

Transparent and accurate public communication in sports

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Introduction

The need to review sports organisations' public communication policies arises from the recent wave of public scandals to have tainted various sports events in the past few years, including a succession of doping and mismanagement cases in the cycling world,²⁴ instances of bribery in the selection process of hosting nations for the FIFA World Cup,²⁵ corruption in numerous international federations and a growing concern about how sport can effectively fight match fixing. These cases of bad governance and opaque practices have damaged the image of sport, its federations, and its representatives. They have also marred the values long associated with sports and with the Olympic spirit.

And yet, the task of analysing the public communication strategy of sports organisations such as Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) is made difficult by the fact that many of them are both non-governmental and non-profit, but also companies with colossal revenues, unprecedented global reach, political clout, and tremendous social influence. This unique status, setting sports organisations apart from both NGOs and commercial corporations, constitutes a challenge for pinpointing the exact best governance practices applicable to them.

Moreover, the international head organisation gets its governing mandate from the national member organisations, represented by officials (presidents, delegates, etc.) who are themselves elected by the base. Thus, the head organisation is accountable to its own member organisations, but those, in turn, are dependent on it for part of their funds. This mutual dependency and lack of mandatory accountability to the outside world makes the prospect of reform highly unlikely.

However, the organisations' stakeholders, i.e. the supporters, the teams, the athletes, the sponsors, the general public, and the media, are pressuring sports organisations to implement change. Given their exposed position and the current crisis of trust, the EJC argues that it is essential for them to augment transparency and accuracy in their public communication, adopt more detailed public reporting practices of financial information, and define disclosure policies for the processes that shape the decision making procedures governing the action of these bodies. We also argue that it is essential for sports organisations to understand that democratic proceedings can only be implemented by taking into account the interests of the various stakeholder groups, and by trying to

24 Hart, S. (2010). Road to ruin: how relentless scandals have cast a depressing shadow over cycling. The Telegraph. Retrieved August 8, 2012, from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/othersports/cycling/7746437/Road-to-ruin-how-relentless-scandals-have-cast-a-depressing-shadow-over-cycling.html>

25 The Telegraph (n.d.). FIFA corruption: the men at the centre of the bribery scandal. Retrieved August 8, 2012, from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/football/international/8657400/Fifa-corruption-the-men-at-the-centre-of-the-bribery-scandal.html>

bridge the gap between the international organisation and between the stakeholders and the national member organisations.

The purpose of this report is to recommend a number of basic criteria for accurate and transparent public communication for international sports organisations. Transparency in communication is key to organisational transparency in governance, and is essential in particular for the good reputation of the sports organisation among its main stakeholders. It is also a *sine qua non* for gaining the general public's trust and support, and for rehabilitating the values of sport.

The first part of this report will discuss the basic criteria for transparent public communication and provide examples of best practice elaborated and implemented by non-governmental organisations and corporations. It will also give an overview and evaluate the public communication policies of the three international sports organisations, in light of the criteria presented earlier. The second part of the report focuses on social media as an efficient tool for sports public communication. Although their arrival in the media sphere presents many challenges in the field of communication, we contend that they represent a golden opportunity for sports organisations to build and maintain strong and fruitful relationships with their stakeholders.

Part I:

Criteria of transparent and accurate public communication practices

While transparency is a general managerial concern, guaranteeing operational efficiency and control, it is also an important principle in contemporary public relations, where it is often regarded as a precondition for trust, collaboration, dialogue, insight, accountability, and rational governance (Kent and Taylor, 2002).

Transparency has become a prominent value and a powerful signifier in today's organisational world, as internal and external stakeholders have grown to expect unrestricted access to corporate information. The principle of transparency can also have legal provisions, in countries where organisations are bound by law to disclose information concerning their actions and plans, including annual reports and financial data. Additionally, business practices are routinely scrutinised by media and business analysts, while institutions are increasingly held accountable for their strategic choices. The growing pressure for increased transparency is also driven by the new communication technologies, i.e. the Internet and social media, which allow for a greater flow of information and an increased public participation.

Transparency is also becoming a conscious corporate and institutional strategy for the gain of respectability and social accreditation. Contemporary organisations not only describe their communication environment in terms of transparency but also prescribe it as a proper managerial response. Hood (2006) claims that the notion of transparency has attained "quasi-religious significance" in contemporary society, where debates over

corporate governance and organisational design are increasingly shaped by references to openness and transparency as the ultimate goal of modern management. Still, as Hood points out, like other semi-religious terms, “transparency is more often preached than practiced, more often invoked than defined” (p. 3). This is also true in the field of sport public communication.

There are typically two modes of transparency. In the liberal sense, transparency is obtained by the very democratic principle of power through representation. In this case, powerful state institutions, which concentrate power, are accountable to the public. Forfeiting the public’s approval, these institutions also lose their mandate. This model of transparency functions according to a ‘top-down’, or vertical visibility.

The second transparency paradigm is horizontal. It enables organisations to distribute and spread their social engagement to a wide audience. When combining ‘top-down’ visibility with the wide sociality of an organisation, it is crucial to maintain a dialogue between the organisation and the public.

The building blocks of transparency

There are a number of criteria that need to be taken into account for public communication to be recognised as truly transparent. When looking at these “building blocks” of transparency, it is also insightful to see how a number of international non-governmental organisations and corporations deal with such concerns. Given sports organisations’ specific status, we have chosen examples from both the commercial and the non-profit areas.

The examples that appear here concern organisations that have gone to great lengths to put into effect best practices in their daily governance activities. This selection is motivated by our belief that any measure undertaken for the future improvement of transparency in sports organisations could profit from understanding how the most successful approaches are implemented.

Accountability

The concept of accountability is seen as a pledge, a moral and legal responsibility to fulfil the interests of the other concerned parties. Accountability can be translated into actions on the condition that the organisation has a two-way communication with its partners and stakeholders. For a sports organisation, the principle of accountability towards their stakeholders concerns financial and moral matters. But beyond questions of morality, the principle of accountability also requires practical means that enable the stakeholders to monitor the organisation’s actions and evaluate them in this light (Brown and Moore, 2001, pp. 570-571).

The subject of accountability, for one specific organisation, can differ from one stakeholder to another. The scope of information, given to one stakeholder, could be smaller or greater from that given to the other. Similarly, the content an organisation shares with different stakeholders can vary: some may require one kind of information, such as a report concerning its activities, and the other may wish to retrieve financial information.

It is therefore important to distinguish between different key stakeholders in order to establish correctly the substance and scope of accountability.

The manner in which an organisation is accountable to a particular group of stakeholders can be set by contract, grant or substantive terms. However, it is recommended to base the relationship on trust, rather than to bind it legally. In any case, this requires regular reporting on behalf of the organisation, the frequency of which is to be determined according to the issues the organisation is accountable for (ibid).

Accountability can and should change over time, adapting itself to the organisation's evolving activities and actions, and to the requirements of the stakeholders. The main benefit of accountability is the establishment of a relationship based on trust, the result of a transparent and open contact.

- The International Non-Governmental Organisations Accountability Charter
Some of the best examples of accountability can be found among non-governmental organisations. Most of them, wishing to adopt principles of best practice in this area, use the International Non-Governmental Organisations Accountability Charter²⁶ (INGO Accountability Chart). The Charter's founding members – all of them INGOs – wrote it in response to increasing pressure from media, businesses, and governmental bodies demanding they implement greater transparency. These organisations, among which Amnesty International, Oxfam International, Greenpeace International, and World Vision International, recognised the need for a global, cross-sectoral code of ethics that would reflect the core values and priorities of the NGO sector. The Charter was designed to cover all the major areas of NGO involvement and to be compatible with, and complimentary to, existing codes. It provides an excellent blueprint for any organisation wishing to implement principles of accountability.

The Charter codifies practices in a number of categories – respect for universal principles; independence; responsible advocacy; effective programmes; non-discrimination; transparency; good governance; ethical fundraising; and professional management – and pledges its members' commitment to their implementation, both internally and externally. It encourages communication with stakeholders and strives to improve the general performance and effectiveness of the organisations. Its signatories recognise that transparency and accountability are essential to good governance, whether by governments, businesses, or non-profit organisations. They vouch, therefore, to achieve the charter's mission effectively, in a manner consistent with their values. In this, they are first and foremost accountable to their stakeholders.

Further on, the signatories commit to openness, transparency, and honesty in communicating about their structures, missions, policies, and activities. They pursue active communication with the stakeholders about themselves, and make information publicly available.

²⁶ See <http://www.ingoaccountabilitycharter.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/INGO-Accountability-Charter.pdf>

“We report at least once a year on our activities and achievements. Reports will describe each organisation’s:

- Mission and values;
- Objectives and outcomes achieved in programme and advocacy;
- Environmental impact;
- Governance structure and processes, and main office bearers;
- Main sources of funding from corporations, foundations, governments, and individuals;
- Financial performance;
- Compliance with this Charter; and
- Contact details” (INGO Accountability Charter, p. 3).

Board members accountability

Board members are usually the least accountable elements in large organisations, their activities remaining mostly opaque. An example of best practice in this instance is Oxfam International’s Board Accountability Policy,²⁷ providing guidelines ascertaining the board members’ accountability. The document states that “*Oxfam enjoys high levels of public trust and this brings a responsibility to provide high quality, timely and relevant information about its work*” (Oxfam International Board Accountability Policy).

The board pledges to disclose any information pertaining to its accountability to stakeholders, beneficiaries, partners, allies, donors, supporters, institutions, media, and the general public. Additionally, as part of its accountability effort, Oxfam International vouches to consult with key partners and allies on this matter, as part of its strategic and operational planning cycles.

Finally, the Policy ensures the publication of key information online: the Strategic Plan, annual reports, campaign policy documents, programme reports, research results, evaluations, media releases, and campaign actions. The degree of detail presented varies among affiliates in their national context.

Information disclosure

Information disclosure refers to the right of the public and the stakeholders of an organisation to obtain important information relating to its financial matters, activities, and decisions. Financial reporting and disclosure are important means for the management to communicate on their performances and governance practices. Some organisations also engage in voluntary communication actions, such as the presentation of management forecasts, participation in conferences and fairs, publication of press releases, distribution of information via official websites, engagement through social media, and so forth. Information intermediaries, such as financial analysts, industry experts, and the specialised press, play an additional role, filling-in the remaining gaps.

Organisations should maintain an equilibrium in the type and scope of information they provide to different stakeholders. For instance, if some data is available to financial

27 See <http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/oxfam-international-board-accountability-policies-2012.pdf>

partners but not to the public or to the state, this discrepancy should be clearly laid out and regulated according to legitimate corporate practices. Favouring one stakeholder over others in terms of information disclosure should only occur when wider interests clearly demand it.

According to the Code of Ethics drawn up by The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), disclosure of information is an essential element in the implementation of successful public relations, but the exact approach to this matter differs from one organisation to another. UNICEF, for example, considers public access to information a key component in its effective engagement with all its stakeholders, including the general public, in its efforts to achieve its goals. It recognises the positive correlation between transparency and public trust in UNICEF-supported development work and humanitarian responses.

The World Bank, in turn, bases its *Access to Information Policy*, on five principles:

- “Maximizing access to information
- Setting out a clear list of exceptions
- Safeguarding the deliberative process
- Providing clear procedures for making information available
- Recognising requesters’ right to an appeals process.” (World Bank, 2011).

As for the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), it has developed an information disclosure strategy, which gives priority to the public’s needs. It has set up information channels, through which it processes information, so that interested individuals and organisations can access data easily. These different channels are the OECD website, the media channel, and the OECD archive. These free channels ensure different groups of stakeholders can access information that is relevant to them and increase at the same time the organisation’s visibility among the general public. The website, which is continuously updated, contains information relating to all its fields of activity, including the organisation’s legal instruments and reports. There are also policy briefs, newsletters, working papers, statistical data, and information concerning the institution’s history and working committees. Meeting agendas, their background documents, and conclusions also appear on the website. The OECD media is an important channel for disseminating and explaining OECD work to the public. In this section, the OECD also broadcasts news conferences, seminars, and interviews it sets up. Through the OECD archive, the public can access new and older official OECD documents.

The OECD has identified different groups of stakeholders it addresses its information to – civil society and parliamentarians, partner and/or member organisations. Taking into consideration these different groups, it manages its information disclosure process and tries to meet the needs of each of them accordingly.

Financial reporting

The issue of financial reporting is a particularly important element in the overall information disclosure policy of an organisation. Examples of best practice in this field also abound among non-governmental institutions, such as Oxfam International and Transparency International. These two NGOs publish online their original financial yearly reports and audit reports. These contain actual financial information and are signed by the organisations' top officials and accountants.

The financial reports of both NGOs detail the salaries of their employees, including their top-level executives. Oxfam, for instance, specifies the number of its employees and the exact budget allocated to the payment of salaries. It also presents separately those employees who earn the highest wages, enumerates them, and provides explicit data on their earnings.

Transparency International is even more rigorous in reporting about its finances. The organisation discloses the wages of each executive in the organisation, detailing their responsibilities. It also specifies the annual budget dedicated to the payment of its executives' salaries. In addition, it provides a comparison table, presenting the lowest and the highest salaries paid by the organisation, according to the qualification level of the employees.

Reporting on decision-making processes

L'Oréal, one of the world's largest beauty industry corporations, has also set good standards in terms of transparency. In 2012, the Ethisphere Institute, an international think-tank dedicated to the promotion of best practices in the corporate world, ranked it as one of the world's most ethical companies. L'Oréal has a strong corporate identity, which recognises accountability, reporting, and the fight against corruption as the business's core values.

In addition to its extensive financial reporting, L'Oréal makes matters of internal governance transparent to the public, providing a good blueprint for reporting on decision making processes. The reports of all board meetings are published online, as well as the general assembly's voting results, with a detailed description of the issues at hand and an account of the voting numbers.

Openness, honesty, and accuracy

Organisations should seek the highest standards of accuracy and honesty in pursuing the interests of clients and employees. *"There should be a free flow of accurate and truthful information"*, states the PRSA (Dennis and Glen, 2009, p. 78). This implies that the information projected in the public sphere should be absolutely truthful and reflect reality.

In order to provide a coherent, accountable, and transparent frame of action, which also guarantees the organisation is respectful of the law and of core human principles, it needs to anchor its actions in a strong set of values that are made public. Thus, codes of conduct, ethical principles, and mission statements, made available to the stakeholders,

must be clear, with a focused presentation of the organisation's structuring values. Transparency International provides a good template on this account as well, reporting on its working standards and on the values guiding its action, namely transparency, accountability, integrity, solidarity, courage, justice, and democracy. Whether in its mission statements or in its internal documents, Transparency International incorporates the values elaborated in the INGO Accountability Charter and makes them the very ethical basis of its action.

An organisation's degree of openness is also a function of its officials' degree of accessibility, how likely they are to engage in discussion and respond to requests, and how likely they are to share information or provide requested materials. Ideally, any information relevant to the interests of stakeholders should be available online or by a request. Moreover, beyond merely sharing the requested information, organisations also need to show the will to make stakeholders aware of inside issues. Therefore, communication, in this sense, also means welcoming the stakeholders into the very heart of the organisation, allowing them to vision it in full.

With these principles in mind, Transparency International provides on its website the contact information of all its employees and departments, thus allowing different stakeholders to have a direct and immediate contact with the organisation's officials best qualified to answer their demands. Transparency International also publishes the names and CVs of all its employees, so that stakeholders know whom they are approaching, distilling a sense of openness, transparency, and interpersonal connection with the organisation.

Fairness

"Fairness is commonly understood as a moral obligation regarding rule adherence, or at least as a norm on adherence to a commonly agreed upon interpretation of the rules" (Tansjo, 2000, p. 158). Once an organisation has submitted itself to certain restrictions, it can expect its stakeholders, who benefited from its compliance, to submit themselves to similar demands.

In their communication practices, sports organisations should strive to maintain a fair compromise between public and private interests. In cases of scandal, conflict or crisis, organisations should be able to fairly communicate about it and present their stakeholders with balanced information.

Relationship building

Public communication, as previously stated, allows organisations to establish and maintain a good relationship with its stakeholders. Oxfam International's approach is exemplary in this regard, making this issue a governance concern. Its communication plan is an integral part of its yearly work plan, accessible for public consultation online. Attentive to developments in the communication field, such as the increasing use of social media and new technologies, Oxfam International also included in its yearly report of 2011 a communication plan specifying a social media-targeted strategy. Oxfam's plans

are updated every year and modified according to outside developments and the needs of the organisation.

Independent advisers

The implementation of reforms necessary for transparency in an existing organisation is all the more complex since it requires the adoption of vast, and sometimes painful changes. It also obliges members of the organisation, on all levels, to submit themselves to these changes and actively collaborate in their execution – an attitude without which the reforms are bound to fail. All these considerations make reforms difficult to carry out without an external impulse. This impulse can be provided by external advisers who specialise in the matters at hand and who are free from internal pressures and contrary interests.

The World Bank faced corruption scandals in the past,²⁸ which threatened to tarnish its reputation. Nevertheless, the organisation managed to maintain a good public image, in part through the establishment of the Integrity Advisory Board (2008) for corruption and bribery prevention. The board included members such as anti-corruption and governance adviser, Mark Pieth. Having an independent advisory board assist the organisation in dealing with such issues is helpful both in dealing with the governance issues and in providing a good communication response to the problem at hand. FIFA, as mentioned before, has started to adopt a similar practice. It remains to be seen what results these would yield.

Implementing principles of transparency in the world of sports

Sports play an important role in society and allow billions of people – be they professional athletes, supporters or amateurs, playing for pleasure or for health – to experience great emotions, learn the value of fair-play and the importance of rules, and to develop respect for others. But athletes, amateur players, and fans are not the only ones to shape the image of sport. This role is played primarily by international sports organisations, which transmit the sports' values to the public.

We took a look at the current public communication practices of three international sports organisations – FIFA, IOC and Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) – in order to identify the guiding communication principles they use and how these are implemented. FIFA is the leading governing body of the most popular sport in the world, this status conferring the organisation certain responsibilities. And yet, in the past years, FIFA has been involved in a number of scandals, surrounding the selection process of football championships' hosting nations. It has also been accused of perpetuating opaque financial practices and suspected of resorting to bribery.²⁹ Concerns of corruption were raised as well in relation to the attribution of television broadcast³⁰ and marketing

28 Cole, J. (2007). Paul Wolfowitz's Fatal Weakness. Spiegel. Retrieved September 25, 2012, from <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world-bank-scandal-paul-wolfowitz-s-fatal-weakness-a-482945.html>

29 Huffington Post (n.d.). Sepp Blatter Cleared, Two Senior FIFA Officials Suspended in Corruption Scandal. Retrieved September 25, 2012, from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/05/29/sepp-blatter-fifa-cleared-officials-suspended_n_868656.html

30 Dunbar, G. (2012). Blatter defends role in FIFA kickbacks scandal. Yahoo! Finance. Retrieved September 25, 2012, from <http://finance.yahoo.com/news/blatter-defends-role-fifa-kickbacks-scandal-160803437--sow.html>

contracts,³¹ as well as the manipulation of FIFA's presidential elections.³² In July 2012, bribe suspicions were confirmed in a Swiss court ruling establishing the part played by a number of FIFA executives,³³ thus further tarnishing the image of the football organisation in the eyes of the public. In June 2011, as the scandals started mounting up, FIFA's president, Sepp Blatter, announced the organisation is committed to revising its Code of Ethics and creating a new Code of Conduct. It is in view of this that the Independent Governance Committee was created.

The IOC has also known its share of negative publicity. The Olympic Games have often been accompanied by doping scandals and stripped medals, problematic judges' decisions, and cases of corruption involving IOC executives. In 1998, the IOC was caught in its own bribes-for-votes scandal, concerning the 2002 Salt Lake City winter Olympics. Several IOC members, it was revealed, had received cash or gifts in exchange for their vote in favour for their support of the U.S. bid to stage the winter games. Although the IOC was pressured to launch a series of internal governance reforms and has administered these changes quite strictly, certain problems persist. Recent events also put the spotlight on the IOC's handling of problems such as athlete misconduct during the competitions, and allegations of a proliferating black market for the sale of tickets, which took place during the London Olympics this year.

The press published evidence linking 27 IOC officials, originally responsible for the control of tickets sales, to a traffic of tickets outside the authorised sales channels. This disregard for IOC regulations on behalf of the very IOC executives responsible for their implementation, and their subsequent refusal to take responsibility for their actions, caused public outcry.

A number of articles and researches, published ahead of this year's Games by BBC's investigative journalist, Andrew Jennings, present the IOC as an organisation "made up of an undemocratic secretly elected group of ultra-elite men and as noted, a few token athletes. There are 10 princes and princesses on the IOC and at least another 2 people from military ruling families [...]. Most of these elites have zero work experience, zero athletic experience, and little if any sports experience".³⁴ Jennings' claims raise questions concerning the transparency and fairness of the organisation's election procedures and the efficiency of its governing structure.

Considering the IOC's prominent international position and the aura surrounding the Olympic Games, the organisation needs to assume responsibility and find a suitable answer for past and present problems, so that it may continue to uphold the moral values of sports as they are embodied in the Olympic spirit.

31 LittleJohn, R. (2011). You're corrupt and you know it. Mail Online. Retrieved September 25, 2012, from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1392526/FIFA-scandal-Youre-corrupt-know-are.html>

32 Reuters (n.d.). Timeline: FIFA corruption scandal in the last year. Retrieved September 25, 2012, from <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/05/29/us-soccer-fifa-timeline-idUSTRE74S2CE20110529>

33 See <http://www.fifa.com/aboutfifa/organisation/news/newsid=1662804/>

34 Dryden, N. and Jennings, A. (2012). Meet the Real International Olympic Committee. Play the Game. Retrieved September 25, 2012, from <http://www.playthegame.org/news/detailed/meet-the-real-international-olympic-committee-5424.html>

The world of cycling faces similar concerns. Notorious for the doping scandals that seem to have come to define it these past decades, the UCI, the largest cycling organisation in the world, is undergoing a major credibility crisis.

According to these organisations' own internal papers and regulations, no guidelines regulate their communication strategies, but there are certain standards they adhere to. Transparency and financial accountability are mentioned in most cases, together with the need to maintain a two-way communication. However, the findings show that these standards are not always upheld in practice.

The indicators pointing to a governance crisis in the sports sector have raised concerns on the governmental level, leading certain EU institutions to actively express their dissatisfaction at the current state of affairs. Both the European Commission and the Council of Europe state in official documents that this crisis must be addressed and dealt with. The major problems they identify include excessive commercial pressures, exploitation of young athletes, doping, racism, violence, corruption, and money laundering. The European Commission's White Paper on Sport from 2007 states that "Corruption in the sport sector may frequently be a reality and, given the sector's high degree of internationalism, is often likely to have cross-border aspects. Corruption problems which have a European dimension need to be tackled at European level".³⁵ The White Paper underlines that sports organisations are not capable of dealing with the problems on their own and that a dialogue, on the European level, must be engaged.

The Council of Europe's response came in the shape of a five-page resolution on "Good governance and ethics in sport", adopted in April 2012 and detailing its concerns. The Council's members noted that "in the globalized world of sport, high economic stakes and the uncontrolled incursion of purely financial considerations are seriously jeopardizing the ethics of sport and increasing the risk of abuses, or even criminal acts, either by individuals or by organized criminal. Not only are doping, corruption and match-fixing growing insidiously, but other problems are also undermining the world of sport and tarnishing its image".³⁶

The sports ministers of the European Union have also taken an interest in the subject, setting-up an Expert Group on Good Governance in Sport, where stakeholders and governments are supposed to meet and engage in a dialogue that would hopefully lead to change.

Defining sports organisations' stakeholders

As mentioned earlier, the first step in defining an organisation's public communication policies and the main principles that shape it is to identify its principle stakeholders - those individuals or groups of people, of varying influence and involvement, who can affect or be affected by the actions, decisions, and policies of the organisation.

³⁵ See http://ec.europa.eu/sport/documents/wp_on_sport_en.pdf

³⁶ See <http://assembly.coe.int/ASP/Doc/XrefViewPDF.asp?FileID=18258&Language=EN>

Sports organisations have a number of stakeholders. These very distinct and different publics will require different public communication strategies. The key stakeholders (or key publics) of sports organisations are:

- players, athletes, members;
- leagues, clubs;
- supporters and fans;
- sponsors, business partners;
- partner organisations, member associations;
- government;
- general public.

In order to maintain quality relationships with strategic publics, organisations must design a range of communication strategies that cater for each stakeholder group, according to its desires and needs relative to certain issues. Information will need to be tailored to effectively communicate with, and sufficiently inform, different stakeholder groups. As we shall later see, sports organisations do not yet recognise this as an important consideration. Generally speaking, they use one single strategy to communicate to all, making it all the more difficult for them to satisfy the needs of all their publics.

Sports organisations and accountability

All three sports organisations struggle with the principle of financial reporting. Although a number of financial documents can be found online, none of the organisations publish information concerning the remuneration, bonuses, benefits, and payments made to its officials.

The reporting of activities is done mostly through press releases, which are also published on the official websites of the organisations and sometimes quoted by the media. The official response to scandals also appears in the shape of press releases. Such was also FIFA's handling of Switzerland's supreme court decision from July 2012, ordering the release of documents identifying senior FIFA officials who took millions of dollars in bribery payments from ISL, FIFA's marketing partner until 2001 (at which point in time it went bankrupt).³⁷ The court also concluded that FIFA's president, Sepp Blatter, knew such transactions were taking place. Reacting to the scandal, the football organisation published official releases on its website, as well as an interview with its president, giving his own version of the events, a strategy FIFA replicates in most scandal cases, allegation, or condemnation relating to its activities. FIFA also uses social media to relay its position. On the day of the court's announcement, Sepp Blatter posted this tweet: "Pleased by the Swiss Fed. Court decision on ISL. It confirms, as I & the court in Zug said: I was not on the list". Blatter's posts have a personal note and he posts quite regularly.

37 Conn, D. (2012). Former FIFA President João Havelange 'received millions in bribes'. The Guardian. Retrieved September 25, 2012, from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/football/2012/jul/11/fifa-joao-havelange-bribes-report>

None of the organisations report with any regularity on internal meetings, decision-making processes, or other internal activities. These topics are sometimes mentioned in press releases and the IOC has even published a number of documents online, but these remain sporadic.

The corruption scandals have demonstrated that good financial accountability to stakeholders – sponsors in particular – is necessary if sports organisations are to maintain a good relationship with them. Sponsors of international sports organisations have certain expectations in extending their financial support, namely, they wish to relate their business to the sport, thereby winning the appreciation of the fans, who constitute themselves another stakeholder group. The good reputation of the sports organisations, as it is perceived by sports fans, is therefore an essential indicator for the sponsors. Ensuring the sponsors' satisfaction in this regard is only possible by implementing a policy of accountability, especially in the case of scandals and other cases of misconduct.

Looking at the practices of the three sports organisations treated in this report, it appears that their public image, damaged by a series of scandals, such as FIFA's opaque presidential election of June 2011 and corruption scandal of 2012, significantly impacted their relationship with their sponsors.

The scandals mentioned above, revolving around FIFA in the years 2011-2012, tainted by association the reputation of its sponsors. This led FIFA's top-tier partners – Adidas, Coca-Cola, Emirates, and VISA Inc – to attempt to repair the damage by publicly pressing the organisation to reform and by sounding out their disagreement with FIFA's treatment these problems.

Already in May 2011, following the concerns raised over FIFA's presidential elections, those four corporations tried to pressure the organisation into implementing reforms. They released to the media official statements in which they asserted that FIFA's practices are harming both the football giant and its partners. They expressed their discomfort at the face of the corruption allegations, which included claims of bribery in the presidential election campaign and in the hosting nations selection procedure.

Emirates' divisional senior vice-president and head of corporate communications, Boutros Boutros, said "Emirates, like all football fans around the world, are disappointed with the issues that are currently surrounding the administration of this sport". A VISA spokesperson noted that "The current situation is clearly not good for the game and we ask that FIFA take all necessary steps to resolve the concerns that have been raised".³⁸ Coca-Cola's representative, Petro Kacur, also weighed in the debate, saying "The current allegations being raised are distressing and bad for the sport". Later Coca-Cola added

38 Mail Online (n.d.). VISA and Emirates are the latest sponsors to voice concerns over FIFA debacle. Retrieved October 2, 2012, from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/football/article-1392710/FIFA-sponsors-Emirates-VISA-voice-concerns-corruption.html>

"We have every expectation that FIFA will resolve this situation in an expedient and thorough manner".³⁹

In the same vein, an Adidas executive noted "The negative tenor of the public debate around FIFA at the moment is neither good for football nor for FIFA and its partners".⁴⁰ FIFA's response to the racist incidents that erupted in England in the course 2011 is another case in point. Following the notorious comment proffered by John Terry, captain of Chelsea, against Queens Park Rangers footballer Anton Ferdinand during a Premier League match at Loftus Road in October 2011,⁴¹ Sepp Blatter suggested that "the one who is affected by that, he should say: 'This is a game. We are in a game, and at the end of the game, we shake hands'".⁴²

Blatter's response, deemed by many as an insufficient, lukewarm reaction, led sponsors to actively express their dissatisfaction and publicly demand FIFA provides clear measures to fight the problem of racism in the stadiums. A spokesperson of Adidas said the corporation "doesn't discuss its sponsorship arrangements as these are confidential. But our position is very clear. Adidas is totally opposed to racism in football and in fact any sport at any level". A Coca-Cola representative stated "We do not tolerate discrimination of any kind. We have also confirmed that we are not reconsidering our sponsorship with FIFA." A VISA spokesperson said "As a global company operating in more than 200 countries around the world, VISA is opposed to racism in any form".⁴³

The sponsors' reaction, both to the corruption scandals and to FIFA's handling of the racist incidents, underlines on the one hand their discomfort at the face of FIFA's practices, and their incapacity, on the other hand, to bring in real change. The four stated clearly their dissatisfaction with FIFA, but hesitated when it came to reviewing their collaboration with the football organisation.⁴⁴ Ultimately, stopping the sponsorship was out of the question, considering these contracts were highly beneficial for both parties, regardless of the scandals tarnishing FIFA's image.⁴⁵ As Coca-Cola later mentioned to the media, its partnership with FIFA is its only chance to be associated with football, which it views as profitable.⁴⁶

39 The Telegraph (n.d.). FIFA corruption claims: What the sponsors are saying. Retrieved October 2, 2012, from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/retailandconsumer/leisure/8548440/Fifa-corruption-claims-What-the-sponsors-are-saying.html>

40 Ibid.

41 Davies, C. (2012). John Terry's remarks were 'very hurtful', Anton Ferdinand tells court. The Guardian. Retrieved October 2, 2012, from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/football/2012/jul/09/john-terry-anton-ferdinand-court>

42 BBC Sport (n.d.). Sepp Blatter says on-pitch racism can be resolved with a handshake. Retrieved October 2, 2012, from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/0/football/15757165>

43 Reynolds, J. (2011). Emirates to review FIFA sponsorship over Blatter race row. Marketing. Retrieved October 2, 2012, from <http://www.marketingmagazine.co.uk/news/1104943/>

44 Ibid.

45 World Football Insider (n.d.). Exclusive – FIFA Sponsors Reaping Benefits of South Africa World Cup. Retrieved October 2, 2012, from <http://www.worldfootballinsider.com/Story.aspx?id=33485>

46 The Telegraph (n.d.). FIFA corruption claims: What the sponsors are saying. Retrieved October 2, 2012, from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/retailandconsumer/leisure/8548440/Fifa-corruption-claims-What-the-sponsors-are-saying.html>

Sports organisations and information disclosure

As mentioned above, the three organisations tend to share some internal documents, but they struggle to disclose financial data and information concerning decision-making and election processes. Whatever information they do publish on these matters is usually of minor importance.

It would seem as if these organisations give priority to the protection of their interests over those of their stakeholders, by shrouding their proceedings in secrecy. In effect, their information disclosure policies do not match the needs of the stakeholders. Nevertheless, supporters and journalists report that FIFA and the IOC usually provide information fairly quickly when requested.

Sports organisations and openness and honesty

Another communication approach all three sports organisations reproduce is that while they discuss extensively the sport they represent, they are almost completely silent on matters pertaining to the organisation itself. They address the promotion of sports but keep mum on internal issues, thus raising frustration among their main stakeholders. It is also hard to reach the organisations. The contact details of their officials, either phone numbers or email addresses, are not published. The only way to reach them is by sending a message to a general address or filling a contact form on their website. Representatives of the Football Supporters Europe federation say that it is possible to contact UEFA and FIFA through these means, but this is not very convenient. Providing different email addresses for each department would make communication more efficient. Supporters also say that it is nearly impossible to get in touch with organisations such as FIFA and UEFA as simple fans. They feel FIFA is indifferent to them and is not likely to communicate with them.

Both supporters and journalists agree that it is impossible to contact the organisations' executives. Many have given up trying since they never seem to obtain satisfaction. It should be emphasised that openness and honesty in communication also concerns communicating on the values and the position of the organisation towards key issues, and that this, in itself, is crucial for maintaining good ties with the stakeholders. As mentioned before, FIFA's sponsors expressed their discomfort and confusion at the organisation's limited response to the phenomenon of racism on the football field, putting a strain on the relationship between the football organisation and its leading partners. This was an uncomfortable situation for both parties, even if ultimately, the sponsors did not withdraw from their collaboration with FIFA, but rather pledged to contribute on their own to antidiscrimination and antiracism activities.

Sports organisations and fairness

Most of the information provided by FIFA, IOC, and UCI in their public communication is not targeting any specific group, but is addressing the general public. In this regard, the organisations' policies on information sharing can be deemed fair, as they provide equal amount of information to all stakeholders. But this attitude also reveals their reluctance to set priorities and find individual approaches suitable for each one of their stakeholders, making it impossible for them to answer the separate, defined needs of

each one of their publics. This attitude is reflected in their mission statements, in which the importance of differentiating between each stakeholder and finding a personal approach for each one of them is ignored. However, according to the stakeholders themselves, if this differentiation in communication is absent in theory, it is still often implemented in practice.

Although supporters testify the organisations disregard their concerns, a survey conducted by the EJC among European sports reporters has shown that journalists tend to be generally satisfied with the attitude displayed towards them. For the most part, they are provided with all the information they ask for and do not face difficulties in this regard. However they also admitted the Olympic Committee and its affiliate organisations are more journalist-friendly than UEFA or FIFA.

Organisations should strive to respect the principle of fairness also in their approach towards cases of conflicting interests among different stakeholders. Such an issue emerged this year, presenting the IOC with a conflict of interests between the general public and the organisation's sponsors. Public health institutions asked the IOC to cease its partnership with corporations that advertise products that constitute a health hazard. In their public statements, they pointed to the fact that the Olympic Games' biggest sponsors, Coca-Cola and McDonald's, are also the world's leading producers of calorie-full meals and beverages. In this case, the commercial interests of the IOC won. The partnership was maintained and will continue to be so in the future. This decades-old collaboration is beneficial to the IOC, which gets 40% of its revenues from these two companies.

It appears, therefore, that sports organisations occasionally do implement separate communication policies when dealing with different stakeholders, although this matter does not receive official consideration. Unfortunately, these communication policies do not meet standards of fairness one could expect from such major international institutions.

As mentioned earlier, it is important for sports organisations to maintain strong ties with their stakeholders – a goal attainable only through the implementation of the transparency standards mentioned above. Recent experience has shown that the sports organisations listed in this report struggle in this regard. Athletes, supporters, sponsors, governmental agencies, and media are all in some way dissatisfied with their governance practices. Some feel they are ignored or disregarded, while others are critical of the organisations' involvement in corruption scandals or their equivocal reporting on core values and issues affecting the reputation of both the organisations and their stakeholders.

Part II:

Relationship management in sports and the potential of social media

The first part of this report dealt with basic standards of transparent public communication and provided examples of best practice from the non-governmental sector. This part will focus on the tools available to sports organisations best adapted to allow them to integrate these standards, focusing primarily on social media, recognised as one of the most efficient media tool currently at hand.

Some sports organisations are applying certain basic principles of transparent public communication. Still, there is room for improvement, first and foremost by considering relationship building with key stakeholders a crucial element in their public communication. With this in mind, sports organisations need to look for the appropriate communication models and tools best suited to address specific issues that concern and affect different stakeholders.

The emergence of new technologies has changed the communication process, as well as the habits and the behaviour patterns of the audience. One of the key developments that revolutionised the communication flow is the emergence of Web 2.0, paving the way for a transformation of the public's media engagement, primarily through the simplification of content creation and publication. The increased importance of Web 2.0 and social media, and the influence it exercises on user behaviour in terms of awareness, information gathering, opinions, and attitudes require organisations to adapt quickly and define new ways of interacting with their stakeholders – from fans to community to sponsors to internal staff. The top-down approach, traditionally practiced by sports organisations, does not work anymore. A feedback-based reflexive communication is fundamental for the establishment of a fruitful relationship, beneficial for all parties concerned. Social media represent therefore a unique opportunity, as they are the optimal tool for such a communication model, based on a continuing dialogue. Once organisations relinquish control and begin to engage in a two-way communication, in a transparent and open manner, trust is fostered among the users, as is receptiveness to the organisations' message.

Social media offer an additional advantage in this respect. More than traditional communication means, they give organisations the opportunity to interact directly with fans and other stakeholders. This enables them to get acquainted with the main issues that concern their audience and gain greater knowledge of the stakeholder base, allowing them to better adapt their message to each specific stakeholder, paving the way for a diversity of communication channels and strategies, finely tuned to the needs and specificities of each public.

Moreover, social media offer organisations the possibility to reach out to a great number of people, spread over the whole world, letting them connect either directly with the organisation or among themselves. On top of this, Web 2.0 endows sports organisations with the capacity to link their communication to a multitude of websites, communities, and blogs, thus widening the scope of the message and its appeal. This makes the growth

of a fan base and the development of fan loyalty, through closer interaction via these networks, much easier.

Finally, social media allow consumers to interact with sports organisations for a far lower cost and with a much wider reach, in comparison with traditional promotional alternatives. The consumers are the ones to invest time and money in this exchange, allowing the organisations to obtain a global reach for a relatively small investment. This also means the organisations generate a greater coverage and awareness to their message, provided by the facilitation of fan-based content creation. This is a boon, particularly for sports organisations which do not enjoy major television coverage, or which are interested in increasing their visibility in order to promote and develop sports participation.

The goal of all public communication activities is to build a long-term relationship with strategic publics. In order to accomplish this, sports public communication should identify key publics, evaluate the organisation's relationship with those publics, and strive to foster the desirable relationships with them (Stoldt, 2006). This should be sports organisations' main objective in planning their public communication strategies, rather than simply building symbolic relationships, while disregarding the stakeholders' desires and needs.

The advantages of managing relationships with key publics, for an organisation, are:

- gaining their trust and support in future dealings;
- making it simpler for the organisation to achieve its objectives and function as part of the community;
- managing a good reputation;
- strengthening the commitment and the bonds of trust between the organisation and its stakeholders.

Sports organisations are particularly attached to the traditional communication style, even though those fail to bring the desired results. In the highly-socialised world of modern communication, traditional communication styles must give way to the more effective contemporary ones.

Social media deeply affect how public relations are practiced. This transformation has not always been easily processed in corporate and organisational communication. One of the biggest challenges for public relations nowadays lies in the organisations' lessening control over their brands and reputation. Whereas in the past individuals could inform only a small group of people about their past experiences with certain institutions or corporations, social networks and other forums allow them presently to spread the word worldwide in record speed. However, if managed properly, this changing balance of power can prove beneficial to organisations as well. Relinquishing control and engaging with the public in a transparent and open way allows them to foster trust with other users, as the receptiveness to the organisations' messages increases (Gillen, 2008).

Social media tools also allow organisations to bypass the gatekeeping prerogatives of legacy media and make their news available to people who have an insatiable appetite for information regarding their favourite sports teams and athletes. Currently, an increasing number of sports fans prefer to get their sports news from social networks such as Facebook or Twitter, rather than national news websites. They want live updates, active participation, and a behind-the-scenes look at their favourite teams and players. Social media make all this possible and even permit supporters to connect directly with their stars.

This transformation of the communication field requires organisations to rethink their interaction with their stakeholders as a continuing dialogue. Expertise in this area will be less concerned with immediate objectives and more with long-term nurturing and development of the relationship between the organisation and its stakeholders, as well as with promoting intra-stakeholder communication (Solis, 2008).

One of the complicating factors of the new communication environment is the increased ability for stakeholders to interact among themselves, out of the organisation's reach. But instead of considering this a drawback, organisations will need to understand how to facilitate, intervene, and negotiate within this new frame, moving from an organisation-centric model to relationship-centric mode of operation (van der Merwe, 2005).

All these changes point to the importance of constructing a communication policy built on the basis of a two-ways symmetrical communication model, as described by J. Grunig. This model is based on an exchange of information, constituting a dialogue. Symmetrical communication is balanced, equilibrating the relationship between the organisation and the public. *"It [two-ways symmetrical communication] uses research to facilitate understanding and communication rather than to identify messages most likely to motivate or persuade publics. In the symmetrical model, understanding is the principal objective of public relations rather than persuasion"* (Grunig, 1992, p. 289).

This model is based on the premise that both parties need to negotiate and compromise in order for them to develop a mutual resolution. In the context of sports, this could mean perhaps that a club decides to change the uniform of its players, while the club supporters object to the decision. A compromise could be reached by allowing supporters to provide their own input regarding the new uniform design or keeping the old uniform for home games. By seeking to understand their publics, rather than simply persuade them, organisations are better positioned strategically to establish and maintain fruitful relationships with these key groups and avoid damaging them in cases of conflict.

Sports organisations' social media experience

Past events have shown that immediacy and the viral aspect of real-time conversations via social media channels can be either very successful when well-managed, or catastrophic when left unmonitored or when badly handled. Social media thus provide sports organisations with both a challenge and an opportunity in the harnessing of this new mode of communication, which provides a more direct and participative approach to building relationships.

While this case study was being compiled, it was apparent that international sports organisations are trying to use social media in their communication arsenal, but with little, or negative, effect. Organisations have a lot of communication channels and new media tools, but these are not used properly and do not give them additional value.

Two major sports events were taking place during the time of this study, and both exemplify well how the use, or misuse, of social media can affect the organisation's image as a whole.

The 2012 European football championship is a typical case of a communication policy gone awry, leading to confusion and misunderstanding between the organisation, the athletes, and the fans. Having no guidelines as to the use of social media, certain national teams (Spain, Denmark, Germany) forbade their players to use social media during the championship, causing discontent among both athletes and supporters, the athletes feeling censored and the supporters feeling shunned. This case demonstrates the organisation's incapacity to manage social media in way that is advantageous for the organisation and in the interest of its stakeholders.

The London 2012 Olympic Games constitute a rather more successful case of communication management. Considering the importance of social media during sport events, the IOC provided guidelines for the use of social media.⁴⁷ In this document, the IOC actively encouraged and supported athletes and other accredited persons at the Olympic Games to take part in social media communication and to post, blog and tweet their experiences. Generally speaking, the IOC encouraged all social media and blogging activity at the Olympic Games, provided it was not done for commercial purposes. It also emphasised such activity must respect the Olympic Charter and comply with the rules. The guidelines also specified that any post made during the Olympics should be made in a personal style format and should not be of journalistic character, it must not report on the results of the competitions or comment on the activities of other participants or accredited persons, or disclose any information which is confidential or private in relation to any other person or organisation.

The IOC's policy was a success, insofar as it leads to augmented visibility among the public and to a greater adherence with the organisation's brand, activity, and values, while also answering the stakeholders' wishes and needs.

These examples underline the need to recognise social media as an important part of an organisation's governance activities. International sports organisations need to include social media communication in their budgets, but also to monitor how athletes use them. As Twitter and Facebook continue to contribute to change and personalise sports culture, sports players, teams, leagues, and news outlets have to welcome social media to the game.

⁴⁷ See http://www.olympic.org/Documents/Games_London_2012/IOC_Social_Media_Blogging_and_Internet_Guidelines-London.pdf

Conclusion

This paper focused largely on the basic criteria of transparent and accurate public communication to be applied by sports organisations. The guiding principles, which have to be followed in order to achieve a transparent and accurate communication, include accountability, information disclosure, fairness, openness, and honesty.

As such, it is important for sports organisations to be accountable in their financial and decision-making processes, a path open to them by establishing a two-way, feedback-based communication with their stakeholders. The public communication should be done observing the principle of fairness, which means serving the needs of each of the identified stakeholders. Organisations should be open and willing to communicate, engage in discussion with their stakeholders and seek to get a response from them. Any information, which might be in the interest of the stakeholders must be disclosed and accessible.

Additionally, we tried to highlight the importance, for sports organisations, to understand and value their relationship with stakeholders and key publics. To do that, it is essential for them to first identify their stakeholders' reactions to pertaining issues and subsequently devise adequate communication strategies, which are appropriate to the degree of influence they have over the organisation.

Moreover, sports organisations need to keep in mind that public communication is not only about self-promotion. Its role is also to ensure a long-lasting and fruitful relationship among all players in the sports field, be they athletes, sports organisations, fans, or commercial partners. And yet, sports organisations often content themselves with relying on traditions and on the fans' dependency on their infrastructure to ensure their dominance in the field and to avoid dealing with criticism.

Organisations have to recognise that building relationships based only on their own needs and interests, while ignoring the voices of their stakeholders is harmful to them. But maintaining a good reputation, as a transparent and accountable organisation, is only possible by treating the stakeholders in an open manner and by demonstrating a willingness to adapt to innovations and make reforms when necessary. And yet, presently, the score of sports organisations in this regard not up to par, causing misunderstanding, mistrust, and dissatisfaction among stakeholders.

It is therefore essential that sports organisations identify their stakeholders as their primary support groups, able to stand behind the sports organisations, and sustain them in their efforts to transform the world of sports into a genuinely collaborative field, true to the values and ethics it seeks to represent.

The use of social media is one of the key tools in establishing such a two-way, transparent communication environment with the stakeholders. Considering the changing face of the media environment and the rising importance of social media, seen as *the* future tool of communication, sports organisations need to pay special attention to them. Using them appropriately will be an easy way to enrich the relationship with stakeholders,

particularly the supporters and the general public. In light of their speed, efficiency, and low cost of implementation, they can be particularly advantageous for sports organisations. Therefore, social media need to be recognised as a powerful tool, managed according to suitable communication strategies, and with the help of adequate budgetary means.

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