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Blogging the 2006 FIFA World Cup Finals

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This study focuses on the use of new technologies by the sports-media complex, looking specifically at the 2006 FIFA World Cup Finals. Combining the world's single largest sports media event with one of the most current, complex forms of Web-based communication, this article explores extent to which football fans embedded in Germany used the Internet to blog their World Cup experiences. Various categories of blog sites were identified, including independent bloggers, bloggers using football-themed Web sites, and blogs hosted on corporate-sponsored platforms. The study shows that the anticipated "democratizing potential" of blogging was not evident during Germany 2006. Instead, blogging acted as a platform for corporations, which, employing professional journalists, told the fans' World Cup stories.

Cette étude est centrée sur l'utilisation des nouvelles technologies par le complexe sports-médias, plus particulièrement lors des finales de la coupe du monde de soccer en 2006. En combinant le plus important événement sportif médiatisé avec une des formes les plus complexes et les plus courantes de communication sur le web, cet article explore jusqu'à quel point les fans allemands ont mis en blog leurs expériences de la coupe du monde. Plusieurs catégories de blogs ont été identifiées, incluant des blogs indépendants, des blogs utilisant les sites web reliés au soccer et les blogs dont les hôtes sont des corporations. L'étude suggère que le « potentiel de démocratisation » anticipé des blogs n'était pas évident pour cette coupe du monde 2006. Plutôt, l'utilisation des blogs s'est avéré être une plate-forme pour les corporations qui, en employant des journalistes professionnels, ont pu dire aux fans des histoires de coupe du monde.

Football fans are no longer content simply to attend games and are seeking greater levels of involvement in their sport. A growing body of literature is exploring these changes, with many building on Hall's (1980 [1973]) work on the "active role of audiences" and of fan's "performative consumption" (Hills, 2002; see also Brown, 1998; Crabbe, 2003; Crawford, 2004; Giulianotti, 2002; 2005; Hughson & Free, 2006; Parry & Malcolm, 2004; Wilson & White, 2002). Before the arrival of the Internet football fans were dependent upon, and deferred to, the mainstream media, with the second half of the 20th century seeing a mutually beneficial coexistence between British football clubs and the mainstream media (including regional and national newspapers, radio and television broadcasters). More

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recently, the increasing capitalization of football has led football clubs to bypass the mainstream media and develop their own independent forms of communication and engage more directly with a growing global fan-base. This is due in part to the technological advancement of the Internet and the move from a mostly read-only format to a read-write model (characterized as *Web 2.0*). These developments are allowing sports fans to adopt a more participatory role (Bale, 2000; Malec, 1996; Ruddock, 2005).

The combination of “new journalism” (Keeble & Wheeler, 2007) and new Internet software (such as Wordpress, Blogger, LiveJournal, and Typepad) saw blogging enter the mainstream at the beginning of this decade. Blogs are created by people writing and posting their comments on-line, which other people then read and, if moved to, reply. Blogging allows anyone with access to the increasingly available technology to participate, with here, football fans, acting as producers of their own story rather than consumers of what others have written about them. Advances in technology (e.g., greater bandwidth speed and computer memory) have led to an explosion of blogging sites with some 120,000 blogs being launched each day. The blog search engine Technorati (2008) currently tracks over 110 million blogs, of which between 30 and 100 million are active. Among these are a significant number of football blogs with the site www.soccerblogs.net just one example of a growing number of blog aggregators specializing in tracking football blogs and posts.

To discuss the impact of blogging and the extent to which football fans are using the Internet, this essay focuses on the FIFA World Cup Finals, looking specifically at how Germany 2006 was blogged by fans embedded in the tournament. The essay begins by outlining the blogging phenomenon and then discusses the methodology employed, which resulted in the identification of four types of blog sites. Exploration is made of the participatory and democratizing potential of fans blogging their own story, set against a background of increasing interest in sports blogging by mainstream media organizations and multinational corporations.

The Potential of the Blog

Since the Internet entered mainstream society in the mid 1990s, technological developments have been exponential in terms of type, content, form, and authorship. User generated content (UGC) has become a central part of the *Web 2.0* phenomenon with people discussing their personal interests on social network sites (such as MySpace, Facebook, and Bebo), on photo sharing sites (e.g., Flickr), wikis, and blogs. The increasingly widespread availability of blogging software means that no specialist technological knowledge is required (all one needs to do is to set-up an account), with bloggers seen as anyone with a blog, which is an on-line diary in which entries are posted chronologically. Other people (in the “blogosphere”) then post a response to the original comment and enter into an on-line conversation (Jenkins, 2006; Perseus Publishing, 2002).

Blog sites started off as little more than filters for information (often by genre or profession), and specialized in single-issues stories often ignored by the mainstream media. Since then, blogging has developed a more free-form style with technological enhancements, such as podcasting (in which spoken words are made

available on-line using MP3 technology) and video-blogging (which uses MP4 software; see YouTube.com and Seesmic.com). Many dedicated sports Web sites, including blogs, now use RSS feeds¹ (for an example see www.sportsblogs.org and www.bloggersblog.com/sportsblogs), which notify subscribers of new postings.

For some people, blogging is inherently democratic as it empowers individuals to create their own content and publish to a global audience. The blog platform offers an alternative to the accepted voices of authority and acts as a challenge to, what for many is, an elitist mainstream media (Blood, 2002a; 2002b). Those who advocate the democratic potential of blogging highlight the ease of participation in which anyone can set up a blog and express their views. However, for Beer and Burrows (2007), the suggestion that Web 2.0 technology is generating greater levels of participatory democracy involves a significant degree of rhetoric. Such rhetoric, they argue, requires a detailed and critical interrogation to reveal how the conception of democracy is created, how new hierarchies are being formed and the nature of power held by new cultural industries. One might also seek to question how established powers are responding to these new circumstances.

Little academic research has been conducted on the popularity of the still emerging phenomenon of blogging. In an albeit small study, yet one well cited in the blogging literature, Nardi, et al. (2008, p. 5) identify five main motivations as to why people blog,

- to document one's life,
- to provide commentary and offer opinion,
- to express deeply felt emotions,
- to articulate ideas through writing, and
- to create and maintain community forums.

Widely read blogs such as those about a workplace or profession, are relatively easy to identify by potential readers. There are some examples of “trickle-up” writing, which is when on-line musings attract the attention of mainstream media who then turn them into books and films (see for example Burden, 2006; Copperfield, 2006; De Jour, 2007; Gray, 2007). However, very few people are able to generate any kind of income from blogging, (indeed it is more likely to incur costs), with the CEO of Google provocatively suggesting that “the average blog has one reader: the blogger” (quoted in Leonard, 2006, para. 22).

Debate is taking place as to whether, how and why blogging is different from what has gone before. For some, it is merely an extension (rather than replacement) of existing arrangements (e.g., personal diaries, home movies and holiday pictures—see Herring et al., 2005). For others, there exist fundamental differences between the traditional, private diary and one designed as a creative space to display publicly one's thoughts and personality. Blood (2002b) suggests blogging is different because of its format, reliance on links, immediacy, and two-way communication. For Blood (2002b) the significance lies in the *format* rather than the *content*, proposing that the content can even be uninteresting, as people will interact and converse about almost any shared experience. By contrast, Shanmugasundaram (2002, p. 142) claims “content is everything.”

Democracy and the Football Fan

That football is popularly described as “the people’s game” is based on the premise that the “people” are its working class players and fans, whereas the “game” is owned and run by members of middle classes (Holt & Mason, 2000; Walvin, 1994). In 1985, The Sunday Times described English football as “a slum sport played in slum stadiums watched by slum people” (cited in King, 2002, p. 93). Less than a decade later saw publication of the Popplewell and Taylor Reports (on fan safety), the creation of the Premier League and television deals with BSkyB (generating huge revenues), which resulted in football moving away from its working class origins and into the arms of a profit-driven free market (Bower, 2003; Brown, 2007; Conn, 1997, 2005; King, 2002).

With football clubs, and wider society, under the thrall of consecutive Thatcher governments and its celebration of a shareholding society, football fans began to set up Independent Football Supporters Associations and Trusts (FSAs and ISAs), to create an albeit illusory sense of a burgeoning participatory democracy in English football (Brown, 1998; Nash, 2001). In his research on ISAs, Nash (2001) questioned the extent to which organized supporter associations can meaningfully democratize the power relations within modern football. For Malcolm (2000), a prerequisite of democracy requires a definition of the boundaries of the community being represented, with a central problem being that almost anyone can be described as, or call themselves, a football supporter. In response to English football clubs being floated on the Stock Market and the increasing hegemonic power of global (sports) corporations, football fans responded by creating fanzines to voice their concerns (Haynes, 1995). According to Haynes (1995, p. 64), some 600 football fanzines titles had, or were, giving fans an independent platform to share their opinions, many of which were critical of the running of “their” club.

The emergence of the Internet, and specifically blogging, created further opportunities for fans to voice their opinions. Stoddart (2004, p. 332, [emphasis added]) suggested that “*given that fans themselves can feed the net, they are taking control of the sports form and of the opportunity to bypass or supplant the major sources of supply to which they have been tied for generations.*” The absence of hierarchical structures offered by Internet and blogging contrasted with those structures found within traditional media and corporate sports organizations. The Internet was seen as allowing fans a greater voice and sense of participation and democracy in their sport, with democratization used in this essay to denote greater numbers of football fans telling their *own* World Cup stories, rather than relying on the mainstream media.

The traditional, mainstream media organizations have recognized the importance of having an on-line presence and are investing significant resources to ensure they can interact with their consumers. An example of the mainstream media’s attempts to engender a sense of participatory democracy is their regular invitations to their viewers to “Tell us what you think.” This solicitation is usually followed by the corporation’s text or e-mail address so the viewers can send their their comments. Blackshaw (2006) has noted that media and corporate organizations are increasingly using major sporting events as both a catalyst and context for developing on-line conversations. He claims businesses are becoming well practiced in using consumer-generated media to reinvent how sponsored content

wraps around and amplifies the sports experience. In Britain, BBC Sport is making greater use of their Web site and their blogging platform (including podcasts and v-blogs) to increase its content, in particular at those sporting events where they do not have live broadcast rights (Mosey, 2007).

This research adopts the premise that the sports-media complex (Jhally, 1989) must be identified and located in reference to the unremitting accumulating tendencies of capitalism. Given the increasingly symbiotic and concentrated relationship between media corporations and elite, professional sport (exemplified here by the FIFA World Cup Finals), this research considers the extent to which the sports-media complex is using new technologies to control the flow of information and capital (Castells, 1996). What possibilities are offered by the Internet for alternative framings to an increasingly commodified and corporative representation of sport as presented by the sports-media complex? McDonald (2006) identifies the privileged role enjoyed by media structures in encoding sporting texts. The process of accumulation and legitimization results in the sports media rarely offering alternative views or controversial framings of sporting events. Does new technology allow for alternatives to McDonald's (2006: 504), conclusion that "within this commodity relationship too often the media producers provide highly selective reformulations or reinterpretations of sporting events in ways that seek legitimation for dominant understandings of militarism, nationalism, competition, authority, and consumption (Jhally, 1989)."

With sports clubs, governing bodies, sports-media and multinational corporations all seeking greater levels of control over *their* product, there is the need for alternative, arguably more independent, objective and credible points of view to be heard. To what extent does the blogging platform open up the field and bring a sense of a participatory democracy to the telling of the fan's World Cup stories? How are fans using the now widely available software to offer alternative stories to those carried in the mainstream media, ones that might challenge the increasing power of sports-media complex?

Methodology

Scholarly research on the Internet is gathering pace and receiving greater levels of methodological interest (Hine 2005; Jones, 1998; Mann & Stewart, 2000; Slater & Miller, 2000; Stewart, 2008). In contrast, blogging, which rapidly established itself as part of the Web 2.0 phenomenon, has received very little methodological consideration (Herring, et al., 2005). Studies by Wilson (2007) and Ruddock (2005) notwithstanding, sports sociologists are not alone in academia in their tentativeness to engage with the new technologies. Many academics that were educated before the arrival of the Internet are often bewildered by the students' handling of information technology and their use of the Internet (Brabazon, 2007). That said, the academics most aware of the changes taking place appear to be those for whom the impact is more direct and immediate (in journalism, see: Wall, 2005; Robinson, 2006; in education see: Williams and Jacobs 2004; Brabazon, 2007).

Advances in digital technology are creating numerous research possibilities, although the pace of technological change can leave academics facing the prospect

that their research is out-of-date by the time it is published. With these changes continuing apace, academics are often playing catch-up, perhaps hoping for a period of technological consolidation to allow for a more measured assessment to be made. The speed of change presents particular methodological challenges, not least being the lack of a standard technique for researching digital material accessed via the Internet. This means that each study has to develop its own methodological framework (Real, 2007). Those researching via the Internet, and specifically blogs, increasingly have little sense of the actual size of the research field, which can hinder on-line navigation. A significant amount of time is needed to search through the blogosphere, often having to surf through numerous sites, posts and comments in the hope of finding a *half decent blog*, an experience characterized as looking for a *needle in a digital haystack* (Keen, 2007). Researchers operating in the digital sphere recognize that while the actual artifacts can be difficult to identify they can be even harder to preserve, especially when “*The page you requested is no longer available.*” The transient nature of digital material means that future researchers may well lack the artifacts essential for study (Hookway, 2008; Stewart, 2008). This notion of “digital oblivion” (BBC, 2001), suggests that researchers need to start identifying, and storing the material currently available on the myriad of digital technologies (including mobile-phone texts (IM), e-mails, and the content of social network sites and blogs).

The World Cup blogs in this study were identified initially using generic web search engines, entering terms such as *FIFA*, *world cup*, *2006*, and *blog*. However, as Zhou and Davis (2006) have noted, it is not always straightforward to identify a blog through a keyword search. Consequently, specific blog search engines (e.g., Technorati; Feedster; blogdigger) were also used to identify World Cup football blogs. The original research aim was to identify independent football fan bloggers who were not reliant on the mainstream media but who, embedded in attending Germany 2006, could offer alternative perspectives to those being presented by the sports-media complex.

The term *embedded* is most commonly identified with journalists reporting from war-zones with the support of the military (Katovsky & Carlson, 2003). In this paper it is applied to those football fans attending the 2006 World Cup Finals, who writing their own accounts, had no restrictions placed upon them by a third party (i.e., editors or moderators). In by-passing the traditional media structures, blogging fans would have a free role to write about anything with this type of independent reporting being closer to fans’ typical experiences and perhaps offering a greater sense of the *narrative flow* of the football fan’s World Cup.

The original aim of the research was on the presentation of fan blogs and the levels of engagement by those reading the blog—the much-anticipated conversation within the global football community. However, this aim soon became redundant when it emerged that very few blogs had been written by fans that were embedded in the tournament. It soon became evident that it was not the ordinary fans who were blogging, but other interested parties. As the research progressed, the blogs were placed into one of four subgenres:

- 1) Independent fan World Cup blogs,
- 2) World Cup fan blogs on preexisting football Web sites,
- 3) World Cup blogs hosted on mainstream media Web sites, and
- 4) Corporate-sponsored World Cup blogs.

The research focus then shifted to look at *who* was blogging the finals and their motivations. In the summer of 2007, the researcher downloaded the main webpage for each blog site, with each site viewed to explore a number of themes. The relationship between the bloggers and their audience remained, although it became necessary to consider how the mainstream media and global corporations were seeking to engage with the on-line football fan. With the main research taking place one year after the Finals, it is not possible to identify how many blogs are no longer available. This paper is based on an analysis of English language blogs and excludes those written in other languages.

Bloggging the 2006 World Cup Finals

The FIFA Web site (FIFA.com) was the tournament's official on-line presence (Nielsen/NetRatings, 2006), but like many corporate sites it lacked interaction with its consumers, and had very little informal content aimed at engaging the global fan community. The site did not make use of RSS feeds, and relied instead on still photographs and statistics to create a somewhat static and staid fan experience.² Stepping in to fill the space left by FIFA and provide for the growing on-line audience were numerous Web sites offering live reports, commentary, post-analyses, and the latest WAG activity. This section begins by looking at two types of Web sites competing for the fan's attention: independent bloggers and football themed blog sites.

Independent Bloggers

One independent, embedded fan using established blogging software, and seen as representing the "true spirit" of blogging can be found at www.aloneincologne.wordpress.com. The blog includes information not readily available from traditional media outlets,

The sources for black market tickets at previous England games have been from the Paraguay FA, Gillette, hospitality tickets, and for reasons beyond any consideration, Costa Rican FA tickets. An alleged incident at Togo vs. South Korea was that McDonalds hospitality reps were emerging from the stadium soon before kick-off laden with unclaimed competition tickets, sold cheaply to scalps among others, who promptly walked 20 yards down the road and sold them for 10 times as much.

The blog contains four pretournament posts with a further 15 posts made during his visit to Germany, which generated some 30 responses (including ones from friends and family).

There was little evidence of people using either the dedicated travel blog sites (e.g., Travelblog.org; Travelpod.com) or the generic diary blog sites (e.g., Xanga, Diaryland, or Livejournal), to record their World Cup experiences. One exception was Rawley (2006) who, using the travelblog.org platform, did get caught up in the World Cup atmosphere,

The Fan Mile became a very big party for a lot of shirtless drunk Italian men aged 16–35. There were also a lot of very drunk Germans, some of whom had

been there since noon when the German national team held there “Danke” event. Some German fans rooting for France started a Mussolini chant (four syllables make it easy), which seemed to me to be a good way to invite some troublesome counter-chants. The standard German anti-Italy chant was, in translation, “Italians are pizza delivery boys.”

One independent blog site set up before the 2006 Finals (available at www.worldcuphippo.com), used the popular Wordpress software. However, the blogger did not appear to be embedded in the event, but instead was reliant on mainstream media accounts for its posts.³ In one post about the England player Owen Hargreaves, the blogger describes how,

at half-time the BBC still found time to show clips to demonstrate why Hargreaves wasn't the ideal deep-lying midfielder for England. Newspapers now highlighted that Hargreaves had proven his critics wrong: *The Independent* stated that Hargreaves “won his personal battle with the sceptics thanks to a magnificent display,” while *The Guardian* noted that he had “rammed the boos of England supporters back down their throats with a series of versatile displays.” (Entry posted July 5th, 2006)

Forty comments were posted on this site during the tournament, which elicited some 400 responses, many of which originated from the same people, which raises the issue of how blogs can generate a wide readership (an issue revisited later in the essay).

Stubseid (1993) suggested there is an increasing need for travel writers to differentiate their work, with one option being to use humor. This trend has extended to the blogosphere, with the www.worldcuppubcrawl.blogspot.com describing the activities of a group of friends, who not in Germany, but in London attempted to watch all the matches in a series of pubs and cafes associated with the teams playing,

The crowd (in the restaurant) went suitably mad when Italy finally took the lead, two minutes short of the inevitable penalties defeat. They were still jumping around, spilling drinks, breaking stuff and kissing random people when Del Boy Piero scored. There was such excitement . . . (it was) unclear whether the extra cheering was for the replay of the first goal or in fact for another goal. It was also the hottest venue we've visited . . . this was our main reason for ordering all that wine. (Entry posted July 7th, 2006.)

Despite their attempts at differentiating their blog site by using humor, they received very few responses to their posts.

It was evident from surfing the Internet (and specifically the blogosphere), that there was an absence of blogs written by independent football fans embedded in the event. It is possible that, despite extensive searching, some World Cup blogs were missed, with the difficulty in locating material on the web increasing in relation to the period between the actual event and its analysis.

Football-Themed Blog Sites

Whereas some Web sites and blogs were set up especially for the 2006 Finals, most football-themed Web sites simply incorporated the 2006 Finals into their

preexisting site (many of which shifted their focus to Euro 2008 and FIFA 2010). One leading site, www.bloggersblog.com/worldcup, aggregates sports blogs and has a dedicated 2006 World Cup Finals page. The site shows 36 links to blogs launched specifically for the 2006 Finals with a further 21 links to preexisting football blog sites. What initially appeared to be a goldmine of World Cup blogs sites turned out to be pyrite when one started clicking on the hyperlinks; there was a very high degree of self-referential material, extensive link decay, and over 35 links to mainstream media sites and official sports organization sites. MP4 (v-blogs) and MP3 (podcasts) are available on this site (and via the links), and although many are of low quality, one can expect higher production standards as technology improves. Other football themed blogs that still have their 2006 archives available can be found at www.worldcupblog.org/2006/06 and www.soccerlens.com/tags/competitions/world-cup-2006. The following extract from Soccerlens.com illustrates how most of these sites relied on the mainstream media,

By now everyone has probably either seen or heard or read about the confrontation after the Argentina–Germany World Cup quarterfinal between the two sets of players. After watching the video (link at the end) and read reports on the matter, here are some details on what actually happened.

As noted earlier, the original research focus was to identify independent, embedded bloggers, but after extensive surfing, very few examples were found. The original *promise* of the blog was that it would generate greater levels of (fan) participation and offer (fans) an alternative platform to the mainstream media. It was therefore significant to find very few embedded football fans blogging their own World Cup experiences. Those sites that did appear to show fans blogging were in fact hosted by multinational corporations, and it soon became apparent that embedded fans blogging the 2006 Finals were doing so on platforms sponsored by the traditional mainstream media and multinational corporations.

The Media Corporation: The BBC World Cup 2006 Blog

The BBC 2006 World Cup blog (www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/worldcup) is accessed via the main BBC Sport Web site. The site received 3.4 million Unique Visitors during the tournament, a 58% share of the total sports and gambling Internet audience, and three times more than its nearest rival—the official FIFA World Cup site (Nielsen/NetRatings, 2006). For their World Cup Blog the BBC used 16 experienced journalists, two of whom toured Germany in a VW Campervan to blog *the fan's perspective*. It is evident that the emerging medium of sports blogging continues to be a predominantly male activity (Wanta, 2006), and a perpetuation of Redhead's (1997) observation that the early Internet sports sites frequently replicated the male dominated world of pub culture. The BBC World Cup blog ran for 42 days and produced 123 lead posts from their reporters including MP4 video blogs). The open invitation for fans to post their comments resulted in over 13,000 responses. Interestingly, the site displays a list of links (i.e., *a blogroll*) to other World Cup sites, suggesting that the BBC recognizes the role of such conventions in the presentation of a blog site, even if this facilitates fans in leaving their site.

Live television rights to high profile sporting competitions are increasingly being secured by satellite broadcasters (with recent examples in the UK being the

Ashes series and the 2007 Rugby World Cup). As a public service broadcaster the BBC has to seek alternative ways of covering such mega-events and has identified the Internet (including blogging) as a platform to supplement, and occasionally replace, their television and radio coverage (Mosey, 2007). Successful blogs have typically built up an audience over time, but the short nature of mega-events limits this possibility for the independent blogger. The scale of the BBC allows them to cross-promote their different platforms and direct fans to their Web site, which makes extensive use of their access to sports personalities, celebrity presenters and high profile sports commentators. The BBC identified its 2006 World Cup blog as one in a series of blogs being trialed across the BBC (others include 2006 Ryder Cup; the 2007 Rugby World Cup and on-going international test cricket).⁴ However, soon after the events have ended, the blogs are removed from the homepage and thus making it more difficult for the reader (and researcher) to locate the original artifact.

Shortly after the World Cup had ended, the BBC solicited feedback on their World Cup blog (BBC, 2006). A lead post from the BBC Sports Interactive editor summarized what visitors to the site had said they had enjoyed about the site, which included the blogs written by the two fan-journalists who were described as “your eyes and ears in Germany” with requests for more of “this kind of *fun* from us” (italics original). In response to the lead posting, others were less complimentary, with complaints that the blog was being censored, “*I was so annoyed that some of my comments about the responsibility the media during the world cup were not even posted. Moderate - blank words and phrases and say why . . . don’t just pull it. Warn people about public conduct.*” Because blogs work in “real time,” there were complaints on the time taken to moderate comments, “*Why does it take so long to get a comment posted? That’s a big negative for me. Shall I check for reactions tomorrow or next week? May as well write you a letter!!*” Responding to these complaints, the Director of BBC Sport blogged that the BBC platform was unlikely to be used for “*slagging themselves off*,” but rather was an opportunity to promote BBC Sport “*whether that’s construed as PR or not*” (all italic comments from BBC, 2006).

The Global Corporation: Coca Cola’s “Weallspeakfootball.com”

Internet technology is allowing multinational corporations opportunities to attract new audiences. Although all major corporations now have an official Web site, many of their sites are static (read-only) and thus of limited appeal to the younger generations who have ever-increasing expectations from the Internet. The more “tech-savvy” corporations are using new technologies to engage their consumers in conversations, much like the mainstream news media who “want to know what you think.” The 2006 FIFA Finals had 15 Official Partners, all of whom used static, read-only Web sites. Whereas the McDonalds Corporation invited fans to participate in an on-line fantasy FIFA World Cup experience, only the Coca Cola Organization used a blogging platform.

The Coca Cola organization previously experimented with blogging during the Torino 2006 Winter Olympic Games (www.torinoconversations.coca-cola.com). Six undergraduate journalism students were described as “fans” rather than

“reporters” and offered an alternative to traditional sports reporting, aimed at the hard-to-reach 16–24 year old demographic. The site netted over 100 in-bound links and received nearly 100,000 page views a day (Blackshaw, 2006). Using the lessons learned from the Torino Conversations a much larger and more refined blogging platform was developed by Coke for Germany 2006 (www.weallspeak-football.com). The student bloggers were replaced by four probloggers (experienced multimedia bloggers, podcasters, and video bloggers), who were joined in their Coke-sponsored Berlin apartment by a changing group of up to six *guest bloggers*. As Blackshaw (2006, para. 5) suggests “the image that comes to mind is one of those vibrant ‘everyone wants to party with everybody’ youth hostels on the college Euro-trip circuit.” Coke actively promoted the v-loggers (video bloggers) in an attempt to engage with a younger, alternative audience as part of their global marketing campaign; Coke’s global marketing director claimed, however, that their involvement in blogging was as a *platform*, not an advertising exercise (quoted in Blackshaw, 2006).

The site shows 255 blogs (including MP3 and MP4 blogs) with an average of eight posts a day (for the 30-day tournament). These posts generated 232 comments from the blogosphere, with fans from more than 150 countries reading and interacting with the site (Jones, 2006). Hyperlinks are a central component to blogging, with both the Coke and BBC blogs displaying links to other sites, with both sites free of advertisements. By contrast, the independent and sports-themed blog sites were replete with advertisements to generate funds needed to pay for the site.

Part of the essence of event-based blogging is to involve others and solicit responses, with bloggers needing to generate stories and strike up conversations with others in the blogosphere. Blogs have been characterized as platforms for dissenting voices and therefore the moderation of comments becomes a significant issue for the blog host. It is not possible to identify how many comments were not accepted on the Coke sponsored blog, although their global marketing communications director did admit to some nonspecified problems in the German speaking area (Jones, 2006).

Moderation, PR, and the Power of the Corporation

The BBC bloggers who toured Germany in their camper van and the Coca Cola bloggers in their Coke-sponsored Berlin apartment can be seen as *faux bloggers* whose activities are akin to “astroturfing” (that is, an artificial grass-roots campaign; Sourcewatch, 2007), with their blogs acting as little more than PR and advertising platforms. Real (2007, p. 172) sees the Internet as “a site of struggle between independent Web site designers/bloggers and the megamedia conglomerates already dominating sports and media,” and based on evidence from Germany 2006, this domination continues with the independent bloggers placed firmly on the back foot. As Real (2007, p. 182) suggests,

Given the trends towards convergences and consolidation of ownership, the likelihood of a spiral of silence emerges, in which fringe minority voices get less hearing and are gradually brought into conformity. Similarly as

dominance of the web reverts, as seems to be happening, towards the media monopolies, the hegemony of the privileged over web content and values will marginalise less powerful groups as it has in other media.

The scale of the BBC and the Coca Cola Corporation and the resources at their disposal allow them significant cross-promotion opportunities and access to high profile celebrities and commentators. Their presence hollows-out the medium's image with their cross-marketing and dominant profile, eclipsing those independent voices seeking to offer an alternative to the dominant orthodoxy. As Blood (2002b, p. 15) has suggested, when there is an overload of information, people will revert to what they are familiar with (i.e., the mainstream corporate media).

For the sports media and corporate world (including advertisers) one of the main attractions of blogging is its ability to find and connect with the demographic audiences who use the Internet in preference to more traditional forms of media (i.e., television and newspapers). A central question is therefore to consider the motivation for establishing a blog site and wanting to converse with an on-line community. Is the blog host genuinely seeking to engage in a conversation? If it is, then a central issue becomes one of moderation, that is, getting your viewpoint (in the form of a post) approved by the moderator. If the blog is being used as just another marketing and PR platform, it is likely to fail because few people will want to read it. Part of the attraction of blogs is their human-interest stories, gossip, and potential to cause controversy. However, when the wrong type or too much information has been made available, bloggers have been sacked (BBC, 2007a; Empson, 2005). This suggests that what makes for an acceptable topic of blog conversation is still being played out, with corporations struggling to reconcile the personal with the corporate. One potentially significant development was the decision by a British court to order the owners of an independent football fan Web site to reveal the identity of Sheffield Wednesday fans who posted comments that were critical of the club's board (Dyer, 2007).

As previously shown, corporate hosted blogs are unlikely to contain posts that are critical of the host or which are likely to cause controversy, such as comments on the levels of commercialism found within elite sport. With major sports clubs and organizations restricting access to their product and seeking greater levels of control, blogs hosted by such organizations are unlikely to offer any kind of political analysis of sport, preferring instead to adopt a more individualized focus. Corporate sites are certain to invest in the resources required to moderate fan comments posted to the blog site (Kiss, 2008b), but they should be aware that excessive levels of control (i.e., moderation) are likely to rapidly curtail any on-line conversation.

The centrality of the communication process in blogging does suggest that freedom of speech is being exercised. Even when there are few responses to a lead post, there is the appearance that a participatory democracy is operating. Supporters of blogging highlight how it allows for an unprecedented means of expression (from below), and bypasses the mainstream media; however, this in itself is insufficient to claim that blogging is democratic. It is typically not the consumer of the blog who decides what is posted, but rather the moderator. Consumers exercise choice when they search for the site, and then having found one, by returning on

a future occasion. Therefore, although the claim is that “anyone can blog,” the reality is that one’s comments need to be approved by a moderator, or one has to set up their own blog site (and join the other 100 million) and face the likelihood of being lost in the blogosphere.

Media corporations have been quick to recognize the need to embrace new technologies (for example, ESPN’s blog site at www.sports.espn.go.com/espn/blog/main; and www.nbcolympics.com). However, other corporations have been more hesitant, with Nike’s “blog” (sic) site, at www.blog.nikebasketball.com, an example of the original read-only sites. Despite calling itself a blog it does not actually have any blogging option to allow for conversations, and therefore the site becomes just another PR platform. The International Olympic Committee’s (IOC) vacillation over athlete’s blogging during the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games illustrates how a monolithic sports corporation is struggling to adjust to the rapidly changing environment being created by Internet-based technology. The desire of the IOC to expand the appeal of the Olympics to the youth market suggests that they will have to engage with these new technologies, including athlete blogging, yet at the same time protect their existing financial agreements with their official sponsors.

The increasingly commercial world of sport means that organizations are becoming more wary of on-line *ambush* or *guerrilla* marketing, with blogging offering a significant platform to those not signed up as an official sponsor or who hold live television rights (such the BBC in their coverage of the 2007 Rugby World Cup; see also the unofficial Orange blog at www.blogs.orange.co.uk/2006_world_cup_blog). Developments in technology that allow for live blogging of major sports events from a mobile phone, WiFi, and YouTube’s plans for live-blogging (Smith, 2008) are set to present significant challenges to sports organizations, the mainstream media and official sponsors (Arango, 2008; Greenslade, 2007; Kiss, 2008a; Sandoval, 2008).

However, live-blogging is only one example of how the evolving technologies are having an impact on sporting culture and the sports media. In September 2007, two British elite junior tennis players had their funding and coaching withdrawn and several other players were officially warned after the Lawn Tennis Association had received information regarding photographs and text on the Bebo social networking site (BBC, 2008b). In the summer of 2008, a Crystal Palace football player wrote on his Facebook page about his “secret” trial with Fulham F.C., unaware that 2.7 million other members in the London area were able to read his entry (McMillan, 2008). In the US a number of colleges have introduced strict bans on their athletes’ use of social networking sites (Anderson, 2007b; Armour, 2006; Steinbach & Deavers, 2007). As a consequence of the negative images being portrayed on such sites, a monitoring tool has been developed that allows college and universities officials to monitor what student-athletes are posting (Powers, 2008).

The increasing involvement of the global sports-media complex in online activity illustrates the rapid changes taking place in sports culture. Their presence on what was seen originally as an alternative platform is creating a new dialectic between *new* and *old* forms of media. This paper is not suggesting clear binary between professional sports media corporations and independent, amateur fans, but rather a changing dialectic that requires further investigation. Neither is it

being suggested there exists an inherent *good* in blogging by amateur fans, counterpoised by the activities of the *bad* sports-media multinationals. What is being suggested is that further research is needed to better comprehend the complex relationship between the two camps, notwithstanding the accumulating, consolidating and dominating tendencies of corporate global capitalism. The increasing availability of digital technology, including blogging software, has the potential to offer a greater sense of participation, and therefore an increased sense of democracy. However, as this paper has identified, the mere availability of such technology, on its own, is not sufficient to substantiate this claim.

Conclusion

Rapidly changing digital interactive technologies are allowing fans to actively participate in ways not possible 15 years ago, with *Web 2.0* technologies creating shared platforms for two-way, instant conversations. However, debate continues on the actual level of real change with the protagonists located in one of two camps: those who see a brave new world in which new digital platforms are engendering and engaging new audiences, allowing fans not only to consume but also produce. For others, it is *plus ça change*, with the content remaining much the same, albeit using a different medium (such as video blogs, which are little more than video diaries: see BBC, 2007c). One possible scenario will see blogs lose some of their distinctiveness; especially as independent bloggers and the large media corporations are now using the same platform. As blogs integrate with other Internet-based platforms, there will inevitably be changes in terminology and intermittent shakeouts as fans sift and select those Web sites worth revisiting.

Caution is needed when encountering the rhetoric surrounding Web 2.0, with moderation and other potentially “undemocratic” behavior suggesting that much of the Web 2.0 hype is just that: hype. As Beer and Burrows (2007) suggest, in this period of rapid sociocultural change identification is needed of some basic parameters to this emergent digital phenomenon. It is very early to assess the full impact of blogging, and at this stage in development, one needs some solid, distinctive and rich sociological description of the phenomenon, in order that foundations can be laid for wider theoretical discussion.

Blogging is redrawing the distinction between private communication and mass publication by allowing fans to publishing *almost* anything to a global audience. It is a separate issue, and a future direction of inquiry with regard to the audience reading the blog. Studying both the medium and the message will be informative with research needed on audience consumption and perceptions of blogs: who is reading them, how skilled or literate are they in recognizing and interpreting the relationship between attempts at objective authenticity and statements of personal opinion. As to whether, and where, blogs fit with Anderson’s (2007a) “long-tail” model, most blogs are destined to go unread, with the challenge for bloggers being to differentiate one’s blog and find an audience for the duration of a sports tournament. The significant moment for the blogger is not when he (*sic*) posts the message, but whether the global football audiences can find the blog, whether they then read the blog and finally whether they sign-up for a RSS feed.

More research is needed on the suggestion of a *digital divide* (BT, 2004; Coughlan, 2007) in which socioeconomic class (and age) are salutary reminders of continuing social division. Is it correct to suggest that a two-tier Internet is emerging, one that is divided by broadband speed in which faster connections are only available to those willing and able to pay (BBC, 2007b)? At present the blogosphere is relatively lightly regulated, although there is growing concern on the future direction of the Internet (including blogging) with the originator of the web Tim Berners-Lee stating that “*certain undemocratic things could emerge and misinformation will start spreading over the web*” (Ghosh, 2006). As sports organizations and sponsors increasingly look to the markets of China and the Asian subcontinent and consider how best to exploit the available advertising opportunities, they are encountering national governments who are struggling with what their populations want to do online (BBC 2008a; Thompson, 2007).

The increasingly widespread availability of Internet-based technology did not lead to a more democratic reporting of fan’s World Cup stories during Germany 2006. This is due, in part, to the enveloping tendencies of an economic structure that exploits every opportunity for commodification and profit. It is therefore necessary to show full cognizance of the relationship between technology, power and political and economic capital and how these inform the symbiotic relationship operating between the media and elite professional sport. Often mesmerized by superficial forms and interpretations of popular culture, it is relatively easy to neglect the specific, persistent features that are essential to grasping the fundamental dynamic of all-things-sport in a capitalist society. Far from diluting the power of the media, new technologies are increasing the concentration of the sports-media complex and offer little likelihood that controversial framings or alternative meanings will be heard.

This research has shown that the sports-media complex are fully exploiting the opportunities being created by technological advances. Corporations are attracted to the alternative, nonmainstream *image* of blogging and were found employing professional journalists (posing as bloggers) to blog the 2006 World Cup fans’ stories. Operating a properly functioning blog demands significant resources (not least time), which partly explains why there are so few independent bloggers and why the mainstream media and global corporations have secured such a high profile, and in the process successfully marginalized other voices. Stoddart (2004, p. 336) anticipated this struggle and cautiously hoped that the Internet might offer an alternative sports communication system, with fans controlling what they “wanted to learn, buy, generate and reject [for] the very first time in the history of the modern communication industry.” What is evident is a rapidly changing dynamic, with the global sports-media corporations using the Internet to interact with fans during major sporting events. Fan blogging from a sports event has *the potential* to offer alternative viewpoints to those presented by the mainstream sports-media corporation, but one that during Germany 2006 remained unrealized.

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Notes

1. An RSS feed is the name for one common protocol (Really Simple Syndication) that uses technology (i.e., web feed format) to inform users of digital updates to content in Web sites, newsfeeds, blogs, podcasts, or Internet TV channels.
2. In 2007 sports-themed blogs were given their own award category (see www.2008.bloggies.com); for Manchester United FC's award-winning Web site and message board forum, see www.manutd.com).
3. Among the UK news print media that operated a World Cup blog, the Guardian newspaper is principal exponent with their World Cup blog (www.blogs.guardian.co.uk/worldcup06) involving main postings, daily podcasts and photo blogs from some 25 mostly experienced journalists, some of whom were identified as "the fans" correspondents." The Times Online blog used "laddish" (see Carrington, 1998) presenters from a popular television football show to podcast the Finals with an accompanying site allowing "fans to chat" (www.baddielandskinner.com/forum).
4. The 2006 Ryder Cup at www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/rydercup; the 2007 Rugby World Cup at www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/rugbyworldcup/ alex_trickett; International cricket at www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/tms.

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