Journalism or Public Relations?

Proposal for Conceptualizing a User-Oriented Research Program on the Confounding of the Two Genres Online

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Abstract
The Internet makes it easier for strategic communicators to address their PR audiences directly in a way that has never been seen before. This is even more true as media users increasingly turn to the Internet as an alternative source of information, especially in times of crisis and controversy. As a result, new forms of 'particular-interest oriented persuasive simulations of journalism' (PIoPS) are spreading over the Internet. This chapter provides a first theoretical review and foundation of the troubled situation and briefly explains why and from which perspective we are actually dealing with a 'problem.' On this basis, it conceptualizes a user-oriented research program that enables us to measure whether and, if so, how PR's simulations of journalism can be distinguished from actual journalistic products/content. The contribution discusses theoretical implications for a text-oriented approach that could be suitable for describing and operationalizing criteria of distinctiveness. It also yields theoretical implications for a reception-oriented perspective which helps to describe users' concrete differentiation behaviors and procedures in the reception of PR and journalism and operationalize these for respective reception studies. In conclusion, specific challenges that will inevitably arise for the outlined research program are outlined.

The Internet has fundamentally changed the conditions under which the public sphere and public communication[1] are created. This particularly affects the two societal sub-systems of public communication: 'journalism'[2]

1 For definitions of 'public communication,' see e.g., Godulla (2017), Kohring (2006), and Pfetsch and Bossert (2013).
2 In this contribution understood as "institutionalized journalism" as defined by Wolf (2014, p. 72).

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and 'public relations' (PR) (cf. for example Pietzcker, 2017), also and especially in their interplay in the production of public communication and the public sphere (cf. Ward-Johnson & Guiniven, 2008, among others). Distinguishing these two fields becomes problematic when formal and content-related measures are used to make PR on the web look like journalistic reporting without labeling the respective content as PR. While the integration of PR or marketing content into editorial content is regulated by separation principles in professional self-obligations and in laws[3] to safeguard editorial independence and protect media users[4] from being misled, there are no labeling obligations for original PR communication published beyond original journalistic media. However, as the Internet now offers the possibility for organizations whose primary field of activity is not publishing to expand their communication channels, their role as communicators changes and a new problematic situation arises. Lloyd and Toogood (2015) describe this situation as follows: "Every organization is a media organization' has developed from being a slogan into becoming a growing reality" (p. vii). Years ago, Henry (2007) had already warned that "PR firms have become increasingly effective at churning out advertising that looks and sounds just like mainstream journalism" (p. 180).

There has always been a certain 'closeness' between journalism and PR on the content and formal levels. This arises primarily from the fact that PR in the area of media relations must prepare its services for journalists such that they fit the professional journalistic criteria for form and content. To be perceived and ultimately processed by the media system/journalism, PR messages intended as source and research material for journalists (media relations, press releases) must meet journalistic standards. These demands include the expectation that the respective PR material fulfills the criterion of truthfulness while also meeting the general technical rules of journalistic texting/writing as well as the special requirements derived from theories of news selection and newsworthiness (news factors/values). With regards to its journalistic target group, PR has therefore always been guided by journalistic skills. If it is done well, PR in

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3 The 'principle of separation' is regulated in Germany in the *Pressekodex* (the 'Press Code' is a voluntary commitment; Presserat, 2019) in section 7 on the separation of advertising and editorial work. Moreover, it is legally stipulated in section 8 of the State Media Treaty (MStV) (for the latest version of April 2020, see here https://www.rlp.de/fileadmin/rlp-stk/pdf-Dateien/Medienpolitik/MedienEventstaatsvertrag.pdf).

4 The terms user(s), recipient(s), and audience are used synonymously in this contribution.

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the field of media relations has thus typically 'simulated'[5] journalism (cf. for example Fröhlich, 2015, p. 115). This is done because the closer PR products are in form and content to what is relevant for journalists in their work, the greater the chance that journalists will perceive and process PR products in their work and the greater the chance that PR can establish itself as a source of information for journalists. Or – to put it differently following Hoffjann and Arlt (2015) – public relations imitates journalism in its press and media work to "[...] become the subject of journalism with its self-representations" (p. 94).[6] However, as far as PR's target groups beyond journalism are concerned, PR now has the opportunity to bypass journalism altogether from the outset. Using new digital communication channels, PR can reach the relevant stakeholders online, thereby overcoming the spatial and temporal barriers that previously existed (cf. Wendelin, 2014, p. 80). The Internet thus makes it easier to address PR audiences directly in a way that has never been seen before. This is even more true as media users increasingly turn to the Internet as an alternative source of information, especially in times of crisis and controversy. As a result, online PR now increasingly simulates journalism in direct communication with its non-journalistic audiences. This is quite reasonable because journalistic procedures and programs represent "(...) professional instructions for the production of public communication offers, i.e., typified action patterns and rules. Those who wish to address the public be it as a group or individual can greatly maximize the success of these efforts by using the professional and organizational programs of journalism" (Altmeppen & Quandt, 2002, p. 58). As a consequence, authoritative self-representations (i.e., PR), as Hoffjann and Arlt (2015) have described it, can increasingly be found on the Internet disguised as authoritative external representations (journalism). This appears to be facilitated by a view dominant in large parts of the German population that PR is a form of journalism (77%, Bentele & Seidenglanz, 2005, p. 211).

(1) The described problematic situation on 'particular-interest oriented persuasive simulation of journalism' (PIoPS), as I call it, has not been well studied so far. This is especially true for newer forms of persuasive journalism simulations spreading over the Internet. This article provides a first theoretical analysis of this situation. In this context, I

5 All quotations from non-English language sources were translated into English by the author.

6 The phenomenon of "churnalism" has reinforced this reasoning in recent years (Hummel,2009, p. 59; cf. also Hummel, 2016).

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understand PIoPS of journalism as PR texts that can unequivocally be identified as products of strategic-persuasive communicators/sources,

(2) closely follow journalistic rules and conventions in terms of form and content-related quality criteria,

(3) seemingly imitate journalism by strongly leaning towards the visual and textual appearance and formal style of journalistic texts, and

(4) primarily pursue the goal of having a persuasive effect on a target audience, i.e., persuading people of a claim, product, opinion, attitude, etc.[7]

Two examples of PIoPS in the Internet are shown in the following:

https://www.travelpulse.com

https://alles-rund-ums-auto.de

This contribution elaborates on the possibilities for a theoretical foundation that enables us to measure whether and if so, how, PR's simulations of journalism can be distinguished from actual journalistic products/content. On the one hand, this question relates to theoretical implications for (1) a text-oriented approach that could be suitable for describing criteria of distinctiveness as textual features and operationalizing them for the con-

7 Journalistic texts of specific genres, such as commentary, must be distinguished from this, as they may also pursue a certain kind of persuasive intention.

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tent-analytical testing of corresponding texts. On the other hand, it yields theoretical implications for (2) a reception-oriented perspective, which helps to describe users' concrete differentiation behaviors and procedures in the reception of PR and journalism and operationalizing them for respective reception studies.

At an early stage, Bucher (2000) pointed out the need for empirical studies on recipients' perceptions of the quality of *online* journalism to be conducted with a reference to the specific online products in question. More precisely, he speaks of the necessity of a "product-oriented" approach that "relates reception findings and product/content attributes to each other" (p. 155). Ideally, the reception-related question should be combined with the text-related question, and the relevant stimulus material from the reception study should then be the basis for the content analysis or vice versa.

The following section will describe the outlined problem and its causes in more detail. It will also briefly explain why and from which perspective this is actually a 'problem.' In a second step, existing theoretical components are presented that appear to be helpful for a scientific treatment of the specific, two-part object of interest. Based on this, in a third step, initial considerations for the empirical operationalization of concrete research questions are made. Finally, particular challenges for operationalization are discussed that arise when empirically implementing the outlined approach, especially if it is product-oriented in Bucher's sense.

Causes, Relevance, and Consequences of the Problem

The constant proliferation of media products and services is nothing new; in fact, it is even typical for the emergence and development of "mediated public spheres" (Wendelin, 2011). In this context, the technology driven development of "owned media" mentioned above is one among a number of processes that increase the sheer amount of media offerings as part of the (further) development of mediated public spheres. And of course, the communicative offers of strategic-persuasive communication from a wide variety of organizations not primarily active in the field of journalistic publishing (e.g., companies, NGOs, political parties, etc.) have long provided alternatives to the media offers of journalistic editorial departments and media organizations. PR has thus always been involved in the production of the public (sphere) (Röttger, Preusse & Schmitt, 2014, p. 5). From the perspective of democracy and norms theory, however, journalism, PR, and their products should be distinguishable, both explicitly and above all

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for the recipients (cf. among others Gonser & Rußmann, 2017, pp. 3-4). After all, PR is a form of self-referential persuasive communication that acts in an interest- and client-driven manner (= self-referential) and whose "controlled communication activities (...) are intended to contribute (...) to the realization of overarching organizational goals (...)" (Zerfaß & Pleil, 2015, p. 47). In contrast, journalism's hetero-referential communication is committed to the common good. From this fact, some essential protection rights are derived for journalism and media companies (e.g., the right to refuse to testify/to give evidence; 'Tendenzschutz,' a protective regulation for media enterprises serving ideological purposes/tendencies). Such specific protective rights do not exist for PR.

While journalism, from a normative point of view, is still committed to hetero-referentiality, i.e., to the "public description(s) of society, namely of the society that is currently happening" (Hoffjann & Arlt, 2015, p. 40), PR can act both self- and hetero-referentially in the sense of a flexible situational adaptation to specific communication topics and intended communication goals. Depending on the situation, PR can, therefore, either generate "self-representation for image cultivation" or construct "desirable realities" via external representations (Merten & Westerbarkey, 1994, p. 208) – e.g., via issues management. On the Internet, PR is increasingly also found in the form of hetero-referential communication. The probability of this is high because PR must also be understood as a "performance system of publicity" (Hoffjann & Arlt, 2015, p. 39). From a theoretical point of view, one can conclude against this background that journalistic and PR publications should/must be distinguishable from each other (in a way that is easily recognizable to the audience) – today more than ever. This is the ideal-typical way of looking at things. It is also reflected in different attributions of responsibility in rules laid down by professional policy and in the establishment of special professional control bodies (in Germany: German Press Council, DPR, and German Council for Public Relations, DRPR) to monitor compliance with these rules.

However, the prerequisites for PR's involvement in the creation and production of the public sphere are quite different today than they were in pre-digital times. These prerequisites concern, for example, the functional characteristics of strategic-persuasive communication: Due to the dwindling credibility attributed by recipients to traditional advertising, which is subject to labeling requirements, label-free PR is increasingly taking over functions previously attributed to brand marketing (cf. Ries & Ries, 2004). It is hoped that this will lead to higher credibility attributions for the persuasive messages among the respective target groups – always assuming

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that the PR communication in question in such cases does not then come along again in a form that is easily identifiable as ‘advertising.’

One way of avoiding the impression of advertising in PR is to give the PR texts in question a journalistic appearance, that is, to ‘simulate’ journalism. This also leads to a ‘proliferation of media offerings,’ whereby the Internet decisively facilitates the dissemination of journalistic-looking PR directly to the intended PR target groups. In this context, Gonser and Rußmann (2017) even speak of a "planned deception of users" in the online sphere by PR communicators “overstepping the boundaries of ethically correct behavior” (p. 7). In contrast, Pleil (2015a) takes a more neutral stance on the matter when he describes this development as a process by which companies, for example, succeed better today than in pre-digital times in offering their reference groups “new mechanisms of orientation alongside journalistic orientation” (p. 22). Regardless of the perspective with which one views this development, it promotes a blurring of the boundaries between journalism and PR.

Another trend contributes to the problem: Media companies are adapting to the advances of the Internet and the migration of users to the Internet by expanding their online presence (see Beck, Reineck & Schubert, 2010; Godulla, 2015; Neuberger & Kapern, 2013, pp. 196-213). Accordingly, the number of users who also search for and use media coverage on the Internet beyond paid online or offline newspaper or magazine subscriptions has been multiplying steadily for years (cf. Beisch & Schäfer, 2020; cf. also Keen, 2007). The probability that they will encounter content that looks like journalism but is not journalism (such as “PR, service, archive and reference functions, and lay communication;” Weischenberg et al., 2006, p. 348) is high. This is not a problem as long as users are able to recognize it. However, in the course of the developments described above, the distinction between journalism and simulations of journalism is seeming to become increasingly difficult for recipients (Bucher, 2000; Neuberger, 2011); they usually appear to lack the media competence required for this (Gonser & Rußmann, 2017, p. 7; see also Pietzcker, 2017, p. 73; Henry, 2007, p. 23).

Meanwhile, fears are growing that, through its digital transformation, the public sphere is increasingly losing its normatively desirable effective selectivity between journalism and PR, and that the shortage of editorial capacity is further exacerbating this problem (as a result of cost-cutting measures by media organizations; cf. for example Neuberger, 2018). Ruß-Mohl (2017, p. 17) even speaks of a “digitization-induced power shift” between journalism and PR. Against this background, Neuberger et al. (2019) diagnose “that professional journalism has forfeited its extensive

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monopoly as a scrutinizing control authority on the current public sphere: audiences and speakers [in the sense of 'senders'; R. F.] can bypass journalism and dispense with its services, they can more easily criticize it publicly or take on scrutinizing tasks themselves, which are thus no longer the exclusive preserve of professional journalism, which is moreover weakened by an economic crisis. As a result, the previous order is weakening." (p. 175)

This 'softening' is even inherent in some theoretical models of journalism. Haller (2003), for example, writes that journalism must pursue the goal of "successful social communication." This "(...) succeeds when journalism creates a media reality that is used by the communication partners (actors and recipients) as an orientation on current event contexts, or is at least understood as such" (p. 181).[8] Here, the 'success' of specific journalistic goals and functions depends on the perception of the communication partners of journalism and thus also on the recipients' perceptions and assessments of journalism and its products. This means, firstly, that journalism does not achieve its 'goal' if recipients do not use or understand the media reality as an orientation on current event contexts. This happens completely independently of whether or not recipients are correct in their respective perception and assessment (as reflected in the pejorative keyword 'lying/mendacious press' when recipients in Germany believe the media report is not the truth but propaganda). Secondly, considering the theoretical foundations of the distinction between journalism and PR scenarios are also conceivable in which recipients may prefer to understand current event contexts by using 'media' which originates from strategic-persuasive communicators (from organizations and institutions beyond the publishing industry, e.g., companies, NGOs, political parties, etc.). This may occur because these PR texts (1) are sometimes less complex and less diverse and thus appear more comprehensible, because (2) they better hit the core of the recipients' particular interests, because (3) they have an entertaining character, or other reasons. This would mean that a situation would exist in which strategic persuasive communication (and not journalism) would achieve 'successful social communication' – even if

8 See also Arnold (2008) on the journalistic criterion of "applicability." According to this criterion, journalistic offerings "should be attractive [to recipients; R. F.] and applicable in the users' living environment" (p. 499). PR communication can also fulfill this criterion as well as the criterion of being "entertaining." Under certain circumstances, PR can even meet these criteria better than journalism. Unlike journalism, it does not have to consider other criteria that might run counter to these goals here, such as 'diversity' or 'balance.'

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only in certain thematic areas and/or only among some of the recipients (keywords 'fake news,' 'post-truth,' or 'disinformation'). That this scenario is not at all improbable is indicated by findings from an unpublished, initial study of recipients (Kiefl et al., 2020) that I will come back to later.

It is, therefore, "not a matter of course that the audience is almost automatically interested" in the "professional and independent communication of relevant information" by journalism (Godulla & Wolf, 2017, p. 233; cf. similarly Schweiger, 2007, p. 264). The audience may even become less and less interested in this kind of independent communication in the future. Non-journalistic sources and communicators may fulfill the individual and specific information needs of recipients better than journalism. This can result in a reception-functional overlap between journalism and PR, which in turn presents journalism with new challenges of an attention-economic nature, especially on the web. The consequence of this could be that journalistic products change significantly.

There are also further reception-functional overlaps between journalism and PR. For example, Bentele and Seidenglanz (2005, p. 216) found in a representative population survey that the German population expects truthful communication, objectivity, honesty, and social responsibility from PR, as well – criteria and expectations that are also (and actually primarily) attributed to journalism. Bentele (2013, p. 46) assumes that the boom in corporate media (corporate publishing) is mainly responsible for this. Journalism has long been simulated in this PR field as well, both online and offline. In recent years, large publishing houses have increasingly invested in corporate publishing and maintained independent units to produce corporate publications. The commissioning companies benefit from the journalistic expertise and appeal and the associated high credibility of their publications among recipients (Ruß-Mohl, 2017). Increasingly, however, 'corporate publishing' products (available online and offline free of charge) represent serious competition to classic journalistic products, which "(...) can potentially offer a more critical view (...) less influenced by the need for positive self-promotion" but "have to sell at the newsstand" (Ruß-Mohl, 2017, p. 19).

The general public, at any rate, has surprisingly similar value expectations and quality perceptions of the two (normatively and functionally quite different) publishing performance systems (Bentele & Seidenglanz, 2005). It can be assumed that this attitude of the audience additionally aggravates the problem of the increasingly difficult differentiation between digital forms of journalistic and PR texts. However, there is still a dearth of research on the problematic situation described regarding PR that simulates journalism (as defined above). This applies to research on the form and

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content of such simulations as well as to research on the question of the reception and impact of such simulations. A short overview of the state of research on this subject area is given in the following.

State of Research

Previous research on 'journalism and PR' has focused primarily on the working relationship between the two professions. In particular, studies have investigated the extent to which both sides are oriented towards or adapt to each other in the production of public communication. This research is primarily interested in the extent to which journalistic products are influenced and determined by PR interventions (e.g., PR's influence on the timing and the topics of media coverage, c.f. Baerns, 1991). In Anglo-American research, studies on this topic are usually referred to as "information subsidy" (Gandy, 1982; cf. also Kiousis et al., 2007; Manning, 2001). In contrast, research on the 'intereffication model' assumes a mutual orientation, adaptation, and enabling of journalism and PR (Bentele et al., 1997; cf. also Bentele & Fechner, 2015). Corresponding research also addresses the question of the extent to which PR imitates formal selection criteria of journalism in order to influence the reporting process in a way that is favorable to the respective strategic communicator (Hoffjann & Arlt, 2015, p. 92). However, this research does not get to the core of the problem described here regarding the distinguishability between journalistic and PR products.

Godulla et al. (2017) are closer to this issue with their study on differences in digital long-form journalism and corporate publishing (CP). Some of their content-analytic findings have the potential to be transferred to the comparative analysis of journalistic texts and PIoPS of journalism. Among other things, the audio elements and graphics, as well as photos, were found significantly more frequently in journalistic online articles than in the online CP offers examined. Moreover, the online CP texts were also considerably shorter in comparison. Conversely, the occurrence of hyperlinks in CP items was more than three times higher than in the journalistic items. There were also apparent differences in terms of the design of the reception structure: While the linear reception structure (from top to bottom or, less frequently, from left to the right) dominated in corporate publishing (83%), less than half (44%) of the journalistic contributions had this "rigid" structure, as the authors describe it. The "elastic, parallel or ramified narrative structure and storytelling in strands" practiced in 38% of journalistic posts occurs in only 10% of CP posts, and only 7% of

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CP posts have a “concentric narrative structure” or “narrate in chapters” compared to 19% of journalistic posts (pp. 216-217).

Against this background, it is hardly surprising that the journalistic articles were more complex in structure than the CP articles, which had a significantly more straightforward and more homogeneous appearance. Godulla et al. (2017) interpret this as an indication that the two compared text types pursue principally different narrative approaches. They write:

> “Aspects such as objectivity, completeness, and comprehensibility are traditionally emphasized as qualities in journalism (...). A narrative consisting of many sense units can meet these postulates. Thus, the consideration of many aspects theoretically leads to a more versatile (and thus also more complete) picture, which becomes more comprehensible through supplementary information. In corporate publishing, on the other hand, the focus seems to be on formulating an accentuated message, even in digital long-forms, which would lose conciseness if there were too many segments since users could set their own priorities” (p. 215).

Overall, the study offers some interesting starting points for examining differences between journalistic and PR texts. However, it must be remembered that the analyzed criteria apply specifically to textual long forms, and their generalizability is therefore limited.

Another study by Theis-Berglmair and Kellermann (2017) is the only one to date that explicitly addresses the distinction between journalistic and PR texts. In a pilot study, they investigate whether and, if so, how original journalistic texts can be distinguished from original PR texts. In describing this extant research gap, the authors argue that “[t]he problem of classifying and evaluating texts (...) can neither be solved satisfactorily with regard to the (professional) status of the actors nor concerning the traditional quality debate in journalism” (p. 107). They assume that due to the increasingly blurred boundaries between journalism and PR and the changing work roles and new communicative offers on both sides, the previous actor- and organization-related approaches are becoming increasingly useless. Therefore, they propose a descriptive differentiation approach on the text level. The approach aims to develop a survey system that can be used for content analyses and that overcomes the time-consuming operationalization of other (primarily normative) differentiation criteria.

Theis-Berglmair and Kellermann (2017) assume unique and typical linguistic characteristics that can be distinguished for both types of texts. For this purpose, they develop and test a text-analytical procedure based on theoretically founded text-immanent and textual meta-elements, by means

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of which (unambiguous) assignments of texts to journalism or PR can be made. Such text-immanent elements include, for example, certainty-reducing clauses, which are regarded in journalism as a quality feature in situations of uncertainty. A first qualitative pilot study of the two researchers with small text samples indeed provides evidence that their assumption is correct. However, an empirical test on a large scale is still pending. The approach sounds promising for the research interest explicated here regarding the distinguishability of journalism and PR texts. Therefore, it will be presented in more detail later in this article in a section on the contingency-oriented linguistic dimension at the text level to provide a theoretical foundation for the stated research interest.

The question of whether the democracy-theory and norm-based differences between journalistic texts and PIoPS of journalism are actually reflected in the respective text products of PR and journalism is only one side of the coin. Without a doubt, whether recipients can distinguish the two types of texts is also essential – including the questions of whether recipients even expect that the two text types can be distinguished, whether they want to distinguish them at all, and whether they can then actually do so. However, there has been no research on this complex of questions. What is available so far are studies that deal with the recipient perspective on journalistic quality and studies specifically on the quality of online journalism from the recipient perspective (e.g., Neuberger, 2012). From such studies, one could conclude that if recipients can judge journalistic quality, they should also be able to identify communication that does not meet these quality criteria as something other than 'journalism.' They would thus be able to differentiate. However, the findings of relevant audience studies are ambiguous (cf., e.g., Rössler, 2004 vs. Dahinden et al., 2004). Moreover, most studies equate 'quality of journalistic products from a users' perspective' with 'users' expectations of journalistic products' (e.g., Wolling, 2002; as an exception, see Jungnickel, 2011). In most cases, no distinction is made between content producers' professional quality criteria and content users' quality criteria (which may greatly differ; for exceptions, see Rössler, 2004; Wicke, 2022). The question of whether and how the online media audience can judge professional 'journalistic quality' on the Internet at all, and if so, how they go about it, has not been solidly researched so far. The qualitative survey by Wladarsch (2020) does provide the first current assumptions that complement and substantiate older findings by Neubeger et al. (2012), however.

The findings of an as yet unpublished empirical study of recipients (Kiefl et al., 2020) raise initial doubts about the ability of the media audience to distinguish between journalistic texts and PIoPS of journalism on

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the web. The pilot study in question was product-oriented in the sense of Bucher (2000, p. 155). Therefore, it was supplemented by a parallel content analysis of the relevant stimulus material of the recipient study. Most of the respondents expressed an interest in distinguishing between journalism and PR on the Internet and slightly more than 50% were able to classify respective texts correctly. Nevertheless, 38% of the respondents in the experimental study were still unable to accurately identify the presented texts[9] as journalism or PR. Here, actual journalistic texts were identified as PR, and actual PR texts as journalistic texts. Adding the "don't know" residual response category, the number of those who found the task too difficult is quite large. Therefore, there is some evidence that assumptions about a lack of recipients' media competence (see above), which have not been particularly well supported empirically, are probably correct. On the other hand: This result does not have to be due to the audience's deficient media competence. It can also emerge because the respective PR texts simply do a good job in simulating journalism.

The pilot study also revealed initial interesting insights into which formal and content-related criteria the respondents use to identify and distinguish journalism and PR on the Internet (method: thinking aloud). Except for the criteria 'neutrality' and 'diversity,' it is not the classic quality criteria, e.g., according to Arnold (2009) or others (see above), that are used here, but completely different measures, through which individual ideas of journalism and PR come into play. Furthermore, it has been shown that the test persons found the actual PR texts, which they mistook for journalism, more appealing than the actual journalistic texts, which they took for PR. In addition, quite a few test subjects rated the PR texts they had correctly identified as more interesting and relevant than the journalistic texts they had correctly identified. In addition, it made no difference to the perceived credibility of the text stimuli presented whether the subjects had previously identified a text as journalism or as PR. The majority of respondents based their attribution of credibility on their individual perception of the truthfulness of the information provided and not on the more formal question of whether the text was written by journalists or PR authors and what the author's intentions were. In addition, it was shown that for demographic characteristics of the test persons, only age showed slight effects in the response behavior. The same applies at a low level to the frequency of reception of online content (Internet experience).

9 Real journalistic texts existing on the web (i.e., not 'built' for the study) and real journalism simulations of PR sources on the topic of 'Diesel-Gate.'

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The state of the research summarized above means the current scientific knowledge on our topic is sparse. Above all, there is a lack of an initial and coherent theoretical foundation for the research interests introduced above. In the following, possibilities for a theoretical foundation of the two-part subject of research will be explored. For this purpose, existing theoretical components will be brought into play that can be helpful for our problem.

Theoretical Implications for the Distinction Between Journalistic Texts/Products and 'Particular-Interest Oriented Persuasive Simulations' of Journalism (PIoPS)

As already explained, two intertwined sets of questions arise for the overarching research interest of communication studies in the problem context described above:

1. the questions of which theoretical approaches could be suitable for identifying criteria of indistinguishability between journalistic and PR texts and how these criteria can be described in such a way that they allow for a content analytical operationalization to assess text products. The corresponding question here would be whether said differences could be recognizable for users/recipients at all because the two text types are (or are not) designed differently (formally and/or in terms of content);
2. the question of which theoretical approaches could be suitable in audience research that intends to investigate whether recipients (want to) identify differences between the text products in question, how well or poorly they ultimately succeed in doing so, and what criteria they use in trying to distinguish the two.

At this point, it should be recalled once again that one should ideally address both sets of questions in a combined, one-to-one approach within the framework of a "product-oriented" research agenda (cf. Bucher, 2000, p. 155).

Additionally, a third set of questions is conceivable: How do professional communicators from journalism and PR/strategic-persuasive communication actually think about the problem complex described? Do they perceive the overlapping boundaries between journalism and PR and the challenges of difficult distinguishability that may go hand in hand with them as a problem at all? And if so, how do they describe this problem, with what consequences for whom or what, etc.? However, the theoretical foundation for this vital complex of questions is fed by other theoretical

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approaches (e.g., professionalization research, role research, organizational research), depending on the specific knowledge interest, and therefore cannot be dealt with here. It deserves a separate consideration, which would, however, far exceed the framework set here.

Differentiation Dimensions from the Content Perspective

At the center of the product-oriented research interest is the question of which differentiation *dimensions* appear suitable for distinguishing between PIoPS of journalism and actual journalistic texts/content. As described, this question focuses on border shifts/transgressions between PR and journalism, which are especially intensified by the digitalization of public communication. Consequently, the following explanations address the essential content-related and format/design-related peculiarities of journalism and PR as well as selected peculiarities of online texts/content of journalism and PR. A whole range of different dimensions can be used to derive measurement criteria for operationalizing this research interest. Referring back to my explanations in the previous chapters, these measurement criteria can be systematized as follows. However, there is no claim of completeness here: 1. the dimension *'journalistic quality,'* 2. the dimension *'advertency (control),'* 3. the c*ontingency-oriented linguistic dimension* at the text level and 4. the dimension *'persuasion and ethics in PR.'*

The 'Journalistic Quality' Dimension

This dimension focuses on what professional and scientific discourse largely consensually define as good and sincere journalistic online products. To simplify, one can assume thereby: The more online PR texts/content correspond in form and content to these (relevant) journalistic quality criteria, the greater the similarities between PR content and journalistic content on the web.

The public interest orientation of journalism described above, which in most liberal democracies also legitimizes important protective rights of institutionalized journalism, gives rise to two assumptions: First, that a whole series of quality features characterize products of institutionalized journalism in an ideal-typical manner, and second, that products of institutionalized journalism are therefore recognizable by such quality criteria. These assumptions hold true at least for quality journalism.

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For PR, there are no such distinguishable quality criteria (Hoffmann, 2007, p. 558). This does not automatically mean, however, that PR products in general or PIoPS of journalism generally do not exhibit such journalistic criteria. However, from the point of view of professional practice and technique, it can certainly be assumed that journalism simulations – understood as the product of commissioned persuasive communication – fulfill these criteria less often or clearly than journalistic products committed to the common good. This would open up a first theoretical horizon for the measurability of differences between journalistic and PR products: approaches and models for 'journalistic quality.'

In 2008, Arnold presented a first systematization proposal for the wide-ranging discourse on the quality of journalism in communication studies. For this purpose, he developed a three-level model (cf. also Arnold, 2009): (1) For the connection between function and quality of journalistic products, the functional-system-oriented level of the social function of journalism (key phrase "public good orientation"), (2) for the connection between values and quality of journalistic products, the normative democracy-oriented level of fundamental social values, and (3) for the connection between audience benefit and quality of journalistic products, the audience-based action-oriented level of marketing driven expectations. Arnold assigns corresponding quality criteria to each level which could be operationalized both for a content-analytical approach to our research interest and in the context of user studies:

– Functional-system-oriented criteria such as diversity (of topics, arguments, sources, and actors), topicality/novelty value (in the sense of an "observation of society connected to the present" (Arnold, 2008, p. 494)), relevance (in the sense of the journalistic selection program based on news value theory), credibility (not in the sense of assessment by recipients but in the sense of a plausible linking of facts and opinions), independence (in the sense of the norm that journalism does not submit to the logic of other systems), research (in the sense of self-observation "that goes beyond the interests of the performing actors of individual subsystems" (p. 495)), criticism (in the sense of criticizing communication and actions from other social subsystems), accessibility (in the sense of presenting information as comprehensibly, clearly, and vividly as possible), background reporting, regional/local reference;
– Normative democracy-oriented criteria such as balance/neutrality/separation of news and opinion (including legal regulations on impartiality), protection/respect for personal privacy or protection from libel or slander (regulated in media laws and press codices);

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– Audience-oriented criteria such as applicability (journalistic products should be attractive to recipients and applicable in their life setting), entertainment value (in the sense of an entertaining format of information), transparency (in the sense of a minimum requirement for naming sources of information), design.

Other authors arrive at other systematizations, specify and expand this catalog of criteria, or assign specific quality criteria to other levels than Arnold. For example, Pöttker (2000) simply distinguishes between quality criteria that are aimed at the subject of reporting (accuracy, completeness (relevance), truthfulness, distinctiveness) and quality criteria that are important with regard to the audience and its expectations of journalism (independence, topicality, comprehensibility, entertaining nature). On the other hand, other authors point out which criteria are considered irrelevant, less relevant to quality, or even hostile to quality in journalistic products and for what reasons they are placed in these categories. Concerning hostility to quality, Neuberger (2012, p. 44) mentions, e.g., individual or participatory aspects such as views from a personal perspective. Differentiation dimensions can also be operationalized from such 'negative nominations.' Finally, PR products have greater freedom to thematize individual, participatory, or particularistic aspects. The occurrence of such aspects in relevant text products could therefore indicate that a respective text is a PR text.

Arnold's systematization of criteria represents "core qualities" of journalism (Arnold, 2016, p. 558). Depending on the object of investigation and journalistic genre (e.g., opinionated forms such as reportage) or media type (e.g., online journalism or broadcasting), they must be adapted or differentiated. Arnold (2016) emphasizes that this necessity does not make the core qualities obsolete or that "completely different quality grids have to be developed in each case; rather, the quality criteria can be concretized, modified, and weighted accordingly" (p. 557).

For the operationalization of the criterion 'journalistic quality' in the context of our epistomological interest, it must also be taken into account that the classic journalistic quality criteria have so far been developed predominantly for offline journalism. For the online context relevant here, they must be supplemented by quality criteria specifically for online journalism (cf. for example Mehlis, 2014). These include, above all (but not limited to), hypertextuality (cf. Ryfe et al., 2015), interactivity, and multimediality. These web-typical criteria for the quality of online journalism possibly reinforce the similarity between PR and journalism on the Internet because these criteria are also characteristics of professional online

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PR (cf. Pleil, 2015a; Radl et al., 2015, and others). Nevertheless, they are also seen as quality criteria of online journalism in the relevant quality research. Hypertextuality, for example, allows for more transparency of research sources and enables the presentation of further contexts (cf., Neuberger, 2011, p. 108). Interactivity offers recipients better and faster opportunities for feedback to and contact with editorial teams and even enables them to communicate in dialog (cf. Bucher, 2000, pp. 155-156). Multimedia possibly improves the quality of communicating complex issues. For the concrete operationalization of these criteria, however, it is essential to bear in mind that the quality of online journalism is not guaranteed per se by such criteria, but that it depends in turn on the concrete quality of the specific design of these features, functions, and offerings. A difference between journalistic text products and those of online PR could become apparent in the particular design of these criteria. First indications of this can already be found in Godulla et al. (2017) – at least as far as long-text forms of journalism and PR on the Internet are concerned. The only remaining question is whether these findings can be transferred beyond long-text forms and sustainably to other textual formats, which would then make these typical online quality criteria universally distinguishable.

As an overview in McQuail (1992) shows, by the early 1990s, there was already a whole series of studies that examined either individual journalistic quality criteria or larger groups of these criteria. As with McQuail, more recent synopses by Beck et al. (2010, pp. 28-37) or Arnold (2016) show that content analyses dominate quality research. Concrete proposals for the operationalization of journalistic quality criteria, including ideas for improving, adapting, and further developing existing measures, are thus available in large numbers; no fundamental pioneering work needs to be done here.

The ‘Attention’ Dimension

Less relevant than the criterion ‘journalistic quality’ is the criterion ‘attention’ (attention control). The importance of this criterion for the stated research interest arises primarily from the fact that PR and journalism operate in the same online distribution space and are thus, unlike in the offline world, direct communication competitors (cf. Ruß-Mohl, 2017; Altmeppen et al., 2002). Here, their content products are only a single click away from each other. Audience studies have shown that recipients are strongly guided by the formal design of web content when selecting information (Seibold, 2002, p. 37). Thus, in comparison to the offline scenario,

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strategic considerations for attracting (and/or controlling) attention gain enormous importance in the somewhat "chaotic" Internet (Pleil, 2015b, p. 1017), both in PR and in journalism (cf. Franck, 2014).[10]

News factors represent a comparatively classic instrument of attention control. They not only control the journalistic selection process in news production. As research has shown, they also influence the selective use and information processing of news by recipients (e.g., Eilders, 1997, 2006; Eilders et al., 1999; Fretwurst, 2008; Temmerman et al., 2021), especially when they increase the newsworthiness of an article simply by appearing in headlines (see also Seibold, 2002). Therefore, news factors can also be regarded as an instrument for controlling the attention of recipients and are given a corresponding relevance for the dimension 'attention.' In addition to these content-related aspects of news value logic, it is primarily aspects of the design layout and narrative structure that can control the recipients' attention. These include the ranking and positioning of an article, graphic design of headlines and the rest of the text, specifics of the layout, type of imagery, narrative structure (elastic, parallel, ramified, concentric, etc.; Godulla et al., 2017), and, on the Internet in particular, features such as brevity and conciseness, but also size and conspicuity of the typography (especially of the headline) (Seibold, 2002).

However, in journalism there are normative expectations of adherence to certain reliable design rules. These give journalistic products a specific value of recognition and therefore appear to be suitable as a criterion for distinguishing between journalistic and non-journalistic text products in general. In online journalism, design aspects extend far beyond simple rules such as 'headline, title, lead.' They also depend on the type of presentation (e.g., interview, report), whether the format is more opinion-driven or information-driven, whether it is 'hard' or 'soft' journalism, and much more. Also, the web offers more possibilities for creative attention control of textual products than the offline area (unique technical features, multimedia, etc.). In this context, PR has more leeway for the use of different attention-grabbing strategies (e.g., more conspicuous typographical features; tabloid characteristics) than offline and online journalism. They both are subject to expectations and professional requirements based on normative standards (e.g., seriousness and credibility through creative presentation). However, one can assume that in PR texts that aim to have a journalistic appearance, this leeway will not be exploited, and instead, the products

10 It should be remembered here that the simulation of journalism by PR is already per se a strategy for attracting attention (cf. also Hoffjann et al., 2015).

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will be oriented in terms of content and form towards the stricter and narrower rules of journalistic attention-creation. Or vice versa: A journalism-like text that aims to gain/increase attention by employing online strategies that are rather unusual or even undesirable for journalism is probably the journalism simulation of a strategic-persuasive communicator.

The Contingency-Oriented Linguistic Dimension at the Text Level

The pilot study by Theis-Berglmair and Kellermann (2017) offers an interesting approach to distinguishing journalism from PR at the text level. The aim is to overcome the limitations and research pragmatic hurdles of classical actor, role and organizational dimensions, including journalistic quality criteria. The authors propose a contingency-oriented approach. The orientation on the construct 'contingency' is crucial: The approach assumes that journalistic contributions can be distinguished from PR content similar to journalism by looking at contingency. In this case, contingency simply means "that something can be one way or another" (Theis-Berglmair et al., 2017, p. 108). The measurement of distinctiveness between journalistic and PR texts is derived from the specific contingency character of each of the texts under investigation. This is because, according to Theis-Berglmair et al., the space and potential possibilities for the 'this way or another' are more extensive and more diverse in journalism (second-order observation) than in PR (self-referential observation). This is reflected in journalistic texts by, for example, a larger number of different sources, a greater variety of perspectives and reference horizons, and/or more independent reference observers such as experts/scientists or other organizations (p. 109). Conversely, Theis-Berglmair et al. expect significantly higher degrees of certainty in PR texts than in journalistic texts. Thus, a journalistic text would be characterized by an open contingency (a great deal of internal plurality) and a PR text by a closed contingency (little internal plurality). As clauses 13.1 and 14 of the Press Code of the German Press Council (2019) show, this assumption is also plausible from a norm-theoretical perspective; there is nothing comparable for PR products.

Theis-Berglmair et al. propose to investigate precisely this difference by means of text-linguistic procedures, e.g., a content-analytical survey of the occurrence of certainty-reducing modal verbs and modal adverbs in texts. Linguistically, certainty reduction is expressed via modal adverbs of conditional validity such as 'probably,' 'possibly,' 'perhaps,' 'presumably,' etc., as well as via modal verbs such as 'can,' 'may,' 'should,' etc. (Theis-Berglmair

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& Kellermann, 2017, p. 110; see also Simmerling & Janich, 2016; Janich & Simmerling, 2015). In a first pilot study, the authors showed that PR texts contain far fewer, if any, certainty-reducing clauses than journalistic texts (p. 111).

The approach presented by Theis-Berglmair et al. is not entirely new, but its application to the measurement of differences between journalism and PR products is. There are already studies on the handling of linguistic forms of certainty reduction and the expression of uncertainty in journalism, especially content analyses on science journalism (e.g. Collins, 1987). From this research on journalists' grammatical, stylistic, and rhetorical choices for the linguistic depiction of 'uncertainty,' theoretical implications in the sense of Theis-Berglmair et al. can also be derived and survey indicators identified that are relevant for the operationalization of our specific research interest. These include, for example, the occurrence of so-called "qualifying indications" (e.g., 'obviously,' 'unambiguously,' 'presumably,' 'apparently') (Kepplinger, 2011, p. 101), "restrictive formulations" (e.g., 'presumably,' 'possibly') but also "formulations in the subjunctive" (Maurer, 2011, p. 62; see also Collins, 1987) or the investigation of tense, expressions of negation, and certain patterns of word formation like the use of particular affixes, etc. (Simmerling & Janich, 2016, p. 964-965; see also Janich & Simmerling, 2015; Stocking & Holstein, 2009). Given such a linguistic orientation of operationalization, the goal set by Theis-Berglmair et al. to overcome the limitations and research pragmatic hurdles of classical actor, role, and organizational dimensions could probably be realized in the context of automated computational linguistic content analyses.

The Dimension 'Persuasion and Ethics in PR'

The working definition for PR's journalism simulation presented above assumes that the textual messages in question are persuasive in nature. As a reminder: The definition suggests that journalism simulations by strategic communicators (PR) primarily pursue the goal of having a persuasive effect on a target audience, i.e., persuading them of a fact, a product, an opinion/attitude, etc. Conversely, this means that original journalistic texts of high quality (quality journalism) do not pursue persuasive goals in

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this sense – at least from a normative and ideal-typical point of view.[11] The question is whether the persuasive character can be identified in journalism-simulating PR and would be recognizable for users of such simulations. To clarify this question, the occurrence of 'persuasion' or the persuasive character of a text product has to be operationalized. For this purpose, I propose the following indicators, which do not all have to occur simultaneously. This means that 'persuasion' can also occur on a sliding scale:

– a less pronounced separation of news and opinion (in contrast to journalism, PIoPS of journalism does not have to separate information/facts and opinion or explicitly identify the author's individual position as his/her 'opinion');
– less pronounced labeling of promotional content (e.g., product PR)
– less background reporting;
– fewer different and independent opinions and consequently less diversity, balance, and neutrality;
– less criticism/polarization (prioritizing positive coverage/sentiment).

The extent to which these criteria of persuasive impression are used at all in successful PIoPS of journalism has not yet been investigated. Their use is rather unlikely because they interfere with the intended (non-persuasive) journalistic impression and are thus somewhat counterproductive for journalism simulations. However, for the question of the more or less well recognizable persuasive character of PIoPS of journalism (and thus for the operationalization of distinctiveness), they are indispensable as dimensions of investigation as a start.

While the quality debate in journalism research has developed numerous indicators for 'good' journalism on the basis of demands and expectations grounded in democracy theories and its normative implications, no "separable indicators" have yet been developed for PR (Hoffmann, 2007, p. 558). One exception to this is the quality requirements for PR in media relations which are specifically geared to the target group of journalism. For professional reasons, the requirements here are very closely aligned with what is known from the quality discourse in journalism research; it can therefore come as no surprise that the parallels to the quality of journalism are obvious here. Beyond media relations, quality

11 Extreme tabloid journalism can be seen as a typical exception to this rule. And I have already mentioned the special forms of opinionated journalism such as commentary or feature reporting. They, too, can or even should have a persuasive character.

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standards for PR are described and discussed under the heading of 'ethics in PR,' some of which are very close to those of journalism or have even been adopted one-to-one from journalism (cf. Pleil, 2015a). These include requirements such as credibility/reliability (e.g., Bentele & Seidenglanz, 2015) and transparency/full disclosure (about sources of content and sender transparency), timeliness, or completeness. Other quality criteria of PR that are rather atypical for journalism concern authenticity, symmetrical dialog orientation (Grunig et al., 1984), consensus-oriented communication (Burkart, 1993; 2004), respect for differing viewpoints, veracity or honesty (cf., Parsons, 2016, Ikonen et al., 2017; Deutscher Rat..., 2012, among others).

As we have seen, there are several possible text-oriented operationalization dimensions for the comparative analysis of the two online text types in question. As mentioned, this overview does not claim to be complete. For example, one could also consider what role the occurrence of typical Internet advertising plays for our question. This includes the content of advertising, its design and placement or the way it is embedded, its number, etc. – from pop-up ads to banner ads to links that lead to external advertising websites.

Differentiation Dimensions from an Audience Perspective: Recipient Characteristics and Reception Behavior

The question of whether recipients would even have the chance to detect differences between the two types of texts on the Internet is covered by content-analytical procedures. Content analysis can be used to clarify whether corresponding texts exhibit distinguishing features at all and whether this chance, therefore, at least potentially exists. It is, however, unable to answer whether recipients are able to recognize such features, whether they use these features as criteria in their attempt to distinguish between text types, whether they possibly apply wholly different or even their own distinguishing criteria, whether these finally lead to the goal of a 'correct' distinction, or how important it is to recipients that the types of texts are distinguishable and that the recipients themselves are able to distinguish between the types. For this, an audience-oriented approach is needed which enables us to describe the concrete differentiation behaviors and procedures of recipients and offers possibilities of operationalization for reception studies. This dimension includes the usual socio-demographic characteristics of recipients, which can be assumed to determine their ability to discriminate and the concrete procedures they use to do so. Following

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existing assumptions about the quality of media literacy in general and online media literacy in particular (cf., for example, Bucher, 2000; Gonser et al., 2017; Henry, 2007; Neuberger, 2011; Pietzcker, 2017), it is quite plausible to assume that, in addition to sociodemographic characteristics, characteristics of recipients' media literacy also influence their individual discrimination behavior and procedures. However, media competence is difficult to operationalize. A helpful approach would be to survey the respondents' general media use (quantity and/or quality of media use, depending on the specifics of the research question) on an individual level and, with a view to our specific research interest, also ask about the characteristics of their Internet use in particular. This is based on the assumption that respondents with more Internet experience may practice different discrimination behaviors and procedures than respondents with less Internet experience. The individual level of media literacy could also impact the question of how important it is to recipients in general that journalism and PR are distinguishable from one another and/or whether they want to distinguish between the two at all.

Operationalization Concept: Design of a Structural Model

The operationalization concept proposed in the following is to be understood as a first attempt to empirically implement a research goal that has not yet been investigated in a theoretically well-founded way. For this purpose, we recall the specific research interest from the beginning of this contribution: Can persuasive journalism simulations of PR on the Internet be distinguished from actual journalistic products/content on the Internet and, if so, how? The research interest is twofold:

(1) Do theoretically derived features that are assumed to be typical occur in both types of texts on the Internet, and if so, to what extent and in what form? That is, are the texts actually characterized by different features? This is aimed at the question of whether it is even possible for recipients to recognize differences?
(2) Do recipients have the skills to distinguish between the two types of texts on the Internet and what criteria, means, and procedures do they use for this? How important or unimportant is it for recipients to be able to distinguish between the two types?

Following Bucher (2000), the approach will be product-oriented. As discussed above, this means that reception findings (user studies) are related to text/content characteristics (content analysis) in the same project, i.e.,

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a recipient study is combined with a content analysis of the relevant stimulus material from the recipient study. Table 1 summarizes the derived theoretical dimensions according to the chosen system (cf. the sections on differentiation dimensions) and names the respective objectives. It serves as a basis for developing an operationalization concept.

Table 1: Theoretically Derived Differentiation Dimensions, Research Areas/Methods and Knowledge Objectives

Differentiation Dimensions	Research Area & Method	Knowledge Objective
Text feature 'journalistic quality' Text feature 'attention' (including narrative structure) e'Contingency-oriented linguistic features at the text level' Text feature 'persuasion and ethics in PR'	Media content research: – Quantitative methods of content analysis, including computer-assisted automated methods – Qualitative methods of content analysis – Combinations of quantitative and qualitative methods	Identification of assumed distinguishing features, the weighting of their (gradual) relevance as well as the degree of their discriminatory power between text types → Derivations for recipient study
Recipient characteristics and reception behavior	Reception research: – Quantitative & qualitative methods of inquiry – Thinking aloud – Participatory observation – Eye-tracking as well as mixed methods or method triangulation	Identification & description of: – Characteristics of recipients' individual *intention* to discriminate – Characteristics of the relevance of the basic discrimination *possibility* for recipients – Characteristics of the *individual discrimination behavior/procedure* ... based on the function and relevance of content-analytically identified differentiating features (differentiation dimensions 4.1.1. to 4.1.4) ... beyond the content-analytically identified differentiating features. – Analysis of the importance of individual user-specific recipient characteristics (e.g., socio-demographics & media competence)

From this scheme, a large catalog of research-guiding questions can be derived. Table 2 outlines these questions for the text-oriented part of the declared knowledge interest. In this context, I also refer to the relevant basic literature for each aspect (cf. the section on the state of research).

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Table 2: Possible Research-Guiding Questions for the Text-Oriented Part of the Stated Research Interest (Media Content Research) According to Knowledge Objectives

Knowledge Objective (Each of which has specific implications/derivations for audience-focused research)	**Research-Guiding Questions**
– Identification of various distinguishing features of the dimension ***'journalistic quality,'*** the weighting of their (gradual) relevance as distinguishing features as well as their general discriminatory potential	‣ *Do the two types of texts on the Internet differ with regard to the norm-theoretically founded and ideal-typically attributed classical criteria for 'quality'?* [Occurrence, type, and frequency] (e.g., Arnold, 2016; Beck et al., 2010; Deutscher Rat…, 2012; Ikonen et al., 2017; McQuail, 1992; Mehlis, 2014; Neuberger 2012, 2011; Parsons, 2016; Pleil, 2015a; Pöttker, 2000). ‣ *Do the two types of text on the Internet differ concerning Internet-specific criteria for 'quality' such as, in particular, multimedia, interactivity, and hypertextuality?* [Occurrence, type, and frequency of multimedia, interactive and hypertextual tools] (e.g., Bucher, 2000; Godulla et al., 2017; Mehlis, 2014; Neuberger; 2011; Pleil, 2015a; Radl et al., 2015)
– Identification of various distinguishing features of the dimension ***'attention'*** ***(including narrative structures)***, the weighting of their relevance as suitable distinguishing features, as well as determination of their general discriminatory potential	‣ *Do the two types of text on the Internet differ in their content and/or formal design to attract/enhance attention?* [Occurrence, type, and frequency of means to attract/enhance attention, including news factors/values] (e.g., Altmeppen et al., 2002; Eilders, 1997, 2006; Eilders et al., 1999; Franck, 2014; Fretwurst, 2008; Godulla et al., 2017; Pleil, 2015b; Ruß-Mohl, 2017; Seibold, 2002).
– Identification of ***contingency-oriented linguistic distinguishing features at the text level***, the weighting of their relevance as suitable distinguishing features, and their general discriminatory potential	‣ *Do the two text types on the Internet differ concerning contingency-oriented linguistic features at the text level?* [Occurrence, type, and frequency of linguistic forms of certainty reduction and expression of uncertainty] (e.g., Collins, 1987; Deutscher Presserat, 2019; Janich et al., 2015; Kepplinger, 2011; Maurer, 2011; Simmerling et al., 2016; Stocking et al., 2009; Theis-Berglmair et al., 2017
– Identification of various distinguishing features of the dimension ***'persuasion and ethics in PR,'*** the weighting of their relevance as suitable distinguishing features, and their general discriminatory potential	‣ *In PIoPS of journalism on the Internet, how does the persuasive nature of PR manifest itself (if at all), and (how) does the implementation of ethical standards of PR become apparent?* [Occurrence, type, and frequency of persuasive characteristics and ethical standards of PR] (e.g., Bentele & Seidenglanz, 2015; Burkart, 1993, 2004; Deutscher Rat…, 2012; Grunig at al., 1984; Ikonen et al., 2017; Parsons, 2016; Pleil, 2015a)

The operationalization concept outlined here for the content-analytical distinction between journalistic products and journalism simulation on the Internet is certainly not complete. For example, it could also be relevant to investigate whether and, if so, in what way advertising plays a role, as it is embedded in or surrounds the respective text products. It could also be investigated whether and, if so, how much advertising the two types of text have, how much advertising surrounds the texts in each case or is

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embedded in the texts – from pop-up advertising to advertising banners to links that lead to external advertising websites. PR texts are likely to have greater leeway here than journalistic products, which could result in a differentiating criterion.

From the content-analytical examination of the presented differentiation dimensions, two contrasting result scenarios in the sense of a continuum are conceivable, between which further gradually graded scenarios could be distinguished. Result scenario 1: The two types of text can be distinguished (more or less beyond doubt) on the basis of the dimensions and criteria analyzed. This means that recipients have at least the potential to distinguish between original journalism and simulated journalism on the basis of product-immanent characteristics. Result scenario 2: The two types of text cannot be (easily) distinguished on the basis of the analyzed dimensions and criteria. The similarities between journalism simulation (PIoPS) and actual/original journalism are too considerable. The recipients have no/few possibilities to distinguish between original journalism and simulated journalism on the basis of product-immanent characteristics. From these two result scenarios (if necessary, gradually staged) derivations can and must then be made for a corresponding recipient study. Depending on the resulting scenario, a large catalog of research-guiding questions can also be derived for recipient-oriented research based on the systematization presented in Table 1. Table 3 outlines corresponding questions for the user-oriented part of the research.

Beyond these research-guiding questions derived from the preceding theoretical considerations regarding the stated research interest, one can, of course, deduce quite different research questions from other theoretical contexts. For example, in an evaluation-theoretical PR context, it seems interesting to ask whether the assignment of a text on the Internet to journalism or PR by the recipients influences its perceived credibility, seriousness, transparency, etc.—and in which way. Interestingly, such patterns were not found in the pilot study by Kiefl et al. (2021). The study's results indicate that the perception of a text as credible, serious, transparent, or balanced is independent of whether respondents had previously classified this text (correctly or incorrectly) as PR or as journalism. The uses-and-gratifications approach represents an entirely different, alternative theoretical anchoring of the described problem context. From this perspective, it could be interesting to ask which motivational and reward conditions users on the Internet prefer for one or the other type of text. Here, too, Kiefl's et al. pilot study produced some interesting initial findings, according to which the test subjects made highly individual

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Table 3: Possible Research-Guiding Questions for the Reception-Oriented Part of the Stated Research Interest by Knowledge Objective (Reception Research)

Knowledge Objectives	Research-Guiding Questions
– Identification & relevance of the user-specific ***discrimination intention*** [also wholly independent of the result scenario content analysis].	‣ *Do users even want to (be able to) distinguish between the two types of text on the Internet? How important is this to them? How do they justify their respective attitude?* [Characteristics of intention/willingness to distinguish and reasons for this]
– Identification & relevance of recipients' ***basic discrimination ability***.	‣ *Are users able to distinguish (correctly) between both types of text on the Internet? If not, how great is the recipients' uncertainty in this regard, and what exactly do these uncertainties consist of?* [Duration of the decision-making process; quality of the decisions made; reasons/causes for a particular decision, etc.]
– Identification & relevance of recipients' ***individual discrimination behavior/procedure*** ... ... according to the function and relevance of content-analytically identified differentiation dimensions as well as ... beyond the content-analytically identified differentiation characteristics (user-specific differentiation criteria).	‣ *Which (classical vs. own content-related and/or formal) criteria/procedures do recipients use to distinguish between both text types on the Internet?* [Particular characteristics of the differentiation behavior of recipients, including procedures beyond the content-analytically identified differentiation dimensions such as consultation of the imprint, etc.]
– Identification of the influence of recipients' ***socio-demographic characteristics*** and characteristics of their ***media competence.***	‣ *Do specific recipient characteristics influence the response behavior of the respondents?* [e.g., socio-demographics, quantity & quality of general media/Internet use; media literacy]

benefit assessments, again irrespective of whether they considered a text to be journalism or PR.

Challenges for Operationalization

For the operationalization of the research interest outlined here, a series of challenges arise. From a methodological point of view, the realization of the product-oriented approach demanded by Bucher (2000) that was presented above, i.e., the combination of content analysis and reception study, is only a minor difficulty. However, the product-oriented approach entails several particular features for the selection of the investigation and stimulus material. These are due to the fact that this material must be identical in the reception study and the content analysis and must therefore meet the requirements of the research question for a content analysis as well as for a user study. The specific conditions that have to be taken into

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account in selecting a study design and stimulus material and the kind of care that has to be taken in the content analysis will be briefly outlined in the following two sections.

Selection of Study Design and Stimulus Material for Audience Research

Since there is no established procedure for identifying PR texts on the Internet, it is not possible to systematically select the text samples for PIoPS of journalism. On the other hand, when selecting stimulus material for a study according to the outlined approach, it has to be taken into account that the respective media brands strongly determine recipients' quality expectations, perceptions, and evaluations (cf., for example, Slater et al., 1996; Urban et al., 2014; Voigt, 2016; Wladarsch, 2020). This speaks against selecting prominent, widely known media brands for recipient-oriented research on the issues under consideration here. The journalistic product could then be identified by the subjects from the outset quite simply via the media brand. The search for journalistic stimulus material suitable for the research interest outlined here thus represents a challenge that should not be underestimated. Artificially constructing a corresponding text as investigation and stimulus material, as experimental media effects research does in many cases, is not a solution. The specific research question requires authentic text material which can actually be found on the Internet.

This also applies to the selection of a suitable content topic for both types of text. It must be a topic that is very likely to arouse widespread interest to minimize the influence of the topic on the response behavior of the recipients (interest in the topic, being personally affected by the topic, etc.). The recommended topic for journalistic and PR stimulus material should be a socially relevant problem. To ensure that different perspectives are presented (e.g., internal plurality/diversity as a quality feature of journalistic reporting), it should also be sufficiently controversial or crisis-related. After all, strategic communicators from different social subsystems should (want/be able/have to) express themselves. The probability of this increases in the case of crisis-related topics. Kiefl et al. (2020), for example, solved these challenges as follows: The research team decided to use the diesel scandal ('Diesel-Gate') of the German car industry as a topic for the study. This topic was quite current at the time of the survey. In addition to journalism, many companies also commented on it – especially car companies as part of their crisis PR. The aim was to restore confidence and minimize the damage done to their image. To this end, a number of

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German car companies affected deliberately relied on stakeholder communication in the form of journalistic simulation.

This topic also made it possible for Kiefl et al. (2020) to find corresponding journalistic reporting on the Internet beyond the comparatively prominent media brands that are easily recognizable. In the case of Kiefl et al., specialist media sites proved to be well-suited for this purpose. The researchers therefore chose journalistic online contributions from *manager-magazin.de* and *gute-fahrt.de* for the pilot study in question and PIoPS of journalism from the PR-products *fleetdriver.de* and *meinautomagazin.de*. The vast majority of participants in the study were not familiar with either media brand.

The stimulus material of the PR text type 'journalistic simulation' must come from stakeholder media. According to Hoffmann (2007), these cannot "intuitively be attributed to either PR or journalism, [since they] often have a professional journalistic makeup" (p. 555). One can easily find such texts, for example, on industry-specific, subject-specific online sites.[12] Nevertheless, great care must be taken when checking whether the corresponding material actually originates from strategic-persuasive communicators (e.g., through detailed checks of the information in the imprint of a website). This is all the more relevant because journalistic simulations are, by definition, similar to actual journalistic reporting. At first glance, therefore, it must not be recognizable whether a text is journalism or PR.

The second challenge consists of checking whether this PR material also represents a sufficiently clear journalistic simulation – sufficiently clear in the sense of the declared research interest. For this purpose, a precise and easily applicable definition of 'journalistic simulation' (content-related and formal criteria) that can be easily applied to the selection process must be established in advance.

Quite a few of the research questions listed above as examples for reception studies and content analyses also require the sender/author of the stimulus material to be clearly identifiable in the imprint of the website in question. This is not always the case, especially not with hybrid models such as blogs. There is a surprisingly large number of texts on such websites that cannot be unequivocally identified as either journalism or PR. Here, too, broad exploratory work may have to be done first.

12 For the sake of completeness, it should be mentioned here that Kiefl et al. (2020) selected their PR stimulus texts (journalism simulations) on the topic of 'Diesel-Gate' from the PR platforms *fleetdriver.de* and *meinautomagazin.de*.

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Content Analyses

Apart from selecting suitable stimulus material for content analysis and reception study, there are further challenges, especially for the content analysis part. It is already known from the many existing studies on journalistic quality that an enormously sophisticated system of categories is needed for a correspondingly comprehensive survey, and this system must be broken down into many different dimensions and characteristics (cf., also Theis-Berglmair et al., 2017). Because of the need for intersubjectively verifiable coding, great care must be taken in defining categories. Given the complexity of sub-dimensions of the construct 'journalistic quality' (e.g., credibility, transparency, diversity), the same applies to developing corresponding coding instructions. Because of the long tradition of (also internationally comparative) content-analytical research on journalistic quality, one does not have to reinvent the wheel here. However, it must be clarified, for example, whether and how individual quality dimensions should potentially be weighted or how one deals data-analytically with the problem that quality criteria are not entirely independent of one another.

Concluding Remarks

The digitization of communication and the emergence of the Internet have not only sustainably changed the conditions of interaction between journalism and PR in the production of public communication and the public (sphere). The reception of their respective products by the intended target groups has also changed. While the first aspect – change in the *interaction* of journalism and PR in the production of public communication and the public – is comparatively well researched, the latter – change in the *reception and expectations* of journalism and PR – still remains a blind spot in communication science. This is surprising because it is a field in change. Fields in change are always well-suited for research. In addition, they are well-suited to improving and advancing dialogue and mutual stimulation between science and the respective professional practice. In the present case, journalism and PR are involved likewise – also explicitly with a view to each other.

This theoretical contribution is intended to show in which direction(s) the outlined research interest could be developed. In doing so, two questions were deliberately omitted: First, could relevant studies on the comparison of journalistic texts and persuasive journalism simulations also offer an answer as to whether journalistic products actually provide higher quality

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(from whose perspective?) than persuasive journalism simulations produced and disseminated by strategic communicators (PR)? As already mentioned, initial research results (Kiefl et al., 2020) indicate that this question may be answered differently from the recipients' viewpoint than from a normative perspective taken by experts and professional representatives. However, further research on this interesting and important issue, which is highly relevant for the future of journalism in liberal democracies, requires different theoretical foundations than those outlined here.

Second, to what extent do the audience's perceptions go hand in hand with what journalists and strategic PR communicators see as their own professional tasks and experts see as the quality of journalism and PR texts. Concerning journalism, communication scholars are now working on this question (see, e.g., Loosen et al., 2020); concerning PR, interest in the issue is still minimal. In any case, the research interest outlined in this chapter can contribute initial answers to these two questions. However, concrete theoretical foundations for the study of these two questions would have to differ in various aspects as compared to the ones presented here, which particularly considered the distinguishability and differentiation between journalism and persuasive journalism simulations.

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