

# EXPLORING WAYS IN WHICH SOCIAL NETWORKERS CONTRIBUTE TO ONLINE GROUPS: A CASE STUDY OF ONE FACEBOOK GROUP'S DISCUSSION OF AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTER CHANNEL 9 DURING THE 2010 WINTER OLYMPIC GAMES

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## Abstract

The World Wide Web has transformed the way in which media companies, sport organisations, and consumers interact. For example, the traditional mediated sport product was once confined within the boundaries of programming, formatting, audience interest, and contractual agreements (Mahan & McDaniel, 2006). Historically communication was typically one-way, disconnecting the consumer from the sport and media entities (Mahan & McDaniel, 2006). However, the emergence of the 'Internet era' has allowed sport organisations and consumers to bypass the traditional 'gate-keeping' role the mass media once had (Arsenault & Castells, 2008; Mahan & McDaniel, 2006). In addition, the recent advent of social networking sites has provided a new interactive platform for communication and continuous accessibility between the consumer and sport product (Mean, Kassing, & Sanderson, 2010).

One of the major engines behind the advancement in social communication capabilities is Facebook (Kushin & Kitchener, 2009). Facebook is a social networking website that connects individuals and groups from all over the globe (Barnes, 2006). Once connected, individuals are able to communicate with one another via public forums, instant conversations, and email. Social networking websites such as Facebook have allowed sport fans to collaborate with their favourite sporting entity, athlete, and/or with other sport fans to organise, mobilise, and voice their support or displeasure with specific sporting or media entities via online discourse (Kushin & Kitchener, 2009). Furthermore, the absence of a "gate-keeper"

provides individuals with the opportunity to post un-edited, user-generated content relating to social or political issues.

A recent example of this cyber group forum was seen during the 2010 Winter Olympic Games. The Winter Olympics is a quadrennial event in which athletes from around the globe compete in a variety of sports. This global event was exclusively televised in Australia by the broadcaster Channel 9. The evening program was hosted by Australian television personality and former Channel 9 CEO Eddie McGuire. During the coverage, a Facebook group titled 'Eddie McGuire is ruining the 2010 Winter Olympics games' was created. The backbone of this group was a common dissatisfaction of the commenting and interviewing style of Eddie McGuire and the general broadcast coverage of the games provided by Channel 9.

Despite its rising popularity, little research has examined the use of social networks as a tool for mediated campaigns and democratic-styled lobby groups. Thus, the aim of this study was to explore personal opinion comments posted by Facebook users on a group's discussion board. To achieve this, the publicly visible commentaries from the group "Eddie McGuire is ruining the 2010 Winter Olympic games" were analysed. In total, there were 814 pages of text included in the examination. The data set included all posts present on the discussion board between the 16th of February and the 3rd of March, 2010.

Through a textual analysis of Facebook users' comments, a grounded theory approach was used to identify and quantify salient themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This analysis netted 42 themes which were further grouped based on belongingness into 17 themes. Some of these themes were: non-expert commentaries, alternative offerings, and dissatisfaction with the negative focus of Channel 9. Each theme will be presented at the conference with an illustration on how each theme was used by Facebook users.

Implications for this study are twofold. Firstly, this study sheds light on how internet users utilise a social networking website to "virtually protest" current events. The results demonstrate that individuals are looking beyond recreational use and harnessing the capabilities of social network websites to express themselves and engage others in issues they care about (Kushin & Kitchener, 2009). Secondly, this study highlights the loss of the gate-keeping role the media once had and the relatively unregulated nature of the internet as a communication medium (Arsenault & Castells, 2008; Mahan & McDaniel, 2006). The emergence of World Wide Web has afforded users greater control over the information posted on social network websites, diminishing the mediating role that a producer or editor formally had.

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