



Media strategies of professional football clubs

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Candidate of Political Sciences, Associate Professor **R.V. Bekurov**¹
 Candidate of Political Sciences, Senior lecturer **Lai Lingzhi**¹
 Candidate of Sociological Sciences, Associate Professor, **L.P. Maryna**¹
¹St. Petersburg State University, St. Petersburg

Corresponding author: r.bekurov@spbu.ru

Abstract

Objective of the study – article attempts to analyze the functionality of club media of leading Russian and European football clubs. In particular, the material includes a reasoned, case-based assumption about the need for a media component in the structures of such organizations, regardless of their status.

The concept of the article was determined by fundamental and applied research in the field of sports communications and sports journalism. These include the works of K. Alekseev and S. Ilchenko, S. Mikhailov and A. Mostov, E. Votik, M. Danilova, M. Vishnevsky, I. Tkachev, I. Lyulevich and V. Kostikov.

The interdisciplinary nature of the study led to the application of a systematic approach using the method of analysis (structural and comparative) and generalization. The authors identify the status of football clubs as subjects of sports media communication, review the media assets of football clubs in Russia and abroad, identify the main channels and tools of interaction between clubs and fans. The main conclusion is the thesis about the inevitability of the functioning of a modern football club as an effective media company, including for the construction and development of a club brand.

Keywords: *club media, sports media communications, mass media, football brands, information technology, advertising, media sports, sports organizations, journalism.*

Introduction. The relevance of the study is due to the following factors.

Firstly, modern sport is increasingly seen as a media communication phenomenon that forms a significant share of news, entertainment and advertising content. As a result, the emergence of the concept of "media sport", which includes both the communication of states in the space of sports and politics, and the communication of sports fans and media, and the communication of sports and journalistic communities.

In other words, there is currently a dynamic process of involving traditional and new media in the production of content that forms an active dialogue with the audience and subjects of the sports industry.

In this regard, the main tools for the successful positioning of a football club in the communication environment are the systems of club media that implement a certain long-term strategy for the development of the club as a commercially successful project.

Secondly, the target audiences of football clubs cease to be passive participants in communication processes. Fans realize their activity by performing personal marketing actions in the information space, thereby forming the content of a particular action or campaign emanating from the club. The effectiveness of such a model is manifested in the creation and development of fan media.

Thus, there is a process of development of a relatively new phenomenon in the football industry – the active positioning of clubs as media companies.

The relevance and novelty of the study is expressed in the identification of the status of football clubs as subjects of sports media communication, the review of the media assets of football clubs in Russia and abroad, the designation of the main channels and tools for the interaction of clubs with fans.

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The purpose of the research. The main purpose of this work is to analyze the functionality of club media of leading Russian and European football clubs.

In particular, the material includes reasoned, case-based theses that allow us to identify the pros and cons of the information activities of modern football clubs and suggest the need for a media component in the structures of such organizations, regardless of their status.

Methodology and organization of the research.

The interdisciplinary nature of the study led to the application of a systematic approach using the method of analysis (structural and comparative) and generalization.

During the work on the article, the structures of the club media of the leading European teams (Russian "Zenit", English "Liverpool" and Spanish "Barcelona"), as well as teams playing in the third most important leagues (Russian "Alania Vladikavkaz", English "Wimbledon" and Spanish "Recreativo") were analyzed.

Research results and their discussion. The peak of club media development occurred in the second half of the XX century. And if at the first stage football organizations focused mainly on active fans, then in subsequent years "the focus of attention gradually shifted towards passive (potential) sports fans and professionals" [2, P. 123]. Thus, there was a gradual process of involving the maximum number of people in the football industry.

In the late 1980s, the situation changed. Private media companies were actively developing, which led to an increase in revenues from television rights. Business managers came to football, and for the first time they began to focus on marketing and media communication. According to V. Kostikov, this has dramatically affected the growth of income and attractiveness of clubs in the global market [4, P. 51].

In recent years, another trend has emerged – a relatively new trend has been added to the existing factors: the development of own club channels of interaction with the audience, which allows you to study the characteristics of fans and form targeted offers for them. Thus, a modern club is a kind of channel (tool) of access to a huge and loyal audience for partner brands.

In our opinion, the following types of club media prevail in modern sports organizations: status pro-

jects (press services, official websites, publishing houses); online stores (websites and applications for the sale of club paraphernalia); media for fans (radio and TV channels, magazine periodicals); fans' media (online and offline fanzines and online communities); pages in social networks, channels in messengers and on video/audio platforms; personal media of players.

In addition, the club's media assets also mean the availability of financial and other instruments to influence the nature and frequency of mentions of the team in the media that are not part of the structure of the football organization.

For example, it is no secret that the most influential daily sports newspaper "Marca" sympathizes with the "Real" (Madrid) and mercilessly criticizes "Barcelona". In the Catalan editions of "Mundo Deportivo" and "Sport", on the contrary, materials about "Barcelona" predominate, and articles about "Real" are exclusively negative and ironic. In Russia, the specifics of the relationship between "Zenit" (St. Petersburg) and "Match-TV" (sports TV-channel, owned by "Gazprom-Media"), are being discussed.

Anyway, according to K. Alekseev and S. Ilchenko, "a football club is an actual sports newsmaker, creating at least one news event per week" [1, P. 69]. Moreover, club news is often associated not only with professional activities, but also with indirect sports events in the social sphere.

In any case, it should be noted that often the amount of media assets depends on the form of ownership of a football club, as well as the level of its financial well-being. Obviously, the richer the football club, the more funds are invested in its information activities.

However, if we talk about the qualitative measurement of the functioning of the club as a subject of sports media communication, big money does not always ensure the effectiveness of media assets. Moreover, there are many cases demonstrating situations in which the lack or lack of funds for the development of club media involves active experiments with alternative and accessible communication tools and the conceptual and thematic content of the information product. In addition, it is easier to manage a small number of club media, such structures are more flexible and are able to respond in a timely manner to information occasions and media conjuncture.

Currently, many people in Russia underestimate the potential of club media, "focusing on more linear and obvious development issues" [3]: buying and sell-



ing players, seeking funding from state or regional budgets.

Only "Zenit" and partially "Spartak", "Lokomotiv" and "Krasnodar" have a systematic way of working with the audience through media and social networks. In most clubs, "projects in the information environment, ranging from match protocols and working with journalists to SMM and shooting videos, are handled by the press attache in the singular" [3]. As a result, there is a decrease in interest in national tournaments.

Russian clubs (with the exception of "Zenit" and "Krasnodar"), being financially dependent on the state, are focused on the domestic audience.

In this sense, the approach of European clubs is systematic and global. For example, "Liverpool" and "Barcelona" are clubs that have a huge international audience and strive to expand it.

This is evident even in the nature and frequency of the use of club media as channels for the distribution of advertising messages. In this case, several main directions should be distinguished: advertising on the club TV channel, in magazines and pre-match programs; advertising on the official website, affiliated resources, in social networks and mobile applications; game advertising (advertising the club in esports products); souvenir advertising and advertising on clothing.

The largest volume is occupied by advertising sponsors and media partners actively promoting the club brand. Most clubs with a global audience of fans have special departments to protect the club brand.

This observation is true both in relation to the world's top clubs and local level clubs – not only well-known teams strive for popularity. Small clubs often pay off due to the love of the local audience. For example, not the most famous and successful clubs "Wimbledon" (England) and "Recreativo" (Spain) effectively survive by concentrating on the environment of local fans.

The specifics of the media product in football depend on the specifics of clubs as organizations. The first feature is that any club media product is somehow used to achieve sports results.

If the sports component itself is not similar to other business areas, then from the point of view of marketing it is necessary to proceed from the features of the media product. And football clubs have quite a variable one.

The information product is based on everything related to the club: traditions, history, positioning. At this level, the interaction of the club with the main consum-

ers of its media content (fans) is much deeper than in classical business models. Fans rarely change their club preferences.

In a sense, the football matches themselves and their broadcasts are a media product. The increase in club income at this level is realized through competent stadium merchandising, the sale of paid subscriptions to TV broadcasts and club video channels.

According to a study by "Deloitte", in 2021, the Russian Premier League accounted for only 6.4% of revenue on match days, while sponsorship and other commercial revenues of clubs reached 61% [6].

At the same time, in Europe in the same year, according to UEFA, revenues on match days accounted for 14.4% of all football revenue, and sponsorship brought only 31%. The main share of income to European clubs was brought just by the sale of television rights – 37% [6].

Football clubs form their audience by functioning like classic media companies. Fans are presented with various information services – club TV channels, radio, websites, pages in social networks, paper and online magazines, fanzines, pre-match programs, mobile applications, channels in messengers. Monetization is implemented through the presentation (sale) of data to such an audience to potential sponsors, investors and business partners. Thus, fans are the main media asset of football clubs, regardless of their level and results.

In addition, the analysis of the media assets of professional football clubs allows us to identify some trends.

In particular, the combination of media and non-media assets (channels) in the football brand communication model contributes to effective interaction with target audiences. "Club content of news and event character not only reacts to various information flows, but also forms public opinion, as well as reputational and image components of the brand" [5, P. 54].

Conclusions. Based on the results of the study, the following conclusions were formulated.

Firstly, the development of information processes related to football leads to the fact that football tournaments become global events (media events). New media play a decisive role in the mediatization of football. This is largely due to the fact that the audience goes online, and new technologies allow packaging and distributing content mobile and in convenient formats.

Secondly, big money does not always ensure the effectiveness of media assets. And vice versa - the



lack or lack of funds for the development of club media implies active experiments with alternative and accessible communication tools and conceptual and thematic content of the information product.

Thirdly, the media product of football clubs is quite variable. It is based on everything connected with the club: traditions, history, positioning. At this level, the interaction of the club with the main consumers of its media content (fans) is much deeper than in classical business models.

Fourthly, football clubs "form their audience by functioning as classical media companies" [3] – they create and distribute unique media content, increasing the audience due to its quality and quantity, and also implement joint media projects with various media and other subjects of sports communication.

And, finally, fifthly, the analysis of the information activities of the subjects of the Russian segment of the football industry allows us to formulate a conclusion about the need to intensify the further development of club media with an emphasis on the specifics of the internal audience and taking into account those media strategies that are successfully implemented in the practice of European clubs.

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