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Communication of higher education institutions: Historical developments and changes over the past decade

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1 Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are pivotal organizations in modern societies (Schäfer & Fähnrich, 2020). Over the past decades, the higher education sector has expanded considerably in countries across the world, with many newly founded colleges and universities and rapid increases in student enrollment and research output. In addition, new public management reforms and a growing need for societal legitimation have led many HEIs to establish or enlarge their communication departments, pursue branding and reputation management, and professionalize their communication efforts across various channels (Elken, Stensaker, & Dedze, 2018; Marcinkowski, Kohring, Fürst, & Friedrichsmeier, 2014; Raupp & Osterheider, 2019; Schwetje, Hauser, Böschen, & Leßmöllmann, 2020; Vogler & Schäfer, 2020). Although a growing body of literature has shed light on how HEIs engage in public relations (PR) and science communication, we know little about how their communication has developed over time and in relation to the fundamental transformations in higher education systems and the media landscape in recent years, decades, and even centuries (Daenekindt & Huisman, 2020; Koenen & Meißner, 2019). Most existing sketches of such historical developments have focused on one country – as is typical for histories of PR in general (Raaz & Wehmeier, 2011) – and have been dedicated to the second half of the 20th century (Bühler, Naderer, Koch, & Schuster, 2007, pp. 25–32; Escher, 2001, pp. 13–22; Höhn, 2011, pp. 118–129). In contrast, the early beginnings of university communication since the late 19th century and recent trends in the past decade have been little researched. This guest editorial and the contributions of this Thematic Section on *Changing Communication of Higher Education Institutions* address these gaps in research and together shed light on developments in different European countries, as well as in the U.S.

2 The institutionalization of HEI communication: A historical sketch

It has long been assumed that PR first emerged and was professionalized in the corporate sector before it spread to other sectors (Myers, 2021, pp. 20–22; Watson, 2014). Accordingly, research into the history of PR has focused on the beginnings and developments of PR in companies, while "public relations practice outside corporate and political circles" (Myers, 2021, p. 76) has been neglected. This neglect has included university communication, which is typically understood as following the example of corporations and, thus, being shaped by a corporate logic (Bonfiglio, 1990, pp. 32–33; Rodnitzky, 1967, p. 303). However, a few doctoral theses on the U.S. (Bonfiglio, 1990; Rodnitzky, 1967) and recent work on Germany (Koenen & Meißner, 2019) suggest that the beginnings of university communication preceded the widespread use of professional PR by companies, which challenges the "dominant model of managerialist corporate orientation of PR history" (Watson, 2014, p. 876).

University PR can be traced back to the 17th century, when Harvard College established fundraising efforts, and other U.S. universities followed suit in subsequent decades (Myers, 2021, p. 80). Fundraising was still crucial in the 19th century, when higher education was exponentially growing and new universities were emerging (Myers, 2021, p. 81). While the demand for knowledge, academic education, and specialized workers by industry and society was growing, only small segments of the U.S. population had contact with or personal connections to universities (Weerts, Freed, & Morphew, 2014, pp. 232–233). This is where the promotion of campus life came in: "Campus calendars were filled with events promoting ceremony, pageantry, and large crowds, including newly established Founder's days and Homecoming weekends" (Weerts et al., 2014, p. 233).

Publicity efforts began to evolve afterwards, with the University of Wisconsin as the first HEI to publish a monthly journal in 1870 (Cutlip, 1995, p. 230). In 1896, this was supplemented by a biweekly bulletin sent out to journalists, mainly informing them about research conducted at the university and intended to create media attention, thereby improving fundraising, student recruitment, and the public reputation of the university. Although the bulletin was well received by journalists and successful in sparking media attention, it was temporarily discontinued in 1898, showing that resources for university communication were still volatile at that time (Cutlip, 1995, p. 230). In many cases, university leaders were responsible for communication activities and contributed to the public visibility of their universities, for instance, by organizing large-scale anniversary celebrations or creating periodicals for internal and external target groups, such as staff, students, alumni, and funders (Bonfiglio, 1990; Cutlip, 1995; Rodnitzky, 1967). Such periodicals could comprise inputs from university staff and were often compiled in the president's office with the help of presidential assistants, faculty staff, or students (Cutlip, 1995; Rodnitzky, 1967). The president of the Uni-

versity of Chicago, William R. Harper, stated that his communication efforts were driven by two objectives: to secure public support for the university and to transfer scientific knowledge to society. His success stimulated other university leaders to follow suit (Bonfiglio, 1990, pp. 28–29; Cutlip, 1995, pp. 233, 238).

However, as the 19th century drew to a close, the growing size of universities led to the emergence of a specialized, separate administrative staff beyond the president's office (Bonfiglio, 1990; Esmond, 1959). Moreover, the increasing number of universities fueled competition for students and funding (Bonfiglio, 1990). At the same time, news media gained importance with the proliferation of newspapers and growing readerships (Bonfiglio, 1990; Turk, 2000, pp. 12–13). News outlets showed an interest in reporting about campus life and research findings but often did not have sufficient means for comprehensive coverage (Bonfiglio, 1990, p. 24). Due to these changes in the higher education and media sectors, a few U.S. universities relied on external agencies; that is, they hired a "publicity bureau to help them communicate with the public" (Kummerfeldt, 1975, p. 6). Several U.S. universities established bulletins for journalists and institutionalized communication departments or considered such plans (Bonfiglio, 1990; Cutlip, 1995, p. 231). The first communication department was founded at the University of Michigan in 1897, and later, more and more U.S. universities established communication departments primarily concerned with media relations (Bonfiglio, 1990). This dynamic characterizing the institutionalization of university communication also resulted from mutual observations of HEIs, with the forerunners being contacted and asked about their communication practices and structures. In doing so, some universities realized that competitors were already successful in pitching stories to newspapers about research, events, and decisions at the university, in influencing coverage (e.g., by providing facts and correcting misinformation), and in reducing negative press reports (Bonfiglio, 1990; Cutlip, 1995; Myers, 2021). Sim-

ilar developments occurred in Germany at the beginning of the 20th century, with the first communication departments established at the universities in Berlin and Leipzig (Koenen & Meißner, 2019). While the former was mainly focused on internal communication and student recruitment, the communication department at the University of Leipzig focused, in particular, on responding to journalistic inquiries and creating press releases. However, compared to the U.S., communication efforts of German HEIs were rare and uncommon.

During the First World War, the total budget for communication departments at U.S. universities was still small. Efforts by communication personnel to obtain more resources and thus increase communication output were rejected due to a lack of funding; some of the existing communication structures and practices were even discontinued as a result of scarce resources due to the war (Rodnitzky, 1967, pp. 47–48). However, university communication accomplished an important step in professionalization and networking by founding the "American Association of College News Bureaus" in 1917, later called the "American College Publicity Association" (1930) and the "American College Public Relations Association" (1946) (Bonfiglio, 1990, pp. 36–37; Kummerfeldt, 1975, p. 7).

An early survey by Fine (1941) found that between the two World Wars, most U.S. universities established communication departments. Especially at larger universities, they became a standard feature (Bonfiglio, 1990, pp. 29, 36; Turk, 2000, p. 16). However, some smaller HEIs still lacked the resources required to employ communication practitioners and instead relied on university leaders to inform the public and create news releases (Grossley, 1944, p. 339). Better-resourced universities also used new media technologies, such as film and radio, to diversify their communication practices and reach different target groups, such as (prospective) students and their parents, alumni, financial supporters, and the general public (Loper, 1960; Rodnitzky, 1967, pp. 243–244). While such communication practices became more common in the 1950s, early adopters in the 1920s already used new media to draw attention to campus life, teaching, and research (Rodnitzky, 1967).

As higher education systems were reformed after the Second World War and had to rebuild their legitimacy, universities started to cooperate and, together, tried to earn the trust of society. Rather than promoting only one's own organization, U.S. and German HEIs aimed to contribute to the legitimation of universities in their region or the higher education system in general (Bonfiglio, 1990; Koenen & Meißner, 2019). An association of German university leaders agreed that HEIs should invest more resources to inform the public about their research and teaching, thereby increasing public support and interest in higher education (Bühler et al., 2007; Escher, 2001; Höhn, 2011). However, in the German case, this was a long-term process with pronounced differences between universities (Koenen & Meißner, 2019).

With the 1960s came a "golden age" of higher education (Weerts et al., 2014, p. 241). Growing student numbers, newly founded HEIs, and a growing demand for research resources brought about an intensification of university communication in Germany and the U.S. (Koenen & Meißner, 2019, p. 48; Nelkin, 1995, p. 128; Turk, 2000, p. 18; Weerts et al., 2014). However, most communication departments still had rather low personnel resources; in the U.S., universities typically employed three practitioners (Steinberg, 1966), and in Germany, typically one communication practitioner was employed (Höhn, 2011), with some on a part-time basis.

By the late 1960s and 1970s this flourishing climate for university communication shifted, bringing many, and considerable, challenges such as "uncertain economy, demographic changes, and loss of public confidence" (Weerts et al., 2014, p. 241). Student protests and "revolts swept throughout the United States" (Turk, 2000, p. 18) and Europe (Sauter-Sachs, 1992) and attracted strong media attention (Kummerfeldt, 1975). In response to this critical coverage and as a defense against such political pressure, communication

departments in German and UK universities were established or expanded (Bühler et al., 2007; Dyson, 1989; Escher, 2001; Koenen & Meißner, 2019). In the following years, some countries, such as the U.S., experienced declining student numbers or public debates centered around predictions that student enrollment rates would decline in the future and employment prospects for graduates could become worse (Kummerfeldt, 1975; Weerts et al., 2014). In other countries, such as Germany, HEIs faced growing student enrollment rates but declining allocations of state funds (Höhn, 2011; Koenen & Meißner, 2019). Overall, higher education systems had to deal with negative media coverage, a lack of legitimacy, and precarious resources. News media stimulated discussion on the contributions of the higher education system to society and whether the funds invested in teaching could be justified (Weerts et al., 2014, pp. 241–242). This crisis of confidence was also fueled by "risky scientific-technical innovations such as nuclear power" (Peters, 2022 in this Thematic Section, p. 552; see also Escher, 2001). These developments have had different consequences for university communication. Some universities had to apply cost-cutting measures and decided to cut resources for their communication departments, while others strengthened their resources for communication to regain trust and keep up with the increased competition for students (Kummerfeldt, 1975; Saichaie & Morphew, 2014; Weerts et al., 2014).

The crisis of confidence later gave rise to the influential 1985 "The Public Understanding of Science" report published by the Royal Society in the UK, aiming, for instance, to stimulate an "[i]mprovement of public relations work of scientific institutions" (Göpfert, 2007, p. 216). Overall, the 1980s and 1990s brought about significant changes in higher education in Western countries, with greater competition for students and increasingly scarce public funding (Bühler et al., 2007; Escher, 2001). New public management reforms pressured HEIs to compete with one another and to "legitimize themselves by proving their efficiency and the societal relevance of their performance" (Fürst, Volk, Schäfer, Vogler, & Sörensen, 2022a in this Thematic Section, p. 519). The growing competition strongly revolved around student recruitment, financial resources, and a good public reputation, thereby increasing HEIs' willingness to allocate more resources to public communication (Bonfiglio, 1990; Friedrichsmeier & Fürst, 2012; Koenen & Meißner, 2019). Scientists also showed an increasing interest in the public communication of their research findings and public engagement more generally (Nelkin, 1995), contributing to the dissemination of knowledge and the reputation of their universities, but also strengthening a more decentralized communication. Many HEI communication departments still focused on media relations, such as by creating news releases or supporting scientists in their contacts with journalists and different publics (Peters, 2022 in this Thematic Section), but they also invested more resources in event management and marketing (Bonfiglio, 1990; Escher, 2001; Saichaie & Morphew, 2014). Moreover, their communication became increasingly differentiated in terms of specific target groups, such as alumni (Bonfiglio, 1990). In the 1980s and 1990s the professionalization of the field was also strengthened with the emergence of German and European networks of HEI communication practitioners, such as the "Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Hochschulpressestellen" (Association of University Press Offices), the "Verein Pro Wissenschaft e.V." (Association Pro Science e.V.), and EUPRIO ("European Universities Public Relations and Information Officers," today called: "European Association of Communication Professionals in Higher Education") (Escher, 2001, p. 20).

In Germany, the size of HEI communication departments grew from typically two employees in the late 1970s (Höhn, 2011, p. 123) to around three in the late 1980s (Bühler et al., 2007, p. 29). Some communication departments were inventive in emphasizing the need for more personnel resources. In cooperation with students, communication practitioners at the University of Berne in Switzerland con-

ducted an image study in 1987. Interviews with more than 300 citizens revealed that the majority did not perceive research as the main activity of the university. Almost all respondents expressed an interest in receiving more information about it. These results were then successfully used as arguments to expand information services and hire additional staff members to create news and videos on research projects and findings (Sauter-Sachs, 1992, pp. 258–261). Although "[i]nstitutional image was always an important component of higher education, […] this began to accelerate with the emergence of reputational rankings marking institutional prestige" (Weerts et al., 2014, p. 247). Rankings stimulated HEIs to monitor one another in terms of reputation, adopt practices of successful competitors, and strengthen self-promotional communication activities (Friedrichsmeier & Fürst, 2012; Koenen & Meißner, 2019; Väliverronen, 2021).

3   Changing HEI communication in the past decade: Contributions of this Thematic Section

This Thematic Section takes up where this historical overview ends in its aim to reflect upon recent developments in HEI communication. It presents four studies conducted in Finland, Switzerland, and Germany, as well as an invited essay by Hans Peter Peters. Together, these contributions demonstrate through three overarching themes – the impact of digital media, centralized and decentralized structures of communication, and dysfunctional effects in HEI communication – how HEI communication has changed in recent years in Central and Northern Europe.

3.1 Increasing importance of digital media for HEI communication

Since the 2000s, a growing number of communication practitioners (Bühler et al., 2007; Marcinkowski et al., 2013) use various channels to increasingly communicate to the public (e. g., Serong et al., 2017). They do so more and more online (for an overview Metag & Schäfer, 2019), via social

networks like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, via video-sharing platforms like YouTube and TikTok, and via other digital formats. Three of the empirical studies in this Thematic Section focus on HEI communication online, its characteristics, affordances, and limitations.

Esa Väliverronen, Tanja Sihvonen, Salla-Maaria Laaksonen, and Merja Koskela (2022) reconstruct and analyze the crisis communication around a contentious university merger in Finland in 2017. By analyzing the communication around this issue until 2020, the authors show how social media (and Twitter in particular) were used by students and staff to voice their concerns about new, perceived-to-be quasi-corporate communication and to organize opposition to a new, rather top-down management style. They reconstruct how internal critiques became a wider debate on social media, eventually spread to legacy media, and ended up on the national news, thus illustrating the workings of the contemporary hybrid media system for HEI communication. The authors also show how faulty communication management can damage the reputation of an emerging HEI and have real-life consequences, as the communications and brand director was eventually replaced. These findings illustrate how communication "talks an HEI into being" and how this is an increasingly polyvocal process when accounting for social media, on which the central communication management and the university leadership are merely one voice among many.

Charmaine Voigt's (2022) study zooms in on one of the stakeholders of this communicative construction, analyzing student-produced college television in Germany and its presence on social media before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similar to Väliverronen et al. (2022), she finds that social media have become a relevant arena of HEI communication in general and for the distribution of student-produced TV in particular. While the distributed content has decreased in volume as a result of the pandemic, the college television stations reconsidered their social media strategy.

Kaisu Koivumäki and Clare Wilkinson (2022) complement these findings by exploring the factors motivating Finnish researchers to communicate their science to non-academic audiences, primarily via social media and blogging. Based on a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with 17 researchers and 15 communication professionals conducted in 2017, the authors find a gap between those that are familiar with digital spaces and willing and able to participate in science communication online and via social media, and colleagues who are either not willing or unable to communicate using these digital platforms. The authors conclude that HEIs will profit from cautiously implementing measures that encourage researchers to communicate about their science, methods, and results online.

While each of the three articles presents and discusses different aspects of online and social media communication, together they highlight the importance of digital media in and for HEI communication, while also pointing out that this importance is not increasing linearly.

3.2 Changing structures of HEI communication

This Thematic Section also focuses on the changing communicative structures and resulting exchanges between the central and decentral levels of communication at HEIs. Some scholars have observed first signs of decentralization of HEI communication (Entradas, 2022), challenging the often diagnosed trend toward centralization of HEI communication (Elken et al., 2018; Marcinkowski et al., 2014) and allowing for a new perspective in which communication at different levels of HEIs coexists. As Hans Peter Peters (2022, p. 554) points out in his invited essay, "[u]niversities host many public communicators that are not legitimized to speak for the whole organization, but are still perceived as voices of the university, and thus will contribute to shaping its public image." All four studies in this Thematic Section contribute to the analysis of these developments.

Voigt's (2022) standardized surveys and qualitative social media analysis of college television in Germany illustrate the structural and communicative foundations of this development. She demonstrates how digital technologies offer new possibilities for actors with scarce resources – such as students –, thus broadening the opportunities for potential decentral communicators within HEIs. Voigt calls for more research analyzing the interplay of college television and central communication departments in HEIs.

Koivumäki and Wilkinson (2022) used qualitative interviews with Finnish researchers and communication professionals to assess what they perceive as effective measures for encouraging decentral science communication. Their results show similarities and differences between these two groups. Institutional measures, such as reward systems and financial compensation, find little support among researchers but are seen as desirable by some communication professionals. Researchers, on the one hand, feel that such measures conflict with their intrinsic motivation to communicate their science to non-expert audiences. On the other hand, some communication professionals favor such mechanisms and do not object in principle. Instead, this group sees practical questions concerning the design and validation of such reward systems and financial compensation mechanisms as hurdles to implementation.

As put forth by Koivumäki and Wilkinson (2022), a better understanding of the rationales of different actors in HEIs can help advance the restructuring of HEI communication in a way that also results in the desired outcomes. They suggest that creating a climate of approval for online science communication with the public is an effective way to get researchers to communicate beyond academia online. Such a cultural change is seen as the main responsibility of academic leadership backed by communication departments at the central level. Thus, the authors find encouragement for a system change toward more continuous rewarding of researchers' individual science communication efforts. The authors also find a slow yet pronounced change in the role conceptions of

scientists. Scientists and communication professionals alike see communication with the public as an increasingly important task, which should eventually become anchored as part of the core tasks of being a scientist and thus encouraged by institutions.

While the two studies from Finland examine the practices of HEI communication, Silke Fürst, Sophia Charlotte Volk, Mike S. Schäfer, Daniel Vogler, and Isabel Sörensen (2022a) focus on changes in HEI communication at the organizational level in Switzerland, as assessed by HEI leadership. The authors find that several changes have occurred during the past decade, including a strong trend toward diversified communication using an increasing number of communication channels to cater to more target groups. Notably, the authors also show that central communication departments are perceived to have an increasing influence on the communication of other HEI members, likely including decentral communication teams. Fürst et al. (2022a) also identify, albeit to a lesser degree, a trend toward an increased influence of HEI communication departments on strategic decision-making at the level of the entire organization. The authors also show, for example, that HEI leaders who value public reputation building and perceive a competition between HEIs for this reputation assess more and stronger changes in the central communication of their organization than others. These findings illustrate that the orientation toward public reputation and competition are driving forces of change in HEI communication.

3.3 Dysfunctional trends in HEI communication

Finally, the articles in this Thematic Section emphasize unintended and partly dysfunctional effects of recent changes in HEI communication. These can be traced back to changes in the larger media ecosystem but also to HEI leaders' and political actors' changing expectations, as discussed by Fürst et al. (2022a) and Väliverronen et al. (2022) with respect to the new public management reforms.

Peters (2022), drawing on numerous similar diagnoses from the past few decades, emphasizes that the public communication efforts of many HEIs have moved toward a corporate model. Like other scholars before him, he argues that this trend can lead to clashes with the normative foundation of other models of science communication, for example, when HEIs uncritically promote organizational developments and achievements to boost public reputation, exaggerate the findings of studies conducted in-house, or do not disclose their limitations and scientific uncertainties (Fürst, Volk, Schäfer, Vogler, & Sörensen, 2022b; Sumner et al., 2014; Weingart, 2017). The study by Fürst and colleagues (2022a) in this Thematic Section illustrates this development: In Switzerland, most HEI leaders see the creation of a good image and a positive public reputation as one of the main goals of their organization.

The alleged move toward a corporate model of HEI communication carries additional risks, as the articles also show. Väliverronen and colleagues (2022) demonstrate that failure to acknowledge the specificities of HEIs and adhere to the specific values underlying higher education and universities can result in substantial reputation damage and conflict with staff and students. The article illustrates that corporate marketing processes and principles do not easily translate to the higher education sector. The findings of Väliverronen et al. (2022) and Fürst et al. (2022a) suggest that HEI leadership pushing toward image and reputation building could become a considerable challenge for HEI communication in the future.

The articles in this Thematic Section also show that new digital possibilities for science communication and HEI leaders' increasing expectations to communicate with the public can be challenging for individual communicators. Although HEI leadership sees public communication of science as important for universities, as Fürst et al. (2022a) show, individual scientists often are not rewarded for such work or do not see it as part of their jobs. Koivumäki and Wilkinson (2022) reveal

that science communication is frequently not planned and not accounted for in the organization of research teams, project proposals, and working plans. Therefore, researchers often do it during extra hours, partly unpaid, and do not benefit directly from it for their careers. If public communication by researchers is seen by HEIs as an important aspect of communication, HEIs must recognize and value it accordingly, taking the so-called "third mission" seriously at the highest level.

4   Outlook

The studies in this Thematic Section emphasize the need to investigate intended and unintended effects of HEI communication and how it is affected by new technologies and societal changes. In this regards, special attention should also be given to the decentralization and centralization hypotheses. Is the expansion of central communication departments linked to a growing influence on how the whole organization communicates in public? Or is the simultaneous increase in communication resources and staff in decentral units, such as research institutes, an indication of a shift from centralization to decentralization in HEI communication? If so, what role do digital communication tools play? We also need more research on the functional or dysfunctional effects that come with changes in HEI communication, thus taking the specificities and characteristics of HEI communication into account. As an extension of this logic, we see a growing need for research on the transferability of organizational communication "ideals" and models borrowed from other types of organizations. Such an approach, however, needs to be informed by the historical development of university communication since its early beginnings in the 19th and 20th centuries. In analyzing the public communication of HEIs from a historical perspective and by tracing developments with various methods and across countries, "much is revealed about the changing role of higher education in society" (Bonfiglio, 1990, p. 6). Strengthening this

line of research would not only provide a better understanding of the specifics of HEI communication but could also provide valuable guidance for practitioners of HEI communication and help counteract dysfunctional effects.

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