

SNOWBOARD AND THE ORGANIZATION OF IDENTITY: A THEORETICAL OUTLINE OF THE NETWORK AS AN EMERGENT ORGANIZATIONAL FORM

Kari Steen-Johnsen, Norwegian School of Sport Sciences, Norway, kari.steen-johnsen@nih.no

INTRODUCTION

In the growing field of research on sports organizations, a particular interest has been devoted to change (Slack & Hinings, 1992; Amis, Slack, & Hinings, 2004; Enjolras, Seippel, & Waldahl, 2005). Existing studies share certain underlying assumptions. One of them is the postulate that a general move is taking place from traditional voluntary organizational forms to hybrids that imitate the logics of the market or the state. This may for example involve the adoption of more bureaucratic and professional modes of organizing, or an increased focus on efficiency. Using the Norwegian Snowboard Federation (NSBF) as a case this paper suggests that there exist new, emergent forms of sports organizations that are not imitations of the market or the state. Rather they cut across established definitions of how organizations work in different sectors of society. This paper describes this emergent form under the label of the “network organization”. The main theoretical foundation for this development is found in Manuel Castells’ work on the “Network Society” (Castells, 1996).

METHODS

A qualitative case study of the Norwegian Snowboard Federation, including in-depth interviews (10), document studies and field observation was carried out. The interviews included former and current presidents (since 2001), employees, among them the general secretary, and several persons that had had a central position in the federation. Document studies included accounts of board meetings and general assemblies, policy documents from the period from 2001 to 2007 and the web pages of the NSBF. Field observations were made at a major snowboarding event and at the General Assembly of the NSBF.

RESULTS

The analysis of the organization of the NSBF consists of three main parts: i) a description of the major modes of operation at the central level of the NSBF, ii) a description of the relation between the central level and the members of the organization and iii) a description of the organization of elite sports within the federation.

- i) The central level of the NSBF is characterized by a close and informal relation between the board and the administration, where the administration may initiate projects and the board may take active part in projects alongside the staff. Much work is project based and volunteers are recruited through the networks of the board and the staff. These networks are fluid and shifting.
- ii) The NSBF is characterized by having many young leaders in the clubs. The board and the administration find it necessary to keep a close relation to these and to help them fulfil the administrative requirements of membership in the federation. The president and the staff use their networks to keep in touch with the wishes and needs of members and claim to have a strong touch with the different undercurrents in the organization. They find that this enables them to adjust their course according to the needs of the organization to a stronger degree than through traditional representative channels.
- iii) In developing elite sports the NSBF must be observant of the values inherent in the “authentic” snowboard culture, which imply freedom, individualism, playfulness combined with commercialism. This authentic culture partly emanates from the snowboard industry and from privately organized events run by commercial sponsors and by high profile snowboard stars. Such events are considered to be the more authentic expressions of the snowboard identity than competitions run by the traditional sports systems, i.e. the Olympic Games.

DISCUSSION

The NSBF displays signs of being a network organization insofar as its staff and board actively creates networks and uses them to carry out central tasks in the organization. These networks are egalitarian and informal, which also implies that the initiative to develop projects may come from different nodes in the network. Which persons participate in a given project varies, which gives the network a certain fluid character. These traits distinguish the organizational form of the NSBF from a hierarchy in an organizational theoretical sense.

The network is characterized by the potential for integrating quite heterogeneous actors. It includes magazine journalists, photographers, producers of snowboard products, athletes and event managers as well as the central actors in the NSBF and ordinary snowboarders. What integrates these different actors into the same network is a strong collective identity related to the snowboard culture. This collective identity cuts across the distinctions between being part of the voluntary organization NSBF and being part of the snowboard industry. According to Castells (1996) this potential to integrate diversity distinguishes contemporary networks from more traditional identity communities.

According to the outlined aspects of the organization, the NSBF bears strong similarities to social movements, as they have been described by Castells (1996). However, the NSBF is not a social movement, but a voluntary organization, which is federated in the Norwegian Confederation of Sports and which is strongly dependent on traditional market relationships through sponsoring. The final part of the paper discusses how the outlined network form is embedded in and finds its specific shape within this organizational context. The question is also raised whether the organization of life style sports, like snowboard, may have an impact on traditional voluntary organizations.

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