

GOVERNANCE IN PLURALISTIC ORGANISATIONS: A CASE STUDY OF FOOTBALL CLUBS

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Abstract

Commercialised team sports clubs, notably but not exclusively football ones, often appear highly unstable and volatile, with a high turnover of coaches and managers, financial issues despite growing revenues, and knee-jerk reactions to any poor on-field performance, and more generally speaking a seeming lack of clear direction and purpose. This paper aims at better understanding the dynamic of governance of professional sport clubs by providing an in-depth case study of two European football clubs. Following in the steps of Gammelsæter (2010), we mobilise the concept of institutional pluralism (Kraatz & Block, 2008) to better apprehend the complex set of stakeholders which surround and interact with football clubs. Within this perspective, stakeholders may not hold a set of fixed characteristics and attributes (Senaux, 2008) and the governance issues are not limited to trying to reconcile different –often diverging– demands from different stakeholders. Rather, professional football clubs are pluralistic organisations confronted to multiple logics: any stakeholder may be predominantly influenced by a given institutional logic, but –because they are also likely to be confronted to alternative logics which will influence them and which they can mobilise– their objectives, attributes and even way of thinking may change over time.

As a result, the picture is fluid. Interactions between stakeholders and coalition building might still be relevant, but even a rich network analysis (Rowley, 1997) is not sufficient to apprehend the dynamic nature of professional sport clubs governance. In that perspective, clubs are multiple things to multiple people and their organisational identity is multi-faceted. This explains the difficulty of managing stakeholders and prioritising some claims over others. But it also constitutes an opportunity to envision a more holistic way of reconciling stakeholder and ensuring clubs are not faced with constant instability and tensions.

Relying on a case study of two European football clubs – using a mix of data from different sources (press articles, semi-guided interviews with various clubs' stakeholders, clubs' websites and discussion forums)– this paper provides a rich description of clubs governance issues through the management of different situations. As such, it constitutes the first empirical illustration of the multiple logics identified by Gammelsæter (2010) and of their dynamic, thus confirming and nuancing previous assumptions. More interestingly, it proposes an analysis of this dynamic and of the interplay between logics and critically assesses the necessity for leadership to define clubs' identity by infusing it with value.

The cases outline the role played by high media coverage in making it easier for different logics to be mobilised by stakeholders, either sincerely or just as a way to lever additional support from other groups, thus making the interplay between logics even more fluid and clubs' governance more difficult in face of higher instability and volatility. Above all, this paper illustrates the difficulty for clubs' managers to legitimately define the boundaries of their organisation, the domain of their management, and the ambiguity that exists in terms of what are the ends and means in their organisations. In face of constituencies which may have mixed motives or be guided by mixed logics, sequential stakeholder management does not appear as a satisfying solution. Rather clubs' difficult governance can be overcome if the clubs forge durable identities of their own, thus becoming “a valued end in [their] own right” (Kraatz & Block, 2008, p.251). The challenge however is to shape a legitimate and coherent organisational identity which reconcile the club's various facets (perceived or expected identities) while being simultaneously confronted to the emergence of new logics (e.g. increased commercialisation, managerialism) and ensuring that strong identification from external members of the organisation (e.g. the supporters) is maintained.

References:

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