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The Norwegian Football Family and Strategic Crisis Communication

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Abstract

This commentary uses the Norwegian Football Association's Covid-19 crisis communication strategy as an example on how federations can take an active role and use their influence to guide and be proactive in the opening of a society after a lockdown. By paying close attention to the public debate and by interviewing the federation's Communication Director, we outline the four phases of the strategic crisis communication – and the consequences of them in Norway. While the first consequence was the postponing of the Euro Qualifier against Serbia on March 26th for the European Championship this summer, the lockdown changed the focus quickly and the strategy became about getting *all players* back on the football fields. We elaborate on how a major federation can (and maybe should) take a leading role by using its 'voice' in the media and public and expertise to aid reopening a society after lockdown.

Keywords: Grassroots and elite football, strategic media pressure, economy, political engagement

The Norwegian Football Family and Strategic Crisis Communication

On Wednesday, March 11, 2020, two Champions League matches were played in Europe. In Paris, the home team (*Paris Saint Germain*) beat German *Borussia Dortmund* 2-0, a match played without spectators due to the Covid-19 pandemic. At the other side of the English Channel, *Liverpool* and *Atletico Madrid* played at Anfield Stadium for 52,000 spectators of whom 3,000 had arrived from Spain (Ihle, 2020). Three days later, Spain was on lockdown and a month later Britain had become one of the European countries with the highest number of sick people – including Prime Minister Boris Johnson. These two events were the last major football events in Europe, and Manager Jürgen Klopp has, according to an Italian national sports newspaper, called it a “criminal act” that the Liverpool game was not cancelled but went ahead (Yoesting, 2020, para. 1). The day after these two matches, European football shut down to prevent the spread of Covid-19, and UEFA President Aleksander Čeferin labelled Covid-19 as “the biggest crisis that football faced in its history” (Conn, 2020, para. 2). Here we will discuss, by using information obtained from an interview with the Norwegian Football Association’s (hereafter NFF) Communication Director, the crisis communication and strategic actions used to increase activity after the lockdown.

Norway During the Crisis

Already on January 31st, the Norwegian government started planning for the outbreak of Covid-19. In the following month, the Norwegian government participated in global research on how the virus affect people by working with WHO and CEPI. From March 12th onwards, Norway was officially shut down; schools were closed and the strictest rules of governing since the Second World War were imposed. Certain sectors were completely shut down, including hairdressers, physiotherapy and sports, and the border was closed and anyone arriving in Norway would automatically need to go into a 14-day isolation (Regjeringen.no,

2020). Other sectors were running but with strict rules of social distancing and work from home.

Many businesses were forced to use temporary layoffs to keep expenses down. As of April 1, over 400,000 Norwegians, or about 14% of the total Norwegian workforce, are temporarily laid-off and live of social benefits (NAV, 2020). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, all leagues were suspended until at least June 15th, and the NFF temporarily laid-off 60% of their workforce on April 14. In solidarity with the many employees, the leadership, who was not laid-off, took a pay-cut to help reduce the economic impact on the organisation.

The Norwegian Football Context

Football is the most popular sport in the world with approximately 265 million players (FIFA, 2007); it is also the most popular commercial sport in Norway with 380,000 licensed players in a country with 5.3 million people (Kristiansen, 2017). In the Norwegian league system, the Premier League for men is *Eliteserien*, and *Toppeserien* is the equivalent for women. In addition, there are several lower division football leagues administrated by 18 NFF regional offices. These offices are the primary contact points for clubs and they oversee coach education and player development for grassroot clubs in this decentralized system. Norway is a social democratic country with a strong egalitarian tradition, which is also used in relation to the corporate social responsibility of sponsors. Hopwood and Skinner (2013) provided an interesting overview of the concept of social responsibility, and suggested that stakeholder engagement is an important part of *sport social responsibility*, which they argue is derived from “an increasing awareness that the business of sport does not operate within a vacuum where only the team, the spectators and the fan base are affected by the operation of the sport” (p. 421).

The NFF's vision is *football excitement, opportunities and challenges for all*, and sport social responsibility is a foundation for the ways in which sport is organized in Norway.

Grassroots and elite football are equally important to the NFF, and supporting local clubs is fundamental to their policy for grassroots football (NFF, 2012). Norwegian football generates over 3,000 jobs and there are over 150,000 volunteers, parents and coaches involved in football for children. Many of the 3,000 people working in Norwegian football have now been temporarily laid-off due to the government's shutdown.

The success of the national teams, both men, women, and youth, are important as the revenue generated from professional football is one of the main funders of grassroots activities. One of the main goals of the NFF during this pandemic was to get the professional football leagues up and running, so that they could keep the revenue stream from TV rights and sponsorship that also fund grassroots activities. Hence, the delay of the qualification and possible participation has consequences for both grassroots and elite football in Norway.

When the pandemic hit, the focus in Norwegian football was for the men's team to qualify for the UEFA European Championship (EURO 2020). However, that quickly changed.

The NFF's Strategic Crisis Communication during the Covid-19 pandemic

Gro Tvedt Anderssen started as Communication Director for the NFF on January 6, 2020, and she had barely met her new colleagues when the Covid-19 pandemic suddenly took most of her time and postponed all the new plans she had for communication in the NFF. However, she had plenty of experience from crisis communication due to a drought a few years back, when she, as the Communication Director for a Norwegian Agricultural Cooperative managed to successfully convey their challenges to the government. In addition, she has a background as a political advisor and has worked extensively with campaigns and strategic communication. The research group had followed the men's national team for over two years during the EURO 2020 qualification, and it was easy for us to connect with Tvedt Anderssen. She agreed to a video interview via *Microsoft Teams* on April 28, in between

department meetings and televised debates. The interview lasted almost two hours, it was semi-structural, with one lead interviewer and the two others asking for clarifications.

With this focus on community engagement first, the NFF strategic crisis communication ended up influencing general politics and recommendations. We will divide the NFF's strategic crisis communication up in two parts to understand the strategy. First, we will introduce the concept *football family*, as this serves as the basis for the NFF's crisis communication. Then, based on our observations and data, we elaborate on the four phases of political engagement of crisis communication under the Covid-19. We will focus on how financial aspects have been an underlying factor for the crisis communication. Information from the Tvedt Anderssen interview will be used in both parts.

The Football Family: A Crisis Affecting both Grassroots Football *and* Elite Football

The slogan *sport for all* captures the Norwegian sport model, which is also apparent in the organization of the Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports, NIF. The NIF is an umbrella organization for sport at all levels in Norway and has over 2 million members with 54 national sport federations and 19 regional confederations (Kristiansen, 2019). The NFF is subordinated to the NIF and has similar organizational structures (elite and grassroots sport), which is vital for understanding the NFF's strategic crisis communication. All groups are given the same priority by all stakeholders of the NFF. This also means that the major sponsors of the men's national team *must* also sponsor grassroots activities and tournaments for kids. This Norwegian structure is unique in Europe.

The NFF, from the beginning, emphasized the concept of *football family*. Tvedt Anderssen elaborated on this in the interview,

We have this vision, to keep the *football family together*, often when a crisis happen it is so easy to blame your top leaders. In Norway we have this unique organisation with the NFF being in charge for both top and grassroots football. So during the Easter

holidays we created a strategy to what we saw as a main problem: *That politicians did not feel that they had a sport problem to solve.* Most politicians do not feel sorry for wealthy players in the *Eliteserie*, but our organization is about so much more than them, it is about all the minor clubs that lose their income and about kids without a place to play football. So we focused on telling the politicians that we needed to get started with activities, this was important for everyone.

Crisis communication is about having an overview, communicate facts, plan for worst case scenarios, and act. However, no one had ever experienced a crisis like this one before. The communication draft prioritised keeping the football family together, besides being proactive, be part of political discussions, decide what the media should focus on yourself, and stay in constant contact with internal and external stakeholders (also UEFA and FIFA). With ‘family first’ in mind, the NFF focused on the rules and guidelines that had to be in place before community football fields could open again. Baffled by the Minister of Health’s statement, “we will not have any football in 2020” early in the pandemic, the NFF became proactive and advised with guidelines, liaison contacts, and developed graphic guidelines in Norwegian, English, Somali, Urdu and Arabic, which became much used and copied in Norway.

[***Figure 1 near here***]

With the family concept as the overarching framework for crisis communication, as the Covid-19 pandemic affected all members of the football family, we will now turn to the phases and the importance the NFF placed on engaging with political authorities.

Engaging with Political Authorities

The NFF’s crisis communication, from the beginning of the crisis in March to May, can be divided into four different phases. The phases show how NFF struggled with the deadlines that were set by political authorities over the course of the Covid-19 crisis, and how

the NFF's role moved from being a passive actor to become an active stakeholder, engaging more and more with the authorities.

Phase 1: Realising what is happening.

During the first weeks, until the Easter holiday, the NFF struggled to understand the severity of the situation and the overall time frame of the crisis. Initially, the NFF assumed that this would be a short-term crisis and that everything would return to normal within a couple of weeks. As Tvedt Anderssen explained it in the interview,

In the beginning we thought that this would end soon, this won't last long, [...] and not any longer than the Easter holiday. [...] But, after a while you begin to understand that this won't be over soon. It will take time. You don't understand the storm that is coming. The problem is that we don't understand what we are standing in, and things happen fast in crisis.

Realizing that this would take time, the NFF prioritized developing Covid-19 guidelines for football. The guidelines were approved by the Norwegian Institute of Public Health and the NFF (see Figure 1) thought this would be an important start to deal the overall situation. However, this was soon contested. There was confusion around the government's lockdown rules, and the NFF received contradictory information about guidelines. Uncertainty around the rules and around 'what was allowed and not' made it difficult for the NFF to communicate with its members. Realizing that government bodies were unsynchronized, the NFF took immediate action and "requested that all football fields close down until we got a clarification" (Tvedt Anderssen). The NFF hoped that the official government instructions, that were expected to come before the Easter holidays, would clarify that the authorities had a "sport problem to solve."

Phase 2: Developing a government relation strategy.

The government instructions given on April 7th was not uplifting for the football family. The government announced plans for opening kindergartens on April 20th and students in the first few grades of elementary schools on April 27th. This gradual opening of society did not include sport, and the general message was “five persons in a group and distance of two meter, and the same rules for football as for a shopping mall” (Tvedt Anderssen). The NFF realized that they had to change the ways they were working and communicating. As Tvedt Anderssen explained it,

We realized that we had to get more involved with political authorities and decision-making processes that are important for football [...] So we developed a strategy for government relations during the Easter holidays. The strategy had two main objectives. The first objective was to get started with activity and the second objective was to adjust the economic crisis response to support football.

An important part of the communication strategy, as the quote illustrates, was the focus on activity and children and their need for engaging in outdoor activity.

Phase 3: Implementing the strategy.

After starting out as a passive actor, waiting for government instructions, the NFF started to invite themselves to meetings. The aim of these meetings was to explain both the uniqueness and complexity of the Norwegian model, and that football at a top level would also benefit local clubs and grassroots activities.

We made a presentation that illustrated our model. We invited ourselves to the health directorate and Norwegian Institute of Public Health to present the work we had done [...] and to the Family and Cultural Committee at the Parliament to show the importance of activity, and also to stress that the financial crisis response does not meet our needs. (Tvedt Anderssen)

The NFF hoped that these official meetings with the different authorities would improve their understanding of how football was organized, and that including sport and football from the top to the bottom in the gradual opening of society would contribute to solving a real problem.

Not only did the NFF take an active role, they also used their network and the concept of football family to get their message across. Several people from all over Norway; players both professional and young children, coaches, leaders and parents voiced their concerns in local and national media about the lack of activity and the financial crisis clubs were in, which, showed that there “is a real problem out there.”

In addition, the NFF President Svendsen hosted a press conference on April 23, where he discussed two topics; how to start up with football again and financial compensation for lost income of clubs. He expressed that “there is a real concern that the Norwegian football model may collapse” (Moen Myhre & Brodal, 2020, para. 9). Svendsen wanted a minimum of \$60 million for football from the authorities for the first couple of months to be distributed to grassroots and top football; \$30 million each. The sport and the volunteer sector had previously been allocated \$70 million in an application-based compensation from the state. However, after certain criteria were set by the government, only \$27 million was applied for by all types of sports clubs to compensate for their losses, even though there is an estimated loss of over \$100 million for these clubs. As Tvedt Anderssen commented,

It’s quite difficult to communicate financial issues, but a lot of our members (i.e. grassroot and elite clubs) are worried about money. They are worried that they can’t keep their volunteers and that kids will lose a place to be active. In the NFF our sponsors go in with a lot of money, but they are not allowed to just sponsor elite football, they must also sponsor grassroot activity. For example, Telenor [the biggest telecom company in Norway] sponsors the Women’s senior National team, but they

also sponsor Telenor Xtra [i.e., an after-school academy for kids in grassroots clubs where they get help with homework and play football].

Phase 4: Intensifying media pressure.

On April 30, the Government declared that exercise in groups of 50 persons was allowed as of May 7, if people could maintain a one-meter distance. This first step toward more activity had an impact on the football family; grassroots clubs and children started playing football again. However, elite football was still neglected; the early changes did not affect them in any major way, frustrating many supporters. The NFF President Svendsen's focus on financial issues was questioned and the Minister of Health ended up accusing another politician for being a football *bully*. Obviously, the Minister felt that football enthusiasts had been too much in the forefront and he was quoted saying,

I would like to remind you [i.e. Giske, another famous politician in Norway with a heart for football,] that we still haven't decided when the rest of the school will open and when important parts of our business world will be able to open. Then Trond Giske demands that football should be informed about opening up before the rest of these sectors. I think Giske is a football bully. (Baardsen, 2020, para. 2)

Now, the general message was that football would not get any special treatment. However, this changed after a week. In a press conference on May 7th, the government identified football as one of the most important actors to be included in the gradual opening of society. Opening up the game of football was mentioned in the same sentence as the re-opening of schools. The NFF had worked hard to change the situation. The voices of the football family had intensified and the overall focus had shifted from financial issues to children's need for activity. By doing so, the NFF managed to get rid of the bully label and was again seen as a federation that acted for the benefit of society at large. In addition, the NFF had shown

through their work with a pilot project for *Eliteserien* that they could start up with activities at a professional level, though without spectators. The Government and NFF chose football as the “pilot sport” for the gradual opening of the society, as a sign of the successful proactive strategy. The men’s professional league *Eliteserien* started up training on May 11 and plan to play matches after June 15.

Concluding Remarks

While it is unsure when a Champions League match will be played in front of ecstatic spectators again, we will be able to watch matches again – on TV. The financial consequences of this shift due to the Covid-19 is also unsure; this was a main issue, but less stressed in the strategic crisis communication of Norwegian Football and the NFF. As indicated above, in Phase 2, the NFF created a government-contact strategy with two focal points; (1) influence politicians with the goal to start up with activity again, and (2) to alter the government’s crisis approach to better suit football clubs. This turned out to be a successful strategy. As described in Phase 3, to get this message across, the NFF took an active role in presenting the football model to political authorities and other government bodies. Other than the press conference held by the president of the NFF on April 23, the NFF never publicly discussed its financial crisis. This was a deliberate choice from the NFF. As Tvedt Anderssen expressed it in our interview, “every industry looks at themselves as important, but you are not important because of your size or power. You are important if you get politicians to make legislation in your favour.”

Through their Covid-19 crisis communication strategy in Norway, the NFF managed to influence Norwegian politicians so that the Norwegian football model can continue to exist after the pandemic. Leadership under crisis is a balancing act, and the NFF’s Communication Director Tvedt Anderssen, was clear on the fact that communication and providing enough and appropriate information was a challenge. The NFF’s strategic use of the voices from the

football family had a major impact on the development in Norway. More so because other stakeholders who could have participated in the debate over the importance of physical activity, such as PE teachers and many of the other sports associations in Norway were less visible in the media debate and less active in the process. The action taken by the NFF also underlines the importance of timing in crisis communication, i.e. *when* issues can or should be emphasised in a crisis and at what pace (Dille & Söderlund, 2011). As illustrated in Phase 4, this can be a delicate and fragile process. Had the NFF started with an emphasis on financial issues and not included grassroots activity and the voice of the football family, the situation might very well have had a different outcome.

While the professional players dominate the public space, there is a constant tension between grassroots sport and elite sport over funding. Our description of the four phases illustrates how these tensions decreased during the crisis, and particularly how elite sport depended on the football family during the crisis. The NFF appealed to the political authorities by focusing on grassroots activities and particularly children's needs for activity. This finding illustrates the importance of sport social responsibility (Hopwood & Skinner, 2013) and promotion of health in general (Hills, Walker, & Barry, 2019) in crisis communication, and how a close relationship between grassroots and elite football can be beneficial for communication and overall stakeholder engagement during crisis.

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Figure 1: The Covid-19 rules made by NFF so clubs could have activity that followed the government restrictions (include by the permission of the NFF). May 13th
<https://www.fotball.no/contentassets/4b52dab0741c4340ad447a6640461d9a/koronavettregler-engelsk.jpg>



CORONA - ACTIVITY GUIDELINES



There should be one leader present per group.



Number of players per group:
6-9 years: max 10
10 years and older: max 20



Always one meter or more distance.



Tackling or close physical contact between players is not permitted.



Remember that the ball is a potential source of infection and must be cleaned with disinfectant before and after use.



Cones and other equipment should be cleaned before and after training.



Shared changing rooms shall not be used.



Remember good hygiene practices in connection with all activity, good access to disinfectant and routines for thorough washing of hands, before and after training.

REMEMBER TO CHECK FOTBALL.NO FOR THE LATEST RECOMMENDATIONS.