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Authenticity matters: A digital ethnography of FIA World Rally Championship fan forums



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ABSTRACT

In today's landscape of sport coverage, the increased competition for attention begs the question of how to provide offerings tailor-made not only to people's media consumption patterns, but also to their motivation for following a certain sport. This paper argues that digital ethnography provides a way to analyze views on media coverage of sport that promoters can make use of in attracting new consumers and keeping existing ones. By investigating two online forums where the television coverage of FIA World Rally Championship (WRC) from 2010–2013 was discussed, the most important thing to offer rally fans is not technical perfection and sanitized images, but explicit storytelling elements that are authentic—mirroring 'what rallying is all about.' This approach is believed to be applicable across a range of sports. Therefore as much stress is laid on the methods involved as on the specifics of this example. Along the way, strengths and weaknesses of this approach, these methods and these findings, are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In a media context, it can be argued that sport as a cultural phenomenon “works” only if it is “relevant to and resonant with the life of the audience,” as media professor Michael Schudson puts it (Schudson, 1989, p. 167). Schudson elaborates on this concept of *resonance* as follows: “what is resonant is not a matter of how culture connects to individual interests but a matter of how culture connects to interests that are themselves constituted in a cultural frame” (Schudson, 1989, p. 169). For sports, this means that media coverage must take into account other dimensions than technical quality and nice pictures. It must also utilize the sport's dramaturgic elements to convey sporting authenticity, which in this context include “uncertain outcomes, display as part of performance, its physical basis and all-sensory nature, self-making and the construction of identity, and its propensity to develop community” (Hinch & Higham, 2011, p. 69). In order to identify these elements of resonance, this paper uses a sample of online discussions about the television coverage of the FIA World Rally Championship (WRC) 2010–2014 as its key example.

The rationale for selecting this kind of data is that, despite the plethora of social media in sports, television is still a central platform for conveying the action of the WRC (Evans, 2013). In November 2014, WRC Promoter GmbH announced a 35% increase in total TV audience for the first ten rounds of the 2013 season, boasting 581.81 million viewers (although the reliability of these TV numbers is dependent on a lot of variables, such as the range of free-to-air deals, explaining why annual

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TV viewing figures between 2003 and 2009 have oscillated between 571 and 816 million viewers).¹ By utilizing “digital ethnography”, defined as “a method for representing real-life cultures through combining the characteristic features of digital media with the elements of story” (Underberg & Zorn, 2013, p. 10) to study two major motorsport forums, this paper investigates specific ways of retrieving and analyzing these viewers’ preferences.

2. Methodological context

What is argued in this paper is that, as research in other studies of sport and social media suggests (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015; Greene, Dotterweich, Palmero, & Good, 2014; Stavros, Meng, Westberg, & Farrelly, 2014), digital ethnography is especially useful in exploring sport media consumer preferences. Nowadays, sport promoters have a number of media options when it comes to conveying sporting ideations and to utilizing the engagement of sport media consumers. At the same time, these options can also be used as data-gathering devices due to their interactive characteristics. Alvin Toffler’s term ‘prosumers’ from 1980 has been reinvented to describe the expanding interactivity enabled by the proliferation of social media like YouTube and Facebook; networked individuals who can simultaneously produce, distribute and consume their own goods or services (Santomier & Hogan, 2013, p. 179). Gillin (2007, p. i) even argues that, in some cases, “the real influencers are no longer marketing experts, nor the traditional media that has always controlled and filtered marketing messages, but millions of ordinary people who are determining in direct and powerful ways what people hear, say, and believe.”

There is, hence, little surprise that marketing research, consumer studies and “commercial ethnography” (Picone, 2013, p. 54) have merged into a powerful and rapidly expanding combination (regardless of whether it is called multimedia ethnography, digital ethnography, virtual ethnography, cybersociology or netnography; see Caliandro, 2014; Hine, 2005; Kozinets, 2010; Moisander & Valtonen, 2011; Murthy, 2008; Picone, 2013; Scaramuzzino, 2012; Underberg & Zorn, 2013). By leaning on the virtues of conventional ethnography – undertaking “research and writing about groups of people by systematically observing and participating (to a greater or lesser degree) in the lives of the people they study” (Madden, 2010, p. 1) – this merger between ‘being there’ and commercial explorations, at its best, offers “greater insight into the virtual space in relation to consumers’ needs and wants, choices, symbolic meanings and more” (Xun & Reynolds, 2010, p. 18).

While online forums are often regarded as less important because of their virtual nature from a consumer research position, they are not less real, as Robert V. Kozinets early on pointed out: “these social groups have a “real” existence for their participants, and thus have consequential effects on many aspects of behavior, including consumer behavior” (Kozinets, 1998, p. 366). More than 15 years later, social media has become an important tool for motorsport businesses and organizations to attract potential customers and to interact with current customers or partners. In the light of how influential an understanding of these interactions can be, Goetz and Barger (2008, p. 31) argue that a co-operational approach to up-and-coming influencers is essential to organizations that want to capitalize on their preferences: “if organizations want to be relevant participants in the dialog with the new generation, they must go where these people are and speak their language and on their terms.” Similarly, Moisander and Valtonen (2011) claim that this approach can be a valuable asset to sport managers if done properly:

Marketing executives and managers need to put aside – at least for a while – their preoccupation with facts and figures, as well as their fixations with accurate measurement and prediction. They need to be able to broaden their views about what constitutes data and appropriate knowledge of marketplace phenomena. (Moisander & Valtonen, 2011, p. 261)

As product-focused analyses in general have been replaced with more experiential considerations of consumers (Pine & Gilmore, 1998, 2007; Xun & Reynolds, 2010, p. 18) and could lead to a new set of negotiation settings, sports should explore their fan bases through any channel available. Moreover, most sports now have a global audience through television. WRC is only one example. The principles outlined in this section therefore have a potentially much wider application, and with the borderless world of the Internet, this approach makes sense, as forums allow people from a variety of locations, as the lack of English language skills shows, to engage in the debate on common themes.

One of these themes is ‘the real experience’, or the authenticity, of the sport. According to Pine and Gilmore (2007, p. 4), authenticity as a business imperative has become increasingly important in the experience economy because the management of the customer perception of authenticity has become “the primary new source of competitive advantage.” As in other sports like rugby and hockey (Hinch & Higham, 2008), this does not necessarily mean a search for objective authenticity, but “enjoyable and meaningful experiences, or the entry into an ‘authentic state of being’” (Weed, 2008, p. 17). To grasp these authentic experiences, moreover, it is essential to understand the WRC’s historical development because “the easiest way to be perceived as phony” – the opposite of authentic – is to repudiate one’s heritage (Pine & Gilmore, 2007, p. 190). As a result, authenticity is not predefined. Rather, it is an emerging narrative that digital ethnography allows the researcher to explore.

¹ ‘WRC TV Audience Rockets by 35%’, [wrc.com](http://www.wrc.com), 7 November, 2014. Date accessed 10 January, 2016, from <http://www.wrc.com/en/wrc/news/november/tv-figures/page/1922-12-12-.html>. For alternative numbers on television audiences, see WRC Fact Book, editions 2004–2010.

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