

# Imagined publics – On the structural transformation of higher education and science. A post-Habermas perspective

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/psc](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/psc)**Georg Krücken** 

University of Kassel, Germany

## Abstract

Referring to Habermas' groundbreaking book 'The structural transformation of the public sphere', the article discusses contemporary transformations of higher education and science. In order to do so, in a first step a post-Habermas perspective will be developed, which implies two changes to the theoretical foundations guiding Habermas' analysis: On the one hand, we are in the midst of a social transformation that has led to a pluralization of the understandings of the public – that is, publics. The representation of society in society no longer finds a homogeneous form; it takes place only within the framework of different partial publics. These publics gain importance for different types of organizations (companies, public administrations, NGOs, etc.). This is where the second change to Habermas' concept comes in because, on the other hand, from the perspective taken in this paper, such publics are constructs of the organizations themselves, that is, imagined publics. The fruitfulness of such a post-Habermas perspective on the public sphere will be illustrated by focusing on higher education and science. Universities as the organizational embodiment of higher education and science, not only represent a discursive space in the public sphere, but they are also increasingly transformed into strategically acting organizations that imagine and actively shape the publics that are relevant to them. Four examples will be used to present empirical observations that emerge from the theoretical perspective proposed here. These examples, however, require more in-depth investigations and only serve as illustrations for a new research agenda on 'imagined publics'. In the end of this contribution, it is asked how far-reaching the discussed change processes towards universities as strategic organizations are, and what consequences result concerning a discursive and communicative understanding of universities.

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## Corresponding author:

Georg Krücken, International Center for Higher Education Research (INCHER), University of Kassel, Moenchebergstrasse 17, 34125 Kassel, Germany.

Email: [kruecken@incher.uni-kassel.de](mailto:kruecken@incher.uni-kassel.de)

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**1. Introduction**

The following contribution should be seen in the context of the critical debate of Jürgen Habermas'<sup>1</sup> groundbreaking analysis of the structural transformation of the public sphere from 1962.<sup>2</sup> The original German text and its English translation from 1989 are widely debated in philosophy and the social sciences.<sup>3</sup> Starting-points for joining the debate are twofold. On the one hand, we are in the midst of a social transformation that has led to a pluralization of the understandings of the public – that is, publics. The representation of society in society no longer finds a homogeneous form; it takes place only within the framework of different partial publics. These publics gain importance for different types of organizations (companies, public administrations, NGOs, etc.). This is where the second basic idea comes in because, on the other hand, from the perspective elaborated here, such publics are constructs of the organizations themselves, that is, imagined publics.

This post-Habermas perspective, which draws inspirations from Habermas' groundbreaking analysis, is explored using the example of the university as a specific type of organization. Universities are of particular interest because they, in the course of their transformation into strategic actors, have made several attempts in recent years to imagine publics that are relevant to them and to develop capacities for action accordingly. From this perspective, universities are not to be understood primarily as discursive communities of communication, but – just like economic and political organizations – as strategically acting organizations. In this organizational transformation lies an essential structural transformation of higher education and science. After describing the theoretical and conceptual considerations on which this contribution is based (Part 1), empirical examples are discussed which shall illustrate the concept of publics as imagined by universities (Part 2). Finally, opportunities are briefly discussed as to how universities, in spite of all changes toward strategic actors, can be understood as discursive communities of communication that represent increasingly important locations of public debates (Part 3).

**2. Structural transformation of the university and imagined publics**

In his extensive foreword to the new edition of his original analysis, Jürgen Habermas in 1990 deals with criticisms that suggest important extensions of his analysis.<sup>4</sup> For this contribution, two references are of particular importance: the increasing expansion of education, which Talcott Parsons already called an 'educational revolution'<sup>5</sup> in 1971, as well as the concluding, thus prominently placed reference to 'the effects of electronic media on the restructuring of simple interactions'<sup>6</sup> and traditionally spatially defined communities. Here, Habermas clairvoyantly anticipates two comprehensive processes of

social and technological change that characterize contemporary society and whose significance was not yet recognizable in 1962, and in 1990 at best in rudimentary form.

The technological changes are dramatic. Manuel Castells, for example, who like no other focused on the Internet at a very early stage and with a theoretical claim in sociology, coined the term 'Internet galaxy'.<sup>7</sup> Similar to a galaxy that represents an accumulation of different astronomical objects (stars, planets, cosmic dust clouds, dark matter, etc.) caused by gravitation, the Internet, whose commercial and broad use in society started only in the 1990s, binds and produces very different social objects such as new forms of expression, economic branches as well as new forms of mass media and political communication. The effects on democracy and public sphere are extensive, multi-layered and ambivalent; they do not allow for an unequivocal assessment.

While technological changes in science and society are broadly discussed, the expansion of higher education within society mentioned by Habermas takes place more gradually and thus leads to less intense discussions, both in the German and English debates about more recent transformations of the public sphere.<sup>8</sup> Yet here, too, the extent and the consequences are significant. The inclusion of ever broader segments of the population in the higher education system represents an essential characteristic of the development of society. The enormous and continuous expansion of higher education can, for example, be observed in the quota of students. In Germany, between 2002 and 2020, it increased from 37 to 55 percent and is thus significantly higher than the share of those who go through the vocational training system, which is traditionally very important in this country.<sup>9</sup> As a consequence, higher education institutions become central instances of socialization in society:<sup>10</sup> here, basic principles of modern individuality such as self-regulation, tolerance of frustration and ambiguity as well as expressivity and resilience are trained; second, the institutions play an ever more important role for social mobility and social dynamics; third, they lead to an expansion of demands for societal participation; fourth, despite continuing social inequalities, they increasingly become a social institution that facilitates exchange and discourse across different cultural and socio-structural settings.

With this only briefly described development, Germany is part of a global trend. Frank and Meyer, for example, show with extensive data that we are currently in the midst of a historically unique trend of higher education expansion, which can be observed in different regions of world society, regardless of national or socio-economic characteristics. The expansion of higher education institutions is also associated with a structural change in the organization of higher education which shapes its relationship to its publics. Universities not only represent a discursive space in the public sphere, but they are also increasingly transformed into organizational actors that imagine and actively shape the publics that are relevant to them. Here, too, they are embedded in a broader trend of social development.

If one considers publics as imagined constructs of organizations, as proposed in this contribution, the societal relevance of organizations needs to be pointed out first. In a very fundamental sense, societies are organizational societies because organizations and their logic permeate all areas of life, not only the economy, politics and administration, but also, for example, science, education, health, sports or partnership.<sup>11</sup> Just consider

the academic sphere, which is highly shaped by organizations and their logic, from university studies to recruitment as a staff member, learned societies, publishing houses, funding agencies, as well as national and international networks. Globalization and world society research also views the worldwide expansion of organizations as a central characteristic of global processes of rationalization and socialization; organizations are carriers of these processes. They act as if their environment is composed of other organizations, even in areas that are traditionally characterized by communal life words.<sup>12</sup>

With the increasing penetration of very different areas of social action by organizations, a type of action is disseminated which, following Habermas, can be described as strategic action in contrast to communicative action.<sup>13</sup> Of course, this is not to deny that organizations also offer a lot of space for communicative action, for example, within the framework of political parties, universities or NGOs. However, the environmental relations of these and other organizations are oriented along the primacy of strategic action because this type of action is peculiar to organizations in general. Herewith we extend Habermas' focus on the primacy of purposive rationality in the economic and political-administrative spheres by assuming that purposive rationality is central to all kinds of organizations, not only economic and state organizations.<sup>14</sup> Organizations in very different areas of society establish their environmental relations strategically by imagining the publics that are relevant to them – against the background of cultural interpretations that are assumed to be legitimate – and addressing them: political parties discover social media in order to address and attract especially the younger audience that they have heard about; companies claim the importance of corporate social responsibility for their own organizations in order to regain social legitimacy; environmental and development NGOs rely heavily on visualization in order to address the publics identified as target groups as effectively as possible; public administrations flaunt their customer orientation as part of New Public Management; and schools develop mission statements in order to reach the environments relevant to them, such as parents, students and authorities, as effectively as possible.

Universities are of particular interest here as the expansion of higher education also entails a structural transformation of the underlying characteristics of universities. Traditionally, the university receives its social legitimacy as a global or national institution, not as an individual organization. Olsen and Maassen<sup>15</sup> have further developed this thought and marked it as the vision of the European university as 'community of scholars.' This vision was increasingly supplemented by the vision of a 'representative democracy' and, even more distant from the classical vision, by that of the university as an 'instrument of political agendas' as well as a 'service enterprise'. For the German discussion, Habermas focused on the traditional idea of the university as a community and addressed early the question as to how this idea can still be represented in view of processes of scientific growth and differentiation.<sup>16</sup> The answer lies in subject-specific discourses that are based on 'communicative or discursive forms of scientific argumentation'<sup>17</sup> and thus express the idea of the university and university learning processes as a whole. Complimentary to this, from the perspective of organization research, universities are described as self-organized, internally loosely coupled expert organizations, as, according to this research, such an organizational structure is considered

particularly suitable for the organization of research and teaching, its communicative foundation and the systemic goals of knowledge production and transfer.<sup>18</sup>

Even if, as briefly sketched out in the previous paragraph, the university continues to represent a discursive space which embodies the idea of the university as a ‘specific organization’,<sup>19</sup> it increasingly transforms into a strategic actor which has only little to do with the classic organizational description. This transformation also shifts the basis of its legitimacy, which is no longer attributed to it only as a global or national institution but increasingly as an individual organization. This development began comparatively early in American universities, even though they also served as a model for the well-known organizational description outlined above.<sup>20</sup> For German universities, this transformation can be observed since about twenty to thirty years.<sup>21</sup> To mention only a few relevant aspects: universities increasingly try to present themselves to the outside world as a ‘brand’, as an organization with a clear strategy and profile. While the university used to be considered especially in the German tradition as an institution, that is, an entity, whose tasks and structures were taken for granted without further questioning, today it is much more about developing an individual organizational identity that is expressed both to the inside as well as the outside of that organization. Moreover, most university leaderships today demand cross-faculty networking in research and teaching. The strong ‘bottom up’ character, which starts with the individuals involved in research and teaching and, especially in the humanities and social sciences, suggests individual research and dyadic teacher–student relationships in doctoral studies, is increasingly being replaced by the creation of larger research networks and research training groups. Complementary to this, instances of academic self-governance are losing decision-making power to the presidencies and department heads and their management staff, who have longer terms of office. Likewise, the university organization itself increasingly sees itself as an actor in various competitions. For Germany, this is especially true in the context of state-initiated competitions such as the Excellence Initiative or the Quality Pact for Teaching, whereas in other higher education systems competition for students plays a much stronger role. Global rankings also contribute to the self-perception and external perception as competitive actors. All these processes – ‘branding’, networking and organizational competition – are mutually reinforcing and are accompanied by a considerable expansion of central university administration, which can be shown for all areas from quality management and controlling to knowledge and technology transfer, internationalization and public relations. The transformation of the university as outlined here – which consists in understanding tasks such as research, teaching, and transfer as tasks of the respective organization, not of the university system as a whole nor of the individuals engaged in research and teaching – is accompanied by an internal differentiation within the organization that is also significant for the relationship to the public. Highly specialized administrative units purposefully address specific publics of the organization; the internal differentiation goes hand in hand with a pluralization of the understanding of the public.

These transformation processes of the university as an organization are not only interesting from the perspective of organization theory but also from that of social theory. In the sense of Reckwitz, this expresses a culturally hegemonic trend toward

singularization that can be observed across society and which promotes the emergence of supposedly unique and distinctive characteristics in individuals, but also in cities, regions, and organizations.<sup>22</sup> The fact that the singularization pressure rests on everyone and the leeway for singularizations is limited by society indicates the paradoxical constitution of singularized actors who express their embeddedness in society through their singularity. As we will see in Part 2 of this contribution, this paradox is also true with respect to the imagined publics of universities.

Reflecting on the relationship between university, science and the public by taking a broader, socially embedded perspective on organizations is certainly not self-evident, quite the contrary. Just as large parts of past reflections on the university in the humanities and social sciences are characterized by a certain 'obliviousness to organization', one finds similar patterns in the well-consolidated research on the topic of 'science and the public'. On the part of science, this research mostly either focuses on individual scientists – with regard to traditional mass media,<sup>23</sup> citizen science<sup>24</sup> and social media<sup>25</sup> – or on the entire system of science,<sup>26</sup> without grasping the constitutive significance of the organizational character of science and its externally directed communications.<sup>27</sup>

The change of perspective proposed here, however, goes beyond emphasizing the organizational character of science and higher education with reference to different publics. As the title of this contribution indicates, it is assumed that these publics do not simply exist in the environment of the university organization and merely need to be represented internally within the organization. Rather, they are imagined and actively shaped by the university organization. In addition to the organization theory rationale presented above, which sees this as a result of the increasing strategic and environmental orientation of organizations, the general basic idea of sociological systems theory that environments – and this includes publics in the sense used here – only come into play as constructions by systems is also of central importance here.<sup>28</sup> Environmental expectations are thus anticipated by social systems – but also by individuals, as can be assumed if following up on Luhmann<sup>29</sup> – and processed within the respective system as anticipated expectations. Whereas Luhmann focuses especially on the respective publics of the functional systems – public opinion for the political system or the market for the economic system – the focus here is exclusively on the publics constructed by organizations. Such a constructivist understanding of the public is difficult to reconcile with the basic premises of Habermas' analysis,<sup>30</sup> but it represents a complementary perspective that certainly borrows from the analysis of the strategic orientation in organizations of state administration and the economic system emphasized by Habermas in his 'Theory of Communicative Action' and transfers this type of action to universities as core organizations of the system of science and higher education.<sup>31</sup> Loosely in line with Anderson's groundbreaking concept of imagined communities, I would also like to speak of imagined publics here.<sup>32</sup> His analysis of national communities within nationalist interpretive schemes is driven by the idea that such communities are imagined and not the reflection of real communities. The publics of university organization, too, are in this sense imagined. They do not have a one-to-one correspondence in the external world of universities. Moreover, they are not understood as a sphere of exchange between individuals, but as different audiences consisting not only of individuals but also of organizations such as

other universities and ministries, as well as abstract schemes such as rankings. In general, such publics imagined by the university as an organization are characterized by a high degree of future-oriented fictionality and imagination.<sup>33</sup> This will be illustrated empirically in the following.

### 3. Empirical illustrations

Basically, it should be noted that the developments in higher education and science described in Part 1 should be understood as global; they play a role in very different national systems.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, the national level does not disappear as a level of reference; on the contrary, it can even be strengthened, as shown, for example, by national efforts to achieve global ranking positions for universities.<sup>35</sup> In the framework of an increasingly strategic university, the ‘reputation management’<sup>36</sup> is of fundamental importance. As organizations, universities can refer to very different publics. Analytically, three types of imagined publics can be differentiated: first, it is about individuals like, for example, students that are addressed in the area of teaching, or about citizens that are addressed in the area of research; the latter as recipients of research results or increasingly as active partners in the field of citizen science. Despite its heterogeneity and fuzzy structure, this group of addressees is more and more being focused on with measures that are supposed to be specific for individual target groups. The increasing external orientation with regard to organizations and rankings appears to be even more important, however. Thus, very different organizations in the social environment are being targeted by the respective university. This applies both to organizations such as ministries, funding organizations and companies, and to other universities. It is precisely the networking and competitive orientation described above that leads to universities observing and addressing each other. Third, there is an increased focus on rankings, which are addressed by universities. Rankings, in the sense of Georg Simmel’s famous ‘Sociology of Competition’,<sup>37</sup> represent an third party that relates different competitors to each other who try to anticipate the wishes of the third party and court for their favour.<sup>38</sup> While Simmel is concerned with ‘the public’ as a third party and ‘coming changes in taste, in fashion, in interests’,<sup>39</sup> which competitors anticipate with ‘an almost clairvoyant instinct’,<sup>40</sup> rankings represent a highly standardized form of measurement and metrization, which, as third parties, condense quite different information into a ranking position.<sup>41</sup>

Aside from this differentiation according to groups of addressees, different levels should be distinguished on which imagined publics are addressed. For universities, the distinction between the global, national and regional levels applies in particular.<sup>42</sup> Thus, for example, global rankings, national ministries or regional corporations are identified as relevant environments. In the following, four examples will be used to present empirical observations that emerge from the theoretical-conceptual perspective proposed here. These examples, however, only serve to illustrate and point out a research agenda whose results would have to be demonstrated in the context of more in-depth investigations. The first example, logos of universities, indicates the global character of the development sketched out here. The second example, mission statements of universities, represents a more in-depth examination of the construction of publics within a national context, here



using the example of German universities. In the third example, the focus is on case studies of reputation management at universities of Hong Kong, hence illuminating in particular the linkages between globalization and strategic behaviour among universities vis-à-vis different audiences. The fourth example shows that the common trend of expanding public relations departments within two national contexts, Germany and the United States, may well be accompanied by differences in imagined publics.

To begin with the first example. Logos, just like mission statements, merchandising, image brochures or video ads, are activities that are part of the 'branding' of universities. Logos of universities are in the tradition of seals. From the beginning, universities have developed specific seals, as can be seen in the case of the oldest universities in Europe (Università di Bologna, 1088) and what is today Germany (Universität Heidelberg, 1386). A global study of recent and older representations, working both historically-qualitatively as well as with 'big data' methods shows that the self-image of universities can be reconstructed very well in connection with their social environmental relations on the basis of seals and logos.<sup>43</sup> Early university seals show strong references to the Roman Catholic Church and the monastic origins of universities. Depicted are scholars and students immersed in the study of texts. The presentations change over time. The understanding of activities carried out in universities and the character of a university community change significantly in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Natural sciences and technical symbols point out the expanded canon of subjects; references to the nation states in which the universities are embedded increasingly take the place of an institution that is global and communal in its self-understanding.

With the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the further development of seals to logos as well as the new creation of logos has become an important part of 'branding' activities with which universities try to strategically address environments that are relevant to them. On the one hand, the central challenge lies in establishing an allegedly unique brand that will be recognized over and over again in the environment imagined by the university, while, on the other hand, positioning the university within the framework of symbols, goals and visions that are generally desirable. In this context, three things become apparent: First, the active individual, open horizons, and reference to the global level currently represent important points of reference. Interestingly, this applies to universities in very different national systems and corresponds to the above mentioned analysis by Frank and Meyer<sup>44</sup> of an increasingly global development in universities which is also embedded in a more general social tendency towards a 'brand society'.<sup>45</sup> Second, most universities try to achieve a balance between visualization of the own organization and the overarching institution 'university'. This is also of importance with regard to publics imagined by the universities. There are, however, also cases where the logo no longer clearly reveals whether it is a university, a corporation or an NGO. Third, external organizations are usually involved in the creation of logos, from consultancies to design offices. By turning to external consultants, universities are carrying out a process that began with companies in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and which since the end of that century has increasingly been found in other types of organizations such as public administrations, hospitals and social service institutions. In spite of the diffusion of management concepts and logos across sectors via consultants, fundamental knowledge of the social sector in



which one operates is necessary. This has been demonstrated by the failure of newly created logos. For example, in the US, a logo had to be withdrawn which tried to visualize a university beginning with the letter D with a 'd+' – a mediocre grade at American universities. Similarly, an attempt to symbolize a Canadian university with a logo modelled after a neoclassical monument in Italy under Mussolini failed as well. As these examples show, the strategic positioning expressed by logos within the framework of imagined publics that one wishes to actively influence is a process that is anything but trivial and subject to different interpretations. Likewise, especially in the case of universities of a younger age, both the university's own history and past embeddings as well as visions of the self and future embeddings must be expressed by the university with the help of only one graphically designed sign; older universities, on the other hand, only need to refer to their history while the openness to the future can be confidently emphasized via a brief hint next to the logo – as, for example, in the case of Heidelberg, which reads: 'University of Heidelberg. Future since 1386'.

The second example is on mission statements. Like logos, the construction of mission statements of universities also represents a global trend in the more recent development of the university. However, in contrast to logos, this has already been studied widely, for example in Germany.<sup>46</sup> Mission statements originally stem from corporations where they are understood as part of the strategic communication that is addressed to the inside (employees) and especially to the outside (clients, suppliers, competitors, etc.). For German universities, it can be noted that most universities have a mission statement. These have come to life in very different ways: some in the framework of a broad internal discourse, some were created by university leadership or administration. The mission statements express the strategic positioning as well as visions of the future self of the organization. In Germany, however, mission statements are more than diffuse communications directed to the outside for the purpose of obtaining legitimacy, even if this is of great importance. They serve, for example, for the accreditation of private universities, reflect tasks of universities expressed in state higher education laws such as the promotion of knowledge and technology transfer, play a role in target agreements between ministries and public universities, and were demanded from universities applying for funding in the third line ('Institutional Strategies') of the Excellence Initiative.

The analysis of mission statements of universities shows two things: On the one hand, it is about the incorporation of different, partly contradicting, imagined expectations. For example, universities should have a regional and global, disciplinary and inter-, respectively, transdisciplinary profile. They should also promote research, teaching and direct relationships with the social environment, express their own history as well as expected futures and pursue socially desirable goals like gender equality, inclusion and sustainability. On the other hand, similar to logos of universities, it is about the strategic environmental positioning in between broader institutional and more specific organizational characteristics. Universities use classical, institutional self-descriptions, such as a focus on research and teaching, in order to be recognized and acknowledged as universities in their environment. Research and teaching are, however, also used as descriptive formulas of the individual university, enriched by characteristics that are not expected to apply to all universities to the same extent as to their own organization. The

balancing of commonalities and differences makes it possible to identify specific patterns and types, where in particular founding year, range of subjects, and geographic position, among other factors, play an important role in generating differences. At the same time, however, with regard to imagined publics, the basic cultural assumptions about what a university is supposed to be are not transgressed – which is entirely in line with the paradoxical constitution of singularized actors outlined above. To sum up the first two examples, it can be noted that, in the global process of their transformation into strategic actors, ‘higher education institutions have become significant communicators’,<sup>47</sup> and ‘branding’ activities like the creation of logos and mission statements have gained in importance.

The third example consists of the deeper analysis of reputation management through branding and re-branding activities, including logos and mission statements, at different universities in Hong Kong. With the help of three case studies, Lam (2023) shows that, in particular global rankings, related competition for ranking positions, and other scarce goods for which universities compete (attention, reputation, personnel, students, etc.) have an impact on universities as strategically acting organizations. They try to shape or even control their public image through a wide array of Public Relations activities. Information policies are central and targeted to specific audiences. These could be global rankings, policy-makers in Hong Kong, or non-local Chinese students. As diverse as these targeted audiences are, so are the related university communication strategies. With a lot of empirical data, Lam (2023) shows that different ‘imagined communities’ are addressed in a highly strategic way, while communicative action in the sense of Habermas (1984, 1987a) and related direct interaction is of minor importance. Equally important is that these efforts are not necessarily successful, and the pitfalls of strategically acting universities become apparent. One such effect, as demonstrated by Lam (2023), is that universities’ strategizing might lead to the exclusion of students and staff who voiced their dissent in the process of branding and, in particular, re-branding.

The publics imagined by universities, however, vary significantly according to the national context. This shall be shown with the fourth example by comparing US American and German universities. For the US, Espeland and Sauder<sup>48</sup> as well as Xie and Teo,<sup>49</sup> among others, have shown that the external presentation of universities plays a central role in public relations.<sup>50</sup> In this context, it is very much about showing a ‘return on investment’ (ROI) of the costs associated with studying, which is seen as an individual investment in one’s own human capital. A positive ROI means labour market success and higher earning as compared to not taking up the chosen course of study.

However, as Espeland and Sauder<sup>51</sup> show, such a positive ROI can no longer be taken for granted for the case of law schools they studied, and is doubted in many cases. This also leads to greater communication efforts on the part of universities and their law schools. Interestingly, in the process of external presentation, potential students and their parents are not only addressed directly as relevant environments but also indirectly via national rankings of law schools. Because of the permanent instability of ranking positions, which put individual and organizational actors under pressure, Espeland and Sauder<sup>52</sup> also refer to them as ‘Engines of Anxiety’.

An increasing importance of public relations departments in universities can also be observed for Germany. These have been considerably expanded since the beginning of the 2000s; moreover, their importance from the perspective of university leadership has increased.<sup>53</sup> The orientation towards public relations is directed in particular at higher education and science policy, while the target groups relevant in the US play a much smaller role here. Despite all efforts to present themselves as global players, the focus in both countries is primarily national, in Germany even very strongly related to the state-ministerial sphere. In Germany, to put it bluntly, the state is the central imagined public of the university as an organization. This contradicts the often proclaimed efforts to primarily focus on and reach the broader population with different formats. The strong orientation towards the state and the resulting attempts of anticipation and fulfilment of its desires – as a third party, following Simmel's aforementioned definition of competition – also in the area of public relations are insofar notable as the higher education policy reforms of the last two to three decades are typically equated in higher education policy discourse with greater university autonomy vis-à-vis the state.<sup>54</sup>

The strategic orientation toward state environments in the area of public relations, which has been elaborated by media and communications research and which also played a significant role in the example of university mission statements, also corresponds to our own studies on the establishment of technology transfer offices at German universities. With the help of these offices, the connection between universities and companies was to be strengthened in order to facilitate and speed up the transfer of knowledge and technologies.<sup>55</sup> Despite this programmatic approach, they were founded primarily as an externally visible signal to higher education policy and its expectations. In contrast, the anticipated expectations of industry play just as subordinate a role as those of transfer-active university scientists. According to the analysis by Meyer and Rowan, transfer offices are part of the formal structure of universities that is directed to the outside.<sup>56</sup> By taking into account the environmental expectations relevant to it, – or, according to Meyer and Rowan: myths – which are expressed in the formal structure of an externally visible office, the university obtains legitimacy as well as resources,<sup>57</sup> in our case especially via target agreements and state-induced competitions. At the same time, the activity structure directed at the inside can be decoupled; this prevents rapidly changing legitimacy requirements, especially on the part of the state, from translating into organizational change just as quickly. It can be assumed that similar modes of reaction of increasingly strategically acting university organizations towards the state as a central imagined public can also be observed in current topics – think of the comprehensive demands of dealing with 'grand challenges' or, in view of the Corona pandemic, of digitization and science communication.

The fact that universities, in the competition for ranking positions, environmental legitimacy and material resources, increasingly act strategically, especially in their external presentation, and make major investments in the expansion of public relations departments in the process, applies in different national systems. One can, however, observe that the publics imagined by the university, and whom they want to address under these conditions, are more likely to be seen in the market or state sphere. Interestingly, the fact that American universities tend to address the former, while German universities tend

to address the latter, corresponds to somewhat older findings in research on university governance. Burton Clark, for example, developed a very influential triangle of coordination whose cornerstones consist of academic oligarchy (respectively, self-governance), state and market, and within which different national systems can be located.<sup>58</sup> While coordination in the US especially takes place via the market, the German higher education system is characterized by a combination of influence by the state from the outside and internal academic oligarchy. Yet, despite all the changes and reforms in higher education governance, especially in Germany, that have taken place since Clark's 1983 study, the different external orientations of universities still seem to be a defining feature in both systems. However, further imagined publics are being added. These are formed in particular by the universities' increasing global and competitive orientation and networking, as well as abstract schemes such as rankings, which increasingly structure the attention of individuals, state and market actors as potential addressees.

#### 4. Discussion

As we have tried to show, higher education and science as well as the university as their organizational embodiment are highly relevant, though often overlooked sites for critically engaging with Habermas' analysis of the structural transformations of the public sphere and other central aspects of his work. As a result of this critical engagement, the perspective we developed theoretically in Part 1 and demonstrated in Part 2 with empirical illustrations implies a high degree of scepticism regarding the notion of understanding universities as discursive communities that are relevant sites for public debate in society. The increasing strategic orientation of the university, which as an organization imagines and addresses the publics relevant to it, is much too obvious, and, as shown, there is also a decoupling of external representation and inwardly directed activity structure. In principle, it is possible to combine the character of the discursive community with the activities of the strategic organization, based on purposive rationality, described in this paper. Think of, for example, discursive-participatory processes of creating university mission statements as they have taken place at some universities. It can be assumed, however, that the discursive orientation is at a disadvantage compared to the strategic one.

Nevertheless, it would be short-sighted to perceive universities only from the point of view of their transformation into strategic actors. On the one hand, the core processes at universities, research and teaching, continue to be strongly shaped by academics and their specific patterns of action and coordination, which often elude being shaped by the organization. Academic collegiality, although under pressure from a variety of sources both from within and outside universities, is still highly valued and practiced in universities all over the world.<sup>59</sup> On the other hand, universities can very well be understood as a relevant part of the political public sphere in the sense of Habermas,<sup>60</sup> be it in the context of specialized academic discourses or in the context of broader social discourses that at the same time affect the university as a whole – think of, for example, the current treatment of historical patrons and monuments at universities.

This is even more true since universities have become a central instance of socialization in the expansion of higher education, including more and more groups of people.

Universities are part of society and, likewise, shaped by social inequality and exclusion. Nevertheless, universities are also sites where important communication processes of a culturally and socio-structurally heterogeneous society occur. More than in many other societal fields, a large group of members of society, that is, students, can get in contact with others from different social classes and cultural settings, including the large and heterogeneous group of international students. This is an important, though often overlooked, strength of present-day universities. In addition, universities could also gain in importance as societally relevant discursive sites because science is, in its basic constitution, discursive, uncertain and open to results and interpretation, even if it is, in practice, not safe from a tendency towards dogmatization. Especially in a society characterized by conflicting interpretations of the present situation as well as desirable futures, in which many things are tried out and just as many are discarded, the university as a discursive institution could represent a suitable framework for social processes of at times conflictual communication that at the same time serves as laboratories for trying out and embracing new perspectives.

## ORCID iD

Georg Krücken  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5342-5024>

## Notes

1. This paper is a revised and updated version of a paper, which appeared in German in 2021 (Krücken 2021). In order to avoid misunderstandings, a brief clarification, as we speak of universities, higher education institutions, and science: For universities, the connection of research and teaching under the umbrella of an organization is constitutive. They are part of the comprehensive higher education system, which also includes other types of higher education institutions for which this connection is not constitutive. In Germany, these are in particular universities of applied sciences, respectively institutions of higher education without the right to award doctorates, which are considered higher education institutions in the same way as universities. The particular significance of state environments outlined in the text applies especially to public universities, and less so to private universities, which are of lesser importance in Germany. Science refers to the totality of systematically obtained and openly verifiable knowledge through disciplines and interdisciplinary connections, as represented especially at universities. Cf. Hüther and Krücken 2018; Weingart 2001; Jacobs 2013.
2. cf. Habermas 1962; Habermas 1989.
3. cf. Habermas 1990; Calhoun 1992; Crossley and Roberts 2004.
4. cf. Habermas 1990.
5. Parsons 1971, p. 29.
6. Habermas 1990, p. 48, our translation.
7. cf. Castells 2001.
8. cf. Habermas 1990; Calhoun 1992; Crossley and Roberts 2004; Seeliger and Sevignani 2021.
9. cf. Statista 2021.
10. For a general overview with the corresponding references, see Hüther and Krücken 2018; Frank and Meyer 2020.

11. cf. [Perrow 1991](#); [Arnold et al. 2022](#).
12. cf. [Bromley and Meyer 2015](#).
13. cf. [Habermas 1984, 1987a](#).
14. cf. [Coleman 1982](#); [Bromley and Meyer 2015](#).
15. cf. [Olsen and Maasen 2007](#).
16. cf. [Habermas 1987b](#).
17. *ibid.*, p. 21.
18. cf. [Musselin 2007](#); [Hüther and Krücken 2018](#), pp. 133-176.
19. cf. [Musselin 2007](#).
20. cf. [Ramirez 2020](#).
21. cf. [Krücken and Meier 2006](#); [Hüther and Krücken 2018](#); [Krücken 2020](#)
22. cf. [Reckwitz 2020](#).
23. cf. [Rödder et al. 2012](#).
24. cf. [Vohland et al. 2021](#).
25. cf. [Carrigan 2016](#).
26. cf. [Weingart 2001](#).
27. For an exception, see [Rödder 2020](#).
28. cf. [Luhmann 1995](#), pp. 176-209.
29. *ibid.* 1995.
30. cf. [Habermas 1989](#).
31. cf. [Habermas 1984, 1987a](#).
32. cf. [Anderson 1983](#).
33. cf. [Beckert 2016](#).
34. cf. [Musselin 2021](#); [Berman and Paradeise 2016](#); [Bleiklie et al. 2017](#); [Pineda 2015](#).
35. cf. [Brankovic et al. 2018](#), [Ringel and Werron 2019](#).
36. cf. [Christensen et al. 2019](#).
37. cf. [Simmel 2008](#).
38. cf. also [Werron 2015](#).
39. [Simmel 2008](#), p. 962.
40. *ibid.*
41. cf. [Ringel et al. 2021](#).
42. cf. [Marginson and Rhoades 2002](#).
43. cf. [Delmestri et al. 2015](#); [Drori et al. 2016](#).
44. cf. [Frank and Meyer 2020](#).
45. cf. [Kornberger 2010](#).
46. cf. [Kosmützky and Krücken 2015](#); [Kosmützky 2016](#); [Berghaeuser and Hoelscher 2020](#); [Jungblut and Jungblut 2017](#); [Oertel and Söll 2017](#).
47. [Fähnrich et al. 2019](#), p. 2, our translation.
48. cf. [Espeland and Sauder 2016](#).
49. cf. [Xie and Teo 2020](#).
50. On the historical development, cf. [Warner 1996](#).
51. cf. [Espeland and Sauder 2016](#).
52. *ibid.*
53. cf. [Marcinkowski et al. 2013](#).

54. cf. [Hüther and Krücken 2018](#), pp. 9-37.
55. cf. [Krücken 2003](#).
56. cf. [Meyer and Rowan 1977](#).
57. *ibid.*
58. cf. [Clark 1983](#).
59. cf. [Sahlin and Eriksson-Zetterquist 2023](#) for a comprehensive overview; for Germany, see [Kosmützky and Krücken 2023](#), pp. 31-57.
60. cf. [Habermas 1989](#).

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