



Media orientation of German university decision makers and the executive influence of public relations

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the executive influence of public relations managers in the German higher education system. The study is based on a whole-population survey of German university decision makers ($N = 1619$). It provides evidence that the mediatization of German higher education offers an important opportunity for the empowerment of university PR departments. They can benefit from the New Public Management reforms in recent years as power shifts to management-oriented administrators and the public image of universities turns into a competitive asset. Nevertheless, an indispensable precondition for PR departments' organizational advancement resides in professionalization. PR workers need to claim a status of expert boundary spanners between their universities and the public stakeholders.

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1. Introduction

1.1. New public management reforms enter the German academic culture

During the last two decades, the German higher education system has been subject to fundamental and far-reaching transformations. These transformations have been occurring in a university landscape which is still clearly dominated by state institutions: in 2010, 82% of the more than 2.3 million students were enrolled at the 100 largest universities (all of which participated in our study) – 99 of these are state-owned. Since the early 1990s, New Public Management (NPM) reforms in the higher education system have challenged state administrative competency (Braun & Merrien, 1999) and brought a philosophy of competition and economic efficiency to German universities (Marginson, 2004; Weingart & Maasen, 2007). The NPM reforms affect all levels of the academic hierarchy. They encompass a permanent and systematic evaluation of research activities and study programs, a performance-based granting of funds and an adoption of international standards in higher education (Hazelkorn, 2007; OECD, 2008; Weingart & Maasen, 2007).

The NPM reforms have produced a fierce competition for excellence among German universities. This struggle for excellence has also become a struggle for public visibility. One premise is that universities receiving favorable media coverage are better able to attract excellent students and research staff. Moreover, bad publicity might exacerbate a downward spiral for those that already suffer from structural problems and find it particularly difficult to implement the necessary reforms (Münch, 2010). Thus, media coverage and public attention may reinforce a dynamic of winners and losers among universities.

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In communication science, the concept of ‘mediatization’ has been introduced in recent years to describe the complex interdependency between the mass media and various social sectors. A wide range of authors has covered the ‘mediatization of politics’ (Kepplinger, 2002; Marcinkowski, 2005), the ‘mediatization of religion’ (Hjarvard, 2008) and the ‘mediatization of science’ (Weingart, 2005), among others. The basic idea behind the concept of mediatization is that mediatized social sectors adapt to media scrutiny in characteristic ways.

In this paper, we draw on this concept and investigate the mediatization of German higher education. As we explain, mediatization manifests in the substantial media orientation of university organizations, entailing structural and strategic transformations (Raupp, 2005).

1.2. The role and influence of public relations departments in the German university system

German universities are at the crossroads in the process of mediatization. They find themselves confronted with journalists and mass media eager to acclaim success and reprove failure. As a consequence, we suppose that public relations departments will gradually obtain a central function in the strategic management of universities. The specific expertise of PR professionals becomes an indispensable resource for decision makers eager to improve their institution’s public image. In this vein, professional expertise should lead to an “empowerment of the public relations function” (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002, p. 140) when the dominant coalitions of a university become aware of the relevance of the mass media (Grunig, 2006).

Systematic research on public relations in higher education systems is generally scarce. In the case of Germany, two recent studies have been dedicated to university PR (Bühler, Naderer, Koch, & Schuster, 2007; Höhn, 2011). The studies agree on two main findings: PR departments have to function with relatively poor personnel and financial resources, and their daily tasks consist mainly of technical activities such as editing press releases. Remarkably, Bühler et al. (2007) found that most PR staffers of German universities do not believe their work is highly appreciated. On the other hand, Höhn (2011) had PR managers assess the future development of the profession in German universities and encountered optimism: the importance of PR departments for the strategic management of universities was predicted to rise.

In summary, the studies cited above suggest that university PR departments still hold a kind of wallflower status, even though their importance is expected to rise.

1.3. Research questions, basic constructs and hypotheses

Our study aims to systematically investigate the current status of university PR managers’ executive influence and the preconditions of this influence. We assume that university decision makers’ media orientation plays a role in the empowerment of the public relations function. That is why we focus on the perspective of the dominant coalitions of universities responsible for relevant structural and strategic decision-making processes. In German universities, the dominant coalitions consist of an administrative board and an academic board. The administrative board is in charge of strategic planning and structural decisions for the university as a whole. In contrast, the academic board is an autonomous institution predominantly composed of full professors, and it has a say in decisions relevant to research and education. Our assumptions lead to the following hypotheses.

H1. Members of the administrative board attribute more executive influence to PR managers than their colleagues on the academic board.

Within the scope of this study, executive influence is defined as the influence PR managers exert on structural and strategic organizational decisions (Moreno, Verhoeven, Trench, & Zerfaß, 2010; Zerfaß, Verhoeven, Trench, Moreno, & Verčič, 2011). According to Reber and Berger (2006, p. 240), PR managers can exert direct influence in shaping decisions and indirect influence when they have personal access to decision makers. Our first hypothesis is derived from the fact that university PR departments are generally subordinate to the administrative board. Hence, administrators should be more susceptible to PR influence.

H2. Members of the administrative board report a more pronounced orientation toward the mass media than their colleagues on the academic board.

We assume that mediatization of universities manifests in the media orientation of decision makers. Marcinkowski and Metag (2011) have introduced the concept of ‘mental mediatization’ to capture mediatization effects at an individual cognitive level. In this vein, decision makers’ media orientation can be seen as a measure of mental mediatization. Our second hypothesis rests on the fact that scientists are traditionally reticent toward the mass media (Poliakoff & Webb, 2007; Tsifti, Cohen, & Gunther, 2011), whereas administrators fulfill the role of ‘university managers’ and thus should be more preoccupied with their universities’ external images.

H3. Members of the administrative board show more appreciation for PR managers’ expertise than their colleagues on the academic board.

Professional expertise was defined as PR managers’ specific competency in managing and maintaining the relationship between universities and their environments. PR experts should fulfill a representational and an informational boundary-spanning role (Springston & Leichty, 1994); i.e., they should represent organizations to the public and perform environmental

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