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Television & New Media
2014, Vol. 15(8) 741–745

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DOI: 10.1177/1527476414541968

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Ilan Tamir¹

Abstract

Throughout the history of the nation-state, political leaders have used sport as a means of promoting individual and national agendas. Over the last few years, their hold over sport appears to have weakened. In an era of commercialization, individualism, and globalization, many sport fans have access to matches from all over the world at all hours of the day. This commentary argues that while the broadcasting of international football tournaments remains highly profitable for national television networks, their close relationship with national political agendas will continue to weaken.

Keywords

sport, nationalism, globalization, media, social networks

Research on sport and nationalism over the last few decades has described how sport plays an active role in instilling nationalism in forming citizens' sense of their national identity. Many studies have also emphasized the role of national media in influencing the nationalist sentiments of sports fans (Ytterstad 2012). This research illustrated how nation-states appropriated sporting events, the achievements of its local and national teams, and appointed their own athletes as “ambassadors” who effectively work on their behalf to represent their nation in the international arena. In turn, researchers have considered sport fandom as a civil religion in which the rituals activate nationalism (Butterworth 2008).

To this second point, this short commentary discusses the decline in nationalism among football fans in recent years and the root causes of this shift. National football teams nowadays receive less enthusiastic support from their fans, and at times, even rejection. Globalization and the rise of social networks, along with economic and

¹Ariel University, Israel

Corresponding Author:

Ilan Tamir, School of Communications, Ariel University, Ariel 40700, Israel.

Email: ilantamir125@gmail.com

individual agendas, have all been steadily chipping away at nationalism's hegemony over sport.

Sport and Nationalism

Sport's role in creating national identity and sentiment is well documented in scholarly research. Anderson's (1991) exploration of national discourse and the impact it has had on one's consciousness and imagination offered insight for the first time into how sport in all its forms boosts national spirit (Hargreaves 2000). Moreover, with its dominant media presence and ever-surging popularity, modern-day sport as whole has become the primary, unifying, nationalist framework, carefully designed to rally the masses and generate national sentiment (Hobsbawm 1990; Poulton 2004; Topic and Coakley 2010).

The power of sporting events lies in the fact that for fans, sport teams stand for something beyond the game itself. Aligning oneself with a sport team is undoubtedly one of the more public declarations one can make about one's own identity, seeing as sport teams are often identified with certain political ideologies and economic realities (Polley 2004). Within a national context, one might even argue that contemporary sport is directly tied to the geopolitical ideology of nationalism. The notion that national sport teams confront other political entities automatically implies that the nation would band together around the flag; for all the individual rewards and acclaim their positions entitle them to, these athletes are first and foremost seen as national icons (Hobsbawm 1990).

Politicians, who recognize the power and impact of sport and its athletes on the people, have been keen on generating national myths via sport as a means of glorifying the state and its leaders, while also boosting national identity and sentiment in the process (Bairner 2001). Some twentieth-century fascist leaders even went as far as to interfere with the direct outcome of football matches (in particular), in a bid to promote their own political agendas (Karush 2003; Large 2007; Martin 2004; Murray 2003; Rein 1998).

Sporting events promote a sense of social education. Their media coverage educates many football fans worldwide about the very existence of countries, their symbols, their national flags, and their historical events through (Holsti 1995; Rowe 1995). The tiny South American Republic of Suriname, for example, gained worldwide recognition as football stars on the Dutch national team (Leeds and Leeds 2009). The historic tensions between Germany and its neighbors, the war between Britain and Argentina over the Falklands, and the Serbo-Croatian tensions prior to the collapse of Yugoslavia are but a few examples of major historical events that people learned about through media coverage of football (Kuper 2003).

Indeed, sport media plays a pivotal role in boosting national sentiment among football fans. Television's meteoric household infiltration rate was most influential in raising people's interest in football, regardless of class. In Israel for example, the media had an important role in encouraging national spirit through sports. The soccer matches between Israel and the USSR in the summer of 1956 and their media coverage have

become a part of the national pantheon (Harif 2009). Football's high-profile international competitions have become the highest rated telecasts worldwide. To illustrate the tremendous impact national football teams have on the lives of football fans, look no further than the streets themselves in the aftermath of the telecast of a national team match that has ended in victory, as tens of thousands of fans take to the streets in frenzied celebration (Kuper 2012, 138).

Winds of Change

In a popular article on sport, Kuper (2012, 140–141) describes how “more and more fans watch tournaments with transnational loyalties instead of the old single-minded nationalism.” Nationalism's decline in sport fandom can be explained by three different but intertwined factors with media: globalization, commercialization, and regionalism.

Globalization

Globalization has significantly weakened the ties between nationalism and football as evidenced by the international sporting organizations, the frequent emigration of footballers for better contracts, and the worldwide adoption of Western football rules (Galily 2009). These changes have been broadcast through global media, which have aimed to attract more international audiences to the European Champions League as well as regional tournaments around the world. This has disrupted the timing of televised football European matches to the earlier hours of the afternoon to maximize East Asian viewership. With so much content readily and steadily available, fans have begun to develop a sense of loyalty to football clubs competing in foreign leagues.

Commercialization

The 1995 “Bosman Ruling” banned restrictions on foreign-born soccer players within national leagues in the EU and allowed players in the EU to change clubs without paying a transfer fee. As a result, more foreign-born footballers have been signed by domestic teams in the EU, and sports clubs have severed local ties to become meta-national brands (Ben-Porat 2010). A team's commercial identity has become a much higher priority than its national one. Nike CEO Phil Knight even admitted that when his native USA was playing Brazil during the World Cup, he was actually rooting for a Brazil that was donning full Nike gear, over a Adidas-dressed, U.S. national team (Galily 2009, 143).

Regionalism

National games have increasingly become the sites of interregional violence and jingoism. One only has to look as far as the weekly league matches for Hapoel Tel Aviv to see fans holding up banners that read “We represent Hapoel, not Israel!” Using primarily social media, football fans in recent years have become increasingly

comfortable with expressing their support of foreign and regional football teams alongside criticism, anger, and disdain for their own national team with its achievements and values. Some Israeli fans have even gone as far as to wish harm onto footballers during national team matches if they happen to play for a rival domestic football team (Tamir 2014). In other words, the national is no longer necessarily the glue that holds teams together, but rather it is simply the setting where domestic teams engage in head-to-head clashes and settle old scores.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Author Biography

Ilan Tamir, PhD, is a mass media researcher and lecturer at Ariel University and Bar-Ilan University, Israel. He writes for the sport section of Israel's popular website Walla!.