Social Media in Crisis Communication: What Can we Learn From Elite Sport?

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Abstract: Social media engagement is changing the relational dynamic between organisations – and individuals - and their publics. This is particularly evident in the world of elite sport where the market value of an elite athlete is measured by their public reputation which is pinned on healthy relationships with stakeholders, such as fellow athletes, team managers, coaches and, importantly, fans (Hopwood 2007). In fact, social media analysts have attributed much of Twitter’s growth to early adopters in the sports world. As a continually expanding global business, sport has to grapple with the challenges of how to harness this uncontrolled medium to best advantage, particularly in times of crisis. Social media platforms breathe life into crises and the world of the elite athletes, who often enjoy a privileged existence beyond the reach of their fans, is no exception. Sport inherently is a breeding ground for crises, particularly of a reputational nature. Fuelled by social media, transgressions by elite athletes spread like wildfire worldwide. These can range from in-game competitions, inappropriate tweeting about private lives, entering into virtual verbal spats with fans, detractors and fellow athletes to the arguably more sensational admission of active engagement in doping. Using a case study approach our research examines the intriguing - and still evolving - case of professional elite cyclist Lance Armstrong’s fall from grace, when in January 2013 he confessed to an audience of millions on the US-based Oprah Winfrey television show that he had a lengthy history of doping, despite years of denial. The case study on Armstrong, a devotee of Twitter, provides an insight into the world of elite sport and the powerful dynamics of social media to champion heroes and demonise those who fall from grace by their own hand. Although Armstrong is a prolific user of social media platforms in order to engage with his fans he chose traditional media through which to “come clean” on his involvement in doping. We argue that Armstrong’s choice of Oprah Winfrey to host his “confession” on her national television program in fact alienated many of his legions of fans on social media, where reaction ranged from disbelief to shock. We argue the reason is found in the bonding power of social media to build personal bridges between an elite athlete and their fans, who can be forgiving of transgressions, but that extends only so far. Secondly, we found that Armstrong’s failure to apologise without reservation to his fans in his ‘confession’ intensified social media outrage. This paper examines the bond between fans and sport in the context of social media in order to examine how this relationship could foster forgiveness for elite athletes who confess to transgressions. Our research focusses on how the convergence of social and traditional media is impacting the sport/fan relationship. The findings of this research will be of relevance to anyone with an interest in the business of sport and social media relationship management within the wider public relations context.

Keywords: social media, sport, crisis communication, fans.

1. Research Methodology

Weerakkody (2009) points out that a case study can examine an ‘individual, a group of people, an organisation, an event, a process, an issue or a campaign’ (p. 229). The process is suited to the study of communication and public relations. The approach is exploratory and ‘used to examine what others have done, and what worked and what did not work in a given case’ (p.229). Gillam (2010) states that a case study answers specific research questions. For this paper, the initial research questions were:

(a) What role does social media play in the bond between fans and elite athletes?
(b) How important is this role in a case of wrong-doing?
(c) How did Armstrong, a consumer of social media, manage his Twitter account in relation to his televised confession?
(d) What was the reaction of his social media fan base to the confession?
(e) Gillam (2010, p. 101) notes that the ‘meticulous description of a case can have an impact greater than almost another form of research’. The methodology adopted for this paper is based on ‘naturalistic research’, a legitimate method of inquiry (Gillam, 2010) to explore the underlying dynamics behind the social media relationship between Armstrong and his fan base. Following a literature review on the relationship between fans and elite athletes, the authors conducted a Google search, using terms such as Armstrong confession, Armstrong fan reaction and Oprah Winfrey and Armstrong. The search results were then examined for primary evidence with a particular focus on quantitative Twitter reactions, statements issued by Armstrong and...
authorities and media reportage of the confession and fan reaction. The confession itself was viewed and the content of the confession was analyzed against the theoretical constructs of Coombs and others.

2. Fans, Elite Athletes and Social Media

Sport is a reflection of society, both good and bad, and is compelling because of its ability to connect people emotionally rather than rationally. As Boyle (2013) observes: “[t]he sporting discourse is often about emotions and opinions deeply held and readily expressed by athletes and fans”. Dimeo (2007, cited in Lopez 2010) argues that sport has a war-like persona therefore,

“is fundamentally about winning, hierarchy, elitism and losers get nothing. It encourages people to think of others as enemies. Bias and partisanship are actively promoted. It demarcates the best from the rest. It is all about physical and social superiority. It is a harsh system that is not just intolerant towards failure but explicitly rejects those who fail”.

The battle-ground environment of sport unifies fans (Osborne 2013) who link their social identity to the on-and-off field performances of athletes and teams (Sanderson and Emmons 2014). This bond arguably can blossom into a religious-like fervor (Garratt 2010) and beyond with an “identification so intense that some fans are willing to engage in hostile and criminal acts towards opposing teams and players” (Sanderson and Emmon 2014). Although there is no universal definition of a fan (Osborne 2013), scholars have explored fan motivation and how their allegiance develops in favour of certain clubs and athletes. For example, the revised Funk and James (2006) Psychological Continuum Model sets out the process of becoming a fan: awareness, attraction, attachment and finally allegiance. In their study of an Australian Football league fan, de Groot and Robinson note that the “feeling of belonging and closeness is achieved by fellow group members sharing important experiences and on this basis build their own identity” (2008). In a study of sport bloggers McCarthy (2014) found that they were motivated by a sense of community by sharing and meeting with like-minded fans and “somehow shaping, or shaping the narrative of sport”. Blogging, they observe, allows fans to “regain a sense of common ownership of sport which has been lost” (2014). To sustain fan support, Taker (2012) argues that it is crucial for athletes and clubs to frequently interact with fans so they develop strong bonds with the team, which creates a ripple effect that attracts others to become involved. In the context of social media, fans expect content to be of maximum interest, which in turn will increase revenue generated by an engaged fan base (Taker 2012). In reality, however, Taker (2012) argues that the sport industry often takes fan loyalty for granted rather than engage in two-way symmetrical social media conversation. For example, in the UK, the Newcastle United Football Club Supporter Trust found only 3 percent of fans felt the club was engaging with them. The vital importance of fan engagement is evidenced by the emergence of groups such as The Fan Experience Company (UK) and Fan Engagement (the Netherlands) both of which are actively engaged on social media.

3. Building Relationships on Social Media

Social media has changed forever the sports communication paradigm. Arguably, it has empowered fans to become participants rather than placid observers (Kishner and Crescenti 2010). Gantz, therefore notes,

“Modern technology magnifies fan voices so they can be heard far and wide. Lurking or active participation in blogs and websites provides a connectivity and sense of extended community fans value. It democratizes sports and provides fans with a base of information and influence they would not have as individuals. These forums can break news as well as serve as a bullhorn expressing and galvanizing fan pleasure or disgust”. (2012)

Twitter has been described as two-way talk which has perks which also allows athletes to speak on their own terms (Gregory 2009). Athletes have also noticed that where once they were followed by fans on Twitter, they are now actively chased. When fans tweet athletes messages and they get a response, this is the modern equivalent to an autograph (Wertheim 2011). The 140-character micro-blog Twitter is one of the most popular platforms for connecting fans (Highfield et al. 2013, Laird 2013, Hambrick et al. 2010) while Facebook remains the top preference for following and discussing sport. Hambrick et al. (2010) observe that Twitter is popular with athletes to connect directly and in real-time with fans without any filtering by public relations departments, clubs and traditional media. The choice of using social media, however, remains in the domain of the athlete. As Frederick et al. (2014) note: “The athlete must choose to take down that wall, effectively transforming the everyday fan from voyeur to digital acquaintance”. Athletes, therefore, become content generators “deciding not only what to discuss but how to discuss it and with whom to discuss it” (Frederick,
The use of social media to engage with fans extends to referees, who are responding to questions about on-field decisions in an effort to build relationships (Glynn 2013). As one referee noted: “For a long time there has been a view is that we just turn up for games, make decisions that are viewed as wrong, take no accountability and then go back into our box”. (Glynn 2013)

Social media helps tighten the bond between the fan and the sport entity. A recognized fan state is known as “basking in reflected glory” (Cialdini et al 1976), also referred to as BIRG-ing. This is a recognized state in which fans, through their association with a successful team or athlete, develop feelings of success and belonging, thus creating a stronger emotional bond between themselves and the sport entity. Social media, by its very nature, is proving to be a powerful enabler of this state which is a crucial element of fan engagement.

4. Social Media in a Sport Crisis

Social media platforms breathe life into a reputational crisis (McLean 2013). With access to social media available on a myriad of mobile devices, it takes little time or effort for fans to voice their opinions in real-time. For example Sanderson (2013) analyzed Facebook posts regarding a voluntary move by a football coach between teams. Fans of the team the coach departed responded with posts ranging from character assassination, threats and intimidation to rallying support for a future without the coach. Therefore, social media platforms become valuable tools in uniting a fan base (Brown and Billings 2013), frequently to defend the reputations of athletes and “build community and promote preferred representations of athletes and sports figures” (Sanderson 2013). Sanderson (2010) observes that elite athletes can counter negative media coverage by encouraging their social media fan base to support them. Seeking such support has benefits as Sanderson (2010) explains:

“In such circumstances, it seems plausible that communicative exchanges between professional athletes and fans via blogs would empower professional athletes to be more open in their disclosures about such events, which may translate to fans expressing support for the athlete’s openness.”

5. The Armstrong Enigma

“@lancearmstrong Imperfect guy in an imperfect world. Founded @Livestrong. Raised half a billion dollars to fight cancer. Raced bikes. Finally broke 80. Austin, TX - mellowjohnnys.com” (Lance Armstrong’s Twitter biography)

Lance Armstrong was undoubtedly a global sporting icon but an individual who, as his career and image burgeoned, polarised opinion. Until 1994, which was the year that he began working with Dr Michele Ferrari who was known to dope cyclists, Armstrong achieved moderate, but not outstanding success in his sport. In 1995, his winning streak began and he rose to 7th place in the world rankings and joined the French team Cofidis but in 1996, aged just 25, he was diagnosed with testicular cancer which swiftly metastasised throughout his body and from which he was not expected to recover. However, following aggressive treatment, by early 1997 he was in full remission. Just a year later in 1998 he got back on his bike and made his post-cancer comeback:

“Sponsored by Nike, the US Postal Service (USPS), Discovery Channel, RadioShack, Anheuser-Busch, Oakley, Nissan, Trek-Bicycle Corp, Johnson Health Tech, SRAM Corporation, FRS, Easton-Bell Sports, Honey Stinger and 24-Hour Fitness Gyms, Lance build a team strong in cycle technology, sports gear, nutrition and capital.” (Young, 2013)

Against seemingly unbelievable odds Armstrong won the first of his seven consecutive Tour de France races in 1999 and became a living legend. He acknowledged this himself during his opening speech to the World Cancer Congress in Montreal in August 2012. This coincided with his announcement the previous week that he would no longer challenge United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA’s) drug charges against him and USADA throwing out his competitive victories dating back to 1998, which included all seven Tour wins: “My name is Lance Armstrong. I am a cancer survivor. I’m a father of five. And yes, I won the Tour de France seven times.” (Associated Press 2012). Armstrong’s inspirational and iconic status was further enhanced by his links with the Livestrong Foundation of which he is acknowledged as “Our Founder” on the organisation’s website (Livestrong.org 2013). “He and Livestrong were indivisible; he was not merely a rider, he was a cancer survivor. He credited his fitness and willpower with his ‘beating’ cancer, which appeared to convey greater cult status.” (Young 2013). Lance Armstrong helped to create and perpetuate for himself an image of the
invincible sporting hero. What the millions of fans around the world did not or perhaps did not want to see was that underneath it all, Lance Armstrong was a cheat who used his power unethically (Young 2013).

6. Armstrong Goes Against the Flow

Player transgressions - on and off the field - directly threaten relationships with fans. Therefore, transgressions frequently result in players confessing and seeking forgiveness (Sanderson and Emmon 2014). This strategy places fans in the position of having to make a choice about whether or not to forgive the transgression. Confession is one of the fundamental strategies to reduce negative stakeholder reactions to wrong-doing (McDonald 2010, Coombs 2012). One such approach to confession is the notion of self-disclosure, or stealing thunder, which emerged within the legal context where defendants who fessed-up of their own accord to damaging information, the outcome had less negative impact that had it been brought to light by the prosecution (Williams et al. 1993). The strategy is also found to reduce negative media coverage of a transgression by moving the media forward to a frame of “what comes next” (Wigley 2010).

On two nights in January 2013, Lance Armstrong, world renowned cyclist, cancer survivor, Olympic Bronze medalist and winner of an unprecedented seven Tour de France titles finally admitted to US chat show host Oprah Winfrey and a television audience of 4.3 million what many had long suspected – he had used banned performance enhancing drugs (PEDs) throughout his professional cycling career. In a statement released within an hour of the interview’s conclusion, Travis Tygart, CEO of (USADA), the organization with whom Armstrong had been battling for many years against persistent allegations of doping said “Tonight, Lance Armstrong finally acknowledged that his cycling career was built on a powerful combination of doping and deceit.” (USADA 2013).

For more than a decade, Armstrong strenuously denied any involvement in doping and verbally attacked and sued anyone who suggested that he did. From winning his first Tour de France in 1999 – ironically hailed as ‘The Tour of Renewal’ as it was intended to bring the Race out of the shadows of doping accusations - until he finally gave up his fight with USADA in August 2012, Armstrong, as leader of the U.S. Postal Service cycling team was involved with what Tygart described as “. . . the most sophisticated, professionalized and successful doping program that the sport has ever seen. . a program organized by individuals who thought they were above the rules and who still play a major and active role in sport today.” (USADA 2012).

7. Why Oprah Rather Than Twitter?

So, why did Lance Armstrong decide to finally admit to his transgressions and why did he choose the public forums of the Oprah Winfrey Show and Twitter as his preferred communications channels? It is evident that Armstrong is an individual who is very used to being in control and controlling and his choice of media channels for his mea culpa reflect this. As a televised interviewee, confessing all to his friend Winfrey, he could both craft his message and his image. King (2008) argues that television talk show programs “selectively exploits and manipulates the confessional process” where celebrities can engage in a form of damage control. Televised confessions are designed and delivered to meet the demands of performance, competitive advantages and audience expectations. As King (2008) observes, “confessions on television are staged for entertainment without deep moral consequences. The tears and ardent pleas for forgiveness are tied to the occasion and quite often faked”. It is suggested that by his use of Oprah Winfrey and Twitter as his confessional platforms, Armstrong felt that he could control his message. Arguably the fundamental principles of crisis public relations are these: knowing your audience; crafting the message accordingly; communicating a credible message through appropriate communication channels with the ultimate objective of getting the audience onside: apologizing for a transgression and making amends. However, Armstrong’s communication behaviour since August 2012 suggests that he feels that such rules do not apply to him as even as recently as 7 November 2013 he was sniping with Tyler Hamilton (a previous cycling team mate) on Twitter (@lancearmstrong @Ty_Hamilton twitter exchange 7 November 2013). Armstrong has never actually apologized for his taking of PEDs, maintaining throughout that the fault is with the sport of cycling rather than him the individual, leading to claims of arrogance particularly when he aligned himself with former President Clinton’s rehabilitation stating that Clinton was a “hero of mine” that he wanted to copy him in becoming “president of the world” and publicly stating that “I’m like Bill Clinton and people will forgive me.” (Bates 2013).

Armstrong polarizes opinion and therefore analysis of his “confessions” and his media strategy will reflect this. In these days of “open access” communication a polarity of viewpoints is to be expected. Nonetheless, from a
crisis public relations perspective, it seems more important that individuals and organizations who are mindful of their image and reputation, together with their relationship management strategies give closer consideration to how and when they communicate with their publics, particularly when the platform of choice becomes social media. From the perspective of the sports personality this is even more critical. “Armstrong has been a strong proponent of Twitter since its inception, and social media analysts have attributed much of Twitter’s growth to early adopters in the sports world such as Armstrong.” (Fisher 2009 cited in Hambrick et al 2013). Though his current Twitter followers stand at 3.8m he is losing followers at the rate of 160 per day (http://twittercounter.com/lancearmstrong) which suggests that his communication strategies may be backfiring (Hambrick et al 2013).

Since “coming clean” in January 2013, Armstrong has shunned the media spotlight and reverted to using Twitter, though to a lesser extent than previously. An analysis of his current Twitter usage indicates that he focusses predominantly on his family, social and charitable activities. Much of his Twitter activity is devoted to supporting and encouraging cancer sufferers, another example perhaps of, his attempts to salvage relationships. There are also instances where he engages directly with fans who continue to press him for an apology, in one case responding to a young fan who has written a blog in which he eloquently expresses his disappointment in the cyclist thus:

‘@Michael_Better Mike, read your piece & I don’t take your words lightly. I am truly sorry for the disappointment and betrayal you feel.’ (Lance Armstrong Twitterfeed, December 10, 2013)

No outright apology, perhaps, but certainly an expression of regret. He is also using Twitter to communicate with journalists, wishing Paul Kimmage, one of those who originally exposed him, a happy New Year on 31st December 2013. In another move, on 8th January 2014 Armstrong chose to confirm via his Twitter account his willingness to co-operate openly and honestly with an independent commission into cycling’s doping past.

8. Conclusion

We argue that Armstrong’s failure to engage with social media at the time of his “confession” was a missed opportunity to capitalize on the empathy of fans, who feel valued when asked for forgiveness (Sanderson and Emmon 2014). As Sanderson and Emmon (2014) explain, fans can identify with mistakes, confessions and forgiveness. For loyal fans, forgiveness may be the only course of action. A key finding is that fans on social media are part of today’s sport DNA and should not be ignored in the confession process when player transgressions happen on-or-off the field. Fans, we suggest, should be fully engaged in the confession process, which may bolster the chance of forgiveness and the opportunity to salvage the relationship with genuine two-way dialogue. Social media provides the ideal platform for such engagement but effectively utilizing its undoubted benefits for mutually beneficial outcomes is a whole new ball game for sports business.

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