where the borders between the self-conceptions of journalists and custom publishing editors are drawn.

As for the limitations of this study, the representativeness of our data is constrained to a certain degree for several reasons. It was not possible to draw a random sample from all editors employed in custom publishing, as there is no record or database in which they are registered. Additionally, our method of researching companies and agencies shifts the focus to larger organizations and tends to ignore NGOs, unions, and political parties, although editors who work for these organizations would potentially be included in our sample if they are employed by agencies. Furthermore, we had to rely in our selection on organizations that publish the names of their editors online, or alternatively made their editors accessible to us upon request, for instance by forwarding a link to our survey. Such an online sample suffers from a certain bias caused by self-selection.

Because custom publishing has received little research attention to date, there are numerous possibilities for follow-up research. First, in terms of *further research on the field of occupation*, research could be done on the occupational field in other countries and compared with our results. Qualitative studies could help to develop typologies for editors working in this field, and a closer look could be taken at editors—including at their self-conceptions, norms, and ethical principles—who work for corporate publications that address internal stakeholders (e.g., employee magazines). Moreover, it appears critical that esteemed journalistic publishers recurrently offer custom publishing services. This blur of the boundary between journalism and PR should be subject of future studies. Secondly, *reception studies* could be carried out, looking at how and to what extent corporate publications are consumed. The question of “why” could be posed in the traditional sense of studies on uses and gratifications that deal with the motives of recipients for consuming media such as customer magazines. Future studies could also examine the *effects* of corporate publications. As many customer magazines are hardly distinguishable in terms of their content from journalistic publications, experiments could be designed to shed some light on the moderating effects of persuasion knowledge. Finally, a lack of *content analyses* on custom publishing represents a fourth research gap. Customer magazines, in particular, could be analyzed because of their position at the intersection of journalism and PR. Studies could, for instance, look at the extent to which news values can be found in customer magazines.

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