Communicating science in higher education and research institutions
An organization communication perspective on science communication
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Abstract
Purpose – The paper reports on a research project exploring the change in the organizational context of communicators and communication units in higher education and research institutions (HERIs), the importance of informal processes within their daily work and the great diversity of expectations communicators have to tackle.
Design/methodology/approach – Based on a literature review, a mixed-methods study combining expert interviews with 54 German HERI heads of communication units, an online-survey and a document analysis of organizational characteristics was conducted. Findings were validated in four focus groups.
Findings – The study illuminates the impact of organizational and operational structures of HERIs on communicators and their boundary spanning activities. Due to varying expectations of stakeholders, communicators constantly have to switch roles. Members of HERIs’ executive boards affect status and working conditions for communicators in the organization.
Research limitations/implications – Interviews with other HERI actors, especially members of the executive board, are proposed to get more thorough insights into the organizational context of HERIs and the mutual expectations of different internal stakeholders.
Practical implications – Insights from the project may help HERI actors to reflect their organizational context and to identify potentially contentious structures or processes.
Originality/value – Communicating science sometimes clashes with complex organizational and operational structures. Despite the “organizational turn” in HERI research, there is a lack of data on the relation between communicators, their communication units and the larger organizational context. The exploratory study addresses this gap.
Keywords Communication department, Internal communication, Methodology, Organizational communication, Research
Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction
For close to 40 years[1] now, the global landscape of higher education and research has been subject to almost constant reforms. An essential consequence of the reforms is an increased need for communication in and of higher education and research institutions (HERIs[2]). Following the “organizational turn” in HERI governance (Paradeise, 2012, Gratefully funded by the Volkswagen Foundation
p. 573), HERIs are more and more conceived as organizational actors, “integrated, goal oriented, and competitive entities” (Krücken, 2014, p. 1,439) that are more autonomous as well as more accountable for their actions than before. This means that communication on behalf of the organization is gaining importance to establish accountability, to legitimize actions and decisions toward political, social and economic stakeholders and to gain competitive advantages on global (or regional) higher education markets (Peters, 2012, p. 220). Inside the organization, the organizational and structural changes necessitated by new governance regimes require communication to establish, coordinate and sustain (Lewis, 2019, p. 56).

This development fuels the ongoing growth and professionalization of communication departments in HERIs (Davies and Horst, 2016, p. 84; Elken et al., 2018, p. 1,115; for Germany: Friedrichsmeier et al., 2013, p. 23; Schwetje et al., 2017). It is argued that with this expansion “institutionalized push communication of academic institutions has become the dominant form of public science communication” (Marcinkowski and Kohring, 2014, p. 1). While there is an emerging literature on the communication of higher education institutions in general (Fähnrich et al., 2019), and the more strategic parts of HERI communication in particular (e.g. brand and reputation management, marketing; for further literature, see Elken et al., 2018, p. 1,110), research into the organizational contexts of communicating science has been rare (Horst, 2013, p. 760). Particularly, “there is limited knowledge about how communication departments as specific organizational units operate within higher education institutions” (Elken et al., 2018, p. 1,110).

Against this background, this paper analyzes how communicators and communication departments in HERIs interact with their organizational environment and how they perceive their role and function in regard to the organization. After reviewing the literature on HERIs as specific organizations and the organizational settings of communication departments in HERIs, the results of a study of more than 50 German HERI communication departments are presented. The following considerations are focused mainly on the German HE landscape, as the empirical evidence was gathered in this particular education and research system (for the differences between national systems, see Whitley, 2010). However, they may be, as Kleimann (2018) put it, “applicable to many research universities around the globe [...] if these organizations are equally engaged in teaching and (multidisciplinary) research and show a considerable amount of, e.g. state influence, professorial autonomy (through constitutionally guaranteed freedom of teaching and research), and student participation” (Kleimann (2018), p. 1,086).

2. Higher education and research institutions as (incomplete) organizations

Compared to their long history, systematic research into the organizational characteristics of higher education and research institutions – their structures, processes, hierarchies and so on – is a relatively new phenomenon (see, e.g. Musselin, 2006). The scholarly discourse on the organizational nature of HERIs can be loosely described along two main lines of reasoning (see Kleimann, 2018; Hüther and Krücken, 2016):

(1) HERIs are “ordinary organization[s] resembling corporate businesses or bureaucratic entities” or are “at least about to turn from an incomplete organization (an arena of loosely coupled professionals) into a complete one” (Kleimann, 2018, p. 1,087). To be a complete organization in this context means to exhibit all of the constitutive elements of a formal organization “as defined in laws or textbooks or otherwise widely spread conceptions” (Ahre and Brunsson, 2010, p. 4): membership (or identity); hierarchy; and rules, monitoring and sanction (sometimes aggregated as rationality, c.f. Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson, 2000, p. 730). While individual elements may be
present in other types of social structures (e.g. institutions, networks), only formal/complete organizations exhibit all of them (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2010, p. 4).

(2) HERIs are “highly odd” organizations (Schimank 2008) with structural and functional peculiarities that “can only be understood as a deviation from a global model of formal organization” (Kleimann, 2018, p. 1,088).

On a theoretical level, Kleimann (2018) argues that both lines of reasoning – (1) HERIs are like other organizations and (2) HERIs are unique organizations – operate on different levels of abstraction and are not mutually exclusive (Kleimann, 2018, p. 1,088). While there are a number of details of HE sector organizations that result in them being “seen as [...] not directly or easily comparable with other types of organization, even within the public sector” (Ferlie et al., 2009, p. 1), on a more abstract level similarities with other public sector organizations become equally obvious: “European universities are largely dependent on the state for financing; the state is concerned to regulate their behaviour as they influence citizens’ life chances significantly; they contain a mix of professional and bureaucratic elements and they operate within strongly structured institutionalized fields.” (Ferlie et al., 2009, p. 2) Examples for research leaning toward the second line of reasoning describe HERIs as “organized anarchies” (Cohen et al., 1972), “loosely coupled systems” (Weick 1976) or “professional bureaucracies” (Mintzberg 1979). These descriptions highlight how modes of organizing and decision-making in HERIs differ from other types of (rational-bureaucratic) organizations such as corporations or public administrations (Hüther and Krücken, 2016, p. 156) and establish HERIs as specific and exceptional organizations.

On the other hand, various authors argue that HERIs are subject to larger trends of rationalization and modernization affecting public sector organizations globally and are in the process of becoming (or already are) organizations like others (Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson, 2000; Krücken et al., 2009). These authors observe an adaptation in organizational structures of HERIs along a “generalized script [...] which through processes of transnational communication and observation is diffusing globally” (Krücken et al., 2009, p. 4). This “emerging global model” (e.g. Mohrmann et al., 2008) codifies cultural and political expectations of HERIs as “integrated, goal-oriented entities” that deliberately and autonomously choose their own actions (Krücken and Meier, 2006, p. 242). This shifts the image of HERIs from being perceived (and governed) largely as public service institutions toward their conception as more “normal” (complete) organizations in line with other organizational types (Kleimann, 2018, p. 1,087; Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson, 2000).

Empirically, Seeber et al. (2014) determine that the process of “constructing” HERIs as complete organizations by introducing or strengthening elements of formal organizations through policy (Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson, 2000, p. 730) is far from compelling (Seeber et al., 2014, p. 1,468). Organizational forms of HERIs and the manner and degree of adaptation to modernization pressures differ widely between national HE systems and HERI types (Seeber et al., 2014). Seeber et al. (2014) show that “there is a clear association between the modernization pressure and the levels of hierarchy and rationality” (Seeber et al., 2014, p. 1,468), that is, HERIs in HE systems with a higher degree of modernization pressures tend to adapt by developing their organizational characteristics toward more closely fitting a generalized model of formal organizations. However, their evidence also shows “that public entities like universities can hardly become fully complete organizations” (Seeber et al., 2014), as policies or mechanisms aimed at developing one dimension of complete organizations in HERIs seemingly constrain the capability to develop one of the other dimensions (Seeber et al., 2014, p. 1,444). For example, attempts at increasing intraorganizational hierarchy through policy by “establishing a vertical chain of appointment from the government down to the academic chairs” (Seeber et al., 2014, p. 1,468) were found to negatively impact
“substantial autonomy” and weaken organizational identity (Seeber et al., 2014). In a similar vein, Musselin (2006) and Hüther and Krücken (2016) argue that the central characteristics that distinguish HERIs from other organizations arise from properties of their basal operations, teaching and research, and are therefore quite resistant to change (Hüther and Krücken (2016), p. 197). These basal operations are commonly described as “unclear technologies,” meaning that it is difficult to describe, prescribe and reproduce “successful” research or teaching (Cohen et al., 1972). Seeber et al. (2014) conclude that HERIs, while increasingly “following some managerial principles of efficiency, cost-effectiveness and central strategic control” also retain “traditional professional values and practices” (Seeber et al. (2014), p. 1,452). Empirical evidence thus suggests that HERIs are neither “being transformed through an ineluctable global process” into formal organizations, nor that they are irrevocably “bounded to a loose structure” (Seeber et al. (2014), p. 1,468). Instead they are situated on a continuum somewhere between both extremes, contingent on national differences in HERI governance and organizational characteristics of individual HERIs.

From a systems theory perspective, Kleimann (2018) describes HERIs as “multiple hybrid organizations,” by virtue of their basal operations situated in (at least) two functional systems: science and education. He further describes them as exhibiting multiple goal programs of equal organizational value, as well as “inconsistencies” in their decision programs, communication channels and personnel structures (Kleimann (2018), p. 1,091). Similarly, Hüther and Krücken (2016) characterize HERIs as internally fragmented organizations with multiple aims and multiple identities (Hüther and Krücken (2016), p. 196). One example that illustrates these characteristics results from the high degree of autonomy and in part conflicting identities of academics compared to other groups of actors in the organization. Typically, the administrative and managerial staff of a HERI is willing to identify with overarching organizational goals and other requirements of rationalizing the organization, for example, working inside hierarchical structures and accepting centralized governance. Academics on the other hand primarily identify with their respective discipline (thus further fragmenting academic staff into subgroups), insist on academic freedom and expect some form of self-governance in a community of equals (see Billot, 2010; Henkel, 2005).

To sum up: There is an astonishing convergence in the literature regardless of the theoretical approaches used about specific features of HERIs that differentiate them from other organizations. Firstly, HERIs are incomplete organizations that can be seen as being in the process of turning (or being turned) into more complete organizations. This dynamic of “constructing” organizations (Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson, 2000) is driven by different factors, particularly by differences in the respective cultural–institutional settings (e.g. Whitley et al., 2010). Examples for such differences are the degree to which competition between HERIs is stimulated, for example, through excellence competitions (particularly in Germany), rankings or national variations in their (perceived) importance within globalized knowledge economies. Secondly, these processes are in many cases conflict-ridden. Because the formal principle of organization is often in contradiction to the community relation of researchers, there are inherent tensions within HERIs. Therefore, different modes of organizing, work routines and decision-making processes are likely to lead to reciprocal incomprehension and organizational tension. Organizing HERIs has to be seen and analyzed as a multifaceted process and an active construction site.

3. Organizational setting of communicators in higher education and research institutions

The organizational specificities of HERIs outlined earlier affect the role and function of the communication department and individual communicators within HERIs. Surprisingly, there is little research available specifically on communication departments and communicators in HERIs (Elken et al., 2018, p. 1,110). This section will discuss where the organizational
specificities of HERIs most likely affect the general description found in the public relations (PR) and organization communication literature and what the consequences of these differences presumably are.

Springston and Leichty (2016) characterize the communication department as that part of the organization that helps define and maintain organizational boundaries (Springston and Leichty (2016), p. 697). Communication departments operate at the periphery (or boundary) of the organization, “performing organizational relevant tasks, relating the organization with elements outside it” (Leifer and Delbecq, 1978, p. 41). Leifer and Delbecq (1978) define such persons or organizational units as boundary spanners and their activities as boundary spanning activities, noting that the same concept may be used to describe “interunit exchanges within the organization” Leifer and Delbecq (1978). The two primary functions of boundary spanners are often described in terms of information processing and external representation (Aldrich and Herker, 1977, p. 218). Both informational and representative functions require extensive work across organizational boundaries, either that between the organization and its environment (external) or those between different organizational units or groups (internal). In its informational function, the communication department as boundary spanner collects and curates relevant information from and about the organization’s publics, preprocesses it and presents it to decision-makers. From an organizational theory perspective, this is the main mechanism by which organizations adapt to their environment (c.f. Leifer and Delbecq, 1978, p. 40). In its representational function, the communication department is tasked with presenting a coherent image of the organization, its processes and its adaptations to external pressures (e.g. regarding legitimization, resource allocation) toward its stakeholders (Springston and Leichty, 2016, p. 698; Cornelissen, 2014, p. 98).

While this general description holds true for communication departments of all types of organizations, the fact that HERIs are specific organizations that regularly “[face] decision situations involving unclear goals, unclear technology, and fluid participants” (Cohen et al., 1972, p. 11) suggests that communication departments in HERIs may face additional or different challenges in both informational and representational functions than those in other types of organizations.

First, it is likely that the ongoing growth and professionalization of HERI communication departments lead to organizational conflicts (Elken et al., 2018, p. 1,111). The development of professional standards for HERI communicators – like the “Leitlinien gute Wissenschafts-PR” in Germany (WiD, 2016) – potentially opens up a number of competing aims and objectives between the communication department and other organizational units (Meyer and Rowan, 1977, p. 356). It “may also create pressure for isomorphism with other professionals” outside the organization, for example, from fields such as journalism or PR, “as a way to legitimate [HERI communicators] occupational autonomy” (Elken et al., 2018, p. 1,111). Second, it can be expected that communication departments in HERIs face even more difficulty controlling or regulating the flow of communication than those in other types of organization (c.f. Grunig, 2009, p. 4), as organizational boundaries and organizational membership tend to be vaguer. In part, this is a functional aspect of science communication, as the sheer amount of decentralized knowledge in HERIs combined with the increased need to legitimize public funding makes public communication by individual researchers highly desirable. Institutional communicators in HERIs may therefore face a conflict between monitoring and aggregating communication to construct a coherent organizational image and supporting and encouraging individual members of the organization to communicate without organizational oversight. For these reasons, it can be assumed that internal communication may shape organizational function and role of communicators in HERIs to a larger extent than their counterparts in other types of organizations.
Third, there is evidence that even identifying and subsequently quantifying the significance of stakeholders or target audiences respectively can prove difficult for HERI communicators (Mainardes et al., 2010). While this is a (relatively) straightforward task in corporate or private sector organizations with clear goals and markets, a large number of key relationships and contacts in HERIs are commonly scattered, transient and informal (Mainardes et al., 2010), p. 78). Therefore, accessing information about them can be a challenge. The problem of identifying and quantifying stakeholders is relevant because different internal and external interest groups of HERIs have differing and often conflicting expectations of what and how the organization should communicate.

This means that idealized role descriptions commonly found in PR and organization communication literature – for example, the technician–manager dichotomy established by Dozier (1992) and its later extensions and reworking (see Frandsen and Johansen, 2014, p. 236 for an overview) may prove insufficient as a means to frame actual communicator behavior in HERIs, as role enactment is likely dependent on who communicators are interacting with. It also means that it can be assumed that HERI communication might either lack focus if it is trying to suit every organizational stakeholder or that it systematically ignores certain stakeholders. This assumption is supported by statements from practitioners, describing the communication practice of HERIs as unfocussed and “neither doing science communication nor developing “public” relations in the proper sense. […] [but] rather a mix of different things, serving various purposes and targets” (Claessens, 2014, p. 1). Since communication controlling and constant evaluation gain importance (Zerfass, 2010), it can be assumed that this multitude of expectations, purposes and targets is becoming more and more problematic for HERI communicators.

Fourth, communicators in HERIs often have little to no managerial authority to establish and enforce communication guidelines and sanction “misbehavior,” despite commonly being situated close to HERI leadership (Kohring et al., 2013). Even though research shows that management often associates “expert power” (Springston and Leichty, 2016, p. 698) with communication departments, their influence on strategic decisions in HERIs is judged to be low (Kohring et al., 2013, p. 176). Particularly in Germany, they often “lack credibility within the circle of scientific experts who are in charge of the universities’ core tasks” (Kohring et al., 2013) – one of their key constituencies.

In sum, the activities of communication departments at HERIs can be described as “boundary spanning activities.” This concept is commonly used in public relations and organization communication theory to describe the work of organizational units tasked with extensive cross-boundary work (e.g. Aldrich and Herker, 1977; Springston and Leichty, 2016; Haas 2015; Williams 2013). Boundary spanning units in HERIs face specific functional and structural challenges in their activities, namely intraorganizational conflicts, communication control, specification of stakeholders or targets and the enforcement of communication guidelines. Against this background and with focus on the individual as well as the organizational level and their interdependence, the study presented here focusses on three questions:

1. Do processes of turning HERIs into more complete organizations affect the ways of organizing boundary spanning activities of communication departments in HERIs?
2. How important is informal communication for the boundary spanning activities of communicators in HERIs?
3. How do communicators (individually and on the department level) deal with their boundary spanning tasks in the light of multifaceted expectations of stakeholders in HERIs?
4. Methods: case selection and data gathering

In order to answer the questions outlined at the end of section 3, a mixed-method study with communicators of 54 German HERIs was conducted. Expert interviews were used as primary method of data collection. This was complemented by document analysis, focus groups and a short online survey to deepen and contextualize the findings. The organizations that were included in the study represent the German HERI landscape with regard to size (as measured by number of students), type of HERI (university, university of applied sciences), funding body, budget (total budget as well as third-party funding), geographical position and type of region (urban, rural, rural in process of urbanization). Taking into account all these factors allowed including a wide variety of HERIs that differ in regard to organizational structures and profiles. Table I shows the selection of organizations in the study with regard to size, type of HERI and funding body.

To prepare for the interviews, a detailed profile of each HERI was constructed by means of document analysis of publicly available information, for example, via the HERIs’ websites. These “organizational ID cards” were later also used to contextualize statements in the interviews. The ID cards contained characteristics such as an organizational chart (when available), mission statements, the variety of degree programs, research foci, national/international orientation, embeddedness in the region, knowledge transfer activities and information about the communication unit.

The guideline for the qualitative, semistructured interviews consisted of four modules in total, addressing the questions described at the end of section 3 and exploring the working routines and organizational context of the interviewees. The interview guideline was constructed adhering to common research standards (see Bogner et al., 2005; Gläser and Laudel, 2010) and went through multiple pretests. The interviews were conducted with the heads of the communication departments (Chief Communication Officers, CCOs) that were previously identified during the investigation for the profile. Recruiting interview partners turned out to be uncomplicated due to a general openness within the field of HERI communicators regarding research into their profession. The first 20 interviews took place in January and March 2018, the remaining 34 were conducted from May to July 2018. The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 min, with most interviews taking around 60 min.

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Note(s): *: Total number of state and state-recognized higher education institutions as listed in the German “Hochschulkompass” published by the German Rector’s Conference (cutoff date: 12-Jul-2017); **: Subgroups with less than five entries were excluded.
were conducted primarily via telephone. The interviews were transcribed and coded using the qualitative analysis program MAXQDA.

To support and contextualize the qualitative findings of the interviews, all interview partners were asked to take part in a short standardized online survey a few weeks after the interviews. They were asked to assess a number of statements regarding science in general, HERI communication and their (perceived) role in their organizations. A majority of interviewees participated (46 out of 54). As the online survey was primarily used to contextualize the interviews and to generate working hypotheses, its results are not separately presented in the findings section.

In February and March 2019, first results and working hypotheses were presented to and discussed with HERI communicators in four focus groups (see Stewart and Shamdasani, 2015) in order to get additional insights, validate and enrich the findings. Communicators from all types of German HERI (including music and art academies) participated in the focus group workshops. As invitations were sent to pre-existing local or regional HERI communicator networks, the participants of the focus group interviews were partly identical with the interviewees from the one-on-one interviews. The number of participants ranged from 5 to 25, thus making the dynamics in the group interviews very different. The topics discussed during the focus groups were informed by working hypotheses gained during the interviews and were aimed to get more detailed insights into systemic aspects beyond the individual working routines and structural conditions. For example, whereas boundary spanning activities and the practice of adapting to shifting expectations emerged as topics of relevance in the daily working lives during the interviews with individual communicators, the focus groups revealed more detailed information about how, for example, boundary spanning activities are integrated into routines and which different types of roles communicators are shifting between. Furthermore, the focus groups shed light on contentious conflicts within the HERIs, how communicators are influenced by them and how they try to find solutions to work around them (see Chapter 5 for more details).

Overall, the chosen mix of methods including desktop research, qualitative semistructured interviews, online survey and validation workshops helped to get detailed insights into the self-image of communicators, the organizational embedding of the communication departments within the HERI, the working and coordination processes regarding communication activities of HERI and the challenges that the heads of communication departments are facing in their daily routines at work.

5. Findings: organizational context, challenges and role models of communicators in HERIs

The description of the findings follows the questions outlined in section 3, highlighting (1) the changes that can be observed in communication departments that point to HERIs becoming “complete” organizations, (2) the importance of informal processes in rather fragile structures and (3) the diversity of roles that communicators fulfill while interacting with a variety of internal and external stakeholders. Wherever possible, the presentation of selected findings points to differences in the HERIs that were part of the study to show factors that influence how HERI communicators (can) work.

5.1 Communication in “incomplete” organizations

The interviews confirm recent research into the organization of HERI communication departments (e.g. Schwetje et al., 2017), showing the great majority of communication departments being situated closely to the executive board of the HERI. This is true with regard to the formal hierarchical structure as well as the informal work flow and coordination processes. Most communication departments report directly to the president or rector of a
HERI and thus have direct access to the leading members. This often includes frequent jour fixes, the participation in meetings of the executive board (though without voting powers) and the possibility to contact the president or rector on short notice when necessary. Primarily in larger universities where the communication unit often has a voice in strategic decisions, this close relation is described as having major advantages:

“[... ] the advantages I see are that we are not considered an administrative unit; that we are a [... ] strategically thinking unit, directly attached to the president; that there are short decision-making processes and a quick flow of information; that we are able to provide consultancy services and have access to information on every aspect of the university.” (Interviewee from a public university, > 20k students)

In smaller HERIs with communication units that report less impact on strategic decision-making, the close link to leadership often has drawbacks and can be fraught with tension:

“[... ] sometimes I wish for more freedom and creative leeway [... ] open conflict is rare, but I have to coordinate and get authorization for every step, every single process [... ]”. (Interviewee from a public university of applied sciences, 5k–10k students)

Although communicators no longer act solely as spokespersons for the rector/president of their organization, but on behalf of the whole organization, this often is not mirrored in stronger formal structures or more formally confirmed power for HERI communicators or the communication departments they are working in. Many interviewees describe their professional autonomy as low:

“Let’s take our website relaunch for example [... ] it is incredibly frustrating for the person in charge – in this case in my unit – when there is no progress over one and a half years because every small change has to be discussed in great detail and you’re constantly told by the board to additionally involve this and that person in the process and you [... ] never have the authority to make a decision”.

(Interviewee from a public university, 10k–20k students)

Furthermore, formal structures within HERIs are constantly changing, as they are strongly dependent on personal preferences of and strategic decisions by the members of the executive boards. Most communication departments that were examined in the study experienced changes in their formal structures within the last five years. Many of these changes were initiated by the head of the executive board, without coordinating them with the staff of the communication department:

“We used to be a department [... ] that consisted of the online editorial team, the marketing unit, the international office and the press office. Then there was a change in the executive board and it was decided to turn the press office and the international office into staff units. That’s why we’re separate of this department structure and now act as independent staff units”. (Interviewee from a public university of applied sciences, 10k–20k students)

“(... ) I experienced seven changes [in the position of university rector] [... ] there were some times when I sat at the table in all major leadership discussions, at the moment I no longer get to sit in. The situation can be like this today and totally different tomorrow, just by a change in leadership”. (Participant in focus group 4)

Similar to findings for PR in general (e.g. Röttger, 2010, p. 46), the members of the executive board of HERIs play an important role in building up, changing or stabilizing organizational and operational structures for communication activities. In the interviews and in the focus groups, communicators complained about the missing courage of their superiors (often the head/executive board of the HERI) to establish clear and transparent structures within the organization. In their perception, structural changes initiated by members of the executive board often focus on aspects connected to the external visibility of the organization, such as a
specific profile, research performance or improving the HERI's role in regional development. This often leads to unclear internal organizational structures resulting in dysfunctions and discontentment:

“My experience regarding the executive board is that they are oriented on externalities – establishing a profile, struggling for survival. That’s an issue we constantly think about. I feel like the executive board is in a rat-race, looking where to develop. And then they run in that direction, pulling or pushing the organization like baggage, explaining "we have to go there, that’s where the others are weak". But that baggage is people, employees – that have to be organized somehow". (participant in focus group 3)

These changes often put a heavy strain on communicators until they settle in the new structure. This even holds true for communication departments that are well resourced, report to have a strong standing within their organization and work highly professional:

“I realized that the last change [...] caused a lot of stress and weighed me down for over a year. That was an incredibly taxing time. [...] With this change, as with the one before that, I had to reason and invest a lot to reestablish a position in which I can persist”. (Interviewee from a public university, 10k–20k students)

Many communicators in the study described their individual strategies to deal with the fragility of formal structures. One interviewee states:

“Either you start the process from scratch, or you attempt to salvage the situation. You can look for a structural solution – e.g. you try to change formal responsibilities [...]. Or you can try to defuse the conflict – the communicative solution. Or you scrap the project and wait until somebody else is in charge”. (Interviewee from a public university, > 20k students)

Others describe a proactive approach:

“We know six months in advance that a new rector will be elected. Then I prepare a five-year plan, on paper, and personally invite the new rector to be to a cup of coffee or a working lunch where we discuss the plan. [...] Then he*she says "I have this agenda or these ideas" and you continue meeting and synchronizing until there’s a strategy paper for communication and you establish a personal relationship along the way [before his*her term even starts]”. (Interviewee from a public university, > 20k students)

In a few cases, the communicators themselves tried to build up strong formal structures for the communication department. In one case of a very large university, the leading communicator managed to restructure the communication department as integral part of the HERI administration and to become departmental manager for the unit him/herself. Thus, the communicator formally has access and voting powers in regular meetings of the HERI administrative board. The communicator, who describes him/herself as manager and communication consultant for other internal actors, furthermore managed to formally integrate communicators from decentral units of the HERI into the communication unit by giving them contracts as staff of the central communication department while their working place remained within their respective decentral units. This process was rife with uncertainties and risk and had to overcome strong internal resistance:

“Initially, no one liked or wanted that construction. It was just a crazy notion that could have gone terribly wrong. [...] these positions are incredibly uncomfortable – they are fixed-term contracts, with two formal superiors – one in the scientific unit, the other in the respective central, administrative unit – they are volatile because they largely depend on third-party funding that could also be used for research. You can imagine that there were critics everywhere [...] no-one understood what these positions were good for or why they are necessary. [...] That’s just how it is – whenever you want to establish something unprecedented you have to do a lot of persuading”. (Interviewee from a public university, > 20k students)
By enforcing this concept, the interviewee created formal structures that resemble hierarchical structures in “complete” organizations and stabilized the work routines of the communication department. Thus, boundary spanning activities within this very large university became more formalized and easier to handle. Most other interviewees describe formal structures as not supporting their boundary spanning tasks. Instead they describe relying on informal structures and personal contacts.

5.2 Using informal structures for communication purposes
As the formal organizational structure is described by the interviewees as being rather fragile and changeable by any new head of a HERI, the operational structure (meaning all processes within an organization, formal as well as informal ones) is described as much more important for steering the communication activities of HERIs.

“[...] we’re a comparatively small HERI [...] so personal contact is of course easier to realize than perhaps in larger HERIs. [...] we informally meet with students, representatives of the student’s union, and professors respectively, and gather and exchange information. [...] It’s our conviction that this personal contact is indispensable”. (Interviewee from a public university of applied sciences, < 5k students)

However, as there is a high fluctuation particularly in scientific personnel, the reliance on informal, personal relationships is sometimes described as problematic:

“It depends on the person–sometimes on the person no longer being there [...]. If we are informed that there will be someone new and we can approach them early and integrate them, it’s relatively easy. If you have stable contacts everything is easy. But when your contact persons in the different facilities constantly change, it gets really complicated – because they just do not know [how things work]”. (Interviewee from a public university of applied sciences, < 5k students)

Whereas formal structures are fixed at least for a certain period of time, informal processes can change more often. Because these processes are transient (as they are not formalized), they require a constant involvement and attention of all participating actors.

“[...] we had to recommend warmly that a weekly meeting with the executive board and the rector is of great importance to us; and I am glad that [the rector] not simply sends his consultant, but considers it his duty to personally participate in the meeting. Getting there took us approximately half a year, but since March it works”. (Interviewee from a public university of applied sciences, < 5k students)

“I cannot expect to just be informed about essential developments or problems. We have a strong obligation to actively gather information, because the leadership is simply too busy dealing with other stuff to always remember to keep us informed. So we actively approach the executive and administrative boards – and of course not only them, but other actors as well – to collect information. We are constantly in contact with leaders and coordinators of different parts of the university”. (Interviewee from a public university of applied sciences, 10k–20k students)

An essential part of the communicators’ work is fulfilling the informational aspect of their boundary spanning function (see section 3): to get information from different actors and distribute it internally and externally. Therefore, they have to cooperate with a huge number of stakeholders within as well as outside the organization. Many of the interviewees reported this cooperation to be fairly difficult due to strong competition between administration units regarding personnel, budget and scope of tasks, partly restraining effective (science) communication. Some participants of the focus groups described units that on paper are supposed to cooperate or at least coordinate – for example, the communication department and the marketing department – in practice often
fighting over the attribution of success, as they individually need to legitimize their actions and costs and validate their existence:

“[…] the problem is that we have two departments tasked with communication […] which almost never cooperate […] because there is a lot of rivalry going on. […] For example: I’m in charge of the college magazine, but a colleague in the other department does the layout. And nobody there likes that, because it taxes their scarce capacities. […] They perceive the magazine as a product of their competition. Social media is situated in the other department as well, and I’d rather have that in my department. And there’s immediate pushback: “that would give you even more influence […]”.
(Participant in focus group 1)

The majority of the interviewees state that the esteem of the president/rector is crucial for the standing and reputation of the HERI communication department and its staff. The relationship between the rector/president and the head of the communication department in particular is deeply affected by trust and credibility:

“[…] if there is no mutual trust then you cannot do this job […] I keep the rector informed, I seek his*her counsel and he*she seeks mine and we discuss how to deal with specific problems”.
(Interviewee from a public university, > 20k students)

One interviewee thus provocatively suggests the following:

“[…] head communicators […] should be on contracts bound to their superiors’ term in office, and a new rector should be able to decide whether he*she wants to be represented by this communicator internally as well as externally, or not. […] This insecurity – that I have to consider being out of a job in four years, or six years–of course would have to be reflected in remuneration […] which is impossible to achieve in the current public sector payment structures”. (Interviewee from a public university, > 20k students)

To sum up, communication units of HERIs are embedded into formal structures setting the general framework for the communicators (see section 5a). Their daily work routines, however, are strongly affected by informal processes. These processes have to be negotiated with a number of internal stakeholders in HERIs, pointing to a strong boundary spanning function of the communicators and the communication departments, respectively. Communicators can implement, stabilize or change both organizational and operational structures – and indeed often have to do so to compensate dysfunctional formal structures. To do that, they heavily rely on informal communication.

5.3 Changing expectations: role diversity of HERI communicators

Due to the importance of operational structures and informal processes, communicators interact with a number of internal stakeholders most of which have different expectations toward science communication. To manage these various expectations is one important function most communicators describe in the interviews and focus groups.

“[…] because of our size and structure we are […] first and foremost situated and active in our local region. At the same time we want to be active on the federal level – at least with some of our departments. And of course a lot of our professors want to make an impact internationally. […] there’s a lot of different approaches […]and if the executive board does not chart a clear course, does not say for example “we cannot be an international player, we focus on our region and at most the national level”, it gets really difficult. Because the demands and expectations towards the communication department connected to each level are massively different”. (Participant in focus group 3)

“[…] it’s even possible to be attributed different roles by different people in the organization at the same time. […] you have to try to break out of these preconceptions or role attributions […] actively and consciously break out and attempt to act for example as a strategist, to demonstrate that you see yourself in a different role […] it also depends who you interact with […]”.
(A scientist with a project
or event he*she wants to communicate perceives me as a manager or strategist. It’s the polar opposite whenever the executive board says “we have a great idea” [...] – then its “we developed the strategy, now you go implement it”. (Participant in focus group 4)

The data from this study suggests that communicators constantly adapt their behavior toward other organizational actors as part of their boundary spanning function. This is primarily due to the broad range of tasks and differing expectations the various internal stakeholders of HERIs have with regard to communication activities. The majority of interviewees stated they usually switch between two or even more roles in their daily work routine depending on the situation, the task and the expectations of the actors they are working with. They describe situationally shifting between roles such as “gatekeeper,” “service unit,” “networker,” “bridge builder,” “mediator,” “counselor,” “consultant” and even “court jester.” Some of these role descriptions fit perfectly to the boundary spanning function of communicators or communication units as described in the literature (see section 3). They frame how communicators or communication departments connect different actors and HERI units (informational function) and build a common ground for representing the HERI as coherent organization (representational function).

Handling this role diversity can be challenging, especially when multiple actors are involved in communication processes and their expectations and aims diverge from each other:

“Even chancellor and rector do not always agree on what they want, or match in what they say. If one of them says “go left” and the other one “go right” then that's a major problem for me, of course”. (Interviewee from a public university, 10k–20k students)

How these different roles are enacted by the individual communicators depends strongly on the resources and the division of work tasks within the communication unit and with other HERI units. Even communicators working in large, differentiated communication units describe their work as encompassing jumping between different roles to act as interface between organizational units and thereby performing boundary spanning activities. This relates directly to the fragile formal (see section 5a) and the complex operational (i.e. rather informal) structures (see section 5b) that force communicators to adapt their professional behavior constantly. One of the challenges here is to always adopt the right role in the right situation, anticipating the demands other actors expect the communicators to fulfill. This may lead to tensions between communicators’ perception of their own role and tasks and those other actors have in mind when working together with the communication unit of a HERI.

6. Conclusions

The empirical findings show that communicators in HERIs are facing multifaceted boundary spanning challenges due to the complex organizational and operational structure of HERIs and their near-constant change. This leads to a variety of strategies to deal with the organizational features specific to HERIs.

As formal structures in HERIs are fragile (see section 5a), informal processes are an integral part of communicators’ work routine (see section 5b). Communicators need to build up and maintain contacts to relevant actors within HERIs in order to fulfill their boundary spanning functions. By doing so, they help to stabilize the organization and its boundaries and facilitate the flow of information. As described in section 5c, the diversity of expectations communicators have to deal with in their daily work routines leads to them “shifting between roles” depending on the situation and the actors involved. Not only the self-perception of the communicators influences their work, but the perception of other (internal) actors in HERIs has an impact as well. This holds especially true when the perceptions and expectations of
these actors are contradictory. A future typology of role models specific to HERI communicators thus needs to include different dimensions on the individual as well as on the organizational level, extending theoretical considerations of roles of PR practitioners like the “communication technician – communication manager” scale.

The empirical data presented in this paper show that the interplay of formal structures and informal processes and the behavior of various internal stakeholders strongly influence communicators’ scope of action. One of the most salient strategies of actors involved in boundary spanning activities is to attempt to influence organizational structures – both formal and informal – to more effectively fit their working routines and standing in the organization. The inherent tension between formal and informal activities of boundary spanning can be dissolved either by establishing more functional formal structures or by bypassing formal structures and using individual reputation and competence to gain organizational influence. Which strategy communicators use depends strongly on personality traits of the actors involved and their scope of action to shape formal or informal structures.

As further analysis of the data collected in the study indicated that the size of the organization, the funding body (private or public) and the resources available for communication are important factors that have lasting effects on the organization of HERI communication departments, one important next step would be to relate the type of HERI organization to different forms of organizing communication units. Doing so, one would gain insight into processes of establishing formal structures for boundary spanning as a function of a HERI’s “character” and degree of being a “complete” organization. Relevant factors beside the degree of organization might be the international versus regional focus of a HERI or the positioning of HERIs within the national and international education sectors on communication issues.

Furthermore, it seems important to conduct interviews with members of the executive board as well as other key actors in HERIs to add additional perspectives to contrast and contextualize perceptions of role, function and aims of HERI communication.

For the professional field of HERI communicators knowing about and reflecting on the interplay between formal and informal structures and their configuration in individual organizations can open up the possibility of change and help to overcome unclear responsibilities, opaque coordination processes and resolve persistent intraorganizational conflicts.

Notes
1. In a global context. Some European countries and Germany in particular started reforms later, most during the early 1990s – see (Paradeise et al., 2009).

2. In higher education research, the abbreviation HEI (“Higher Education Institution”) is more commonly used. For this paper, it was decided upon using HERI (“Higher Education and Research Institution”) instead, because it better captures the dual nature of education/teaching and research as core missions of universities (and increasingly universities of applied sciences in Germany). As these missions are funded and supported differently and vary in perceived and attributed status (particularly in Germany), it can be hypothesized that this dual nature affects the communication of these institutions deeply.

3. This and all the following quotations have been translated from German by the authors.

References


**Further reading**


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