The organization of information within online sports communities: case study, HaPoel Tel Aviv football club / Dotan Shraiber

Abstract:

The current era of Israeli sports can be characterized by the fans new ability to unite independently of the official communication channels of the sports clubs. This, due to significant recent developments in ways the fans can communicate between themselves, mainly using online social networks, fans websites, databases, discussion groups, forums etc. Those online trends of information reorganization and emerging of new communication channels are based on removing communication barriers between individuals and significantly lowering the entry level for creating and sharing of content. In the particular case of Hapoel Tel Aviv fans and their protest against the club's owner during the 2011/2012 season, the Internet advanced the transformation of the fans' communication methods from the physical space of the stadium, to the cyber space. Mainly due to the reduced costs of creating and sharing information and improving accessibility to larger groups on one hand, and disengaging from the dependency on the owner's controlled (or influenced) media on the other. This Internet based cooperation, helped create a dynamic way of organizing information which rely on the collective knowledge of the fans, and their ability and willingness to contribute to the creation and communication of information in their common interest.

This thesis focusing on the social and media phenomenon of the emerging of online sports fans communities, which are expected to be broaden following future technological advances. Thus, is destined to change the very essence of sports fandom in Israel in a way that besides the trivial weekly arrival to the stadiums, it will be based on Independent and unified community of sports fans, relying on the principles of sharing and social relationships (in contrast to the one sided communication witch dominate the Israeli sports since its inception). This phenomenon combine four distinct research areas: Sociology of sport, sport and media, online communities and information organizing (especially social information). The significance of the latter is found in its ability to portray the current sportive, media and social trends, as a result of the knowledge organizing, uses and its distribution between individuals in a well-defined social group. Nonetheless, while there is a wide interdisciplinary research in all of the four areas above, the academic literature on the specific subject of organizing online information by sports fans is limited. Furthermore, the studies which approach this subject, directly and indirectly, are focusing only on the perspective of British and US sports fans.

The aim of this preliminary study is to offer primary examination of the information organization by sports fans in Israel, and to discuss the elements, meanings and trends of Contemporary and common social phenomenon. This main goal consists of two sub-goals: first, to portray the

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historical development and to analyze the current status of online information and knowledge organization by sports fans; second, to discuss the meanings of this phenomenon, and to suggest potential future trends. For this, the study uses two qualitative methods: interviews and content analysis of websites and online social networks, used particularly by Hapoel Tel Aviv fans.

The results suggest that the widely acceptance on the Internet for private uses during the 1990's, and its rising popularity since then, led to two important changes: relative mitigation of creating and sharing information, and immense improvement in the quality and verity of communication channels. Two significant motives were found for the fans' online involvement: their desire to express their emotional connection to the sports team, and to create an independent formation, parallel to the team's official communication channel which can often be used to display contrary perceptions and ideology. The first motive point to the fans desire to be more actively supportive, as a way to produce social contribution to the fans community or as a way to improve their status among the community. The second motive on the other hand, point to the ambition to produce an alternative to the existing information, as a way to oppose to the source of the information (the team or its owner) or as a need to create more relevant information, focusing on the fans interests, which otherwise will receive none or marginal attention from the commercial sports website or the official team website.

The study also found that the protest against the club's owner in 2012, was the pinnacle of the fans desire to maintain independent activity which will support the creation of a new uncensored content, and will improve the sharing of ideas, the spreading of information, and collaboration. The nature of the protest, the unification of several fans groups, and the need for speedy distribution of information, immensely widen the use of different platforms and the way the information was being organized across them. The frequency use of every platform is dependent on both the quality of the content and the potential number of users exposed to the information. Hence, because of Twitter relatively low number of users in Israel (although its advantages in instant creation and spreading of information) was less commonly used; websites, especially because of their accessibly (no registration required) and their preferable design and visual richness, were second in popularity; and in first, came the different groups and pages on Facebook, mainly due to the magnitude of users and it's superior interactivity over the fairly static websites. The period of the fans protest can be considered as the main catalyst for great advances in the integration of online tools, and the involvement of fans due to the use of these tools.

Addressing the change in the information consumption by fans, two important elements should be noted: habits and possibilities. As for habits, sports fans were used to adapt themselves according to the sources of information. Namely, the information relating to the team, was delivered by television, radio or newspapers, and the fan was merely a consumer. From this perspective, the Internet advanced a vast change in the way the information is produced and it helped remove the former limitation of time of broadcast and physical location (e.g. proximity to TV set). The second element, possibilities, presents a revolution in the sports fandom culture, for it influenced both the habit of the fans, and the importance and rearranging of sportive information. The main change is

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found in the information sources, particularly the transformation from single to multi sources, and adding the private sources to the formal or commercial ones.

The current era could be considered as interim which do not possess full integration between the different information platforms and sources. Nonetheless, while YouTube clips, Facebook statuses and Twits are already presented on TV, some degree of unity of information exposure could be expected, while the main issue will be the level of instancy. Therefore, the fans with technological knowledge and means to find information in an unsorted environment, will be exposed to it prior to others. It is important to emphasize that the Internet do not represent improvement of the current but rather a new situation in relation to the source of information and its openly sharing and spreading. Websites are not a linear continuation of fanzines, just as online forum or Facebook are not linear continuation of the fans interaction in the stands. The Israeli sports fans prior to the Internet era was largely a byproduct of professional sports teams, while today, due to formation of new sportive information, they form an independent community with enhanced capabilities for each and every individual.

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