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## **Guidelines for a model for university institutional web application. The case of the Latin American and Spanish communication faculty websites.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The goal of our research –did between 2002 and 2005- was to construct a theoretical-practical model that works as the true departure point for developing institutional university web applications. With this objective, we observed 64 institutional websites from Latin American and Spanish communication faculties.

The conclusions that are synthesized here reinforce the design of the model, from an idea of how the public approach and consume the product. In addition, as in a knowledge spiral, the final model as much as the conclusions about consumption will be useful as antecedents in future research and institutional communication projects.

As a main conclusion, we can say that of the 64 websites observed and analyzed, less than ten could be considered efficient communication and management products. Consequently, the study shows that the Latin America and Spanish faculties of communication do not develop quality web products and have severe structural deficiencies in their institutional websites, failing to take advantage of the potential the World Wide Web offers.

Of the 64 webs observed initially, only 10 could pass a meticulous analysis on the basis of the guidelines established in the model. The 54 remaining sites lack the minimum professional guidelines of development of a web product. Only 5 products reach or surpass 50 percent of the established ideal value of the designed model.

### **KEYWORDS**

University institutional web application, knowledge management, intercreativity, communication economy, grammar of the interaction.

### **1. INTRODUCTION.**

The doctoral thesis that served as a framework for this article had a high-priority objective: to design a model for university institutional web applications. The research began in 2002 as a result of the observation that communication faculties do not have an effective institutional communication policy, or, in the worst case, none at all. This observation was also true for the communication faculty institutional websites visited and known. These websites aren't professional products of university technicians.

From this first impression we elaborated a work methodology that proposes, in addition to analyzing already existing websites, constructing a theoretical-practical model that works as the true departure point for developing institutional university web applications. The conclusions that are synthesized here reinforce the design of the model, from an idea of how the public approach and consume the product. In addition, as in a knowledge spiral, the final model as much as the conclusions about consumption will be useful as antecedents in future research and university institutional communication projects.

## **2. DESIGN FOR A MODEL FOR UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL WEB APPLICATION.**

### **2.1. Evolutionary stages of the model.**

The analysis model was designed based on three increasing development stages.

#### **2.2.1. Stage one: efficient institutional communication.**

The first objective to get a quality application web is to promote efficient institutional communication. This should be the basic objective of an organization. Institutional communication through websites represents actions that appear in public relations manuals, and that are taught in the communication faculties. The difference is that these public relations are not those of a commercial company in charge of managing the communication of a company. These have a comparative differential value: they are the opinions of a social organization for generating knowledge and professionals, respected by public opinion. This simplifies the task.

Let's talk about marketing and social profitability. We can imitate company strategies but keep in mind the contribution that universities can make to the community. We refer to prestige as fruit of the implication with the community. This is like thinking of the institution with company logic in the society network (Castells, 2001). Nothing makes us believe that this is not necessary or that the institutional aims exclude the obligation to deal with communication and the relationship with society in a professional way.

#### **2.2.2. Stage two: Contributing added value in services.**

Websites are movable products that require constant modifications. A current Internet project can't be limited to a simple institutional communication channel. It is something much more complex. This is the second stage of the optimization process. The website must be an effective tool of overall management, it is what allows users to work productively for the institution. The web contents must give immediate benefits to the users or they will give their time and attention to other sites. In this second stage institutional communication gives more added value to services. When we think about services we usually associate them with administrative tasks. However services can also be the academic contents that is supplied in the institutional website for pedagogical or knowledge distribution purposes.

When constructing this model we consider a website that slowly begins to work as an

administrative space, supplying better services and, as mentioned before, saving future administrative tasks, generating a progressive electronic administration. In worldwide public administration there is an increasing policy of incorporating quality websites with added value in services into the network. E-government is the reference point of this second stage.

### 2.2.3. Stage three: Institutional knowledge management.

For this stage, the theoreticians of knowledge management (Nonaka, Takeuchi, 1999; Davenport, Prusak, 2001; Garvin, 1993) are a necessary reference. From the middle of the 90s they have published the ideas of the value that represents the knowledge the organization generates that is not formalized in any way. This management means collectively knowing how to use it efficiently while new knowledge is acquired, in a circular methodical process.

In institutions, to know means to have power, and in spite of the productivity of making knowledge circulate, we think that it is naive to think that the knowledge can be offered in exchange for anything, without a previous motivation. This is why a strategy should be undertaken, an interface that acts as an intermediary and allows the information and knowledge to be shared, creating a market where ideas are given and acquired.

An efficient Intranet can be a compensation, or in this case, a web application model, in which the shared knowledge is equivalent to prestige inside and outside the institution. It is therefore necessary to design a quality product that motivates the developers to introduce contents. Then the concept of "meritocracy of the strongest ideas" will work (Davenport, Prusak, 2001). The hierarchies in the knowledge markets do not respect the organizational format of the institution, but only the production of experts: who produces and shares most, has a higher hierarchical position in this distributive market. Indeed, the successful virtual and scientific research communities work in this way. "The market of knowledge has its own changing hierarchy based on who knows the things and how useful the ideas are." (Davenport, Prusak, 2001: 59)

According to Nonaka and Takeuchi (1999), the creation of organizational knowledge must be understood as the capacity of a company to generate new knowledge, to spread it between the organization members and to use it to produce products, services and systems. This is the tool for innovation in the organizations, a spiral that works constantly. Both authors promote a new type of organizational structure of hypertext that allows users to create knowledge effectively and continuously.

## 2.3. Categories and properties.

In constructing the model, in addition to the evolutionary stages, categories and properties in relation to quality parameters served as a reference for analyzing Latin American and Spanish communication faculty websites. The categories and properties of the model are:

### 2.3.1. Intercreativity.

Open cooperative model and decentralization / Empowerment.

### 2.3.2. Communication economy.

Originals and differential contents / Synthesis / Processing texts according to an objective public (target).

### 2.3.3. Planning management.

Consolidation of brand / Work teams / Updating / Studies on public consumption / Predicted investment and origin of the resources.

#### **2.3.4. Grammar of the interaction.**

Interface Design / Multimedia resources / Site map / Appropriate software / Web accessibility.

**Figure 1.** Model for a university institutional web application.

### **3. RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT**

For the field work, we carried out the following the activity agenda.

Between March 2002 and March 2004:

a. Data was collected and websites of communication studies in Latin America and Spain were observed, as well as later selecting these in 64, 31, 10 and 4 products according to previously established quality parameters.

b. Questionnaires via e-mail to the managers of 10 selected websites were made.

c. Personal interviews were made with the 4 managers of websites in the last stage, the websites that offered the highest quality parameters under the terms of the proposed model.

d. An opinion poll was made of the objective public of 3 websites selected in the last stage. This research aimed at extracting tendencies of consumption of the institutional web by its public, being conscious of the limitations of our sampling process, which only aimed at obtaining reference data on the consumption of the websites studied.

Opinion poll of the objective public: 130 cases, made in La Plata and Buenos Aires, Argentina and in Pamplona, Spain, in the faculties of communication that obtained the best score in the previous observation.

Duration and place of the opinion poll: it was carried out between March and May 2004, in the classrooms of the Facultad de Periodismo y Comunicación of the Universidad de La Plata (Argentina), the Facultad de Diseño y Comunicación of the Universidad de Palermo (Argentina) and the Facultad de Comunicación of the Universidad de Navarra (Spain).

Universe: 50 surveys in the Facultad de Periodismo y Comunicación of the Universidad de La Plata; 40 surveys in the Facultad de Diseño y Comunicación of the Universidad de Palermo; 40 surveys in the Facultad de Comunicación of the Universidad de Navarra.

### **4. Figures and tables**

Figure 1. Percentage of ideal qualification in the 64 websites of communication studies in Latin America and Spain.

64 WEBSITES OF COMMUNICATION STUDIES IN LATIN AMERICA AND SPAIN

LATIN AMERICAN AND SPANISH FACULTIES OF COMMUNICATION	Percentage of ideal qualification
UNIVERSIDAD DE NAVARRA	68 %
UNIVERSIDAD DE PALERMO	64 %
UNIVERSIDAD NAC. DE LA PLATA	62 %
UNIVERSIDAD RAMON LLULL	60 %
UNIV. DE SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA	50%
UNIV. PONTIFICIA DE SALAMANCA	49%
UNIVERSIDAD DE CHILE	48%
UNIVERSIDAD DIEGO PORTALES	48%
UNIVERSIDAD POMPEU FABRA	39%
UNIVERSIDAD DE LIMA	32%
21 websites	Less than 30 %
33 websites	They do not have their own websites and/or not were qualified

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

As a conclusion, we can say that of the 64 websites observed and analyzed, less than ten could be considered efficient communication and management products. Consequently, the study shows that the Latin America and Spanish faculties of communication do not develop quality web products and have severe structural deficiencies in their institutional websites, failing to take advantage of the potential the World Wide Web offers.

Of the 64 webs observed initially, only 10 could pass a meticulous analysis on the basis of the guidelines established in the model. The 54 remaining sites lack the minimum professional guidelines of development of a web product. Only 5 products reach or surpass 50 percent of the established ideal value of the designed model.

**Figure 1.** Percentage of ideal qualification in the 64 websites of communication studies in Latin America and Spain.

From the simple observation of the Latin America and Spain faculties of communication websites, taking design from a theoretical framework with its respective analysis categories and properties as a starting point we can see that almost half of all the observed faculties do not have their own website and the university website is the digital support for very limited academic and administrative information.

Although within the 31 websites selected in the first stage there are independent interfaces of the main university website, most of these do not have a single system that allows users to browse the pages in an independent way. In some cases, there is a home page that responds to the minimum

criteria of interface design, but there is no coherence in aesthetic or efficient development. In the cases where the communication contents are integrated into the main university website, the user enjoys an ample range of possibilities offered by the university, but little specific communication contents.

It is only fair to point out that some of the products studied are quality websites with efficient management. We are speaking about the faculties of communication of the Universidad de Navarra (Spain), [www.unav.es/fcom](http://www.unav.es/fcom) ; Universidad de Palermo (Argentina), [www.palermo.edu.ar/dyc](http://www.palermo.edu.ar/dyc) ; Universidad Nacional de La Plata (Argentina), [www.perio.unlp.edu.ar](http://www.perio.unlp.edu.ar) ; and Universidad Ramon Llull (Spain), [www.comunicacio.blanquerna.url.es](http://www.comunicacio.blanquerna.url.es). These websites passed the analysis positively, although they are more the exception to the rule than a common policy of all the institutions. An encouraging fact about these 4 products is that from the beginning to the conclusion of the study, after almost 3 years of implementation, reforms have been carried out optimizing strategies that have improved the authors' perception of the products. In these few cases, the move is increasingly towards implementing the management policies via the web. Although they are good products, the 4 websites mentioned also have deficiencies at different levels and they are far from being products that use all the possibilities of the World Wide Web.

On the other hand, the first secondary hypothesis is confirmed. The institutional websites of the Latin American and Spanish faculties of communication do not develop strategies of communication or added value in the services directed at their public. Except in the four products selected, the observations of the authors confirms the last sentence. In fact, not all the products of the 10 websites chosen surpass successfully the first stage of institutional communication and still less the criteria of added value services.

In the 3 cases with higher quality, the results of the survey demonstrate that the institutional communication stage is perceived positively by the public, although the added value services stage has not yet been developed to reach the guidelines of the proposed model. The authors, the managers and the public agree that the best qualities of the 3 sites refer to the actions of institutional communication.

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