

To Tweet or Not to Tweet:

Social Media Use as Strategic Communications
in Australian Rugby Union

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ABSTRACT

The Australian Rugby Union (ARU), an internationally engaged not-for-profit sporting organisation, has had a proactive online marketing presence since its first professional season in 1996. Its media, marketing and communications strategy now incorporates social media tools and services including the social networking site Facebook, micro-blogging site Twitter and video sharing service YouTube.

Using both qualitative and quantitative research methods, this dissertation investigates the use of social media as strategic communications by the ARU and other rugby organising bodies, players and other rugby community stakeholders. It also looks specifically at how *Wallabies* players are using social media as strategic communications in developing/ nurturing their personal brands online, with a view to articulating any areas of conflict and/ or cooperation that exist within the elite Australian rugby marketing environment between the team and administrators.

This dissertation found that while the International Rugby Board made good corporate use of social media sites and tools in preparation for their landmark event, Rugby World Cup 2011, the Australian Rugby Union's adoption of social media platforms was less advanced in comparison. The ARU's social media strategy was underdeveloped with respect to the management of the corporate and team reputation online, despite strategic marketing efforts across new media platforms.

Secondly, the research suggests only a handful of elite professional rugby players actively use social media. Their rationale for engagement, consumption time and

approach differing significantly depending on how they were using it ie: personal v marketing purposes (in some cases both) and whether they were managing their accounts or had outsourced to marketing and media managers. Location and situation (or playing schedule) were also factors affecting use and purpose of communications – whether players were talking to one another, pre or post match, touring or based overseas. Intra-team communications, corporate media relations and promotional activity all produced varying levels of engagement and measures of success, with lack of technical competence and problem solving skills (technacy) articulated as a key deterrent to use of social media.

Finally, this dissertation demonstrates that the players and fans who are engaged in social media activity are building social capital and brand equity although there are still challenges to operating within the corporate codes and speech conventions of the ARU. Overall social media use in the ARU still tends towards traditional asymmetric models of strategic communications, rather implementing than the more symmetric and dialogic possibilities idealised in early new media theory.

KEYWORDS

Social Media, Social Networking, Social Capital, Strategic Communications, Brand Management, Sports marketing, Web 2.0, Australian Rugby Union.

***'A game which started out as a simple pastime
has been transformed into a global network
around which vast stadia have been built,
an intricate administrative structure created
and complex strategies devised.***

***Rugby Union, in common with any activity which attracts
the interest and enthusiasm of all kinds of people,
has many sides and faces.'***

- IRB Playing Charter (2008 ed)

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My thanks also to former players, colleagues and rugby friends: *Qantas Wallabies'* assistant coach Mr Jim Williams and media manager Mr Matt McIlraith; former Wallaby and WARU director, Mr John Welborn (*coincidentally the first professional rugby player I ever interviewed back in 1996*); former *Cox Group* colleague and *Qantas Wallaby* Alastair Baxter and Mr Anthony McKaiser (marketing and communications director) SANZAR. Special thanks also to Ms Rosemary Towner, National Player Development manager at the Rugby Union Players Association and her RUPA development team; Mr Ben Hartman of *Octagon*; Mr Michael Garnett, founder of *The Old Boys Rugby Choir* and now general manager, marketing and partnerships at *New South Wales Rugby Union*. Sincerest gratitude to Mr Wayne 'Gus' Erickson, principal of St Andrew's College, University of Sydney, chairman of Australian Rugby's National Referee Selection Committee, member of the International Rugby Football Board Referee Committee and the world's first ever professional rugby referee for assisting where and however possible.

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***"Social media provides the perfect platform
for RWC 2011 to engage with the global Rugby family.
Through the latest content, including video,
news and discussion topics,
fans will have a fully interactive involvement
in the Tournament like never before,"***

Bernard Lapasset (2009), Rugby World Cup Limited Chairman

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“Facebook is bringing the world together. It has become an overarching common cultural experience for people worldwide... it has become a technological powerhouse with unprecedented influence across modern life, both public and private. Its membership spans generations, geographies, languages and class... It changes how people communicate and interact, how marketers sell products, how governments reach out to citizens, even how companies operate... this scale, rate of growth, and social penetration raise complicated social, political, regulatory and policy questions... how do we feel about an entirely new form of communication used by hundreds of millions of people...?”

- David Kirkpatrick (2010), *The Facebook Effect*

*'The beauty of Facebook is that it lets us communicate directly
with people who are interested in the Tournament
but it also lets them talk back.
While RWC 2011 is hosted in New Zealand,
this is an international event and it is important
to connect with fans all over the world.
The dialogue and interaction that takes place online
is enabling us to create an active international community of fans.'*

Shane Harmon (2009), General Manager of Marketing and Communications,

Rugby New Zealand 2011 Limited

INTRODUCTION

Across the globe social media use is reshaping the way communities organise and communicate (boyd, 2009). Not surprisingly, as internet use evolves organisations are also reassessing how they create value through their communications relationships (Stanton 2007) with an interest in using social media to add intrinsic brand and community value to their operations (Sneddon 2010). Globally engaged sporting entities like the International Rugby Board (IRB) are now using social media for strategic corporate, team, and event brand communications (IRB, 2010). In Australian rugby, strategic communications are adapting (with varying degrees of success) to users' rapid adoption of online communications technologies (ICT) such as the Internet, the world wide web (www) and 3G mobiles or 'smartphones'. Yet there is little available research on the challenges facing Australian sporting organisations as they adopt social media tools and services.

The phenomenal rate of adoption of social media sites facebook.com, youtube.com and twitter.com,¹ alongside the speed of information creation and intensified media sharing they allow, is giving the Australian Rugby Union (ARU) and its branded teams unprecedented access to communicate directly, quickly and symmetrically with their audiences. These new social channels are clearly important to the brand management and relationship building of professional sport. They also enable the Australian rugby community – management, teams, players, fans and media –to develop new communicative relationships.

¹ Facebook acquired 500 million registered users within five years, (Nielsenwire 2010), Twitter now handles 140 million tweets a day (Twitter, 2010) and Youtube registered 700 billion playbacks in 2010 (YouTube, 2011).

This dissertation will explore the scope and implications of these activities for building and maintaining elite Australian rugby brands.² It will analyse how clubs and players are using social media, and why they are using them, with specific reference to brand value and social capital.

Access to global social technologies, free publishing software and the internet has enabled members of the Australian national rugby union team, *Qantas Wallabies* - a team brand - to proactively construct, maintain and monetise themselves as individual brands. For example, James O'Connor is one player, who at 20 years of age, has a personal website (www.james-oconnor.com.au). He also promotes himself (his identity), his football (profession and source of economic capital) and his charitable works and fan activities (social relationships) via social media, in links to social network sites, dedicated Twitter feeds (self-managed), a branded Facebook page (outsourced), RSS feed and YouTube channel. In the process he is cultivating another form of value, social capital, or the intrinsic value and resources born from durable social networks and community relationships (Bourdieu 1991). But is O'Connor representative of a wider trend amongst professional footballers and what are the implications of such individual activities for corporate strategic communications?

AIMS

This dissertation aims to understand the social, cultural, and economic implications of social media use for elite Australian rugby brands. It will examine the uses of

² In using the term elite the research adopts a commonly used distinction between professional and amateur rugby activities.

social media, specifically social network sites Facebook and Twitter and their product and brand extensions (apps and plug-ins), as strategic stakeholder communications in Australian rugby. It will seek to understand the rationales for, and consumption of, Facebook and Twitter, by members of key stakeholder groups within the professional Australian rugby union community, in particular the administrators (ARU) and the players (*Qantas Wallabies*), and how these activities impact specifically on individual and corporate team brand creation and management.

The dissertation seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Who within the elite Australian rugby community is using social media?
2. Why are they using social media?, and
3. How are they using social media?

This research will contribute to a discussion about the development of effective web 2.0 strategic communications, or scalable, participatory and dialogic approaches to media relations, public relations, marketing and brand management. It will also contribute towards a more informed debate on the need for corporate social media guidelines, given the rise of citizen journalism and participatory media.

Until now the rugby industry has lacked information on how many players recognise their brand value and subsequently harness social technologies for the purposes of building this and maintaining their social capital – and what threat (if any) these activities pose to Australian rugby organisational and team strategies. In 2011, corporations as diverse as Coca-Cola, Ford and Reuters are regulating social media use through the distribution of social media guidelines to employees in an attempt to mitigate tensions between individual and corporate brands (Boudreaux, 2011).

Preliminary research suggests there is no comprehensive ARU social media policy despite the ARU using social media as a public relations tool, ARU-contracted players using it to communicate and maintain relationships while travelling, and such guidelines being increasingly common in corporate strategy (Leonard, 2009).

SIGNIFICANCE

Social media services such as Facebook (launched 2004) and Twitter (launched 2006) are playing an increasingly important role in (re)shaping corporate and social communications practices in Australian corporate media (McNamara, 2010; Kotler, Kartajaya. and Setiawan, 2010). They are being used to develop and maintain individual and corporate brands (Hearn, 2008; Qualman, 2010) and have given rise to significant legal and ethical dilemmas in sport. For example: the now infamous Celebrity Fan @ItsStephRice 'suck on that faggots' tweet during the Wallabies historic win over South Africa in Bloemfontein (Tatnell, 2010) and most recently Digby loane's \$2000 fine over 'the worst ref ever' tweet (Smith, 2011). However there is a gap in the existing social media literature about how and why these tools are being used as strategic communications in professional sporting communities in Australia.

In Australia sport is a way of life but football has dominated mainstream leisure consumption and media attention (Cashman 1995). Rugby union is a popular and a successfully internationalised football code (Euromonitor International, 2008), which has been played In Australia for over 140 years. It has undergone significant structural, cultural, economic, and social changes since its commercialization in 1996 and new rugby brands have emerged from, and alongside, reconstructed

international elite corporate rugby event brands (*Super Rugby* and *Tri-Nations*); internationally-facing national representative team brands like the *Qantas Wallabies* and regional teams: *NSW Waratahs*, *Queensland Reds*, *ACT Brumbies*, *Western Force* and *Melbourne Rebels*. These locally produced, but globally mediated entertainment products are now nurtured in both traditional and more recently new media via the internet, mobile web, social media, social networking and through corporate integrated marketing communications. But again there is little available research about best practice use of new media as strategic brand and marketing communications in Australian sport.

Most information about social media use in rugby union is contained in corporate documents talking about the intended harnessing of new technologies for the purposes of marketing and communications activities, and which discuss 'getting social' through website developments (see IRB, 2010: 56; Australian Rugby Union Annual Report 2010; NSWRU Annual Reports 2009-2010). The lack of relevant analytical research is significant in marketing, media and public relations terms as Australians are some of the most engaged users of social media in the world (Nielsenwire, 2010) and over 9 million Australians have registered Facebook profiles and active accounts. It is also a gap in corporate communications knowledge and rugby policy terms given that 15 of the 43 man 2010 Qantas Wallabies squad are active on Twitter (refer Appendix A).

In media management terms there is also a need to re-examine the importance of rugby's relationship with broadcast media. While rugby's relationship with international broadcast media has been mutually beneficial (economically for the Unions and in terms of content production for the broadcasters), it has redefined

practice, performance and consumption. Now social media may be used to do the same. Rugby 7s and Women's Rugby are proactively being developed by the Australian Rugby Union as nationalized global rugby brands, with their own Facebook branded pages on www.rugby.com.au as well as a dedicated Facebook page and Twitter profiles. Prior to professionalism of the sport in 1995, and the subsequent widespread adoption of the web, neither of these playing groups were actively mass-marketed by the ARU.

Finally the leadership roles of the CEO (organization) and coach (team) cannot be underestimated in understanding the strategic communications imperative of social media development for sports business (Argenti, Howell and Beck 2005). The Twitter profiles of international rugby identities @IRBMikeMiller (IRB CEO Mike Miller) @NZRU_CEO (Steve Tew) make it is clear the IRB and New Zealand union are active participants in social media discussions and debates - but the absence of the ARU's CEO John O'Neill suggests the Australian organisation is yet to heed the call to dialogic arms. So in answering how social media are being used in Australian rugby this thesis will explore what social media leadership and strategy looks like, in the hope of contributing to the development of more effective corporate communications practice.

BACKGROUND

Rugby Union is an international code of football played by men (and increasingly women) in over 25 countries, and a multi-million dollar entertainment product with sponsors such as Heineken, Arab Emirates and Microsoft. Rugby is governed by its member and associate member unions under the auspices of an international administrator – the International Rugby Board. With 3.7 million players from 97

member and 20 associate member unions worldwide, the IRB actively promotes rugby globally via broadcasting, internet and electronic publications.

The Australian Rugby Union (ARU) is considered one of the leading unions in world rugby, with its national team, *Qantas Wallabies*, ranked second in the world behind New Zealand. The ARU is currently nurturing the brand value of the Wallabies in its 2011 Rugby World Cup (RWC) 'One Team' campaign, which exploits fans nationalistic and tribal feelings. The RWC 2011, hosted by the New Zealand Rugby Union, has already raised £UK44million in sponsorship. It is expected to attract a global television audience of over 4 billion and has attracted a million 'likes' for its Facebook page. Thus the RWC provides an economic, social and cultural platform for the development of the Game worldwide and strategic benefits for neighbouring unions like the ARU (IRB, 2010).

For these reasons the ARU is a relevant and significant case study of an internationally focused sporting organisation adapting to social media use. In the coming chapters I will examine the forms and purposes of social media use by ARU (administrators), *Qantas Wallabies* (teams) and Australian professional players (individuals). While I acknowledge the Australian rugby community also comprises media, corporate sponsors, venues, services providers and fans, the focus of this inquiry remains the use of social media as strategic corporate, team and individual brand communications.

Increasingly, the Australian Rugby Union organisation, professional players such as *Qantas Wallabies* James O'Connor, Quade Cooper, Digby Ioane and Nathan Sharpe as well as fan groups such as the *Old Boys Rugby Choir* are using or have used

social media. These tools may help them to maintain strong and develop weak social ties within and across professional and personal networks (Ellison, Steinfeld and Lampe, 2006). Their network activities also may also enable them to build 'social capital', relationships of trust and mutual support that produce measurable benefits for them, their reputations and their communities (Putnam 2000 & 2011; Coleman 2002).

The ability of individual players and fan groups to autonomously represent themselves via global and ubiquitous social media channels raises important questions about the impact of these communications on professional sports brands - in particular, how these representations impact on rugby brand value and the subsequent strategic communications around those brands.

METHODOLOGY

This study examines the construction of brand value and social capital using three traditional empirical methods: stakeholder interviews, a survey and textual analysis.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by telephone and face to face with members of key stakeholder groups within the elite Australian Rugby Union community: marketing management, players, and rugby managers and rugby teams. The online survey, which provides quantitative data to complement these interviews, was constructed using best practice media studies guidelines (Weerakoddy, 2008). It is based on a model developed by the American Marketing Association to gauge social media use among its members (AMA, 2010) and was adapted to collect social media usage data from the Australian Wallabies players. A textual analysis of social

media communications is based on a discussion of brand building, brand management and brand culture, concepts developed in Chapter One.

The target sample size for the human subject research in this study is 41 and includes: current and recent Australian Wallabies (players), an administrator (SANZAR), team media manager (ARU), a manager at the Rugby Union Players Association (RUPA), the founder of rugby fan movement *The Old Boys Rugby Choir*, an independent social media strategist, a professional player manager/ sports marketing practitioner. This approach allows the aims of the study to be met by collecting data on social media use and usage rationale from a representative sample of individuals in the Australian Rugby Union social and professional network.

By way of disclosure of interests, the author held the positions of features writer and associate editor for *Australian Rugby Review* and *International Rugby Review* between 1996 and 1998. She was also a regular contributor to both *Rugby News* (NSW) and the match day programs for the *ACT Brumbies*, *Queensland Reds* as well as *New Zealand Rugby News*, *SA Rugby News* and *NZ Rugby Monthly* between 1996 and 2000.

CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

Chapter One, the literature review, situates discussions about brand management in marketing, sports communications and new media research. It introduces the idea of Australian rugby as a brandscape, before developing a detailed discussion of three key theoretical concepts: brand culture, social capital, and social media.

Chapter Two describes the context for adoption of social media in professional rugby, and then analyses the strategic social media use of key organisational stakeholders within the current Australian rugby union brandscape. It then presents quantitative research articulating how rugby players use social media and why, pointing to examples where conflict may arise between individual and corporate brand.

Chapter Three provides a critical analysis of current Facebook and Twitter use by members of *Qantas Wallabies*, including a case study of current Wallaby James O'Connor's use of social media to develop brand equity via social capital. Using digital textual analysis and interviews, this chapter provides a situated example of how and social media is being used as strategic communications, within a broader

toolkit of internet technologies, for the purposes of building and nurturing social capital and creating intrinsic brand value.