

DIGITAL INTERACTION AND COMMUNICATION IN SPORTS

JOSEF WIEMEYER

Josef Wiemeyer is professor of sports science at Technische Universität Darmstadt focusing on movement and training science and sports informatics. He is currently conducting research on selected topics of technology-supported learning and training. He has published on topics such as serious games for health, individualized training with exergames, mobile training applications and learning in human-robot dyads.

Introduction

Whether professional or amateur sports, both are - like all other aspects of society - deeply affected by digitalisation. From the recording and processing of data, to data modelling and simulation, to the presentation and communication of and the interaction with data, all major aspects of digitalisation are found in the world of sports (Wiemeyer et al., 2010; Baca, 2015). Digitalisation is used in sports competitions, training, and learning interventions. Other important fields of application in sports also include knowledge, information and communications systems. The core of sports research focuses on two themes: research on human performance in different contexts (e.g., high performance sports and health-related sports) and on targeted measures that influence this performance; and research on information about and the communication of sports performance and activities.

The main theme of this working paper is the critical assessment of the influence that digitalisation has on communication. The following two examples illustrate both the possibilities and the challenges of digitalising information and communications processes in the world of sports.

Example #1 - Internet coaching

At the professional level many sports disciplines require athletes to travel all over the world to compete. Yet in some disciplines it is not customary for a coach to accompany the athlete. Coaches therefore face a challenge: how to provide high quality coaching from a distance. Internet coaching is a possible solution, where communication between the coach and the athlete occurs over long distances without them needing to be physically present in the same place.

Link (2006) has, for example, developed a special web interface for such

long distance coaching in beach volleyball. Both the coach and the athlete can analyse videos together, despite geographic distances between them. They can comment on and annotate these videos, and they can illustrate strategic moves and exchange audiovisual information via a special white-board.

Link is able to prove that internet coaching changes the structure and content of the interaction between coach and athlete. Internet communication is significantly more task-oriented and focused than face-to-face coaching. In face-to-face coaching, the coach and athlete spend more time troubleshooting problems, and the conversation is less visually oriented with more time spent on social exchanges. Internet communication offers a wider variety of avenues of expression, topics of conversation change more rapidly and there are fewer pauses in the conversation. The dominance of the coach is more pronounced during these internet communication sessions. Thus there is a propensity for the power imbalance between coach and athlete to become more pronounced.

Example #2 - Information and communications systems

Sports are a social phenomenon with a positive connotation for most. This is reflected in communications in sports. Digitalisation - especially the internet - has brought about significant change here (e.g., Horky, Schieler and Stierl, 2018). The quasi-monopolistic traditional mass media outlets (particularly the press and TV) once transmitted sports news unidirectionally. However, sports aficionados with an internet connection now have the opportunity not only to connect with other sports fans via digitalised media, but also to actively participate in broadcasting information. These new avenues of communication and interaction are especially evident in “niche sports“ that are only rarely represented in the mass media.

The website of the German Olympic Sports Confederation (Deutscher Olympischer Sportbund, DOSB) reveals that the organization currently, as of 29 March 2019, uses Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. Anyone who is interested in sports can therefore personalise their own web content and newsfeeds. A further look at the different posts on the DOSB’s social media networks reveals that highly heterogeneous content is being created, ranging from personal opinions to professional reports (cf. Horky, Schieler and Stierl, 2018).

However, sports clubs and associations sharing information with their fans is not the only way social media is being used in sports. A variety of other types

of interaction take place via social media as well; for example, “fans can now directly communicate with their star athletes and clubs and vice versa” (Grimmer and Horky, 2018, S.18). These digital practices are potentially value-added, as they provide opportunities to carry out research and gather information, to exchange and network, to sustainably grow an audience, to market and advertise, and to establish intimacy. However, these practices also create a plethora of challenges, such as dealing with potential insult and hate campaigns and hounding, widespread public outrage expressed via social media (termed “shitstorms” in German), invasion of privacy through stalking and mobbing, and videos, photo and text copyright violations.

Sports journalism, too, has seen the downsides of digitalisation: why should an athlete participate in an interview that has the potential for conflict, if they can publish their viewpoint in an unscrutinised social media post? It is obvious that the role of the (exclusive and autonomous) intermediary between sports and sports consumer has been restricted as a result of the increased use of social media (Grimmer and Horky, 2018).

A further facet of digital communication in sports is the discovery of scandals (von Sikorski and Hänelt, 2018). Social norms, such as fair play or equal opportunity, are frequently violated in the world of sports, which is heavily characterised by normative ethics. On the one hand, ubiquitous, digitally connected technology can aid in discovering and sanctioning such violations; on the other hand, there is increased propensity to make false accusations and allegations.

Conclusion and outlook

There is no doubt that digitalisation has changed sports significantly. The numerous new possibilities for communication, participation and digital networking are countered by a variety of challenges and dangers, such as the manipulation of information and threats to privacy, personal integrity, and information security, among many others. Policies and potentially statutory regulations are needed in order to establish an adequate balance between different participants' reasonable needs.

Digital technology will continue to develop – including in sports in particular: technical capacity and ubiquitous availability will without a doubt increase. Video drones, 360 degree views and virtual technology are already in use, for example (Hebbel-Seeger and Horky, 2018). Furthermore, live streaming will gain in importance as transmission capacities improve and can better convey a sense of personal presence (Burk and Grimmer, 2018). Closely con-

nected with the latter is the increasing, ever harder to monitor infiltration of private and public spheres. On the one hand we have increased transparency and participation, on the other disinformation, manipulation, violation of personal integrity and ever fewer private spaces to withdraw to. The online streaming of the terrorist attack in Christchurch, New Zealand on 15 March 2019, shows that lines can be quickly overstepped. Appropriate technical, political and legal parameters must be established to maintain a healthy balance.

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