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Communication Strategies in Times of Crisis - Qualitative Results from Swedish and German Universities

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Abstract

The pandemic represented a crisis universities have never faced before. Agility and ephemerality of information flow as well as the changing pandemic situation forced universities to act flexible and to inform all relevant parties – students and employees. However, this process of information distribution varied significantly between European universities. Due to the different national pandemic situations as well as the different assets of universities, information distribution varied. Facing similar challenges, we identified different strategy types of communication and clustered them into different approaches. We differentiate four central types with alignments to Mintzberg & Lampel's strategy types to light up the way for a more strategic approach towards information dissemination during critical situations in the future.

1. Introduction

The pandemic situation increased the need of structured information – especially online. However, universities quantity and quality seemed to be limited. As universities tried to react fast in distributing information via various online channels, unorganized information flow resulted in a lack of help for students [1]. However, not only the crisis demand a suiting strategy of information distribution. Students increasingly demand a better structure of both communication networks and availability of information provided online. This leads to a multidimensional meaning of universities online presence [3] and their digital learning concept. Transparency, flexibility and modular opportunities are key aspects of supporting students in gathering information [5] as well as improving their mobility [3]. As students life overall changes due to digitization and the availability of information, universities have to adapt to this fast changing world and approach students strategically whilst offering information [6]. Regarding that, some universities performed better than others did. Identifying similar obstacles of digital communication during crisis, students' flexibility and demands on digital communication such as accessibility, Updativeness and availability [1], we

see some strategic pattern of universities' way of communication. This leads to the question what types of strategies are used by universities to communicate. To answer this question the homepages of twenty selected universities in Germany and Sweden were analysed with the goal to identify good practice examples.

Within the following chapter, general as well as pandemic-specific challenges for universities will be briefly outlined. Afterwards the theoretical framework referring to the strategy types differentiated by Mintzberg & Lampel (1998) is adapted towards higher education, being followed by an explanation of the methodological concept of the study. Finally, the results are presented and discussed in a systematic aggregation of the typical strategic approaches used during the pandemic.

2. Communication lost – Students need for information and communication

Megatrends such as digitalization, remote learning due to the pandemic and the establishment of an information-centered community demands a better structure by universities.

Within prior research [1], we therefore identified the core dimensions of communication and content. These are clustered in the follow:

The dimension of communication includes availability, transparency, accessibility, findability, flexibility and up-to-dateness. Information distribution and communication needs to be orientated on that guideline for students to improve their way of studying. Summarizing these findings, information distribution needs to be available on a very low level, putting universities in a spot to provide information. Furthermore, they have to be transparent with their communication to avoid misunderstanding. Accessibility means for students to be able to achieve the information in an easy way from a technical perspective, whilst findability describes the content related findability (e.g. via search tools). Flexibility is targeted more towards the content creation and meeting the demands of students as well as their environmental requests. The dimension Updativeness describes a steady actualization of information to keep information up-to-date. All these dimensions are

linked by the need for continuous maintenance and the individual impact of communication platforms. Not information channels, but rather the strategy and the fulfilment of the criteria of good communication are a factor of good communication management. This type of communication management has become an essential factor for the flow of information between universities and students, especially in times of crisis such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

Especially in dynamic times, the disruption of structures whilst dealing with retaining rigid modular curricula can be challenging. Many universities already realized the above aspects and the importance of communication channels. The pandemic situation affecting universities globally, causing the closure of universities and a switch towards digital learning increased the demand of a steady digital informational flow. In particular, online channels such as websites, social media channels and digital news platforms are a popular tool used by universities to reach as many students as possible. However, this approach also poses challenges. As universities still face obstacles regarding the technical implementation and the quality of information distribution [3; 4], we do see tendencies of strategical approaches via communication channels. This leads to the central question of this research, what kind of strategical approaches can be outlined and whom can be deemed successful as an example of good practice for further communication strategies in times of crisis.

In order to answer this question, first the different strategy types used by the universities were identified and then compared over time to discover typical strategic approaches. Therefore, the theoretical model of Mintzberg & Lampel (1998) was adapted to the university context. The results of the analyses of the 20 selected university homepages are based on this theoretical framework.

3. Communicational strategy types in higher education

To analyze the organizational-strategic approaches of universities during the pandemic, we adapted the model of Mintzberg & Lampel (1998). This model was chosen because it represents the atypical patterns of teaching institutions and thus enables a respective transfer. Furthermore, the different typical characteristics can be applied very specifically to the representation of the output. Mintzberg & Lampel (1998) differentiate the following ten types: design, planning, positioning, entrepreneurial, cognitive, learning, power, cultural, environmental and configurational. The authors understand the strategy types as different phases within a strategy formation process. Within this process, the respective schools undertake a positioning, and then enter the cognitive phase, in order to strive for autonomous, creative shaping through the planning, design and finally

entrepreneurial phases. In this regard, a slight adaptation is made for the higher education context. This subsumes the assumption that higher education institutions position themselves differently depending on their orientation and objectives. Consequently, for the research on which the article is based, the 10 original types were subdivided into four approaches, which then show different levels of abstraction. Within these types, we were able to narrow them down to four central approaches:

The **systematic approach** comprises the planning, cognitive and configurational types. The planning type is strongly oriented towards formal processes, defined steps and means of organization. This facilitates the implementation of plans and projects by creating clear structures and defining tasks in the sense of checklists. The type thus symbolizes the systematic approach most strongly. Constructing creative interpretation of strategies instead of mapping reality in an objective way is characteristic for the cognitive type. The respective research focuses on cognitive biases in strategy making as well as cognition as information processing, knowledge structure mapping and concept attainment. The latter is perceived as especially important for strategy formation [7]. Universities of this type do not consider reality very extensively, but rather choose ways to solve the problems of the actual situation and to develop their own solutions to deal with it. The configurational type sees organizations as coherent clusters of characteristics and behaviors. This type integrates claims of selected other types. This strategic type contains the leap from one state to another and the transformation between these steps [7]. Universities of this type provide very adaptable and broad information. They collect data and compress them for their target groups. Universities pursuing this type are quite dynamic.

The **socially sensitive approach** includes the learning type, the cultural type and the environmental type. The cultural type tends to be more focused on community integration and emphasizes culture, high collectivity and neutrality. Above all, the well-being and inclusivity of students is an important concern, which is also placed above the institution's own interests. This view is further abstracted by the environmental type. Within this type, an even stronger focus is placed on the environment and responsibility for the environment is assumed. The strategic orientation is strongly influenced by the enablement of the assumption of social responsibility. This is also realized within the learning type, by striving for a permanent learning process is to adapt to the environment and to meet its demands in the best way possible. This cluster is particularly suitable for universities that are located in the community and have a high level of integration into the community, or also strive for a high level of identification with the environment. Vice versa, a collective can be created

within the university community by striving for clear goals (sustainability, taking responsibility, social commitment).

The **political approach** tends to be power driven, therefore uniting the traits of the positioning type and the power type. Strategy is regarded as an analytical process within the positioning type. From this perspective, strategy is reduced to generic positions, which are selected through a formalized analytical process of industry situations. The decision makers depend on the recommendation of the analysts, which plan their strategic positioning based on hard data [7]. The universities using this approach mainly rely on (scientific) data and they can be characterized by a strong analytical focus. Furthermore, a data oriented scientific view, e.g. regarding safety measures, as well as statements to deal with health problems, would be characteristic. The power type is rooted in the concept of power and can be differentiated into two orientations: First, micro power sees development of strategies within organizations as essentially political (bargaining, persuasion, confrontation of divided power) and second, macro power views organizations as entities with power over others in the sense of negotiating with others [7]. The universities of this type divide responsibility within their organization towards all groups. Furthermore, they tend to learn from trial and error, which is notable by recollecting mistakes or correcting statements without admitting mistakes.

The **future driven approach** is facing towards the trends of tomorrow, uniting the entrepreneurial type and the design type. The design type can be seen as strategy formation of achieving the essential fit between internal strengths and weaknesses as well as external threats and opportunities. The management formulates clear, simple and unique strategies in a deliberate process of conscious thoughts, which is neither formally conscious nor informally intuitive. Universities following this type also create clear and simple statements to address all relevant stakeholders. Furthermore, a low degree of shared reasoning over time is characteristic for this type. The entrepreneurial type centers on the chief executive and roots the strategic process in the mysteries of institution. This type shifted strategies away from precise design and rather focuses on visions and broad perspectives, often seen through metaphor. This led to a focus on particular contexts like e.g. start-ups [7]. Universities of this type emphasize a processual approach possibly using metaphors to encourage the collective - not in an empathic way, but in a collective contextual way.

Mintzberg & Lampel (1998) state that some strategic approaches cut across the above types in eclectic ways. Furthermore, they discuss the question whether these ten types represent different processes, whether they are different approaches to strategic formation or different parts of the same process. The authors give some examples of strategy types that

clearly are stages or aspects of the strategy formation process. For example, the positioning type looks behind at available data analyzing it and using it for making strategy. In contrast, the design school looks ahead to a strategic perspective or the entrepreneurial school looks beyond to a unique vision of the future. In this paper, the presented strategy types are understood as different processes rather than as stages of one process.

4. Research Design and Sampling

To gain a more holistic overview, both Germany and Sweden were identified as sample countries. The main reason for this selection is the DESI, the Digital Economy and Society Index [2]. With Sweden holding the second place and Germany on 12th place, the sample can be deemed as representative. The sample analysed consists of the top 10 universities in the international ranking from the two selected countries within the ranking of Times Higher Education (THE 2021).

Within this study, the university homepages were recorded via screenshots and analysed using qualitative type-forming content analysis [8]. To standardise the process, the information on the homepages was selected based on the first result displayed in a google search to meet the demand of low accessibility. The first result displayed by the university, which contained either information for students and/or material, was saved and transferred to a data analysing software.

To trace the changes in universities' strategic approaches coping with the pandemic situation over time four observation points were chosen. The observation points were randomized during July 2020 and May 2021.

5. Results: Universities' strategic approaches in times of crisis

The results show that universities do not follow one specific strategy type but rather different strategies tend to be combined with each other, which underlines the approach of combining the types into general strategy approaches. Hence, two phenomena were observed with regard to the strategy types: First, often several characteristics of different strategy types were observed at one university and second, the strategy types of some universities changed during the pandemic. These observations will be concretized in the following by using the strategy approaches to structure the results.

5.1 Systematic approach

The planning type in particular evolved by gaining further visible characteristics. Overall, the planning

type seems to focus on both content and appearance. This means that universities belonging to this type visibly prefer long-term approaches and outlining respective plans on how to deal with the pandemic situation. The content was rather compressed. Only information regarding further studies were integrated. This type seemed to gain popularity over time: While in the first wave, no characteristic traits could be identified at any university, at the end of the fourth wave, six universities showed traits of the planning type. Even though the characteristics of this strategy type appeared more pronounced at German universities, roughly the same number of universities in both countries use the planning type.

The cognitive type seems rather similar to the planning type, because both are characterized by a strong rational focus on strategy. However, the cognitive type considers the situation to a lesser extent than the planning type does. Furthermore, the respective strategies are not planned long-term. The cognitive type rather tries to outline immediate solutions for the situational challenges and neglects the circumstances. Therefore, this strategy type appears as a bundle of information and fast changing reactions as well as an organized provision of links to further information. While characteristics of the cognitive type could only be identified at one point in time at two universities in Germany, this type seems to be used as a prominent strategy type in Sweden. The typical characteristics were identified at eight universities. Four of them used this type especially at the beginning of the pandemic, while three universities showed the respective characteristics during the completely analyzed period. This strategy type was clearly used more often at the beginning than at the end of the observation. Furthermore, it is striking that the universities using the cognitive type over time also exhibited characteristics of the entrepreneurial type.

The configurational type especially considers changes of the environment. Information gets adapted very quickly and collected information is compressed to give an overview. Hence, dynamic combined with the sharing of well-structured information characterizes universities using this type. However, this type is overall the least relevant strategy type (used by only three German and one Swedish university) and was only used sporadically in the course of time. Thus, at observation point 4, no university could be identified which show characteristics of this strategy type.

5.2 Socially centered approach

Comparably to the latter, universities representing the cultural type initially stress collegial measures, which then level off again over time. While universities in Sweden used this strategy type only sporadically, German universities in particular used

this type more continuously. The cultural type emphasizes collectivism in a more positive manner than the entrepreneurial type. Students are the main focus group and accordingly information is provided mainly to them. Furthermore, the idea of collectivism is also related to emotional and informational support as well as cultural enablement. This especially involves “invites to join” (fighting the spread of the virus via e.g. health measurements) or student life centered information (e.g. library, travel, courses) and points out concrete contact data and addresses. However, concrete plans or updates tend to be missing also within this type.

The environmental type accentuates the environmental changes and adapts to them rather quickly. This type is characterized by frequent updates and immediate support. This leads to an information flood with many frequent updates. Information is also not structured but chronological. This type could only be identified at one German university at one observation point, while at Swedish universities comparatively a lot more characteristics were recognizable at 7 out of 10 universities. Furthermore, the Swedish universities used aspects of this strategy type over time (five universities more than once). Overall, the use of this type was relatively even distributed over the analysed period. Furthermore, universities using this type often shifted their strategy towards the entrepreneurial type.

The learning type quickly adapts to the fast changing environment, as the information sharing process could be seen as a “learning by doing”. Hence, updates occur frequently and corrections are made often. A very typical example for this type are FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions). These websites automatically get longer over time, as more questions are asked and answered. Another example is the category “Information for Students”, where the content is also updated frequently in terms of governmental regulations, restrictions and further plans of the university. This type seems to be used more often in German than in Swedish universities. Furthermore, this type seems to be used over a long period. The closeness to the cultural type is particularly noticeable at Swedish universities. In contrast, in German universities the type often went hand in hand with the design type, even though the characteristics of the learning type partly contradict the design type. There is a tendency for the learning type to decrease over time. Thus, this type occurs especially at observation points 1 and 2 (five universities) compared to point 4 (three universities) or especially point 3 (only one university).

5.3 Future driven approach

Universities of the design type tend to provide information visually and superficially with links to other, more detailed pages. Information has been

summarized as briefly and concisely as possible to ensure both clarity and topicality. The structure is very intuitive. The visitor is forwarded to the respective topic with links according to their interests. The information design and the references to the redirection ranges from a few sentences to just keywords. The comparison of several strategy types shows that the design type is relevant in particular as initial strategy. A disproportionately large number of characteristics could be assigned to this type. The use of the design type remained relatively constant over the observation periods, so that a strategic continuity could be identified for all universities (n=10) over time, which is very typical for the design type. The layout and the presentation of information and the information content remained relatively stable over time. Universities of this type could be identified in both countries (GER=6, SWE=4).

Moving away from a rigid informational focus, the entrepreneurial type shifts the focus towards a collectivism of the university community. Students, employees and interested readers were addressed directly, e.g. within a letter or a video. The content especially addressed the roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder group. Furthermore, statements of gratitude and concrete advice could be observed frequently. However, these entrepreneurial strategy traits could only be identified within five universities. It shall be mentioned here that the respective content often accentuate a collective „we“. Therefore, the information provided do not necessary contain health advice or further plans and structures, but aims to spread the message “we will do this together”. The entrepreneurial type can be identified within both countries, but only at five universities in total. It has to be mentioned that universities that use this type comparatively often seem to show characteristics of the cultural type. Furthermore, they use the collective type over time, especially at the beginning, decreasing strongly over the analysed period.

5.4 Political approach

Regarding the content and timely structure, the positioning type is the exact opposite of the cognitive type. Especially the clinical universities included in the sample outlined the current situation at the university hospital – tending to focus on current solutions from a medical point of view. These universities often shared scientific information and health advices. As the focus shifted towards describing the situation at the hospital over time, especially information for students were mainly provided through links to other websites or they were completely missing. Another typical manifestation of the positioning type was a pure focus on health advices. The use of this type is identical in both countries. However, at Swedish universities, the typical characteristics were identified much more

frequently. This type gained popularity over time, in particular between observation point one towards two.

In addition to all other outlined types, the power type was not identified within this sample.

As already mentioned within the above results structured by strategy types, these types occur partly in combination with each other. Here, the frequent overlapping of the design type and the environmental type was particularly outstanding. While the design type concentrates primarily on the structured presentation of information, the homepages were enriched with current information and updates, which are typical characteristics of the environmental type.

In addition, university websites with characteristics of the design type also showed evidence of either the entrepreneurial type, the learning type or rarely the planning type / cultural type. In addition, common characteristics of the entrepreneurial and environmental types could be identified within a university. Another connection could be identified within a mix of the learning and cultural type as well as the configurational and cultural type.

6. Discussion

The central question of this study was to identify the different strategical approaches of information dissemination. Overall, the results suggest that certain strategy types either complement or cannibalize each other.

The high structure of the design type and the information density of the environmental type result in synergies: Within highly structured homepages, content can be presented in a very simple and reduced way in order to address and inform all stakeholders individually. In particular, the rapid changes in regulations during the pandemic made it necessary to react quickly to legal directives (e.g. university closures) and to communicate them. This fast pace is also reflected in the learning type - all universities were confronted with the new situation and therefore a certain amount of "learning by doing" was necessary.

The need for initial adaption of information due to the uncertain pandemic situation is also reflected in the learning type, which explains the high usage of this strategic approach at the beginning of the pandemic and its flattening over time. After adaptation, other types replaced the learning type (for example the cultural type). During as well as after the situational adaption, especially the support of collectivism was relevant. The cultural type's popularity at the beginning of the pandemic can be explained by universities' intention to address students' uncertainty. Besides, they wanted to promote a collective message in the sense of "we can do it together". However, this signal remained limited over time and then rather shifted more towards the

entrepreneurial type, which focuses less on emotional collective aspects but more on social belonging and holistic, as well as collaborative aims to solve problems.

Furthermore, the proximity of the entrepreneurial and the environmental type is notable. Universities using the entrepreneurial type selectively promoted the collective and strengthened process-orientation. It is surprising that Swedish universities more strongly orient towards the environmental type than German universities did. This could be explained by the rather rigid, nationwide regulations in Germany, which were enforced relatively early (already before observation point 1). While Germany was already in lockdown and universities were closed, Swedish universities were still free to hold face-to-face classes.

In general, a direct comparison of the two countries shows that German universities in particular place an emphasis on collaborative-collective approaches. The design type also has a higher priority at German than at Swedish universities. Clear, rather brief information and structured presentations of further information sources on German university websites contrast with the broad provision of information and highly elaborated websites of Swedish universities. These differences can probably be partly attributed to social customs and underlying bureaucratic structures.

7. Limitations

This study is subject to certain limitations. These include the limited number of observation points, the material considered and the sample selection. The observation points do not exactly reflect the beginning and end of the pandemic. These snapshots only allow rather general statement on the process of strategic changes over time. Furthermore, the analysed material only reflects a part of universities' communication and management strategies. Universities especially also use other communication channels such as social media to reach their digitized target groups, which were not analysed. The sample selection led to the analyses of well-performing universities in an international comparison, which might limit the transferability of the results to other universities. This

limitation can also be seen as a strength, as the identified strategic approaches could be perceived as "good practice" examples. However, a reliable identification of well-functioning strategic models requires further qualitative research investigating the experience and perception of people in charge of strategic decisions in universities.

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