

ACADEMIC GLOBAL COMMUNITY: SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE PROGRAM

Kenneth Black, PhD Candidate in Architecture and Design Research
Virginia Tech

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROGRAM AND ITS SOCIAL MEDIA

This particular question is based on the tenets of the Global Perspectives Program (GPP), a summer abroad travel program through the Virginia Tech graduate school. This program is designed to give students interested in becoming future academics a wider variety of experiences and perspectives on higher education. More detailed information can be found at: <http://graduateschool.vt.edu/GPP>. The concept of social media is not new in the academic lives of students in the United States. It shows up on posters, websites, used not only by the student themselves but also the administration to communicate information to the others.

METHODS OF INFORMATION TRANSFER

The use of social media is a method of information transfer, often heavily reliant on visual means to be conveyed to others. In the United States, specifically at Virginia Tech, this method is commonly used to convey information and interact with others for both academic and consumptive (recreational) purposes. This report is done in an effort to see how the universities and colleges we visit on the GPP relate not only to the United States, specifically Virginia Tech, but also to the other locations visited abroad.

WHO IS DOING WHAT?

University of Zurich (UZH)

UZH is the first university that was visited during the trip. As a cantonal university it receives most of its approximate 1.35 billion Swiss franc budget from the cantonal governments. With 3700 total academic staff and 26,500 students, UZH has grown tremendously since its founding as a theology college in 1853. It boasts 12 Nobel laureates as a top 10 university in Europe and world, all for 720 francs a semester.

In terms of social media usage on UZH's website, easily found on the main page with almost no scrolling there were links to Facebook, twitter, Youtube, Xing, Linked-In, and Issuu. Facebook is a social media site that focuses on user submitted content as a sharing mechanism with friends and family mainly at a consumption level, although some businesses use it for promotions. Twitter is a micro-blogging platform in which users follow each other and interact with 140 characters or less. Youtube is a video hosting site that has an untold numbers of hours of content with more uploaded daily to show aspects of almost anything. Individuals, universities, and others can have a channel which organizes videos submitted to the web. Xing is a German-speaking country version of Linked-in, which is a professional online networking platform. Linked-In organized similarly to Facebook, except its main focus is resumes and online marketing and networking. Issuu is a reading and publishing platform in which publications are uploaded to the cloud and available to others.

Though subdued, social media was easy to find and connect using the similar rounded-edge square with each social media site's icon. When accessing the icons, each was up to date with active involvement. Off the web, there were connections on flyers in designated posting areas in the main building we visited. The students only used these areas and were respected well. Promotional material that was given to us during the meeting such as paper brochures had QR codes, Facebook and twitter mentioned on the back.

Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich (ETHZ)

ETHZ is located in Zurich, Switzerland and was founded in 1885. ETHZ now has 10,000 employees, 20,000 students of which 4000 are doctoral students. There are 500 professors and the school claims 21 Nobel Laureates. ETHZ is a federal university meaning that it does not receive as much of its funding from the cantons, but rather directly from the central government. ETHZ is a polytechnic institute that is more limited in scope and more heavily shifted towards doctoral students than Virginia Tech. This limitation in scope is mainly due to the faculty (department) split between it and its neighbor, University of Zurich.

The format of the initial has the links to social media on the main home page with a subpage dedication to social media links (Facebook, twitter, Google+, Youtube, Linked-In and Xing). A small link under the main scrolling picture current articles, the *Zukunftsblog*, translated to Future Blog: blog of the university about opinions and research by faculty, students and other compiled interesting writings. This was unique to ETHZ and the University of Basel, that was easily found among the universities. After more searching there is actually a “*Netiquette*” page about how student and other users of the social media should conduct themselves. For example: as a part of corporate communications, the need for relatable comments, not necessarily opinions of ETHZ, remain fair and objective, comments can be removed if not acceptable.



University of Basel (UniBasel)

UniBasel was founded in 1460, making it the oldest of the universities visited on the trip. It has a student population of 12500 and 350 professors with an operating budget of 650 million Swiss francs, of which 70% is provided by the canton. It has a culture of quality that includes the intergenerational planning and responsibility of faculty and students. It historically has the departments (faculties) of theology, medicine, law, and liberal arts and now has science, business and psychology.

For UniBasel, their social media is located on the main homepage under a script of current important events. The method they used of embedding the different feeds into the homepage was interesting as the images and content was present on the website and not as an icon link to the respective websites. This immediately showed that the social media is active with links to Facebook, twitter, Youtube, and Instagram fully integrated into the page. From a personnel perspective, social media literacy is not critical, although junior staff are being trained and it is a topic of conversation at the university level.

Another interesting sight was the “Beast!” blog. This required scrolling down to the blog on the homepage and was situated next to the links to social media. Unfortunately the blog is in German and would need to be translated for further review. The homepage of UniBasel was also organized to student posting areas that were respected as shown above. In the example no icon were used, but the url to the Facebook page was provided in the lower right corner. This is the typical placement for icons and url links.

University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland (FHNW)

FHNW was the first to have a direct connection to my own background in architecture and design which allowed for more direct understanding of its educational methods. FHNW has approximately 9500 students and was formed from the merger of multiple colleges of professional education and training (PET) in 2006. As an applied sciences university it prides itself in preparation of its students for the professional realm by connecting the links between practice and research, relying on the constant advancement of the profession to inform its educational praxis. In this way FHNW was devoted to the use of critical thinking and aesthetics to the production of design research.

FHNW had similar social media connection to many of the larger universities including: Xing, Google+, Facebook, and Twitter. However it had different formatting between the German and English pages. On the English page the links are moved to the bottom of the page and or did not load Xing, whereas on the German pages the social media icons are placed higher up on the page with the standard square icon hyperlinks. What was interesting was that most of the materials were provided in English, but other sites were solely provided in German. This was more common the smaller the university, school, or department was and given the explanation of the mother-tongue concept during our visit, makes sense in the arts and design campus, for example the Jazz Campus.

The Jazz Campus in Basel (Jazz Campus)

The Jazz Campus was a unique campus among the different universities that were visited. A renovation of a factory facility in Basel it became a music conservatory. The Jazz Campus is the Jazz department of the School of Music of the *University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland* with less than 100 students. From a facilities standpoint it was an interesting use of space to provide for the molding of a student on their understanding of jazz music. As a privately invested university it was also a different model from the cantonal or federal universities. It also had a website that was different from the others, relying more heavily on visuals to convey information as seen below.



The use of social media also included some new additions to the list of social media used overall. At the bottom of the homepage, Facebook, twitter, Google+, were displayed with the usual icons; however as shown in the lower right of the image, Facebook, soundcloud, and vimeo are displayed more prominently. Soundcloud is a music sharing platform and vimeo is a video sharing platform. This much more visual homepage, and the first to have audio as a component of social media extension, makes sense for the Jazz Campus. In this instance, social media is used as a platform for sharing not only information but also the cultural experience of the department and the result of this style of immersive education in a conservatory situation.

University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI)

This university was created after the Bologna Process and was formed through the merger of a number of PET colleges and research institutes in 1997 as SUPSI. This university is structured with strong industry ties to funding and the application of research into the market. This is done through a multidisciplinary

approach to applied education. The university focuses on Bachelor and continuing education in German and Italian tracks.

What was atypical was that there was no social media on the website; however with some searching a Facebook and twitter accounts were present through a web search at: (Facebook) <https://www.facebook.com/supsi.ch> and @supsi_ch (twitter). The university had its own photo and video gallery hosted on the website in “communications” <http://www.supsi.ch/home/comunica/media-gallery/2015.html>. The Facebook page is shown below as an example. Unfortunately the content is in Italian, however it is interesting to see a disconnect between a social media presence that is current and strong with outreach programs that is not featured on the main website.

University of Italian Switzerland (USI)

USI is another post-bologna process university, founded in 1996 with 300 students, it now boasts 3000 with 107 professors and 400 academic staff. USI has an operating budget of 99 million francs. Its programs are taught in two main languages, the Masters is in English and Italian, and the Bachelor is in Italian. It along with SUPSI, serves to provide university-level education to an area that traditionally did not have as many opportunities for higher education with its mission being focused on the local Swiss-Italian canton of Ticino.

In terms of social media, USI uses a homepage that has all of the content visible with no scrolling to find information. The icons and hyperlinks to social media were at the top of the page, colored grey to fit in with the page design. This might make it a little difficult to find at first only because the icons are the standard elsewhere. USI utilizes Facebook, twitter, Youtube, and Linked-In. All of the sites are commonly updated. There was also a “selfie tv”, the so called “Moment Machine”, in the main lobby which was interesting. The television, seen below, is an analog version of user-submitted content, allowing people to take pictures on-site and record their presence at the university.



Polytecnico di Milano (PolyMi)

Located in Italy rather than Switzerland, founded in 1863, PolyMi is the largest of the universities that were visited with 40,600 students and 1300 academic staff. The focuses of the departments at PolyMi are architecture and engineering based with multiple campuses. We visited the architecture campus in Milan which had 9500 students. Each campus is devoted to the needs of the area. PolyMi is also the closest to, or most resembles, a US university on the trip.

PolyMi has a high level of social media use as well as an online store, which it is the first of the institutions to do so. Its social media includes a very responsive Facebook, Instagram (lots of sports team photos), Youtube, and Linked-In. What is interesting about the website is that while the social media is placed in a similar location to many of the universities, PolyMi is the first to provide a non-Latin or Germanic root language translation page, in this case for Chinese international students.

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech)

As Virginia's most comprehensive research university, Virginia Tech is a land-grant university founded in 1872 to serve the local community as an agricultural and mechanical college. Since its inception, Virginia Tech has grown to have an operating budget of 1.3 billion dollars and educates 31,000 full-time students offering 240 bachelor, masters and doctoral programs in 10 colleges including a graduate school. As a research institution Virginia Tech aims to transform knowledge into useful practice to the local and regional areas of Virginia.

Virginia Tech utilizes mainly Twitter and Facebook on its homepage, integrated directly into the information bar near the top of the page. There are a number of unofficial and official Facebook pages. There are also a large number of videos on Youtube, with embedded content on the homepage, but not an official link on the homepage. When content such as videos are paused, they become sharable over Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr. These videos are lower on the page under "life at tech" section. Also there is an extensive nature of self-reporting topics and accomplishments as internal news articles that are posted to the front homepage, which is common at larger research universities.

WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE PLACES VISITED?

Since information transfer is done much more rapidly in the digital age, we need to understand that prospective students will be looking for a view, a vision of the university very quickly. This means browsing websites rapidly and perhaps making a decision about the school without even visiting to limit the variety of choices to be made. For this reason, each location was reviewed by both visiting each university's website for information and access to social media links, and then as a function of the Global Perspectives Program, visited directly for use of social media on the campus in a short tour and interviews with academic staff and students. It is also understood that as an US citizen, my view of social media's use will be in reference to my experiences from universities in the United States.

There is a culture of user-submitted content both in the United States and in Italy and Switzerland. This concept of Web 2.0 or the constant inking of material and content to each other to create a web of information is also incredibly important to utilize in a university setting. To not be connected between different sources of information such as the official homepage and associated social media sites is not only difficult for a person to find a glimpse into life at a university, but also suggests a disconnect in the use of technology at a university.

With students constantly having more and more choices, split decisions, or universities that are very similar, are often made with supplementary information to differ between top US institutions. In Switzerland and Italy it appears that a stronger regional presence and funding to universities suggests that students often go to the cantonal university, and with fewer choices and multiple educational tracks it is clearer to discern the direction of personal education. Social Media is the social side of a university, that it makes a university seem less overbearing and more approachable to a student or can provide a community. When a student is already a part of the university, social media sites can serve as a point of interaction between that student and other students, to see interesting content that is occurring at the university and share ideas with others.

DENIZENS OF THE INTERNET

As digital natives in a global university, the students face a level of uncertainty in their future and that nothing is for certain, driving them to be pragmatic in decision-making in a sea of choices leads to a burden of making a choice. This leads students to rely on a number of places for information such as

social media. Personally, here are some things that I found helpful when reviewing the social media at university websites.

The reputation and persona of the university and students is apparent in the content that is provided by social media. It is important to understand that this perception of the climate at a university is immediately made, even if the association or conclusions are incorrect in the longer term. This can either made or break a connection to a university, and while not the primary reason for choosing a university it can be a contributing factor in the United States, but perhaps not as much in Switzerland and Italy where departments (faculties) are often not numerous to be in direct competition with each other. While the necessity of social media's use in the digital realm is more apparent every day with the absolutely stunning amount of uploaded content, it is now much more important to verse students and academic staff on its use. This not only protects the institution, but also the reputation of the individual.

The final important concept I have found is this: from an implementation aspect, it is more eye-catching to have a live stream embed into the homepage of a website that aggregates, not a link to somewhere else. Simply the visual makes a better connection to the content as compared to the smaller icons. This generates interest and keeps a visitor interested in the content longer; possibly generating a positive experience and they can see themselves there. This is what we want for our students, a positive, strong contemporary education to empower students to a life of learning and skill implementation.