

# "PULS." – a Blog-based Online-Magazine for Students of Medicine of the Goethe University Frankfurt

## Abstract

In the context of nationwide protests 2009 also students of the faculty of medicine/dentistry at Goethe-University in Frankfurt demanded more transparency and communication. To satisfy these demands, a web 2.0-tool offered an innovative solution: A blog-based online-magazine for students and other faculty-members.

The online-magazine „PULS.“ is realized with the share-ware blog-software (wordpress version 3.1.3) and is conceived and written by an online-journalist. „PULS.“ is available from <https://newsmagazin.puls.med.uni-frankfurt.de/wp/>.

The articles are generated from own investigations and from ideas of different groups of the faculty– deanship, students and lecturers. A user-analysis is conducted with the open-source software Piwik and considers the data security. Additionally, every year an anonymous online-user-survey (Survey Monkey) is conducted.

“PULS.” is continuously online since 14.02.2010 and has published 806 articles (state: 27.11.2012) and has about 2400 readers monthly. The content focuses on the needs of Frankfurt medical students. The close cooperation with different groups of the faculty - deanship, students and lecturers - furthermore guarantees themes relevant to the academic faculty. “PULS.” flanks complex projects and decisions with background-information and communicates them understandable.

The user-evaluation shows a growing number of readers and a high acceptance for the online-magazine, its themes and its style. The web 2.0-tool “Blog” and the web-specific language comply with media habits of the main target group, the students of the faculty medicine/dentistry. Thus, “PULS.” has proven as a suitable and strategic instrument. It pushes towards a higher transparency, more communication and a stronger identification of the students with their faculty.

**Keywords:** Blog, Online-Magazine, Web 2.0, Social Media, Communication

## Introduction

About 3185 students of medicine were enrolled at the Goethe-University Frankfurt in 2008. The medical school is one of the largest faculties of medicine in Germany (<http://www.landkarte-hochschulmedizin.de>). A substantial number of lectures, courses and assessments, as well as ever-changing curricula mark the local study conditions. Numerous construction work on the campus and a high number of graduates exceeding the legal number of university places, especially in clinical semesters, tighten the study conditions even more.

In autumn 2009 medical students protested against their study conditions and called for higher transparency and communication focused on curricula and syllabuses. Frankfurt medical students miss reliable and reasonable information which relates to a multiplicity of decisions

and changes which affect their study conditions. They were also interested in the actual and prospective developments on the medical campus.

Typically, faculties, medical and non-medical, communicate information to students about e.g. rearranged seminar rooms, examination dates or lecture announcements, via faculty websites (“news”) or newsletters (online or print). On virtually every faculty homepage “News”-sites can be found which can be also subscribed. In contrast, “newsletters” are rarely published. “Newsletters” are published periodically as an online or printed edition, e.g. once per semester. Thus, information is not up-to-date, but elaborate articles could focus on long and relevant themes. Often illustrations are of high graphic quality. Two examples of these rarely published newsletters come from a medical faculty: „Studium und Lehre“ of the Tübingen Faculty of Medicine (pdf-Format, edition 1/2009 und 2/2009) (<http://www.mezizin.uni-tuebingen.de/Studierende/Newsletter+Studium+und+Lehre.html>) and

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the newsletter of the Freiburg Faculty of Medicine (deanery of student affairs; pdf-format, edition January 2012) (<http://www.medizinstudium.uni-freiburg.de/wir-ueber-uns/newsletter.pdf/view>).

To meet the legitimate requirements of students neither a web-based "news-page" of short messages nor a rarely published "newsletter" seems appropriate. But blogs as typical web 2.0 tools, offer an innovative approach if used as an online-magazine for students and other faculty members. Actuality (up-to-date response) to current developments, intermediality (embedded video, audio; links to other websites) and interactivity (opportunity for comments) are advantages of blogs. Furthermore, articles can be managed and searched along categories, keywords or date. Thus, a blog featured as an online-magazine can meet student expectations towards more transparency of decision making processes, up-to-date hints and background information much better than "news-pages" or "newsletters". Hence, we decided in favor of a news magazine named "PULS." designed as a blog (<https://newsmagazin.puls.med.uni-frankfurt.de/wp/>). Based on our research, we found no similar faculty blog magazine in Germany. "PULS." is a service feature for students and lecturers from the dean's office of the faculty of medicine of the Goethe-University Frankfurt.

## Project description and implementation

We organized a sweepstake for students of the faculty in order to choose the name of the blog. A book token sponsored by the local medical bookshop attracted the students to take part in the naming process, which results as "PULS." (pronounced as "PULS dot").

The news-magazine "PULS." is realized with the established shareware blog software wordpress (Version 3.1.3.; <http://wpde.org/>; Lizenz GPL, Atahualpa-Theme; [1]). It is hosted by the university computer center, which also takes care of the technical administration. For both authors and readers, the web 2.0 medium "blog" is easy to handle and facilitates cost-effective and up-to-date online-publishing of text, images and data [2], ([http://www.dnb.de/DE/Netzpublikationen/netzpublikationen\\_node.html](http://www.dnb.de/DE/Netzpublikationen/netzpublikationen_node.html)). The commenting feature offers direct interaction of readers and the editorial staff. "PULS." can be subscribed. The link to new articles is directly mailed to the registered mailing address. For reporting of visits we implemented the open-source web analyzing tool Piwik (<http://de.piwik.org/>; Lizenz GPL3). Because of data privacy protection no IP-addresses are stored. Thus, "PULS." meets the strong Frankfurt Goethe-University guidelines of data privacy. Annually and anonymous user survey has conducted with the online-tool Survey Monkey (<http://de.surveymonkey.com/>; [3], (<http://blog.webalytics.de/2010/10/neue-wiederkehrende-und-eindeutige-besucher/>)). Again, both tools are hosted by the university computer center.

Usually, content production such as writing articles and concepts are committed to motivated staff members, who adopt this task in addition to their usual tasks. Experience with these seemingly less expensive solutions are not encouraging, especially with respect to sustainability. This special work cannot be done "on the side", as demonstrated by both newsletters from Tübingen and Freiburg. The Tübingen newsletter published only two pdf-editions (1/2009 und 2/2009), and the latest Freiburg issue was released in January 2012.

Consequently, the Frankfurt medical faculty decided in favor of an online editorial journalist to run the online-magazine "PULS."- project. She drafts the magazine coordinated with different staff members (dean of studies, dean's office, lecturers, students...) and writes articles with great sensitivity for the language of the target group [4], accomplishes interviews, revises occasional contributions of other authors and moderates postings and comments [4]. Interviews and quotations are always authorized. Content, which is controversial, is cleared in advance with the dean of studies and dean's office. If required, the online journalist supports the faculty with drafts for speeches or memoranda. This guarantees the high quality of both content and language. "PULS." is a professional blog publishing reputable content of high quality [4]. The online journalist and the blog are funded by the faculty. Both deans of studies (preclinical / clinical curriculum) act as editors and patrons of "PULS."

"PULS." avoids uninspired text, e.g. dreary press releases. Content as well as style are tailored to the particular needs of the special student target group. Thus, we achieve the typical web 2.0 user-friendliness (usability, [<http://mileon.net/category/wort-und-text/>]) for our readers or visitors. Our carefully searched and written articles offer reliable and first-hand information and background facts for better understanding of faculty activities. The central issue of articles focuses on learning, teaching and the curriculum: interviews with lecturers, new and innovative courses, introduction of PJ-logbooks, reports from courses and student projects (e.g. Lernstudio). Thus, new curricular developments could be introduced to students in some detail and also recognize dedicated lecturers positively. Further essential topics are special information for freshmen ("Starter Kit") and expanding thematic dossiers about e.g. the dissection course, substantial construction work on campus or critical reviews about the CHE-ranking. Also, topics cover information about data protection, good media skills and netiquette.

In a welcome note both deans of study address the students just before the actual semester or encourage students to succeed in upcoming assessments. In addition, "PULS." provides information about policy of higher education and university boards, scholarships, funds and awardees, interviews with project groups, reminds the students of assessment registration periods and reports student troubles. A column written by students reflects the student view and opinion on campus events [3]. Based on key words the search function can be used to

find articles and thematic dossiers, or one can flip through the thematically or chronologically organized archive.

"PULS." is publicly available. All articles and comments can be read and commented. Notably, critical comments will be anonymized and passed to the dean. Letters to the editor or comments in "PULS." cause positive and negative feedback concerning processes at the faculty, thus enhancing interactivity and transparency.

"PULS." bundles the multiplicity of information at the faculty in categories and gives important and unique background information, e. g. in interviews. The close cooperation with the deans office, students and lecturers guarantees different perspectives on the campus and enhance the exchange of information between the different protagonists. Hence, "PULS." contributes to a positive emotional climate on the campus (see Attachment 1).

"PULS." is a constant and provides orientation as shown by comments and letters to the editors. The best example is a student's letter, if the video "Anatomy for beginners" from Gunter von Hagens can be described as "education" or "science". "PULS." picked up this question and published a discussion with the "Ethics commission" and several additional articles (letter to the editor: see Attachment 2). These soft location factors should not be underestimated. Meanwhile, the students voted twice for the continuation of their online-magazine. Additionally, in the last months access to "PULS." as a reliable source increased, e. g. from the Goethe-University press office or the local press.

## Evaluation

Since June 2010 "PULS." has been continuously online with 806 articles published up to 27.11.2012. Suggestions of themes and topics from lecturers and students emphasize the interactive character of the magazine. Based on a user analysis and evaluation in 2011, we could demonstrate a high acceptance for the online-magazine and its contents and style [3].

### How many user visit "PULS."?

User numbers increased steadily from 2010 (7 937 visitors), 2011 (30 171 visitors) to 2012 (January to November; 25531 visitors). Access is much higher at the beginning of the semester, as expected. Especially in October, with freshmen enrolled, access increases significantly. In October 2010 we count 2524 visits on "PULS." and 3043 visits in October 2011. Because we conducted no direct marketing in the inauguration activities in 2012, visit numbers were smaller than expected (2529 visits in October 2012). At the start of the spring semester we counted 2173 visits in April 2011, and already 2588 visits in April 2012. User access focuses on three articles: „Obituary on Karen Emminger“: 1484 visits (obituary for a student who was killed in an accident), „Niklas Zender und Jan-Philip Glania trains for Olympia“: 907 visits (article about two Olympia-participants of our fac-

ulty) and „Interview with Giulia Enders: „Charming intestine“: 873 visits (Interview with science-slam-winner Giulia Enders). Visitors focused also on articles about the first Frankfurt "Goethe Contest 2012" (487 page views), changes of the ÄAppO (452 page views) and the student written column (417 page views). Currently, about 550 users per week visited "PULS.". No articles are published on weekends (see Figure 1). As expected, page views on working days are much more numerous as compared to weekends. Daily data of page views (annual average) show a small number of visits (about 137) between 1:00 to 8:00 a.m. and many more visits around noon (about 502, 00:00 to 2:00 p.m.). Between 5:00 and 9:00 p.m. the number of page views peaks at 726 (see Figure 2).

### Does the number of page views correspond to real users?

Data analysis based on tracking with Piwik permit identification of "visitors by chance" and "recurring visitors". The number of "recurring visitors" constantly is 88% of all visits (see Figure 1). We conclude that most visitors of "PULS." actually read the articles and recur at a later date (<http://blog.webalytics.de/2010/10/neue-wiederkehrende-und-eindeutige-besucher/>), which is supported by analysis of average visit length: visits lasted from 60 to 120 sec. Thus, at least one article is read during a single visit.

### How visitors locate "PULS."

Up to now 99 readers subscribed to "PULS." and were automatically informed about every new contribution. Most visitors (in 2012: 4894) used a link on the faculty website (<http://www.med.uni-frankfurt.de/>) to reach "PULS.", and 1247 were directed via facebook or via a search engine (e.g. Google: 7026).

### Who are the visitors on "PULS."?

As analyzed from the annual online assessment data (Survey Monkey) above all, visitors of "PULS." turned out as students, lecturers and deanery staff. Recently, also alumni detected "PULS." (see Appendix 3: commentary published in "PULS."). Furthermore, Piwik tracking data also show access from abroad, especially "recurring visitors" from the US and European countries. We suppose that these visitors are students spending a medical internship abroad.

## Conclusion

After two years, "PULS." turned out to be a succeeding project of the faculty. The online magazine assists faculty decisions and complex projects with background information and communicates these to all visitors in an intelligible manner. The up-to-date web 2.0 media "blog" written



Figure 1

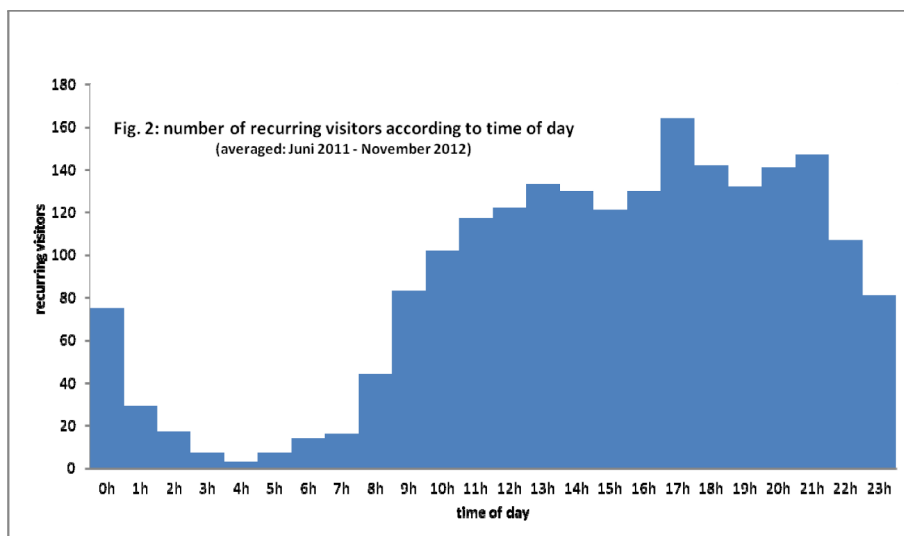


Figure 2

in a less formal style correspond to the media behavior of the student target group.

With aspects of an online magazine, interactive elements, user-friendliness, professional style and editing, and also continuity "PULS." is an interesting project at German universities (<http://milion.net/category/wort-und-text/>, [5]). Close collaboration with both deans of studies and numerous other faculty members increase considerably, thus demonstrating that "PULS." is a reliable source of information, which is more and more often noticed and used. The high percentage of "recurring visitors" is an indicator of success. "Recurring visitors" are of great value, because they reflect content quality and achievement of the target group (<http://blog.webalytics.de/2010/10/neue-wiederkehrende-und-eindeutige-besucher/>). The average visit duration of about 1-2 minutes supports this: a minimum of one article is read.

Success and sustainability of "PULS." critically depends on the assignment of a professional online editorial journalist. She accounts for conceptual design and professional writing adapted to the target group. With the

professional editorial work we gain confidence of different groups of faculty members: students, lecturers, deanery staff and alumni. This leads to better collaboration, information exchange, letters to the editor, more comments and requests for interviews and themes. The constant increase up to 2200 visits per month, including 1900 "recurring visits", point to real readers of "PULS." Research revealed, no other German faculty online-magazine for especially the student target group, thus data to compare with the "PULS." data are not available.

A medical faculty runs multiple demanding tasks affecting teaching, research and health care but also manages numerous different lecture halls, seminar rooms, wards, teaching hospitals, local and distant medical practices, foreign clerkships, library etc. for students and lectures. This illustrates the need of an efficient communication policy for the student target group, which is a challenging task. A professionally edited online magazine using a blog-software is particularly suitable to promote higher levels of transparency, more communication and at last creates identity of students with their local faculty.

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## Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

## Attachments

Available from

<http://www.egms.de/en/journals/zma/2013-30/zma000846.shtml>

1. Attachment 1.pdf (9 KB)  
Attachment 1: Examples for the upgraded communication and higher transparency of occasions, which concerns the students
2. Attachment 2.pdf (57 KB)  
Attachment 2: letter to the editor form Martin Mendel, 12.09.2012
3. Attachment 3.pdf (10 KB)  
Attachment 3: Comment to "PULS."-Beitrag "Baumstelle Campus Niederrad: Bilder der KOMM-Grundsteinlegung" from 20.09.2012

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