

There do not appear to have been any exclamations of “Je suis Torben” on social media over the last few weeks. This suggests that, in spite of the tragic and abhorrent events that have recently hit Paris, there are after all some limits to free speech. Torben Aakjaer from Denmark, a country often portrayed as the home of free speech, was a Manchester United scout. But, following the alleged posting of anti-immigration messages on his Facebook page, Aakjaer [was sacked](#)

The incident highlights the uneasy, and indeed unclear, relationship that sport has with social media, especially in the context of its business concerns. Manchester United, with its corporate communications teams, [commercially valuable brand](#) and global fan-base is compelled to take action against any suspect social media content with which it becomes associated. After all, United jousts with other top teams around the world for the title of “Most Liked Football Club” [on Facebook](#)

. Popularity translates into fans, which translates into ticket and merchandise sales. How people perceive the club and the brand is therefore critical.

The problem is though that people like Aakjaer, especially through their personal accounts, cannot be managed so easily. Similarly – and more publicly – they struggle to control their players. Former United captain Rio Ferdinand is a [case in point](#) .

Time for sport to up its game

In one sense, such incidents simply re-confirm for us that elite professional athletes are human beings, with the same frailties and the same tendency towards communicating before speaking that we all suffer from. But for their employers, their inclination to pose their views whatever the consequences, poses some significant strategic challenges.

Many of us – individuals and organisations alike – will be aware of the likely consequences should we post socially undesirable content on our social media sites. With higher profiles and greater followings, the stakes are even higher for athletes and those connected to the big businesses of sports clubs.

Yet the compromising posts keep on coming. A player ranting on social media may be the

epitome of free speech, but the fact that those such as Manchester United sometimes struggle to fireproof is symptomatic of the need for sport to up its game in a social media environment that is rapidly maturing.

Chasing the rainbow

As well as fearing the negative potential of social media, sports clubs are also keen to exploit it for commercial gain. There are perhaps lessons to be learnt from the 1990s when clubs first began developing websites (with huge investment involved), with the hope that they would bring huge new revenues for them. While these sites have affected the way some fans consume sport the anticipated monetary gains have never quite materialised.

Social media is so far telling a similar story. At the end of 2010, I chaired a sports marketing and social media conference in Barcelona at which some of the great and the good from sport gleefully looked forward to an impending financial bonanza. Towards the end of 2014 I found myself at a similar conference, this time at a football and social media event in Berlin. So far, not so good though. There was still a sense of expectation in the air, but few answers to the question of how to make money from social media.

What social media can and can't do

Social media is great for providing information about the line-up for a game, details about event timings and the latest news about a star player's injury. But otherwise, most in sport have struggled to create either the buzz achieved by Gangnam Style, or the revenues generated by other internet start-ups.

Indeed for many in sport right now, the extent of cutting-edge social media appears to be them posting videos on YouTube – something many 12-year-olds are capable of doing. If further evidence was needed of sport's inability to get to grips with social media, one needs to look no further than a case from the English Premier League.

One high-profile Premier League club maintains its global social media presence. This entails a group of willing volunteers in countries across the world translating daily messages and a ragtag assortment of announcements, photographs and press conference coverage. This is not the stuff of legend, nor is it a sturdy foundation upon which to generate and sustain revenues.

Social media in sport: still more Emperor's New Clothes than Brave New World

Written by The Conversation

Some in sport will in turn inevitably counter that social media engagement is more about fan engagement. But clubs and their financial managers often want to see a direct link to the bottom line. Just how far down the line these benefits are to be expected remains a moot point. Furthermore, for all the hype about social media bringing supporters and and sport closer together, some fans have [vehement objections](#) to it

So can social media be mined for profit for sports clubs? At the Berlin conference last year, there was much excitement surrounding the appearance of Cristiano Ronaldo's social media team. The Portuguese international footballer is something of a social media phenomenon, the world's first athlete to hit 100m Facebook followers.

Having listened to the presentation though, it was hardly an insight into the secrets of alchemy: one of the best players in the world, playing for one of the best clubs in the world; young, handsome and rich to boot. Great for Ronaldo and the business people behind him, but of little value to those who struggle to fill stadiums or retain financial solvency.

You have to ask therefore whether at this juncture social media in sport is more a case of Emperor's New Clothes than Brave New World. Twitter, Facebook and the rest were supposed to herald a new age of openness, freedom and revenue generation, yet so many athletes and clubs seem to be forever back-tracking on content they have posted. At the same time, the pot of social media gold on the horizon remains exactly that: despite industry rhetoric about fan engagement, this particular pot is too infrequently achieved.

As social media therefore matures and we enter the next phase of its development, the challenge for sport will be how to handle what seems like a need for controlled openness, while at the same time of finally delivering on the promise of "jam tomorrow" revenue predictions.

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