

# Importance of University Social Media Communications in Czech Republic

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**Abstract**—This article currently focuses on the problems of university communications with target groups in the Czech Republic. This issue has been chosen with respect to the ongoing demographic crisis causing a decrease in the number of prospective university applicants. The topic reflects new trends in effective communication of university, i.e. social media communications and concentrates on prospective university applicants. The presented study introduces the results of sub-analyses carried out within selected Czech universities. The sub-analyses dealt with the problems of university social media profiles and their conceptuality, approach of individual universities towards profile administration and the importance of involving fans into communications on Czech university profiles. The necessary data have been gained using both primary and secondary research as well as with help of social media monitoring by Newton Media. The study concludes with the identification of common and different attributes of Czech universities' social media communications and with suggestions as to how to make these communications more effective.

**Keywords**—university communications, media communications, target groups, social networks, social media monitoring, content analysis

## I. INTRODUCTION

According to the Bologna Declaration Magna Charta Universitatum signed in September 1988, „the university is an autonomous institution, whose research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent“ (Magna Charta Universitatum, ...

In order to maintain the above mentioned objectives, universities need to take steps encouraging quality of activities and their effective functions on the education market. One of the important factors of university effectiveness is making sure that the university has a sufficient number of quality students and thus fulfils the mission of universities in society. Czech higher education is currently undergoing a long-term reform and due to the demographic crisis, the number of prospective university applicants has been decreasing (Soukalová, 2012). For example, between 2003 – 2005, the level of age cohort of prospective university applicants in the Czech Republic amounted to 130 – 140 thousand. The

dramatic demographic turning point occurs in the years 2012 – 2014, when the amount of university age cohorts will drop to slightly above 90.000. This number will be approximately 10 years stagnant and then a little increase is expected (Koucký, Bartůšek, 2011). The following data confirm the above mentioned statistics. In the academic year 2011/2012, there were about 55.000 students at private universities and approximately 368.000 at public universities, while the following academic year 2012/2013 saw only 49.000 private and 360.000 public university students (the data were successively gathered from the websites of individual universities in May 2013). With respect to the demographic development and its forecast, current long-term plans of universities focus on the quantitative growth slow-down and the quality and variety of university educational offer becomes the main priority.

Among the activities leading to the achievement of the university's strategic objectives belong the realization of effective marketing and communications with target groups or prospective applicants, as well as the identification and comparison of the effect/impact of the university's communications.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### A. University Marketing Management

Czech universities are well aware of the need of deep changes and strive to fulfil the activities resulting from the Bologna Declaration. If universities want to succeed in both national and international competitive environment, they must focus on quality education, interactivity of programs, graduates' employability and especially on the excellence of scientific and creative outputs. It is impossible to solve the mentioned areas randomly according to current situation; they must form a process of the university systematic marketing management. The ideas to apply marketing management at Czech university began to be realized in the 1990s, during the transformation from centrally planned to market economy. The emergence of private universities brought competitive environment also the area of education. The fundamentals of practical application of university marketing management is the Service Marketing Theory (Kotler, Keller, 2006) and it is

essential to bear in mind that strategically planned objectives should aim not only to satisfy needs but also to fulfil the mission of universities, resulting from the 1998 Magna Charta Universitatum.

### *B. Target Groups of University Communications*

The results of analyses carried out within university marketing management brings findings about changes in academic environment which usually change the direction of university activities (e.g. different offer of study programmes, changes in numbers of accepted students, etc.). Marketing management aims to identify these changes and respond to them adequately and the objective of marketing communications is to effectively inform interest target groups about current activities as well as about planned changes at the university.

University target groups may be classified as **inside / internal groups**, which are a part of the university internal environment, i.e. teachers, academic officers, other employees and current students. **Outer / external groups** involve prospective applicants, graduates, business representatives, partners, expert teams, expert public and competitors.

Target groups of university external academic environment are an important object of university marketing communications. They represent the external factors that may be directly influenced by the university's activities. The university's communications should in this case be targeted at the following groups:

- Prospective university applicants
- Graduates and their employers
- Expert public and business representatives
- General public and others.

Every university should have an interest in informing its applicants, students, partners and public about its existence, objectives, activities, study programmes offer and thus incite the interest of these groups to study or cooperate exactly with this university.

Since prospective applicants may be viewed as the most important university target group whose focus and intellectual characteristics significantly vary, the tools for communicating with them are almost identical as for communicating with expert and general public, i.e. both classic and new media.

### *C. Position of Media in University Communications*

**The position of media in society** depends on the quality of its culture and system of values. Media may verify the society's current and respected social values, but under some circumstances can be destructive or help recreate, enforce or shape brand new values. This is also dependent on what behaviour is attributed to the media by the relevant social culture. The way how media deliver information may result in certain effects in the society, e.g. increasing the society's attention to an issue, strengthening its importance in public assessment (Jirák, Kooplová, 2006) or supporting positive or negative perception of a given institution. Public perception of

an institutions or a university should be an integral part of marketing management of the university's PR communication activities.

Public relations should particularly aim to build the university's positive image in the eyes of its target groups and society as a whole through positive publicity, through disclaiming or avoiding unpleasant events and stories causing harm to the university (Kotler, Keller, 2006).

The following, among others, may be considered as the main objectives of the university's public relations:

- Increasing positive awareness about the university/faculty,
- Higher interest of prospective applicants to study at the university,
- Higher interest of target groups about the university.

These objectives are closely connected with the target group of prospective applicants whose attitudes and opinions about a specific university influence their decision as to which university to study at.

**Kotler describes the main stages of public relations process as follows:**

- **Identification of the institution's key target groups** (students, prospective applicants, sponsors, graduates, business representatives, state institutions, employees etc.). The presented article considers university applicants as the identified target group.
- **Public attitude and image measurement** – successful building of positive image and relationships with the public depends on detecting feedback, e.g. by media and social networks monitoring. The result is the evaluation of events benefits, for example with help of questionnaires or content analyses of media releases. To find out more about the quality of communications, it is possible today to use the monitoring of social media communications and add information regarding the effect of sometimes managed but mostly spontaneous university's communications especially with prospective applicants. The basic tool for evaluating social media activities is so-called "Facebook Insights" enabling to learn more about an already built fan community on a Facebook profile (Růžička, 2013).

### *D. Communications in Social Media*

Current boom in IT development also influences the tools and means for communication, traditional media, new and social media.

*"The term "new media", or more precisely "digital media", relates to a platform of media technologies based on digital, i.e. numeric data processing. In the broader sense of the word, the concept of digital media contains the whole area of computer and information technologies and relating data contents; in the narrower sense it relates only to computer, i.e. digitally mediated communication. The emergence of digital media in their narrower sense can probably be connected with the successful realization of hypertext media in computer*

environment (late 1960s), and designing the first decentralized computer network within the 1963 ARPA U.S. military project.” (Macek, 2002).

In the sphere of communication it is currently possible to talk about sociotechnical changes. Successful management of technical innovations is usually accompanied by the emergence of new types of socially stable behaviours and abandonment of older practices. The research conclusions executed at the Masaryk University in Brno, the Czech Republic (focused on sociotechnical changes in online social media communications), suggest that both active and passive social media communications satisfy the need of social contact as social media are used to access the public space, act as a channel for the selection of consumed media texts as well as a space for discussion, shaping attitudes and defence of opinions (????).

Online social media communications are based on communications among users who usually create and consume their contents. Social media basically just provide a space for communication. If social media are to be used for effective communication or promotion, it is necessary to adhere to the above principles.

The fundamental principle of spreading information on social networks is the message virality. Only sufficiently interesting information is shared among users, friends etc. Considering how social media work, information may spread rapidly. On the other hand, its lifespan is usually just a few hours or days. Social media act as an ideal feedback medium. Audiences can communicate with authors, users can react on communicators as well as among each other, they may share and comment current topics and offer new ones. The drawback is that such communications may have a negative impact or comments which can pose significant influence on communicators or institutions/universities (Bednář, 2011).

The world-wide social media leader is Facebook (Facebook.com, 2013). Other networks often work on similar principles but they are just local mutations.

The most spread social medium in the Czech Republic is Facebook. According to the analytical web zoomsphere.com there are 3.945.120 Czech accounts. The latest data show that within the first 3 months of 2013, the number of users grew by 3% (comparable with the previous year). Analytical data of socialbakers.com suggest that this is almost 39% of Czech population and 55% of the internet active population with the gender ration being almost balanced – 49% men and 51% women.

Zoomsphere.com also presents important demographic data about Czech Facebook users. They conclude that almost 14% (app. 500.000 accounts) are users between 16-19 years of age – a group profiling as future university applicants. Nearly 14% of users are 20-24 years old, i.e. similar to current university students. Another group users aged between 25-29, i.e. 17%, may be considered as students of especially part time studies (Figure 1). The above mentioned data clearly show that members of the target group – prospective university applicants – are intensive Facebook users.

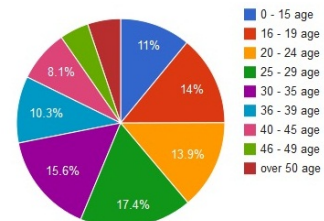


Figure 1 Facebook Users by Age Group (Zoomsphere.com)

As far as the content is concerned, is it vital to monitor what posts (or published content) is most frequently viewed. A study published on databoutique.cz (see Figure 2) suggests that photographs represent half of the contributions. The study randomly selected 190 pages with more than 10.000 fans.

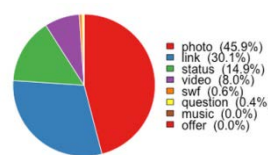


Figure 2

Figure 2 Types of Facebook Posts (databoutique.cz)

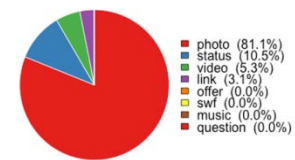


Figure 3

Figure 3 Contents of Posts with More Than 75 Likes (databoutique.cz)

Sharing itself, however, is not always an adequate figure. From the page administrator’s viewpoint it is also important to monitor the involvement of fans with respect to individual posts as shown in Figure 3. The threshold here was to gain more than 75 likes at the above mentioned 190 pages. Photographs take the lead with 81% of all successful page updates. The reason is that pictures are more visible among other posts and it is more creative and interesting means of communication.

Twitter is another social network used in the Czech Republic. Data analysis regarding numbers of users, published contents etc. is problematic since comprehensive data are not available. The most respected analyser of Czech Twitter, Klaboseni.cz, claims that the number of Czech and Slovak accounts is higher than 100.000. It is very difficult to have relevant data since the measurement tools are not unified. We have to mention the predecessors of Czech social media, such as Lidé.cz, Spolužáci.cz or Líbímseti.cz, which gave way to Facebook, Twitter and others. Nevertheless, their analysis is useless for the purposes of this study.

### III. RESEARCH METHODS

#### A. Definition of Research Problems

As a consequence of current demographic crisis, many Czech universities face the difficult task to ensure quality education processes and sufficient numbers of students. Since there are many universities and decreasing numbers of

prospective applicants (see Introduction), Czech universities need to communicate more effectively, e.g.:

How to address as many applicants as possible?

How to gain quality students interested in the study programmes etc.

The majority of universities communicate using traditional approaches (mass media, Open Door Days, trade fairs, competitions, conferences, web sites). In 2011 – 2012, Newton Media carried out a research focused on the content analysis of Czech universities' communications with use of media monitoring. The study aimed to identify the intensity of media communications, their contents and focus on target groups and compare them with prestigious European universities (Soukalová, 2012). In order for the analysis of the universities' communications to be comprehensive and to enable comparisons of the results of Czech universities' communications, we also included the analysis of university social media communications. The reasons why social media communications must be monitored are stated in Chapter II.A.

### B. Research Objectives

The study aims to present the realized research results of social media communications of selected universities in the Czech Republic. Due to current development of new communication possibilities and their massive use when communicating especially with the young generation, the following objective was set.

The objective was to analyse university social media communications while applying information gained by primary research and social media monitoring by Newton Media. In addition, within the executed analyses, it aimed to determine whether university profiles have a kind of conception, whether university profiles administration shows similar or different approaches and to find out how fans are involved in the profiles of the selected universities.

### C. Research Methodology

The research primarily selected four major Czech universities according to the global university ranking (SIR World Report 2012). To maintain anonymity, the actual universities' names will not be mentioned and the results will be presented under numbers 1-4 (Author's Note).

In the first phase, the research focused on mere identification of existence of universities' social media communications in sense whether the universities have a Facebook and Twitter profile. This phase monitored eight universities including the four selected from the ranking.

The second phase saw an analysis of the universities' social media profiles based on the following criteria: number of fans, contents, profile activity and number of posts. The data were monitored in the first quarter of 2013. Although the data do not reflect the whole academic year, the findings provide interesting information and confirm that this research approach is able to show a summary of the development of

university social media communications in the selected time period.

The third research phase processed the data gathered through social media monitoring. Since this is a paid service and the research was financially limited, the monitoring of social media communications included only three universities (according to the global ranking). The study monitored the period from 1.1.2013 to 1.4.2013.

The monitoring itself applies the principle of publicly available social media data. These are then filtered using various algorithms (e.g. language variations). The following step is to determine the key words for the monitoring purposes – in our case, we used the names of the selected universities. All data were statistically and graphically evaluated. To achieve the established objectives, we selected the most interesting issues reflecting the significant change in communication.

## IV. PRESENTATION OF RESEARCH RESULTS

### A. Social Media Communications of Czech Universities

The vast majority of Czech universities (state, private and public) use classic communication channels, which today is a must. This study covers also social media, generally described as online space. Here it should be pointed out that it is impossible to separate e.g. web presentations from social media and vice versa, as web sites and their content also enable to create contents on social media. These may be used for example to draw attention to new information on the web. The basic assumption of the analysis of university social media communications was the argument that it is impossible for major educational institutions not to have a social media profile.

The analysis showed that all universities somehow work with social media, yet a systematic concept or approach is missing (see Table 1).

TABLE 1 OFFICIAL SOCIAL MEDIA PROFILES OF UNIVERSITIES

University	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Facebook	YES	Y	Y	Y	YES	YES	YES	YES
Twitter	YES	N	Y	Y	YES	NO	NO	NO

The analysis further proved that each university has a Facebook profile with the university's name. Some universities have an unofficial web not administered by the university and in many cases; such webs are more active than the official ones. More than half of the universities have an official Twitter account and compared to Facebook, Twitter seems to be less interesting for universities.

Analysing individual profiles revealed that the number of Facebook fans is highly disproportional and does not depend on the university's size or number of students (Figure 4).

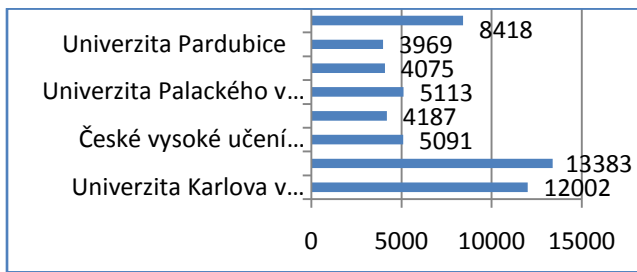


Figure 4 Number of Fans of Universities' Official Facebook Profiles.

**B. Analysis of Social Media Profiles**

The following analysis looked into the above listed most spread and in the long term the most used social media of Czech internet – Facebook.com and Twitter.com. According to latest research, Google+ could have been included but opinions about this social network vary. Some experts claim that Google+ is a rarely used network whose membership is growing, yet their activity remains very low (Schon, 2013).

The executed profile analysis was based on establishing the criteria for assessing the monitored universities' profiles. Data collection was carried out by recording of activities from January to March 2013. The analysis monitored the number of fans, number and nature of individual posts published by administrators. The challenge was to maintain unified procedures when evaluating the contents since the administrators applied various approaches. The analysis further revealed that the universities use many sub-profiles, e.g. according to study programmes, faculties or departments, that were not primarily monitored. We investigated only the profiles which, with their name and content, should embrace the whole university.

Considering the analysis results, it may be concluded that the monitored universities use social media communications mostly as an informative channel, while the profile activity with respect to posts is totally different and depends on the individual approach of administrators and the conception of the university's social media communications. University 2, for example, reports the highest number of fans, yet the profile activity is close to zero, which shows a lack of social media communications concept. The data in Table 3 show that Twitter communications at universities is either at its beginnings or does not exist at all.

TABLE 2 ANALYSES OF FACEBOOK PROFILES

Univ ersit y	Number of Fans	Content	Profile Activity	Posts per Month
1	12 002	informative	YES	8
2	13 383	informative	NO	0,7
3	1434	informative + entertaining	YES	27
4	5 091	informative + entertaining	YES	57

TABLE 3 ANALYSES OF TWITTER PROFILES

Univ ersit y	Number of Fans	Content	Profile Activity
1	45	Articles, students' issues	YES
2	NO	NO	NO
3	283	Informative	YES
4	NO	NO	NO

An interesting finding was the fact that two of the monitored universities operate special sub profiles of projects aiming to attract attention of high school students, i.e. prospective applicants. The projects use funny or competitive ways to present the faculties, their focus and activities. Currently, the profiles of University 4 have 1.788 "likes", University 2 has received 3.421 likes.

To be complete, the profile analysis added an overview of fans' activities measured by so-called "People talking about". The data was provided by Socialbakers.com and the factor development is depicted in Figure 5 for Universities 1,2 and 4, and Figure 6 illustrates University no. 3. To achieve better comparability, the data were recalculated based on the ratio of number of students and their activities. The figures clearly show fans activity development on individual profiles in the monitored days (expressed in % of the total number of fans).

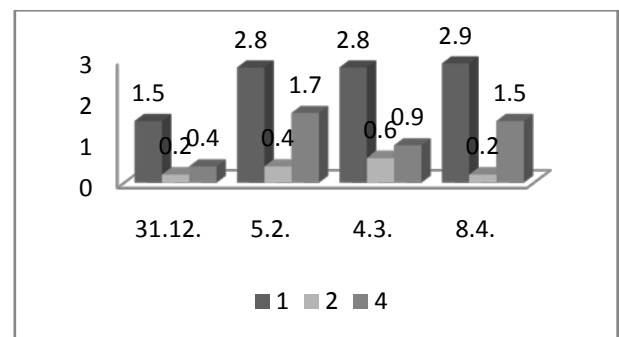


Figure 5 People Talking About – Universities 1,2,4

The above figure proves that the lack of maintenance of University 2's profile is reflected in low activity of its fans, although their number is the highest. University 3 (Figure 6) sees an interesting development in the "People Talking About" (PTA) factor. There is a significant increase in PTA proving a very high activity. This high activity was caused by a popular video "I love you, my university" as well as by a media case one university teacher. The video had a strong viral character and resulted in the high activity of fans.

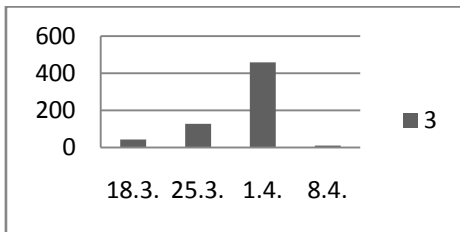


Figure 6 People Talking About – University no. 3

The comparison of the two above figures again confirms that the number of fans does not correspond with the university’s size, or with the fans activities. University 3 shows the lowest number of Facebook fans, yet their activity is by far the highest as the communicated contents are attractive for them. In this specific case it was caused by the interesting video that drew attention of the fans.

C. Monitoring of Selected Universities’ Social Media

The source for collecting relevant data on university social media communications was also the paid monitoring of Newton Media. This company operates one of the most important systems for media administration and monitoring also in Czech online space. Due to the limited research budget, only three selected universities were monitored. The monitoring was carried out from 1.1. to 1.4.2014. With respect to the presented research objectives and high amount of monitored messages, the study selected only the data closely related to the above presented results. The chosen data related to causing the so-called “buzz” (*Buzz marketing* aims to cause hype and discussion about a certain issue, product or brand) on Twitter and Facebook, connected to the mentioned institutions. Figure 7 depicts the share of individual universities on the overall Facebook and Twitter buzz. As for the “buzz” amount, University 3 is the most successful, which is also confirmed by the results of previous analyses. Based on the research of particular posts it was revealed that the high increase was caused by publishing the already mentioned viral video, in a funny way commenting the university events. Therefore, it had a viral potential and was often shared and commented upon. The difference in the number of posts between Universities 1,2 and University 3 is striking. It is given by the fact that University 3 has a single and conceptual approach to administration, resulting in regular communications and checks that peaked with issuing a promotional recruitment video.

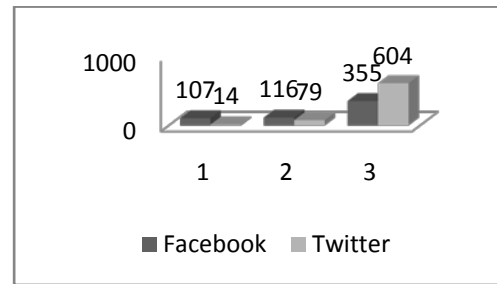


Figure 7 Comparison of University 1,2,3’s “Buzz” on Facebook and Twitter

The success and difference that the university achieved after publishing the video is best illustrated in Figure 8. It shows posts about University 3 after publishing the promotional video.

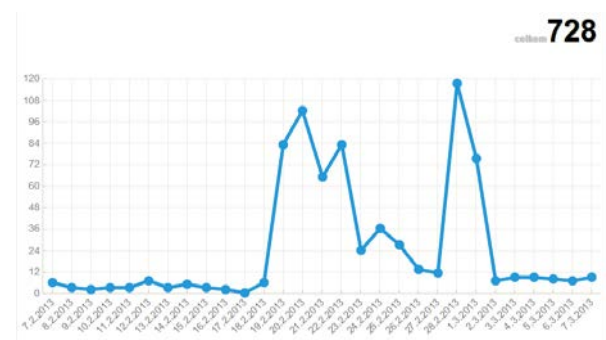


Figure 8 “Buzz” Change After Publishing University 3’s Promotional Video

V. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The above presented sub-analyses results highlighted some basic factors concerning university social media communications: whether university social media profiles are administered, in what style they are managed, if they achieve high interaction and if they show regular conceptual approach to their contents. A positive finding is that an unmanaged profile does not almost exist. When focusing on the contents, there are different approaches as some are used for clearer, official communications, post general information and articles reflecting university events. However, the profile of University 3 confirms that interactive, interesting and sometimes even informal communications present the most powerful tool of university communications and promotion. The statistical results of “People Talking About” prove that, with respect to habits of target groups, i.e. prospective applicants, this trend is positively perceived and achieves great results in sense of involving communities into the shared contents.

The analysis results of selected social media communications monitoring complete the above facts. It proved the strength of viral contents that may significantly increase the university visibility on social media, especially with respect to current and prospective students. It is understandable that entertaining videos cannot be generated every day, since such projects are highly demanding. This fact shows a promising way in the area of social media

communications in case the institution does not want to operate a “boring” information channel lacking interaction and feedback from its users.

Based on the mentioned analyses results, it is possible to propose a discussion about recommendations or general rules for university social media communications. A necessary prerequisite is the complex solution of this communication means as it is essential to find suitable project managers with the necessary communication skills (Šviráková, 2012). An important factor is the administrator’s activity, inciting and involving into discussions. Attractive contents may be co-created by engaged fans, especially through informal and cultivated communications. Another positive attribute is critical feedback and interconnection of social media communications with promotion and the university official website. Last but not least, it is vital to regularly monitor and analyse the activity of fans and set up the communication strategy accordingly. Following and accepting new trends is also essential.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The comparison of sub analyses results conclude that in the Czech Republic there are universities with comprehensively established strategy for social media communications and strive for its practical application. It is therefore possible to detect the understanding of basic communication rules, yet the overall concept linking university and faculty profiles is missing. Some universities are currently designing the strategy and try to incorporate this communication trend, often with a various degree of success. Individual universities’ approach towards profiles administration is different and corresponds neither with the quality nor size of the university. So far, we cannot talk about a certain standard that all profiles would meet. As the analyses showed, an important parameter of social media communications is the engagement of fans, reflecting the attractiveness and creativity of posts by an increasing number of users’ reactions. The current trend in social media communications is the emergence of independent profiles targeted at prospective applicants. The analyses also revealed that pictures together with videos are the most effective means of communication as for their virality. From the above mentioned it can be concluded that the most important part of communication is the content itself (sufficiently interesting and creatively interpreted), as without the content it is impossible to retain fans and without fans it is impossible to gain feedback and interaction.

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