

Introduction to the Special Issue on Communication and Soccer

At an academic conference in spring 2017, we three coeditors were part of a five-person panel examining the sport of soccer from perspectives both global and domestic. This included discussion of gender-related issues in broadcasting and funding, as well as issues of presentation and fandom. Less than a year later, we were beginning to receive and sift through submissions for this special issue of the *International Journal of Sport Communication (IJSC)* on communication and soccer. The opportunity to serve as coeditors for this project was a welcome one for us, three individuals who have a certain level of enthusiasm for what many call The Beautiful Game. As sport communication continues to develop as a field of study, the discipline has concurrently widened to involve a truly international perspective. *IJSC* Editor Paul Pedersen's idea for this special issue served as a chance to bring together the work of scholars from multiple nations with a focus on providing research pertaining to the world's most popular sport, whether called soccer or football.

This special issue features articles from authors who hail from nations including France, Germany, Poland, Nepal, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States, with reviewers from places including Canada, France, Germany, Slovenia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Mirroring the backgrounds of the authors, the work in this special issue includes a set of diverse approaches, as well as topics. Studies of fandom sit alongside examinations of both traditional and social media, with discussions of politics, as well as economics and multimedia engagement, also filling these pages.

The core of sport is the fan base, and perhaps uniquely aside from the international presence of the United States' National Basketball Association, soccer clubs occupy a strong position in terms of cultivating a highly engaged level of worldwide interest. Kassing and Nyaupane provide here an examination of fans partaking in soccer pilgrimage, that is, individuals who travel overseas seeking to witness in person a game or games involving their favorite soccer team. These pilgrimages can involve becoming part of the traditions and atmosphere around these events, and the authors found that individual pilgrims felt that such experiences helped enhance and authenticate their own fandom and devotion to the soccer clubs. The social aspect proved invaluable as those on such pilgrimages took their place in the fan group in a manner beyond viewing on television and purchasing merchandise.

In regard to individual clubs' ability to create messages that are meant to be relayed directly to the fan base, Borges looked at the official television arms of S.L. Benfica in Portugal's Primeira Liga and Ligue 1's highly successful Paris Saint-Germain F.C. In both cases, the clubs created their own in-house media, as first public relations and marketing efforts and later Benfica TV and PSG TV allowed

them to create their own stories and cultivate their own image without the filters of traditional media. In this case study, Borges conducted in-depth interviews with personnel at both Benfica TV and PSG TV about this use of media on multiple platforms in direct communication with the clubs' respective fan bases.

As a further examination of how soccer-related organizations communicate with their target publics, Winand, Belot, Merten, and Kolyperas analyzed tweets from the feed of the largest such organization, FIFA. As soccer's international governing body, FIFA often could be expected to serve as the direct line for social media interaction among fans and with the sport itself. However, through an analysis of more than 5,000 tweets from the official FIFA feed, the authors discovered that FIFA's Twitter feed favors mostly a one-way dissemination of information as opposed to a more fluid and engaged conversation with fans.

With the global nature of soccer, the ability of teams to communicate with fans and for fans to communicate with each other can be affected by the need to adapt to multiple languages being spoken across the spectrum of people who are interested in team news. Baines's work investigating the challenges and methods pertaining to communication in multiple languages between soccer clubs and interested parties provides insight into the world of professional tweet translators who are at the forefront of sport entities' efforts to present an authentic image for their target publics. The research notes the implications for not only communication but also sport organizations' business interests.

Similar to noteworthy occurrences in other sport-related settings, political interests can intertwine with soccer clubs. Kassing's case study on La Liga superpower FC Barcelona discusses how Barcelona's "Mes que un club" (More than a club) motto affected perceptions of the club's status as a possible stakeholder in Catalan nationalism and independence. Responding to unrest in the wake of a referendum vote on Catalan independence, Barca requested postponement of its next game, which La Liga refused. The club's decision to play the game in an empty stadium is the center of this case study, as Kassing discusses the event in the context of Barcelona's status as a club with passionate local interests on and off the field, as well as one with a massive global fan base.

As was evident for decades during the Cold War, international sport competition often presents the possibility of nationalist or patriotic views permeating local media coverage for the individual countries. Horkey, Baronovskaa, Grimmer, Jakubowska, and Stelzer undertook an analysis both quantitative and qualitative of the broadcasts for the Group C teams in the 2016 UEFA men's European Championship. Contradicting previous research, they found that broadcasters from Germany, Northern Ireland, Poland, and Ukraine did not engage in the type of nationalism that might have been present in sporting events of decades past, with tactical discussions, enjoyment of sporting achievement, and the event itself taking precedence.

Two industry interviews provide on-the-ground insight into the intersection of communication and soccer. Roger Bennett of the popular *Men in Blazers* media empire spoke on the steadily increasing level of popularity for the sport in the United States, which has coincided with the rise of *Men in Blazers* from a podcast to include a television show and a book, *Encyclopedia Blazertannica*. With that rise in interest, stateside fans are able to follow teams overseas, as well as play as those teams in the popular video game FIFA. On a more somber note, economist

Andrew Zimbalist notes in his interview the economic and communication challenges surrounding the hosting of megaevents such as the World Cup and the Olympics.

The research presented in this volume indicates a spectrum of interests across the possibilities of communication and soccer. At the core issue of communication with stakeholders, social media and traditional media usage by soccer clubs provide a window into ongoing and future research on the use of media by organizations as traditional media outlets fall out of favor. The necessity for good communication aligns with business interests, as well, with soccer organizations needing to disseminate messages in multiple languages to fully engage their fan base. Finally, the respective fan base's passion for issues that are unrelated to the deployment of a false nine- or four-person defensive backline must also be considered. We believe that this special issue provides a good overview of the many avenues sport communication research can undertake going forward, and we are happy to have the chance to present it to you.

We would also like to thank Editor Paul M. Pedersen for extending the invitation for us to compile and serve as editors on this special issue. His continued support of sport communication research and long-standing openness to new approaches in sport communication research manifested throughout this process. The coeditors hope you enjoy and find useful and illuminating research in this volume. That includes everyone with interests from social and traditional media to fandom and politics, as well as business, and all those who have personal soccer interests on either end of the spectrum, from supporting your local MLS club to wondering if your snakebitten Premier League or Serie A side will ever win another trophy, and including a desire to see Lionel Messi and Argentina finally break through, or not.

Thank you for reading.

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