Social Media and Universities - an Unexplored Territory - Case Study of Poland

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Abstract. Social media are ubiquitous and more people adopt them to their own needs and requirements. The basic need is to stay in touch with your friends, relatives and business associates. Furthermore social media allow to control the flow of information and block communicates that have little or no interest to the recipient. Universities in Poland seem to ignore the trend, as social media are being utilized in a standard, non-interactive mode, where University sends the message and closes the connection. A case study of 4 Polish public universities is presented: University of Warsaw, Jagiellonian University, University of Lodz and University of Jan Kochanowski in Kielce. Author analyses how social media are being utilized to communicate and form a relationship between the university and its stakeholders, is the communication process fluent and effective. To compare, a case study of Faculty of International Relations and Political Studies, University of Lodz is presented. The department developed its own unique communication system, based on a custom solution. The author evaluates the potential of the approach.

Key words: communication, social media, relationship building, university.
JEL classification: M39 – Marketing, Other; I23 – Higher Education

1 Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the possibilities of establishing new communication schemes between universities and their stakeholders using social media. The subject is becoming more pressing each year as since 2011 Polish universities are required by the Polish Ministry of Higher Education to monitor student and alumni situation on the job market. Additionally a vast decline in number of students, is slowly forcing the universities to become more accessible and open to the environment they operate in. On the other hand students have adopted the Internet and expect to find the information they require through Web services, mobile services and social media. The problem is that universities in Poland treat social media as a phenomenon, as a trend, rather than a part of a reality. This translates into using services like Facebook or Twitter, like a standard web service using a static communication model. There are examples which show there is potential and Faculty of International Relations and Political Studies have adopted a new approach, aimed not only at students, but all major stakeholders, including, alumni, business and own staff.

The paper itself is of exploratory nature and is based around a particular case study. There is a clear lack of scientific sources tackling the issue, therefore the author hopes, that this paper may serve as a starting point for further studies.

2 Definitions

Social media are becoming more and more popular among Internet users, among younger generations particularly. This new form of communication have abolished traditional borders between content creators and content consumers. Now everyone can build a community around a particular event, goal or person. The community is dynamic and can interact with each other and share parts of their lives. These characteristics are empower people to become more involved and therefore more interested (Jones, 2011). Internet and social media require a new approach to communication, as it is the first medium that allows to send and receive messages instantly with any number of people. This allowed people to create their own personal infosphere (Patrut and Patrut, 2013). The desire to create personal information streams holds true both to personal and professional aspects of life. Becoming a part of a community encourages users to take an
active part in it. It does not mean that everyone has to publish content, but in terms of social media, subscribing or following a particular person, brand or institution is an act of choice. This can be view as a way of dealing with information overload, that every Internet user is facing today (Sui, 2000). Social media allow users to easily categorize and control the information flow, by keeping the most interesting bits of content on the front, while the rest is pushed back to background (Governor, et al, 2006). One has to keep in mind that people are usually more susceptible to views and opinions given by peers, rather than celebrities or institutions. Communicating in real time, allows to build bonds and relationships, between people from different parts of the world. The process feels natural and therefore is more engaging for all parties involved. As the bond strengthens, people start to trust each other and identify themselves with presented views. Credibly is built, which can be used to influence others, without even the need to talk to them directly (Parks, 2011). As research indicates, recipients tend to believe and accept content coming from people they know and formed some kind of a relationship before (Macnamara, 2010). It is now believed that recipients are now searching not only for new content, but for new ways of interacting with each other. Currently emerging trend called Gamification is a perfect example (Tkaczyk, 2013). Incorporating game mechanics into presented content, allows more interaction, competition and therefore more involvement to happen.

3 Universities and social media

Universities do not differ significantly from other institutions and from a marketing standpoint, can be treated as a service provider (Tuten, 2011). Naturally the main service offered will be education, but also research and expertise. One could argue, that the first element is the most important, but in Polish reality, where 42 public universities operate under the same laws and regulations, the profiles of these institutions are very similar. It is the communication and reputation that sets one university apart from the rest (Freeman, 2011). If so, then building a strong community around the university and maintaining relations with their stakeholders, should be a priority (Attwood, 2005). It has been well established, that students on all levels, now expected an individualized approach and are looking for a personalized learning experience (Robbie and Zheng, 2012), (Guthrie, 2012), (Castrium and Liang, 2012). Social media fulfil those needs, as they allow personalized communication with different stakeholders, which allow communities and group of interest to form and flourish (Cheal, 2012). However, social media are only a tool and require a new approach to communication and media management. The main issue is that, social media are currently treated as another element of the standard media portfolio, which before was non interactive. Buzzetto-More, 2012). The popularity of social media comes directly from curiosity to try and explore new things and interact with others – traits embedded into human nature (Noor Al-Deen & Hendricks, 2011). If the content published on social sites is static, people will lose interest in it and stop consuming it, once it becomes irrelevant to them. Authors own research indicates that more than 40% of subscribers of the University of Lodz, loose interest in the content, once they graduate (own research, 2013).

3.1 Social media in Poland

In Poland, the dominant social media service is Facebook and local Nasza Klasa (Our class). The latter is aimed mainly at Polish customers, and was designed to become the meeting point for old classmates. The service was based on its Canadian counterpart Classmates.com, which allowed to search and communicate with classmates from United States and Canada. Nasza Klasa was adopted to Polish environment, providing a constantly updated list of schools, class names and numbers, graduation dates etc. Every user after submitting a short survey was presented with a list of possible classmates, which made the contacting process very simple and intuitive. The problem
was, that the service never evolved beyond the presented model and was becoming somewhat obsolete, especially after 2006 Facebook launched a localized version of the service. One has to acknowledge, that Nasza Klasa was very innovative at its launch, offering tools and real time communication, unknown to Polish Internet user. The problem was, that new generations were graduating in a new Internet based reality. For these people keeping in touch with other classmates was something natural, through mobile phones, e-mail or instant messaging. A service like Nasza Klasa was not needed (Wojas, 2012). Furthermore the portal had constant security issues, resulting in data loss and disappearing content (hacking.pl, 2008). Quality of the content was another issue, as user profiles were not verified in any way, which resulted in abusive content. The final problem were ubiquitous advertisements, which flooded the service after 2008. It was an attempt by the owners of Nasza Klasa, to mitigate the loss of profits caused by increasing popularity of Facebook. As one might imagine, the consequences were severe as more users dropped out of the service. Since 2009 there were attempts to revitalize the portal, by introducing new services like personal and public chat rooms, Blip (a Polish Twitter clone) or multiplayer games. More administrative staff was higher and all profiles were now undergoing periodical verification, for abusive or illegal content. The changes were positive, but it was too late. Facebook was already an established brand at the time and offered similar range of services, plus it was an international standard available to general population. Therefore Nasza Klasa failed to offer anything more than competition and according to Internet Standard portal, in September of 2011, the number of Polish users on Facebook exceeded the number of users on Nasza Klasa. The numbers were 11 725 422 and 11 628 873 users respectively (Social Media, 2012). Since September 2011, the number of Polish Facebook users continue to rise, resulting in clear dominance of the portal. Other social media sites like GoldenLine.pl (a LinkedIn clone) stay far behind with about 2 million users. Linked in mentioned before has about 500,000 users (Interaktywnie.pl, 2012). In April 2012 a localized version of LinkedIn was launched, yet it did not result in a noticeable increase in number of subscribers or decline in GoldenLine users. The Polish social media market seems to be stable with Facebook as the dominant player and slowly deteriorating Nasza Klasa. Twitter is a niche medium, used by a very specialized target group and is irrelevant, in terms of this paper.

3.2 Poles and social media

According to the research conducted by PEW Research Center, 40% of Poles use social media on a regular basic, 17% don’t use them at all (by choice), while 42% lack a permanent connection to the Internet (SocialPress, 2012). The largest group of social media users are between 18 to 29 years old, as 82% of them declare to visit social media portals regularly. In the 30 to 49 years old group, 53% use social media, while people above 50% are not interested in this medium (8%). These data are coherent with the Central Statistical Office data that indicate, 62% of Polish households have permanent Internet access and 42% use social networks. 55% of people access the Internet using a computer, while 45% use a mobile device (Wave6 Report, 2012). The data clearly indicates that, Poles are present in the Internet and social sphere, despite obvious infrastructural shortcomings. This shows potential for everyone, who wishes to build a community using social media. A perfect example would be the Heart and Mind fan page on Facebook maintained by Orange, former Polish Telecom. The fan page focuses on presenting the brand Orange and its commercial offer. It is done by two characters Heart and Mind, which were developed for a marketing campaign of Polish Telecom. Apart from the fan page, a large number of videos were created, where the characters are portrayed as someone living among us and have similar problems and issues. The videos, very humorous in nature, resulted in great popularity of the characters and allowed their fan page to
become the number one polish language fan page on Facebook with over 1.9 million subscribers (Internet Standard, 2012). The mentioned before Wave6 report indicated that Poles like to engage in humorous, entertaining content using social media. The mayor change since 2011 was, that commercial content and direct advertisements, were an important factor discouraging people from participating in a fan page discussion. For Polish social market, it is a novelty.

4. Universities and communication through social media

The subject has not been researched to satiable degree and there is a clear lack of comprehensive research in the area. A report published in February 2012 by assistant professor E. Kulczycki at the Adam Mickiewicz University of Poznan investigated the presence of universities in social sphere. The results were quantitative and presented in an open notebook format. The research gives strong arguments, that Polish universities are present on various social media sites, but does not measure user involvement in any way. Therefore the research cannot answer the question, how communication is conducted and does it differ from standard message creator – recipient scheme. Based on Kulczycki’s findings an exploratory research was conducted in February 2014. The main objective of the study was to analyze the behavior and attitudes represented by the institutions themselves and by the followers. For this survey four institutions were selected: the University of Warsaw (the largest Polish university in terms of the number of students), Jagiellonian University (second largest), the University of Lodz (according to the Kulczycki report this institution was the most active in social media), and the Jan Kochanowski University of Kielce, which is the youngest public university in the country. The research methodology involved an analysis of the content published on social networking sites. The main question was whether universities are trying to engage their target audiences via social media by their own initiative, for what purpose is content published, and how many subscribers are involved in discussions on the institution’s profile. This limited the study to only the official profiles that have been established and administered by authorities of the institution. The University of Warsaw is Poland’s largest public university, with more than 51,000 students. The university has an official Facebook profile with more than 19,000 subscribers, which is used to communicate with students. Published content is mostly connected to events inside the university itself, news about competitions, conferences, as well as changes taking place in Warsaw like changes in public transport, events for students. The profile is very detailed in terms of the range of information regarding the university and its history. Facebook Timeline goes back to the 19th century when the university was founded and contains period figures and documents. However, the main problem concerns the involvement of its recipients and the way in which the content is divided. Statistics show that, on average, there are 2 posts daily, but their content is in no way reordered or divided for different recipient groups. The posts mainly contain information on new initiatives and events, but there is no incentive for contact or cooperation with the university. On average each post has 30 ‘Likes’ and 2 comments. These figures should be considered as highly unsatisfactory, as the level of participation of the profile’s subscribers is extremely low at less than 1%. Posts that contain information regarding studying at the university or organizational communiqués enjoy the most attention. From the University of Warsaw’s profile it is clear that the institution is also present on YouTube; the channel is active since September 2012 and have accumulated 78 subscribers and a total of 44,000 views. The videos are uploaded 2-3 times per month, but there are periods when the channel is completely dormant. There is no ongoing discussion, content is not commented in any way.

The Jagiellonian University, with 50,000 enrolled students, has an official profile on both
Facebook and YouTube. The Facebook profile currently has more than 29,000 subscribers (about 40% of enrolled students) and an activity level of 5%. This profile is less extensive with regularly published content only beginning in January 2010, while the University of Warsaw's profile page contains important events dating back to 1931. The average number of posts for the Jagiellonian University's profile page is 1 per day, which often contain a break between posts of up to 2 days. The main difference is visible, when one looks at the YouTube activity, with 513 subscribers and over 250,000 channel views. Here, the various reportages, events, and initiatives of the university are published. The YouTube channel was created on the 23rd of February 2010 and contains regularly updated content (3-4 clips a month) that relate to current events. However, subscribers do not seem to be interested in discussing the materials, as the total amount of comments is 5. Currently the channel is updated more frequently, as the university is preparing to celebrate its 650th birthday.

The main page of the University of Lodz has several links to social networks. The university has over 42,000 enrolled students. The institution has had an official Facebook profile page since 2009 and has gathered more than 11,700 subscribers (about 20% of students). The information posted on the page is similar to the two previous universities that is general information regarding the university and city events. There are attempts to encourage subscribers to be active, however, this has not resulted in an increase in participation as the level is currently at only 1%. Content is published several times a week, averaging one post a day. There are incidents where a post contains only an Internet link with no description at all under the link. The university’s profile on Google+ currently seems to be inactive, with the last post occurring on the 3rd of September 2012 and again its content is of an informative nature. However, the posts on Google+ were published irregularly. The University of Lodz also runs a blog whose graphics design is completely in line with the university’s main page. The blog has existed since 2009 and was most active in 2011 with a total of 205 entries followed by only 54 entries in 2012. The entries are informative and describe in detail events that took place within the university or are directly connected with it. The blog suffers from an irregular posting of entries and the number of comments is negligible. The Twitter and Blip profiles are practically carbon copies of the content published on the Facebook profile page, with the links directing the user to the relevant posts or websites. These two social networking services are treated more as a kind of intermediary service. The most interesting in terms of content is the GoldenLine profile, where in addition to the content posted by the university itself there are posts that encourage students and graduates to participate in events, exchange experience, and take part in discussions. Unfortunately the content appears sporadically, averaging only one post per month. However, the content reaches over 21,000 people, which is a very good result considering the social network’s market share of Internet users. A YouTube channel going by the profile name ‘promocjaul’ contains all kinds of information and promotional content. The channel has existed since 2009 and has 106 subscribers with just under 100,000 views. The video material is categorised, though the add comment function is turned off and thus the channel’s videos have no comments as such. The channel is updated with new content once a week.

Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce is the youngest public university in Poland and is the smallest in terms of the number of enrolled students. In 2011 the institution was granted the title of a full university, and in the 2011-2012 academic year 16,000 students studied there. The university only has one official Facebook profile, which was established in July 2011 and has accumulated a total of 1,100 subscribers (about 8% of enrolled students). Unfortunately, the level of participation is practically none. Content is published quite rarely, averaging only 2 posts per month. ‘Likes’ happen only occasionally, while comments are mostly negative and remain unanswered. The subject
matter of the posts is similar to the previous universities, although they are more focused on the university and its agenda. The situation repeats itself on the university’s YouTube channel, though at the beginning of 2013 a series of films focusing on the faculties and their staff were produced under the name Forest TV. The series comprises of 6 episodes, with the last episode being viewed more than 200 times. This is by far the best result, as other episodes of the series did not exceed 100 views and averaged just 30. This is a new and innovative initiative that defiantly should be perused by other universities.

4.1 Conclusions

The research although exploratory and qualitative in nature, clearly show that universities have a problem, when it comes to producing quality content, that would engage its recipients and focus a community around the institution. Social media are being treated as an non-interactive medium, to send messages and sometimes receive them. There is a clear lack of involvement on both sides. It would seem that, people leading those profiles do not believe, that they are communicating with real people. Most messages and status updates are written in an announcement fashion, there is no clear recipient indicated. Furthermore, if someone actually makes a comment about the content published, it remains unanswered. The overall feeling coming from these profiles is, that they are treated as an announcement board for students. It is not to say, that Facebook or Twitter cannot serve such a purpose, especially that most students already owns a smartphone and hotspots are ubiquitous, therefore the recipients receive the information almost instantly. However it is not enough to keep people interested, especially after graduating. Currently the approach to communication is based around function. The message has to go through and reach the audience. The problem is that general audience may not be interested in a post relevant only to bachelor level students. For the rest, this is just clutter, which gets in the way. Such an approach is against the basic principle of social media, as it forces users to consume irrelevant content and clutters ones info sphere. That is why people decide to unsubscribe from the university’s profile once they have graduated.

A way to mitigate the situation, is to carry out extensive research and know your target audience. Such data would allow to create specialized profiles and information streams, relevant to a specific target audience and would allow the users, to choose what kind of information they want to consume. This approach is naturally more difficult as it require more time and energy from content creators. Social media are interactive and live, therefore require constant attention. The research showed, that in most cases, once a post has been published, it is forgotten by its publisher. In that sense, the border between interactive and non-interactive media stop to exist. Facebook profile managed in such a way, becomes just another website.

Another aspect of social media is user involvement. The research clearly indicated, that the universities failed to interest its subscribers and build a community. It is worth mentioning that 3 of those institutions have a long tradition and many Poles are somehow connected to them. The reason behind this situation is twofold: one, the profiles are treated as announcement boards, rather than meeting places. Users just read the messages and leave, without even thinking about responding to it. That’s partially the case because one profile serves the whole university, so a lot of messages are irrelevant to large groups of users. Secondly people do not believe that someone actually is behind those posts and actually awaits a response. Unanswered comments are a living proof, that it is not worth to invest time, to actually try and respond to the message. Social media need to be alive in order to function properly and dynamic approach is required, especially when dealing with students, so young people. One must keep in mind, that those people expect, that the university will reach out to them, not the other way around. In case of these 4 universities, the statement is true, but the quality of the attempts is poor, mainly
because the target audience is treated as one mass, that is homogeneous in nature, while it obviously is not.

5 Connection Project

In 2011 on the Faculty of International Relations, University of Lodz a project was launched Connection – cooperation between universities and business. The goal of the project was to conduct research about the needs and expectations of alumni and business environment of the university and develop a stable model of cooperation, which could then be transferred to other units. The first part of the project was to prepare a questionnaire about the expectations of the alumni. Since the Faculty is pretty young, in 2010 it celebrated its 10th birthday, the number of graduates was calculated at 2,600 people. A total number of 2132 alumni were successfully verified and agreed to take part in the survey. One has to keep in mind, that while initiating such large scale initiatives, privacy and data security must be taken very seriously. Therefore during first contact with a particular person, a statement was collected that he agrees to participate and wishes to be informed about future events on the Faculty. Furthermore a clear instruction was given on how to withdraw such agreement or change any of the data. Such approach was time consuming, yet very effective in terms of building credibility and trust. Participants felt safe and were more eager to cooperate, as they knew that at any point they can drop in or out, without any consequences.

The survey was sent to 2,132 people. 282 people filled out the questionnaire, which is above 15%, so the survey can be regarded as a success and is representative. The respondents had a week between 4th of January 2012 till 12th of January 2012. The main focus of the survey was put on different approaches to collaboration between alumni and the university. All of the respondents agreed to cooperate with the university, with more than 40% willing to present publicly their previous professional experiences, as a case study for students. A little bellow than 20% was able and willing to accept students for internships and offer them employment after graduating. Another part of the questionnaire tackled the issue of relationship between alumni. Over 150 of the respondents was in contact with their classmates, however only 12% was a part of the Faculty’s Alumni Association. The reasons pointed out by the respondents, were that being part of the Alumni Association provided no tangible benefit to them, secondly the lack information about its activities. Furthermore, more than 60% stated, they wish to be informed about the Faculty’s initiatives or events created by other alumni. The main point was, that the communication should be personalized in nature and allow the recipients to choose what kind of information they are getting and when.

Keeping that in mind a custom portal was built to suit the needs of 4 main target groups, which were identified during the survey: students, alumni, researchers and business. The portal was divided into 3 segments, which could be easily modified with the use of an integrated CMS. The first part – Faculty’s website – is the center for all students to get information about their studies, events happening around and in the university. The website was divided into segments for candidates, students, fresh alumni and cooperation zone. The second part of the portal is a social media service for alumni. There every former student of the faculty can create a personal account, which will grant him access to personal messages and contacts to other people that graduated the same year. Additionally everyone can talk to each other in real time, present his former business experiences, search for business partners or present his business and services. The portal is fully functional since July 2013 and is a moderate success. On one hand, there is an active group of people that are constantly posting new content, creating new events etc. On the other, the portal did not grow above 250 active subscribers. The final part of the portal is dedicated to business. There the commercial offer of the Faculty is presented and constantly updated, while firms can post requests for partnerships, reports or students for internships. This part was successful and allowed many
students to find internships. More than 10 partnership agreements for research was signed between the university and business. The numbers are still low, but one has to keep in mind, that the project was the first in Poland. Both the university, alumni and business require time, to change their way of thinking about each other and familiarize themselves with their offer.

6 Future predictions and conclusions

The article has shown that universities have not yet mastered communication through social media and are treating them as a non-interactive medium to inform, to present content. As such, recipients usually visit their profile only to find a particular piece of information and leave. This approach results in students unsubscribing from universities profiles, once their study periods concludes. The university has no contact with its alumni and therefore cannot keep track of the carrier and adopt to changing environment. One can assume that decreasing number of students, while growing competition from private counterparts, will force the universities to change their communication patterns and start thinking more about community management, rather than information management. The example of the Connection project on the Faculty of International Relations and Political Studies, shows there is potential and expectation to build a strong community. However it is difficult to find the right modus operandi for such initiatives. The custom portal developed for the project is a very capable tool, yet has its problems. Firstly the portal is only available through a web page and does not offer any kind of notification system, except e-mail. It is the user who has to check what new content appeared or are there any new messages waiting for him. Facebook or Twitter offer a vast number of access types, including apps for mobile devices with push notifications. The conclusion is that in the Connection portal, the user has to approach it, while services like Facebook approach the user. Facebook may not be the best social network, but it’s well established and known to its users, therefore solutions adopted there are considered a standard. Developing new portals always forces potential users to learn something new and it might be a problem for some people. There is no clear answer on how to use social media to build a strong community around a university, but the author hopes that it may be a starting point for further research and discussion.

References


**Author description**

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