Universities' media communication strategies: Theoretical foundations and implementation features

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Abstract

The article examines media communication strategies of universities in the context of implementing their "three missions": scientific, educational, and social. In this context, a strategic approach is essential for planning and implementing media communication activities at a university. According to this approach, the work of subject matter experts should be aligned with the university's general concept or strategy for development. A review of literature enables us to pinpoint where the media communication strategy fits within the general communication strategy of a university and identify its essential features: as a rule, it has a delayed effect and aims to develop long-term relationships with target audiences. The author analyzes current media communication practices of relevant university departments using the method of expert interviews with university officials and studies publicly available, documented media communication strategies. There are two approaches to working with media communication strategies in universities: the first one sees the strategy as an undocumented "action plan" not formalized in a document, whereas, according to the second one, the strategy exists as a local regulation. In certain universities, such a formal document not only sets the main goals and objectives of a relevant department but also contains performance indicators and key communication narratives, which makes the strategy more functional in terms of the tactical operation of a communication department. The results

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of a comprehensive review of the actual practices and vision of what is "proper" in media communication work, as shared by the universities, reveal several dimensions of a media communication strategy, including conceptual, process, organizational, and contextual ones, and target audiences of a university's media communication strategy. The building blocks of each of these dimensions can be represented as a standardized framework of a university's media communication strategy, which includes the university development strategy, goal setting, contributing factors, target audience groups, and three stages, i. e. development, implementation, and performance evaluation.

Keywords
Mediatization, mediatization of research and education, university media communications, university media communication strategy, strategic communications.

Introduction
Higher education is inextricably intertwined with what is going on in society, its social, economic, and political elements, and cannot therefore be taken out of the context. A higher-education system shapes our society by nurturing the intellectual elite, contributing to a new generation of human capital, translating the set of values, and offering broader capabilities to individuals. Various economic and political institutions determine the ever-changing order of society for the higher-education system, prioritize different types of government support, and define the prospects for further development of science and education.

Academician Viktor Sadovnichy, Rector of Lomonosov Moscow State University and President of the Russian Union of Rectors (2019), highlights that successful universities always pursue three fundamental goals that can be called "university missions". This first educational mission focuses on training skilled professionals capable of addressing present-day challenges. The second research mission involves producing new knowledge and technology critical to science and innovation development. The third social mission is related to a university's participation in society. Universities play a crucial role in improving regional economies, shaping public opinions, conducting expert assessments and consultations, and delivering educational projects for the general public. They become cultural and scientific exchange clusters and contribute to the integration of various stakeholders into a single extensive communication network.

At the present stage, academic organizations traditionally fulfill several key roles as social institutions and at the request of the state: the transfer of knowledge

from generation to generation (education as the first university mission), the production of scientific knowledge and the assurance of technological sovereignty (science as the second university mission), and the formation of a cultural and value-based foundation for the individual, as well as their socialization and even upbringing (society as the third university mission). These roles dictate the need for the comprehensive goal-setting of media communication activities and the structuring of countless multidirectional information flows. The fundamental diversity of media communication activities of an academic organization becomes one of the factors that brings to the forefront the discussion about the principles of their organization within the academic and professional community.

Today, each and every Russian university has its own development strategy or program (often referred to as a roadmap or by other names), which outlines the university's advancement across its core competence areas in the long term (3 to 15 years). However, a strategic approach is not often employed for a university's media communication activity, either as research optics or as a practical concept. This study, therefore, seeks to address the lack of a conceptual and categorical description of university media communication strategies that takes into account diverse aspects of their activity.

Theoretical approaches to university media communications

In terms of theory, the concept of a media communication strategy is infrequently addressed in scholarly discourse. Instead, researchers focus on marketing, communication, or communicative strategies (Ahmed, 2024; Dugin, 2024; Nefedova, & Anikina, 2024). Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize the significance of a clear definition and description of a media communication strategy as such, given the powerful influence of the mediatization process on all spheres of society (Vzorin et al., 2024; Gago-Galvagno et al., 2024). At the same time, one can find a substantial body of research devoted to strategizing, as well as to marketing, advertising, and sales strategies, along with descriptions of their various classifications and types (Færch, & Kasper, 1984; Thompson, & Strickland, 2006; Balmer, 2012; Price, 2015; Romashko, 2016; Werder et al., 2018; Kvint, 2019; Nazaykin, 2019; Capriotti, Carretón-Ballester, & Zeler, 2024; Sörensen et al., 2024).

It is worth noting that the specific features of the scientific and educational sphere render a purely marketing-based approach not entirely appropriate for universities. Nevertheless, the main elements of a marketing communication strategy and a media communication strategy are similar in many respects: "A

marketing communication strategy represents a comprehensive impact on both the internal and external environment and includes the full range of measures to promote information about a product or service. The integration of various forms of communication makes it possible to achieve synergy, which leads to greater results than could be obtained through their separate use. For this reason, integrated marketing communications have increasingly been used to implement a marketing communication strategy. <…> The set of tools within a communication strategy for development includes advertising, exhibitions, personal network sales, sales promotion, public relations, sponsorship of various events, etc. In this case, the different forms of communication complement one another. This unlocks synergy that exceeds the effectiveness of individual communications taken as a sum" (Romanyuk, 2020: 49).

The polysubjective character and the transformation of target audiences from external to internal categories and vice versa, the seasonal prevalence of different target audiences, the high social value of a university's activities, and the advocacy of national causes both domestically and internationally – all of this requires recognizing a media communication strategy as a distinct and significant area of both theoretical research and practical application.

It is also necessary to note the terminological diversity in defining the concept of a media communication strategy and understanding its place within the hierarchy of marketing communications and communication strategies (Zakharova, 2014; Gureeva, 2015, 2020). Historically, the concept of "strategy" was used in military policy and understood as the art of war, but this concept has found a wider scope of application over the past decades. If we look at the entire history of the development and public understanding of the term "strategy," a second, business vector can be identified, along with a third, state policy, which was added somewhat later. Undoubtedly, the first semantic field historically associated with the definition of this concept was warfare (Gavra, 2015: 231). Sun Tzu, who stated that "all warfare is based on deception," laid the foundation for what came to be called military strategy. Originally, strategy (from the Greek στρατηγία, "generalship") was understood as the science of war, in particular the science of generalship, i. e. a general plan of military activity designed to achieve major long-term goals and encompassing an extended period of time.

In business, one can find a broad range of definitions for strategy and a considerable variety of strategies themselves. The choice of a particular strategy by managers means that, among all paths and actions they could have chosen, they decided to follow this route and conduct their business in this manner. Without a strategy, a manager has no thought-out course to follow, no roadmap

to manage by, no unified action program to produce the intended results (Thompson, & Strickland, 2006: 12).

In general terms, a company's strategy represents the comprehensive management plan that strengthens the company's position on the market and provides efforts coordination, consumers' attraction and satisfaction, successful competition, and achievement of global goals (ibid: 32). Today, nearly every university has its own development strategy (or development program, which, by its very nature, amounts to a strategy), typically with a planning horizon of five to ten years.

In the most general sense, "strategy is a model of behavior that an organization follows in order to achieve its long-term goals" (Cassells, 2000). One also incorporates the important categories of problems and resources into the concept of strategy, it may be defined as a general program of action that sets out priorities, identifies problems, and allocates resources for achieving the primary goal. More strictly, strategy is "a specially designed program of action, based on long-term planning and aimed at achieving a complex goal using limited resources" (Gavra, 2015: 231). Strategy is always associated with the most important long-term (strategic) goals, mission, and values of a social actor. A strategic decision, therefore, is a decision regarding the allocation of resources to achieve a long-term goal (Gavra, 2021).

It should be noted that the term "strategy" may be employed across a fairly broad range of meanings (a long-term plan, a guiding principle of behavior, a position, or a program of prospective actions). Its application is meaningful not only at the level of the social actor (organization) as a whole, but also at higher communicative and, more broadly, societal levels.

A detailed description and theoretical insights are necessary to distinguish and compare marketing, communication, and media communication strategies, due to the diversity of scholarly approaches and interpretations of their structural interrelations. Nevertheless, it should be clearly stated that, within the scope of this study and considering the specific character of the scientific and educational sector, a university's media communication strategy can be reliably considered part of its overall communication strategy. This strategy operates alongside the marketing strategy, which promotes university products and services, and the creative strategy, which involves direct communication with target audiences without using media channels.

Overall, researchers distinguish two main interpretive tracks in understanding communication strategy: the linguistic track and the marketing track (Gavra, 2019). It should be clarified at the very beginning that the concept

of a communicative strategy is more linguistic in nature and is not of interest within the scope of this study, as communicative strategy is mainly used in linguistics, cross-cultural communication theory, and pedagogy. In the broadest sense, a communicative strategy is understood as a plan for achieving the communicator's goals, i. e. a scheme by which an individual constructs a model of their speech behavior to accomplish communication objectives.

Unlike a communicative strategy, the concept of a communication strategy is applied in communication management, communication planning and design, marketing, political and business communications, public relations, and advertising (Gavra, 2019). In his works, Gavra defines communication strategy as a long-term program, which is based on the overall strategy of a social actor, balanced in terms of resources, and aimed at achieving the actor's strategic goals through information and communication interactions with both the external and internal environments. The author further emphasizes that the development of a communication strategy involves the sequential formulation of three types of strategies: a marketing strategy, a creative strategy, and a media strategy (Gavra, 2019). Thus, a media communication strategy is a component of the overall communication strategy and is of equal significance to the marketing strategy, rather than being part of it.

The confirmation of this approach comes from the works of other contemporary theoreticians and applied researchers in the field of social sciences: "A brand communication strategy is large-scale planning for brand promotion aimed at achieving specific goals. It is based on brand positioning and addresses the challenges of communicating with particular groups of target audiences (TAs). The goals of the strategy may include creating a specific brand image or maintaining and enhancing consumer loyalty to the promoted brand as a whole and to its individual products. The outcome of developing a communication strategy is a plan (tactical stages) of marketing communications to be implemented in a comprehensive manner in accordance with the objectives of each stage" (Malygina et al., 2017: 39). As researchers note, a communication strategy is based on three main components: marketing analysis, a creative concept, and media planning.

The foundation of a communication strategy is the strategic goal of the social actor (not a communication goal, but a long-term, large-scale social, political, or business goal). To achieve this goal, a fundamental system of values/ideas is formulated, combined with a positioning concept, which the social actor conveys to their audience(s) in order to influence their attitudes and, ultimately, their behavior.

Thus, the main characteristics of a communication strategy can be summarized as follows (Gavra, 2019):

- A close connection with the strategic goals and objectives of the social actor;
- Reliance on the mission, philosophy, and values of the strategizing actor;
- Focus on controlling the mind and behavior of significant (strategic) audiences;
- Long-term nature, aiming for a delayed but meaningful effect;
- The use of information and communication resources;
- The capacity to integrate and coordinate the marketing, creative, and media strategies of the actor.

As mentioned above, we adopt the position that the communication strategy takes precedence, viewing marketing strategy as an integral and essential component of the communication strategy of political, business, or socio-cultural actors. A communication strategy implies two groups of goals: global (strategic) goals and operational/tactical goals designed for a specific and clearly defined temporal horizon.

An interesting approach was suggested by Zakharova (2014), who classifies university communication strategies into three types, depending on strategic goals and underlying principles: strategies based on trust, indifference (background presence), and givenness. The researcher emphasizes that, in practice, universities primarily use either indifference-based or, less frequently, givenness-based strategies. In the first case, informational messages serve merely as a background, failing to build trust, with no clear understanding of the need for dialog with target audiences, or, where such dialog does exist, it occurs in a fragmented manner. The second type, based on givenness, is characteristic of universities that have the status of a "national heritage," where communication support is less critical and primarily focuses on maintaining the existing status. Based on her classification of university communication strategies and the assessment of their application, the author formulates the following principles of a university communication strategy: the principle of trust, the fulfillment of the social mission, the principle of openness and transparency, and the principle of long-term relationships.

There is a substantial body of scholarly work devoted to strategic communication as a core element of the communication strategy itself. In the most general terms, strategic communication refers to communication that ensures the development and implementation of a social actor's strategy through its specific, i. e. communication resources, means, and tools (Gavra, 2015: 231). Thus, researchers (Gavra, 2021) identify the following delayed effects of strategic communications:

- Process changes;
- Institutional changes;
- Changes in the macrostructure of the market, both economic and political;
- Changes in the power relations in the market;
- Changes in the public climate;
- Reappraisal of values;
- Changes in aesthetic models, aesthetic revolution, etc.

This delayed effect and lack of obviousness to everyday consciousness and to contemporaries in general give strategic communication a special ontological status. The conclusion as to whether this communication is strategic cannot be made a priori. It becomes such only when strategic effects occur. At the same time, it is quite possible that communication was intended to be strategic, but macro-effects did not occur. In this case, the communication can no longer be regarded as strategic. In addition to the need to achieve a strategic effect, Gavra (2021) identifies six other important elements that determine whether communication can be recognized as strategic. These elements are: actor's intentionality and goal orientation (strategic communication always has an actor); a focus on managing the behavior of target audiences and reinforcing their behavioral patterns, rather than just their consciousness; a stable relationship with the corporate or actor's strategy; the direct, indirect, or latent involvement of audiences in achieving the strategic goals of the principal actor and the final integration of the positions and communicative behavior of the principal actor and stakeholders; communication ensures the coherence and synergy of distributed players (with multiple target audiences and their characteristics, the task of strategic communication is to bring all flows to a common denominator of strategic effect, to generate communicative synergy, thus the task of strategic communicators is to form what is called a conceptual umbrella); integration of informational influences and direct actions (Gavra, 2021: 17–19).

Media communication strategy and media activity cannot be considered separately from each other, they act as a single whole, because only through activity (the university's work in the information space) can a strategy manifest itself, and the very nature of this activity is the type (character) of strategy. A media communication strategy can be proactive and reactive, planned and spontaneous, formalized and intuitive, and so on. Conceptually, the media communication strategy of the university can be formulated as follows: the media communication strategy of a university is an integrated approach and systematic (purposeful) information activity aimed at promoting and popularizing science and education, reputation management, correlated with the main social functions of education

as a social institution and the missions of a modern university and based on the overall development strategy of the university.

The main characteristics of a media communication strategy can be summarized as follows:

- It is based on the mission, vision, and values of the strategizing object and is aimed at achieving its strategic goals;
- It has a long-term planning horizon and is designed to generate delayed effects (economic, social, societal, etc.);
- Its implementation involves the use of specific media tools and other information and communication resources;
- It clearly correlates with marketing and creative strategies; as a rule, the marketing strategy is developed first, followed by the creative strategy, and then the media communication strategy;
- It demonstrates flexibility and adaptability to change;
- It is aimed at building long-term relationships with target audiences.

In most universities, however, the role of communications is typically restricted to specific functions, such as information dissemination, coordination, motivation, public relations, advertising, etc. At the same time, there is usually no unified communication concept. Communication is often seen as a basic function not only for the marketing complex, but also in the overall formation of a university's marketing strategy. Without denying the possibility of using various marketing tools, a university's overall strategy is ultimately based on a communication-centered approach.

The primary drivers for the development of a university's communication strategy include the prioritization of the quality of higher education; correlation with the university's mission and vision for development; adaptation to the changing needs of its target consumer segments; and self-identification as a basis for building competitive advantages (Morozova, 2013).

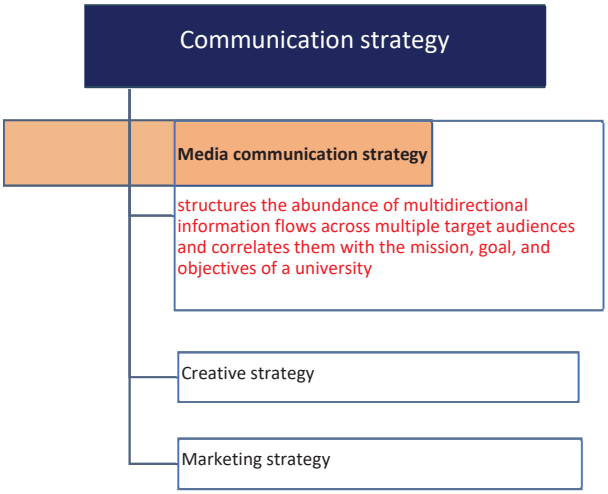
Several conditional stages in the development and implementation of a communication strategy can be identified: 1) an initial audit or monitoring of the state of the information environment; 2) setting the goals of the communication program; 3) provision of resources, including human resources; 4) development of the communication program; 5) implementation; 6) performance evaluation.

Thus, summarizing the various scholarly approaches to the understanding and role of a university's media communication strategy, one may define a university's communication strategy as a long-term program, which is based on the overall strategy of university, balanced in terms of resources and components, and aimed at achieving the university's strategic goals through information and communication interactions with both the external and internal environment (*Figure 1*). A media

communication strategy, as part of universities' communication strategy in addition to marketing and creative strategies, is a long-term program for achieving a universties' strategic goals through interactions with all groups of external and internal target audiences through the direct mediation of media resources.

Figure 1

The role of a media communication strategy in universities' communication strategy



Source: Author.

A media communication strategy has the capacity to transform media communication flows (which are essentially media communication capital) into other types of capital: economic (grants, subsidies, extrabudgetary funds, etc.), social (university image, interaction with the target audience, etc.), and political (the level of the university's influence in the social and political realm and the scientific and educational sphere). Strategic goals are, in essence, a vision of the target dynamics of a social actor over a significant period of time. Operational/tactical goals derive from the strategic ones and ensure their implementation within specific time frames through the use of communication tools.

As we noted earlier, the basic research problem is that complex entities of national importance, such as scientific and educational organizations, still lack a complete conceptual and categorical description of their media communication strategy and its individual elements that would reflect the various aspects of their activities. Therefore, the aim of this study is to form a comprehensive, verified understanding of the media communication strategy of a Russian university as a key social institution

that currently faces a number of critical challenges that go beyond the traditional understanding of the functions of a scientific and educational organization.

Methods

This study is based on data obtained during a series of expert interviews with Russian university staff responsible for strategic media communication planning and the implementation of information policy (vice-rectors, heads of press services) (N=13). The sample of respondents was selected based on the positions of universities in the Media Activity Ranking of Universities, which was compiled by the Russian Ministry of Science and Higher Education (M-Rate)[2]. The ranking included the following institutions: large organizations that are leaders in terms of their presence in the information space (leaders[3], n=5); organizations whose outreach performance is more modest (average performers[4], n = 4); organizations occupying objectively low positions in terms of media communication activities (underperformers[5], n=4).

The sampling also took into account the geographical location of the universities (the sample includes organizations from eight federal districts) and different "status" characteristics, largely related to the level of state support (including federal universities, national research universities, regional flagship universities, and universities without these statuses).

In 2024, the author conducted 13 expert interviews with university staff. The guide used for the interviews was based on several thematic blocks. The present study synthesized the data from responses addressing the following question topics: goal setting in universities' media communication activities; the influence of external and internal factors on strategic planning in the field of media communications; human resources for media communication support of scientific

[2] The Media Activity Ranking (M-Rate) was first presented by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation in 2021 at the international festival "Russian Creative Week". It was created in response to the need to increase the transparency of universities' activities and stimulate their media activity. The ranking developed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education highlights to the professional community the key areas of media communication work and the criteria for evaluating its effectiveness. It is particularly important to note that a university's position in the M-Rate affects the overall performance indicators of the rector and, ultimately, the size of the performance-based bonus.

[3] The leaders in this case are the universities that were included in the top 20 universities at the M-Rate universities.

[4] The average performers in this case are the universities that were included in the list of 40-100 lines of M-Rate universities.

[5] The underperformers in this case are the universities that were included in the list of 150-200 lines of M-Rate universities.

and educational organizations; main target audiences of universities and areas of media communication activities; evaluation of the effectiveness of a scientific and educational organization's media communication strategy. In addition, a comparative analysis of two media communication strategies of Russian universities was conducted: one was provided by a respondent from the Leaders group, the other by an employee whose university ranks as an average performer on the M-Rate.

Results

Two approaches to developing a media communication strategy can be identified based on the interviews with representatives of Russian universities. The first approach involves a separate document that formalizes the main components and principles for implementing the media communication strategy. In the second approach, the strategy remains an undocumented plan of action in the media space, which is shared by all involved actors but is not formalized in a special document.

In this study, 10 out of 13 interview participants reported the absence of such a local regulation (*Table 1*), but only two of the three universities that reported having such a document were able to provide it for analysis.

Table 1

Availability of a documented media communication strategy

Universities	*Leaders*					*Average performers*				*Underperformers*			
	U1	U2	U3	U4	U5	U6	U7	U8	U9	U10	U11	U12	U13
Do you have a documented communication strategy?	no	no	yes	no	no	no	no	yes	yes	no	no	no	no

Source: Author.

Some respondents, from both leading and mid-ranked universities according to the M-Rate, said that they plan to develop and adopt such a document. In this context, the position of one university (from the Leaders group) is particularly noteworthy, where the decision not to formalize the media strategy was a deliberate choice: *"I have no guarantee of complete confidentiality of the document if it passes through all the regulatory channels. Our university is very large, and leaks are inevitable. A media communication strategy is too candid a document for a limited audience. <…> I see no point in adopting a declarative ('skimmed') document just for the sake of having one." (U5, SFU)*

An analysis of two media communication strategies provided by universities, in which the strategies are formalized as separate documents, shows the difference in the approaches of higher education institutions to drafting such documents and their functional application. The results of comparing the two documents according to formal and substantive criteria are presented in *Table 2*.

Table 2

Comparison of communication strategies of two universities

	Strategy 1 (Average erformers)	**Strategy 2 (Leaders)**
Document size	13 p.	71 p.
Planning horizon	2030	2030
Structural elements (sections)	1. General 2. Goals, objectives, and principles of the communication strategy 3. External environment, target audience 4. Current position 5. Strategic goal and vision 6. Strategy implementation mechanisms 7. Final provisions	1. Strategic goals of the university's development until 2030 2. Development of the university's communication activities until 2030 2.1 Communication goals and objectives of the university 2.2 Current positions of the university in the Media Activity Ranking of Universities (Russian Ministry of Science and Higher Education) 2.3 SWOT-analysis of the university 2.4 Target audience groups 2.5 Communication model of the university 2.6 Channels of communication with target audiences 2.7 Organizational structure for communications control 2.8 Open data policy of the university 2.9 Corporate partnership policy 2.10 Alumni policy
Availability of formulated statements on the desired positioning of the university	Yes	Yes
Availability of numerical KPIs (Key Performance Indicators)	No	Yes

Source: Author.

Both documents focus on the development of media communications until 2030. They record the current position of the universities and the external and internal conditions affecting them, identify key target audiences, and outline the university's positioning in a thesis-like format.

Nevertheless, we believe there is a fundamental difference in the availability of specific performance indicators. Strategy 1 (Average performers) sets out the expected results of strategy implementation, the mechanism and frequency of their evaluation: *"The implementation of the development strategy is evaluated on the basis of monitoring the results and reporting on strategic areas. At the monitoring level, the effectiveness of target programs, projects, and specific activities of the communication strategy is tracked. The University's strategy implementation should be monitored at regular intervals, at least once every six months. As the management system develops, a transition to continuous monitoring of strategy implementation will be made".*

In contrast, Strategy 2 (Leaders) not only postulates the need to monitor the achievement of results but also defines specific indicators: a 20% increase in the number of visitors to the university's resources, a 1.5-fold increase in the total audience of the university's official communities, and 45,000 mentions of the university in the media per year. The year 2025 serves as a benchmark, which suggests that these indicators are intermediate and intended to evaluate the effectiveness of media communication activities from a tactical perspective.

An analysis of the document structures also suggests that Strategy 2 covers a wider range of issues, including those indirectly related to the work of the media communication unit. For example, the strategy provides a detailed account of the university's overall development goals until 2030 and outlines the policies for alumni and corporate partners. In essence, these areas are largely the responsibility of the relevant departments, as noted in the corresponding sections. Nevertheless, an understanding of the key vectors of the university's development is also necessary for media communications specialists who interact with external target audiences.

It should be noted that the differences outlined above do not imply a higher or lower quality of either strategy. We believe that in this case, the distinction reflects the different purposes of the documents within the university's overall system of local regulations. At the document level, Strategy 1 formalizes, to a greater extent, the goals, objectives, and scope of activities of the media communication department, its place within the university's structure, and the necessity of collaboration with other structural units. Strategy 2 also performs these functions, but it can also be considered an internal "working" paper of

the relevant department, which assists in regular performance evaluation and tactical planning.

From the perspective of a research-based approach to strategy and the convenience of analyzing the university's media communication activities, it seems more effective to have a media communication strategy, approved and endorsed by the management and aligned with the overall development plan (program/strategy) of the university.

Key features and elements of universities' media communication strategies

Based on an analysis of academic works and our own data obtained during a series of expert interviews, we can identify the following key characteristics of a strategic approach to media communication activities: a close connection with a university's strategic goals and objectives; reliance on the three missions and values of a university; a focus on controlling the mind and behavior of all target audience groups; long-term planning with an emphasis on a delayed but meaningful effect; the use of various media communication resources and the publication of content on such resources catering to the thematic interests and format preferences of the audiences that these platforms aggregate.

We propose that the main elements of a university's media communication strategy be understood as follows. First, conceptual dimension: the foundation of a university's media communication strategy, linked to a conceptual understanding of the university's missions, goals, and roles in the scientific and educational sphere at the current stage. Second, process dimension, related to the stages of work on the media communication strategy. Third, organizational dimension of a university's media communication strategy, related to the human resources and staffing. Fourth, contextual dimension of a university's media communication strategy, related to the external and internal factors affecting its development and implementation. Fifth, target audiences of a university's media communication strategy. A description of each of these five elements is provided below.

Conceptual dimension

The foundation of a university's media communication strategy is the university development strategy/program with respect to the three missions of a university: educational, research, and social. The full-fledged implementation of all three of these functions (especially the third one) is impossible without media communication support. Thus, the global goals of implementing a

university's media communication strategy are not related to communications, but to strategic achievements in the scientific and educational sphere. In today's mediatized reality, the university's third, social mission becomes a fundamental characteristic for the realization of the other two missions: science and education.

Process dimension of a university's media communication strategy

The work on a university's media communication strategy includes three main stages. First of all, it is *strategy development (strategic level)*. This stage involves a series of interrelated actions: defining the key goals and objectives that the university's media communications should address at the current stage; analyzing factors that may influence the planning and implementation of media communication activities; identifying target audiences and taking into account their communication needs and media consumption patterns; determining communication technologies and methods; defining semantic patterns and topics of information flows; determining criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of the strategy, and formalizing the strategy in the form of a media communication matrix by target audiences and a roadmap by seasons/months/other calendar units. Second stage is *strategy implementation (tactical level)*. This stage involves the work of specialists guided by the existing roadmap, with adjustments made during implementation. Finally, it is *strategy evaluation (tactical level)*.

The main criteria for evaluating media communication strategies by Russian universities are predominantly qualitative rather than quantitative indicators, which is also due to the specific features of the mediatization of the scientific and educational sphere. Based on expert interviews with university representatives, it can be concluded that when evaluating the effectiveness of media communications, they either pay more attention to qualitative indicators (which "predetermine" quantitative ones) or recognize the importance of an integrated assessment of both qualitative and quantitative indicators and their interrelatedness. In this connection, one of the respondents gave the following example to illustrate the integrated approach: *"When there is a large reach (quantitative assessment) but low engagement (qualitative assessment), an in-depth analysis and focus group are conducted to identify the reasons [for the decline in engagement]" (E6)*. This is confirmed by another informant: *"The conflict [between the two types of indicators] arises when the quantitative indicator is high (clicks on a banner ad) and the qualitative indicator is low (conversion into applications)" (E9)*. It is worth noting that there is no correlation between the university's position in the M-Rate and the point of

view of the media communication department on the ratio of the two types of indicators.

Organizational dimension of a university's media communication strategy

Here a specialized department responsible for planning, organizing, and monitoring media communication flows should be mentioned. All employees of such departments can be conditionally divided into three groups according to their functions: an administrative unit that manages the team, develops communication strategies, monitors the results of their implementation, and is responsible for ensuring the alignment of the department's work with the university's objectives; a team of authors who produce textual and audiovisual content; a content promotion team that adapts the authors' materials for various distribution platforms by the administrative unit for the university's presence.

A distinctive feature of the human resources policy in a university's media communication department is the focus on recruiting staff from within the institution. Students, alumni, and faculty members account for at least half of the staff of the media communication department, and in many cases, they form the majority (ranging from 70% to 100%). When it comes to the size of information departments in academic organizations, the study found that the universities have between one multi-tasking employee, who combines the functions of press secretary, PR officer, marketer, SMM specialist, etc., and a staff of 20 people.

At the same time, as expert interviews revealed, a media communication department may consist of an even larger number of professionals, while the overall number of participants engaged in media communication activities (excluding full-time staff) can reach several hundred. Thus, there is no direct correlation between quantitative indicators and performance: minimum and maximum values were recorded both in the group of leaders and in the group of underperformers. This is true for both full-time employees and those involved in the university's media communication activities on a voluntary basis.

It should be noted that the heads of relevant departments define the category of participants in media communication work in different ways. In some cases, the category is understood broadly and includes dozens or even hundreds of individuals, such as staff from related units, students, management representatives, faculty acting as media experts, and researchers who have their personal accounts and "publish information about what they do with reference to the university". At the same time, in other universities, the number of full-

time employees and participants in media communication activities differs only slightly, which means that this involves a narrower circle of employees from related departments and representatives of the administration.

A number of key criteria can be identified for the organizational structure of a communications department in an academic organization based on the concepts of "ideal" or "proper": it should report directly to the senior management of the organization; its activities should be aligned with the work of other structural units; it should not deviate from its specific role, and its functional responsibilities should be separate from those of other departments.

Contextual dimension of a university's media communication strategy: External and internal factors

All factors taken into account by experts responsible for the media communication support of universities' activities can be divided into two groups: external and internal. *External factors* include economic factors, related to the state of the national economy; political factors, related to the political arena of the country; technological factors, related to the development of information and communication technologies; sociocultural factors, related to the characteristics, preferences, and attitudes of the population; the competition factor, related to the rivalry among participants in the higher education market for limited resources such as applicants, workforce, and funding. *Internal factors* include the human resources factor, related to the staffing potential of the relevant structural unit; the corporate factor, related to collaboration among the departments and the effectiveness of intra-university communications; the resource factor, related to the technical capacity for implementing the strategy; the value-and-culture factor, related to the system of values and organizational culture adopted and shared within the institution; the factor of importance to management, related to the rector's commitment to and interest in the effectiveness of the university's media communication activities.

Russian universities whose representatives participated in expert interviews tend to pay more attention to internal rather than external factors when developing and implementing their media communication strategies. However, universities with more successful media communication strategies are generally more inclined than average to acknowledge the impact of external factors on the development and implementation of their strategies. Their "sensitivity" to the changing realities of the external environment (including the political and economic contexts, the activities of competitors, and the consideration of these

factors in their work) enables them to plan their media activities appropriately. Universities that demonstrate more modest results in media communications are those whose information policy is subject to micromanagement by management and whose internal communication system between different departments is poorly established. These institutions tend to evaluate the influence of the leadership significance factor and the corporate factor higher on average than universities in other categories. Furthermore, they evaluate the influence of the corporate factor and the factor of importance of their work to management higher than universities in other categories.

Target audiences of a university's media communication strategy.

Internal target audience includes students, faculty, and staff. *External target audience* includes prospective students from Russia, prospective students from other countries, parents of prospective students (in Russia and abroad), government organizations, Russian academic community, international academic community, Russian business community, international business community, and media and bloggers in Russia and abroad. Despite the diversity of message recipients, the results of expert interviews with university representatives show that the main work of universities is focused on three key target audiences: prospective students, current students, and employees.

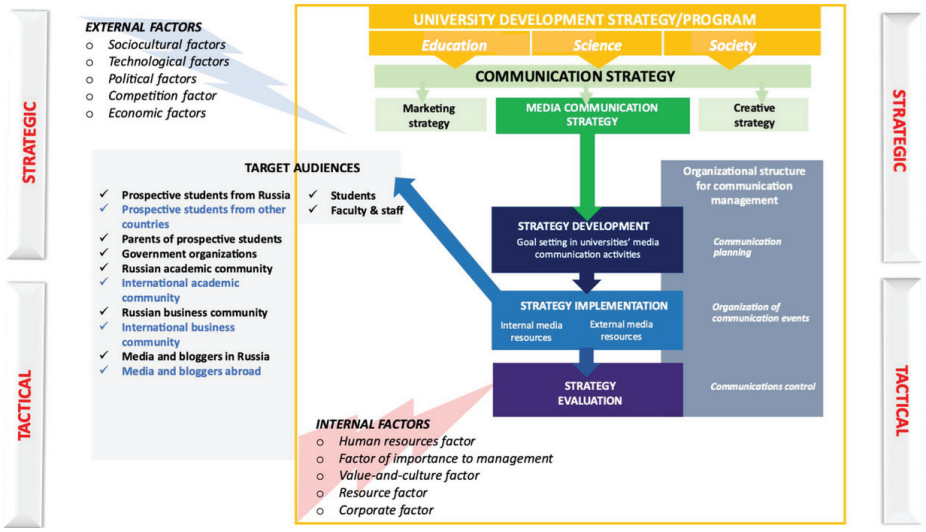
Target audiences in the scientific and educational sphere have their own specific characteristics: first, they are polysubjective, i.e., highly diverse and numerous; second, they have the ability to transition from external target audiences to internal ones; and third, the so-called non-institutionalized communication participants command a large part and have the greatest significance among all university target audiences.

It is worth noting that as some leading universities transition to the University 4.0 model, their media communication strategies increasingly emphasize the need to work with commercial partners both in Russia and abroad. Since the transition to a new national model of higher education in Russia is expected to be associated with a significant increase in the role of industrial partners in the educational process, we can expect a further intensification of media communication work by a much larger number of universities targeting the business community and state corporations as key audiences.

The proposed set of elements of a media communication strategy in their interrelationship can be presented in the form of a diagram (*Figure 2*).

Figure 2

Diagram of a university's media communication strategy



Source: Author.

Discussion and conclusion

In the context of the transformation of the media system, changing patterns of media consumption, and the increasing pace of mediatization of social practices, modern universities are compelled to regularly revise their media communication strategies, adapting them to new realities and taking into account the evolving media preferences of different target audiences.

The urgency, complexity, and multifaceted nature of the challenge of transforming the information policy of higher education institutions predetermine the multiplicity of approaches to addressing this challenge and the search for various options and mechanisms for effective communication management. The application of modern management approaches and tools, such as process and project approaches, the balanced scorecard system, management information technologies, quality management systems, and ranking score technologies, which enhance the responsiveness of a university's internal environment to external changes, becomes a necessary condition for the innovative development of a university. A global resource for updating and modernizing the communication policy of universities is a conscious awareness of the inevitability of change and development. In a university committed to innovative development, transformation processes acquire a sustainable character, and an adaptive, flexible system for managing the information environment is created.

The key characteristics of a strategic approach to media communication activities include a close connection with a university's strategic goals and objectives; reliance on the mission, philosophy, and values of a university; a focus on controlling the mind and behavior of all target audience groups; long-term planning with an emphasis on a delayed but meaningful effect; the use of various media communication resources and the publication of content on such resources catering to the thematic interests and format preferences of the audiences that these platforms aggregate.

A standardized framework of a university's media communication strategy is based on and supported by the university's overall development strategy and includes goal setting, two sets of contributing factors, two broad target audience groups, and three stages: development, implementation, and performance evaluation. The global goals of implementing a university's media communication strategy are not related to communications, but to strategic achievements in the scientific and educational sphere.

A strategic approach to media communication activities involves purposeful efforts by professionals to develop, implement, and evaluate the effectiveness of the media communication strategy. The main criteria for evaluating media communication strategies by Russian universities are predominantly qualitative rather than quantitative indicators, which is also due to the specific features of the mediatization of the scientific and educational sphere.

The key elements of a university's media communication strategy include several dimensions: a conceptual dimension; a process dimension, related to the stages of work on the media communication strategy; an organizational dimension of a university's media communication strategy, related to the human resources and staffing; a contextual dimension of a university's media communication strategy, related to the external and internal factors affecting its development and implementation, and target audiences of a university's media communication strategy.

In today's mediatized reality, the university's third, social mission becomes a fundamental characteristic for the realization of the other two missions: science and education. Thus, the media communication strategy serves as a foundation for the implementation of all three missions of a modern university.

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