

Spectator Sports as a Representation of Conflict. The Case of Stakeholders' Conflicts in Professional Cycling.

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Abstract

Research Question/Aim of Paper

Sports are commonly perceived as a cultural field of human understanding and fraternization. Both global sport institutions such as the IOC and local sport cultures as sport for all claim a positive contribution to peaceful human interaction. In contrast to this claim, professional sports are featured by issues of conflict. The main question arises if spectator sports are a representation of peace or conflict?

This study uses the case approach, as it is ideally suited to learning as much as possible about a little-researched topic. Professional cycling is an interesting test case to deal with the main research question because cycling not only has to cope with the doping problem, but also faces a great divide between the international federation UCI (Union Cycliste International) and the main organisers (Grand Tours) since the introduction of the new competition formulae UCI Pro Tour (UPT) in 2005.

Theoretical Background

Although cycling is a very popular sport in core European countries and was one of the first sports to be practised professionally, it has received until now limited attention from economists. While Lagae [2005] described the marketing consequences of the UPT, Rebeggiani & Tondani [2006] analysed the changes induced by UPT on the racing teams' behaviour.

This study analyses the policy network of the UPT. Policy networks are more or less stable patterns of social relations between independent actors which take shape around policy programs and/or problems [Kickert, Klijn & Koppenjan, 1999].

Bressers & Honigh [1998] and Marsh [1998] state that the selection of members ((1) which, (2) why, (3) what) for a policy network will have a substantial influence on the outcome of the negotiations.

Methodology/Research Design/Data Analysis

In order to collect data on stakeholders' conflicts, we developed an open-ended questionnaire in 2004 and in 2008. We used this questionnaire to screen the different conflict zones towards the UPT. The semi-structured face-to-face interviews were transcribed ad verbatim and analysed using Nvivo [Miles & Huberman, 1994]. Also, a qualitative research methodology [Yin, 2003] was developed (document and discourse analysis) to measure the influence of the policy network on the policy decisions.

Results/Discussion/Implications

From the stakeholder analysis we distinguished core and secondary conflicts. The core conflict deals with economic and political power. Ownership and distribution of television rights is the major economic conflict, while the ownership and distribution of marketing rights is a minor economic conflict. Since the French media group ASO (organiser of the Tour de France, the most important cycling race in the world) possesses around 70% of all television incomes from organisers, UPT is perceived as an attempt to attack ASO over its stance on rights. The introduction of UPT has deteriorated the relations between the major stakeholders that it is not clear anymore which group governs professional cycling: the international regulatory body (UCI) or the powerful economic media group ASO? While in the eyes of the International Olympic Committee and the sports movement as a whole, the UCI should be responsible for managing world cycling we discovered that ASO seems to influence in a decisive way decision processes within the UCI.

Last but not least, professional cycling, as other endurance top sports, copes with a tremendous (perception) problem of doping abuse of cyclists. Analysing their 'peace rhetoric', UCI and ASO 'fight united' against doping abuse. However, we illustrated that due the great divide UCI-ASO doping cases have escalated during the Tour de France 2007. Characteristics of this core and secondary conflict are a failure of peace agreements, continuous talk to the media), poor preventive crisis communications, unilateral decision making and victimising a third actor that has been supported by the weakest actor in the conflict.

The results also indicate that there is a substantial influence of the selected actors of the policy network (heterogeneous composition and key characteristics of the UPT Council, Grand Tours and teams) on the failure of the negotiations. The existence of dominant actors and lack of consensus on policy goals are important characteristics in understanding final policy decisions.

Overall we can conclude that, as a modern sport spectacle, professional cycling produces globally shared cultural images and experiences. However, we discovered that professional cycling is a cultural representation of conflict, not only in its inside actions, but also in its outside perceptions. Moreover, professional cycling needs to move from amateur to professional conflict management.

Finally, more research is needed to investigate the impact of the UPT on the relationships between the managers of the UPT teams.

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