Department of Communication and Media

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Sports Fan Empowerment through Social Web

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Abstract

This study examines Euroleague teams and their approach to fan empowerment through social web. By combining previous knowledge with new empirical data, the aim of this research is to learn about fan position in power relations of sports industry and see if they get empowered through participation on social web. The study also explains what opportunities are offered for basketball fans on social web and how the power balanced has changed between Euroleague teams and fans with the rise of social web. It is believed that social media provides fans possibility to participate and become empowered to affect teams they support in a way it was not possible prior social web. Existing research has established the importance of social media in sports and has focused on how sport teams utilise social media and until now there was little data about sport team's approach to fan empowerment.

To understand if sports fans get empowered through social web and if they do, how their situation has changed, this study interviewed social media and communication specialists from three different Euroleague teams. The study involves a text analysis of data collected through interviewing Euroleague personnel from three different countries combined with semiotic analysis of official websites and examples of best practises. This study suggests that fan empowerment did not increase with the rise of social web as much as it believed in sports community.

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Introduction

It is believed that technology and social web in particular gave people an opportunity to get closer to organisations they are interested in. Sports fans tend to think that social web break territorial boundaries that existed before, allow them communicate directly to sports clubs and possibly influence organisations they care about. However, scholars disagree if social web is a fair, democratic, participatory and empowering space. Although there has been growing research interest in the field of impact of social web and social media in particular on sports communications, only few attempts have been made to study sports teams' approach towards participatory web and fan empowerment through social media.

Some scholars do not see social web as an empowering tool for fans as Carpentier (2011) argues that fans could be called minimalist media participators at best since they lack power and influence comparing to teams. Jenkins points out that some platforms pretend to look participatory and they lack empowering aspects (2013), while Dunning (2011), Raney and Bryant (2006) argue that social media is becoming more controlled than ever before. However, their colleagues Boyle and Haynes (2003) disagree by believing that new media provides communication without the control. This research will look from team's perspective to see if the power balance between clubs and fans has changed with the rise of social web.

Most of recent social media literature has disproportionately focused on impressions, security and examining the motivations and constraints of social media users (Barnes, 2006; Boyd and Ellison, 2007; Jagatic, Johnson, Jakobsson and Menczer, 2007; Stutzman, 2006, Witkemper, Lim and Waldburger, 2012). Existing research, which analysed how social media impacted sports communication, focused mostly on how teams can utilise social media, while this research will examine motivations and constraints of actions made by basketball teams on social web.

Due to the fact that the subject of this research is professional European basketball, the study will inevitably focus on strongest European basketball competition's Euroleague teams and especially communication specialists as they historically had been in a position of control and decision making in relation to club's image management and representation, message construction, and general communication (see Methodology chapter for more details). By

analysing official websites and expert interviews with Euroleague teams' personnel and complementing my findings with specific real life examples, I hope that my study in the end will be able to answer the question if social web empowers sports fans and thus complement and expand the existing research in this field.

I chose three Euroleague teams from three different regions of Europe as my research subject for qualitative data collection as Euroleague is one of most popular sports competitions in Europe and also the second best basketball league in the world. As it will be seen in my analysis and discussion of my research findings in Chapter 5, communication professionals, which were my research participants, shared their experience on dealing with fans on a daily basis and solving problems related with their team representation on social media. Experience of communication personnel and critical analysis will be supported by semiotic analysis of official websites.

Furthermore, the findings and their evaluations will be supplemented by four other chapters relating to this study: Chapter 1 will provide a literature review complementing my research in greater detail and giving all background information related with social web and sports communication, while Chapter 2 will present the theoretical framework, and Chapter 3 will clearly state research's aim, purpose and research questions. Chapter 4 will demonstrate methodological structure of the research I conducted and the decision-making process related to it.

Chapter 1

Literature Review

There has been a lot of academic interest regarding sports communication and social media, but only limited research exists in the area of social media impact on sports communication and more specifically, sports teams' approach to moderate social media and fans participation. Scholars have analysed many different areas of sports communication, power relations and participation of fans, and in order to understand the background of my study, I critically reviewed and analysed the most relevant studies, which I divided into three categories. Based on the research question, this review of theoretical literature will work to elaborate several key areas, which are relevant to the topic: sports communication, fan participation and power, and social media control and policing. It will also look at current Euroleague social media guidelines as a relevant case study. The goal of this chapter is to critically review and assess existing knowledge in the area of social media management in sports communications, discussions and debates on power and participation, while supporting it with the relevant more general researches in the fields of sports communication, sports websites and social media.

Sports Communication and Technology

Modern sport would not be as advanced as it is now without the development of sports communication. Whannel and Boyle (2010) noticed that sports and sports communication played an important part in developing communications in multiple ways. The scholars found that "from the earliest emergence of a modern mass media, sport has had a close relation to the emergence of new communication technologies" (Boyle and Whannel, 2010: p.259). Early film newsreels, live broadcasts of sports, promotion of colour television, satellites – sport has accelerated the improvement of all kinds of communication. Even in recent years, HDTV, 3D television technology is being promoted through sports, while many sports fans join social networking sites (SNS) such Facebook and Twitter only to follow sports stars. The most important reason that lead this development has been the humongous commercial potential of sports. According to Forbes, the value of an average National basketball association (NBA)

team rose by 13 percent last year and now seeks $1.25 billion, while 30 teams combined generated $5.2 billion in revenue in 2014-15 season (Badenhausen, 2016). Also NBA recently signed a new nine-year $24 billion media-rights deal with Disney and Turner, which almost tripled annual revenue from media-rights deal comparing with the previous agreement (Flint and Cohen, 2014). NBA recently also secured an eight-year apparel deal with Nike, which is worth $1 billion per year (Rovell, 2015). The second strongest basketball league in the world, which is based in Europe, Euroleague was also happy to announce a ten-year $387 million partnership with International Management Group and the president of IMG events and media, Ioris Francini stated that "this is a ground-breaking partnership which will change the face of European basketball for the long-term" (Long, 2015). NBA personnel often indicates the fact that financial incentive in professional sports is as just important as traditional sports values, therefore these recent investments and partnerships will assure that sports and basketball in particular will continue playing an important part in communication development.

Looking at sports communication from a wider angle, Pedersen, Laucella, Miloch and Fielding (2009: p.430) define it as "process by which people in sport, in a sport setting or through a sport endeavour, share symbols as they create meaning through interaction". Before analysing cases and research of fan empowerment, it is important to understand sports communication phenomena in general and realise why sports fans follow sports stars and what is their motivation to participate in SNS. Whannel (2002) did a research on how masculinity and male identity is represented through images of sport (Wenner (2015) did a similar research by analysing semiotics) and sport stars and, explored the limitations of sports teams, which could be related to social media as well. For example, Whannel (2002) explains that teams can make celebrities out of their players and social media can help achieve that as well, but scholar argues that teams do not have full control of image creation as, for example, they cannot create sports heroes. Whannel (2002: p.52) also says "if stars are central figures of sport representation, it is only through transforming their doings into the form of stories that they come to signify". Whannel's (2002) work lacks direct links to new media, but connecting it with social web, posting updates and spreading the word on SNS is a good example of a way to transform doing into form of stories.

To be influential, these stories must have a symbolic meaning matching the buyer's self-image, according to the research that was made by Kwak and Kang (2009), where they examined the predictive utility of self-image congruence in spectator sport consumption. Kwak and Kang (2009) found out that purchasers buy products or services that have symbolic meanings matching the buyer's self-image, which means that sports teams must be interested in their positive representation on social media as that would lead to higher amount of purchase by their fans. The research also revealed that respondents who reported higher degree of image congruence with team followers' image indicated they attended more games per season, followed their team more through the media, and expressed higher loyalty to their supported teams. On the other hand, there are different categories of sports and some use sport consumption activities just for social interaction, escaping life routines and sport is not the only activity where these needs can be satisfied as Funka, Beaton and Alexandris gives examples of restaurants, casinos and theatres (2012). However, the main difference between places mentioned by Funka, Beaton and Alexandris, and area that this research will focus on - social web - is that electronic mass media have crossed physical and territorial boundaries and created virtual space of media consumption for fans that see their self reflection and constitution through media consumption (Sandvoss, 2005: p.53). On this topic, Sandvoss ' ideas are similar to Kwak's and Kang's (2009) as he cites Marcuse, which points out that people recognise themselves and their soles in their commodities that could be from automobiles to kitchen equipment to sporting merchandise (2005: p.157). Sandvoss argues that mass media consumption is both, a way to create identity and also integrate in modern industrial modernity (2005: p.165). In this process, sport teams can be compared to a mirror that according to Sandvoss, leads to a strong emotional involvement of fans: "like the notion of the transitional object, the idea that the object of fandom functions as a mirror to the fan helps to explain the intense emotional involvement of fans, which is based on, as McLuhan describes it, one's fascination with one's own extension" (2005: p.162). In my research, I want to find if Europe's best basketball teams see fans as media consumers and what is their approach towards their fan base while producing those products.

Most of recent social media literature has disproportionately focused on impressions, privacy and examining the motivations and constraints of social media users (Barnes, 2006; Boyd and Ellison, 2007; Jagatic, Johnson, Jakobsson and Menczer, 2007; Stutzman, 2006, Witkemper, Lim and Waldburger, 2012) without making bigger emphasis on sport communication. Existing research that analysed how social media affected sports communication, paid most attention to understand how teams can use social media in their favour. But before moving to concrete examples of practices, in order to understand sports communication relation with social media, it is important to learn what impact the Internet had on sports communication, what is media in general and specific differences of social media. Oxford dictionary defines social media as "websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking" (2014). But before social media made the daylight, the Internet has already revolutionised sports communications in many ways. Raney and Bryant, who discussed present relationship of the sports and media industries in their book, noticed that those who "produced sports production in the Internet era had more control over the promotion and distribution of their production online than before and prior the Internet, mediated sports production complex was the one-way nature of communication between sport media and their audience" (2006: p.444). The appearance of the Internet provided sports teams more control than they had before and Internet also delivered sport team a possibility to maintain a constant media presence for longer time. Raney and Bryant (2006) gives an example of International Olympic Committee (IOC), which with the help of the Internet, can be seen and visible all the time despite the main events, Summer and Winter Games, occur on a four-year cycle. The scholars also remind that the Internet provides IOC platform for its sponsors, such as Coca Cola and McDonald's (Raney and Bryant, 2006). Raney and Bryant ideas made me see social web not as a platform designed for interrupted participation, but also as a platform where some players likely have more power and more possibilities for moderation than others.

The subjects of this research, sports teams are dealing with active audience, which has a chance to interact with sports teams anytime and at any place. An old media definition by Raney and Bryant (2006) says that it "can be understood in the dictionary sense of a means of mass communication, such as newspapers, magazines, or television" (p. 444). Considering

that this paper was written before social media became a significant power in sports communication, Raney and Bryant (2006) has not considered that the new media will be as significant in the future as an old media. However, as Witkemper, Lim and Waldburger (2012) noticed that it can be confusing to any researcher to know what qualifies as social media. Kaplan and Haenlin (2010) points out that social media is different from similar Web 2.0 and User Generated Content (UCC). Oxford dictionary explains UCC as "denoting or relating to material on a website that is voluntarily contributed by members of the public who use the site" (2014), while the same dictionary defines Web 2.0 as "the second stage of development of the Internet, characterised especially by the change from static web pages to dynamic or user-generated content and the growth of social media" (2014). Kaplan and Haenlin (2010) also says that the beginning of the era of social media is the 1950s (since Internet was seen as a social tool) and that high-speed internet access aided in the creation of social networking sites such as MySpace (2003), Facebook (2004) and Twitter (2006), which will become one of the main subjects of this research.

Some scholars argued that new media is different from traditional media in many ways and that is the reason why some of old researches that were made before the arrival of social media are not relevant today as they were ten years ago. Boyle and Haynes (2003: p.96) points out that traditional media is manufactured and shipped in a physical form or via analogue waves", while digital media is "broken down into intangible 'bits' of information that are easier to manipulate, distribute and reproduce via computer-mediated communication". However, the main factor of success of Facebook, Twitter and other forms of new media is its interactivity and different flow of information. Boyle and Haynes (2003) explain that "traditional mass media were about the one-way flow of information, new media incorporate the ability to interact with the medium in a two-way or multilateral communication without the control of" (p. 98). Also some scholars suggest that consumer-generated media sometimes can be more valuable than other media content since it is the most honest source of information available (Foux, 2006 in Stavros, Meng, Westberg, Farrelly, 2014). At the same time, this kind of interaction is very useful for sports fans but brings new challenges for sports teams, which need to ensure that their organisations are being represent in a positive way.

Fan Participation and Power

As it was discussed in the first part of literature review, theoretically social web is the technology that was suppose to cross territorial boundaries and provide active fans a platform for fair participation and possibly empowerment. However, one of the main topics in fan participation debate is whether SNS and Web 2.0 increased the level of participation. Since the appearance of the Internet, the new technology helped sport fans to transform themselves from passive to active and gave them more options to choose from. Crawford (2004) points out that "the Internet is not only a static text that its users passively consume, but rather it involves higher levels of participation than most other forms of mass media such as television, radio and print media" (p.141). Crawford (2004) also noticed that most of media studies viewed audiences as a passive group, which was controlled by mass media. Jenkins talked about a shift from distribution to circulation that "signals a movement toward a more participatory model of culture, one which sees the public not as simply consumers of reconstructed messages but as people who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined" and National basketball association (NBA) was the first major sport league which understood the value of unpaid labor (2013: p.2). Pronschinske, Groza and Walker also think that SNS increase activeness and involvement of fans by "being available, free to the subscriber, and because they provide the most up-to-date information on the team, they tend to serve active information seeking audiences rather than passive ones reached through traditional media" (Walker in Pronschinske, Groza and Walker, 2012 p. 223). Of course, access to SNS is free to certain extent as sports fans still have to buy computer or mobile device and pay for the Internet.

For a very long time the television audience, including sport fans, has been seen as couch potatoes - passive and isolated media consumers, who are powerless and suffers from watching television or playing a computer games (Hill, 2015). The outdated metaphor means that the audience becomes disembodied and loss their sense of self by consuming media, like rotting vegetables (Hill, 2015). However, the changes in media ecosystem reshaped the

situation. For example, sports content is no longer accessible only through television sets as it is now distributed through different types of platforms, which strongly increases the connections of programs with they audiences (Garcia-Aviles, 2012). Audience is no longer seen as passive viewers – Uses and Gratification Model (UMG) and other theories supports the idea that audience is active and the power lies with them, not with producers (West and Turker, 2007). Networks and current technology provide audience a wide number of tools and opportunities to participate and engage, such as commenting, reflecting, sharing, promoting, criticising as well as affecting the future of the program (Garcia-Aviles, 2012). Opportunities to actively participate and engage in sports have also changed the perception of fans. The scholars say that "in contrast to the trivialising lay perception of fans as strange, solitary, passive, and obsessive consumers of media content, fan researchers describe fan culture as common, active, social, and participatory" (Plante, Roberts and Reysen, 2014). Philip Napoli also points out that the distinction between content provider and audience has diminished: "From an academic standpoint, these developments have often been considered noteworthy for facilitating a more "active" notion of the media audience over the more traditional "passive" conceptualisation that has characterised some strands of academic audience research that developed in conjunction with the traditional mass media, where the distinction between content provider and audience member was much clearer" (2011, p.78).

The size of participation and media consumption matters, but not all fan participation is welcome by the teams and considered to be positive. For example, Mudrick, Miller and Atkin warns about growing concern on dysfunctional fandom: "because fandom is such a strong aspect of one's identity, negative repercussions may surface if outcomes go awry" (2015). Auty (2002) gives example of football hooligans who use web to organise their activities, however, that does not happen on public team profiles that I am focusing in this research. But what is important for this study is that computer or mobile devices and Internet are not enough as in order to successfully perform on sports teams' social networking sites since fans require having 'cultural citizenship': share a common understanding of the logic of sports events and its role in the citizenality (Rowe and Scherer, 2014). Turner define cultural citizenship as "cultural empowerment, namely the capacity to participate effectively, creatively and successfully within a national culture" (Turner, 2001 in Rowe and Scherer,

2014, p.75). Hill adds that cultural citizenship includes "a connection between the individual, audience and public and their participation or avoidance of political matters within public and private spheres (2011, p.161). Lancaster says that "fan performances are based upon a form of 'immersion' in which the fan becomes an active performer within a given text. Immersion is therefore based upon the simulation of narratives in play through fantasy" (2011 cited in Sandvoss, 2005, p.45). In my research, I want to find what are teams' perspective of active fans, who would visibly lack cultural citizenship and cannot participate effectively within a national culture in Greece, Lithuania and Germany.

Opinion leaders in this field, Carpentier and Jenkins are more critical and say that there is ambiguity with the notion of fan participation in SNS and Web 2.0. For example, Jenkins points out that "many platforms that describe themselves as participatory do not encourage the development of any collective understanding of cultural production: the emphasis is on individual self-expression" (2013: p.8). Scholars also distinguished terms such participation, interaction and engagement, which were typically mixed up by other researchers. They claim, by using previous work of Dahlgren, that engagement is "a prerequisite or precondition for participation" and "one has to feel invited, committed and or empowered to enter into a participatory process" (Dahlgren in Carpentier and Jenkins, 2013: p.11). Carpentier also explains that interaction process is when "every thing acts on, and is acted upon by, other things", while participation is "much more about equal power relations in decision-making processes" (2013: p.7). Carpentier elaborates by describing full participation as a decision-making process, where all actors - in case of sports, teams and fans - hold equal power (2013: p.3). In these terms, the SNS and Web 2.0 does not look as a participatory platform at all (2013: p.3). Also, possibilities for participation in Web 2.0 can be conditioned by producers as Svensson and Olsson brought the term "steered participation" and "pseudo-participation*" (2012). Despite some scholars had high hopes on Internet, as for example, back in 2002 Auty was expecting Internet to become "an ideal forum to exploit in the search of a new support democracy" (p.273), recent studies state that capitalism, not democracy or participatory culture drives the Web. Svensson and Ollson referenced to Fuchs' work and his words: "the more interactive web remains embedded within a capitalist order, the capitalist order then ultimately determines the web's social and cultural outcomes" (2012: p.47).

Professional sport is based on capitalism as Weaver (2011) gives a great list of various techniques that sports organisations have used 'social networking' for decades to promote their teams and increase their profits. The scholar mentioned that athletics and sports were early adopters of social media because "it has always sought out new revenues to pay for department expenditures, including facilities, personnel, and equipment" (p.192). To be more specific, some teams use spreadability mentality and create content that is oriented to be spread, shared and eventually monetised. For example, creating four different images, each with slogan "this particular team will win" and asking their fans to share it and show what they support. Jenkins points out that "a spreadable mentality focuses on creating media texts that various audiences may circulate for different purposes, inviting people to shape the context of the material as they share it within their social circles" (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013: p.6). This is one of the reasons why some basketball teams hire social media professionals, who know how to increase spreadability.

Arvidsson and Bonini agree as they think that modern web is another form of fans exploitation. The scholars say that "audience members are exploited in the process, not only because they are generally not paid for their work (disregarding the use value they can derive from the programming in which advertisements are embedded) but also because they tend to assume the lions share of the investments necessary for them to perform their work in ways such that it becomes a valuable commodity" (Arvidsson and Bonini, 2015: p.160). Van Dijck also critically asses the idea of seeing social media as a public forum as she points out to a fact that "the overwhelming majority (almost 98 percent) are run by corporations who think of the Internet as a marketplace first and a public forum second" (2013: p.16). The scholar also says that in the context of social media, term 'connectivity' should not only mean public or fans getting access to gain social capital, but also owners connected to new possibilities to amass economical capital (Van Dijck, 2013: p.16).

Scholars also failed to achieve general consensus whether social media empowers fans and if it does, to what extent. Some scholars also pointed out that SNS empowers not only fans, but teams and companies too, who now holds symbolic or soft power. Corner says that "the capacity of the media to contribute to the way things are in society, to circumstances and

events, as a result of the perceptions they encourage, the information they provide and the feelings they generate, whether directly or in combination with other factors, is essentially a form of soft power" (2013: p 14). The term 'symbolic power' or soft power also refers not so much to a power that is exercised over physical force or a specific type of power, but rather to an aspect of most forms of power as they routinely, day-to-day deployed in social life (Bourdieu, 1991: p.23). The post-structuralists also say that power is practiced, not possessed and power relations are non-subjective and intentional (Carpentier, 2011: p.140). Foucault explained it by saying "people know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what what they do does" (Carpentier, 2011: p.140). In case of Euroleague, basketball fans, which can be called participants, understand that they take part in Euroleague life and they might find many reasons why they express their opinions on social media, participate in teams' social media activities, but most of these participants do not know how much power it gives to both Euroleague and teams, which again, cannot hold it but practice that power on a daily basis. Van Dijck suggest that even innocent-looking activities are related to exercising power: "friending, liking, following, trending, and favouriting are all subject to their respective site's engineering mechanisms of filtering, selecting, and promoting certain users and content over others. The commercial incentive underlying all systems is the idea of bringing personalised ads to mass audiences" (2013: p. 129). Van Dijck elaborates by saying that commercial owners favour aspects that bring quick success, including sports celebrities, who instantly attract mass audiences (2013: p.130). Guaranteed audience and predictability is what raised the value of most popular basketball leagues, Euroleague and NBA. Smith explained that audience became "a valuable commodity by transforming people watching into predictable expressions", which he called 'audience power' (Arvidsson and Bonini, 2015: p.39). Smith's concept of 'audience power' refers to, for example, relatively young but economically powerful Euroleague audience that are able to buy merchandise, tickets, subscriptions and other goods produced by Euroleague and participate in league's social media activities (Arvidsson and Bonini, 2015).

While investigating passion work of professional wrestling, Hill found out that in professional sport power or sport product can be created only by collective effort. Of course, professional wrestling has many technical differences from basketball, but Hill's idea is

that power can be "neither industry led nor in the hands of audience members; rather, it is made visible through the work of promoters, wrestlers and audiences as a collective performance in a high-energy, adrenalin-fuelled live event" (2015: p.176). However, Carpentier is more sceptical and says that sport audience can be called minimalist media participators at best due to limited power at decision making (2013). He also suggests that participation occurs when power imbalance exist: "whenever a structural power imbalance occurs, attempts are organised to redress this imbalance by increasing the level of participation of the disadvantaged actors" (2013: p.19). Of course, there are more extreme cases of power shift towards one side than Euroleague as for example, Huang and Hong discussed the situation in vertical-centralised power allocation of Chinese basketball league and crucial role of Chinese government (2015). Also previous literature made me consider another power dimension - a pressure to be included in social media life. Van Dijck points out that some fans might be involved in their favourite team's social media activities not because they want that, but due to difficulties and obstacles to behave other way and make a choice to quit social media. Van Dijck explains that "for many of the plugged-in, opting out is not an option: it would mean opting out of sociality altogether, since online activities are completely intertwined with offline social life" (2005: p.173). The scholar's idea lead me looking at team's social media platforms not only as a venue for participation, but a space that has characters of prison.

Nevertheless, an important role in power relations is played by a moderator and according to Dart, a role of moderator has been often neglected in hyping openness and democratisation of new media (2012). Dart points out that "some sites do show where a comment has been removed, but many sites do not give an indication of how many contributions were made, nor how many were rejected. This creates a potential for dissenting voices to be excluded from certain online conversations, although the common response to this that we all now have the freedom and option to set up our own website and "have our say." (2012, p.534-535). Dart's point made me consider including questions related to work and approach of moderator that is responsible for filtering and steering social media conversations on profiles of Euroleague teams'.

Social Media Control and Policing

Although the current study is the first known attempt to investigate Euroleague teams' social media policies, these results are in line with most of the work in sports teams attempt to control social networks. The most recent and most relevant work to this research was published by Price (2013), who explored how football clubs are adjusting to new form of media and how it is changing their relationships with fans and journalists. Price's (2013) work is based on a survey of Football and Premier League clubs, while also combining it with analysis of Twitter content. The study pointed out best cases of sport teams' attempting to control players, such England's footballers being banned from tweeting during the 2010 World Cup, and also revealed that vast majority of the clubs monitor their players Twitter accounts (Price, 2013). Survey made by Price showed that football clubs are currently split on the need to have an official policy regarding their players use of Twitter (2013). Price writes "just less than half (45%) of clubs currently regard themselves as having such a policy" (2013). However, the limitation of this question is that some of the teams do not feel a need to have such policies because they can refer to Football League and FA guidelines, which are made for use of social media (Price, 2013).

Besides Price (2013) work, there is little data about sport team's attempts to directly control their fans and personnel. Two practices dominate in this area as most of the teams try to control fans and players by themselves while some hire companies, which are considered to be experts in this area. McKnight (2012) and Steinbach (2010) talked more about companies, which provide surveillance services as, for example, ESPN (2010) and Sports Illustrated (2012) wrote about UDiligence, which provide technology to the athletic departments so they could monitor what people related and important to their team - fans and personnel - are doing. Price (2013) talks about another option as some teams invite law firms to guide teams and players in social media. Price (2013) provides a great example in football as Wolves manager Mick McCarthy called a media law firm to discuss to his players about using Twitter. That happened after one of Wolves' players Tweeted about the possibility of leaving the club and the team wanted to prevent these type of cases from happening in the future.

There have been many cases when social media content causes trouble for sports teams and for this reason some of sports teams have their own social media policy. However, in academic field scholars tended to focus more on athletes and personnel rather than content produced by fans. As Dunning (2011) noticed, pictures or comments made by athletes on social media can inflict serious harm on athletes or team's reputation and that is why sport teams started making their own social media policies. Scholars argue (Dunning, 2011; Han, 2013; Trottier, 2012) that social media is becoming more controlled than ever before and sport is a great place to find examples for that. Trottier (2012) provides a great theoretical framework and explains sociological relevance of social media policing. The scholar also used the response to the 2011 Vancouver riot as an example of how police are adapting to the volume of information on social networks. Moving on to the policies, the most of research is done focusing on college sports in the United States, which has always been the most sports innovative country in the world. Han (2013) noticed that social media does not only allows fans to stay with a team for 24 hours and possibilities to monetise it (Anon, 2013), but it can also cause troubles for sport organisations. Han (2013) believes that because of the limited control, social-media sites have became a place for inappropriate and irresponsible behaviour. For that reason, according to Han, student-athletes sign contracts restricting the use of social media, while sports teams try to develop policies regarding employees' use of social networks (2013). Han (2013) also points out that "the bottom line is that requiring student-athletes to provide access to their social-networking web sites may not only be against the law, but may also bring lawsuits when schools and universities try to control students' social networking in order to protect their interests" (p.11).

Some organisations tried to avoid risks by creating their own micro platform. Beaubien (2011) gives an example of sports teams, which early took advantage of social media opportunities. Beaubien (2011) reminds that in 2006, the NFL's Indianapolis Colts launched its own social network, MyColts.net, which became a kind of social medium for Colts fans, which offered exclusive content, tickets, merchandise and other personal things related with Colts. However, sports public relation specialist Lucien Boyer warned that "simplicity is always crucial to growth, so sport should look to create apps that supplement the "macro" platforms rather than develop confusing micro platforms that compete with

them" (Anon, 2012: p.21). Previous cases demonstrate that fans do not like an idea switching traditional social networks sites such Facebook and Twitter to micro platforms. In relation to that, previously scholars did a wide scope of websites and social web platforms analysis, focusing on various topics such civic culture (Olsson, 2008), social participation (Norman, Nordin, Din, Ally and Dogan, 2015), social media platforms as marketing tools (Canty and Criswell, 2014), privacy concerns (Osatuyi, 2015) and many others. In the context of sports, scholars have analysed sport websites in terms of platform quality and consumption (Weisheng and Doyeon, 2016), social media integration (Cavusoglu, Ozturk, Kara, 2011) and features that generate revenue (Hudson and Spradley, 2016). However, current study is the first known attempt to investigate opportunities sports clubs provide for their fans to participate or not on platforms they run.

Analysing currently existing written policies in basketball, the first league in the world to take an action was NBA, which introduced its social media guidelines in 2009. The league, again, found players and personnel to be the biggest threat to the positive image of the league and informed teams that the use of cell phones, PDAs and other electronic communications devices, including accessing Twitter, Facebook, is now prohibited during games for players, coaches and other team personnel involved in the game (ESPN, 2009). However, that does not mean that some of NBA teams did not have rules for social media use before. As NBA champion Miami Heat coach Erik Spoelstra revealed in 2009, "social media, we will not accept that in our building during office hours. That's the way we'll look at it when we're coming to practice, to shootarounds and to games. We're coming to work and we're coming to get a job done. That's not time for social media", meaning that some of the clubs have zero tolerant policies for using social networks at work (ESPN, 2009). Other major U.S. sports leagues released their social media policies within three years. National Football League (NFL) did that in the same year as an NBA, 2009 (Associated Press, 2009), National Hockey League (NHL) in 2011 (NHL, 2011) and Major League Baseball (MLB) was the last one to introduce social media policies in 2012 (NBC Sports, 2012). All policies state when athletes are allowed to use social media and what kind of content is unwelcome, but has no guidelines on how to deal with fans and their presence on social media. At the same time, it is important to understand that official policies made by major sports league do not prevent unwanted

events from happening. For example, in 2013, NBA player J.R. Smith was accused threatening other NBA player Brandon Jennings by sending messages through Twitter after Smith became angry about Jennings' critique of his younger brother, which was also expressed in Twitter (ESPN, 2013).

Euroleague, the second best basketball league in the world and the subject of this research, does not have its own strict policy. However, before 2013-2014 season Euroleague included a special chapter in its bylaws called "Social Media Regulations". These regulations are different from the NBA's as they are not as strict and comprehensive. Overall, chapter on social media regulations only includes seven short articles. Apart from team's responsibility of the content their players post, there are also few sentences about Euroleague branding and how Euroleague logos and slogans should not be used in social media. Euroleague also emphasise team's effort to encourage fan participation on SNS as the most relevant to this research article 94 says that "a few contests might be related to a player and a club. In this case, both the club and the player must promote the contest on their social channels and encourage fans to participate" (2013: p.159). Article 88 in Euroleague bylaws says that Euroleague teams are responsible for the content their players post and explains the regulations for players mentioned in article 92: teams cannot "show a lack of respect, encourage violence, provoke opponents and/or fans, include defamatory, vulgar, obscene or offensive text or images, or intrude upon the privacy of others" (2013: p.159). Articles 88 and 94 make Euroleague teams accountable for their content, which in any ways cannot be offensive and impairing general rules. Comparing with NBA social media policy, these Euroleague social media regulations are more general and lacks completeness as there is lot of space left for interpretations, but same as NBA, Euroleague's bylaws say nothing about filtering and steering participation of fans.

In general, I expect this research to give more complex view of fan participation on social web and possibilities for empowerment in sports industry. With the limited research that already exists in this area, none looks specifically at the actions and moves made by sports teams, which have emerged in recent years. Therefore, to update and enrich the existing literature, this master thesis will utilise a semiotic analysis method and expert interviews to

analyse Euroleague teams' approach to social media, participatory web and their fans. This research will also focus on what action do Euroleague teams take to ensure that their team on the web is represented in a positive way as scholars have not tried to find out that before.

Chapter 2
Theoretical Framework

Social media and participatory web had a huge impact on sports communication and there is plenty of literature to support this fact. However, scholars do not agree what social media and participatory web offers to fans. This research was inspired by numerous debates among scholars, who argue if social web became a place where fans can communicate without control or is it another communication platform where organisations do hold power and practice it.

Sport is an important area to observe and research due to its financial potential (Flint and Cohen, 2014, Rovell, 2015, Long, 2015) and size of economical capital as well capabilities of soft and hard power of sports industry (Corner, 2013, Bourdieu, 1991). Moreover, sport and sport industry are one of the elements that create and shape identity of public, while plays an important role by helping integrate in modern industrial modernity (Sandvoss, 2005). The general potential of influence of sport and sport industry makes this area interesting for power relation research.

The same potential of social web that is believed changing more passive model of culture to more participatory model, turns it into a valuable platform and sociality to challenge previous theories. Crawford (2004) was one of the scholars who stated that the Internet involved much higher levels of participation comparing to other forms of mass media such as print media, radio and television programs, despite some argue that Internet users only passively consume static texts. Jennings added that a shift towards more participatory model of culture happened, where public is not only consumers anymore, butthey are audience that directly influence content in multiples ways such reframing or sharing the content (2013).

On the other hand, Dunning (2011), Raney and Bryant (2006), Han (2013) and Trottier (2012) says that social media is becoming more controlled than ever before, meanwhile with the rise of social web organisations gained more power over content distribution as well. Carpentier (2011) argues that fans could be called minimalist media

participators at best since they lack power and influence comparing to teams, while Jenkins points that some platforms pretend to look participatory and they lack empowering aspects (2013). These theories demonstrate the importance of content producers and moderators and importance of understanding their role and approach they use and apply. Previous studies by other scholars and literature review proved that relationship between organisations, or sports clubs in this case, and their fan base or audience can be problematic. However, previous research that focused on control and power balance between content producers and users, lacked empirical data and real case examples that will be provided by this study.

Same important, Boyle and Haynes (2003) were more optimistic and believed that new media has an ability to interact with the medium in a two-way communication without the control of, while prior the Internet era traditional mass media were about the one-way flow of information. However, since non of existing research has investigated in depth the flows of information and communication between organisations and fans, this research makes an attempt to answer the question if a way of information flows have changed together with finding out if that affects sport fans empowerment. At the same time, understanding fan empowerment through social web is important in order to find out what degree of influence fans hold towards sport teams decision. These findings will be supported with real life examples.

Also work of Price (2013), McKnight (2012), Steinbach (2010), Beaubien (2011) and real life cases of NBA and other professional sports league indicates previous attempts to utilise existing power imbalance in favour of organisations by controlling, steering, moderating and altering participation of their own personnel in multiple ways. This research will try to find out if same attempts are made towards another essential figure in professional sports industry - fans, which, according to Hill (2015) play as important role in collective sports performance as organisations.

Previously other scholars did a wide scope of websites and social media platforms analysis (Olsson, 2008, Norman, Nordin, Din, Ally and Dogan, 2015, Canty and Criswell, 2014, Osatuyi, 2015, Weisheng and Doyeon, 2016, Cavusoglu, Ozturk, Kara, 2011, Hudson

and Spradley, 2016) and demonstrated that the nature of the platform and opportunities offered for participation alter the power balance between organisations and their audience. By applying the best practices of previous researches of content and semiotic analysis, the current study will be the first known attempt to investigate opportunities clubs from sports industry provide for their fans on platforms they made and moderate.

Chapter 3

Aim, Purpose and Research Questions

After learning about the role and importance of sports industry and social web, how related these industries are and issues that come with understanding relations and power balance between different subjects of this system, this study aims to find out if social web empowers sports fans and if they do, to what extent. By combining previous knowledge with new empirical data, the aim of this research is to learn about fan position in power relations and see if they get empowered through participation on social web.

There are few key factors affecting power relation system in sports industry and the purpose of this research is to understand fan empowerment and opportunities they receive for participation through understanding approach of content producers and moderators. Traditionally organisations and their personnel that will be the subject of this research, were the main power holders in sports industry, therefore understanding the role they play and approach they use in contemporary modern web and essential to learn if fans get empowered through social web.

This will be done by answering a question how Euroleague clubs position and see themselves, how social web changed fan participation, how fan participation is different in different parts of Europe, do Euroleague teams monitor fan participation and how often do organisations respond and react to fans participation. Moreover, this research will question if fan participation is welcome in times of adversity and crisis and how strong is altering power of fan actions on social web. At the same time, this study will make attempt to find out how many opportunities for participation official websites of clubs provide.

Chapter 4

Methodology

First of all, the reason why I chose to investigate basketball teams of Euroleague is the considerably large fan base of the sport and the online popularity of basketball teams. For example, the official Euroleague Facebook account has more than 540,000 fans, while official Euroleague Twitter accounts has more than 310,000 followers. Also investigating Euroleague teams might reveal different approaches towards fan participation and interaction as well as distinction between different European regions - Nordic, Middle and South as I will do my research by collaborating with teams from Lithuania, Germany, and Greece. Each interviewee manages, analyse or is somehow related to communication, social media and interaction with fans of an individual Euroleague team.

Method Selection

According to Tracy (2013), 90 percent of all social science researches use interviewing method as it provides responders opinion, motivation and experiences. Kvale and Brinkmann defined interviews as "guided question-answer conversations, or an interchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest" (2009, p. 2). I believe that using this qualitative research method was more suitable for this research as I would have a chance to go deeper into fan participation and empowerment topic and get more detailed and comprehensive answers that were needed for this study.

Also I wanted to have a chance to ask follow up questions, which could enrich my research and help to see a bigger picture of this specific area. Berger (1998) points out that if a topic arises, by using interview method, it can be pursued through further questioning, while other research methods cannot offer such opportunity. After making a decision to do interviews I had to choose between four possible communication options - telephone, e-mail, Skype or doing a personal interview.

My initial choice was conducting e-mail interviews for few reasons. A distinctive feature in e-mail interviewing, noticed by Meho (2006), is that it "allows participants to take their time in answering questions and to take part in the interviews in a familiar environment" (p.1291). Because my research took place during basketball season and at the time when communication managers had most work to do, e-mail interviewing method seemed to suit both sides as I still had a chance to receive their answers and views, while participants could answer the questions when they had enough time for that. Meho (2006) also points out that the quality of responses gained through online interviews is much the same as responses produced by more traditional methods, such telephone interviews.

However, e-mail interviewing method had some important downsides, for example, by using this method, I would not be able to read facial expressions and body language of the participants. As a result, there is a chance that some important visual, for example, eye contact, cues and emotions were missed that would be observed during face-to-face data collection. Another disadvantage noticed by Berger (1998) is that sometimes respondents may not give meaningful answers.

These are the reasons I chose to conduct data through in-depth semi-structured personal interviews and travel to Lithuania, Germany and Greece to meet communication professionals at their work offices. By conducting needed data using personal interview method, I could use all the previously mentioned advantages of e-mail interviewing method, while I would also gain access to read body language, ask quick follow up questions, have more control over interview process and hopefully increase amount of meaningful answers. According to Sreejesh, Mohapatra and Anusree, semi-structured technique is primarily used to interview "busy executives, technical experts and thought leaders" and since interviewing technique requires interaction with experts, the interviewer "must possess knowledge of the latest trends in technology, market demand, legislation and competitive activity" (2014). Combining my seven years working experience in basketball industry with previous academic research that was discussed in the first chapter, these factors made me think that I posses required knowledge to use semi-structured personal interview method to conduct needed data.

Also this research method lets attribute responses directly to interviewee, while, for example in focus group, there might be difficulties linking answers and ideas to a direct person. Back in 1979 Groves found that respondents where more likely and felt more comfortable discussing sensitive topics face to face than over the telephone. Sreejesh, Mohapatra and Anusree explains that "mutual interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee helps to generate an informal atmosphere that facilitates the discussion of sensitive questions or 'taboo themes' (2014). Since power and control for some might be sensitive questions, conducting face-to-face interviews increased the chances to get needed sensitive data for this research.

I will also analyse the social web platforms created by basketball teams that allow fan participation to happen. To understand how basketball teams encourage fan participation, I will use semiotic analysis method or to be more specific, I will analyse myths that are broadcasted on those platforms by the basketball teams. Bignell (2002) explained that "myth here does not refer to mythology in the usual sense of traditional stories, but to ways of thinking about people, products, places, or ideas which are structured to send particular messages to the reader or viewer of the text" (2002). Part of this research will focus on those messages that are sent and metaphorical relationships that are constructed by the teams. I will also fully analyse every page of official website and all opportunities for participation provided by teams to see how they adopted Web 2.0 technology.

Other methods such as focus groups would be suitable for my research as well, but after carefully considering this method, I have decided that due to geographical and timing constraints it would not be possible to use it in my case. As participants of my research are located in different parts of Europe, it would be very difficult to physically locate many people in one place at the same time. Moreover, I am conducting this research in the middle of basketball season, which is the busiest time for all Euroleague communication managers, and even if I had required budget, the participants would not have enough time to gather together for a group interview, therefore using focus group method was not possible. Apart from geographical reasons and timing constraints, Euroleague teams are also competitors off the basketball court and I felt that members of communication departments did not want to

share inside information with other teams. Meho (2006) noticed that "asynchronous, in-depth interviewing is also different from virtual focus groups in that the information volunteered by individual participants is not shared with, viewed, or influenced by other participants" (2006: p.1285). For this reason, personal interviewing method seemed to be more suitable for this research than focus group.

Sampling

Tracy (2013) noticed that most of qualitative researchers engage in purposeful sampling, which means that they "purposefully choose data that fit the parameters of the project's research question, goals and purposes" (p.134). For those reasons, in order to find out more about the fan empowerment through social web, I purposefully chose the second strongest basketball league in the world, Euroleague as I have seven years experience of working in basketball industry. I chose to examine three basketball teams which participated in most recents Euroleague season from three different countries. After I had familiarised myself with 24 Euroleague teams and their work in communication and media field, I chose to formally e-mail three Euroleague teams' media managers to ask them to take part in my research.

My research objects became Zalgiris Kaunas from Lithuania, Alba Berlin from Germany and Panathinaikos Athens from Greece. Alba is the most successful team in Germany that has the best attendance results in Europe by attracting more than 10,000 fans per game, in both European competition and domestic league. In terms of communication with fans, I chose Alba because of their off-the-court achievements since they not only have best attendance results in whole Europe, but their work and high working culture has been acknowledged by others. For example, their general manager Marco Baldi has won Euroleague Club Executive of the Year award twice in last seven years and Alba team has won Euroleague Devotion Marketing awards five times since 2007.

My other selection, one of the most successful European teams in history, Panathinaikos has been the attendance leader in Euroleague for the past two seasons,

averaging around 12,000 fans per Euroleague home game. Panathinaikos is a six time European champion that has over 370,000 fans on Facebook and a very passionate fan base in general that is famous in Europe. Differently than other objects in this research, Panathinaikos name represents not only a basketball team, but also teams in football, volleyball, boxing and other sports.

Zalgiris, undoubtedly the most popular team in Lithuania, is a club that has the best arena (voted by Euroleague general managers for two years in a row) in the Euroleague and has been among top teams terms of attendance results in Euroleague for the past three years. Lithuania is also known world-wide for their passion for basketball as Lithuania is currently being ranked third after United States and Spain in FIBA power ranking. If Alba and Panathinaikos has always been leaders in communication with fans, Zalgiris made a huge improvement over last few years and in terms of communicating with fans, and has been a rising power in basketball elite.

These teams were also chosen because of their geographical and cultural differences, which would likely lead to different experiences and approaches in terms of fan participation and empowerment. Fans of Panathinaikos in Greece are know to be extremely passionate, devoted and this strong passion occasionally turns into aggressiveness or violence. Zalgiris fans in Lithuania, in terms of identity strength, would be ranked between Panathinaikos and Alba, while the German team has been known for their educated and exclusively correct fan base.

Research Limitations

Despite my research subject is not related with race, gender or disabilities, other research methods, such telephone or e-mail interviews would eliminate possible problems that might be associated with face-to-face interviews. For example, status difference between the interviewer and interviewee. Meho (2006) points out another potential problem that some participants may not be as effective speakers as they are writers. Interviewing in other forms, for example, written, could give interviewees more time to find right words to express their

thoughts and represent their position more accurately. Two biggest limitations related specifically to this research, as mentioned by Sreejesh, Mohapatra and Anusree, are the costs of this research method and result dependence on interviewer (2014). Since research objects were located within 2,800 kilometres, traveling and meeting them face-to-face to conduct needed data was much more expensive than using other research methods. Also as scholars pointed out, "quality of the results depends on the skills of the interviewer", therefore the role of interviewer is much more important comparing to some other research methods (Sreejesh, Mohapatra and Anusree, p.51). Another disadvantage noticed by Berger (1998) is that in some cases depth interview method might generate huge amount of material. However, huge amount of data enriched this research with specific examples, which could not be found out by using quantitative research method.

Guidelines for Successful Research

In order to conduct effective personal interviews, I used the guidelines, which were based by key studies reviewed and examined Meho (2006).

1. Invitations

After making decision to use in-depth personal interview method, I sent personal invitations for three Euroleague teams to participate in my research. I did not send group e-mail and I chose making it personalised because according to Dillman (2000), this move demonstrates candidates that they are important in this research and that encourages them to take part in it.

2. Subject line and self-disclosure

Meho (2006) recommends to use effective subject line to avoid situations when e-mail is deleted before it is read. In my case, I used "inquiry concerning team's experience in communication with fans" subject line by replace 'team' with specific team's name, for example, Panathinaikos or Alba. Meho (2006) also points out the importance of self-

introduction, providing brief information about your professional status and telling your interviewees how you acquired their e-mail addresses. Apart from self-disclosure, my previous experience working with Euroleague teams and members of their staff helped me to gain trust as well. According to Moon (2000), people will more likely open up and participate in more self-disclosure when they first receive such self-disclosure from their interviewers. I also tried to be as open as possible as I outlined the details of the project, including interview procedure, what type of questions they should expect, how much time is required for participation and other important information.

3. Interview request

As getting access was one of my main concerns about this research, prior sending questions and moving on with the research I decided to send interview requests in order to find out if my preferable teams would like to participate in this research and how many positive answers I will receive. After trying to reach out for three Euroleague teams that I mentioned in sampling section, I received answers from all of them. As my goal was to interview two or three Euroleague teams, I reached the mark as I received positive answers from all three Euroleague teams that I contacted. In one occasion, a person I contacted would refer me to another professional working for a team that in his opinion, is more knowledgeable about this specific topic. While some researchers e-mail their interview questions along with the interview invitation so that potential participants will have a better idea of what would be involved in the interview process before any commitments are made, I believed that the presentation and brief explanation of my research was enough for the candidates to understand what my research is about and if they would be interested to take part in it.

4. Incentives

In order to motivate future participants and encourage them to take part in my research, I promised to share the results of my research with them by sending them the key findings by e-mail.

5. Research ethics

The communication professionals were informed that they will be free to express their opinion and they has a right to refuse to answer or disclose private information. The future interviewees were introduced to their right to withdraw from a study at any time. However, non of participants used these options and were open for collaboration.

6. Deadlines and reminders

The guidelines by Meho (2006) also suggest that due dates should be set when inviting individuals to participate and during this research all participants met deadlines we set for meetings. For two participants, I had to send couple reminders as they were slightly late confirming the meeting that was about to happen in few days, but at the same time, I tried to be not overaggressive, as Meho (2006) suggested to "limit the number of reminders to one or two; otherwise, it may be construed as pressure to continue participation" (p. 1293).

7. Interview questions

The interviewees were not introduced to questions prior the interview but approximately a week before the meeting I let them know the themes that we would talk about. I did this in order to get more insightful answers.

8. Follow-up questions

I tried to follow the same questionnaire that I made after doing literature review with all interviewees, but at the same time, I would come up with different follow-up questions depending on interviewee and circumstances. All participants agreed to be contacted if some confirmation need in the future or additional questions arise.

Subjects interviewed:

Almantas Kiveris, Press Officer, Zalgiris Kaunas (Lithuania)

Apostolos Liogkas, Communication Assistant, Panathinaikos Athens (Greece)

Jan Buchholz, Club Media Manager, Alba Berlin (Germany)

Konstantinos Papakonstantinou, Community Manager, Panathinaikos Athens (Greece)

Maria Gkouma, Marketing & P.R. Manager, Panathinaikos Athens (Greece)

Nikos Bourlakis, Director of Communications, Panathinaikos Athens (Greece)

Finally, all relevant data from the interviews and literature were analysed, drawn upon and categorised into the findings and discussion, supported by examples.

Chapter 5

Analysis and Discussion

Website Analysis

In this chapter I am going to analyse my findings from the interviews I conducted with six communication specialists from Euroleague teams, discuss Euroleague teams' approach to various types of fan participation in the second best basketball league in the world, supported with specific examples from their daily work. After analysing three official websites of the Euroleague teams - http://www.albaberlin.de, http://www.paobc.gr and http://zalgiris.lt/ - it became clear that basketball clubs in Europe use similar techniques and approaches to entail participation, but offers different level of participation on their websites by using social web and Web 2.0 technology.

Panathinaikos Athens
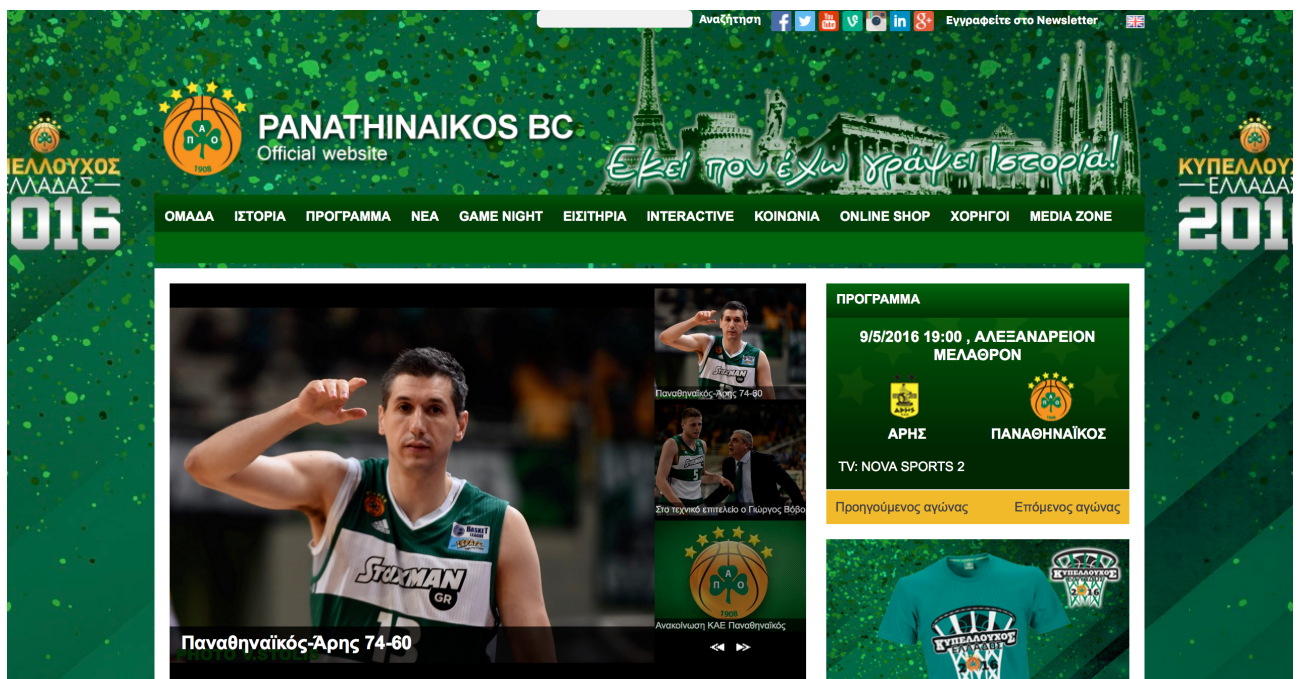
www.paobc.gr (2016-05-07)

From media semiotic standpoint, it is common in sport world to see teams using myths to portray team's image or identity in one way or another. Bignell explains that "myth

here does not refer to mythology in the usual sense of traditional stories, but to ways of thinking about people, products, places, or ideas which are structured to send particular messages to the reader or viewer of the text" (2002, p.16). Those ideas, usually in form of slogans which are used for one or multiple seasons, usually are constructed by connecting one signified idea or signifier with another in order to attach connotations to things and give them mythic meaning (Bignell, 2002). These associations work in two ways - by making one signified appear similar to another, which is called 'metaphor' and by replacing one signified with another related signified, which is 'metonymy' (Bignell, 2002). Myths takes up existing signs (as in these cases, Panathinaikos, Alba and Zalgiris) and makes a new sign system out of them (Bignell, 2002).

In official website of Panathinaikos, the most visible text on front page, right next to the name of the team, says "Where I have written history!" (in Greek, 'Εκεί που έχω γράψει Ιστορία!'). The name and logo of Panathinaikos becomes the signifier attached to the signified 'success'. The sign 'written' has nothing to do with playing basketball, but the slogan and metaphor asks us to realise how influential and successful the team is as Panathinaikos is winning and their actions are written and remembered. The metonymical sign, 'history' has a relationship with time and replaces 'championships' or 'leagues'. Also it can be argued that metonymically 'written history' replaced 'winning championships' to create a new mythical meaning of Panathinaikos club. Equally important are the symbolic and famous buildings that are in the background of the slogan. They represent the cities where Panathinaikos won the European championships and metonymically replace the arenas where the games actually took place. Using a mix of linguistic and iconic symbols is a common practice in advertising industry as it is in basketball communication.

Despite Panathinaikos has many texts in the website that are oriented to increase fan participation, comparing to other two teams, Panathinaikos does not offer on their website many opportunities for their fans to express their passion and participate. Panathinaikos focused mostly on advertising its official store where fans can buy merchandise and tickets. Other than that, fans can also search information while they are on the website or contact the team through the contact form. However, all these four areas mentioned above

existed prior arrival of social web, which means Panathinaikos has not used opportunities offered by Web 2.0, did not increase participation on their website and did not empower their fans.

Zalgiris Kaunas
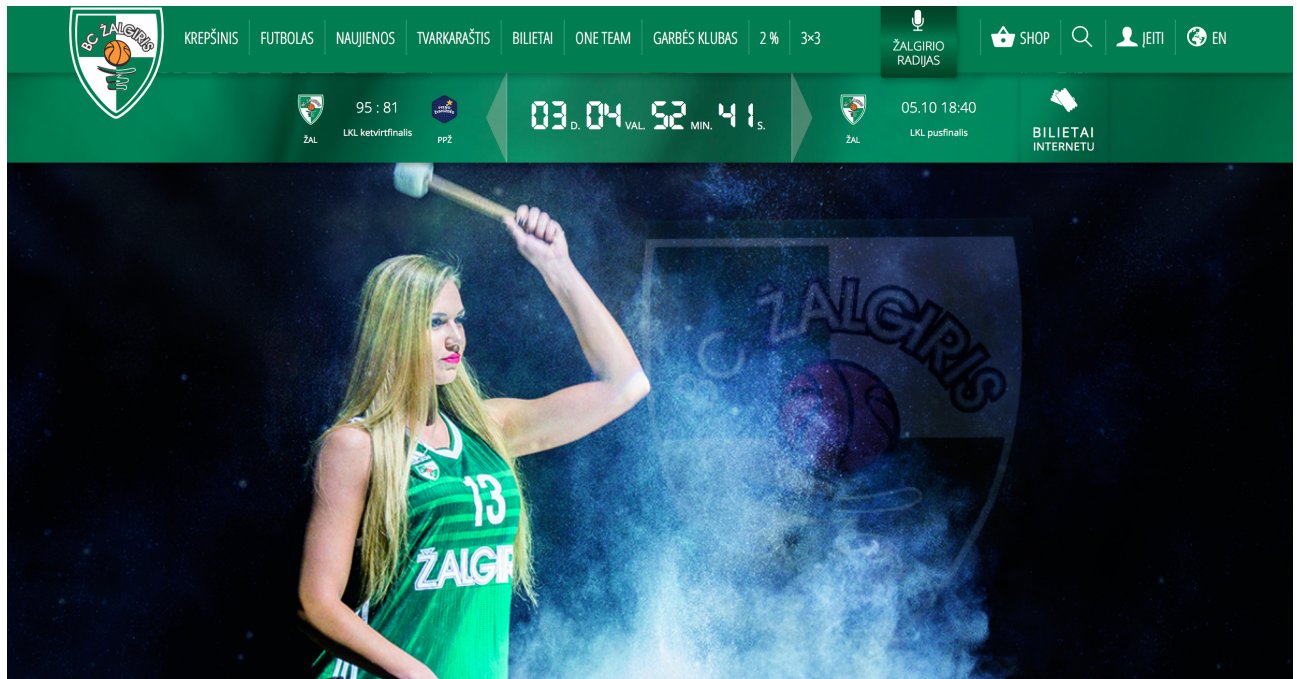
www.zalgiris.lt (2016-05-07)

Differently than other two teams, Zalgiris did not put their team slogan next to the logo, but placed it on game advertisement, their promotions and videos. Zalgiris' slogan is pretty straightforward and has been previously used by other basketball teams - 'My team' (in Lithuanian, 'Mano komanda'). According to the team, they tried to emphasise that Zalgiris is a fan team and slogan 'My team' should strengthen the level of fan identification with the team. There is also a hashtag in front of the slogan in every occasion it is used. Hashtag is a symbol of spreadability, sharing and identifying yourself with a certain group, which in this case is being a fan of Zalgiris and calling this club 'My team'.

Since this slogan is used in advertising, Bignell explains that "the meanings of ads are designed to move out from the page or screen on which they are carried, to shape and lend significance to our experience of reality" (2002, p.30). Also Zalgiris advertisements with

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slogan and hashtag encourage fans to participate by decoding their linguistic and visual signs and according to Bignell, enjoy that decoding process (2002, p.31). The scholar says "ads make use of signs, codes, and social myths which are already in circulation, and ask us to recognise and often to enjoy them" (2002, p.31). Zalgiris fans should recognise these signs, codes and social myths such as slogan 'My team', hashtag, picture of a player in a competitive manner and team logo, while also enjoying the process.

Zalgiris use their website to encourage participation in multiple ways. For example, there is a page where Zalgiris promote their game for schools, which is called 'Zalgiris at your school', or there is also an option to celebrate your birthday and watch a game with friends at Zalgiris arena. Same as Panathinaikos, Zalgiris offers a chance to buy tickets online and shop online at team's merchandise store. Differently than Panathinaikos, Zalgiris also offers opportunity for fans to comment on the news either with their Facebook account or without it. Again, Zalgiris use their website to spread the information of how fans can participate, but lack direct tools to empower their audience.

However, Zalgiris also runs 'The club of honour' for fans that pay a yearly membership and forms a closed community. Members of 'The club of honour" can participate in discussions, make suggestions, get discounts on a special website and platform that was created by Zalgiris. The most important - they have a chance to interact with team personnel and coaches during organised online conferences, but all that information remains behind closed doors and is not available for public. Therefore comparing to Panathinaikos, Zalgiris does not empower their fans more on their official website, but for an extra charge their audience can join a closed community, where fans are offered more opportunities for participation and likely has more power.

Alba Berlin
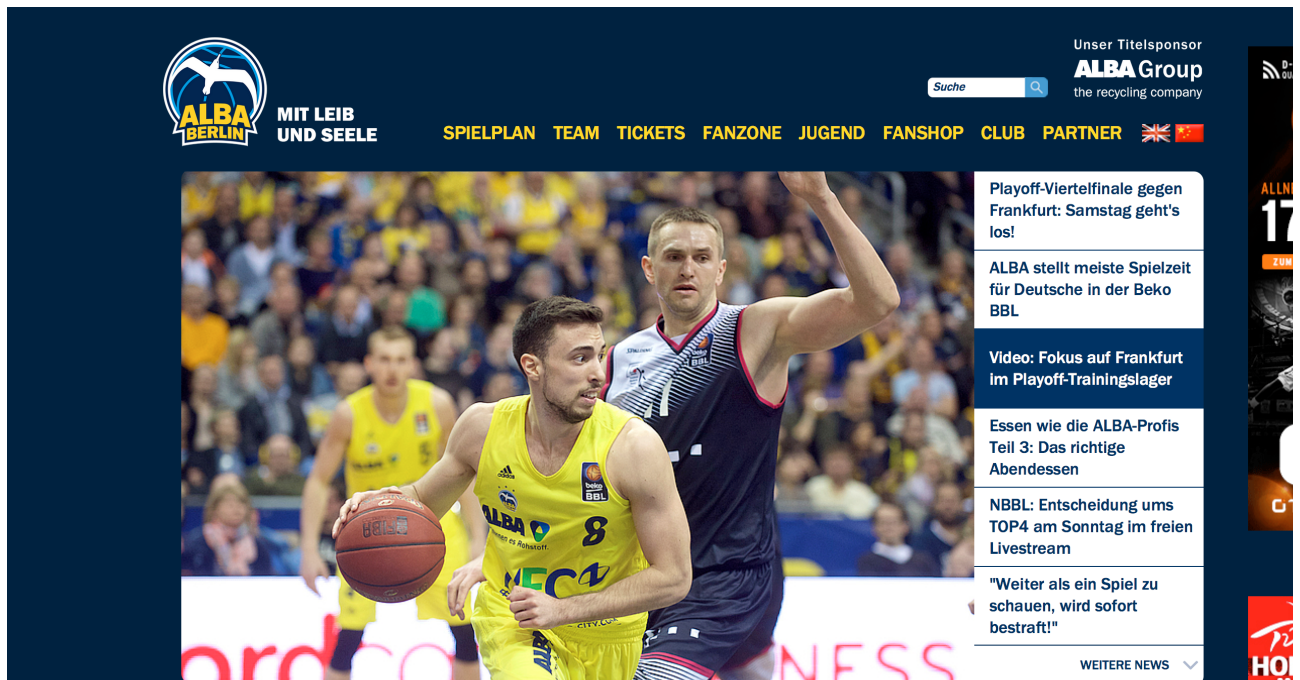
www.albaberlin.de (2016-05-07)

The most participatory website of three belongs to Alba Berlin, which is the only team that was able to use social web and Web 2.0 to increase participation of fans on their official website. For example, fans can send photos of themselves that are published on the official website, 'My Alba' photo gallery and the only requirement is that it must be related to Alba. The team also promote opportunity for fans to upload their team songs and records from the game on team's Soundcloud platform. Another feature offered by Alba is fans expressing their opinion on music that is played before and during the games. Alba provides lists of music that was played during the game day, while fans can say their opinion if they liked it or not and also make their own suggestion.

Other than that, Alba fans can also send messages to the team, shop at the official store, buy tickets, download team app for their smartphones, search on the website, write comments under the news, join the fan club for free and get Alba's credit card. The majority of the content provided on Alba's website focus on participation that is not related to social web. However, Alba offers by far more interactive opportunities for fan participation on their

website, including 'My Alba' photo gallery or influencing game day music playlists, comparing to other Euroleague teams.

Just as Panathinaikos, Alba placed its slogan - 'With heart and sole' (in German, 'Mit leib und seele') next to the logo and Alba's Club Media manager Jan Buchholz points out that it has a special meaning in the club. According to Buchholz, the slogan is not oriented for the fans only since personnel use it to recruit coaches and players. Buchholz says, "we found a right coach with Sasha Orbadovic, who lives by this motto and you can see it every time he is on the court. He picks players that fit this motto. If we had another coach, this would still be our identity. Alba will always be 100 percent fighting, 100 percent hard and 100 percent Berlin". The sign 'Alba' becomes the signifier attached to the signified 'devoted' and 'fully dedicated'. In this syntagm of linguistic signs metaphor has been used since the signs 'heart and 'sole' has nothing to do with basketball. However, the slogan asks fans to realise how dedicated the team is in every aspect of their organisation. In a metaphorical sense, basketball players need to have and give their heart and sole on the court to have best chances to win and be appreciated by their fan base.

Overall, all of the teams provide basic and traditional forms of participation which do not require existence of social web such buying tickets, merchandising and searching on the web. All of the teams also have team apps for smartphones, Zalgiris has a closed platform and community for the fans who are willing to pay extra, while Alba is the only team among three that has few features on its website involving social web and standing out among the others.

The producers' view of the website

In general, Euroleague teams did not transform their websites to social platforms, which could possibly empower fans by providing them more opportunities to participate. According to the producers of the websites, communication personnel working for Zalgiris, Panathinaikos and Alba, they see website and social networks such Facebook, Twitter or Instagram playing very different roles. Alba's Club Media manager Buchholz explains his approach to the official website and their pages on social media:

"Both are very important but both are very different channels that must be addressed with different approaches. It is not one or the other. We would never post a full game report on Facebook as an example. We have content that only fits into our website. We have some good traffic and it is important for us because we have a lot of content there and we update it regularly. We have all the information there. Our website and social media has same importance. We never put it against each other because they go parallel."

Zalgiris' Press Officer Kiveris points out that the traffic of their website is not growing, but did not notice a noticeable drop too. That happened because of few important advantages of official website:

"There is more information on our website and it is more convenient than, for example, Facebook events. You can see all games, every score and so on. And also, everything is connected, everything is one click away and easily accessible. The main idea is that our content would reach largest possible audience. The website is still important because a large part of our fanbase still use the website, maybe because of their habits. We still focus on every platform equally."

Buchholz says that Alba's traffic on their website is also not going down as they have 60,000 unique visitors per month. In his opinion, the drop was avoided due Alba's reaction to the changing situation and investing in transforming their website to make it mobile friendly:

"Some information that you would put on website, you move to social networks, you lose some traffic because of social media and it is true. But I cannot say that our traffic is going down. Our traffic has been stable and maybe is going slightly up than down. And in social media it is still growing. 40 percent of our visitors use our website on their mobile phones. And I am sure that our traffic would be going down if we did not have a mobile version of our site. No one wants to see a normal site on their phone."

Apostolos Liogkas, Communication Assistant at Panathinaikos, thinks social networks will not take over and eliminate websites because "on Panathinaikos website, they have only serious and official announcements, news that people look for". This also support the conclusion of website analysis that websites will remain relevant due to its credibility and amount of information, but not as a place where fans will find opportunities for participation and empowerment. Due to increasing amount of information and information channels, partly thanks to social networks, fans still find it convenient and useful to visit official websites for concentrated and verified information. Since teams did not exercise possibilities of social web, Web 2.0 and made clear distinction that opportunities for online participation lie on social networks, the second part of analysis and discussion will focus on Zalgiris, Panathinaikos and Alba social network content producers, social media pages moderators and their approach towards fan participation and empowerment.

The Image of Euroleague clubs and Self-representation

All three Euroleague teams, in eyes of their communication personnel, have different identity and represent themselves in a different way. First of all, Alba Berlin, Panathinaikos Athens and Zalgiris Kaunas has three different primary target groups they identify themselves with. For example, Panathinaikos represent the biggest part of Athens, but not the port area, Piraeus, which is less than 10 kilometres away from the city centre. Piraeus is the place where Panathinaikos biggest rivalry Olympiakos is located. Alba positions itself as a team of capital of Germany, Berlin and represents people from there, who, according to Alba's club media manager Jan Buchholz, strongly identify themselves with the city:

"We stand for hard-work, for fighting spirit, giving 100 percent for Berlin, capital city of Germany because people from here, they identify themselves a lot with the city. They are really proud to be from Berlin. People like rivalries with other cities, for example Munich. They like to show that they are Berliners."

The third team, Zalgiris has likely strongest ties with the city since the basketball team is by far the most famous object in Kaunas. However, Zalgiris has strong fan base outside

Kaunas since historically it is considered to be a team of Lithuania, differently than Alba and Panathinaikos. Since Berlin and Athens are cities that have 3.5 million and 3 million people, Zalgiris maintains a chance to compete with them in marketing by addressing 2.9 million people living in Lithuania rather than focusing only on 300,000 population of Kaunas.

Sandvoss pointed out that electronic mass media have crossed physical and territorial boundaries and created virtual space of media consumption for fans that see their self reflection and constitution through media consumption (2005: p.53). Despite all of three teams' priority is continuing increasing fan participation inside their countries, all three also considered to use boundaries-crossing electronic mass media to increasing their fanbase by reaching audience from abroad. Zalgiris' press officer Almantas Kiveris is the most optimistic of all three and indicates that this is going to be the biggest challenge in his work:

"Our biggest challenge is to reach not only fans in Lithuania, but also fans from abroad. We are already doing Twitter in English, same as Instagram. We also plan to reach foreigners by using Facebook Global Pages. Reaching foreigners will be our challenge and goal in the future."

A successful team such Panathinaikos already has a larger fanbase abroad than their competitors in Euroleague. Panathinaikos' director of communications Nikolaos Bourlakis says that foreigners often support Panathinaikos as for example, when they played in Malaga, a guy from Spain drove 600 kilometres to see Dimitris Diamantidis. Last season when Panathinaikos played in Vitoria, Spain, Bourlakis found two guys wearing James Gist's jersey. When he asked where were they from, he was surprised to hear they were from Holland. Bourlakis said, "I could not imagine that people from Netherlands would come to see basketball." Also Alba has already made first steps on expanding to China due to their main sponsor, recycling company Alba relations with China. Alba set up programs there, school and university cooperations and looks to lay bases and find fans, sponsors in China. At the same time, they work with Chinese society in Berlin by inviting them to participate, play in tournaments, attend the games. Alba already had some success by finding first sponsor from China last summer. However, Buchholz explains that Alba is not planning to expand any

further by providing content that would be suited for non-German speakers. Buchholz believes that from Alba's stand point, it is not worth it:

"We are not planning to expand now. If we analyse all our followers and viewers, Germany is by far the most important network. Our primary goal is to have people from Berlin come to the arena. I know we are a global brand and we offer people the content but is just not important enough for us so far. Doing things in English would not give results for us or they would be too little. Having people engaged here and coming to the arena, having content directed to them is far much more important for us."

In terms of self-representation, Panathinaikos is the most different club of all three since personnel of Panathinaikos emphasise success of the club. Maria Gkouma, a Marketing and Public Relations Manager at Panathainaikos, briefly described how personnel sees the team they work for:

"Panathinaikos is the biggest brand in European basketball. It is also one of the most successful teams of this century. We won European cup six times, we dominate in Greece and we won 58 titles in total. We also are the most successful tickets selling team in Europe and our fans follow us everywhere all the time."

Panathinaikos community manager Konstantinos Papakonstantinou explains that success of Panathinaikos obligate personnel to maintain highest standards on every level of organisation:

"What the team presents is that we are six-time European champion, so we try to keep up with the history that we already have. It is a whole procedure of having high standards in every segment of the team. May that be the actual athletics, our image on social media, communications, marketing, tools we use, sponsors. In every single way we try show that we are still in just as high standards as is our past and our history."

Panathinaikos has always been a successful club, while, for example, Alba had ups and downs in its history and their identity was not stable. Buchholz says that results are not the only factor that determines the image and identity of the team and until Alba decided to change their strategy of self-representation, they did not see the results they wanted:

"Our identity is changing or has changed. Between 1990 and first years of 2000, Alba was a dominant team in Germany. It was a really professional team, far ahead in terms of budget, organisation. Our identity was success and professionalism. Over the years some other teams really stepped up and started to have bigger budgets, teams such Brose Baskets Bamberg and Bayern Munich. Over the years we realised that we have to change our identity because we could not keep up with the success because of the budget. In basketball, success comes very often with the budget. More often than in other sports I think. We did not change our identity at the beginning and we could not fulfil the expectations anymore. It was not just losing. Everybody, both fans and media, thought that we still must win championships and everything else is a disappointment. And if two other teams have bigger budgets, it is a tough position to be in."

As it was discussed in literature review chapter, Kwak and Kang (2009) found out that purchasers buy products or services that have symbolic meanings matching the buyer's self-image and respondents who reported higher degree of image congruence with team followers' image indicated they attended more games per season, followed their team more through the media, and expressed higher loyalty to their supported teams. After year 2000, Alba had to reshape their identity to match with buyer's self-image again and raise the level of image congruence to increase fan identification. Sandvoss argued that mass media consumption is both, a way to create identity and also integrate in modern industrial modernity and sport teams can be compared to a mirror that according to Sandvoss, leads to a strong emotional involvement of fans. Throughout the years the image of Panathinaikos and Zalgiris have been stable and reflective mirror of their fanbase, while Alba became once again, in words of Sandvoss, a mirror or "object of fandom function" that lead to increase of fan participation, only after changing their strategy and ideology.

A case of Alba also demonstrates that team identity is a flexible and complex term, which can be affected by multiple factors such results on the court, expectations off the court, financial situation, circumstances involving your competitors and many others. Buchholz also explains that Alba's identity, as most of Euroleague clubs', can be understood as a bigger concept than that just a 12-man team since Alba has the biggest fanbase in Germany and the biggest youth basketball program with most members in Germany.   Buchholz says they, "communicate Alba as they are biggest basketball club and biggest traditional basketball brand. It is more than just one thing."

Social Web Changed Fan Participation

Both Buchholz from Alba and Kiveris from Zalgiris have been working for their respective teams almost ten years, therefore they observed fan participation prior and after the raise of social web. Both communication professionals agree that social web did change fan participation and provided new and more interactive possibilities to express their passion, while at the same time it gave numerous advantages for teams as well. Kiveris explains that around eight-nine years ago, fan participation online was limited to discussion forums, while team actions were also limited due to lack of channels to translate content:

"Back in days, around 2007 and 2008, there were discussion forums, but you would not get feedback to what you produce. It was more about the results, the team. There were way less news about teams and pretty much nothing about team's life. At that time, you really did not have many options to spread your content through."

Buchholz says that social web also helped to overcome the distance that appeared between team and their fans once the team moved to 16,000 seat Mercedes-Benz arena, which was double the size of the old one, in Berlin:

"Social media became interesting for companies in France and Germany once we changed arena. In U.S., it was two or three years before that. We saw the potential in this channel to reach new people and strengthen the relationship with current fans. At the beginning we

focused on having people engaged and we tried to look more personal. We tried to reply to every comment, stay in touch with everyone. It was great because we could not do it before. We were also criticised that we are at this new arena, everything is so wage and far away, the team only cares about the bling bling world, therefore this social media was a great tool to get closer to the people again."

This example demonstrates that social web played an important role in modernisation and commercialisation of basketball. Once Euroleague set the minimum requirement of 10,000 seat arena in 2011 and teams started moving into their new homes, social media helped to maintain as close relationship with their fans as possible, despite the increased size of fan base. Kiveris also noticed that fan comments moved from the website to social media and comparing with the very beginning of the rise of social web, people feel much more confident to express their opinions by using their real names:

"Before rise of social media, all the comments were on our website because there was no other options and now everything is on Facebook. Maybe sometime ago you could also do that on Facebook, but people were still shy to use their real names and were hiding under nicknames. Now that is not a problem. You can feel it."

Interviewees agree with Garcia-Aviles that networks and current technology provide audience a wide number of tools and opportunities to participate and engage, such as commenting, reflecting, sharing, promoting, criticising as well as affecting the future of the basketball club to certain extent. Bourlakis from Panathinaikos says fans express their passion on social web in "every way you can imagine": on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, also on Panathinaikos Youtube channel, as well as they send emails. Papakonstantinou from Panathinaikos calls user generated content the most important in Panathinaikos communication:

"The most important part is that we have a lot of UGC (user generated content) and we try to harness this content for the sake of the team. We have many competitions that would require UGC. For example, what is your favourite picture of your favourite player or fans would have

to edit or photoshop a picture the way they like. It is important because they show their passion not only in the stadium but on the web as well. We try to be the loudspeaker of our fans and we try to promote something is good as much as possible. As Dimitris Diamantidis is ending his career, we are preparing something that is very based on UGC and how fans portray and show their love for Dimitris."

Kiveris says that in Lithuania, Instagram and photo culture has been growing the most. For example, currently Zalgiris is running a promotion when fans can take a picture with their family members at the arena, upload it to Instagram and they can instantly print it and take it there. Kiveris is happy that with Instagram, you can instantly see the feedback once a game starts, how many of them want to share your message. However, both Kiveris and Buchholz agree that the biggest challenge is to measure the impact and feedback gotten from social web. Buchholz says, "It is not always easy to measure such things. We do not know how many people that like our Facebook page buy tickets because they like our page". Kiveris explains that with every form of communication that comes from the team, it is difficult to measure the outcome. Kiveris also gives a specific example when they performed an action, which they thought will boost fan participation, but again, they have no way to prove it:

"From team standpoint, you see how much it pays off in selling tickets to the games. It is very difficult to measure how much Facebook events, messages, advertising determine your decision to go to the games. Even if you are a die-hard fan, would you come if you have not seen the message on your Facebook feed? However, we believe that it pays off, all newsletters or for example, once we won in Barcelona, we sent text messages that next week we are playing home against Panathinaikos, go and buy tickets. During that night, we sold extra 1000 tickets. We do not know if that happened because of our move, but we hope so."

Interviews with communication professionals demonstrated that as Whannel and Boyle (2010) noticed before, sports and sports communication again played an important part in developing communications in multiple ways. However, again, capitalism, not democracy or participatory culture drove the Web. Svensson and Ollson referenced to Fuchs work and his

words: "the more interactive web remains embedded within a capitalist order, the capitalist order then ultimately determines the web's social and cultural outcomes" (2012: p.47). Despite all of the advantages for the fans, still, the main concern of the teams was how to sell more tickets by using opportunities of social web in order to fill in bigger arenas, rather than empowering their fans.

Fan Participation is Different in North, Middle and South

As it was mentioned in methodology chapter, despite similarities that are common for all basketball or sports fans in general, Panathinaikos, Zalgiris and Alba fan bases are known for different aspects. Fans of Panathinaikos are known to be extremely passionate and that devotion can occasionally transform into aggression or violence. Zalgiris fans in Lithuania, in terms of identity strength, would be ranked between Panathinaikos and Alba, since they strongly identify themselves with a team, but never steps over the line. The German team has been known for their educated and exclusively correct fan base. Buchholz says, "We have a situation in Germany that basketball fans comparing with other sports are very highly educated. I have an idea about when we play Greek and Turkish teams that I get glimpse what the job might be there". Bourlakis believes in the uniqueness of fan culture in Greece since life in Balkans in general is very different comparing with Germany or Lithuania:

"In Greece and Balkans, the passion of fans is sometimes unpredictable, you do not know what will happen. Sometimes you win a game and you are a king, you lose a game and you are bastard. But we are Greeks, we know how to handle this. Do not worry. It is something we cannot describe in words. It is our daily routine. All life in Greece is like this. If you go in the streets, go to the supermarket, you go to the gym, if you are a journalist, if you are a doctor, this is our life. I have a Lithuanian friend that came for studies. When I met her in Kaunas, Lithuania I told her: when you come to Athens, you will have very bad time till you get use to Greek way of life. The second day she called me and she was crying. It is a different way of life. I am not saying it is better or worse. Every country and all people have their own style. But in southern Europe, in Mediterranean and Balkans also people are more passionate about this. You have to be southerner to understand."

Papakonstantinou explains that this everyday passion transforms into engagement on social web and statistical numbers of heavy engagement prove that:

"Greek fans are more hot blooded. I am not saying other fans are not passionate, but Greek fans are really devoted and it shows in their engagement. If you compare the size of our page and engagement that we receive, it is quite spectacular. Even the changes Facebook had in its algorithm, we have not seen such a huge change in numbers and that is because fans are always coming back for more. We are trying to reach out the fans and try to overcome all the changes and difficulties. And they also support us in every possible way they can. Numbers of shares and comments are huge. That part of algorithm is far more important. Heavy engagement - that is where we see the most interaction because likes are light form of engagement, where with the share it shows that whatever we are posting, they will be happy to share it and it represents exactly how they feel about the club."

Kiveris says that a big challenge for Zalgiris is to change the fan culture in Lithuania, which focuses mostly on results. Zalgiris fans can be very critical after losses and the team needs to manoeuvre in times Zalgiris is experiencing a downfall. Kiveris gives an example of advertisement strategy that is applied in Lithuania:

"After a loss, when people are angry, you cannot release some advertisement or do favours for your sponsors in Lithuania. For example, once we posted an ad three days later after we lost a game, but still, all the comments were saying that go and practice instead of eating sweet cheese. We did the same thing a month later and success was super huge. We had enormous amount of reached audience, comments and likes. Our fans were even asking for more information about the products of our sponsors."

Zalgiris' press officer says that they already have some success of changing fan culture in Lithuania since now they can encourage participation after losses as well, as before they would wait before negative emotions cool off:

"We are trying to change the culture that "yes, results are important but our team is priority and I support my team". That is why our slogan this year is "My team". I think we are succeeding in changing that but maybe loudmouths are still most visible as they use exclamation marks, caps lock, curse words. Throw that player away, change another one. Sometimes they ask to replace the coach, and then same people ask why did you replace the coach. I am happy that we are over that phase - since we lost today, now we should not write anything for five days. Now one day is enough."

In terms of geographical challenges, Buchholz thinks that comparing with other Euroleague teams, Alba has the biggest competition in Berlin as there are plenty of options to choose where to participate in Berlin and big part of them is free:

"We have from 50 to 100 events per day in Berlin. Half of them is free. We have at least 100 first division professional sports teams in Berlin. Ice hockey, volleyball, football. People say you live in 3 million people city, but we think it is easier to fill in 8,000 arena somewhere in the countryside than here."

Despite these differences, Papakonstantinou believes that teams playing in Euroleague are moving towards certain standard of social media usage. Papakonstantinou thinks that the only difference between, for example, Greece, Lithuania and Germany will be aesthetics:

"Euroleague have certain standards and good practices that we should follow. More or less we are all moving to a certain usage of social media, how to engage with the fans and how to interact with them. And also how to incorporate players in this whole procedure and Euroleague organisation as well. The main difference is aesthetics, every team has their own feeling about aesthetics and what could be more engaging for their fans, video or image based on their culture each country has. It is different what they perceive nice and what is not. You cannot even be country specific, it depends on each person."

Again, these examples proved that in order to create a higher degree of image congruence with team followers' image, that was previously discussed by Kwak and Kang

(2009), teams need to localise their actions according to different cultures and fan needs. Biggest challenge in Kaunas - communicating through losses, Athens - dealing with passion that is at the edge, Berlin - competing with other events that potential Alba fans might be interested in. However, as Papakonstantinou noticed, these differences are merging, cultural boundaries among basketball teams are disappearing and practices to approach fans in North, Middle and South Europe are becoming more similar than before.

Euroleague Teams Monitoring and Responding to Fans

All Euroleague teams agree on importance of following and monitoring fan participation and behaviour on social networks for few important reasons. Panathinaikos and Zalgiris pointed out that instant feedback is a huge advantage of social media and a factor that did not exist prior-social web. Kiveris says that instant feedback gives him extra motivation from human perspective, but the most important thing - he directly sees reactions to the content provided by the teams. Papakonstantinou explains why monitoring fan participation is important for Panathinaikos:

"We monitor mostly to see how fans are reacting to each post and to see if our strategy is going the right way. It is like an instant feedback. Sometimes you might think of something and fans might have a completely different idea about it. There is always someone monitoring posts and seeing how they will react to anything."

All three teams say they read every single comment and message sent on social media, but they have different policies toward reacting to them. For example, Zalgiris and Panathinaikos has a policy to reply only if it benefits the club - to questions related to ticketing, merchandising - and other areas that help teams gain profit. In other cases, Zalgiris and Panathinaikos interact with fans only if it is necessary. Kiveris explains his daily approach:

"We read absolutely everything that is written on our pages. We also respond to most of people that sent us messages, unless in cases when we see people have mental issues. When

people have specific questions, we always respond to those. We do not respond to questions about illegal streams, where to watch games. We do not respond if a same person asks how much are the tickets, or some people involved in betting cursing us about losing games. Ticketing, merchandising, or we are coming from abroad and we want to reserve tickets - we always respond."

These examples prove again that capitalism is a driving force on the web and supports Van Dijck's idea that connectivity means profit for the teams just as possibility for the fans to gain social capital. The scholar says that in the context of social media, term 'connectivity' should not only mean public or fans getting access to gain social capital, but also owners connected to new possibilities to amass economical capital (Van Dijck, 2013: p.16). Similar to Zalgiris' approach is applied in Athens as Papakonstantinou says Panathinaikos "are replying depending if there is a reason to reply". At the same time, according to Papakonstantinou, Panathinaikos try to be as open as possible and try to get as much information out as possible. When fans a trying to get some feedback, contact the team, they try to be open, and if there is something they see they we can help with, if it is something feasible, they try to do it. Papakonstantinou gives an example of arranging marriage proposal for a Panathinaikos fan:

"This season we had a marriage proposal arranged. The guy contacted us and we arranged everything and we were more than happy to have the whole set up here. We try to think out of the box concerning sports."

Papakonstantinou and Buchholz says that one of the biggest challenges in their work and lesson they learned while communicating with their respective fan base (for example, hardcore old supporters and young, new fans) is that different type of fans require different content and different way of communication. Buchholz says, "Our fans need different approaches. They react and like different things", while Papakonstantinou explains why it is difficult to make all fans happy:

"When you have such a large fan base, you cannot make everyone happy. We have hardcore fans, lightweight fans, but they all love the team the same. Others might have different

approach towards producing and sharing through their social media but it is important to have such strategy that would keep everyone happy. You have to in a way segment your fan base and produce something for each part in order to have everyone happy but at the same time, be aligned with what the team represents. It is like having one product that you have to bring and showcase it in different ways. That is a challenge to make everyone happy."

That is another example when a team empowers a fan only if it benefits the team, which reminds seeing their fanbase more as consumers and customers rather than equal power holders. Panathinaikos' Director of Communications Bourlakis explains the general approach of Panathinaikos when asked if they respond to fan comments and messages on social web:

"No, unless it is necessary. If they inbox us about the tickets or they want to travel, for example to Istanbul, we only respond to these messages. We are not going to have conversation."

However, Alba and Zalgiris say that the main reason they do not respond to as many messages as they want is lack of human resources. Kiveris states that as Euroleague teams have different budgets for buying players, it is the same difference in communication field too. For example, what Kiveris do himself, CSKA Moscow has six people dedicated for exact same tasks - Kiveris says CSKA has two photographers, one person for Twitter and Instagram, another one for website. Zalgiris have 3.5 people overall that are also in charge of Zalgiris arena communication. Buchholz says that situation is similar in Alba and he has no time to interact with fans the way he wants:

"I am the one who is dealing with social media and I am responsible not only for that but also whole club media. Website, arena magazine, advertisement, video content production. Everything that is club media at least go through my desk. Restriction is that I have no time to answer everything. With many topics we try to find best ratio of time and result, therefore we cannot answer everything, even though sometimes we want to."

The new trend in the NBA is instead of cold official responses, use humour and not be ashamed to make fun of your own team or situation. Kiveris says that Zalgiris would not mind using more humour, but it also takes more time than responding in a traditional manner: "if you want to involve humour, you need to invest more time to keep the same line".

As these examples proved, fan participation on social media can be seen empowering only in terms of influencing team behaviour by providing feedback since teams tend to monitor and read all of comments and messages that appear on their Facebook page or arrive to their inbox. However, if empowerment is understood as a two-way communication, then social web looks like people shouting in the forest without receiving respond and interaction from the main subject - the team. As Jenkins pointed out, pages of basketball teams on social media pretend to look participatory and they lack empowering aspects (2013) which can be caused by two reasons. First, team approach as example of Panathinaikos proved, and second - lack of human resources as in case of Zalgiris and Alba. Another important factor is that differently than some sport clubs in the United States that hire monitoring companies, Euroleague teams do monitoring in-house by their own personnel as none of them indicated about receiving help from outside.

Dealing with Unpleasant and Negative Participation

In order to successfully perform on sports teams' social websites, the fans require having 'cultural citizenship': share a common understanding of the logic of sports events and its role in the citizenality (Rowe and Scherer, 2014). Turner define cultural citizenship as "cultural empowerment, namely the capacity to participate effectively, creatively and successfully within a national culture" (Turner, 2001 in Rowe and Scherer, 2014, p.75). However, not all fans are useful fans for teams as some lack cultural citizenship and unintentionally might portray team in a negative way. At the same time, some fans might do the same intentionally by making their participation unpleasant for teams and possibly other fans.

All three teams have similar approach towards participation that might be considered as a negative participation. Alba, Panathinaikos and Zalgiris welcomes criticism and they never remove these comments that are visible for everyone. However, when they see that passion steppes over the line by offending other people or cursing, they take action by not replying, but removing comments and sometimes banning a person from the community. Papakonstantinou explains his club's approach and says his team cannot get involved in negative conversation because other fans will follow and that might be harmful for a person that initiated the conversation:

"We try to have a stable approach, which is never engage in arguments and portray our values. We are very stable on social media with our ethics and low-profile. We do not trash talk other teams and we very much care what other teams have done. Usually the fans that are very negative, either way they are persuaded or just left aside by the conversation flow. They are left out. What we try to do is show what this team is really about and not engage in these negative situations that might be harmful not for the team, but for a person. If a lot of people see a team attacking a person, they will do the same thing, they will follow. We lead by example and we show what are our core values. Hopefully, fans will take that in and do the same."

In addition to that, Papakonstantinou gave example of the latest corporate social responsibility project, where Panathinaikos was involved in visiting underage prisons and trying to help 15-20 year-olds while teaching tactics and playing basketball with the team. This was a rare case when Panathinaikos responded to negative comments about CSR project, but according to Papakonstantinou, the main reaction to these negative comments came from their fans. Panathinaikos fans demonstrated that in a way they became a brand ambassadors and they protected what team projects on social media and they were protecting the image of Panathinaikos. Papakonstantinou colleague Bourlakis says that he sees team pages on social web as a house that needs to have certain rules of respectability and it must be controlled by the team:

"Passion is at the edge. Your emotions must be controlled. We are trying to work on this and I think we did a good job. When you have so much passion, sometimes you cannot handle this. We are Greeks and we know how to handle this. The level of your followers is controlled by you. You are the one who puts the rules. Internet is a house. Our rules state that you have to respect the players, respect the team, respect the club, basketball, our opponent. Nobody has a right to talk bad about anyone. They can say that they are better than you, it is fine. But if they are not respecting, they are banned and bye bye. We want the situation on social media represent Panathinaikos and we want to keep it on a high level."

Kiveris says that Zalgiris ban people only if they curse or advertise something. Kiveris says that, "You can see that cursing is the only reason person is here. Other than that, we do not ban anyone else, even if they provide heavy criticism and they do that all the time. We recognise them but we still let them participate". Buchholz is happy when Alba fans complain as he sees it as a sign of strong identification and points out that most of unwelcome participation arrives from abroad:

"Most of the times we let people criticise, we do not censor the criticism we receive. If people want to complain, it is good because they are feeling something and they care. There is certain limit and if they reach it, we have to delete that and ban. It really does not happen often. Typically we receive these things from people from other countries. For example, people do bets, like 20 combined bets and our team result was the last one and then they say they lost 10,000 dollars because we played bad. It is funny and I get these messages pretty often."

As Dart pointed out , very few sites "do show where a comment has been removed, but many sites do not give an indication of how many contributions were made, nor how many were rejected" and this create a potential for silencing voices or excluding certain groups from online conversations (2012, p.534-535). Despite no one can check, for example, on Facebook what kind of comments where actually deleted, all three Euroleague teams seem to be confident and qualified to distinguish criticism, which is welcome by the teams, and demolishing, harmful behaviour by fans.

Crisis Management and Unwanted Participation

All teams try to avoid crisis to happen at any cost, however, in sports world, bad publicity is unavoidable. Panathinaikos has constantly paid fines for their fans behaviour during Euroleague games, Zalgiris is often involved in news about their debt, while last season Alba was criticised and punished for failing to adopt all necessary preventative measures to avoid disturbances during the game against Galatasaray Istanbul. Once these events occur, teams might project that fan participation in, for example, comment section below team's post about the event likely be negative and critical. In these cases teams can act in two ways - open up, make statements and let fans participate and express their passion or ignore it and not provide opportunity for participation on teams' official page. All Euroleague teams agree that the tendency is to choose the second option, silencing voices down, as Buchholz believes it causes less trouble for the team:

"Usually we tend to sit out. You should not react to any rumour or any criticism immediately. Sometimes it is better to say nothing to not make it worse. Especially when it is about players or their night-outs. Never officially comment on that. For the incident with Galatasaray, it was necessary to comment because people were really angry and really disturbed, it never happened before."

Kiveris says Zalgiris uses the same approach:

"In term of crisis management, we tend to wait and avoid participation because despite we might look bad from communication standpoint, but for our team, it is better to deal with it this way. Maybe we would use other strategy but in big picture, it is better in basketball to go against all recommendations and do not make comments on it."

Buchholz personally would like to be more pro-active and reach out more in those delight topics, but he says Alba is a conservative club with conservative general manager, Marco Baldi that only likes to talk if it is necessary for the team. Buchholz says, "Maybe I

would do it slightly differently, but that is the image and policy of the club that here always been". Kiveris provides specific examples of why sometimes Zalgiris cannot participate and provide participation opportunity for others. Kiveris says there are multiple types of situations when they cannot come out and be the first one to talk about issues:

"Two weeks ago media spread the rumours that some big company wants to sponsor Zalgiris team. It was a non-sense. Everyone heard it for the first time. And it was only one source that shared it. So if we make an official statement about it, everyone will write about it. That company was not negotiating with us but if we make a statement about it, then the fans will ask so why we are not negotiating. We analysed the situation and we decided to not respond publicly, even though we did react inside the team. However, if these news were spread and we see that fans are being confused about the big sponsor, we might have done something. If we were the first source, we would try to make the first step and fans appreciate it more when you step out. We always try to be first to announce, for example, about signing new players, but before we have a signature, we cannot do that. And then some agents or someone else leaks information and then occasionally we are the last ones to publish that. So we cannot be first all the time."

Coming back to Carpentier's (2013) theory that participation is "much more about equal power relations in decision-making processes" (p.7) and full participation is as a decision-making process, where all actors - in case of sports, teams and fans - hold equal power (p.3), these examples demonstrate social media does not automatically empower fans and to certain extent should not be called a participatory platform since teams tend to silence fan voices in face of crisis and bad publicity. At the decision-making process, especially in face of adversity, the power belongs to the teams, not audience. These examples also contradict Boyle and Haynes (2003) statement that "traditional mass media were about the one-way flow of information, new media incorporate the ability to interact with the medium in a two-way or multilateral communication without the control of" (p. 98). Sometimes these two-way communication opportunities do not exist and are in a way controlled due to the capitalist nature of the teams that need to think about their image from public relations perspective.

Direct Altering Power of Fan Participation

As it was previously mentioned, all teams read all comments and naturally they make their decision based on feedback they receive, reactions they get or react according to general moods of the fan base. When talking about more direct alteration in decision making, Panathinaikos felt sceptical about individual fan power to change decision or strategy of the teams. Papakonstantinou explains Panathinaikos general approach towards fan suggestions:

"They would never alter our strategy completely the way they want. For example, they might want more videos than photographs and we would work around that part to see what is more engaging for them, what would they like more. If they really like Diamantidis, that does not mean that we would only post pictures of Diamantidis. We try to think that we are applying the latest trends, we make sure we keep in contact with Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, any other social media that will come out and will be used, because not all social tools are useful for us. We base our actions on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Vine and we use Youtube for all the videos we upload. We will see how our strategy evolves this summer and we will try to introduce Snapchat as well. Mostly what we get is very good response from all the groundbreaking stuff that we use. Even the fans suggest something, we are already building on it. Most likely it is not live yet, but it is on the way."

Buchholz of Alba indicates that one of the mistakes he was doing at the early stage of his career is taking fan criticism and suggestions personally and making decisions in a rush. Bourlakis agrees by adding, "you have to stay calm no matter what reasons you have in front of you. You must have good cooperation with your colleagues. We cannot make anything in a hurry, rush that would break everything". However, Buchholz sees Alba as a team that considers and weights fan suggestions that do matter for the team:

"There is a danger if you are not use to it, react too quickly to criticism. When I started doing this job 10 years ago, it felt personal and you feel like you should do something. At the beginning it really felt personal. People complaining about team and they also criticise you

for mistakes in articles, spelling mistakes. With the time you get use to it, but it can be not so easy. If people really care and they expect that something will change, we will do something about it. Typically if I get email, I would forward it to a person that is responsible for it. Tickets, entrance - these are things that people like to complain about. Cannot find the entrance, why there is so many people, I cannot see any good prices. If we see a good point, we discuss it with a responsible person."

Kiveris states that there are always some suggestions that Zalgiris consider and then tries to implement. Zalgiris policy is to read all comments, including all the negative responses after losses and react to feedback that they think is useful. However, Bourlakis of Panathinaikos thinks that social media is overrated since it cannot overcome the biggest problem of the Internet - fully revealing identity of a person. Bourlakis also reminds that personnel that works with communications in Euroleague is trained to read and understand fan behaviour and act accordingly:

"From my point of view, I do not care if people comment negative on social media. This is my opinion, not Panathinaikos opinion. If Apostolos is writing, I do not know who he is. Is he a Olympiakos fan, Panathinaikos fan, Fenerbahce fan, Lokomotiv-Kuban fan. I do not know who is he. This is one of the weakness the Internet has. I do not know who is the guy that is writing. That is why I do not give so much attention to that, I do not care. Also we are communication professionals and we are able to see which comments are serious and which are provocative. Sometimes we see that a person knows nothing and he just writes bullshit. We have experience to understand this."

This demonstrates that teams see themselves as gatekeepers, experts that hold the power and that are confident they have required expertise to use it fairly. Jenkins talked about a shift towards "more participatory model of culture, one which sees the public not as simply consumers of reconstructed messages but as people who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined" and examples of Euroleague teams prove that fans hold certain power as feedback givers (2013: p. 2). However, approaches of Panathinaikos, Alba and Zalgiris to different extent support

Carpentier theory that sport audience can be called minimalist media participators at best due to limited power at decision making (2013). As Napoli noticed, due to social web, distinction between content provider and audience has diminished, but teams remain the dominant decider in sports world that continue having power and control balance in their favour.

<u>Conclusion</u>

Based on relevant literature, website analysis and interviews with Euroleague communication specialists, this study demonstrates that part of social web, official websites of sports teams and their official pages on social media have done little to empower fans. Supporters of teams can be seen as feedback givers that need to be monitored, while teams remain a dominant power figure in sports world. The study also showed that Euroleague teams have power to shape their own identity, as in the case of Alba, and in order to create a higher degree of image congruence with team followers' image, as noticed by Kwak and Kang (2009), teams need to localise their actions according to different cultures and fan needs. Also Euroleague teams did not transformed their official websites into places where fans will find opportunities for participation and empowerment with the help of social web and Web 2.0, but instead made clear distinction that opportunities for online participation lie on social networks, not official website.

Also findings of this research demonstrated that social web had influence on fan participation as now they have more opportunities to express their passion on social media and provide feedback for the teams. Fans also has more opportunities to spread their criticism that is welcomed and uncensored by Euroleague teams, despite their direct influential power is very limited. Moreover, interviews with communication specialists showed that geographical and cultural differences do exist in certain European regions and interviewees supported stereotypes that Panathinaikos fans in Greece are know to be extremely passionate, devoted and occasionally aggressive or violent, Zalgiris fans in Lithuania ar also devoted but in terms of identity strength, might be ranked between Panathinaikos and Alba, while the German team holds educated and exclusively correct fan base. This research also found out that Euroleague teams monitor all their fan activity on social web, but rarely respond or react to their fan participation. This leads to another important finding of this research is that, again, technology and social web in particular played an important role in modernisation and commercialisation of basketball, but capitalism, not democracy or participatory culture, drove the Web forward. Despite there are advantages for the fans on social web, still, main concern of teams remains how to sell more tickets by using opportunities of social web in order to fill in bigger arenas, rather than empowering their fans.

In addition, in times of adversity and crisis Euroleague teams also tend to not offer opportunities for participation for their fans since negativity would likely affect their image and abilities to sell.

The study proved Napoli's point that due to social web, distinction between content provider and audience has diminished, but sports teams remain the dominant decider in sports world that continue having power and control balance in their favour. Cases of Zalgiris, Panathinaikos, Alba demonstrated that pages of basketball teams on social media pretend to look participatory as participation is understood by scholars such Jenkins and Carpentier, since and they lack empowering aspects (Jenkins, 2013). The main reason leading to this conclusion is teams' business approach, but there are also occasions when fans do not get empowered due to lack of human resources and economical capital.

Findings of this research proves Dunning (2011), Raney and Bryant (2006) idea that social media is becoming more controlled than ever before as all Euroleague teams hold power to decide when allow fans participate, how their participation should look like and if it does not benefit organisations, silencing their audience is a choice Euroleague teams occasionally make. The research also revealed that teams see themselves as qualified, confident gatekeepers that hold the power and have required expertise to use it fairly. Jenkins talked about a shift towards more participatory model of culture and examples mentioned in the analysis and discussion partly prove that fans hold certain new power in social web era, but only as feedback givers (2013: p.2). By combining previous knowledge with new empirical data of Panathinaikos, Alba and Zalgiris clubs, these new findings support Carpentier's theory that sport audience can be called minimalist media participators at best due to limited power at decision making (2013).

Future research should analyse social web management from other two key perspectives. First, from fans' perspective by trying to understand constraints in terms of empowering that fans feel while using social web. Second, from social media platforms creators' perspective, while examining capitalist model of technology development. Furthermore, additional research should study athletes, their opportunities to participate and their role in social web since they are strong point of attraction. Additionally, scholars could make comparisons and find similarities and differences of fan empowerment and participation opportunities provided

across different leagues and sports, since situation in football, American football, baseball might differ from basketball. Finally, future research could focus on other media industries such music and television, and compare new findings with the conclusion of this study.

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Appendix 1

Interview-example with Community Manager of Panathinaikos Athens
Konstantinos Papakonstantinou:

How would you describe your general work approach at Panathinaikos?

Try to be as open as possible. Try to get as much information out as possible. And when fans a trying to get some feedback, contact the team, we try to be as open, and if there is something that we can help with, if it is something feasible, we would be more than happy to do it. For example, this season we had a marriage proposal arranged. The guy contacted us and we arranged everything and we were more than happy to have the whole set up here. We try to think out of the box concerning sports. It is a whole event. That is what we try to do. Care about the fans and the idea that they have a good time. And communicate, have openness and communication with all the fans.

What is the difference between your work and tasks done by Nikos?

Nikos communicates with all the other teams, from Euroleague or domestic league. Also he deals with websites that have something to do with sports. He would go through whole procedures of players meeting with reporters. He would make everything feasible. Nikos would also make sure that players would not have all the pressure because they have a very hectic schedule. Nikos is more involved with dealing with press and I work directly with the fans. My part is to communicate whatever is happening during training sessions, during games, during whenever activity by the team and their members that might have some importance for the fans or general public. That might be a CSR (corporate social responsibility) project this year that is very powerful and very strong because it involves underage prison, 15-20 year-olds. We go every week, try to teach them some tactics, play some basketball with them. We had a whole team visiting them and our sponsors are very helpful with that. They provided some things for them, for example, they bought two basketball stands, sports apparel. They are very active and we got a lot of help from them.

How did Panathinaikos fans responded to this CSR project?

They were very happy and they showed that what they perceive as a team is not our image of a very successful club on basketball court, but that we go above and beyond outside too. Because they see as someone that care whatever happens in society and someone that tries to help as much as they can. Either visiting, talking with people, playing basketball. We are not only trying not to receive , but also give them back. Fans show us that they are more than happy to see players involved in that. They make their own proposal of what we should do and in general we received a lot of feedback. For example, could you run the same project at other location. However, these difficult processes have to go through officials, government and ministries. It is not easy since you have to get special permits. And since they are underaged, this is the reason we had their faces blurred. We have to make sure that they do not get the wrong exposer.

Did you receive any sceptical or negative feedback?

Out of 100 comments, one or two would be negative. Some people just want to be negative. The positive thing is that we replied and responded to these comments, but the main reaction to these negative comments came from our fans. That demonstrates that in a way they became a brand ambassadors and they protect what team projects on social media. They are protecting our image. We do get feedback concerning the actual team as for example, that player needs more time or he is not good enough, but it is normal for fans to put such opinions out their. But overall, there are very positive sentiments coming from our fan base.

In your opinion, what is the identity of Panathinaikos and how do you try to represent the team?

Panathinaikos has shown that players are coming from our youth team, that is a very strong Greek core. All the youngster coming show that in a few years time, the Greek element of Panathinaikos is going to be stronger. What the team presents is that we are six-time European champion, so we try to keep up with the history that we already have. It is a whole procedure

of having high standards in every segment of the team. May that be the actual athletics, our image on social media, communications, marketing, tools we use, sponsors. In every single way we try to show that we are still in just as high standards as is our past and our history. Now there is a whole process to reach that standard again by making effort to go to Berlin for this year but that depends on how we do in the playoffs.

Panathinaikos has been always famous for their passionate fans. Did the social web changed the ways your fans can demonstrate their passion and participate and if yes, how?

The most important part is that we have a lot of UGC (user generated content) and we try to harness this content for the sake of the team. We have many competitions that would require UGC. For example, what is your favorite picture of your favorite player or fans would have to edit or photoshop picture the way they like. It is important because they show their passion not only in the stadium but on the web as well. We try to be the loudspeaker of our fans and we try to promote something is good as much as possible. As Dimitris Diamantidis is ending his career, we are preparing something that is very based on UGC and how fans portray and show their love for Dimitris. I think the new web is not just a useful tool for us, but I see it as a win-win situation for both us and fans. We can inform them very quickly as in other times it would be virtually impossible. For example, ticketing as you can purchase it anytime, take part in competitions to win court side seats to watch Euroleague games and we provide experiences that fans before would not be able to have. And it is all based in digital landscape.

What is your approach to fans that you think arrived at your platforms to harm your club's image or fans who lack cultural citizenship, knowledge about basketball?

We try to have a stable approach, which is never engage in arguments and portray our values. We are very stable on social media with our ethics and low-profile. We do not trash talk other teams and we very much care what other teams have done. We try to show an image that we really are. As we do that, like I told you before, fans will participate, will jump on that train

and will go in the same direction. Usually the fans that are very negative, either way they are persuaded or just left aside by the conversation flow. They are left out. What we try to do is show what this team is really about and not engage in these negative situations that might be harmful not for the team, but for a person. If a lot of people see a team attacking a person, they will do the same thing, they will follow. We lead by example and we show what are our core values. Hopefully, fans will take that in and do the same.

How often do you response to fan participation on social web - their posts, comments or messages?

We are replying depending if there is a reason to reply. After a negative result in Euroleague or domestic league, we try to be more typical. There might be more cursing and things like that but we understand since it is a love brand and they might feel very strongly about it. What we try to do is when we make mistakes, we will do something well, we will fix it and will do better in the future and make things better for everyone around the team. When you get a negative message it is not always a crisis by itself. How we see it is either a bell that is ringing that something might evolve in something bad. It might be a warning signal about what might happen. It gives us time to react and suit up the strategy we are going to have that you might call a negative situation.

How does Panathinaikos react in case of crisis or bad publicity? For example, are you trying to be the first one to come out and make a statement, which also give fans a chance to participate, or perhaps you tend to wait until the first wave of reaction goes away?

These situations never happen for us and we do not have an approach how to treat it. If you do not have a problem to start with, you do not have a crisis. The only negative crisis we can only have is a negative result. Losing to x, y or z team. Other than that there is a culture in the team and in changing rooms that it is a very good atmosphere. All the players are like a family. It might sound like a cliche, but that's how it is. That is how the team evolved and it is in its DNA to be low-profile, based on ethics. We never had bad publicity apart from one or

two situations. In these cases players understood their mistake and it has shown in how team supported these players and appreciate the fact they have acknowledged what they have done. It is an give and take situation where the team shows that they do care about the player and a player gives back in effort to become better and learn from what have happened.

Panathinaikos fans are very active on social media and sometimes can leave hundreds of comments under your posts. Do you monitor participation of your fans?

Mostly on game day. Mostly to see how fans are reacting to each post and to see if our strategy is going the right way. It is like an instant feedback. Sometimes you might think of sometimes and fans might have a completely different idea about it. There is always someone monitoring posts and seeing how they will react on anything. We also try to keep it clean in a way we do not allow any cursing and we will always remove that because our youngest fans are around 13-year-old and we do not want to be the page where these young people would learn that kind of language and culture in general. We want positive criticism and we do not mind that at all. If someone, for example, uses examples, we are more than happy to receive criticism that would make us better and show us parts that we might not have completely focused. We think that social media is about fans and our most important feedback is feedback from the fans. Give them content and product all together that they would like and engage with, and they will keep asking for more of that.

Have the feedback received from fans have ever directly altered decision making in Panathinaikos club?

In a way they would alter decision making but they would never alter our strategy completely the way they want. For example, they might want more videos than photographs and we would work around that part to see what is more engaging for them, what would they like more. If they really like Diamantidis, that does not mean that we would only post pictures of Diamantidis. It is a team, not a person. We get to promote a whole team and make sure that they love every player just because they are part of Panathinaikos, not because they are units and they have something special by themselves.

Could you recall any specific example of fan directly altering your decision?

Because we try to think that we are applying the latest trends, we make sure we keep in contact with Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, any other social media that will come out and will be used, because not all social tools are useful for us. We base our actions on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Vine and we use Youtube for all the videos we upload. We will see how our strategy evolves this summer and we will try to introduce Snapchat as well. We will see how that goes. We also want more players profile engage as well because we are a team that wants to promote players as well. That is what we mostly do on Twitter and that is why we have a lot of mentions. Mostly what we get is very good response all the groundbreaking stuff that we use. Even the fans suggest something, we are already building on it. Most likely it is not live yet, but it is on the way.

As you follow other Euroleague teams and participation of their fans, did you notice differences between them and Greek fans?

Greek fans are more hot blooded. I am not saying other fans are not passionate, but Greek fans are really devoted and it shows in their engagement. If you compare the size of our page and engagement that we receive, it is quite spectacular. Even the changes Facebook had in its algorithm, we have not seen such a huge change in numbers and that is because fans are always coming back for more. We are trying to reach out the fans and try to overcome all the changes and difficulties. And they also support us in every possible way they can. Numbers of shares and comments are huge. That part of algorithm that is more important, heavy engagement, that is where we see the most interaction because likes are light form of engagement, where with the share it shows that whatever we are posting, they will be happy to share it and it represents exactly what they feel about the club. Talking about other teams, it is very similar in Spain as well. Fan base in Spain is much bigger because they are more globally known and they have connections with football side as well. They have that sort of promotion. But we always try to focus on what we do and never forget that Euroleague have certain standards and good practices that we should follow. More or less we are all moving to

a certain usage of social media, how to engage with the fans and how to interact with them. And also how to incorporate players in this whole procedure and Euroleague organisation as well. The main difference is aesthetics, every team has their own feeling about aesthetics and what could be more engaging for their fans, video or image based on their culture each country has. It is different what they perceive what is nice what is not. You cannot even be country specific, it depends on each person.

What are the biggest challenges and problems you have to face at your work while working with fans on social web?

When you have such a large fan base, you cannot make everyone happy. We have hardcore fans, lightweight fans, but they all love the team the same. Others might have different approach towards producing and sharing through their social media but it is important to have such strategy that would keep everyone happy. You have to in a way segment your fan base and produce something for each part in order to have everyone happy but at the same time, be aligned with what the team represents. It is like having one product that you have to bring and showcase it in different ways. That is a challenge to make everyone happy. It could also be quite challenging when you have certain amount of resources like all teams have, make sure that every process is aligned in order to bring everything on time, meet the standards of the club.

What position the official website of Panathinaikos takes in your organisation and where do you see it in the future?

It is the culture of Greek sports fans that they visit sports sites often because that is where you can get more information in a sense that you have specific reporters that are known for their feelings for teams. Some people follow basketball, football, volleyball, other sports and they are going to sites for overall take on sports. Panathinaikos website is very specific on the team and it will have specific things to promote it. It will show highlights from the game, we will have pictures and facts about the roster. I think it easier for fans to find more content and more information on sports site. It is in our plans to change and apply more American approach,

where you have a long form, concerning game day and result after the game. Have different kind of assets in it, having things from social media, it could be Instagram photos or Vine, Facebook video and things like that. Combining everything in a very nice package, which would not only help with cross linking between the sites and social media but it will also give an overall experience to a fan that will know that coming to a site, he will get everything in a very nice package. That could be a good enough reason to visit the site as well.

How connected Panathinaikos basketball team is with Panathinaikos football team?

Completely different. Different boards, different presidents. You could also say it is a same team with different organisations. We try to focus on what we do and evolve ourselves better in what we do. Whenever we think that we need to support any segment of Panathinaikos. May that be a boxing team, the football team, the volleyball team, we would be more than happy to do that. But we mostly focus on what we do and stay focused on that.

Does participation between basketball and football fans ever gets mixed?

Usually on the fans mind it is one thing. Because the basketball team is doing so well, sometimes you might see posts saying help out the football team as well, posting photos of our president and saying you are doing so well. Gives us a hand or your DNA. It is something you can understand when you are a fan. When you see one segment doing so well, you want all segments to be just as successful. It is understandable when they reach out something like that.