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THE SPORT-BLOGGING COMMUNITY AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE: AN ISRAELI PERSPECTIVE

Abstract: The aim of the current research was to determine the extent to which blogs serve as a public arena, wherein discourse conditions of equality, mutuality, and symmetry are amplified. Research questions were tested through a convenience sample from audience members (N=103) of the most popular sporting blog in Israel, and involved online surveys and an in-depth interview with the blog writer. Findings illustrate the process of forming a social community (virtual settlement/virtual community) through discussion and engagement, to a large extent similar to the ideal speech situations presented by Habermas. Indeed it seems that everyone is entitled to converse and engage in discourse; each person has the right to raise questions, question any claims made in the discourse and make any claim that comes to mind. Findings indicate that: specific topics receive disproportionate coverage, debate often leads to an overlapping collection of conversations and not to a single discussion, and not all topics are subjected to rational debate.

Key words: sports, blogging, Israel, public sphere

1. Introduction

In recent years we have witnessed a change in how mass virtual activity is conducted. This change is expressed in the increase in the number of blogs that have become personal sites read by millions of internet surfers every day. Moreover, creating, maintaining, and displaying blogs are not the only activities responsible for this massive wave. The potential for self-creativity and self-expression provided by blogs has played a significant role as well. Today we are witness to virtual blog writing that is continuously growing and developing. Blog writing was initiated in 1997, although its great awakening occurred towards the end of 2002, when it became a significant part of online culture.[1] In June, 2002, blog writers accounted for 3% of all internet surfers in the U.S., and this rose to 5% by the beginning of 2004. In November of that same year, the rate of blog creators rose to 7%, which represents some 8 million surfers in the U.S. In terms of blog reading and consumption, significant changes have also occurred. The number of blog readers leaped by 58% in 2004 and accounted for 27% of all surfers at the start of 2005 in comparison to 17% in February, 2004. More than half a decade later, in 2010, almost 30% of the American population was reading someone else's blog, while 9% were working on creating one of their own. Both scientific and popular literature tends to refer to various forms of communication on the internet under the term "blog."[2] The aim of the current research is to determine to what extent blogs serve as a public arena, wherein discourse conditions of equality, mutuality, and symmetry are amplified. Moreover, the research intends to look at the ways in which debate and conversation are evolving in this developing medium.

2. Theoretical Background: Blogs and Blogging

From a historical-linguistic viewpoint, the literature claims that the term "blog" was coined in September, 1997 by Jorn Barger, who combined the terms "web" and "log." Today the term enjoys popular usage in everyday conversation and has even been introduced as a separate language item in new dictionaries.[3] Nevertheless, despite the linguistic classification, and in contrast to popular perceptions, the blog does not constitute a distinct syntactic or literary creation (i.e., "type" or "genre"), but rather a framework for offering self-representations (especially of details, and often of bodies) that can be continually updated and characterized, and are aimed at the present. This orientation towards the present, which characterizes the majority of blogs, can be analyzed in three ways. First, blogs are presented chronologically in a reverse-chronological order. Second, blog content refers to current issues from the personal or the collective. Third, blogs are both consistently and continually updated.[4]

The blog can be characterized by its multi-diversity as a medium, free and open to surfers without prerequisites (such as an I.D. or password in virtual registration). In addition, formats of most blogs share similar features. The organizational format of information and its content remain independent, free of the physical constraints of "pages," and it is not subjected to editing instructions or restrictions such as in a publishing system.[5]

Blog content is typically short, and usually focuses on one subject that is displayed in ad hoc ("post") communication. The writing manner is typically informal and is characterized by short, succinct sentences, regardless of whether the content is made up of technical information, a journalistic message, or a description of a personal experience. The blog can be constructed from all types of media, such as video art or music, and its contents include usage of hypertext and virtual links. In most cases, the blog enables surfer responses and comments to be posted, and some of the more popular blogs receive an extensive collection of responses organized as discussion threads which allows blog creators (heretofore referred to as bloggers) to exercise control over what transpires in the blog.

Online technology opens up a variety of digital narrative possibilities that are also available to those who would have otherwise found it difficult to express themselves via traditional means. This is because in virtual space one can integrate dimensions which are not strictly verbal, and thus the blogger can simultaneously express him/herself in diverse forms of self-representation via the tools it offers, such as hypertext.

Despite its relative novelty, considerable theoretical literature on the blog has flourished. One such theory that can be of help in understanding the blogging phenomena is the Agenda-Setting theory.

2.1. Agenda-Setting and Blogging

Agenda-setting is the creation of public awareness and concern of salient issues by the news media. Two basic assumptions underlie most research on agenda-setting: (1) the press and the media do not reflect reality, they filter and shape it; (2) media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues. Agenda setting has systematically sought to document the effects of mass media on the audience's cognitions. By virtue of creating a shared, national pseudo-environment, mass media fulfill the important function of building a public consensus on the important issues of the day.[6]

Brosius and Wiemann,[7] among others, argued that Agenda-setting could be understood as a two-step flow, with opinion leaders in the public who serve as "personal mediators between media and personal agendas." This would seem to be an adequate description of the actions of the filter-style blogger who chooses which stories to link to and what comments to

make about those stories. Bloggers are still constrained by the agenda(s) set by the sources they read, but they are also free to reshape that agenda by choosing which stories to link to, and what comments to make about those stories. Brosius and Wiemann also argued that when the mainstream media covers an issue, interpersonal communication often reinforces the media messages; however, interpersonal communication actually sets the agenda "when the discussions deal with issues that have received little coverage in the media." If the blogging phenomenon were viewed as a form of hybrid between interpersonal and mass communication, then it would seem that the blogging community could define the parameters of discussion on those issues that the mainstream media avoids. One example is the recent popularity of news/opinion blogs from a liberal perspective that serve as an alternative to the discussions of radio talk-shows that tend to be primarily targeting a conservative audience. As a result, such blogs will set the agenda for their readership on certain topics since other media did not assume that role. In addition to traditional theory, according to Hecht [8] three central approaches for describing and analyzing blogs can be discerned.

2.2. The Blog as a Virtual Genre

Researchers describe genres as ways of categorizing forms of communication. Accordingly, they categorize different literary forms according to common structural and content patterns (i.e., a novel, letter, suspense story, etc.). As far as the internet is concerned, several researchers have pointed to the common denominator shared by many blogs in terms of structure and content. They consider the blog a genre in and of itself, and have formulated explanations according to this understanding. Thus the blog is considered a new type of text, with distinctive linguistic and stylistic characteristics. These researchers tend to view the blog as a test case in network culture, where multi-media dimensions (sound, image), hypertext, and a unique code of personal writing (most prominent in personal blogs) are integrated. Moreover, this places bloggers in the conscious position of central narrators. Miller and Shepherd[9] even go as far as referring to the blog as a genre representing a central aspect of culture.

2.3. The Blog as an Inclusive Discussion Group

Many researchers have identified the blog as an additional channel for discourse and for the exchange of ideas. Unlike approaches which assume that the transition to computer-mediated communication has weakened the depth of interpersonal relations, these researchers have emphasized how computer technology, including home sites, discussion groups, social/professional networks, and blogs have widened and enriched

them.[10] Other researchers have described journalistic blogs as enhanced arenas (in relation to conventional journalism) for the discussion and the inception of ideas within the public arena. Journalistic blogs, like political ones, represent test cases that illustrate the blog's ability to distribute ideas and consolidate the community around common issues. They are therefore perceived as agents that form a bridge between the individual and society.

2.4. The Blog as a Source of Self-Expression

According to this approach, blogs represent a channel for subjective expression with a personal signature, presenting diverse subjects, of both a personal and public nature (such as the economy, politics, health, games, leisure, and sport), and displayed in a diary fashion.

(a) Self-Exposure

A salient characteristic of blogs is that its writers adopt high levels of self-exposure, which in many cases leads to the exposure of intimate details about their personal lives. Self-presentation tends to be holistic, with the emphasis placed on the personal voice which forms an 'informal' and human side. The blog also encourages reflexive creation, by which the blogger expresses his/her feelings and uncertainties. This form of expression and writing serves as a source for promoting identification with others, trust and social legitimacy.

(b) Self-Actualization

The term "self-actualization" has in recent years become a central characteristic of modern society. In the sociological literature, self-identity in modern society is no longer firmly established and predetermined as it was in the past. Identity is not national in nature and is not stable throughout the individual's lifetime. The internet in general and blogs in particular provide countless options for self-presentation and self-expression.

(c) Virtual Freedom

The blog is perceived by many of its members as a stage for the free expression of their opinions and as a mechanism for the passing of knowledge. In the literature and the press, it has been claimed that a significant change has transpired in the perception of freedom of expression in general, and of the internet in particular. The involvement of the individual in what takes place around him/her is possible, among other ways, by direct response to writing on the blog, without mediators from the "professional" field of communications or other such areas. Blog writing journalists abandon the boundaries imposed upon them by editors and publishers. From this aspect, the blog serves as a "safe site,"

an escape from the newspaper editor's authority. In addition, the perception of freedom on the internet is prominent not only in the statements made by the bloggers themselves, but also in the perceptions held by the blog respondents.

2.6. Response Mechanism

The awkward structure of the talkback – which is constructed as a stage upon which each person can "give his/her two cents" and then disappear – allows readers and people within the system to formulate opinions, discuss and analyze interpretations, and create a synthesis with journalistic value, since the discussion is free and uncontrolled.[11]

In contrast, reciprocal relations in the journalistic blog sphere are symmetrical and based on equality. Responses are an integral part of the blog. In fact, the context of the blog creates a distinct and voluntary digital social environment which permits privacy, a sense of freedom and even the "management" of a desired identity. This unique environment is distinct from other social environments formed by means of e-mail, forums, wiki, chats, personal sites, or short text messages/SMS.

In many blogs, sophisticated response mechanisms are being established, such that a blog's life cycle is determined largely by its response rating. However, virtual response in general, and in blogs in particular has not won sufficient attention in the literature. Studies have emphasized how the blog represents a digital framework for self-expression, but less attention has been given to the significance of the social interaction created in the blog. With the widespread growth of blogs, the subject of response has become significant, as the motivation for creating a blog is often derived from the social interaction it generates. This includes exposed respondents as well as unexposed ones (readers and non-respondents), as well as an imaginary audience for whom the blog is often written.

Research on the character of audience feedback has been neglected and is still in its initial stages. Monitoring on-going activity and statistics of links is essential for bloggers, and many are assisted by "response-meters" that are exposed to the readers in order to present the blog's exposure in a positive light.

By examining the plethora of blogs offered in the virtual market and studying the literature reviewing their activity, we find that the self-exposure, perception of self-actualization, virtual freedom, and responses that bloggers receive have deepened motives for creating blogs and upgrading them. Bloggers' mass writings have led to a revolutionary change, both in the self-expression channels of millions of surfers and in the contents marketed to the wider public. Thus, the daily dissemination of personal diaries and reports from a self-proclaimed subjective

perspective on current events has redesigned public discourse, and has widened the opportunity for participating in the public sphere.

2.7. The public sphere

Long before the internet came into our lives, Habermas,[12] of the Frankfurt School, identified the ideal conditions for a "public sphere" in which democratic discourse can be conducted. The architecture of the internet helps to create several of these ideal conditions. According to Habermas,

> [The] public sphere is a middle ground between state and civilian society, a sphere (not necessarily physical) in which differences in power and status are temporarily suspended, a space where in principle all individuals have equal status and are aware of their right to use their intelligence to criticize any issue of public interest.[13]

Public discourse is rational, and takes place in a free country and in an arena independent of economic pressure. Habermas[14] summarized the characteristics of the ideal speech situation (ISS) in the following manner: Everyone is entitled to express their positions, ambitions and needs; everyone is entitled to converse and engage in discourse; everyone is entitled to pose questions, to question any argument raised in the discourse (criticism) and to make any claim that comes to mind; participants cannot be prevented from exercising their rights by external or internal pressure.

Democratic discourse is perceived as a process of mutual understanding and the conducting of dialogue in order to arrive at the truth or at social integration. It enables the surfer, in this case, to become aware of other surfers' reactions and exchanges without worrying about the covert interests that characterize most offline forms of discourse. Habermas[15] refers to the "public sphere" as one in which discourse can transpire between private people who aggregate by their own free will, uncoerced, and form a community. It would appear that the ideal speech situation as described by Habermas can be found in blogs, where equality, mutuality and symmetry can be maintained.[16]

3. The Israeli Blog Sphere

Israel is considered a technological initiator and leader that has rapidly and extensively adopted novel applications and norms in the area of the internet.[17] In May, 2009, 71% of households in Israel were connected to the internet (86% of them to a very fast connection – a broadband), and internet users accounted for some 50% of the country's citizens, representing more than 3 million people.[18] Blogs reached Israel as late as 2001 with the construction of the blog site "Isra-blog," the largest of the two major blog sites active in Israel today.

Israeli blog sites are different from major sites in the Unites States in two ways. The response system in the U.S is constructed in linear sequence, whereas in Israel it is built in a branch-like manner, similar to internet forums. This is a format that encourages a larger number of responses, as it can manage a number of developed discussions simultaneously. In addition, while in the U.S greater weight of the blog format is placed on the text and links, in Israel greater significance is given to the variety available to users and their control in designing their blog, where some of the options are available for a fee.

3.1. The Sporting Blogosphere: The Case of Ronen Dorfan

Ronen Dorfan is a sports journalist and a (sport) web-log pioneer who established the "Dorfan Phenomenon" blog in 2007. At first the blog acted independently. In 2009 it was transferred to a bloggers' platform on the Orange-Time commercial site. At the end of 2010, the blog was once again transferred to a new sports blog site constructed by Dorfan, namely *Debuzzer*. The blog deals with sports in the wider sense of the word, and not only in reporting events. According to Dorfan, the motive to open the blog was the following:

> Whoever writes and makes a living from writing must also have a blog, in my opinion. The days of reporting and commentary are over. The future of this field is in the discussions around sport, such as the link between sport and society. Before the blog I was a little satiated with the world of journalism, but now there are names and faces to all my readers and it adds an interactive dimension which I really like.[19]

When asked how much time he invested in writing the blog, Dorfan replied:

> It's difficult to quantify the time, because I live the world of sport. The amount of text in the postings is only 5% of the content written in the blog – I try to reply to every response, and I upload one posting on average per day. I have on more than one occasion "stolen" ideas from my readers and from things they raised in their response.

In reference to whether the blog was a hobby or work, Dorfan commented "It is work that complements my journalistic work." According to Dorfan,

> One of the things that bothered me sometimes during my years as a sports journalist was that at times I was presented, not on my initiative, as a "commentator." Sports seem to me a subject completely wrong for commentary. It is not analytical. It is terribly chaotic and melodramatic, and subjective. It is a great background for telling other stories. That's what I've always tried to do. That's why although I make so many mistakes in

predictions and tactical understanding of games, few enjoy watching games and competitions more than I do.

The aim was to look at Dorfan's blog inside out and learn more about the people who form a virtual community. The fact that the blog was gaining popularity and attracting sports fans on a daily basis, often leading to fruitful online discussions and diversified debates, led to our decision to use Dorfan's blog as a case study.

3.2. Procedure

Although the relevant communication theories are well established, their application to blogging is unknown and therefore the theories continue to evolve. Thus, in this investigative study it was more appropriate[20] to use research questions instead of hypotheses. A web-based survey was selected for the study, not only because of convenience and cost, but also because it was the most appropriate method for a study dealing with interactive media. In order to become acquainted with the blog community, Ronen Dorfan, the blog writer, was sent a letter asking him to relate to it in a separate posting for the proposed study. The blog's readers were asked to answer a number of structured questions and to then relate to the blog freely. The participants were asked to send their answers to an e-mail account that was opened for the purpose of the study.

3.3. Research Questions

Respondents were asked a number of demographic questions regarding their age, gender, residence, education, average number of hours spent on the computer, and their favorite sports. Other questions they were asked were: How often do you read sports sites on the internet? How often do you read sports blogs and how often do you read Ronen's blog? What are the main reasons you read the blog? Are you a passive or active reader? What is your opinion on the level of the discourse? Do you tend to respond to Ronen's postings? What are the reasons for writing your responses? Do you tend to respond to reactions to your responses?

A qualitative analysis[21] of participants' experiences was conducted in order to better understand their experiences and the meaning they attribute to them.[22] The current study applied a (web) questionnaire analysis based on the grounded theory approach.[23] This qualitative research analysis is based on detailed data collection and data analysis, and then organizes ideas that emerge from the text's content. Data are collected through a process of initial probing until a more general picture is crystallized. During data collection and analysis, categories are formed, which the researcher identifies, until a phenomenon is revealed through deconstructing the data and reconstructing them anew in order to reach a better understanding of the theory. The theory develops in close

interaction with the data that emerges, while the researcher is clearly conscious of him/herself as an analysis tool of the social phenomenon examined.[24]

Qualitative analysis involves dividing data into components and reorganizing them in a new order of different analytical categories.[25] This process of combining sections of data into groups belonging to the same phenomenon is called categorization.[26] Categories are thereby organizing tools that enable researchers to organize data in accordance with their relevant characteristics. It is possible to use categories not just for the purpose of analysis, but also to develop categories whose source is within the data. Categories represent different subjects or perspectives found and revealed from a deeper reading of the text examined, and provide the means for sorting its units.[27]

3.4. Findings

At first, theoretical statistics are presented in order to describe the characteristics of the sample and the distribution of the study variables. Nominal variables (such as gender, place of residence, favorite branch of sport, type of participation) are presented by frequency (in absolute values and percentages from the sample). Interval variables (such as age, years of education, hours spent at computer per day) are presented by central tendency measures (mean, mode, median) and distribution measures (standard deviation and variance) in order to check distribution around the mean of each of the variables.

Frequencies are presented below. Personal background is presented first, followed by the other variables examined.

(a) Gender

Among the respondents to the questionnaire, 94 were men (94.17%) and only 6 were women (5.83%). That is, the common study participant was male.

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
male	94	97.17%
female	6	5.83%

Table 1: Gender Frequency

(b) Age

The average age of the participants in the sample was 32.74. The median age was 32, as was the mode. Ages ranged widely, from 15 to 56. Standard deviation was 8.05.

Percentage	Frequency	Age
12.62%	13	15-24
53.39%	55	25-34

25.24%	26	35-44
8.75%	10	45-56

Table 2: Age Frequency

(c) Education

In terms of the number of years of education reported by the respondents, the mean was 15.03 years of education, the median was 15 and the mode was 15 as well. Standard deviation was 2.05. It can be seen that the majority of the respondents were academics and a large part of them held higher degrees.

Percentage	Frequency	Years of Education
11.65%	12	9-12
54.36%	56	12-15
33.99%	35	16-19

Table 3: Years of Education Frequency

(d) Place of Residence

More than 80% of the respondents lived in Israel and almost 20% lived abroad.

Percentage	Frequency	Place of Residence
80.58%	83	Israel
19.42%	20	Abroad

Table 4: Place of Residence

(e) Number of Hours on the Computer

The average number of hours per day spent on the computer was 7.19, the median was 8 and the mode was 10. Statistical deviation was 3.34.

Percentage	Frequency	Hours on Computer Per Day
27.18%	28	1-4
35.92%	37	5-9
36.9%	38	10-15

Table 5: Hours on Computer frequency

(f) Favorite Sports

Among the respondents, more than half reported football as their favorite sport, about 20% reported that basketball was their favorite sport, and the rest reported other branches.

Percentage	Frequency	Sports Branch
51.45%	35	Football
20.38%	21	Basketball
28.17%	29	Other branches

Table 6: Favorite Sports Branch

(g) Type of Participation

Approximately 75% of respondents described themselves as active readers of the blog, while about 25% described themselves as passive readers.

Percentage	Frequency	Type of Participation
74.75%	77	Active
25.25%	26	Passive

Table 7: Type of Participation

3.5. Qualitative Analysis

During analysis of the respondents' answers, a number of central motives for why sports fans read Dorfan's blog, respond to its writings, and effectively join the blog's community were found. The reasons for initial entry into the blog and for later becoming a participant, as emerged from the questionnaires, can be divided into three basic categories: (a) The blog writer; (b) Subjects/questions that the blog addresses; (c) The blog as a shared community.

(a) The Blog Writer

Many readers enter the blog because of their considerable appreciation of the blog writer and their familiarity with his writing style. As one of the participants wrote, "I've accompanied Ronen as far back the Ha'Ir newspaper. I enjoy reading his distinctive writing style and point of view on different sports events." Another writer added, "I read everything Ronen writes. In my opinion he's exceptionally talented. I read every post he writes, even if it deals with sports branches I'm not interested in." A third participant noted:

> Ronen is a walking encyclopedia. But moreover, when you read him you feel like you're reading a book, not a posting on sports. To be honest, I'd read Ronen even if he reported the traffic on the highway or the stock market crash in Japan.

Another participant summarized:

> Ronen lives the life that all of us would like live as sports fans. He has tickets to important games and a license that allows him to meet with players we all see only on the screen. I really like to hear about his different experiences and the way he describes them in his unique way.

(b) Subjects/Questions that the Blog Addresses

Unlike the above examples, other readers entered the blog by chance while they were looking for sites and blogs on the subject that the blog deals with, and were unfamiliar with the writer. Thus, for example one of the participants noted, "the truth is that I read a number of sports blog

every day, and this blog fits in well with my daily agenda." Another participant emphasizes the singularity of the subjects addressed in the blog:

> Over the year, I'd been looking for an internet site that deals with sports branches that don't receive attention in Israeli media (like cricket), and this place, which deals with branches other than football and basketball, are a safe haven for me.

Another participant reinforced the above and claimed the following:

> It's not as if Israel has so many sites on sports. For heavy addicts like us, every additional site which gives another perspective is great. True, many discussions are dealing with Man United or the English Premiership but as long as we have another opportunity to discuss sport – it's great.

It is important to note that the basic reasons surveyed provide an explanation for initial entry into the blog. The enormous popularity the blog enjoys and the large number of respondents can be explained by the development of the respondent community.

3.6. The Respondent Community

Over the years a unique respondent community debating one another by means of responses to the different postings written on the site has developed. The respondent community is extremely consolidated and appreciated among the blog readers: "[…] here you don't have inarticulate talkbacks found on other sites such as Ofira's site (*authors' note*: an Israeli sporting site)." This reflects one of the major reasons that responses are written to the different postings. As one of the readers explains:

> This is about a group of young people, crazy about talking, who have discovered that there are other people with whom they share a common interest. For years we have felt different on the Israeli landscape because we love baseball and American football. We couldn't find a common language with anyone. Suddenly, you find a goldmine on the internet – a place where you can write your opinion in Hebrew and someone responds to you and you respond back. At first I felt like I was in a support group (like Alcoholics Anonymous) where everyone understands how you feel and everyone supports one another – I'm not insane, there are others like me out there.

Another reader/writer comments about the expertise of many of the writers:

> There are respondents of a high level here with vast knowledge on subjects that almost no one is familiar with (like winter sports).

> We really feel as if we have the advantage of expertise, if you can call it that, over any other sports site or newspaper in Israel.

An additional reader reinforces the above as well:

> There are people here with a great deal of knowledge. Many times I read a posting that interests me and write a question or make an inquiry about the subject which has raised my curiosity. Within minutes someone sends a reply to my question or inquiry and the discussion continues in diverse directions.

The singularity of the community and the quality of the participants often leads to long discussions that raise questions and more extensive thoughts in reader response than the superficial article which initiated them. One of the readers explains the phenomenon in the following manner:

> One of the most fascinating discussions in our community began as a discussion on an article on an insignificant baseball game between two teams which the blog writer attended. The responses to this relatively meaningless game were fascinating and addressed questions such as who is the best Jewish athlete of all times (as a result of one of one of the readers response where he recounted that he had attended a similar game where Sandy Kofax, one of the greatest pitchers in the history of baseball, played). What's it like to be Jewish in American society, etc. – It was simply incredible!

The pleasure derived from debate was emphasized by yet a different reader:

> This is the ultimate substitute for guy talk in the local bar. Someone writes something about my team and then I start arguing with him or trying to convince him he's wrong. Then a third guy appears and tries to convince me that I'm wrong and I begin to argue with him.

That is, the community permits its members to debate one another or to express their happiness to fans of a rival team which has just been defeated:

> I'm a fan of Liverpool, and so I hate Manchester United. On the site there's a very big group of Manchester United fans, so every big game that Manchester United loses (for example on the day they lost to Liverpool or in the Champions League finals when they lost to Barcelona) I enter the site and write sarcastic remarks about the loss.

Another writer described a similar experience:

> We can't go to a pub of the rival team and wait for them outside the stadium to laugh in their face. But in responses you can tease

them and kick them while they're down – what more does a fan
need than to degrade his rival fans on their worst day?

4. Discussion and Conclusions

New technologies are gradually and systematically transforming the
process of information dissemination and retrieval. As argued earlier,
blogs serve as a new type of text with unique linguistic and stylistic
features. Blogs are also seen as a test case of network culture that
integrates multimedia dimensions hypertext and provide a distinct code
of personal writing which consciously renders blog members central
narrators. One of the main reasons of the popularity of the blog examined
in this study is the blog writer, Ronen Dorfan, for whom many of the
respondents express their appreciation; they noted that their familiarity
with his writing style as one of the main reasons for becoming a member
of the blog's community. At the same time, the issues that the blog is
dealing with, the fact that discussions goe beyond the "regular" and
"familiar" are important findings and strengthen the argument that blog
writing journalists such as Dorfan have abandoned the boundaries
imposed upon them by editors and publishers. The fact that the blogs
deals with unconventional sports in Israel, such as cricket and baseball,
and also winter sports, is a good example. Indeed, it seems as the blog
serves as a "shelter site," an escape from the newspaper editors' authority
and as such, the perception of freedom on the internet is prominent not
only in the statements made by Dorfan but also in the perceptions held by
the blog respondents.

   One of the main elements that is evident from the study is the sense of
community that the respondents felt. Sense of community originated from
studies on face-to-face contact, but has been adapted to studies of virtual
communities. Originally, the sense of community in virtual communities
was defined as involving the following: feelings of membership
(belonging to, identifying with); feelings of influence; integration and
fulfillment of needs; feelings of being supported by others in the
community while also supporting them; shared emotional connection:
relationships, shared history, and a "spirit of community."[28] Furthermore,
blogging communities are also driven by the personalities behind them,[29]
and Dorfan's personality certainly helps in this particular case. We have
also argued that the reason for sense of community developed to a large
extent in a similar way to the ideal speech situations evolved in the blog,
as demonstrated by Habermas.[30] Habermas made the following
distinction between two forms of action made in the deliberations that
take place in the context of the public sphere: strategic action and
communicative action:

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