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SPORT COMMUNICATION AS RITUAL*

1. Introduction

The paper adopts a broad perspective for the study of sport communication. It explores how sport communication can be defined, and what opportunities are offered by various schools of communication theory for the description of sport events and phenomena as well as their representations in media. The point of departure for my study is that sport has recently gained in significance both internationally and in Hungary, with the result that research on sport has broadened in scope; however, relatively few attempts have been made at describing sport communication, especially within a communication theoretic framework.

The goal of the paper is twofold. Firstly, I set out to define sport communication, and secondly, I look at which theoretical approach to communication supplies the most comprehensive framework for the description of various communicative situations in sport. After an introductory section (1), I move on to present the major schools of communication theory (2). This is followed by a discussion of sport and ritual, with the everyday role of rituals serving as a starting point (3). Finally, I offer an interpretation of sport communication within the framework of communication theory (4) before making concluding remarks (5).

2. The interpretation of communication. Schools in communication theory

Humans are social creatures living as members of communities. Life in communities requires the coordination of activities, thus the members need to be in continuous contact with each other. Social interactions do not simply follow from the demands of individuals; rather, they also facilitate coordination at the community level and thus are crucial for the proper functioning of a community.

Through frequent use, the term *communication* has acquired a very broad meaning. In a broad sense, any type of signal is considered communicative, but under a narrower interpretation, only humans communicate. Communication is a multi-disciplinary field of research, with its definition and description depending in large measure on what discipline-specific theoretical framework

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is adopted.¹ In addition, communication also receives a variety of interpretations within communication theory.

Early models of communication treated the transmission of information (**transaction**) as a central category. They put an emphasis on the role of the sender. In this model, the sender is seen as determining the goal of communication, which only she has access to, thus communication is an inherently asymmetric process. The sender's activity is aimed at passing on information, i.e. some kind of message, to the receiver, and communication is considered successful and efficient when information is transmitted without any omission or distortion. To reach her goal, the sender works out an action strategy on the basis of her intended effect (what I want and from whom), adjusting the features and components of communication so that this effect can be optimally achieved (Andok 2013: 18). Since the model focuses on the successful transmission of a message, it is geared toward the study of indirect communicative situations, for example when a coach informs athletes about the next week's training schedule, or when a club official makes a press announcement about some change at the club.

Interactional models foreground the process of communication, in which participants act in order to achieve a shared goal. Communication is thus symmetric, the roles are not fixed, and the goal is shared, i.e. all participants know it. The participants collectively negotiate and modify the elements and norms of the communicative situation. Shared action invariably produces a result in the form of information (Andok 2013, Balázs–H. Tomesz–H. Varga 2013, Horányi 1999). Interactional models put a premium on the process which leads to the shared goal, thus they are better suited to the description of coach–parent and coach–sportsperson interactions.

The **semiotic** school regards communication as the exchange of meanings, studying how participants assign meanings (interpretations) to signs. Its chief concern is with the message and its interpretation by a receiver who brings her own cultural experiences to bear on this process. According to this school of thought, individuals become members of a community through social interaction (Balázs – H. Tomesz – H. Varga 2013, Forgó 2010). The semiotic framework is most appropriate for the analysis of communication during a match, for example the use of tactical signals.

Özséb Horányi interprets communication in terms of level of preparedness for a problem. In her view, known as the **participational model**, people use communication in order to recognize and jointly solve problems in their lives (Horányi 1999). She starts off with the observation that people continuously face problems and it is in their vital interest to find solutions to them (e.g. how the ball can be put into the net during a match). Communication is not inter-

1 In the conception of information theory, the source transmits information with the help of signals. Psychology primarily studies effects, whereas sociology focuses on how information is transmitted between members of a society in various social systems. In linguistics, communication pertains to discourse between interlocutors.

preted as a process but rather as a possible state of an agent (the communicator), which is characterized by the accessibility of additional knowledge conducive to the recognition and solution of a problem. This knowledge needs to be legitimized and accepted by all participants (cf. strategy-making before a match, the application of rules in sport). Hence, legitimate knowledge does not exist a priori but rather has a socio-cultural origin (Andok 2013: 21). The model attributes a privileged role to the agent: communication is considered efficient when additional knowledge is most easily accessible to her and when she is granted access to the best possible kind of additional knowledge (Horányi 2006). This framework is ideal for the description of team strategy and the use of various tactical devices.

Finally, according to the **ritual** theory of communication (Carey 2003), communication is a symbolic process which serves the construction and maintenance of reality. This theory holds that the goal of communication is not the dissemination of messages in space but rather the bringing together of society within the realm of time; it is aimed not at the transmission of information but rather at the representation of shared beliefs. All communication is a drama in which we either agree or do not agree to assume certain roles, and we are not communicating in order to obtain information but rather to reinforce a world-view we already have. This theory is associated with such concepts as sharing, participation, association, fellowship, and the possession of general belief. It mainly focuses on social aspects of communication; on involvement rather than on effect or function. On this basis, the ritual model of communication is capable of describing the ritual elements of both micro-level (interpersonal) and macro-level (social, intercultural) communication. Further, it can be applied to both offline and media communication (Andok: 2017: 9). Therefore, it is equally well-suited to the presentation of coach-sportsman relations, team identity, the rituality of sport events, and communication during olympic games.

In order to offer a comprehensive picture of communication in sport, we need a theoretical framework which allows for a complex analysis. The ritual theory of communication may be such a framework.

3. Rituals in everyday life and in sport

Rituals have existed since the earliest forms of human society. They are associated with childbirth, marriage, healing, war preparations, olympic games, and so on. However, whereas in traditional societies, symbols embodying whatever can be known about the world primarily appeared in religious rituals, modern societies increasingly use them in secular ways, following changes in the form and content of public communication (Neulinger 2013: 103).

Rituals are recurring simplified episodes of communication (Alexander 2009: 26). They are characteristic forms of social behaviour, which are primarily differentiated from other communal activities by their special symbolic meaning.

Rituals bind the individual to a group and its traditions; they have expressive as well as reinforcing, structuring functions. The original (sacred) meaning of the word ('recurring custom closely associated with manifestations of religion') has broadened significantly by now (cf. Voigt 2010). On the basis of Moore and Myerhof (1977), Ágnes Neulinger (2013: 105) lists the following formal features as properties of a ritual:

- It consists in the repetition of an occasion, content, form, or a combination thereof.
- It involves active participation which primarily means the enacting of a role.
- It is instantiated through characteristic behaviour and the use of symbols, and may also feature unusual ways of putting routinized actions and symbols to use. It is crucial for ritual ceremonies to be unusual and salient by departing from everyday practice.
- It is an activity which unfolds in an organized manner on the basis of rules, with its onset and closure also regulated.
- It is an expressive presentation which requires attention and concentration. It is typically acted out with the use of symbols.
- It has a communal dimension, having a social message which is meaningful to the group as a whole.

Rituals serve symbolic meaning construction, they are formalized, publicly observable and recognizable by members of the same community; they are social acts (Andok 2017: 10). Anthropological studies demonstrate that the development of rituals is a key cohesive force and carrier of knowledge in human societies. Moreover, Vilmos Csányi suggests that the abundance and intertwining of behaviour patterns and employed symbols give rise to an active dynamic system which also facilitates the reinforced emotional acceptance and memorization of associated knowledge and beliefs (2000: 147).

Rituals are not only linked to social events, rather our everyday lives are also replete with their manifestations. These include congratulations and greetings, for instance, but the supporting of one's favourite sportsperson or team also involves ritual elements. All communicative acts belong here in which the form of execution is key to the felicitousness and success of an interaction.

Communication often has a primarily ritual function, and almost always contains a ritual element. The ritual theory of communication addresses structures, regulations, roles, norms, orientations and meanings integrated into the use of symbols. "It explores how symbolic forms function, how they regulate behaviour, how they create meaning and values" (Andok 2017: 19, my translation).

In the specialized literature, various groupings of rituals have been offered. Bourdieu considers rituals as sociological phenomena, and distinguishes between three major categories, namely legitimizing rituals (*rite de légitimation*),

consecrating rituals (*rite de consécration*) and institutionalizing rituals (*rite d'institution*) (cf. Voigt 2010: 221). Boccock (1974, quotes by Neulinger 2013: 108) also works with a threefold distinction. National rituals are bound up with the story of a nation, including its turning points. Lifecycle rituals (as well as national rituals) reveal how modern industrial societies relate, or do not relate, to the human body, to aspects of embodiment such as sexuality and childbirth, illness and death. Finally, artistic rituals reinforce the symbolic connection between a performer and the audience (on this basis, sport events can be regarded as artistic rituals). Wolin and Bennett (1984) divides rituals into celebrations, traditions and patterned interactions. The key feature of celebrations is that they are organized rarely, on a few occasions every year (they include national and religious holidays); in addition, they are held at the same time and in the same way by all members of a given culture. Traditions are more frequently enacted. These include birthdays, anniversaries and summer holidays; and they have both ubiquitously shared and idiosyncratic features. Finally, patterned interactions (such as shared meals or regular weekend programmes) unfold on a weekly or even daily basis.

Traditional customs related to turning points, landmark events and transitions of human life are called rites of passage by Van Gennep (1960/2007). These rites carry the conditions for how humans live together and adapt to each other in a community. Rites of passage have three phases. The first of these is separation, during which the individual withdraws from her previous roles and relations. This is followed by the phase of liminality, during which the individual may, for a limited time, experience a sense of community manifested in cults. Finally, the last phase is that of reaggregation or incorporation. At this stage, the individual returns to her original sphere of life but, having acquired new knowledge, she has a different, usually higher status. Van Gennep uses the metaphor of entering a room through a door to describe rites of passage; here, the door both separates and connects the old and the new world. On one side of the door are rites of separation, on the other side rites of incorporation. The passage itself corresponds to the act of stepping through the threshold. (In sport, examples of passage include the transfer of a player from one club to another or promotion from the youth team to the adult one.)

The symbolic character of rituals is also emphasized by Levi-Strauss, Mary Douglas, Malinowski and Clifford Geertz (for details, see Andok 2017, Neulinger 2013).

Mónika Andok (2017: 16) sets up two categories for the study of ritual communication: formal rites/ceremonies, which are held at designated places and times, and attract special attention (these include various competitions and matches) and formalized everyday activities (such as a morning run or daily training session).

In conclusion, the ritual theory of communication may be adequate for the study of all contexts of communication. "In couples, families and organizations alike, people define themselves with the help of ritual elements. This is how

they construct and maintain their identities, define borders in their social relations and activities, or perform a reunion" (Andok 2017: 17–18). An important function of rites is that they make time manageable and interpretable. By recurring again and again, they facilitate the functioning of a community (society), reinforce and represent group identity and also give rise to shared memories (such as the Match of the Century, when Hungary's football team beat England by 6 goals to 3 at Wembley Stadium in 1953).

Sport and its various events can be regarded as rites of traditional and modern societies (cf. Hoppál 1982: 334, Péter 2010). As components of religious rites, as games or forms of entertainment, sport activities have always been key parts of human cultures. The pursuit of sport can be considered as a cultural universal, and provides the blueprint of particular historical periods. Through the analysis of sport culture within a society, one can gain a highly accurate picture of the value system, rules and typical properties of people at a given period of time (Pólusné 2013: 25).

Sport is a playful and symbolic form of activity based on historical experiences and norms. It has an emotional charge, it transmits values, and also reinforces as well as represents identity. In sport it is possible to observe characteristic logical patterns of action, established formal organizations, institutionalized roles and a system of internal norms which reveal how a given society functions (Laczkó 2015: 17).

4. The interpretation of sport communication

In studies analysing the relationship between sport and communication, or the role of communication in sport, the focus is generally on media communication associated with sports or sportspersons, and less attention is paid to interpersonal and direct forms of communication, especially in the Hungarian literature.

This is all the more unfortunate because the quality of interpersonal relationships (between PE teachers and students, coaches and sportspersons, sport specialists and sportspersons, etc.) and the careful and adequate communication of coaches (precise formulation of instructions, motivation, evaluation) are at least as crucial for success as professional and methodological expertise, talent, endurance and disciplined work.

It is of course true that sport, and discourses unfolding in sport, can hardly be separated from the media, with the rising popularity of broadcasts, commentaries, interviews, social media groups associated with particular sport activities and even blogs promoting sport in health preservation. However, sport communication goes far beyond this; the role of communication should be studied in a broader context, not only in terms of the relationship between sport and media. In brief, the definition of sport communication cannot be restricted in scope to apply to sport-related messages only (Pedersen et al 2016: 180).

In the most general characterization, sport communication could be defined as the exchange of information closely or loosely related to sport. However, for a comprehensive account, one needs to adopt a more complex approach. If communication is considered to be a symbolic process which serves the construction and maintenance of reality, then sport communication is the process whereby sportspersons or those associated with sport create meanings by exchanging symbols in the course of their interactions. Pedersen and his colleagues explicate elements of the definition in greater detail (2016: 181–209):

Process. Sport communication can be regarded as a dynamic process of creating and indirectly or directly transmitting messages, which is active and interactive. This process involves a number of variables such as the personality of the communicator, his/her status, expertise, reliability, physical properties, and attitudes to individuals or groups. Participation is affected by the prior expectations, level of knowledge and motivation of participants. The process is shaped by the communicative situation, the content, and the reception of messages is subject to selection. In indirect forms of communication, gatekeepers may also play an important role, as their decisions influence both the content and the process of communication.

Participants. The participants of sport communication include sportspersons, sport specialists, representatives of sport clubs, media experts, and supporters as well as supporter communities with an interest in sport events.

Sport, sport activity, sport event. Pedersen and his colleagues (op.cit. 207–209) list three domains of sport communication, which are also closely related to each other. The first domain is that of interpersonal and direct communication in sport. This subsumes intrapersonal, interpersonal and small-group communication as well as the internal and external communication of organizations. The second domain is media communication, including both printed and electronic platforms. Finally, the third domain is that of activities and systems supporting sport communication, such as PR, marketing communication, crisis communication, research and science communication.

The development of symbols. For humans, knowledge is transmitted and expressed through symbols. On the one hand, symbols are carriers of knowledge; on the other, they also constitute conditions for knowledge (Geertz 1994: 47–48). In the broadest sense, symbols can be identified with words, concepts, as these help us connect our experiences and perceptions with sound sequences.²

2 In the literature, symbols are defined in various ways. Ágnes Kapitány and Gábor Kapitány group these definitions into two major categories: „on the one hand, human thought creates concepts, clusters of properties, and gives a name to elements of the world (this is primary symbolization); on the other, it connects these concepts (and perceived phenomena already marked by concepts, names) to others, and uses one concept to stand for another (this is secondary symbolization)” (Kapitány–Kapitány 2016: 5–6, my translation).

In sport, symbols create, reinforce and maintain identity, they produce value and shape rites (Pedersen 2016: 197). For example, narratives that strengthen the identity of a club, sport discipline or even a nation (cf. the case of Ferenc Puskás) function as symbols. Also symbolic are formalized, recurring events (e.g. the singing of anthems, the opening ceremony of olympic games), the special terminology of a given sport discipline, the strategic signals of a team, and reified symbols (e.g. olympic ring, the crest of a club).

The sharing of meanings. The rules of symbol use offer a window into thought processes. Symbols do not simply have an expressive function, they also determine how we behave (Geertz 1994: 47–48). We can truly understand the movements and behaviour of people only when we know the system of symbols underlying them. Symbols set up a community among members of a group through collective stories and rites. Some researchers believe that rites are key to creating emotional harmony, compassion and a sense of community within a group (cf. Csányi 2000). Others highlight the fact that they shape cognitive categories. In particular, they “subject cognitive categories to selection, at times they condense categories of human thought, experience and action – making them visible in key moments of social communion” (Andok 2017: 36, my translation).

To summarize, sport communication is the symbolic joint action of sportspersons and those related to sports which creates, preserves and passes on a community’s knowledge about sport.

The model developed by Pedersen and his colleagues may serve as a suitable basis for the study of sport communication. However, it needs to be supplemented by intercultural communication as an additional component for the description of sport events and activities. In particular, the impact of cultural heterogeneity on performance and success has long been recognized as a highly important issue, especially in the case of team sports. It would also hold benefits to explore cultural effects in particular sports, for example with sports embedded in Eastern cultures appearing in the Western world.

The model is also silent about communicative aspects of the relationship between politics and sport. Finally, the impact of globalization on sport may also be well worth addressing.

5. Summary

Sport is receiving more and more attention today, including both recreational sport with its health benefits and professional sport, which has created millions of jobs and become one of the leading branches of the show industry. Through the transformation of its role in society, sport has become a key area of economy and a major sector in the focus of national strategy. It is increasingly tied up with health care and education, and has an impact on financial figures in the latter domains (András 2003, Sárközy 2017). As a result, research on sport

has seen a dramatic increase. In recent years, increasing attention has been devoted (especially in the international literature) on the quality of interactions within a team, on the relationship between coaches and sportspersons (Révész et al. 2013), on the influence of cultural heterogeneity on team performance (Brandes–Franck–Theiler 2009). Today, the best-researched area remains sports media communication. By contrast, studies on the features of direct communication in sport are few and far between, they are only to be found in sport pedagogy and in research on particular sports (Révész–Bognár–Géczi 2007, Révész et al. 2013).

Each of the models of communication theory discussed in this paper may be well-suited to the description of some communicative situations and phenomena in the realm of sport. However, the ritual model has the advantage of allowing for a complex study of the role of communication in sport. It is capable of exploring the ritual elements of both interpersonal and organizational/social/intercultural communication, with both direct and indirect communicative situations falling within its scope.

Most communicative situations in sport are interactions in which the enacting of a relationship, power dynamics, and the demonstration of roles are more important than the exchange of information. Sport communication encompasses historically transmitted semantic patterns embodied in symbols, with which people maintain and continuously enhance their knowledge.

Particular models and schools of thought are not diametrically opposed; rather, they merely focus on different aspects of communication. They themselves construct what they claim to be describing.³

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3 For example, the transactional model constructs and maintains an asymmetric communicative situation in the interest of power and control, in the service of technology and bureaucracy (Andok 2013: 22).

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