

Summary PhD thesis – Hans Erik Næss

Title: *The Promotional Value of Motorsport Culture. A Sociological Investigation of the FIA World Rally Championship*

From the snow and ice of Scandinavia to the glamour of Monte Carlo, from the heat of Kenya to the thin air in the Argentinian mountainsides, the FIA World Rally Championship (WRC) has served up passionate motorsport drama since its inauguration in its current form in 1973. During that time the sport has transformed from a little-known series to a pop-cultural roadshow worth millions of euros, with 13 rallies scattered around the world and more than 600 million TV-viewers annually. This development has led to diverging opinions on how to balance sporting identity with commercial concerns. On the one hand we find the 'traditionalists' who wants rallying to be what it was 'back in the days' and defy any changes made on the behalf of anything but the sport itself. On the other hand we find the 'modernists' who desire a real shift into 'the commercial age' by adapting to contemporary media consumption patterns and promotional desires. As such, the WRC seemingly is trapped in what is called 'the paradox of commercialism'. This paradox is defined as 'the challenge of extracting commercial value from their brands without compromising the intrinsic "integrity" and spirit of the game'. Hence, the question instigating this thesis was: how can we unravel this paradox?

Located at the intersection between sports management and the sociology of sports my research offer a multifaceted answer. Based on an analysis of the promotional context, the media, rallies, spectator culture, rally cars and the drivers of the WRC, I argue that the first step towards a solution is to realise that these 'traditionalists' and 'modernists' actually are allies, not enemies. The reason is that the WRC's sporting identity is the championship's key promotional asset. Drawing upon interviews with key people in the sport, historical studies, online forum analysis and trans-local ethnographic research from rallies (Monaco and France), spectator cultures (Finland and Argentina), the inner life of a WRC team (Italy), and the media production facilities (Wales), my findings from each of the WRC's main sites specify how its traditions and cultural meaning supply promotional substance to the championship. By investigating the narrative constitution of identity in the WRC ethnographically, most notably through a theoretical framework consisting of analysis of narratives and narrative analysis, I uncovered how the meaning of the WRC – the relational composite of how people lace history, experiences, knowledge, the sense of place and cultural practices – was expressed differently depending on promotional arena. At the same time, I found a mutually reinforcing *leitmotif* in what I call a *positive nostalgia* regardless of where I did fieldwork.

To circumvent the paradox of commercialism the WRC Promoter GmbH (its commercial apparatus) and the FIA (Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile, the governing body of the WRC) thus need to acknowledge the content of this positive nostalgia – what rallies, drivers, spectator culture and cars, all seen as relationally defined arenas within the historical context of rallying, constitute of promotional value. In a broader academic context, the combination of narrative inquiry and trans-local fieldwork was relevant to circumvent the paradox of commercialism. Similar to several other global sports, most notably football, it is precisely the narrative negotiation between past and present – online and offline – that engages many in the WRC community or other sporting communities to spend time, money and emotions on the sport. If one allows for more narrative inquiries at the intersection between sports management and sociology of sports, there is hence a chance that the abovementioned paradox may lose some of its paradoxical force. Finally, because of its storytelling qualities, such an approach enables the researcher to convert the vast material gathered from trans-local ethnographic studies into readable prose and still provide analytic perspectives in line with the characteristics of the phenomena in question.