

Structures and professionalization of Public Relations in national sports governing bodies – a comparison between Austria and Germany

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Aim of the paper and research question

One of the tasks of national sports governing bodies is internal and external communication – tasks which we can summarize under the term public relations. The management of public relations in sport has some specific features (Kaiser, 2012) and should be seen as part of strategic management (Stoldt, Dittmore & Branvold, 2006). In the era of increasing commercialization and medialization of sports the structures of public relations in sports organizations have to become professionalized (Isaacson, 2010; Suchy, 2012). This leads to the following research questions: What about the structures of public relations in national sports governing bodies? In what way are they institutionally fixed? How professionalized are they? This paper will provide an answer to these questions.

Theoretical background

Public relations is a relatively young profession and is mainly seen as a tool of marketing in sports management research (e.g. Hopwood, 2005). Stoldt et al. (2006, p. 2) define public relations in the following way: "Sport public relations is a managerial communication-based function designed to identify a sport organization's key publics, evaluate its relationships with those publics, and foster desirable relationships between the sport organization and those publics."

The term public relations implies three factors: 1) As management function, public relations stands in line with other functions like human resource management or marketing (Stoldt et al., 2006). From this perspective public relations can be subdivided into different topics: print publication development, media relations, new media, web management and design, promotion and marketing, event planning and communication, community relations and integrated communication (Isaacson, 2010). 2) As communication-based practice, the preconditions of the collaboration and the exchange of the participating actors becomes central. A well-working communication is essential both for internal processes and for external relationships. In this regard, the personal contact between public relation staff and the media staff is of special relevance (Isaacson, 2010). 3) The nature of public relations is seen to be systematical, focusing especially on a systematic analysis of the stakeholders and other "publics" (Stoldt et al., 2006).

Looking onto the practical work of public relations managers in sport, Stoldt et al. (2006) conclude that it is primarily focused on media and community relations. For Hopwood (2005) the focus lies primarily on relationship building. Hopwood (2005, p. 186) concludes: "A systemic commitment to proactive public relations is undoubtedly the key, and management commitment to ensuring that the function is professionally applied and resourced is likely to be rewarded". Especially the media relations and the (mass) media are seen as critical challenges in the field of sports (Stoldt et al., 2006; Stoldt, Miller and

Vermillion, 2009). Stoldt et al. (2009, p. 223) state that "the practice of public relations in sport is recognized as unique in several respects". In their review of the literature they found that public relations in sport is predominantly oriented by the press agency and public information models, the personnel in this field mainly plays a technical role and they are producers of information. This is in line with the findings of Buchanan and Luck (2008) who report that not-for-profit organizations mainly follow an organizational-centred approach of communication instead of a consumer-oriented approach. In respect of the professional role of the public relations personnel (Stoldt et al., 2009) conclude that it is related to the organizational culture and that the public relations personnel is facing more challenges than ever before. These challenges especially emerge through the digitalization of communication in the last years (Buchanan & Luck, 2008). Having this in mind, it is relevant to look at the structures of public relations in national sports governing bodies.

Methodology, research design and data analysis

The empirical analysis builds upon the statutes and the homepages of the national sports governing bodies in both Austria and Germany. Using these sources allows one to elicit the institutional regulation of the field of communication in the national sports governing bodies on the one side and the amount of their professionalization on the other side. Furthermore, the comparison between Austria and Germany allows one to look at overall trends and specific tasks related to nations.

The statutes were analyzed using a content analysis. In this content analysis the German equivalents of the terms "public relations", "communication", "media" and "press" were used. If there were no findings in the statutes using these terms the statutes were analyzed in detail additionally. The homepages of the national sports governing bodies were analyzed using a content analysis, too. Here it was looked on the staff list if there a persons responsible for the public relations/communication/media/press task primarily. Persons who are "only" responsible for marketing alone were excluded from the analysis.

Results and implications

The results of the study show that in both countries around fifty percent of the national sports governing bodies have regulations regarding communication and public relations in their statutes – this also means that around fifty percent has no such regulations at all. In national sports governing bodies with these regulations different types of responsibilities for the communication/public relations task exist – mainly allocating this task to volunteers.

Looking at the professionalization of the communication/public relations task, it shows that in Germany in around fifty percent of the national sports governing bodies there is at least one person working especially in this field. In Austria this holds true for only approximately fifteen percent of the national sports governing bodies. These findings indicate less professionalization of the communication/public relations task in Austrian national sports governing bodies compared to Germany. One reason for this may be the size of the national sports governing bodies which are mainly larger in Germany than in Austria – but this is not easy to measure. Computing the relationship between professionalization and size of the organization using the absolute numbers of members leads to no significant findings. Significant findings can be gained using

ordinal categories of organizational size. But both countries differ significantly in regard to the organizational size of their national sport governing bodies; the German national sport governing bodies have in average about ten times more members than the Austrian national sport governing bodies. This implies difficulties for the creation of valid clusters for a cross-country comparison.

For the overall sample of both countries the findings show that there is a strong relationship between regulations in the statutes of national sport governing bodies and the employment of professional staff in the field of public relations – nearly half of those organizations without regulations have employed professional staff compared to nearly twenty percent of those organizations with regulations. Another significant finding is that national sport governing bodies which are responsible for Olympic sports have more often (nearly 40 percent) employed professional staff compared to non-Olympic national sport governing bodies (about 20 percent).

The findings show some differences between the two countries and some similarities. The main questions that follow this research are in which ways the observed differences can be explained, the embedding of the public relations practices into the sport governing bodies' strategy, the handling of the challenge of digitalization and in which ways the internal distribution of responsibilities is coordinated in those national sport governing bodies that have both, volunteer and professional staff responsible for the public relations task.

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