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Blurred lines: German freelance journalists with secondary employment in public relations



Thomas Koch*, Magdalena Obermaier

Department of Communication Science and Media Research, Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, Germany

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ABSTRACT

Nearly half of all German freelance journalists have a second job, mainly in public relations (PR). This work combination can be problematic, since journalists and PR practitioners have different responsibilities. Working as a journalist entails contributing to the public duties of journalism such as informing the public, offering multiple viewpoints, and representing societal interests; in contrast, PR practitioners must advocate solely in their clients' interests. Conflicts can arise between these two roles if a freelance journalist is, for instance, required to critically investigate his or her PR client. However, there has been little research on freelance journalists with secondary work in PR. This study seeks to address this gap in research; therefore, we conducted a quantitative online survey among German "PR-journalists". Our results show that nearly half of the participants take on secondary PR work for financial reasons; however, a similar number of journalists take on PR-work voluntarily, as they find the work interesting and enjoyable. Moreover, participants described their professional identity very similarly to that of German journalists in general. The PR-journalists surveyed were aware of the potential for conflicts of interest arising from their dual role. While such conflicts have been rarely encountered by those in the study sample, most participants assumed that other PR-journalists face such conflicts often, and expressed concern that these conflicts are not handled professionally.

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1. Introduction

Nearly half of all German freelance journalists have a second job, mainly in public relations (PR) (Meyen & Springer, 2009). Balancing the dual roles of a journalist and a PR practitioner can give rise to conflicts of interest because the positions have opposing mandates: journalists are charged with contributing to the public good (e.g., by offering multiple viewpoints and representing societal interests), whereas PR practitioners are employed to advocate exclusively on behalf of their clients (Hoffjann, 2007; Riesmeyer, 2007). These contradictory expectations may lead to conflicts of interest if, for instance, freelance journalists are required to report critically on their PR clients. A journalist in such a position has three options: to decline journalism work that focuses on their PR clients (thereby losing a work opportunity as a journalist), to accept the work and to paint the PR client in a positive light, omitting negative details (thereby not losing a work opportunity, but betraying the ethical standards of journalism), or to report accurately on the issue (thereby likely losing a well-paying PR job). Freelance journalists who rely on their PR work to make ends meet might be inclined toward the second option, despite its breach

* Corresponding author at: Department of Communication Science and Media Research, Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, Oettingenstraße 67, 80538 Munich, Germany. Tel.: +49 89 2180 9833.

E-mail address: thomas.koch@ifkw.lmu.de (T. Koch).

of journalistic ethics and standards (Grass, 1998). Weischenberg, Malik and Scholl (2006a, p. 190) consider the possible consequences of journalists engaging in concurrent PR work to make a living, and conclude that although this dual role does not necessarily result in the journalist failing to uphold journalistic standards, it does compromise journalistic independence. Although in recent years increasing numbers of journalists are concurrently working in PR, little research has been conducted on these PR-journalists (freelance journalists with secondary work in PR).

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Freelance journalists with secondary employment in public relations

The first goal of this paper is to clarify why many freelance journalists seek secondary work in PR. An initial assumption might be that journalists are forced to attempt this balancing act out of financial pressure. It is increasingly difficult for journalists to make a living from their reporting alone (Weischenberg et al., 2006a), and these freelance journalists often seek side work in related fields such as consulting, teaching, advertising, and PR (Meyen & Springer, 2009). Public relations is especially popular, as the skills required of journalists – writing and reading comprehension, critical thinking, and knowledge of the structures, routines, and selection criteria in an editorial office – are also important for PR practitioners. Journalists not only know how to produce successful PR articles that can make it through the editorial process, but often have contacts with other journalists that can be very useful in generating good PR. For these reasons, working simultaneously as a journalist and as a PR practitioner seems logical, with the steady demand for PR work balancing the poor pay and low demand for freelance journalism. However, the few studies exploring the motivations for dual-employment in journalism and PR have indicated not only extrinsic, but also intrinsic motivation (Buckow, 2011; Fröhlich, Koch, & Obermaier, 2013; Meyen & Springer, 2009); certainly, not all PR-journalists have felt compelled to occupy this dual role.

When freelance journalists also work in PR, this can blur the boundaries between journalism and PR, threatening the journalistic identity (Ladendorf, 2012; Loosen & Scholl, 2002; Neuberger, 2004; Weischenberg, Malik, & Scholl, 2006b). As the borders between journalism and PR become more and more indistinct, it also becomes increasingly difficult to determine who qualifies as a journalist: What amount or type of PR work can an individual engage in and still be considered a journalist? Indeed, do these PR-journalists still consider themselves to be journalists?

These questions are closely linked to concepts of professional identity (Donsbach, 2005, 2008; Meyen & Riesmeyer, 2009). Weischenberg et al. (2006a, pp. 101–119) measured journalistic professional identity through assessing the communicative goals and intentions that guide journalists in their work. These goals and intentions include informing the public as neutrally and precisely as possible, entertaining readers, and criticizing injustice. These goals represent three central dimensions: (1) information, (2) service and entertainment, and (3) critique, and control, respectively. These three dimensions are not exclusive, as one journalistic piece may, of course, inform, entertain, and criticize.

Weischenberg et al. (2006a) demonstrated that journalistic identity in Germany is mainly tied to the idea of informing readers; 75–90% of interviewees reported their primary goal to be informing the audience and explaining complex facts and issues. In contrast, less than half of the journalists interviewed approved of writing pieces with the primary functions of entertainment or control. However, it cannot be assumed that freelance journalists who also do PR have the same professional identity as those sampled in Weischenberg et al.'s (2006a) study. For example, journalistic identity may change after taking on secondary PR work, or journalists who seek out work as PR practitioners may have different journalistic identities to begin with (Buckow, 2011). Determining systematic differences in the professional identities of freelance PR-journalists and freelance journalists with no additional concurrent professional roles could provide insight into the nature of journalistic professional identity.

2.2. Dual-role related conflicts

According to the German Federal Constitutional Court, journalists fulfil a public duty. Among other things, this duty entails entering into the current social dialog, providing a point of orientation for the audience by reflecting a broad range of public opinions on diverse issues (Riesmeyer, 2007). Moreover, according to the press laws of the German federal states, journalists have to be “watchdogs” of the government. As per the preceding section, it is questionable whether a double life between journalism and PR can succeed without transgressing the bid of journalistic independence (Weischenberg et al., 2006a).

Fröhlich et al. (2013) explain the conflict inherent in working as a PR-journalist through role theory, which posits that journalists and PR practitioners occupy certain positions in society. In these positions, they have to live up to specific clusters of social expectations, according to which they have to carry out certain roles (Wiswede, 1977). Persons who do not comply with these expectations may experience social pressure, such as public criticism or disapproval. The role expectations for PR practitioners include communicating adequately and truthfully while acting in the interests of their clients. Freelance journalists, on the other hand, are expected to report critically on current, relevant issues, independent of special interest groups. These two contradictory role expectations could easily collide, resulting in inter-role conflict (Biddle, 1979; Gross, Mason, & McEachern, 1958; Merton, 1957, 1995).

Experiencing inter-role conflict can adversely affect one's professional life and negatively affect job performance (Örtqvist & Wincent, 2006); these conflicts are experienced as aversive tension and individuals experiencing them will apply strategies

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