

*This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy*

## **On Mediasport Consumption**

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*To the Basque taxpayers,  
in lasting gratitude*

## ***Abstract***

This thesis dissertation reflects on the way fans consume mediated sport today. The work is comprised of four articles. In *Manufacturing conflict narratives in Real Madrid versus Barcelona football matches* we challenged the identity-based generation of conflict and proposed a celebrity-based framework to understand fans' sport consumption of narratives. In *Community building in the digital age. Dynamics of online sports discussion* and *Discussion moderation in online media. The case of Marca newspaper* the authors examined the comments section under the news in sports journalism. We explored users' participation and interaction behaviour in a Spanish online sports community to conclude that fans' engagement was based on liquid connections. Finally, in *Quantifying the immeasurable: A reflection on sport, time and media* I built on the previous research to comprehensively inquire the nature of mediasport consumption. Following the standardization of modern sports by means of quantification, I argue that mediated sport has become a globally consumable and simplified commodity.

## ***Resumen***

Esta tesis reflexiona sobre el consumo contemporáneo del deporte mediado. El trabajo se compone de cuatro artículos. En *Manufacturing conflict narratives in Real Madrid versus Barcelona football matches* cuestionamos la generación del conflicto basada en características identitarias y proponemos un marco teórico centrado en la cultura de celebridades para entender el consumo de narraciones de los aficionados. En *Community building in the digital age. Dynamics of online sports discussion* y *Discussion moderation in online media. The case of Marca newspaper* los autores analizamos los comentarios de los lectores en las noticias de periodismo deportivo. Exploramos la participación e interacción de los usuarios en una comunidad online deportiva y concluimos que el comportamiento de los fans se caracterizaba por la liquidez de sus lazos. Por último, en *Quantifying the immeasurable: A reflection on sport, time and media* se retoma la investigación anterior para ofrecer una reflexión integral sobre la esencia del consumo de mediasport. A través de la standarización del deporte moderno llevada a cabo mediante su cuantificación, justifico que el deporte mediado se ha convertido en un producto global y simplificado.

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Y claro, luego está Sonia, objeto infinito, que aprendió a leer antes que yo.

## ***How to read this thesis***

This is an article thesis, also known as thesis by publication. The reader will not find an essay-like work but a set of articles. Each one of them functions as a single-purpose research but all four are devoted to the same field of mediasport consumption.

All articles must comply with some ground rules. The Department of Communication of the Universitat Pompeu Fabra establishes the following requirements for the thesis by publication format:

- I. The articles must be published or accepted for publication.
- II. The dissertation must include at least 4 articles.
- III. A minimum of one article must be published originally in English.
- IV. A minimum of one article must be published in a journal indexed at the Web of Science (Social Sciences Citation Index).
- V. The candidate must always be the first author.
- VI. The candidate must be the sole author at least in one article.

In addition to these requirements, the candidate must deliver a general introduction to the articles as well as conclusions that unify the work and allow the reader to understand it as a whole.

The reader can skip the introduction and jump to the articles, which can be read autonomously or together in the order proposed by the author. However, by reading the introduction, the reader will familiarize with the field, and after going through the articles, the discussion and conclusion sections will resume the main ideas and outline the connections between them.

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## Introducing mediasport

*“There’s a great industry in other people’s pleasure”*

MARGARET THATCHER, 1983

In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (Milos Forman, 1975) Jack Nicholson plays the part of Randle ‘Mac’ McMurphy, a newly arrived inmate in a psychiatric hospital in Oregon, USA, who serves a short sentence for statutory rape. The ward of the mental institution suspects that McMurphy is faking his madness to avoid the penal labour and live a much more comfortable life. Surrounded by lunatics, Mac feels amused by their eccentricities: Mr Bancini’s litany of being tired, Mr Harding’s delusional recollections of his wife or Mr Martini’s inability to play poker. They all attend the group therapy, run on a very tight schedule by nurse Ratched.

One day ‘Mac’ McMurphy proposes a change of schedule to watch the opening of the World Series at the Yankee Stadium, a ball match he has not missed since he was a child, ‘even in the cooler, when I’m in the cooler they run it there or they’ll have a riot’, he adds remembering his years in jail. But Ratched would only give in if he is able to get a majority of votes. Feeling confident about the simplicity of the task McMurphy starts to ask the rest of the inmates to raise their hands but unexpectedly he is not capable of drawing enough votes. ‘What’s the matter with you guys? Come on, be good Americans’. Still unable to digest what is happening before his eyes he implores: ‘there’s got to be one guy here that’s not a total nut’. In the end, sitting alone in front of a turned off television set, McMurphy would impersonate the voice of the narrator and attract the attention of the incredulous inmates with the epic deeds of Mickey Mantle.

Why is that surprising for Mac the behaviour of his mates? Are not they supposed to act insanely being that the reason they live in a mental institution? He could understand the existence of ‘partial nuts’ but the refusal to watch the ball game is the border to cross towards the total lunacy. It seems that there is only so much crazy stuff he can tolerate and the baseball is off limits. It is highly ironical that in an environment of madness wherein every conduct can happen, McMurphy perceives that not wanting to watch a sport game is just ‘too crazy’, an amount of craziness that can only be interpreted as excessive even for a madhouse.

Only a few things in our societies have this kind of power, the power to dictate the permitted, the preferable thing to do. What McMurphy’s conduct reflects is a normative impulse to highlight the differences between the normal and the abnormal behaviour, positioning the game at the very centre of normality. Sport thus has the singular ability to pinpoint the area of inclusion, and consequently of exclusion, of an individual within a group, transcending the mere

sphere of the sporting competition and penetrating the sphere of social relations. In the half-century since the period the film portrays, set in 1963, and despite baseball's popularity decline in the last decades (Guttman, 1988), the argument seems more cogent than ever. Sport relates to identity, culture, belonging, social grouping, sharing, community, masculinity, class struggle, social inequalities and progress, to name but a few. Today we are far from thinking in its unidimensionality and more willing to accept the capacity of sport to pervade many aspects of our everyday life, and it has been this way for the most part of the second half of the last century, at least since the advent and popularization of television after World War II (Whannel, 2009).

### ***Consuming mediasport***

The growing social impact of sport throughout the last decades has paralleled its transformation into a commodity (Andrews, 2004; Giulianotti, 2002, 2005a, 2005b). To commodify, needless to say, means to turn into a commodity something that was not marketable until that moment. The commodification process inevitably presumes a previous stage, a pre-commoditised era, wherein items were not part of the market logic (Miller, Lawrence, McKay, & Rowe, 2001, p. 130). Giulianotti in fact has favoured the term *hypercommodification* to explain the current stage of development of sport and its position in the consumer culture (2002). As a consequence, the sport content has become media content, the sport fan has become a sport consumer and the sporting institutions have become ordinary for-profit companies (Blackshaw, 2002).

The implications of the commodification process go beyond the sports realm as well as its causes are more deeply rooted – sport commodification being the effect but not the reason of it. Following some critics of the consumer culture today we could define the sporting commodity as a by-product of the 'cognitive-cultural capitalism' (Scott, 2008). Sociologically speaking, the 'cultural turn' (Chaney, 1994; Tomlinson, Markovits, & Young, 2003) has prompted to shift focus from the 'productive paradigm' to the 'consumption paradigm', fostering the consumer culture sports dwell in (Horne, 2006).

It is precisely the act of consuming the one that primarily constructs our social identity, determining our social relations. In Bauman's words, 'one needs to be a consumer first before one can think of becoming anything in particular' (1998, p. 26). Social but also individual identity, lifestyle, consumption, all have pervaded the sport spectacle and have gently forced sport fans to consider themselves sport consumers. According to Crawford, for many decades the debate around football fans have revolved around the lost essence of fandom, the rigid dichotomies between true/real versus false fans (2003, 2004), but he notes that this

classification no longer applies as fan culture must be considered 'primarily as a consumer culture' (Crawford, 2004, p. 34), and considered as such, there cannot be nothing inauthentic about expanding the fan experience to other spheres of consumption.

In that transformation of sport into commodity the media have played a decisive role. The relationship between sport and media traverses the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the nature of it has been largely the mistrust. First it was the radio. In 1922 when the BBC was launched in the UK and began to air experimental radio programmes, newspaper editors prevented the BBC from broadcasting sports commentaries (Horne, Tomlinson, & Whannel, 1999) in the thinking that this will negatively affect the circulation of print journalism. Then it was the television. In 1953 in the USA it was estimated that 69 per cent of the households who had purchased a television set in the last year stopped attending the stadium (Magnane, 1966). Sport institutions sought to annul broadcasting rights contracts under the assumption that in the long run television would end up killing the competition. Television 'added the living room to the stadium' (Whannel, 2005, p. 413) as a place of sports consumption and professional leagues were not particularly convinced of the good that might come with that for 'the gates still represented the major revenue source' (Evens & Lefever, 2011, p. 37).

Today, matchday revenue – ticket sales, fundamentally – has a limited impact on the total budget of the top-flight European football clubs, amounting only to one third of their income (Deloitte, 2014); the 'primary consumption' has moved beyond the sporting performance in the stadia (Billings, 2011) towards a mediated consumption of sport, merchandising, interpersonal or computer-mediated sports discussion, or the like. As Billings has noted, 'a person can consume sports media for hours each day without ever seeing or hearing an enacted sporting event' (2011, p. 185). There is little surprise, therefore, that many sport fans nowadays do not necessarily watch ball games on any screen, let alone set foot in sporting arenas. So, how do we consume mediasport? The answer is manifold and it varies from country to country. Let's take a look at two of the most developed media markets worldwide: the USA and the UK.

In the USA 71 per cent of the adult population claimed to have followed sports in 2013, amounting to 170 million sports fans in the country. Fans typically follow between 3 and 4 sports, and half of the fans follow American football. On average American fans spend 8.3 hours per week consuming sports content, here including 'placing a bet' or playing fantasy sports games. It is very revealing the fact that only 3.8 hours of those 8.3 are spent watching sports on television, while the rest of the consumption resides in the online editions of the press, the social networks and secondary activities like betting. For the media industry it is of extreme importance the connection that fans make with the brands displayed in

sports competitions. 27 per cent of sports fans said that they are more likely to be interested in a brand that sponsors or advertises around sports, while this percentage ascended up to 36 per cent if asked to engaged football fans. (TV Sports Markets, 2013).

In the UK there are about 33 million sports fans and their behaviour seems to be less committed consumption-wise than American fans'. They spend 6.2 hours per week consuming sports. Only 24 per cent of British football fans would be interested in a product advertised in a sports contest, and only a 19 per cent would be more likely to buy it. 57 per cent of the fans had not paid to watch sports in the last 12 months, a very worrying information considering the centrality of the pay-per-view model media corporations want to impose. Why do British aficionados consume mediasport? Primarily because of the enjoyment; secondly, because it is a nice distraction from everyday life; and thirdly, because their families and friends do so (TV Sports Markets, 2012).

There is a growing interest in the emerging markets like China as any regular sport consumer might have noticed in the last years when observing how Western competitions have increasingly tried to adjust their time schedules to accommodate the Asian viewers, as has been the case with the English Premier League (Manzenreiter, 2013). An astonishing 90 per cent of the urban, Internet connected, Chinese adults claim to be sports fans, and they basically consume Western sports. Fans in Europe and the USA spend between 4 and 8 hours per week consuming sports content, whereas urban people in Brazil spend 10 and in China 11. And more importantly, while the number of fans open to pay for live sports online has declined slightly across Western European countries, it has increased exponentially in China or Brazil (TV Sports Markets, 2012).

Very significantly, recent research on mediasport consumers in the digital age is shedding light on new behavioural trends beyond the sport events. For example, some authors have begun to hypothesize about the 'lunch-time' primetime. It seems that employees are increasingly having their lunch in front of their computers in what has been coined the 'workspace media' (Tussey, 2013). Some of this consumption is also made in a clandestine way, behind the boss's back, peeking the latest updates about your team. Subsequently, some media companies are growing an interest in providing content that fits the conditions under which this content is consumed, in order to attract new advertisers willing to explore this niche market.

These are some of the many reasons why sport occupies centre stage in the entertainment industry and has displaced music, films, porn or video games as the primary drama generator of our time. It has now become popular the speech given by the media mogul Rupert Murdoch in 1996 at the Annual General Meeting of News Corporation: 'Sports absolutely overpowers film and all other forms of

entertainment in drawing viewers to television. We will be doing in Asia what we intend to do elsewhere in the world – that is, use sports as a battering ram and a lead offering in all our pay television operations’ (Cashmore, 2010).

And so they did and still do. News Corporation has commitments to spend over the next 5 years US\$655 million in sports programming rights, mainly in National Rugby League, Football Federation Australia and English Premier League (News Corporation, 2013). Likewise, the other major media companies have designed similar strategies. CBS has deployed US\$11,980 million on sports broadcasting rights (CBS Corporation, 2013); Disney, parent company of ESPN, US\$50,684 million in NBA, MLB, Nascar and NFL, with a huge US\$25,906 million budget already committed beyond the year 2018 (The Walt Disney Company, 2013); and NBC with purchasing obligations of US\$33,270 million for broadcasting sports mega events such as the Super Bowl and the Olympics (NBC Universal, 2013).

This scenario might dramatically be altered if new competitors enter the broadcasting rights market. Largest all-around new age companies like Facebook, Netflix, Google, Apple or Amazon could force traditional media companies out of business if they show an interest in acquiring those rights. That is why we are seeing now a tendency toward long-term deals between traditional actors and sports that could limit the access of those new predators to premium sports content. In the US we can clearly see a *modus operandi* compatible with this threat. Examples are: The MLB eight-year deal with Fox and Turner, the US Open Gold 12-year deal with Fox, the NBC and International Olympic Committee deal through 2032, the reportedly next nine-year deal between ESPN and the NBA, the NBC 10-year deal with the Kentucky Derby, the NFL deal through 2022 with Telemundo, Comcast, CBS, Fox and ESPN, Nascar and NBC through 2024, the ESPN 12-year deal with Wimbledon tennis tournament and 11-year deal with US tennis Open, the NBC and Ryder Cup deal through 2030. All these agreements can be understood as huge efforts to mitigate the looming uncertainty that provokes ignoring how media and sport landscape will look like in the near future.

Despite this uncertainty though, it still seems safe to predict that the hegemony of sports as the premium media content is irreversible in the short term. The ‘cultural ubiquity’ (David Rowe, 2011, p. 94) conquered by sport in our societies feels like a very strong competitive edge, in the process of growing even larger, if anything. This cultural ubiquity prevents the seasonal nature of sports – with its openings as well as decisive moments – from affecting the business model, run uninterrupted all year long. Interestingly, Rupert Murdoch obstinately refused to bid for sports mega events broadcasting rights– Football World Cups, European Cups, Olympic Games – and centred on the day-to-day of sports competitions –

bidding for domestic leagues and the like –, assuming that business-wise it made more sense to run a 24/7 show than a mega-event-based one.

All in all, today we are far from thinking that the relationship between media and sport could be anything apart from mutually beneficial (an extended literature review on mediasport can be seen in my article Lopez-Gonzalez, 2014, which is not part of this thesis). By 1988, the ESPN, the American sports-based TV station, yielded greater profits than the CBS or ABC networks (Wenner, 1989, p. 8). John Horne, not without a fine sense of irony, has pointed out that ‘the philosophical question, what is, and what is not, sport has been decided pragmatically by what appears in the sport sections of newspapers or in radio or television broadcasts (2006, p. 42). That is precisely why Parente defined the relationship between sports and media as ‘interdependent’ in a seminal article – arguably first of its kind – published in the *Journal of Communication* in the 1970s (Parente, 1977).

### ***Origins of mediasport research***

Probably Parente’s work would have not been possible if two years before – and also in the *Journal of Communication* – Michael Real had not published his groundbreaking examination on the 1974 Super Bowl (Real, 1975). Real had an unusual idea based on a hunch: he counted the amount of time the ball was in play. He discovered that the game itself was just a small portion of the spectacle and that most of the time the Super Bowl was about something else than playing the ball. Wenner points out that Real’s big contribution was to think that ‘the game of mediated sport was much more than the game’ (2006, p. 45). Beginning with this intuition, Real inaugurated the interdisciplinary field where sports and media meet each other. Until that moment, Wenner reminds us, ‘the mediation of sports was not part of the disciplinary conversation in either media studies or sport studies’ (2006, p. 46).

It was not until the 1990s that Lawrence Wenner (1998), in an attempt to unite the fields of sport and media studies and transcend the ‘SportWorld’ concept proposed by Lipsyte (1975), coined the term ‘mediasport’ (first spelled as MediaSport). In this regard, Real said that to ignore mediated sport would be like ignoring the relevance of ‘the church in the Middle Ages or ignoring the role of art in the Renaissance’ (Real, 1998, p. 15). Probably the best definition of mediasport is the one proposed by Wenner himself:

Mediasport today operates in a specific historical arrangement of technology, advertising and consumerism. These mass-mediated sports give the deep fan crucial expressive, liminal, cathartic, ideational mechanisms and experiences. They represent, celebrate, and interpret contemporary social life, warts and

all. Understanding the ritual dimension of media culture is essential to understanding how humans act as they are interconnected by mediasport institutions, technology, texts and experience (Wenner, 1998, p. 25).

Although today sports and media relationship have entered the scholarly discussion beyond the shadow of a doubt, it is revealing to revisit some of its preliminary works to realize the minefield they step into when they first began to research. Wenner himself solemnly states in the preface of *Media, sports and society* 'I think I should admit something up front. I'm a sports fan' (Wenner, 1989, p. 7) as if someone should state up front the gender for a study about women, skin colour for a journal of black studies or ideology in order to publish in a journal about politics.

### ***Attributes of mediasport***

As a mediated commodity, sport has many singular attributes. Before the advent of the digital media sport was believed to attract a very desirable demographics for advertisers. The hard-to-reach male adult viewers from 18 to 49 years old and with high disposable income composed the sports audience (Wenner, 1989). Today things seem to have changed slightly because the society in which those assumptions were made has changed considerably. First, the gender differentiation has lost momentum as female viewers have grown an interest in sports consumption. 43 per cent of sport consumers in the USA are female fans (TV Sports Markets, 2013). Second, women's incorporation to labour market has diffused the role of the decision-maker at home. The products advertised at sport events are no longer so rigidly *genderised* as they used to be but there is no denying though that sport continues to be a heavy stronghold for masculinity.

Bellamy (2006, p. 67) listed eight attributes why we should consider sport as a *key television exemplar*: (1) Sporting events are presented live with the attendant element of real-time suspense; (2) Unlike other live events, sports are regularly scheduled and continuing like other entertainment series, which makes them cost effective; (3) There are minimal barriers of language and literacy for sports viewers; (4) Even those who are not fans have a generally benign attitude toward sport; (5) Sports are so culturally ingrained that they can have direct and powerful media effects, such as civic or even national celebration, that most programming cannot; (6) Sports telecasts offer many opportunities for zap-proof advertising; (7) Sports telecasts are widely regarded as an excellent forum for effective promotion of other television promotions; (8) The long-term marriage of television and sports is so well established that the industries are increasingly integrated in effect or in fact.

All those attributes inform sports content as a highly valuable media commodity. However, the digital media are supposed to dramatically change the conditions of viewership and consumption; in a word, to transform the mediasphere. I have been cautious enough to say ‘supposed to’ because, despite Internet’s impact on every day’s life, television continues to be the number one media platform to consume sports, with 94 per cent of Americans claiming to have watched sports on television in 2013 (TV Sports Markets, 2013). This trend could shift any time now, with the computer, tablet and mobile device consumption growing exponentially every year. Mediasport, in a way, appears to be at a crossroad at the moment. Like any other media-oriented commodity, the digital has transformed its habitat, but only partially. The old ways, yet to disappear, and the new ways, still to establish, of doing business around sport cohabit while their main old actors involved are obviously unwilling to hand over their prerogatives.

Irrespective of whether or not those attributes are on the verge of disappearance, there are still many others that play a fundamental role in understanding digital mediasport today. On top of them, I would like to add an attribute that could be summarized in what Whannel calls ‘the fragmentation of the audiences’ (Whannel, 2009, 2010), or to be more precise, the sports ability to fight against the growing tendency of audience fragmentation. With the proliferation of television channels and the expansion of the media offer, the share of viewers a TV show could hope to attract had significantly decreased. In this context, sport could – and still can – claim to be one of the last strongholds to efficiently counteract the challenges of such a fragmented viewership.

It is noteworthy Whannel’s work because he managed to foresee – arguably before anyone else – the tendencies of the sport media consumption in the digital age. As early as 1992 he stressed the transformative endeavour that sport could have in the media ecology as a whole (Whannel, 1992). Sport is a predator, in this sense, an invasive species that forces the rest of the dwellers to migrate. Similarly, sports chatter and sports news generate a phenomenon called ‘vortextuality’. Vortextuality is the magnetic attraction which some news are endowed with, the capacity of few news stories to dominate the public sphere and articulate the people’s discussion for a limited period of time (Whannel, 2001), as seen in Article 1. The death of Princess Diana or the trial of Michael Jackson were good examples of it.

But beyond them Whannel realized that sport was arguably the only media content that managed to consistently deliver these vortexes, and more importantly, to generate them in advance, in a programmed fashion, so the media could build up the event and make the audience acquainted with the main characters if necessary. If we stop and think for a moment about the chosen metaphors to depict it, vortexes, predators, invasions, there is something inherently wild, animal, natural



about sports impact on media and society, as a climate disaster that cannot be prevented nor anticipated, as a wild force of nature, a hurricane or a storm, that devastates the environment and annihilates anything that dares to stand against it.

On the bright side, however, sporting events, unlike most media shows, still function as ‘get-together shows’ (Magnane, 1966), social occasions in which people could gather and comment. As a matter of fact, these shows partly contend the assumption of Putnam about the decline in social capital and the privatization of leisure time caused by television (1995, 2000). On the contrary, they are perfect examples of must-see programs that contribute to the spirit of socialization and increase in a way the sense of community and even the civic engagement, as more recent research has demonstrated (Moy, Scheufele, & Holbert, 1999).

All in all, sports events, and sports mega/media events in particular (Roche, 2000, 2003), defy the fragmented nature of people’s desires and interests, their multiplatform and multitasking contemporary behaviour that degrades any commitment into a liquid relationship, and allow sport to be seen as the last bastion of that communitarian sentiment summed up in the expression ‘everybody watching the same at the same time’ (David Rowe, 1999; Whannel, 2009).

The vortextuality is a central characteristic even in modern digital mediascape; no matter how increasingly scattered the audience is and how much the offer available grows, the mediascape always finds its way of reuniting the flock. This ‘watching together and simultaneously’ that the vortex enables and promotes is undergoing a resurrection with the social media and the empowerment of its audiences. New media, social television (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012), ‘second screens’ where spectators comment on the content they watch on the primary screen (Karppinen, 2013; Vanattenhoven & Geerts, 2012), Twitter (Lochrie & Coulton, 2011) and especially its trending topics, all are magnificent tools for vortex generation. Fans could potentially create bonds of belonging when interacting with each other and re-enact a sense of community. This perspective is widely contested by many scholars who see in social media interaction a form of communication characterized by a communitarian/egotistic desire of sharing (Rendueles, 2013). Individuals seem to wish to participate of ‘something bigger’ without leaving their living room, a practice that could be defined as ‘being alone together’ (Coleman, 2009).

Sport once again demonstrates – and I confess I am overstepping here by a mile because this is largely a non-scientific intuition that I infer from what I have argued all along the articles comprising this thesis dissertation, but nevertheless I will say it –, sport demonstrates, I was saying, that it functions as a privileged thermometer for societies, a social lab presenting the alleviated symptoms of more profound social illnesses. If ‘being alone together’ will become an issue in the next

decades and digital social networks play a role in that, be that role of alleviation or worsening, I deeply believe that sports communities as well as their online interactions have the potentiality to anticipate them because they bring together the individualistic tendencies of consumerism and the natural desire to share a moment or a feeling within a community of equals.

### ***Mediasport as paradoxical commodity***

Also, as a commodity, sport resolves some intriguing paradoxes; for instance, its mixture of rationality in conjunction with emotional factors. Bale understood sports as a highly rationalized form of modernity (Bale, 1994), a representation of the bourgeois values and principles of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, and a son of the British industrialization. This Marxist perspective has been fully supported by many scholars who have seen in sport the perfect embodiment of the mechanized work and in sportsmen the transmutation of human beings into robots (Brohm, 1978; Hoch, 1972; Rigauer, 1981). As I have argued in Article 4 (Lopez-Gonzalez, 2014), sports today build on this rationality to offer a spectacle rationalized by means of quantification and records.

Undoubtedly, the commodification can be understood as a result of this process. However, no matter how developed the commercialisation of sports become, the emotional aspects continue to be significant to the commodity. As Whannel puts it, if sport is an industry, it is clearly a rather unorthodox one, because how else could we explain the rise of the prices and the decline in quality at the same time? (2004). Almost no other product in our societies can claim to have no substitute with similar qualities. Foreign manufacturers cannot reduce cost of production and offer best value for an analogue good. Fans cannot change sides and get involved with new teams. Sentiments and alliances more often than not are inherited from the family circle and community, and individuals learn them in the same fashion they learn to read and write.

The sporting goods are bestowed with a great deal of fetishism that allows their marketers to commercialize *original* products for many times its cost and, even then, minimize the impact of counterfeiting. Emotions cannot be detached from the equation and sport teams, leagues and institutions know that. Commodifying means after all to introduce step-by-step elements of the logics of the market while respecting the emotional aspects that enhance the value of it.

To make our case on the fine balance between these two positions, we can observe, for instance, the stock market. Sport teams have been traditionally perceived as highly volatile, a bad investment all in all. In an empirical examination of the Spanish and English football leagues the researchers found that the agents in the market behaved according to a 'risk averse pattern' after a game

lost and decreased their investment in the team's shares (Berument & Ceylan, 2012). Investors seem to react in a self-fulfilling prophecy basis, anticipating a collective hysteria caused by a chain of bad results, without knowing how to come to terms with the rational/emotional components of the product.

Another intriguing paradox that underlies the sport commodity is the individual versus collective dimension. Sport is in its nature a social practice. Apparently no one can *sport* alone. It involves a community of practitioners, fans, spectators, et cetera. Even when practicing alone, one fights against history, or a former or future self. Consumption, on the contrary, is the epitome of the individualization, the way modern societies have transferred to the private sphere the principles of freedom and liberty, public in nature (McCracken, 1990). By the act of choosing, consumers reinforce their identity and exert their freedom. Sports fans know only too well that they cannot be treated as mere customers since 'the customer concept is incomplete because it fails to consider the role played by supporters in creating the product they are asked to buy' (Morrow, 1999, p. 3 as cited in Boyle & Haynes, 2004).

Under these circumstances sport institutions and the media have opened spaces of collaboration where the individual/collective dilemma could be transcended. This sort of consumption emphasizes the individual participation but is enhanced by a constructed sense of community, as we have explored in Article 2 and 3. New media and digital social networks appear to have facilitated the transition. Fans participate and interact through them redefining the boundaries between the spectacle and the audience. And that is the case not only in professional sports but also in every day's life. Popular races block the city streets on weekends and allow people to run 'lonely together' and share their marks worldwide via mobile apps, prescribing lifestyle and bringing to life the shelves of a sporting goods retail store.

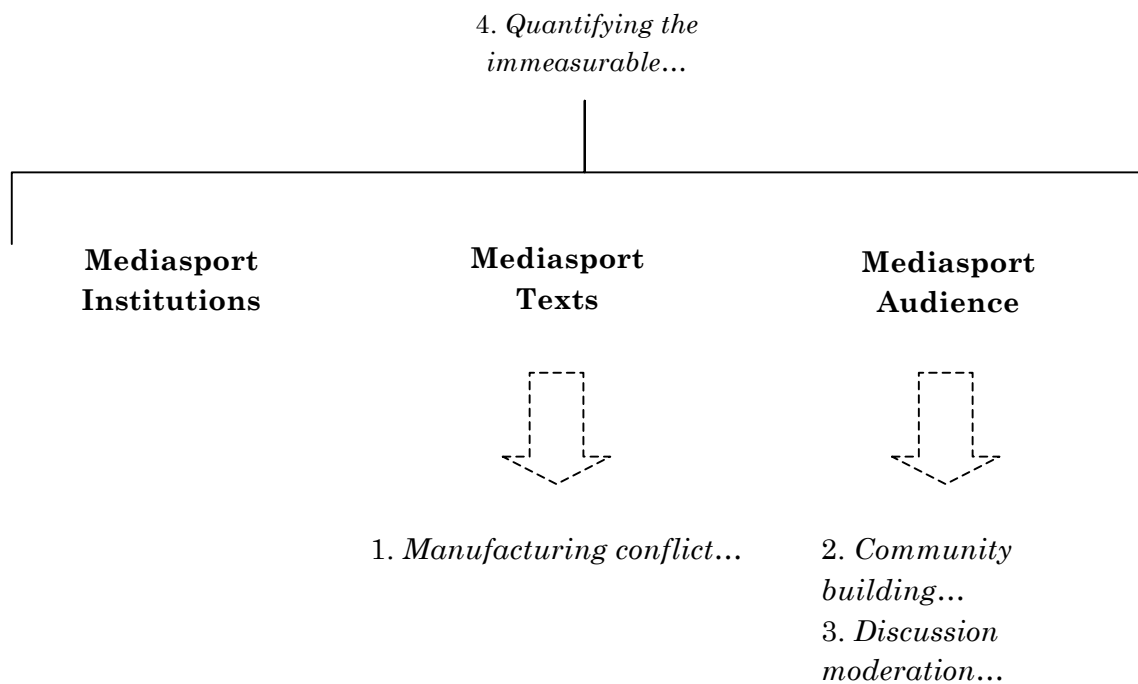
## **Study purposes**

This thesis is comprised of 4 papers. Each one of them has a separate study purpose. However, while encompassing a wide variety of perspectives, they all end up investigating about the same theme. The final aim has been to offer a comprehensive understanding of the mediasport consumption today. This means bringing together two separate and well-developed fields of study: mediasport and consumer culture.

Mediasport studies have been traditionally concerned with three major topics: mediasport institutions and organizations that play the role of the producer of the

show, mediasport texts including messages or content of mediated sport, and mediasport audiences, which investigates the interaction between those institutions and texts and the spectators consuming them (Kinkema & Harris, 1992, 1998; Wenner, 1989; Yoo, Smith, & Kim, 2013). As a matter of fact, Wenner, one of the founding fathers of the discipline, proposed a transactional model for sport inquiry that overviewed the relationships between society and the three of them: production, mediated content and audience experience (Wenner, 1989, p. 26). Wenner had borrowed this model from his own previous research in communication studies (Wenner, 1986) and added sports to the formula.

Drawing on Wenner’s model I have approached mediasport fundamentally from a textual perspective and an audience perspective. In Figure I we can see an overview of the selected approaches.



**Figure I.** Mediasport perspective in each article

In Article 1, the focus of the research was on the narratives depicted in sport journalism and how they made use of the conflict elements of the game to generate drama. The discursive approach took the news items as the study object and examined them by means of a content analysis. In Articles 2 and 3, the research focused on the audience perspective and analysed the participation and interaction of online readers in a sports online community. In order to outline the network the authors employed a structural analysis (to learn more about the specificities of the technical tool for the structural analysis you can see also Guerrero-Solé & Lopez-

Gonzalez, 2013, not part of this dissertation) and additionally, in Article 3, we conducted interviews with the people in charge of the community management.

Article 4 functions as an observation tower of the whole thesis. It combines the institutions, the media and the fans to offer a comprehensive look at the phenomenon. The purpose of this article was to triangulate the audience's consumption of a perfectly packaged commodity by some institutions that work in conjunction with the media that provides the desire for that consumption. All things considered, this thesis dissertation understands mediasport consumption as a holistic area of investigation that needs to look at every part of the puzzle to make sense of it.

In Table I there is an overview of the singular objective each article pursues and how they respond to different methodological frameworks. While Articles 1 and 4 were born as separate research projects, Articles 2 and 3 share a common sample and methodological apparatus with two different but complementary aims.

Article	Objective	Method	Sample
<i>1. Manufacturing conflict...</i>	To understand how the narratives of conflict between Real Madrid and FC Barcelona are constructed in sports journalism in Spain.	Content Analysis	1 clásico match 35 days in 4 online editions 11,035 news items
<i>2. Community building...</i>	To examine the community building in an online sport community in Spain.	Structural Analysis & Interviews	8 matches 15,141 comments 4,967 users
<i>3. Discussion moderation...</i>	To explore the moderation system in the comments section of an online sports community in Spain.		
<i>4. Quantifying immeasurable...</i>	To reflect on the concepts of quantification and records in contemporary professional sport from a time-centred and media perspective.	Philosophical inquiry	No sample

**Table I.** Summary of objectives and methodologies in each article

## List of articles

1. **Lopez-Gonzalez, Hibai; Guerrero-Solé, Frederic; Haynes, Richard** (2012). Manufacturing conflict narratives in Real Madrid versus Barcelona football matches. *International review for the sociology of sport*, ahead of print (online first). Doi: 10.1177/1012690212464965.<sup>1</sup>
2. **Lopez-Gonzalez, Hibai; Guerrero-Solé, Frederic & Larrea, Olatz** (2014). Community building in the digital age. Dynamics of online sports discussion. *Communication & Society*, 27(3): 83-105.<sup>2</sup>
3. **Lopez-Gonzalez, Hibai & Guerrero-Solé, Frederic** (2014). Discussion moderation in online media. The case of Marca newspaper. *El profesional de la información*, 23(1): 51-57. Doi: 10.3145/epi.2014.ene.06.<sup>3</sup>
4. **Lopez-Gonzalez, Hibai** (2014). Quantifying the immeasurable: A reflection on sport, time and media. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 41(3): 347-362. Doi: 10.1080/00948705.2013.832265.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*: JCR Impact Factor 2012=1.125 (Q2, Sociology; Q2, Hospitality, leisure, sport & tourism).

<sup>2</sup> *Communication & Society*: JCR Impact Factor 2012=0.102 (Q4, Communication).

<sup>3</sup> *El Profesional de la Información*: JCR Impact Factor 2012=0.439 (Q3, Information Science & Library Science).

<sup>4</sup> *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*: JCR Impact Factor 2012=0.324 (Q4, Ethics).

Lopez-Gonzalez H, Guerrero-Sole F, Haynes R. [Manufacturing conflict narratives in Real Madrid versus Barcelona football matches](#). International Review for the Sociology of Sport. 2014; 49(6):688-706.  
DOI: 10.1177/1012690212464965

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### **Community building in the digital age: Dynamics of online sports discussion**

#### *La construcción de comunidades en la era digital. Dinámicas del diálogo online deportivo*

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Approved: March 3, 2014

**ABSTRACT: Marca Community is arguably one of the most popular online sports communities in Spain with over 400,000 members. In its forum, users can comment on the news published by the sport-based newspapers Marca while interacting with other members. Drawing on the existing literature on virtual**



communities, this study empirically examines the engagement in online discussion in order to determine the degree of “community building” promoted by the members. We propose a methodological approach taking under consideration the singularities of the sports fans and of the online conversation. A structural analysis focusing on the user interaction was conducted over the members (N=4,967) who posted comments in 8 selected articles. The findings suggest that Marca Community is a non-hierarchical liquid network wherein members participate in an equal footing.

*RESUMEN: Con más de 400.000 miembros, la Comunidad Marca es posiblemente la comunidad deportiva online más popular en España. En sus foros de discusión los usuarios pueden comentar las noticias publicadas por el diario deportivo Marca e interactuar con otros usuarios. Este artículo analiza la involucración de los miembros en el diálogo con el fin de determinar el grado de construcción de comunidad que promueven. Hemos propuesto un acercamiento metodológico que tenga en consideración tanto las singularidades de los fans deportivos como del diálogo online. Llevamos a cabo un análisis estructural centrándonos en las interacciones de los usuarios (N=4.967) que comentaron en 8 noticias seleccionadas. Los resultados sugieren que la Comunidad Marca es un red no jerárquica en la cual los miembros participan en un plano de igualdad.*

**Keywords:** Citizen journalism, sport, online discussion, comments, community, Marca.

**Palabras clave:** periodismo participativo, deporte, conversación online, comentarios, Comunidad, Marca.

## 1. Introduction

Digital media consumers are living in an era largely determined by widespread citizen participation<sup>1</sup>. A myriad of online users access the Internet everyday in order to express and share their opinions. Particularly, comments posted by users in news websites are one of the most extended means of online participation<sup>2</sup>. In those comments participants interact with each other and the media creating online discussions that may even gain more attention than the news articles posted by the hosting website itself.

Although the strategies for generating profit from the user participation are still to be resolved, the media industry allocates considerable human and material resources to enable and encourage this participation, essentially in the hope that a higher user

<sup>1</sup> DOMINGO, D., QUANDT, T., HEINONEN, A., PAULUSSEN, S., SINGER, J. and VUJNOVIC M., “Participatory journalism practices in the media and beyond. An international comparative study of initiatives in online newspapers”, *Journalism practice*, vol. 2, nº 3, 2008, pp. 326-342.

<sup>2</sup> RUIZ, C., DOMINGO, D., MICÓ, J.L., DÍAZ-NOCI, J., MESO, K. and MASIP, P., “Public Sphere 2.0? The Democratic Qualities of Citizen Debates in Online Newspapers”, *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, vol. 16, nº 4, 2011, pp. 463-487.

engagement with the brand will be somehow transformed into money in the future<sup>3</sup>. In this effort, companies try to organize the otherwise fragmented online discussions and form virtual communities wherein users are regrouped into communities of interest<sup>4</sup>. That is in fact, according to Mark Deuze<sup>5</sup>, where the future of citizen journalism lies from an industry perspective: the creation of brand communities around the news. Nevertheless, although virtual communities promoted by media industry do not find it easy to succeed, there are some notable exceptions, sport being one of the greatest. In this sense, Deuze notes that “media projects have been particularly successful in the realm of other domains where communities of interest already exist, such as professional sport”<sup>6</sup>.

There is little doubt about the potential embedded in elite sports to gather different kinds of people around online discussion forums. Arguably sports chatter is becoming one of the most popular virtual discussion forms nowadays. Sport-based online communities have in many cases the advantage of being rooted in offline pre-existing communities of interest, which means a supportive fan base and a stable, long-term team or sportsman identification. However, as Hynes suggests, the traditional environment for sports fandom is decisively challenged by the online experience<sup>7</sup>. The Internet imposes new rules that challenge the dynamics of participation, interaction, heavy/soft user engagement, or locally/globally oriented content, to name but a few. In short, and most importantly, the new medium might define the way people live the communal experience, how they share opinions and interact with each other, that is, the way the virtual community is constructed.

This work explores the community building around online sports discussions in Spain by focusing on news commenting. In doing so, we would like to assess the community engagement or disengagement achieved by the participants in those discussions, describing a user-centered picture of a virtual community around sport.

With this aim in mind a case study was selected. Presumably, the most popular Spanish online sports community is “Marca Community”, with a growing number of 400,000 registered members. News comments posted by users in marca.com can rise up to 800,000-1,200,000 per month. Participants can comment on news published by *Marca* with an identified and permanent user profile. These participants establish links with each other as they mention or respond to others’ opinions and messages, therefore participating in the building of a virtual community.

## 2. The virtual sporting community

Sport-based virtual communities add to the specificities of the online communities the singularities of the sport itself. Sport, and specifically football in Europe, condenses a

<sup>3</sup> VUJNOVIC, M., SINGER, J.B., PAULUSSEN, S., HEINONEN, A., REICH, Z. and QUANDT, T., “Exploring the Political-Economical Factors of Participatory Journalism: A First Look into Self Reports by Online Journalists and Editors in Ten Countries”, *Journalism Studies*, vol. 4, nº 3, 2010, pp. 285-296.

<sup>4</sup> PREECE, J., “Online Communities: Researching Sociability and Usability in Hard reach Populations”, *Australian Journal of Information Systems*, vol. 11, nº 2, 2004, pp. 146-151.

<sup>5</sup> DEUZE, M., “The Future of Citizen Journalism”, in ALLAN, S. and THORSE, E., *Citizen Journalism. Global Perspectives*, Peter Lang, New York, 2009, pp. 257-263.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258.

<sup>7</sup> HYNES, D., “Jaysus! Is Janno a Bird? A Study of Fertility and Football in Online Forums”, in KROVEL, R. and ROKSWOLD, T., *We love to Hate Each Other. Mediated Football Fan Culture*, Nordicom, Göteborg, 2012.

vast number of socially significant traits such as national belonging, fan identity, or community engagement. Quite often, however, sports communities are approached from a behavioral perspective, focusing on the aggressive conduct of sport fans<sup>8</sup>. Ward<sup>9</sup> has argued that football matches are consubstantially violent, as heroic values are enhanced, thus promoting the confrontation between football fan communities. Although violence is not exclusive of sports, it certainly plays its part in it, and the use of derogatory language and insults are key elements to virtual communities around sport. As Boyle suggests “much of the sporting online debate is characterized by partisan and hostile comment, which the nature of the platform encourages in a way face-to-face debates makes more difficult”<sup>10</sup>.

Particularly in football, one might wonder whatever happened to those days in the decade of the 1980 when hooligans terrorized rival fans and prevented football from becoming the family-friendly commodity it is today. As the regulation intensified its fight, the “dysfunctional fans”<sup>11</sup> abandoned the stands or found themselves progressively secluded. Is it possible then to argue that some of those fans might have migrated to the online stands? Be that as it may, researchers have questioned the real impact of violence in virtual communities, emphasizing the socially controlled violence that takes place in them<sup>12</sup>. Similarly, Rokswold and Krøvel have indicated that although conflict and rivalry remain a significant element in the forging of fan identities, they provide values without endangering the basic relationships in society<sup>13</sup>. As a result of this view, online discussion in sport forums have been framed in terms of “the opportunity to give vent to some pent-up aggression”<sup>14</sup>, that is to say, actual violence replaced by a simulacrum, a diluted version of the Two Minutes Hate in Orwell’s *1984*.

Besides violence, a second pivotal element to understand online sports communities is related to the dissolution of the sports community concept as we know it. The internationalization of the top leagues in Europe and the US has switched the focus of interest from hyper local to global, redefining the fan behavior and their brand consumption. In fact, both the local dimension –composed by old-fashioned team supporters– and the global audience coexist. This globalization encourages the proliferation of “tourist fans” –soft users. Giulianotti has referred to this type of supporter by the name of *flaneurs*. A *flaneur* is a cool consumer, a taster, a postmodern spectator “who particularly interacts with the cool media of television and

<sup>8</sup> BERNACHE-ASSOLLANT I, BOUCHET P, AUVERGNE S and LACASSAGNE MF, "Identity Crossbreeding in Soccer Fan Groups: A Social Approach. The Case of Marseille (France)", *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, vol. 35, n° 1, 2011, pp. 72-100; DALAKAS, V. and MELANCON, J.P., "Fan Identification, Schadenfreude Toward Hated Rivals, and the Mediating Effects of Importance of Winning Index (IWIN)", *Journal of Services Marketing*, vol. 26, n°1, 2012, pp. 51-59.

<sup>9</sup> WARD, R.E., "Fan Violence. Social Problem or Moral Panic?", *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, vol. 7, 2002, pp. 453-475.

<sup>10</sup> BOYLE, R., "Social Media Sport? Journalism, Public Relations and Sport", in KROVEL, R. and ROKSWOLD, T., *We Love to Hate Each Other: Mediated Football Fan Culture*, Nordicom, Göteborg, 2012, p. 56.

<sup>11</sup> WAKEFIELD, K.L. and WANN, D.L., "An Examination of Dysfunctional Sport Fans: Method of Classification and Relationships with Problem Behaviors", *Journal of Leisure Research*, vol. 38, n° 2, 2006, pp. 168-186.

<sup>12</sup> WARD, R.E., *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> ROKSWOLD, T. and KROVEL, R., "Introduction", in KROVEL, R. and ROKSWOLD, T., *We love to Hate Each Other. Mediated Football Fan Culture*, Nordicom, Göteborg, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> HORNMOEN, H., "Battling for Belonging. How Club and Supporter Identities are Created in the Mediation of an Oslo Derby", in KROVEL, R. and ROKSWOLD, T., *We love to Hate Each Other. Mediated Football Fan Culture*, Nordicom, Göteborg, 2012, p. 149.

the Internet”<sup>15</sup>, in a market-dominated environment of virtual relationships. We believe this kind of consumer plays a big part in the online sport community.

### 3. Participation in the new media

When seeking to understand a virtual community some considerations must be kept in mind. From a sociological perspective, we could focus on the boundaries of the community in order to define it. Thus, the narrative of the “evil trespassing the border”<sup>16</sup> would help to frame the issue as a “they versus us” conflict. In this sense, the community is the coalition of people who shares an identity, or to put it more simply, a group obsessed about the question “who are we”<sup>17</sup>. However, an online community differs from the common understanding of what an off-line community is. From an operational perspective an online community is described as “a group of people with a common purpose whose interaction is mediated and supported by computer systems, and governed by formal and informal policies”<sup>18</sup>. Ridings<sup>19</sup> elaborated on the term and defined virtual communities as “longer-term” and “based on personal relationships” as opposed to “short-term” and “gather to complete organizational task” that define online groups, a lesser form of union.

As useful as all these approaches are, we believe the new media deeply challenges the way we examine online communities. The web imports behaviors and customs to online discussion that are specific to the Internet –such as lurking<sup>20</sup>. It is widely accepted that the vast majority of the members in online communities are *lurkers*<sup>21</sup>, that is, people who read and rarely participate but whose existence is anyhow “desirable” for the health of the community<sup>22</sup>. The medium imposes its own dynamics, as we can see, and what comes with the Internet is a huge amount of “invisible data”<sup>23</sup> that answers for an “unseen community”<sup>24</sup>. Ironically, the age of active audiences is composed to a great extent of passive participants, an alleged oxymoron, sort of silent users who prefer to stay aside. In addition to this, virtual communities are not only determined by *lurkers*, but by the low participation of those who actually do not lurk.

<sup>15</sup> GIULIANOTTI, R., “Supporters, Followers, Fans and Flaneurs. A Taxonomy of Spectator Identities in Football”, *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, vol. 26, n° 1, 2002, p. 38.

<sup>16</sup> WARD, R.E., *op. cit.*

<sup>17</sup> ROKSWOLD, T. and KROVEL, R., *op. cit.*

<sup>18</sup> PREECE, J., *Online Communities: Designing Usability, Supporting Sociability*, John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, 2000.

<sup>19</sup> RIDINGS, C., GEFEN, D. and ARINZE, B., “Psychological Barriers: Lurker and Poster Motivation and Behavior in Online Communities”, *Communications of the Association for Information Systems*, vol. 18, n° 1, 2006.

<sup>20</sup> FUKKINK, R., “Peer Counseling in an Online Chat Service: A Content Analysis of Social Support”, *Cyberpsychology, behavior, and social networking*, vol. 14, n° 4, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> NONNECKE, B. and PREECE, J., “Lurking and Public Participation in Discretionary Online Communities”, *Electronic Commerce Research*, vol. 5, n° 4, 2005; LI, X., ZENG, D., MAO, W. and WANG, Fy, “Online Communities: A Social Computing Perspective”, *IEEE ISI 2008 International Workshops*, Springer, Taipei, 2008, pp. 355-368.

<sup>22</sup> RIDINGS, C., GEFEN, D. and ARINZE, B., *op. cit.*, p. 331.

<sup>23</sup> PANCIERA, K., PRIEDHORSKY, R., ERICKSON, T. and TERVEEN, L., “Lurking? Cyclopaths? A Quantitative Lifecycle Analysis of User Behavior in a Geowiki”, *CHI 2010: Social Media Users*, Atlanta, 2010.

<sup>24</sup> RIDINGS, C., GEFEN, D. and ARINZE, B., *op. cit.*, p. 331.

Most of the comments in news sites and postings are generated by a handful of users; what has been called “the long tail of participation”.

Generally speaking, citizen participation has been perceived as accessory, and users’ comments regarded as a nonsensical jumble of words. Some authors have reflected on them in terms of bullshit or irresponsible<sup>25</sup>. Furthermore, in many cases those comments enter the realm of derogatory language and insult. Trolls or flame warriors –participants who sabotage the online discussion– become therefore recognizable individuals, inherent to the platform<sup>26</sup>. As a consequence, the media industry has debated the need for a stricter control of the user participation or even its cancellation.

#### 4. Methodological considerations to approach online discussion

Arguably the dominant methodological approach to the study of online communities is Content Analysis (CA)<sup>27</sup>. Many researchers have drawn on the seminal work of Henri<sup>28</sup> and his Model of Content Analysis to explore the dimensions of participation, social, interactivity, cognitive skills and metacognitive knowledge and skills in e-learning forums. In addition to this method, other researchers have utilized Gunawardena’s Interaction Analysis Model<sup>29</sup> that distinguishes 5 accumulative knowledge building phases in the users’ interaction. Obviously, despite still being widely used in more recent investigations<sup>30</sup> these models were designed in an era of computer mediated interactions that vaguely resembles the world today.

Online discussions have attracted a great deal of attention in educational sciences. In general, student-participation-oriented studies are focused on small-scale group interactions, of no more than one hundred participants<sup>31</sup>, sometimes involving as few as 20 students<sup>32</sup>. The educational context fosters new opportunities for the promotion

<sup>25</sup> RUIZ, C., MASIP, P., MICÓ, J.L., DÍAZ-NOCI, J. and DOMINGO, D., “Conversation 2.0. and Democracy. An Analysis of Reader’s Comments in Catalan Online Newspapers”, *Communication & Society*, vol. 23, n° 2, 2010, pp. 7-39.

<sup>26</sup> HIMELBOIM, I., GLEAVE, E. and SMITH, M., “Discussion Catalysts in Online Political Discussions: Content Importers and Conversation Starters”, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 14, 2009, pp. 771-789.

<sup>27</sup> GUAN, Y.H., TSAI, C.C. and HWANG, F.K., “Content Analysis of Online Discussion on a Senior-High-School Discussion Forum of a Virtual Physics Laboratory”, *Instructional Science*, vol. 34, 2006, pp. 279-311; FUKKINK, R., *op. cit.*; MARTINELLO, N. and DONELLE, L., “Online Conversations Among Ontario University Students: Environmental Concerns”, *Informatics for Health and Social Care*, vol. 37, n° 3, 2012, pp. 177-189.

<sup>28</sup> HENRI, F., “Computer Conferencing and Content Analysis”, in KAYE, A.R., *Collaborative Learning Through Computer Conferencing*, Springer, Heidelberg, 1992, pp. 117-136.

<sup>29</sup> GUNAWARDENA, C., LOWE C. and ANDERSON, T., “Analysis of a Global Online Debate and the Development of an Interaction”, *Journal of Educational Computing*, vol. 17, n° 4, 1997, pp. 397-431.

<sup>30</sup> GUAN, Y.H., TSAI, C.C. and HWANG, F.K., *op. cit.*; SING, C.C. and KHINE, M.S., “An Analysis of Interaction and Participation Patterns in Online Community”, *Educational Technology & Society*, vol. 9, n° 1, 2006, pp. 250-261; LEE, J., “Patterns of Interaction and Participation in a Large Online Course: Strategies for Fostering Sustainable Discussion”, *Educational Technology & Society*, vol. 15, n° 1, 2012, pp. 260-272.

<sup>31</sup> ZHU, E., “Interaction and Cognitive Engagement: An Analysis of Four Asynchronous Online Discussions”, *Instructional Science*, vol. 34, n° 1, 2006, pp. 451-480; LEE, J., *op. cit.*

<sup>32</sup> MARRA, R.M., MOORE, J.L. and KLIMCZA, C. A.K., “Content Analysis of Online Discussion Forums: A Comparative Analysis of Protocols”, *Educational Technology Research and Development*, vol. 52, n° 2, 2004, pp. 23-40; NARANJO, M., ONRUBIA, J. and SEGUÉS, M.T., “Participation and

of innovative e-learning experiences, offering excellent insight into the computer mediated studying behavior. Learning rooms, chats, forums and the like, are perfect environments for measuring the knowledge building (KB) by means of student-teacher as well as student-student interactions. Virtual communities in schools and universities are designed for students to facilitate their way to learn while interaction between the users is believed to promote the sharing of information and the building of deeper and collaborative knowledge. In those interactions, although constituted by users extremely motivated to participate –as often the student interaction is compulsory in order to pass the course– researchers have found a low degree of user engagement and consequently a poor knowledge building<sup>33</sup>.

Besides the assessment of knowledge building in online communities, some studies explore what we may call “the democracy building”; in other words, the way users interact with each other in pursuance of the truth, understood as the byproduct of the critical and rational discussion in the public sphere<sup>34</sup>. According to this, citizen participation is nothing but the accomplishment of a democratic ideal. Works that examine the democracy building have been mostly carried out in the political discussion realm<sup>35</sup>.

Specifically in online sports communities, little work has been done so far. There is no correspondence between the amount of research devoted to fan identity and sport-related community behavior and the research dealing with the alleged paradigm shift prompted by the new media in such communities. Alonso and O’Shea<sup>36</sup> analyzed the role of the voluntary moderators in online forums of clubs playing in the Australian Rugby League. Norman<sup>37</sup> studied a Canadian-based fan-produced sports blog and argued that the term “electronic tribe” best suited the community of fans gathered there. Hornmoen<sup>38</sup> examined two online sports forums in Oslo, Norway, selecting two main conversation threads within them, to ascertain the battle for belonging around the identity construction of the supporters. Hynes conducted 16 e-mail interviews to study femininity in online football forums to conclude that the virtual experience is “worthy of attention because it changes and challenges the traditional environment of

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Cognitive Quality Profiles in an Online Discussion Forum”, *British Journal of Educational Technology*, vol. 43, n° 2, 2012, pp. 282-294.

<sup>33</sup> SING, C.C. and KHINE, M.S., *op. cit.*; LEE, J., *op. cit.*; CHEUNG, W. and HEWT, K., “Interaction in Asynchronous Discussion Forums: Peer Facilitation Techniques”, *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, vol. 28, 2012, pp. 280-294.

<sup>34</sup> RUIZ, C., MASIP, P., MICÓ, J.L., DÍAZ-NOCI, J. and DOMINGO, D., *op. cit.*; GOLDBERG, G., “Rethinking the public/virtual sphere: The problem with participation”, *New Media & Society*, vol. 13, n° 5, 2011, pp. 739-754; VALENZUELA, S., KIM, Y. and GIL DE ZÚÑIGA, H., “Social Networks that Matter: Exploring the Role of Political Discussion for Online Political Participation”, *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, vol. 24, n° 2, 2012, pp. 163-184; VELASQUEZ, A., “Social media and online political discussion: The effect of cues and informational cascades on participation in online political discussion”, *New Media & Society*, vol. 14, n° 8, 2012, pp. 1.286-1.303.

<sup>35</sup> XIANG, Z., YUEN-YING, C. and ZHEN-MEI, P., “Deliberativeness of Online Political Discussion: A Content Analysis of the Guangzhou Daily Website”, *Journalism Studies*, vol. 9, n° 5, 2008, pp. 759-770; HIMELBOIM, I., GLEAVE, E. and SMITH, M., *op. cit.*; RUIZ, C., DOMINGO, D., MICÓ, J.L., DÍAZ-NOCI, J., MESO, K. and MASIP, P., *op. cit.*

<sup>36</sup> ALONSO, A.D. and O’SHEA, M., “Moderating virtual sport consumer forums: exploring the role of the volunteer moderator. *International Journal of Networking and Virtual Organisations*, vol. 11, n° 2, pp. 173-187.

<sup>37</sup> NORMAN, M., “Online Community or Electronic Tribe? Exploring the Social Characteristics and Spatial Production of an Internet Hockey Fan Culture”, *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 2012 online first.

<sup>38</sup> HORNMOEN, H., *op. cit.*

football fandom”<sup>39</sup>. On the other hand, Steensen<sup>40</sup> analyzed 64 football chat rooms hosted by the leading Norwegian online newspaper. A Conversation Analysis was implemented wherein the topics, the dominant discourse mode and the intention of the turns –initiation, agreement, disagreement, follow up, etcetera– were identified. In addition to this content analysis, semi-structured interviews were arranged with the journalists in charge of the chat rooms. Steensen argued that professional journalistic institutions are not revolutionized by the participatory culture as he noticed that the discourses were messy while simultaneous conversations went on without much coherence.

So the question remains how to methodologically approach online sport communities, an approach that could take into consideration the singularities of both the sporting context and the computer mediated user behavior. Carey<sup>41</sup> introduced two communication paradigms. On the one hand, he talked about a “transmission view of communication”, wherein the ‘sending’ metaphor is conspicuous and frames the communication as a process whereby messages, information, are transmitted. Instead, on the other hand, the “ritual view of communication” emphasizes the ‘sharing, participation and the possession of a common faith’<sup>42</sup>. Virtual sport communities stand for the latter –message, content is secondary as mere sharing is central. Indeed, discussion on sport has always been considered insubstantial. Eco<sup>43</sup> talks about the sports chatter, a discourse that only refers to itself and the internal circumstances of its production. Previously in the same book, Eco had argued that sports chatter is “a phatic speech, emotions and feelings are expressed for the sake of it”<sup>44</sup>, a constant contact without any message. Phatic communication, as presented by Jakobson<sup>45</sup>, is the function of language that contributes to the establishment of communicative contact. Abril goes further and alludes specifically to a phatic community that has forced mass mediated communities into becoming “gestural patterns of relationship, proxemic communities”<sup>46</sup>.

This viewpoint seems in accordance with the idea of modern liquid communities expressed by Zygmunt Bauman, applied by Prodnik<sup>47</sup> to examine virtual communities. According to Bauman, the idea of network better characterizes the essence of communication in liquid times<sup>48</sup>. Networks this way are attenuated forms of community largely defined by connections rather than relations. Bauman<sup>49</sup> has created the metaphor of the “cloakroom communities”, communities constructed around a spectacle, attended by people dressed for the occasion, wherein everyone leaves the

<sup>39</sup> HYNES, D., *op. cit.*, p. 189.

<sup>40</sup> STEENSEN, S., “Conversing the Fans. 'Coveritlive' and the Social Function of Journalism”, in KROVEL, R. and ROKSWOLD, T., *We love to Hate Each Other. Mediated Football Fan Culture*, Nordicom, Göteborg, 2012.

<sup>41</sup> CAREY, J., *Communication as Culture*, Routledge, London, 1989.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>43</sup> ECO, U., *Travels in Hyper Reality*, Harcourt Brace & Comp, New York, 1986.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>45</sup> JAKOBSON, R., “Linguistics and Poetics”, in SEBEEK, T., *Style in Language*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1960, pp. 350-377.

<sup>46</sup> ABRIL, G., *Teoría General de la Información. datos, relatos y ritos*, Cátedra, Madrid, 1997, p. 261.

<sup>47</sup> PRODNIK, J., “Cloakroom Communities and Cyberspace: Towards a Concept of 'Pseudo-Environmental Niche'”, in MOUSOUTZANIS, A. and RIHA, D., *New Media and the Politics of Online Communities*, Inter-Disciplinary Press, Oxfordshire, 2010, pp. 99-107.

<sup>48</sup> DEUZE, M., “Journalism in Liquid Modernity. An Interview with Zygmunt Bauman”, *Journalism Studies*, vol. 8, nº 4, 2007, pp. 671-679.

<sup>49</sup> BAUMAN, Zygmunt, *Liquid Modernity*, MA Polity Press, Cambridge, 2000.

coat in the cloakroom before entering –his identity– so anyone else could count them by checking the hangers. After the show, everybody collects the coat, recovering the identity left on hold for a couple of hours and re-enters the reality. In Bauman's opinion, these sort of communities we live in are 'single-purpose', 'single-aspect' and 'spectacle driven'. The solid, hardware relations have been replaced by software, liquid connections, easy to disconnect from.

### 5. *Aim and method*

The aim of this work is to examine the community building in an online sport community in Spain. Unlike the "knowledge building" or the "democracy building" previously employed for the examination of online discussion, our research objective consists in exploring the "community building". This construct differs from the former in focusing on the network dynamics of the participants while paying less attention to the content of the discussion. In contrast to the aforementioned kind of communities, sports communities are largely determined by the emotional ingredient and their members' behavior may seem irrational or erratic at times. We want to assess the level of user engagement and whether their interactions actually build bonds and strengthen the sense of community. Community building might yield insight on the way communities behave and their composition.

To address the research objective a structural analysis method was adopted<sup>50</sup>. This method allows us to center upon the pattern of user participation and user interaction at the comments posted on news articles, that is, for instance, the way they respond to other users, whether those users respond back, to whom, et cetera. As mentioned earlier, the aim is user-centered; therefore the focus is on the participation, the relationship between the users and the website-user interaction by means of comment moderation. In Table 1 we have produced a community building analysis template. Although drawing on the literature on online discussions and more generally on works dealing with communities, the originality and value of the template lies in its design to address the singularities of the online sports community.

The methodological tool seeks to elaborate a five-step approach to the online sporting community. Firstly, the general items of analysis were selected. Secondly, for every item indicators were chosen. Thirdly, we expose some theoretical concepts the authors have previously employed to explore those indicators in column two. Fourthly, we develop questions to address these concepts. This is a phase of operationalization, wherein theoretical terms are transformed into question whose answers can be measured and compared. Lastly, we summarize the implications for the examination of the community building these questions has.

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<sup>50</sup> COLL, C., ENGEL, A. and BUSTOS, A., "Distributed Teaching Presence and Participants' Activity Profiles: A Theoretical Approach to the Structural Analysis of Asynchronous Learning Networks", *European Journal of Education*, vol. 44, n° 4, 2009, pp. 521-538; HIMELBOIM, I., GLEAVE, E. and SMITH, M., *op. cit.*; NARANJO, M., ONRUBIA, J. and SEGUÉS, M.T., *op. cit.*; LEE, J., *op. cit.*



**Table 1. Methodological approach to community building in online sports discussion**

ITEM	INDICATOR	THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT	OPERATIONALIZATION	IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COMMUNITY BUILDING
<b>User participation</b>	<i>Network size, composition &amp; activity</i>	<b>Long tail</b> (Panciera et al., 2010) <b>Unseen community</b> (Ridings et al., 2006)	No. of spammers/No. of users No. of users/ No. of readers Frequency of comments per user Distribution of users per no of comments posted	Community member's activity Lurking behavior
	<i>Media activity</i>	<b>Regulation</b> (Ruiz et al., 2011) (Wakefield & Wan, 2006)	Percentage of deleted comments User activity and deletion correlation Activity and deletion correlation	Undesired members of Community Violence, hooliganism related behavior Media censorship
	<i>Time and topic-based participation</i>	<b>Due-date Participation</b> (Lee, 2012) <b>Spectacle-oriented Participation</b> (Bauman, 2000) <b>Long-term participation</b> (Ridings et al., 2006) <b>Single-purpose participation</b> (Bauman, 2000) <b>Pre-existing communities</b> (Deuze, 2009)	Frequency and distribution of user participation since article publication Frequency and distribution of user participation throughout 8 different games	Engaged/Liquid Community over time Community Engagement/Liquidity defined by team or sport identification
<b>User interaction</b>	<i>Between-user interaction</i>	<b>Connectivity</b> (Naranjo et al., 2012)	No. of interactive users/ No. of users Activity and interactivity correlation	Personal relations between Community members
	<i>Core users interaction</i>	<b>Centrality, density</b> (Zhu, 2006) <b>One-way interaction</b> (Lee, 2012) <b>Online facilitator</b> (Guan et al., 2006; Ng et al., 2012) <b>or discussion catalyst</b> (Himmelboim et al., 2009)	User responsiveness Heavy user /Non-heavy-user relationship Mention and response correlation	Creation of ghettos or sub-communities Community builders, core members of the Community Opinion leaders or horizontal community Reciprocal communication, dialogue

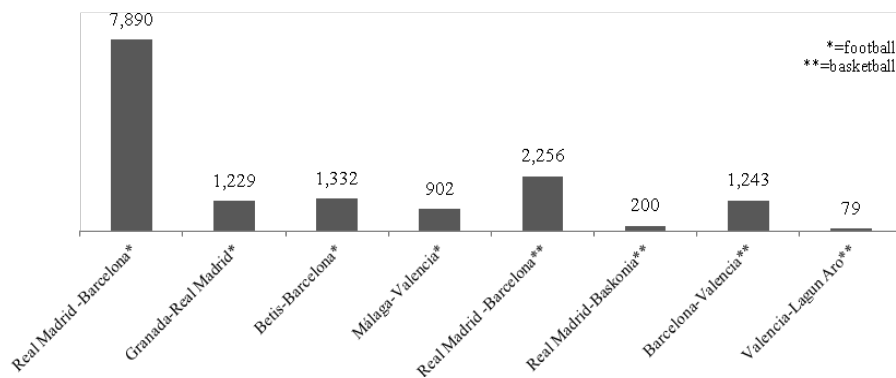
## 6. Sample and data collection

Marca Community was the selected case study. *Marca* is the leading newspaper in Spain and since its inception in 1938 it has been arguably the most prominent sports daily in the country. The press edition has a readership of 3,011,000 people a day, the highest for any daily in Spain<sup>51</sup>. Its website *marca.com* received 30,882,715 unique visitors/browsers during May 2012, approximately the data collection period. The average time spent on *marca.com* per user is 16:01 minutes, a rather high figure considering its scope. The Marca Community is very popular among sport fans, with

<sup>51</sup> EGM, *Resumen general de resultados EGM: Febrero a Noviembre 2012*.

373,869 registered users by May 2012 who express their opinion about the news by posting around 1,000,000 comments a month. Regarding the rules of participation of the community, *Marca* users are warned that insults or disrespectful language will not be tolerated. Also commercial messages are forbidden. The use of lowercase letters is encouraged as well as abbreviations should be kept to a minimum. *Marca.com* reserves the right to delete comments that do not comply with these requirements. The selected sample ( $N=15,131$ ) comprised 8 sport matches during a time span of approximately two months –21 April to 16 June 2012. For each game only comments on the match report were examined. The comments within these matches were distributed as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Number of user comments for the selected match reports**



The rationale for the chosen sample is based on the teams and sports involved in the games. There were two aspects to consider. On the one hand, football is the most popular sport in Spain by far; thus variations in terms of user participation between football and the rest of sports should be expected. Consequently, we divided the sample into 4 football and 4 non-football games –basketball, as a matter of fact. On the other hand, the data would also be conditioned to the involvement of the FC Barcelona and Real Madrid CF teams. The presence of any of these teams separately and furthermore the clash between them would most definitely compromise the findings because of their huge global impact and media awareness in comparison with any other team. Hence, a set of further games were included in the sample, combining simultaneously and alternatively Real Madrid and Barcelona –and the absence of them– in football and non-football matches.

*Marca* management granted permission for the data collection and provided us with a detailed database that included all the comments made in the selected games, identifying: the user's nickname, the game, the complete text posted, the time and whether it was deleted or not by the moderators. All these details were accessible via *marca.com* but for the removed comments, for which their collaboration was necessary. In the context of online sport discussion, characterized by hostile comment as mentioned before<sup>52</sup>, the deleted posts are essential to understand the community building or the lack of it. This study attempts to expand the scope of previous

<sup>52</sup> BOYLE, R., *op. cit.*

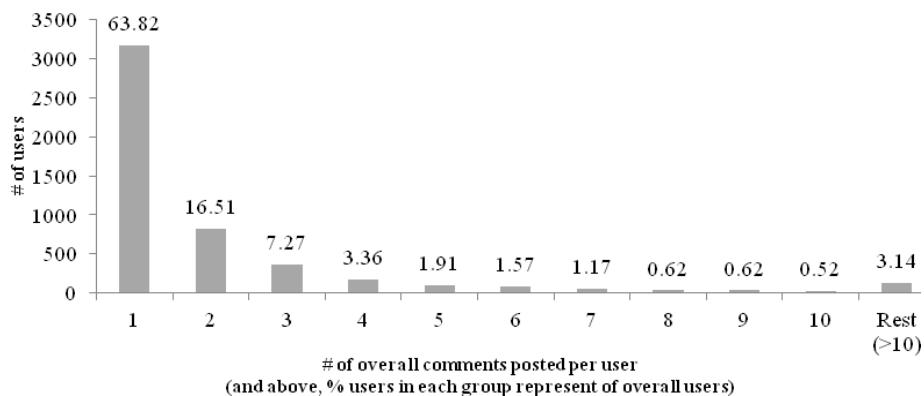
discussion analysis works by incorporating the invisible data –derogatory language, spam, and the like– into the examined corpus.

## 7. Results

### 7.1. User participation

Prior to the analysis, the corpus was stripped of commercial messages (spam). 15,141 comments were therefore downsized to 11,496, as a result of a 24.07 percent reduction. Spammers are extremely active, posting an average of 35 comments per user and making difficult the usual discussion dynamics. Preliminary data on the network yields insights into user activity. The examined news articles gathered the attention of 324,492 readers. However, only 4,967 of those readers not only read but also commented on the news (1.53 percent), accounting for a participation rate of 2.31 comments per user. While user activity is highly dispersed –participants comment as little as once and as much as 155 times– Figure 2 shows a consistent pattern of behaviour. Two out of three users only posted a single comment. Additionally participants who commented more frequently than four times amounted to less than 10 percent of the overall users examined. These results combined allow us to portray our community as a meeting point wherein nearly 99 out of 100 readers do not participate and, furthermore, those who do participate abandon the conversation as soon as they enter it.

**Figure 2. Distribution of users sorted by number of posted comments**



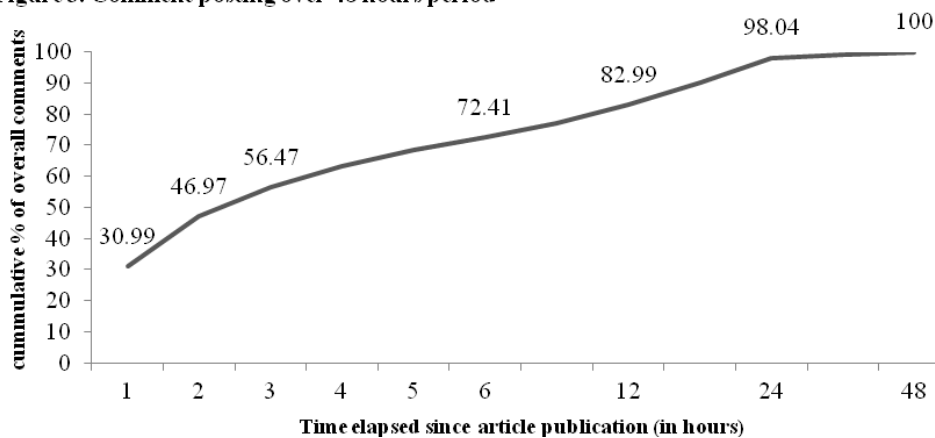
In the collected sample *Marca* journalists did not intervene in the online discussion, reducing the media activity to comment moderation. On top of the 24 percent of spam comments deleted from the discussion an additional 21.21 percent of those remaining messages was removed by the media due to rule infringement. Interestingly, the percentage of deletion was not equally distributed as a very significant correlation between the user activity and comment deletion was found (Pearson's  $r=.847$ ,  $p<0.002$ ), being the participants who posted a single comment the group with the smallest deletion proportion (14 percent).

Data shows, as expected, wider user participation around football games. Also comments per user in football ascended to 2.30 whereas the rate stayed lower (1.92) in basketball games. These results indicate not only that football news readers had

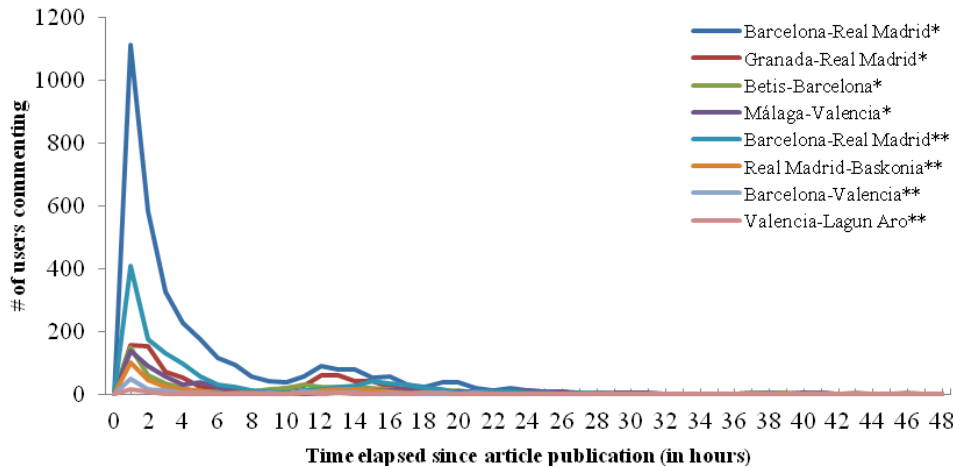
engaged in commenting more frequently than basketball readers but also that their engagement in the participation was more extensive and intense. Despite it was predictable that a sizeable group of users would repeatedly comment throughout the platform in different games involving the team they support, none of that happened. In our selected sample only three users commented in all three Real Madrid games (0.06 per cent of overall users) and exactly the same occurred with Barcelona games. In addition 5 percent of the users who commented on football games also did so in basketball games. Interestingly, although the football match between Real Madrid and Barcelona attracted 2,732 unique users posts (the most commented game), it was also the match with the lowest ratio of participants/readers (only 1.88 percent of the readers posted). In an online community, the boost of participation a match between these two teams can provide was expected to be high. Per contra, the kick-off of this game was of little benefit for the community as only 7.55 percent of the participants in the game returned to the forum to comment more news.

Match reports are uploaded by *Marca* approximately 5 minutes after the end of the game and remain accessible for commenting for 48 hours. During this period of time, users comment primarily in the first two hours, as can be observed in Figure 3. Thus, almost half of the overall comments were already posted within the first 24 hours, with very low activity during the last 24. In fact we could argue that by the time *Marca* administrators close down the comment section in the news the conversation in them was already finished.

**Figure 3. Comment posting over 48 hours period**



These findings can be better understood with the user participation distribution shown in Figure 4. Same as noted in Figure 3, the number of users commenting rose steeply since minute one followed by an equally steep decline after the first two hours. Participant's behaviour along the selected matches was similar as no significant differences were discovered. A noteworthy event can be observed around hour 12 of the discussions, when a tiny upturn trend is perceived throughout all the games. We must consider the fact that all selected matches concluded between 9 and 11 pm Spanish time. Hence, the time frame is compatible with the awakening of the users the next morning.

**Figure 4. User participation distribution over time sorted by match**

An additional observable consequence of user participation over time was the drop of comments per user. As much as the descent of users on the discussion since hour 2 was a predictable result, one could make the argument that those few users still engaged in a conversation whose termination loomed up shall more actively contribute to maintain it alive, hence elevating their ratio of comments over time. However, a statistically significant negative correlation was found between time elapsed and comments per user (varying from  $-.532$  to  $-.855$  according to the game, the significance for all cases always being  $p < .000$ ).

## 7.2. User interaction

With the purpose of examining the community building we shifted focus from participation onto user interaction. We understand interaction as the primary networking effort in which users relate to each other and establish links. In Marca Community users not only post comments on the forum but also are encouraged to enhance their discussion experience by interacting in a Twitter-like manner, adding @username or #commentnumber to their comments whenever they want to address other members of the community. In this article we will consider interactive users to the members who either receive or/and send these sort of comments to other members. An interaction, therefore, is understood in terms of any given comment in the discussion that contains and mentions (@,#) other users.

Among the 4,967 users who posted on Marca Community solely 1,416 (28.51 percent) were interactive users. We had pointed out earlier that the overall comments per user in the forum were 2.31. However, this ratio rose to 4.43 when it came to interactive users. This increase may seem self-evident since high user interactivity could be thought as a natural consequence of high user activity. Nonetheless, this relation should not be taken for granted inasmuch a user who frequently comments does not necessarily imply a user who engages in discursive exchanges.

To explore in detail the discussion dynamics we selected a sub-sample comprising the most interactive users of the network in order to assess the role the core members played in the community building. To narrow the sample down we calculated an

index of interactivity by the formula [number of outgoing interactions (comments containing interaction sent) + number of incoming interactions (comments containing interaction received), all divided by 2]. We picked up the users who scored above 10. We found 52 core members. At first sight the implications for the community of this handful of users can be ascertained by analyzing their activity; while they represented the 1.05 percent of the overall users in the selected games they were responsible for the 13.13 percent of the comments on the discussion. Furthermore, some significant findings were identified.

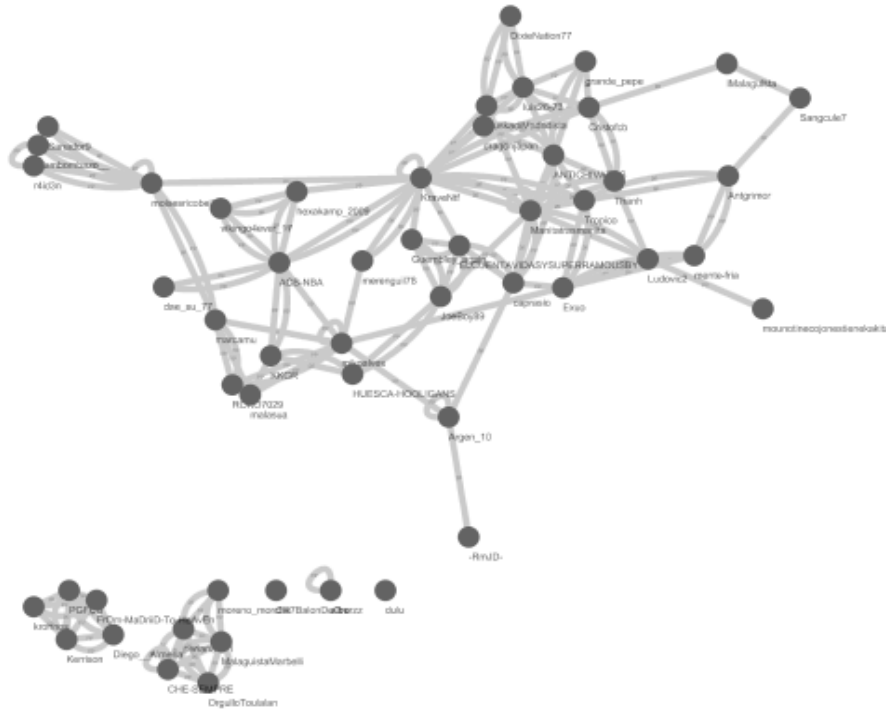
First, it was observed among the core users a deletion percentage of 29.08, considerably higher than the 21.21 percent detected in the overall sample. This result prompted us to further inquire about the link between the user interactivity and their deletion rates. However, these two variables showed no statistical correlation.

Second, we found a strong correlation between core user activity, that is, the number of comments posted on the discussion, and their interactivity. On the one hand, the user activity was correlated to their outgoing interactivity ( $r=.937$ ,  $p<0.000$ ); on the other hand, the user activity was also correlated to the incoming interactivity ( $r=.758$ ,  $p<0.000$ ). This means that those users who post most frequently in the forum are the ones who both send and receive more comments to and from other users as well.

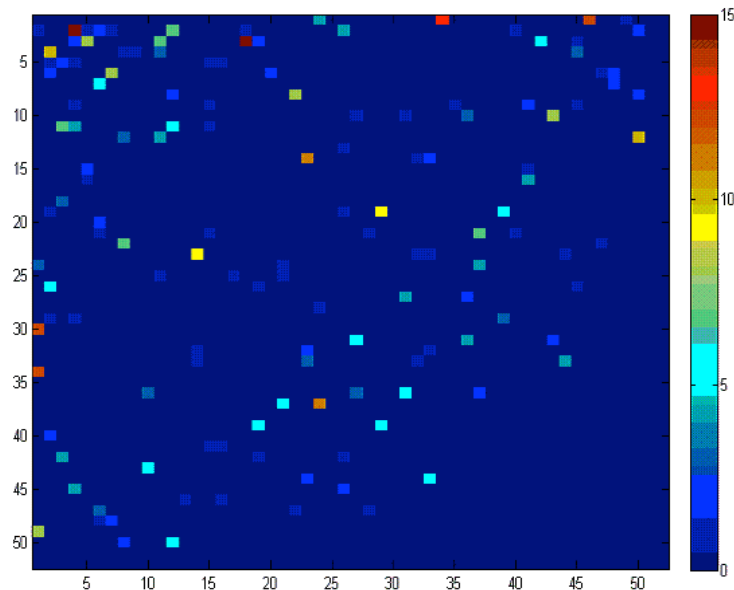
Third, we delved into these results and sought for a correlation between the comments sent by core users to other core users and the comments received by core users from other core users. These two variables were positively and significantly correlated ( $r=.748$ ,  $p<0.000$ ), implying that the users who most frequently contacted other users were the ones who got contacted the most in return, although no statistical causation can be inferred from this data. This symmetry in the communication may appear obvious but, as we will point out later in the discussion section, deserves a more extensive elaboration.

Fourth, we examined the relation between the core and non-core users. We wonder whether the outgoing interaction from the 52 core users to the rest of the platform (other core users included) was more intense than the incoming interaction they received. To do that we calculated the ratio resulting from dividing their outgoing comments by the incoming ones, obtaining a 1.09 proportion that indicates the balance between these variables. On top of that, we estimated two probabilities. In the first place, we sought for the probability of a core user responding to a received interaction (A). In the second place, the opposite scenario, we tried to find the probability of a core-user of being responded when sending an interaction to another user (B). The probability was  $P(A)=.459$  and  $P(B)=.407$ . Data showed a very similar behaviour between core and non-core users in terms of their internal interaction, slightly positioning the core-users as the promoters of it.

Fifth, we described, as presented in Figure 5, the network core users formed. It is clearly visible that almost every core user can be linked to the rest of the hardcore community with the notable exceptions of three users that remained isolated. Moreover, a core-within-the-core composed by a few members seems to embody the nucleus of the group. Finally, at the outskirts of the network dwell two small clusters disconnected from the hard-core community.

**Figure 5. Heavy user interaction map**

Lastly, Figure 6 allows us a close examination on the core users' internal behaviour. In this figure we can observe every interaction core users had with other core users, and more importantly, the intensity of these interactions, complementing the findings of Figure 5. To fully understand it we need to incline our heads and stare along the diagonal that descends from coordinates  $(X=1, Y=1)$  to  $(X=52, Y=52)$  and virtually divides the map into two halves. Symmetrical areas of colour in both resulting sides would indicate a high degree of reciprocity between the core users. Our hard-core community shows a considerable level of symmetry containing corresponding coloured spots in both sides of the picture. These results suggest a bidirectional conversation between the core users wherein every comment sent finds its response. And furthermore, the intensity of that conversation appears to be symmetrical as well, hinting at the existence of a real dialogue between users.

**Figure 6. Heavy user reciprocity map**

Axe X shows the outgoing interactions from users. Axe Y indicates the incoming interactions to users. The temperature column in the right measures the number of interactions between the users.

## 8. Discussion

Online Marca Community, as elsewhere on the Internet, is determined by what has been referred to as “the long tail of participation”<sup>53</sup>, reminiscent of the mathematical power law. Usually a small group of individuals are responsible for the majority of the participation, becoming thus the pivotal roles in the community building. Passive users, *lurkers*, are the norm and, consequently, any conclusion derived from the observation of the actual participants should keep in mind the existence of an “invisible community”<sup>54</sup>, all cloaked beneath the tip of the iceberg. Li<sup>55</sup> estimated around 90 percent the lurkers in online communities. In Marca Community *lurkers* amount to 98.5 percent.

The 63 percent of the users who engaged in the discussion only participated once. From the perspective of offline communities these results would indicate a rather disengaged body whose characterization strays far from that of the community. However, the online culture demands a broader picture for the analysis, requiring complementary evidence from other online discussions to contextualize the implications of our findings. Ruiz et al<sup>56</sup> studied the user participation in the online editions of four international quality newspapers. Firstly, they found a weaker user

<sup>53</sup>PANCIERA, K., PRIEDHORSKY, R., ERICKSON, T. and TERVEEN, L., *op. cit.*; SPENCER, R.W., “A Pervasive Model for Participation in Voluntary Forums”, *Research Technology Management*, vol. 55, n° 3, 2012, pp. 23-31.

<sup>54</sup>RIDINGS, C., GEFEN, D. and ARINZE, B., *op. cit.*

<sup>55</sup>LI, X., ZENG, D., MAO, W. and WANG, Fy, *op. cit.*

<sup>56</sup>RUIZ, C., MASIP, P., MICÓ, J.L., DÍAZ-NOCI, J. and DOMINGO, D., *op. cit.*



involvement, with only around 60,000 comments posted along 3,349 news articles. In contrast, we found over 15,000 comments in only 8 articles. Additionally, the comments per user in those websites were much lower than in *Marca*. The users who posted only once represented the 63 percent in our case, increasing up to 72 percent in *El País* (Spain), 88 percent in *La Repubblica* (Italy), 93 percent in *The New York Times* (USA), and 95 percent in *Le Monde* (France). To sum up, not only more members of *Marca Community* participated in the discussion, but also their engagement in the conversation was higher.

Nevertheless, the participation in the discussion should be contextualized by the quality of this participation. In a research about online discussion in European newspapers conducted by Pastor<sup>57</sup>, he found that 7.17 percent of the comments in Spanish web editions used derogatory language and insults (remember, 21.21 percent in *Marca Community*). This percentage descended to 1.09 in France and 0.32 percent in the UK. These findings might indicate an interesting trend that relates online sporting discussion and low quality conversation, as Boyle<sup>58</sup> pointed out intuitively, and could ground further research regarding the sport-related violence and online sectarianism. However, important limitations to the findings should be considered. First, sports information and general information cannot be equally treated. Second, deletion in *Marca Community* does not necessarily imply low quality conversation or derogatory language –e.g. some deletions respond to all uppercase writing.

The single-aspect, spectacle-driven, and short-term cloakroom communities Zygmunt Bauman talked about<sup>59</sup>, seems to apply to our examined community. The majority of its members only participated in a single article with little user transferring between the different sports and games. Beyond the obvious, no significant evidence was found in regard to football and basketball user participation patterns. *Marca* platform for discussion, we believe, does not encourage a long-term discussion, favouring the leak of users who migrate to other article discussions or websites. The absence of a timeline in resemblance of Facebook and Twitter turns the communal experience into a less intense form of sharing and being together.

When analyzing online communities in education, Lee et al<sup>60</sup> classified students' involvement as "due-date participation"; in other words, students procrastinated their contribution to the last hour of the activity. *Marca Community* displays a very different panorama, with most of the contributions condensed in the first two hours. Expanding the liquid metaphor proposed by Bauman, we could characterize our network as an "effervescent community", whose members participate hyperactively at the beginning but, as time goes by, their impetus fades away.

If we focus our attention on the core users we must emphasize the importance of the correlation between their activity and interactivity and its implications for the community building in *Marca*. These users, beyond participating intensely on the forum –unimportant considering the already overcrowded discussion– engage in the construction of the community as their commenting activity involves a lot of interactivity, that is, a very socially oriented participation. And, what is even more relevant, the social participation they encourage takes place on an equal footing, horizontally distributed, wherein no user recognizes the rest as a leader of the community. The similarity of the outgoing and incoming interactions, plus the similar

<sup>57</sup> PASTOR, L., *Periodismo Zombi en la era de las audiencias participativas*, UOC, Barcelona, 2010.

<sup>58</sup> BOYLE, R., *op. cit.*

<sup>59</sup> BAUMAN, Z., *op. cit.*

<sup>60</sup> LEE, J., *op. cit.*

probabilities of being responded whether being core or non-core user, suggests a non-hierarchical community of users.

These data become more revealing when comparing to the dynamics observed on other online discussion platforms such as Twitter. In Twitter, for instance, users participate in very dissimilar ways, with little correspondence between the most mentioned users and the ones who mention others the most. The offline identity, most notably in the case of celebrities, causes one-way conversations that prompt a vertical hierarchy within the platform. The most mentioned users act as opinion leaders toward the rest of their followers<sup>61</sup>. As we have seen, core users in Marca Community cannot be identified as opinion leaders.

On the contrary, we can refer to them as online facilitators<sup>62</sup> or discussion catalysts<sup>63</sup>. First, core users when addressing other community members incite the debate. Second, the members of the community who do not belong in the hard-core group but desire to be incorporated can conveniently claim core users' attention by interacting with them and, most probably unlike Twitter, will get feedback ( $P=.459$ ). Third, core users function as online facilitators because they do not easily allow other users in isolation. To the contrary, their behaviour prevents the network from creating sub-communities or ghettos. Fourth, despite the vertiginous speed of discussion in the forum core users reciprocate the comments they receive, striking up bi-directional conversations.

## 9. Conclusion

In this article we have examined the community building in an online sporting forum in Spain. The research findings draw a virtual community with no resemblance to the usual features of offline communities. The nature of the bonds promoted within the virtual platform fosters the definition of the Marca Community as a network. Discourse analysis, descent of literary theory, positions the text as the cornerstone of the research task. The essence of this network can be better explained, however, framing it in terms of a "proxemic community"<sup>64</sup>, or a phatic community<sup>65</sup>, wherein message content loses relevance in comparison to the communicative and sharing experience.

The amount of information involved in the big data determines the way researchers confront their task. We believe that networks are best characterized by the connections and disconnections between the members, and to a lesser extent by the exchanged content. Thus, the structural analysis<sup>66</sup> has enabled the authors to approach the online discussion as a system of personal relationships on a broad scale. The examination has portrayed the Marca Community as a network of members who stand on an equal footing, weakly engaged from a traditional community perspective, but

<sup>61</sup> YARDI, S. and BOYD, D., "Dynamic Debates: An Analysis of Group Polarization Over Time on Twitter", *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, vol. 30, n° 5, 2010, pp. 316-327; WU, S., HOFMAN, J.M., MASON, W.A. and WATTS, D.J., "Who Says What to Whom on Twitter", *WWW '11 Proceedings of the 20th international conference on World wide web*, Hyderabad, India, 2011, pp. 705-714.

<sup>62</sup> NG, C, CHEUNG, W. and HEWT, K., *op. cit.*

<sup>63</sup> HIMELBOIM, I., GLEAVE, E. and SMITH, M., *op. cit.*

<sup>64</sup> ABRIL, G., *op. cit.*

<sup>65</sup> ECO, U., *op. cit.*

<sup>66</sup> HIMELBOIM, I., GLEAVE, E. and SMITH, M., *op. cit.*; NARANJO, M., ONRUBIA, J. and SEGUÉS, M.T., *op. cit.*

strongly united from the standpoint of virtual communities. Giulianotti's definition of *flaneur*<sup>67</sup> is best suited to explain the behaviour of the community members: fans who, despite their sporting identification and sometimes heavy implication, treasure more their freedom to wander in, out, and about the liquid virtual network.

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<sup>67</sup> GIULIANOTTI, R., *op. cit.*

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## MODERACIÓN DE LA CONVERSACIÓN EN MEDIOS ONLINE. EL CASO DEL DIARIO MARCA



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### Resumen

Los medios de comunicación se enfrentan al reto de gestionar el contenido generado en sus webs por los lectores. Este contenido requiere de una moderación profesional que facilite la conversación entre usuarios y disminuya la agresividad verbal. Se examinan los comentarios enviados por los usuarios a la edición online de *Marca*, el principal diario deportivo español, mediante un análisis cuantitativo de los datos, y entrevistas con los responsables del servicio. A través del estudio tanto de los filtros automáticos, la *Moderation Technology Platform (MTP)*, como de los filtros humanos, el artículo describe el recorrido por el sistema de cada mensaje recibido. Se reflexiona sobre las estrategias para conseguir una mejor calidad de la conversación online. Resultados: El histórico del usuario y la *blacklist* terminológica son herramientas de moderación fundamentales. *Marca* elimina el 40% de los comentarios recibidos. Se ha constatado en la práctica que el % de posts inadecuados rechazados aumenta con el número total de posts enviados por cada lector: para 2 posts puede ser del 14% y para 9 sube al 33%. Una de las claves para mejorar la calidad de la conversación es la involucración de periodistas.

### Palabras clave

Prensa digital, Medios digitales, Prensa deportiva, Diarios, Comunidades online, Comentarios de noticias, Gestión de comunidades, Contenido generado por usuarios, Sistemas de gestión de contenidos, Moderación, Deporte, *Blacklists*, *Marca*.

**Title: Discussion moderation in online media. The case of *Marca* newspaper**

### Abstract

User-generated content management poses a challenge to the media. It requires professional handling in order to facilitate user engagement and avoid verbal aggression. To illustrate this point, the article examines the comments posted to the online edition of *Marca*, the major Spanish sports newspaper. Empirical assessments of the data alongside interviews with the people in charge of the service were utilized. The analysis of the automatic filters, the Moderation Technology Platform (MTP), as well as the human filters comprehensively shows the itinerary through the system of every posted message. The study reflects on the best strategies to improve the quality of the online discussion. Results: The user history and the vocabulary blacklist seem to be the fundamental tools for moderating user comments. *Marca* removes 40% of the comments received. In practice, it has been observed that the percentage of inappropriate posts increases with the total number of posts sent by each reader: for 2 posts the rejection rate may be 14%, but for 9 it can reach 33%. One key issue to improve the quality of comments is the involvement of journalists in the conversations.

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## Keywords

Online press, Online media, Sports press, Newspapers, Online communities, Comments in news, Community management, User generated content, UGC, Content management systems, Moderation, Sport, Blacklists, *Marca*, Spain.

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## Problema

Las nuevas tecnologías han permitido un aumento en la interacción entre los medios de comunicación y sus usuarios. Esto ha supuesto un auge del llamado "periodismo participativo" (Ruiz *et al.*, 2010), que los medios impulsan con el fin, entre otros, de crear lazos más estables y estrechos con sus lectores. Esta dinámica de colaboración medio-usuario trae consigo un problema, pues la llamada a la participación del lector confronta dos perspectivas en conflicto:

- los usuarios exigen libertad de expresión para opinar cuando y como desean;
- los medios pretenden mantener el control editorial sobre los contenidos que publican, además de querer cuidar su imagen de marca de posibles efectos negativos.

Un aspecto muy específico dentro del contexto general del periodismo participativo es la moderación de los comentarios publicados por el usuario en la web del medio, que ha atraído un interés limitado por parte de los investigadores (Diakopoulos; Naaman, 2011; Binns, 2012). Para gestionar estos comentarios los medios con más recursos y participantes externalizan la tarea en empresas de gestión de contenidos generados por el usuario. Estas empresas ayudan al medio a controlar la participación, principalmente por medio del registro de los usuarios y la moderación de los contenidos (Martínez-Martínez, 2012). Su gestión consiste principalmente en moderar el diálogo que se produce entre el medio y sus lectores, favoreciendo la participación de la audiencia sin perjudicar la imagen del medio.

Se trata de moderar el diálogo entre el medio y sus lectores, favoreciendo la participación de la audiencia sin perjudicar la imagen del medio

El objetivo de este trabajo es explorar el sistema de post-moderación con el que algunos medios gestionan los comentarios de sus lectores. Se describe el proceso que la empresa moderadora emplea para administrar los comentarios, y se reflexiona sobre las herramientas técnicas y humanas que utiliza para ello. Para ilustrar este proceso se ha seleccionado como caso de estudio la moderación de comentarios que se lleva a cabo en la edición online de *Marca*, el diario deportivo en español con más lectores.

## Contexto

Los periódicos online tienen ante sí un reto a la hora de gestionar los comentarios de los lectores. Esto se debe a que su

participación es a menudo conflictiva (Singer, 2010). Pastor (2010) piensa que el lenguaje descalificatorio en las contribuciones de los usuarios es una característica transversal en la prensa española. En su estudio examinó el número de mensajes ofensivos en diarios online del Reino Unido, Francia y España. Pudo constatar que en el Reino Unido esta clase de comentarios suponían un 1,26% de los mensajes publicados, en Francia ascendían al 4,46%, mientras que en España representaban un 7,17% del total publicado.

En un estudio similar que abarcaba España, Francia, Reino Unido, EUA e Italia (Ruiz *et al.*, 2011) se analizaron los comentarios de la audiencia distinguiendo el lenguaje despectivo de los insultos. *Elpais.com* fue la segunda web con más comentarios despectivos (13,4%), sólo superada por *LeMonde.fr* (42,64%). En cuanto a los insultos, *Elpais.com* volvía a situarse en segundo lugar (1,1% de los comentarios), precedida por *Repubblica.it* (1,7%).

Singer *et al.* (2011) llevaron a cabo un estudio longitudinal en el que mediante entrevistas a los periodistas de los diarios estimaron la cantidad de mensajes borrados en sus foros. *The guardian* (Reino Unido) y *The Washington post* (EUA) estaban por debajo del 10% de eliminación, *Der spiegel* (Alemania) en torno al 10-20% y *20 minutos* (España) alrededor del 25%. El diario israelí *ynet* presentaba una situación diametralmente distinta al resto de webs, con un rechazo del 60% de los contenidos de los usuarios, aunque su particular contexto sociopolítico desvirtúa su capacidad como elemento de comparación. En el global de su muestra, los factores de eliminación principales que identificaron fueron, en primer lugar, los contenidos sensibles (religión, raza, etc.) y, en segundo lugar, el contenido comercial o spam.

Ante la dificultad de gestionar los mensajes de los lectores muchos medios se plantean qué hacer con ellos. Masip (2011) repasa 5 maneras diferentes de gestionarlos, que pueden combinarse:

- suprimir la posibilidad de comentar;
- prohibir el anonimato y restringir el contenido;
- introducir sistemas de pre-moderación en donde el contenido sea examinado antes de publicarlo;
- que los participantes del foro se moderen entre sí, por ejemplo, mediante puntuaciones o sistemas de recomendación;
- incorporar un sistema de pago para poder comentar.

El marco legal en el que se sustenta la publicación de los comentarios de los usuarios viene definido por el artículo 30 del *Código penal*. En él se establece la responsabilidad "excluyente, escalonada y subsidiaria" sobre el comentario



publicado. En primer lugar el responsable es el autor del texto, en segundo lugar el director de la publicación, en tercero el editor, y en cuarto la empresa reproductora o emisora. Esta ley está a su vez desambiguada por dos normativas:

a) la *Ley de servicios de la sociedad de la información y de comercio electrónico* (34/2002). En su artículo 16 se exonera al medio de la responsabilidad del contenido del comentario publicado siempre que

- no tenga conocimiento efectivo de que la actividad o la información almacenada es ilícita; y
- si lo tiene, actúe con diligencia para retirar los datos o hacer imposible el acceso a ellos.

b) la ley española es la adaptación nacional de la *Directiva de comercio electrónico* (2000/31/EC) europea.

Hasta el momento los medios que albergan comentarios han sido cautos ante la dificultad de interpretación de las normativas. En España la *Audiencia Provincial de Lugo* absolvió en 2009 a los administradores de la web *Mindoniense.com* por los insultos contra un alcalde que algunos lectores habían publicado. Sin embargo, en una sentencia que puede marcar un nuevo rumbo en la interpretación europea de la ley, el *Tribunal de los Derechos Humanos de Estrasburgo* en sentencia del 10 de octubre de 2013 hizo responsable al medio estonio *Delfi* por unos comentarios ofensivos publicados en su web. El *Tribunal* consideró que la política de “denuncia y retirada” y los filtros automáticos para detectar palabras hirientes, son “insuficientes para prevenir el daño a terceras personas” (*European Court*, 2013). Esta sentencia puede interpretarse como una llamada a los medios para que adopten sistemas de pre-moderación en sus webs.

“ En los últimos años la tendencia es sustituir la post-moderación por sistemas de pre-moderación ”

Aunque los sistemas de post-moderación, más baratos y escalables (Deuze, 2009), son aún los más empleados en los medios con gran volumen de participación, la tendencia es incorporar sistemas de pre-moderación en los que las aportaciones de los lectores se aprueban previamente, como en el caso de *El mundo* o *The New York times*.

Algunos teóricos advierten además del peligro de pasar de una moderación basada en criterios periodísticos, acentuando el interés noticioso de las contribuciones, a una moderación basada en el aumento del tráfico web (Singer et al., 2011). Al fin y al cabo, el modelo de tarificación publici-



<http://www.marca.com>

taria en que se basa el negocio es el CPM o coste por mil, y este depende del tráfico que consigan atraer a sus webs y el tiempo de permanencia en ellas.

### Estudio de caso

Se examinan los comentarios posteados por la audiencia en las noticias de la web del diario *Marca*, el diario de temática deportiva de mayor difusión en España y el de mayor repercusión internacional en español. Su web es comentada por los lectores que se hayan creado un perfil en la *Comunidad Marca*, compuesta por más de 485.000 miembros (dato actualizado a enero de 2014). La web recibe un flujo aproximado de 800.000-1.200.000 mensajes al mes.

Los usuarios de *Marca* han de aceptar las normas de publicación para poder colgar sus comentarios. Éstas contienen 3 puntos:

- no abusar de las mayúsculas ni de las abreviaturas;
- el tono del mensaje ha de ser respetuoso y no se admiten insultos ni faltas de respeto;
- no se aceptan contenidos que se consideren publicitarios.

*Marca* advierte que podrá eliminar los comentarios que no cumplan estas normas y se reserva el derecho de impedir la participación permanente de los infractores.

El contenido deportivo es un caso paradigmático de la necesidad de una buena gestión, ya que la proporción de mensajes con lenguaje ofensivo e insultos es superior a la del resto de contenidos periodísticos (Pastor, 2010). Asimismo la violencia, la agresividad y las posturas viscerales y polarizadas son comunes (Boyle, 2012). Además, al contar la *Comunidad Marca* con un gran número de seguidores, las

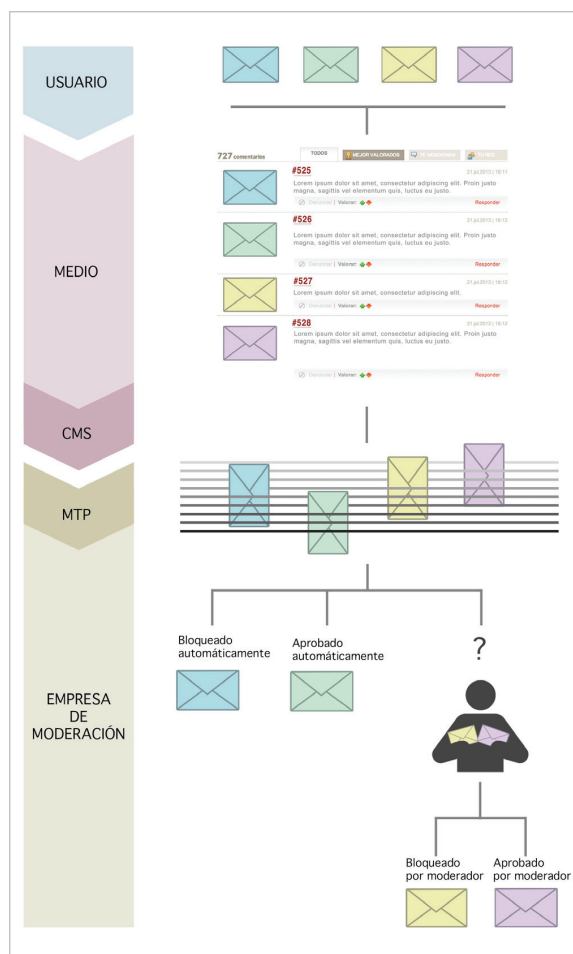


Figura 1. Recorrido del mensaje

compañías que generan spam encuentran en ella un espacio idóneo para publicitar sus contenidos.

Todo ello justifica la elección de *Marca* como estudio de caso. Tanto el número de comentarios, en torno al millón mensual, y su contenido a menudo irrespetuoso con las normas de participación, fuerzan al sistema de moderación de *Marca* a trabajar al máximo de su potencial. Es bajo estas exigentes condiciones cuando el análisis del proceso de moderación se vuelve más oportuno.

### Método

El estudio de caso se ha apoyado en dos fases metodológicas. En la primera se ha aplicado un análisis cuantitativo a una muestra de más de 15.000 comentarios recogidos de mayo a junio de 2012 proporcionados por el diario *Marca*. Se han identificado los mensajes eliminados, y se han calculado los porcentajes de eliminación. Al mismo tiempo, se han segmentado los usuarios que los produjeron atendiendo al número de comentarios que cada uno de ellos escribió. Mediante esta segmentación se trazó una correlación entre la participación de los lectores y su eliminación para comprobar si los más activos en el foro eran también los que menos calidad aportaban en el diálogo.

En la segunda fase, para obtener un cuadro más completo, se ha complementado la metodología cuantitativa anterior con la cualitativa en base a entrevistas. En nuestro caso existía un triángulo formado por los usuarios, el diario *Marca* y la empresa encargada de la moderación de contenidos. Se entrevistó al *community manager* de *Marca*, **Javier Muiña**, al director de marketing digital del diario, **Álvaro Menéndez**, y a **Joan Llorach**, fundador y CEO de *Interactora*, la empresa contratada por *Marca* para moderar su comunidad.

La información que estas personas aportaron sirvió para observar desde un punto de vista más elevado la moderación de los comentarios como proceso integral y significativo en un diario online. Gracias a ellas se ha identificado el recorrido que sigue un mensaje desde que lo postea el usuario hasta que la empresa de moderación toma la decisión final sobre su publicación. En el análisis de los resultados se han entrelazado los obtenidos mediante el método cuantitativo con las entrevistas, con el fin de promover una discusión global del fenómeno estudiado. El objetivo de todo ello es conocer todas las partes integrantes del sistema de post-moderación de un medio online masivo.

### Análisis de resultados

La web del diario *Marca* está administrada mediante un sistema de post-moderación, al igual que otros medios como *El país*, *The guardian* o *USA today*, que previamente utilizaban sistemas de pre-moderación. Este sistema implica que un comentario sigue el recorrido siguiente (figura 1):

El usuario cuelga el comentario en la noticia. Éste aparece automáticamente publicado por defecto en la web de *Marca*. Durante los siguientes minutos el sistema de gestión de contenidos (CMS) de *Marca* empaqueta la información en lotes y los envía a *Interactora*. Esta empresa filtra automáticamente los mensajes mediante lo que llaman una *moderation technology platform (MTP)* y los clasifica en tres grandes grupos: publicados, eliminados y dudosos.

La *blacklist* escenifica la confrontación entre el conocimiento adquirido por los usuarios y el adquirido por el sistema de gestión de contenidos

Estos últimos pasan a un equipo de moderadores para ser evaluados y decidir sobre su publicación o eliminación.

Este sistema de gestión genera por tanto cuatro tipos de tratamiento de contenido:

- comentarios aprobados automáticamente;
- eliminados automáticamente;
- aprobados por moderador;
- eliminados por moderador.

En la figura 2 se observan a modo orientativo los porcentajes de los cuatro tratamientos durante los meses en los que se recogió la muestra.

*Interactora* suministra a *Marca* tanto el sistema automático de filtrado como el equipo humano de moderadores. El sistema automático, la *MTP*, está compuesto por 19 filtros

(Delclós, 2012). Podemos resumir en cuatro tipos básicos las características de filtrado:

- características formales (texto en mayúsculas, mensaje en blanco, reiteración de mensaje);
- características de contenido (lengua utilizada, sentido del texto, lista negra);
- características del usuario (comportamiento histórico, actividad en un determinado período, perfil de usuario);
- características tecnológicas (dirección IP).

Entre las características de los usuarios destacan aquellas que tienen una naturaleza dinámica, como la lista negra y el histórico de los mismos, dos de los principales filtros para la publicación de mensajes. La lista negra o *blacklist* escenifica una confrontación entre el conocimiento adquirido por la audiencia y el adquirido por el sistema de gestión de contenidos. De este modo, los usuarios que desean ver publicado un determinado comentario que, en condiciones normales, sería eliminado por la plataforma de moderación —pongamos un mensaje ofensivo hacia los seguidores del equipo contrario— intentan burlar la lista negra modificando ligeramente las características formales del mensaje pero conservando su sentido, como cambiar algunas letras o separar letras con puntos, por poner dos ejemplos sencillos.

Se trata de una estrategia de encriptación rudimentaria que persigue no ser detectado por la *MTP* y que a la vez el receptor del mensaje siga comprendiéndolo. Si la estrategia es detectada por la *MTP*, estas modificaciones formales pasan a formar parte de la lista negra. Esta interacción entre el sistema de filtrado y los lectores es uno de los aspectos más interesantes de este tipo de comunicación mediada, ya que supone un desafío tanto para los medios como para los propios participantes, que insisten en saltarse las normas, y es en sí un proceso comunicativo entre individuo y máquina que da lugar a un nuevo léxico en permanente mutación.

Llorach no quiere revelar más datos sobre este proceso al considerar que forma parte de su valor empresarial. En cambio, sí que apunta hacia la que según él es la idea esencial de la moderación: centrarse en el comportamiento histórico del usuario.

El comportamiento histórico de los usuarios es una variable cuantitativa y dinámica que calcula el número de mensajes publicados y eliminados a lo largo de su actividad en la plataforma y que actúa también como filtro en la publicación. Si un usuario tiene todos los mensajes publicados, es lógico que ante una duda acerca del contenido del mensaje la *MTP* lo interprete como publicable. En cambio, si el número de eliminados en su historial es significativo, la publicación de un nuevo mensaje estará bajo sospecha.

Sin embargo, todo este sistema de gestión se encuentra con dos retos fundamentales. El primero es el correo con finalidad comercial o spam. En la muestra analizada, la web *Marca.com* recibió 15.141 comentarios de lectores. De ellos, 9.059 fueron publicados y 6.082 eliminados. Esto supone un 40,16% de eliminación. La mayoría de los mensajes eliminados (3.645, un 59,9%) fueron mensajes spam. Según Muiña, *Marca.com* ha llegado a tener picos de “40.000 mensajes spam en un día, el 98% de ellos provenientes de una misma fuente”.

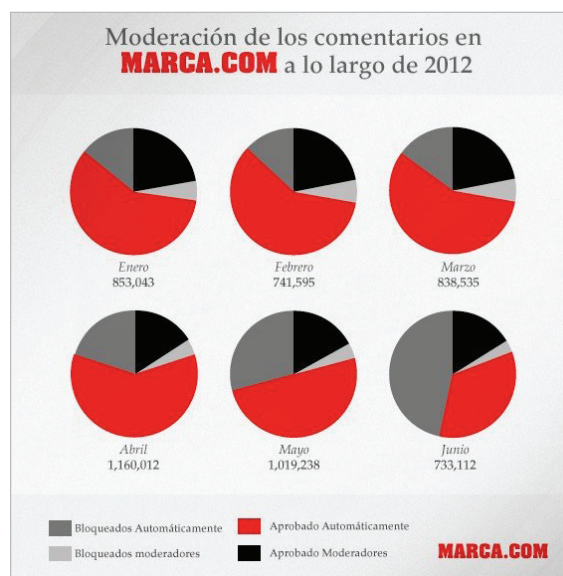


Figura 2. Gestión del contenido del usuario en *Marca.com*  
Fuente: Imagen tomada del blog *Enredados en Mundo Marca*  
<http://goo.gl/cTGfQx>

El segundo reto es el fanatismo. El contenido deportivo atrae muchos comentarios irrespetuosos de fans que, según Menéndez, “perciben un ambiente de crispación en las noticias, lo asumen como propio y lo reflejan en los comentarios”. En estos casos es básica una correcta moderación, ya que los usuarios aumentan su umbral de violencia en un contexto de violencia generalizada.

Algunos diarios empiezan a temer por las repercusiones legales de publicar contenido conflictivo (Masip, 2011). La legislación española suele considerarse excesivamente laxa en comparación con otros países europeos. Al comparar distintos periódicos online internacionales de prestigio, *El país* era el que menos datos pedía a sus lectores para poder registrarse y comentar (Ruiz et al., 2011). Álvaro Menéndez aboga en el futuro por establecer sistemas más seguros de identificación del participante, a través de algún mecanismo que pueda surgir a partir de la implantación del DNI electrónico, por ejemplo.

En la figura 3 se observa que el porcentaje de eliminación de los comentarios aumenta en la medida en que aumentan las contribuciones. Parece obvio que una mayor tasa de comentarios eliminados significa un menor respeto a las normas de participación.

La figura muestra la relación que existe entre las veces que un usuario comenta en el foro y su porcentaje de eliminación. Así, los usuarios que sólo participan una vez ven que sus comentarios son eliminados un 14% de las veces. La proporción de comentarios eliminados aumenta al examinar el comportamiento de los lectores que más veces comentan. Este hallazgo no es intuitivo, ya que en términos proporcionales, comentar muchas veces en un foro no guarda relación con contribuir de una manera menos acorde a las normas. Se trata de un dato contrastado a través de una correlación de Pearson, que muestra la relación significativa que hay en-

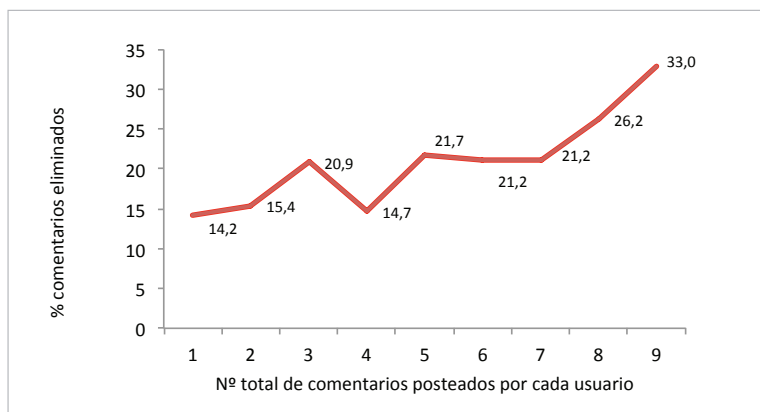


Figura 3. Porcentaje de eliminación de comentarios del usuario dependiendo de su participación

tre el número de comentarios posteados y su porcentaje de eliminación ( $r = 0,876$ ,  $p < 0,001$ ).

En los sistemas con pre-moderación es más sencillo controlar el aumento de la agresividad aunque muchos medios los desechan porque limitan la instantaneidad de la conversación. **Llorach** prefiere la pre-moderación puesto que no sólo consigue eliminar los comentarios más negativos antes de ser publicados sino que además ayuda a “educar” a la comunidad de lectores. A partir de los 3 ó 4 meses del paso de un sistema de post-moderación a otro de pre-moderación, el medio empieza a percibir que no es tan necesaria su labor de censura porque los usuarios se familiarizan con las normas y comienzan a autorregularse.

Una de las claves para la mejora de la calidad de la participación será la involu-  
cración de los periodistas

En los medios que aún utilizan sistemas de post-moderación, una estrategia esencial para frenar la escalada de agresividad es la participación en el diálogo de un periodista. **Muñía** indica que los usuarios modifican su comportamiento si perciben que alguien del medio está también participando en el foro. En muchos casos, señala, la crispación de la conversación disminuye al unirse a ella una figura de autoridad como el periodista que ha redactado la noticia o el *community manager*. No es necesario que estas figuras pidan calma o afeen la conducta al usuario; la ilusión de conversación bidireccional que generan consigue que el lector se sienta escuchado e integrado.

**Llorach** relata un hecho muy ilustrativo. La primera empresa *premium* de atención al cliente en los EUA fue fundada por veteranos de la Guerra de Corea. Las personas que la fundaron, al haber vivido experiencias de gran estrés psicológico y en algunos casos haber vuelto a casa con secuelas, podían tratar con mayor empatía a los clientes. Esta necesidad de empatizar con el usuario al otro lado de la línea es un valor decisivo en la moderación.

der que el contexto en el que se producía ese diálogo era desconocido para sus trabajadores españoles.

### Conclusiones

El reto de la moderación de una comunidad deportiva es aún mayor visto en perspectiva. El 40% de mensajes eliminados en la *Comunidad Marca* se traduce en una labor extenuante de mantenimiento de la calidad de la conversación. Pese a que las cifras expuestas en los estudios citados han de tomarse con precaución, ya que los índices de eliminación dependen en gran medida de que el medio emplee un sistema de pre o post-moderación, podemos observar con claridad la singularidad del contenido deportivo y su vinculación con el conflicto.

La fuerte correlación observada entre la contribución al diálogo y su eliminación plantea muchas preguntas sobre el papel de los usuarios como generadores de contenido. ¿Cómo pueden los medios fomentar la participación y al mismo tiempo generar una conversación de calidad? En una investigación llevada a cabo por **Bergstrom** sobre el periodismo participativo en Suecia, la autora comprobó que las personas con formación media o baja eran las que más valoraban que las noticias pudieran comentarse (2008, p. 69, citada en **Pastor**, 2010). La relación entre baja educación reglada y menor respeto a las normas de participación es un dato controvertible que merecería mayor estudio.

Eliminar el 40% de los mensajes en la *Comunidad Marca* es una labor extenuante de mantenimiento de la calidad de la conversación

De cara al futuro, **Llorach** considera que la estrategia más efectiva para mejorar la calidad de la participación de los lectores es potenciar las comunidades. Esto incluye que se facilite que unos usuarios puedan seguir lo que comentan otros, como ocurre con *Eskup* en *El país* o en *The New York times*. Y unido a esto, dotar de mayor relevancia a aquellos que más valor aporten con sus mensajes: invitarlos a

colaborar en alguna sección, por ejemplo. Para **Muiña y Menéndez**, en el futuro una de las claves para la mejora de la calidad de la participación será la involucración de los periodistas. Cuanto más activos sean en el intercambio con sus comunidades de lectores mejor calidad de conversación medio-usuario conseguirán.

En este artículo nos hemos centrado en el contenido deportivo, que es un caso paradigmático de participación del lector. Dada la singularidad del contenido, los medios pueden optar por dar cabida a expresiones de desahogo. En consecuencia, el sistema de moderación no debe limitarse a la aplicación de las normas de participación *stricto sensu*, sino que debe considerar las funciones de socialización y de evasión que las redes sociales ofrecen a los usuarios que comentan las noticias y, por tanto, gestionar el delicado equilibrio entre lo publicable y lo censurable. Al fin y al cabo, el conflicto entre aficiones forma parte consustancial tanto del espectáculo como del negocio deportivo.

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Para los suscriptores particulares, el precio de la suscripción "sólo online" es de 62 + 21% IVA euros/año = 75 euros/año.

Lopez-Gonzalez H. [Quantifying the immeasurable: a reflection on sport, time and media](#). Journal of the Philosophy of Sport. 2014; 41(3): 347-362.  
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## Discussion

The articles here describe a journey through the field of mediasport consumption with very well differentiated goals. That is not to say that they do not share common elements apart from that. In fact, as I will try to argue, every article constitutes the next link of a logic sequence of interrelated themes that quietly unfold.

In the next pages I will propose a general discussion of the results of the thesis as a whole. I have divided the section in 3 main discussion topics that summarize the most important results of the dissertation: the elements of conflict in mediasport, the liquidity of fans' relationships, and the simplicity as a core characteristic of mediasport commodity. Later on I will also discuss the main limitations of the work and finally I will offer some future directions and implications that could further the research.

### ***Conflict at the heart of sport commodity***

In Article 1, *Manufacturing conflict narratives in Real Madrid versus FC Barcelona football matches*, the authors have focused on the generation of narratives of conflict in sports journalism. We selected the *clásico* rivalry to examine the accounts of the press on a pre-existing conflict characterized by sectarianism, clash of identities and socio-political implications. Our initial intuitions derived from the work of David Rowe, who pointed out that sports journalism was fundamentally interested in 'the production of difference' (2003, p. 282), as well as Moragas, who similarly had indicated that mediasport was essentially about 'emphasizing the elements of crisis and contradiction' (1992, p. 15). Conflict, crisis, difference, and contradiction were connatural elements of sport, which itself is nothing more than a competition.

The literature review revealed three main domains of conflict generation in sport. The first one revolved around gender and sport and the conflicted role played by women in professional sport (Billings & Eastman, 2002; Cronan & Scott, 2008; Daddario, 1997; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Hardin & Whiteside, 2009). The second domain concentrated on the race and ethnicity and the normativization of minorities in elite sport (Birrell, 1989; Van Sterkenburg, Knoppers, & De Leeuw, 2010). Lastly, nationhood was the third traditional dimension of conflict in sports (Alabarces, Tomlinson, & Young, 2001; Alabarces, 2006; Knight, 2005; Puijk, 2000; Vincent, Kian, Pedersen, Kuntz, & Hill, 2010).

Real Madrid versus FC Barcelona confrontations have been traditionally paralleled to Spain versus Catalonia, Madrid versus Barcelona, identity clashes. In

approaching the narratives of conflict about the *clásico* we partially neglected the literature on nationhood and proposed a new theoretical framework to understand it. We hypothesised that conflict was at the heart of the media narratives, yes, but that the content of those narratives did not concentrated upon the identity aspects of their rivalry but on more everyday aspects such as the managers or the star players.

The results suggested that the post-national expressions of elite sports, as a consequence of its internationalization, had moved beyond the ‘nationalistic matrix’ (Llopis-Goig, 2009, 2012) and entered the sphere of celebrity-based consumption. Concepts such as the imagined community (Anderson, 1983) or the invention of the tradition (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983), which were imported to the field of mediasport to centre the discussion about the conflict generation, turned out to be less useful to explain the *clásico* rivalry than the celebrity culture concepts.

The analysis of what we called ‘narratives of conflict’ in *Manufacturing conflict...* was later transformed into the study of verbal aggression and violence in the fans’ participation in Articles 2 and 3. Comments sections under the news, specially when dealing with sports issues (Boyle, 2012), and particularly when happening in Spanish media (Pastor, 2010; Ruiz et al., 2011), accumulate large doses of discursive aggressiveness. In Article 3 *Discussion moderation in online media. The case of Marca newspaper* we specifically targeted those fans whose comments were systematically deleted by the moderators of the online sports newspaper Marca, one of the largest and most influential online sports communities in the Spanish-speaking world. The results of *Discussion moderation...* in conjunction with the findings in Article 2, *Community building in the digital age: Dynamics of online sports discussion*, suggest that, although the causal relationship between deletion and violence cannot be established, there are strong indications revealing a link between being deleted, being violent and being a committed member of the community.

*Discussion moderation...* shows the struggle of the medium to minimize the aggressive behaviour in the comments section and relates back to a very fundamental question in *Manufacturing conflict...* how can the media negotiate the conflict and prevent it from backfiring their reputation? If, as we theorized, conflict lies at the heart of the sporting news narratives but also at the readers’ participation about those news, what is the best strategy for a media company in order to balance the control of the participatory debate and at the same time allow heated opinions and, ultimately, the free expressions of socialization of their members? The balance is subtle and an escalation in the violence is easy to occur, because in the opinion of Álvaro Menéndez, Marca digital marketing director, when fans perceive a tense atmosphere in a community they tend to act accordingly. In



the end, an excessively loose control of the conversation could lead to legal responsibilities for the company and damage the equity brand.

*Community building...* also deals in part with fans' dysfunctional conduct and addresses their role in the construction of the sports community. It begins with the idea that the violent behaviour contemplated in the football terraces in the 1980s could have moved in a softened version to the 'digital terraces'. Trolls, flame warriors, et cetera, are transversal digital specimen but their presence in sports forums is quite usual. One of the aims of the article was to know if user participation in the Marca Community was defined by aggressiveness and derogatory language; by conflict, after all.

We found that user activity was strongly related to comment deletion, that is, the more you participated on the conversation, the more you got your comments deleted. Users with a single comment posted on the forum had less percentage of deleted messages than those more engaged in the conversation, suggesting that the deepening of the engagement in the community was contingent on the rise of controversial elements. This tendency was even sharper when observing the behaviour of core members of the community, those who interacted with other members. All in all, sporting discussion in comments section appeared to be more dependent on conflict generation than other forms of participatory journalism (Pastor, 2010; Reich, 2011; Ruiz et al., 2011; Ruiz, Masip, Micó, Díaz Noci, & Domingo, 2010; Vujnovic et al., 2009).

### ***Liquid relations in the sports mediasphere***

Sports consumers' quest for conflict has severe implications for the type of bonds promoted in their relationships with other sports consumers/fans. Here, the concept of 'community' sprouts in *Community building...* as the key concept of inquiry. Following Bauman's liquidity metaphor (Bauman, 2000, 2007), the authors explored the community building of Marca Community and analysed the interactions between the members. We postulated the existence of an 'effervescent community' based on a spectacle driven participation. After an initial peak, members lost very rapidly their interest in commenting. As Bauman pointed out on modern liquid communities, *mutatis mutandis*, Marca sporting community also behaved as a cloakroom community wherein members left their identity/cloak in the hanger only to withdraw it after the spectacle was done.

In *Manufacturing conflict...* we explored the conflict narrative construction in the post-national identity era and detected that this construction had less to do with group national identities and more to do with individual, celebrity-based elements. The erosion of the global/local duality and the increase of 'tourist fans' just add to the equation. In recent years it has been proposed the term *flaneur*

(Giulianotti, 2002, 2005a) to characterize the modern football fan. A *flâneur* is a taster, a consumer who walks down High Street peeking inattentively at the windows and solely acting moved by his/her appetites. Members of Marca Community entered briefly the conversation and abandoned it right afterwards. Many users only posted once and the overall impression was of a disconnected network of lurkers and tourist fans. However, when comparing to other forums composed of reader's comments their engagement seemed somehow more profound and stable.

The discussion on the community involvement finally gained momentum in Article 4, *Quantifying the immeasurable: A reflection on sport, time and media*. Here, I discussed the territorial boundaries of modern sporting spectacles – e.g. the NBA franchise in Europe or the Tour de France departing from other countries – and challenged the local perspective of sport as a commodity. Yet, more importantly, I did not interpret these circumstances as reasons to depict modern sports fans as more disengaged or liquid in their bonds. On the contrary, I emphasized the capital influence of sport as a get-together show, one of the last examples of the serialized civic ritual of 'watching the same at the same time' (Whannel, 2009). As I have argued before and will argue later again, sport commodity represents perfectly the local/global and the individual/ collective paradox, offering in a single product the overcoming of those polarities.

### ***Consuming the simplest product ever: mediated sport***

There is a first layer in the way of understanding sports consumption in the articles composing this thesis dissertation. It is condensed, for instance, in the clicks an online community gets, the page views marca.com receives, the narratives in the news stories people read and the banners accompanying them, and the air time sport spectacles sell to advertisers. This work, however, has tried to move beyond this first layer and explore the characteristics of the sport product, how the media have shaped the commodity in order to make it more appealing and globally marketable.

One of the main characteristics of mediated sport happened to be its simplicity. Coakley defined mediasport as bluntly as 'an absorbing universe of condensed simplicity' (2009, p. 402). In *Manufacturing conflict...* we examined the narratives within the news items because they worked as 'a specific form of representation, one that accentuates the sequential or syntagmatic nature of meaning' (Bruner, 1987). This meant that a single narrative could condense, that is, simplify, thousand of unconnected words. One might argue that this simplifications by means of narratives could be juxtapose to the simplification by means of standardization, statistics and sports monoculture exposed in

*Quantifying the immeasurable...* In this regard, Giulianotti said that sports quantification was used to 'reduce complex events into intelligible, manageable information for mass audiences' (2005b, p. 21). These two, narratives and standardization, analysed separately in this thesis, serve as joint mechanisms to secure that the sports meaning pierces the medium and reaches the audience, as the Esperanto of languages that sport claimed to be, the globally understandable idiom sport has become.

Aspects of this commodity simplification can be observed in the 'quote culture' posed by Boyle (2006) in *Manufacturing conflict...* But also in the Narrative Science case cited in *Quantifying the immeasurable...* in which automatic forms of journalistic writing have been implemented, first in sports journalism, due to its formulaic, fill-in the blank style (Lohr, 2011). Altogether they seem to highlight the content-less nature of sports journalism and challenge us to redirect our attention to the true essence of mediated sports. Sport spectacle does exist and it is not by any means content-less, but content only answers for a tiny portion of the whole sporting show, a small fraction of what sports consumers and fans experience in it.

It is precisely in this direction that *Community building...* and *Discussion moderation...* find their way of approaching sporting content. We refused the transmission view of communication as we understood that messages were fundamentally irrelevant, and embraced a ritual view of communication, emphasizing the sharing aspects of the exchange (Carey, 1989), especially in *Community building...* The simplified product of sport ultimately derived in a content-free community of messages and comments posted by members only looking for something in common: sharing a proxemic, phatic discussion, a sports chatter in Eco's words (Eco, 1986).

## **Limitations**

There are some important limitations to this study that I would like to acknowledge. The main limitation consists in the fact that the articles composing this work were not conceived in the first place as a long-term strategy to answer a single study purpose. My work began as a traditional thesis dissertation in essay format and changed its course halfway. This transformation *while en route* has caused the fragmented appearance of the study. The aforementioned multiplicity of objectives instead of a single purpose finds its bonding agent in the concept of mediasport consumption. All the articles here reflect the readers', spectators' and fans' ways of consuming mediated sport and how media industries meet this consumption desires. Unfortunately, there are always derivations, excursus, in

each article that inevitably distance them from the rest. Although every article has its own objective and the conclusion to that objective, the thesis as a whole sometimes reads as a purposeless digression on the field of mediasport.

A second limitation derives from the fact that the case studies presented here only offer a local perspective on the issue. Despite the authors will to make a comprehensive and global contribution to the field, applicable to almost every mediasport Western context, in the end the work reflects a Spanish perspective. *Community building...* and *Discussion moderation...* analyse the Marca Community, a Spanish online forum; and *Manufacturing conflict...* does the same with four Spanish dailies' websites. Nevertheless, it is true that *Quantifying the immeasurable...* is unambiguously rooted in the Anglo-Saxon mediasport tradition, and that at least three of the articles build their local perspectives based on global literature reviews. All things considered, the case studies should represent a local illustration of a global trend.

Methodologically speaking, this work does not come without limitations. The Content Analysis, derived from the grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Walker & Myrick, 2006), is still contested in terms of representativeness (Kohlbacher, 2006). In *Manufacturing conflict...* although we analysed more than 11,000 news articles the sample consisted solely on a single case study: one football match. *Community building...* and *Discussion moderation...* examined a sample of around 15,000 comments, which proved to be statistically non-significant for a (small) number of the research questions proposed by the authors.

An inherent limitation when dealing with the digital world is the expiry date of the results. The mediasport environment undergoes constant changes and by the times this work is published some of the figures mentioned here would be outdated. This thesis only tries to contribute with a snapshot of the situation in a specific moment in a specific place. Since the time we wrote *Community building...* and *Discussion moderation...* Marca Community has changed the way they handle spam messages, transforming the whole composition of the community network. Likewise, by early 2012 when I wrote *Manufacturing conflict...* FC Barcelona was the most dominant team in world football and José Mourinho and Pep Guardiola the archenemies in a never-ending narrative of conflict. This situation has undergone profound changes. In the last two years, while these two managers have left their clubs, the Catalonian society's territorial dispute with Spanish government has gained momentum and might have affected the way sports journalism reflects the *clásico* conflict.

## Future directions

Much of sport communication research deals with fans' motivation for consumption and the effects of this consumption (Yoo et al., 2013, p. 10). Sport fans are among the most committed customers any company can dream of, their allegiance being lifelong and indisputable. Disposition-based theories (Raney, 2006; Zillman & Cantor, 1977) explore, among other things, the extent to which our affects condition the way we enjoy media content, that is, the way we consume it after all. The application of this theory and its multiple sub-theories on sport inquiry has shed some light on fan's behaviour (Bryant & Raney, 2000). As we develop the research for this thesis we did not become fully aware of the implications of our findings for the field of fan's studies. The way fans relate to each other is of utter interest to media companies managing fan communities as well as to sport institutions wanting to enhance the engagement of their members.

One of the most salient attributes of engaged sport fans is their alleged connection to violence, and most notably the subsequent moral disengagement they are forced to develop in order to come to terms with their lust for violence (Gunter, 2006). This approach to sports fandom has attracted the attention of many scholars (David, Horton, & German, 2008; Feddersen & Rott, 2011; Raney & Depalma, 2006; Westerman & Tamborini, 2010). This is a matter of great social concern because sport has been traditionally perceived as a very convenient content to channel obnoxious sentiments such as racism (Carrington, 2013; Kian, Clavio, Vincent, & Shaw, 2011; Wiggins, 2014) sex discrimination (P. Griffin, 1998; R. A. Griffin, 2011; Wachs, Cooky, Messner, & Dworkin, 2012) and clash of national prides – profusely explained in *Manufacturing conflict...*

There are a number of fan-oriented effects that have been explored in the last decades. The Basking in Reflected Glory (BIRG), Cutting Off Reflected Failure (CORF) as well as Cutting Off Future Failure (COFF) (Porter, Wood, & Benigni, 2011) are effects observed in fans willing to identify with a winning situation or to preserve their self-identity against an undesirable situation. One line of interest of our future work could follow on the consumption of narratives of conflict and the online violent behaviour and their integration into the BIRG, COFF and CORF reception effects. This effects can be studied in the context of parasocial interactions (Horton & Wohl, 1956) but are not *per se* media effects.

The *mediated* effects of sports could further the present research and add to our knowledge on fans' consumption patterns. A very interesting effect that lines up the quest for conflict and the effects theory is what Germans call *Schadenfreude*, the joy from someone else's sadness. By pure serendipity we found in our results during the making of *Community building...* and *Discussion moderation...* some suggestions that pointed in that direction.

A second branch of our work relates to the new media and the increasingly blurred boundaries between the spheres of fans, media and sports organizations. The tighter their intersection gets, the more urgent the study of that intersection becomes. Organizations and media have merged positions in the last decades and influence each other, in a process sometimes referred to as *murdochization* (Cashmore, 2000, 2002). From a public relations perspective, the audience underestimates the sport institutions influence in feeding biased information to media organizations (L'Etang, 2012, 2014). In addition to that, sport institutions not only feed that information to media but select the desirable frames to present it to the public (Fortunato, 2008). And the global dimension of media industries poses an even bigger threat. It seems reasonable to expect, as the media companies concentrate and merge (Andrews, 2003; Law, Harvey, & Kemp, 2002), and the gap between the elite clubs and the rest increases too, as is the case in European football (Binder & Findlay, 2011; Flores, Forrest, & Tena, 2010), that the synergies between these top sport institutions and these few international media conglomerates will increase too.

Notwithstanding this intersection, the new media seem to challenge the hegemonic position of the traditional actors by empowering the audience. How the coupling sport institutions and media will try to contain and keep under control within their sanctioned limits the fans' desires of communication, sharing, commenting and so on? So far, everything we can say is that traditional media and sport organizations feel uncomfortable and fearful toward the new scenario that digital media present. Athletes themselves have begun to break the chain of command and connect directly with their fan base, exasperating in the process the communication and public relations departments of their teams. Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, Al-Jazeera, BeIn Sports, news aggregators, piracy... they all pose a threat to their consolidated and very successful business model hitherto.

The situation is so unstable that it is extremely difficult to predict what might happen in the near future. What we know now, for instance, is that large media companies have been acquiring broadband, mobile and broadcasting rights only 'to sit on the broadcasting rights' (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012, p. 29). The aim is to reduce the range of digital content available in the market so no other new competitor can purchase it. For the moment, then, traditional media is sequestering digital rights with no interest in them.

## Conclusion

In this thesis I have tried to explore the mediasport consumption of football fans. The articles have concentrated on a broad definition of mediasport as a commodity; this definition did not answer questions regarding how much mediasport did fans buy, or how, when and where. It was not about buying but about consuming, consumption understood in terms of communicating, sharing opinions, posting comments, reading news stories and being 24/7 waiting for updates of the beloved team or athlete. No money was involved in the operation and still, media companies pursued this consumption looking for more page views in their websites, more clicks on their banners, more ads seen on television, and in the long-term, an enhanced engagement of the fans with the medium that provides them with the content they asked for. I am not sure what Chandler et al meant when they said that 'both sport and its participants have become products for sale in the marketplace' (Chandler, Vamplew, & Cronin, 2002, p. 47). If by participants they meant athletes, we will need to add to the equation the audience as a connatural part of the mediasport marketable spectacle. There is a popular saying that reminds us that— if you're not paying, you're not the customer, you're the product. Or similarly – if you're not at the table, you're on the menu. In addition to that, sport has also evolved 'from a local, active and participatory experience to an abstract, passive and spectatorial one' (Burstyn, 1999).

In the last decades we have witnessed the shift from football fandom to football consumption, as anticipated by many (King, 2002). Sport commodity has been refined, sophisticated, and in a way 'de-materialised' (Lee, 1993), a de-localisation producing fans as consumer victims (Sandvoss, 2003, 2005). The normalization of the discourses of personal and consumer choice has aligned with the detachment of elite sports from loyalties and meanings based in place or tradition (Whitson, 1998, p. 66). The commercialisation of sporting goods is seeing a growth of 'experiential commodities' (Lee, 1993), where the product is no longer a t-shirt, a ticket, or a ball, but a sharing together or a comforting reading of an article. A more sophisticated and de-materialised commodity that makes complete sense in an era determined by cognitive-cultural capitalism (Scott, 2008). From a sociological perspective, we could sum it up by saying that lifestyles, and no longer ascribed identities, social divisions or inequalities, are the liquid engines underneath our desires of consumption nowadays (Slater, 1997).

In a way, most of the reflections included in this thesis speak about a world on the verge of extinction. Mediasport and its most salient element, television, are not in the dominant position they were a few decades ago. New technologies are in diapers and it is tremendously adventurous to predict what will mediasport look like in the next decade, and at the same time, more than an educated guess to say

that they will have to create new business models and adapt to completely new media ecology. Us participatory audiences are now experiencing the first years of our empowerment, toying, so to speak, with the digital tools provided by social media. Consumers claim the centre stage to a media industry that is only willing to cooperate by offering a diluted version of emancipation that no longer fulfils our high expectations, echoing the broader debate of the crisis of the representation in motion in the socio-political arena.

But, in the end, does sport really matter? Dunning answered yea in his famous book on the sociology of sport, violence and civilization (1999). And what is it that matters about sports? Koppett said that the consumer needs ‘the illusion that the result of a game matters’ (1981), and that caring about the outcome was the entertainment in itself. The ancient Greeks established that there were two kinds of actions: praxis and poiesis. Poiesis is the transitive way of conjugating the verb making. This *poetic* action always resulted in a product, an outcome of the making. On the contrary, praxis was the pure action, translatable into English by the verb doing; an intransitive verb in a way. In the praxis the ideas find their expression in the very act of doing without the need of an outcome (Agamben, 1999).

I wonder what kind of action mediasport involves and which is exactly the product it entails. Is it the thrill of the victory and the illusion that the victory actually matters? Or is it the comfort zone of the praxis-like predictable event sport is? I speculate that the answer to the essence of mediasport commodity might be in the last pages of Andrew Billings’ book on mediasport (2011, p. 189). There, he writes down his recollection of his father’s passing on a January morning in 1994. ‘Needless to say, it was an extremely draining day. That night, I sat down and watched my Green Bay Packers defeat Detroit Lions and I ate for the first time all day’.

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