Research in Brief

Quantity or quality? The professionalization of social media communication in Portugal and Germany: A comparison

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ABSTRACT

As the worldwide growth of social media usage and institutionalization by organizations rise worldwide little is known about the degree of professionalization that has occurred. By comparing data between two asynchronous countries this research project offers insights into its strategic usage as well as discovering an interesting dynamic between activity and professionalization.

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1. Introduction

The technological development from the World Wide Web to the Web 2.0 has created a new online communication environment. Organizations can use it directly to make contact with their stakeholders, but at the same time they also have to contend with a great variety of often-critical feedback. As a result they often feel overwhelmed by the new challenges and search for appropriate processes to deal with them. (e.g. Duhé, 2012; Linke & Zerfaß, 2012; Macnamara, 2012; Solis, 2012).

It remains questionable whether the professionalization of social media communication has taken place at the same rate in all countries. Furthermore, concepts of PR communication management are tied to country specific socio-political and economic systems. Such dimensions alter the communication reality and cause different dynamics.

Zerfass and Oliveira (2014) show that strategic communication practice and its professionalization in Portugal are more distant from theoretically ideal conditions than those in Germany. Consequently, a combination of studies carried out on two asynchronous European countries can deliver a more comprehensive understanding. Recent empirical studies show that Portuguese organizations are more active and judge the new technologies as more important than their German counterparts (Zerfass, Moreno, Tench, Vercic, & Verhoeven, 2013; Zerfass & Oliveira, 2014).

The aim of this research is to ascertain whether Portuguese social media communication is professional and integrated into their strategic operational communication management process (RQ1) and whether there are any differences in social media professional usage and organizational integration between Portugal and Germany (RQ2).

The following hypotheses are tested:

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- H1.** While Portuguese organizations are more active than German, they lag behind in experience and professionalization.
- H2.** German organizations show less ad-hoc online communication activities.
- H3.** Portuguese organizations use less online activity to support communication goals.
- H4.** German organizations perform more systematic online communication

2. Data collection, treatment and analysis

For Portugal an analysis was carried out on data collected from a quantitative online survey sent to 11,000 professionals working in communication departments between December 2013 and June 2014.

For Germany a secondary analysis of previous data, collected from the Social Media Governance and Delphi Studies (2010–2012), was performed. The final samples comprise of 105 replies from Portugal and 596 from Germany. The numbers are proportional to each the country's inhabitants.

Data treatment included the creation of indices: A Social Media Skills index (I_{SMK}) was determined by giving an average rating to 10 separate individual skills. A Social Media Governance index (I_{SMG}) was operationalized by means of a list of the following 12 items: participative corporate culture; commitment of top management; human resources; person in charge of social media in each department; monitoring tools; social media workshops; seminars or training; social media guidelines; strategy papers; key performance indicators for measuring success; specific budget; software and hardware; and a dedicated social media department. A Social Media Activities index (I_{SMA}) was calculated as the sum of all social media applications used by the communication department – index values ranged from 0 to 27. Finally, a dichotomous index for the number of social media strategies (I_{SMS}) in practice was also determined.

3. Results

Even though 83.3 percent of the Portuguese organizations have higher levels of social media activity (I_{SMA}) than their German equivalents almost 3 in 10 organizations do not have structural processes, rules or organized collaboration. In terms of strategic operational communication management, we see a low investment or effort towards creating integration, as 32.6 percent do not invest any working time in strategy creation and 27.9 percent invest less than 1 h per week. At the same time, 32.6 percent do not dedicate time to evaluation and 46.5 dedicate less than 1 h per week.

We can verify that the majority of Portuguese organizations have a very low level of strategic operation. More than 2 in 10 do not even have a strategy and only 18.3 percent have an extensive spectrum of strategies in place. Further elements for answering their strategic operational communication management process (RQ1) will appear as we compare the two countries further and test the four hypotheses.

The data shows that in 2010, 71.3 percent of German organizations were already active, while in Portugal only a half showed any level of activity. Furthermore, a quarter more organizations in Germany had already started the institutionalization process and thus have more experience. The data projection for 2014 shows that these figures have increased in both countries, but there is still a slight difference. In Germany circa 89.5 percent are active, while in Portugal the percentage is less 5 percent.

As regards to the degree of activity, further differences can be attested. In Germany only one in ten organizations are very active on the social web. On average, only 7 of the listed 27 different activities were implemented. By contrast in Portugal, four in ten organizations (40.9%) have a high degree of communication. In terms of the index, Portugal has an average of only two in ten organizations with a low I_{SMA} where as in Germany it is almost six in ten. This confirms hypothesis 1 that although Portuguese organizations are more active in the use of social media they lack structural organization, professionalism and experience.

In German organizations there are a higher number of specific sub-strategies (e.g. for certain platforms, units or evaluation) to coordinate social media communication. This suggests that German organizations use less ad-hoc online communication activities as the existence of specialized social media officers or departments in Germany also indicate, confirming hypotheses 2. In Germany 48 percent have social media officers compared to 12.8 percent in Portugal. As regards to hypothesis 3 that Portuguese organizations use less online communication to support communicational goals, the data shows that Germany registers higher rates of formulated targets or strategy papers for social media communication than Portugal (33 against 25.5 percent). Where as Portugal places the presence of participative dialogue-based corporate culture and technical possibilities at the top of the social media governance items list (51.1 and 44.7 percent), in Germany the figures were higher at 76 and 63 percent, respectively.

Although 31.9 percent of the surveyed organizations in Portugal have key figures for monitoring success and 42.6 percent for monitoring tools for social media, against 36 and 23 percent in Germany, only 25.5 percent of the Portuguese organizations have a strategy paper, against 33 percent in Germany. This triangulation of the three items shows that control in Germany is performed on a goals orientated approach and thus more strategic than instrumental. Moreover, the majority of Portuguese organizations do not professionalize the task as the survey participants spend none or very little time on it. This data confirms **H4** and German organizations perform more online communication controlling than the Portuguese.

4. Conclusion

Despite the different approaches a general professionalization of online communication can be attested. The majority of organizations in both countries shows medium and high values on most of the four dimensions contemplated by the social media governance concept: I_{SMS} , I_{SMK} , I_{SMA} . The quantitative data shows comparable values for the indices, but should be interpreted bearing in mind the different times of data collection, social desirability, different understandings e.g. of measurement concepts or strategies, and different cultures.

The results of this research illustrate an alternative to the generalizing hype regarding social media. Both countries show high percentages of organizations using social media. However, high activity does not necessarily mean professionalization. Hence, a more detailed look at the conditions for social media communication is needed. As hypotheses 1–4 are supported by the data, it can be concluded that the professionalization and strategic use is more advanced in Germany.

To sum it up, Germany and Portugal show a high quantity of social media activity, Portugal being slightly higher. The professionalization process however, seems to take place quite differently. Portuguese organizations could learn from the more advanced German. However, culture and organization specific aspects also play an important part. Consequently, no one best way can be suggested and generalizing claims need to be understood as far too short-sighted.

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