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THE FACULTY GOES SOCIAL

UNIVERSITIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN FRANCE:

THE CASE OF “UB-LINK”

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INTRODUCTION

The biggest evolution in PR over the last couple of decades has undoubtedly been the rise of digital. If the 1996 BledCom symposium effectively “[took] public relations into the electronic age”, the (r)evolution has been ongoing across different sectors, has included several distinguishable stages, and has irreversibly changed the face of public relations, nearly twenty years on. From electronic marketing to websites, to social media and collaborative content production, digital seems to have progressively become a more-or-less central element in almost every PR strategy, in the US (Wright & Hinson, 2008) and in Europe (Verhoeven, Tench, Zeffass, Moreno, & Verčič, 2012).

Although they are not often reputed for their cutting-edge PR, public universities in France are no exception to this general trend. Academics themselves often make extensive use of technology and software, in the form of research and even e-learning tools (Moran, Seaman, & Tinti-Kane, 2011), yet many universities in France have paradoxically been slow to modernize their internal and external PR (Nétange, 2011), notably in relation to their English-speaking counterparts (Barnes & Lescault, 2011; Davis III, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, & Gonzalez Canche, 2012; Linvill, McGee, & Hicks, 2012). Indeed, PR is frequently underfunded and understaffed in French public universities (Dupont & Desgabriel 2005), traditionally a low priority in a context where competition between public universities, both nationally and internationally, has only very recently become an issue.

In this context, the University of Burgundy (Dijon, France) has become the first French public university to develop its own private social network online. The social platform named “uB-link” was developed and launched in 2011, in a bid to foster links between alumni and current students, and to build an alumni network which would be an asset both for the university and for its alumni. The platform was awarded first prize in the digital communication category by the Higher Education Communication Professionals’ Association (ARCES), in 2012 (<www.arces.com>). A research project was also set up in 2011, to study and evaluate the effectiveness of the social platform. Financed in part by the Burgundy Regional Council, the research project is due to run over six years, studying three six-month datasets at 2-year intervals, and examining: (a) the cultural dynamics emerging in the various online groups, (b) the impact of online exchanges with alumni on student discourse and use of professional language in interactions, and (c) emerging social practices and uses of the platform.

One year after its launch, the social network has already evolved considerably, and various user practices can be observed. This paper presents the results of a preliminary study focusing on the first six months of activity on the

platform (dataset 1, 9th December 2011 - 9th June 2012). Based on the practices observed, internal working documents and interviews conducted with the head of the uB-link project, the university’s community manager and PR director, it discusses how uB-link fits in to the University of Burgundy’s (digital) PR strategy, and the extent to which the emerging practices among users appear to correspond to the initial goals set out for the platform. Finally, it identifies key issues with which the platform is faced, suggesting ways in which they might be handled and outlining a set of good practices for anyone seeking to set up similar private alumni networks.

1. USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS FOR PR BY HIGHER EDUCATION ESTABLISHMENTS IN FRANCE

On 17th January 2013, a “spotted” page was created on Facebook, dedicated to the University of Burgundy: <http://www.facebook.com/SpottedUniversiteDeBourgogne>. This page allows students to post anonymous messages, often in rhyme, in which they express their attraction to another student, also described anonymously, who they happened to encounter in a certain place (generally on campus) at a given time, in the hope that the student will recognise him/herself, feel the same way, and react to the message. Less than three months after its creation, on 25th June 2014, the page had received 5199 “likes” on Facebook. On the same date, the university’s official Facebook page displayed a mere 4170 “likes”. What does this suggest about the place of social media in higher education institutions’ PR strategies? How can universities harness these tools to communicate effectively with their students?

Although Mark Zuckerberg and associates started “The Facebook”, in 2004, as a social network aimed at university students, from an institutional point of view, universities, notably in France, have been relatively slow to harness the potential of Facebook and other social networks as PR tools aimed at students, potential students, and other stakeholders. Indeed, the first groups affiliated with French-speaking universities were created by students themselves, and, despite a few pioneering attempts from university PR professionals, it was not until “pages” were introduced in 2008 that the groundwork was laid for universities to begin to establish a solid institutional presence. In February 2009, six French universities had a Facebook page (source : Com’Campus), with an average of 474 fans. In April 2013, the communication agency Campus Communication lists 70 French Higher Education Establishments (HEEs) with official Facebook pages, and a total just over 340 000 fans, a figure which has increased by 51% in twelve months (Source : *Campus Communication*). Compared to English-speaking universities, this figure is very small, since the University of Oxford, for example, had a total of over

998 000 “Likes” on its homepage in the same month (25th June 2014): almost three times the total of all French HEEs combined.

Adoption of Twitter by French universities progressed in a more-or-less contemporaneous manner to the development of Facebook pages. The Universities of Nantes and Limoges were the first to set up official accounts in January and December 2008 respectively, before many others in 2009 and 2010 (source: Pegasus Data Project, 2012). In October 2012, the Pegasus Project lists 72 French HEEs with official Twitter accounts, with up to 4663 followers for the pioneering University of Nantes.

Public universities in France are often presented, rightly or wrongly, as the poor relations of their private (often Catholic) counterparts, of commercially-run business schools and of the elitist *grandes écoles*. Questions of funding are central to this issue, but also the relative size and (until recently) the centralised management system of universities, as well as the professional status and ideals of a majority of academics who work in them. As a result, public universities in France as a whole have often been relatively slow to accept and adapt to a market-driven higher education economy (Beaud, Caillé, Encrenaz, Gauchet, & Vatin, 2010). In this context, PR and communication have not always been universally recognised as key priorities in a public service culture where funding was already stretched. While academic reputation was traditionally established by peer reviewing, the reputation of teaching and courses was often seen as being of secondary importance, since students generally attended their local university, with little notion of hierarchy or classification between institutions.

However, the massive yet progressive adoption of social media by university PR teams in 2009-2010 coincided with a series of major reforms aiming at liberalising the French higher education system, which had progressively been put in place from 2006 onwards (Pallez, Fixari, & Lefebvre, 2011). In a newly competitive context, PR was a way to reach out to students, and, arguably, social media could be seen as a relatively inexpensive and modern tool with which to do this. At first, many PR services simply added social media management to the role of the webmaster or another PR professional (sources: L’Etudiant, EducPros). However, as usage became more frequent and time-consuming, the need for a dedicated social media / community manager has led certain universities to create a specific position, thus professionalising their practices. The University of Burgundy was among the first to recruit a community manager in 2011 (source: Com’Campus).

2. UB-LINK: THE FIRST SOCIAL ALUMNI NETWORK IN A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN FRANCE

Although the University of Burgundy has thus been presented as a precursor in this domain, the appointment of a community manager was not in fact an initiative of the university’s PR department, but rather it was linked to the university’s desire to develop its own social network. As part of a drive to help students find employment, in 2007 the university had set up a new service dedicated to helping students prepare for and enter the job market (*la PlateForme d’Insertion Professionnelle - PFIP*), alongside the traditional careers service. Following an audit of available resources favouring contacts between students and professionals, the service highlighted the potential of alumni networks. Although such networks are relatively widespread among engineering and business schools in France, they are much less so among French state-run universities. With the notable exception of a few courses and departments, the University of Burgundy had no developed alumni network and, in 2009, the careers service developed a proposal to create a social network for alumni on a university-wide scale. A preliminary study was carried out by an external consultancy which advised the university on the form that such a social network might take, and provided budgetary and functional guidelines for developing and running the network. An internal document was prepared,² which presented the project as both pioneering and adapted to modern “collaborative” recruitment practices, in which positions are created and adapted to the skills of candidates with whom the employer has slowly built up a relationship, over the course of various interactions.

The project’s main objective was clearly stated as being to favour contacts between students and alumni, notably in order to encourage them to exchange information about job openings, facilitate professional mobility among alumni, and help students gain access to work placements and ultimately long-term employment. Three central practices are identified in the project proposal: networking, exchanging information, and self-promotion. As the preceding discussion suggests, the project originated from the *PFIP*, which had very little contact with the university’s communication department (*Service de la communication*) during the initial stages. Despite this fact, five secondary objectives were listed in the original project proposal, several of which contained a PR dimension:

- To promote links between the university and local, national, and international businesses, reinforcing the image of the university as a federative source of knowledge and encouraging links between businesses and specialised research teams;

² This section is based on the internal document produced by the careers service in January 2010 and on an interview with the head of the careers service, Muriel Henry, in April 2013.

- To provide equal opportunities by ensuring equal access to the alumni network for all students and alumni of the university, regardless of social differences;
- To promote links between the university’s various sites (around the region of Burgundy), and with individuals who may currently be living far away;
- To promote the region of Burgundy and the university through its alumni network;
- To use information and communication technologies (ICT) to build an online community as part of an “electronic public service” initiative.

Since the internal project proposal was written in order to seek permission and funding for the project to go ahead, the decision to include these secondary objectives is likely to have been motivated in part by a desire to foster as wide a support base as possible within the university and its various commissions. Moreover, two further objectives were identified by the head of the careers service, when discussing the project in April 2013. Firstly, the social network was seen as a way to generate reliable and valuable statistical data on alumni employment history and maintaining contacts with alumni, by surfing on the trend for “e-nostalgia”. Secondly, the network would be private and hosted by the university itself, in order to protect data integrity and be able to ensure that only legitimate members of the alumni network and university community could gain access to it.

2.1. uB-link as Part of the University’s Digital PR Strategy

The position of community manager at the university was created in 2011, and corresponds to one of the main recommendations of the preliminary study into the social network carried out by the external consultants. The university’s community manager was thus recruited to run the alumni social network, though the position was attached to the web office of the communication service rather than the *PFIP*. On arriving in her post in April 2011, the community manager was asked to develop the university’s presence on the digital networks, while preparing the launch of the alumni social network in December 2011³.

At that time, the university had an institutional web portal, run by the full-time webmaster, and was encouraging the different faculties, services and departments which had developed their own websites to join the portal by producing a new site based on the template provided by the university. The webmaster had very little time to dedicate to social networks. An institutional Facebook profile had been created, before being taken down by Facebook for infringing its guidelines about the use of profiles (reserved for private individuals). Several internal

³ This section is based on an interview with the university’s community manager, Caroline Chanlon, in April 2013, and on her initial audit of the university’s presence on social media (in the form of a Powerpoint presentation created in June 2011).

bodies in the university had developed Facebook pages independently, and there was also an official Twitter account, with no posts.

The community manager thus went about creating an official Facebook page (in August 2011), a “hub” on the French professional social network Viadeo, named “Training and Working in Burgundy” (“*Se former et travailler en Bourgogne*”, September 2011) and developing the Twitter account. A second phase of the digital network strategy involved creating a YouTube channel and Google+ account for the university in early 2012. A Pinterest account was opened later in that year.

The choice of social networks resulted from ongoing discussions between the community manager and PR director of the university, and corresponds to an evolving digital strategy. Facebook occupies a major role in this strategy. Aimed at students, alumni and university staff, the page <<http://www.facebook.com/univbourgogne>> had 4170 likes on 25th June 2014. Information about upcoming events on campus, concerning students and researchers, including cultural and sporting events, is regularly posted (three posts per day on average in March 2013). The vast majority of posts provoke comments and exchanges. Viadeo is used to target professionals, through the hub (“*Se former et travailler en Bourgogne*”, 379 members on 25th June 2014), and through the less-frequented page dedicated to the university (<<http://www.viadeo.com/fr/company/universite-de-bourgogne>>). According to the community manager, Twitter is used to target students, researchers and journalists, and is becoming more and more important (1617 followers and 3153 tweets on the page <<https://twitter.com/univbourgogne>> on 25th June 2014). Posts contain news and links to external websites, that of the university or other social networks. If Twitter is used to relay news, YouTube and Pinterest are used mainly to host videos and photos respectively, which are then relayed on Twitter, Facebook and uB-link. According to the community manager, the Google+ account is yet to be fully developed and currently exists in order to “occupy the space” rather than as an independent social network with its own targets and logic.

The university has thus progressively deployed a digital strategy across many of the major public social networks, at the same time as it has developed its own private social network, uB-link. Moreover, to a certain extent, the university’s presence on public social networks should be seen as complementary to uB-link, since all of the networks are used in conjunction with one another. Thus news from uB-link is posted to Facebook and Twitter, YouTube is used to host videos posted on uB-link, and so forth. As well as using them to post information aimed indirectly at promoting the university, the community manager sees public social networks, and notably Viadeo, aiming at business professionals, as a way to drive traffic to the university’s own private

network, in a bid to increase traffic and interactivity on uB-link. Compared to the former, however, she distinguishes uB-link within the digital strategy by the fact that it is private, and, for her, “a careers tool aiming to help students promote their CV”, rather than” a commercial communication tool used to promote the university”.

2.2. The Interface

uB-link is based on Drupal, an open-source Content Management System (CMS). The platform was developed by a digital PR agency based in Dijon, which also has a contract for maintenance and upgrades. It is hosted locally by the University of Burgundy, which also owns all of the rights to use and develop the system. It is run as a private social network, meaning that only authorised users can access and edit contents. There are four main types of users on the platform: alumni, students, personnel and companies.

All alumni of the University of Burgundy are encouraged to join the social network. They may be contacted directly through an invitation or may discover the network themselves. They must identify themselves with their full name, date and place of birth, and this information is used to authenticate their alumni status against university records. Alumni are lifelong members of the network, unless they delete their account. Current students are also invited to join the network, identifying themselves with their university login details. All new students in September 2012 were required to join the network during the administrative enrolment process. Students automatically become alumni on completing their course. Students and alumni have the same rights on the network.

The social network is open to university staff, who are entitled to remain members only as long as they work at the university. Staff members may act as community leaders, and in practice these are a mix of academic and administrative staff, some of the latter having had this function included in their job description. The final category of members is companies. Companies do not have access to the whole network, but are allowed to enter information about themselves and post job or placement offers. An individual member may grant a specific company access to his/her profile when applying for a job or placement.

Figure 2.1 shows the graphical user interface of the platform, with the main user functions. This is the landing page and home page of the site, publicly visible. All of the information displayed has been selected by the community manager. Some elements are directly accessible to non-members, such as the student guide, promotional video, and social network links. Others, such as the discussions, job offers, and all of the links along

the top menu, require the user to create an account or to log in first. Once the member is logged on, the graphical

The screenshot shows the public landing page of uB-link, a social network for the University of Burgundy. The page features a top navigation menu with links for Home page, Groups, Jobs/Placements, Documents, Search, Directory, Contact, and News. Below the menu is a header with the uB-link logo and navigation options like ACCUEIL, COMMUNAUTÉS, EMPLOI / STAGES, RESSOURCES, RECHERCHER, ANNUAIRE, CONTACT, and ACTUS. A central banner asks "Qu'est ce que uB-link ?" and explains it as a social network for students, alumni, and staff. The main content area is divided into several sections: "Dernières discussions" (Recent Discussions) with posts about Master ERE graduates and a class gift; "Stages & emplois" (Jobs/Placements) with listings for HIF Director, C++ HIF, and an electrical engineering doctorate; "Actualités" (News) with articles about a BNP Paribas internship forum and a musician's experience; "Agenda" (Diary) with an event for diploma handover; "Partenaires" (Partners) with logos for the European Union, Caisse des Dépôts, Bourgogne Conseil régional, and Grand Dijon; "Ils ont rejoint le réseau" (Membership statistics) showing 3165 students, 1589 alumni, 477 companies, 288 staff, and 50 group animators; and "Derniers inscrits" (Members recently joined) with a grid of member avatars. A footer contains social media links for Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn, along with the text "Restez connecté".

Figure 1: The Public Landing Page of uB-link (https://ub-link.fr/)

user interface remains identical, but the member can navigate between pages, for example to read discussions in the different groups (named “communities”), join a community, consult and apply for job or placement offers, consult resource documents, search for members, resource documents, job or placement offers, or companies in the database. Members can also consult the diary of upcoming events, recent news published on the network, and, in the menu “My uB-link”, they can edit their profile, send or reply to messages to or from other members, and see lists of their communities, contacts and favourites.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research project adheres to the methodological approach that Robert Kozinets (2009: 8) defines as “netnography”: *“netnography is not an individualistic approach examining the personal posting of messages on the Internet, or their aggregate. Netnography’s focal topic is collective. Netnography examines groupings, gatherings, or collections of people. Its level of analysis is thus what sociologists would call the ‘meso’ level: not the micro of individuals nor the macro of entire social systems, but the smaller group level in between.”* The netnography carried out by the authors at the University of Burgundy is centred on three aspects of uB-link:

1. cultural dynamics within the online communities;
2. practices developed by members, linked to the interface and architecture of the platform;
3. dialogical construction of professionalization processes through interactions between students and alumni.

These three aspects are to be studied over a period of six years, from the network’s launch in December 2011 until December 2017. The temporal dimension will be examined by comparing the activity during three datasets corresponding to six-month periods, taken at two-year intervals: dataset 1 corresponding to period t (the first six months starting from the launch of the network), dataset 2 at t+2 years, and dataset 3 at t+4 years. In this way, the project aims to look at the way user practises, but also the platform itself, evolve during the first six years. During each experimental phase, three types of analysis will be conducted, in order to examine the object from different angles:

- semiotic / discourse analysis of the platform (architecture, discourse, socio-technical forms and norms)
- analysis of online behaviour (interactions, navigation: “netnographic” analysis - Kozinets 2009 - including ethnography, social network analysis, discourse analysis, analysis of navigation data)
- questionnaires and/or semi-directive interviews with targeted users (representations of practice)

By confronting the implicit socio-technical / discursive forms and norms linked to the platform itself, the activity of users and the representations of selected informants, the project aims to build up a complete picture of the way in which the social network is used, by confronting different types of data (Kozinets, 2010, p. 98). In accordance with the principles of netnography (Kozinets, 2010, p. 75), the researchers are also active users of the platform.

Users' online behaviour is studied using various analytical tools. Google Analytics has been incorporated into the site, and is used as a source of much background data concerning (evolutions in) global navigation practises. A specific tool has been developed in house to capture and extract the navigation data (including conversation contents) from the platform. This data can then be analysed manually, with statistical data-mining tools such as SPSS, or a Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) package.

Since the data studied is not publicly available (though it is freely available to all members of the private network), it was necessary to notify the French Data Protection Commission (CNIL) about the project, and obtain the users' consent to consult and process their data. The system of “implied consent” as defined by Kozinets (2010, p. 143) has been put in place. During the inscription process on the network, users are asked to check two boxes, one to agree to the general terms and conditions of usage of the site, and another to give consent for their data to be included in the research project. Only anonymous data from users who have actively ticked this box is made available to the researchers. Since data is made anonymous from the beginning, selected informants (identified by their user-ID key) are then contacted by email by the community manager (rather than by the researchers) in order to ask them whether or not they would accept to take part in an interview about their use of the platform.

The figures presented in the following section are derived from Google Analytics, and exclude mobile versions of the site. As such, they should be considered as conservative estimates, since they do not take into account users on mobile platforms (iOS, Android), or who have not enabled cookies on their browsers. Comparison with the figures recorded by the Community Manager in her logbook (monthly inscription, group membership, number of elements posted) show that the numbers presented here are consistently lower (by between 1-13%) than the official figures recorded. This may also be partly explained by differences in the dates on which the official figures were obtained and the dates used in this study (systematically the 1st of the month for full calendar months). It is important to bear in mind that Google Analytics identifies a user connecting from two different computers, for example at the university and at home, as two separate (unique) users. While this has no incidence on the figures for the total number of visits or on the members having joined a group, it must be taken

into account in measurements of the number of unique visits to a given group, for example. The figures presented here should thus be taken as approximate estimates, with ‘real’ figures being up to 13% higher in exceptional cases.

4. USE OF THE PLATFORM OVER THE FIRST 6 MONTHS (9TH DECEMBER 2011 - 9TH JUNE 2012)

The platform uB-link was made accessible to the community and officially launched on 9th December 2011. A launching ceremony was organised for the various official partners, local companies, alumni, journalists and members of the university staff. Over 100 people attended. One of the objectives of this event was to publicise the network and encourage a large number of people to sign up from the outset. Figure 2 shows the number of members who subscribed to the network over the first 6 months. The number of students subscribing (out of a total of over 20 000) was more clearly affected than the other categories by the buzz surrounding the launch. A recruitment drive carried out over the social networks and aimed at alumni, in April 2012, also appears to have had a significant impact on the recruitment levels for that month. According to these data, the total number of full members of the network (excluding companies) for the period studied is 2043 (978 alumni, 930 students and 135 staff). The number of subscriptions tails off progressively over that time. The subscription rate of companies is slightly more stable over the six-month period.

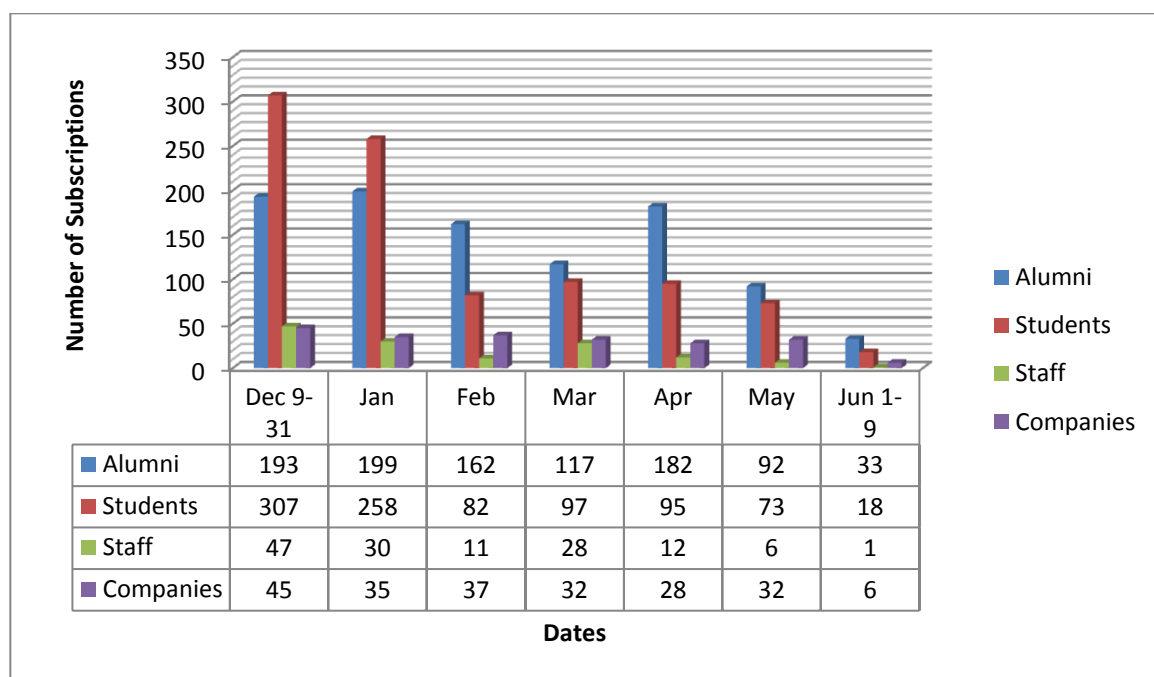


Figure 4.1 : Number of subscriptions to uB-link during the first 6 months

4.1. Frequentation.

Visitors to the platform remained an average of 7.3 minutes and visited an average of 8.9 pages. Time spent on the platform oscillated from a low of 6.3 minutes in the period 9th-31st December to 7 minutes in the period 1st-9th June; with highs in January and February (8.4 and 9.1 minutes respectively). Predictably, the number of pages visited fell from an average of 12.2 to an average of 6.1 over the six months, as users explored the site to begin with, and concentrated on what interested them as they became more experienced. Conversely, the average time spent on a page rose regularly from 35 seconds in the period 9th-31st December, to 1 minute 22 seconds in the period 1st-9th June.

According to Google Analytics, over 85% of visitors visited the platform only once during the first six months. However, it should be remembered that this figure includes users having visited the platform with a different computer or even web browser, and so the real figure is likely to be considerably lower. On the other extreme, and if we exclude the community manager and colleagues working on the platform (4 users with over 100 visits), there is a group of around 65 users who visited the site between 25 and 100 times during the period studied, viewing a combined total of over 21 000 pages, and who thus appear to constitute a central user group.

4.2 Sources of Traffic

During the period studied, visitors arrived on the site notably from the university’s main website (<www.u-bourgogne.fr>), which in itself was the origin of 3990 visits, or 16.2% of the total. One of the reasons for this high rate may be the gif banner advertising the social network, placed on the website (and also on the university’s other websites) during this period, meaning that users could use the homepage of any university website as a shortcut to access uB-link.

The second and third sources of traffic are both social networks (Viadeo produced 1867 visits and Facebook 1249). In both cases, an advert for uB-link was present on the university’s page, and members were encouraged to join the private network. An emailing campaign (the link inside an email sent) was responsible for a further 384 visits, followed by university-run websites belonging to faculties and institutions. 96 visits originated with Twitter, only 60 with Google.fr searches (the first search engine in the ranking), 43 with LinkedIn, 12 with YouTube and 5 with Google+.

This ranking tends to show the effectiveness of promotional activities carried out both on university websites and the two major social networks used, notably in light of the relative absence of search engines as sources of referral traffic in this first period.

4.3. Communities

One of the main objectives of the social network was to bring users together inside communities where they could build relationships and exchange career advice and information about recruitment practises. A total of 8 “communities” were created in December 2011, and 20 others during the period studied (8 in January, 7 in February, 3 in March and 2 in April). The communities are of three types: specific to a particular faculty or department of the university (e.g. the Faculty of Law); specific to a particular group inside a faculty (e.g. the students of a particular Master’s degree); or thematic and transversal (e.g. “Recruitment Practises”). The communities created in March and April are notably of the second type. All members can access all communities and read the discussions. However, in order to post a comment in reaction to a discussion, members must first join the community in question, which they can do freely and with instant effect. Members of a community can choose to be updated by email concerning new posts. The largest community, a thematic group dedicated to professional networks, attracted 136 members (of whom 7 left before the end of the period studied). This was the only group with over 100 members. A large majority of groups had under 50 members during the period observed.

A total of 96 discussions were posted on the communities, generally by a moderator or the community manager. The majority of these received no comments from users. The most commented discussion received 12 comments. Each discussion was viewed between 1 and 175 times, with the average being 26.3 visits to the discussion page in total over the six month period studied. During the period studied, most users did not join communities nor did they seek in significant numbers to participate actively in discussions on the platform.

4.4. Job and Placement Offers

One feature which appears to have been more attractive to users, however, is the “jobs and placements” section. The list of offers received 6324 pageviews for a total of 200 job and placement offers, of which 106 were created in January and February. Visits to the page containing offers were also highest during these two months (1568 and 947 visits respectively). These figures do not take into account members clicking on offers presented elsewhere on the platform (a selection is present on every page), those consulting them directly without passing

through the “jobs and placements” page, or even members clicking on links posted on the university website or other social media sites.

4.5 Networking and Direct Interactions

A second feature of the platform which was relatively widely-used was the possibility for users to search for (and connect with) other members of the network. This basic function, found on virtually all social networking sites, was used 6717 times in the six-month period, and 1390 requests to connect were sent to 497 users. An average of 2.8 requests were received by each of these users, who make up just under 25% of the total number of network members. Once connected, users can send direct messages to one another, although this function (available from January 2012), was only used 265 times in the six months studied. The platform also offers users the possibility to invite entitled non-members to join uB-link, by sending them a pre-formatted email. However, the corresponding page was only visited 49 times during the period studied. Overall, it would thus appear that members are keen to search the network for other members, but that only a minority of them “connect” using the platform, and that most prefer other forms of direct communication.

4.6. Other Features

Two remaining main features of the platform are resource documents and the diary of upcoming events. The resource document index page was visited 1208 times, and 157 searches for resource documents were carried out, using the search tool. Concerning the diary, 68 searches were carried out on corresponding the search tool, and each event posted was viewed an average of 12.3 times (from 38 maximum to 2 minimum).

5. DISCUSSION

The results presented above, based on Google Analytics data, allow us to identify certain general trends in the use of the uB-link platform, although they lack depth, notably in terms of insights into the possible differences in practises between the different categories of user. It will be possible to take these factors into account over the coming months, thanks to the data extraction tool currently being finalised by the research team, which will allow them to exploit data used in social network’s own database, but also through interviews with targeted users. Despite these current limits, a tentative preliminary analysis of the results can be presented here.

Our observations of the first six months of activity on the social network allow us to identify some areas in which it appears to have been more successful than others, in meeting the objectives identified by the university

(*supra*). The creation of a secure, private social network dedicated to students and alumni is well under way, in the sense that a social network implies a functional technical infrastructure, but also membership and active participation. The technical infrastructure, though perfectible and likely to go on evolving, is perfectly functional, and the number of members continued to grow over the period studied, albeit at a declining rate. The platform also contributes to reinforcing links between the university and local companies, indirectly through the presence of alumni members in the companies themselves, and directly insofar as it provides them with a tool through which to publish job and placement offers. The “jobs and placements” section received on average over 1000 visits per month during the six months studied. It was thus one of the more successful features of the platform, along with the networking function (search for members), which also attracted more than 1000 monthly visits on average, even if these searches do not necessarily lead to members getting into contact through the platform.

If the network thus appears to have been successful in some of its more ‘utilitarian’ dimensions (searching for acquaintances, jobs and placements), it has been less so in other areas, and notably regarding communities and discussions. It appears important here to differentiate the concepts of “community” and “network”, as distinguished in the original document of intention produced by the *PFIP*. Whereas the network may be considered to be a group of interconnected users, a community, on the other hand, is built on social relationships slowly fostered through interactions between members. A network, offering various functions to users, may be launched with pomp and splendour and aim to attract the masses, but an online community generally develops organically, typically originating in social interactions around a theme. Unlike a network, as Robert Kozinets points out (2010, p. 8-9), a community often tends to remain small and intimate:

a certain minimum number of people must be involved in order for an online group to feel like a community. We might presume this to be about 20 people at the bottom end. There may also be a maximum number, for efficiency of communication, as proposed in anthropologist Robin Dunbar’s number, often held to be between 150 and 200 persons. Some online communities are, of course, much larger than this. However, we often find larger communities splitting in order to maintain the close atmosphere of a community.

Seen in this light, it is hardly surprising that the communities and discussions on uB-link have not appeared to encounter immediate success among members. On the other hand, if we consider the university and its various faculties and institutes to already constitute existing communities of sorts, the communities recreated on uB-link

can be seen to bring together “real-life” acquaintances, at least for some members. Yet pre-existing relationships, notably hierarchical ones between staff and students, might also be construed as a complicating factor for online exchanges, especially when communicating in one’s own name, where the fear of being judged by various parties, including one’s peers, may constitute a barrier to ‘free’ expression. Nevertheless, the existence of a small group of active users might be interpreted as a sign that a “community” is emerging on uB-link, but it is necessary to examine more closely the members of this group and the nature of their interactions on the platform, in order to clarify this point.

6. CONCLUSION: GOOD PRACTISES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE EVOLUTIONS

When seeking to build a social network or online community of any kind, it appears important to take into account both organic and technical aspects. Robert Kozinets (2010, p. 31-2) suggests that there are two interrelated dimensions which contribute to social cohesion within an online community. The first is the interest of members for the central subject or theme that the community has been set up to discuss. The second is the social relationships within the community itself. The central theme is thus a critical element: it is what makes individuals want to join the community in the first place. In the case of uB-link, the motivating factor is the promise of a private alumni network, centred around possibilities for professional networking, exchanging information, and self-promotion (*supra* section 2). Users need to find a specific advantage of belonging to uB-link (as opposed to other professional networks, such as Viadeo or LinkedIn), such as the possibility of connecting with a larger number of alumni than on other networks, for example. Currently, the network’s offer is based primarily on exclusive resource documents, job and placement offers, and information tailored to students and alumni of the University of Burgundy.

However, the second factor is equally important, if the network is to develop into a community or set of interconnected communities. Members need to feel that they are a valued part of such a community, in a certain role and in a relationship with other members. This feeling of community, based on respect of that community’s norms and history, only develops through interactions over a sustained period of time, suggests Kozinets:

Regardless of the medium or exact pathway to participation, the theory suggests that, over time and with increasingly frequent communications, the sharing of personal identity information and clarification of power relations and new social norms transpires in the online community – that social and cultural information permeates every exchange, effecting a type of gravitational pull

that causes every exchange to become coloured with emotional, affiliative, and meaning-rich elements. (Kozinets, 2010, p. 28)

Through sustained interaction, he explains, the desire to interact becomes stronger and the “lurker”/“newbie” gradually becomes an “insider”/“maker”, to adopt the terms of his typology of online participation:

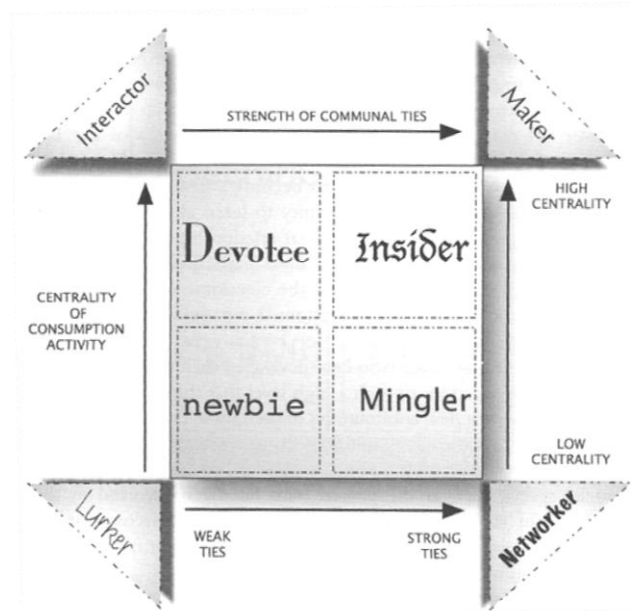


Figure 6.1 : Types of Online Participation (Kozinets, 2010, p. 33, © Sage Publications)

It would thus appear critical for uB-link, if it is to develop into a community or set of communities, to encourage such online participation among members, if possible linking it to the central concerns of the network. The fact that multiple groups/communities have been set up on the platform, linked to questions of recruitment (transversal groups) or corresponding to existing communities within the university itself, thus seems a positive first step. A crucial question will be the extent to which members subsequently feel motivated to participate in these communities, which in turn is linked to how and by whom they are moderated. Indeed, although the network has been set up structurally over the first six months, it now appears all-important for uB-link to go about fostering a sense of community. Based on our observations, there are several ways in which this might be encouraged:

- *Personalise the relationship with and between alumni*, for example with a concept of “class reunions” including IRL meetings, or by inviting alumni to come and talk to current students on the same course. Invite experienced alumni to become “experts” in a certain field, affiliated to one or more communities, to whom students or other members can address questions.

- *Introduce a notion of seniority within the network and increase the symbolic / functional importance of contacts:* include a ‘contact count’ or ‘seniority level’ to help identify connected and experienced, contributing members. Introduce ‘suggested contacts’ based on course history and centres of interest.
- *Reinforce the value of the network for members* by creating more exclusive advantages compared to other professional social networks, e.g. commercial offers for alumni, alumni magazine, alumni card...
- *Extend the network of moderators/opinion leaders* by inviting active members to moderate or contribute to communities, or to become “experts” (*supra*).

Although six months can be a very long time in the fast-evolving world of social media, it is also very short from the perspective of an alumni network whose objective is to become a long-term service, developing and consolidating professional links between individuals and across generations for many years to come. From the point of view of the research project, these preliminary analyses enable us to identify general trends of usage on uB-link, and identify what appear to be central questions for its development. By subsequently deepening these preliminary observations through further data collection and analysis, before comparing them with the second and third datasets in 2013-14 and 2015-16, we hope to come to a better understanding of the dynamics of online community construction and evolving user practices, both within uB-link and on social networks more generally.

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