# Enhancing Media Sport Consumption: Online Gambling in European Soccer

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## Introduction

There was a time when elite sport used to be a fairly simple form of entertainment. Players competed once a week and teams and organizations collected the match day revenue from attendants. The 1930s witnessed the advent of televised sport – first in the UK in 1937, in the US in 1939 and much later in Spain in 1954 – and it was not until the 1950s that the medium became popular. By 1953, 63 per cent of the American households who had bought a TV set within the last year stopped attending sports stadia (Magnane, 1966: 91). Meanwhile, broadcasters compensated poorly for the decrease in fan attendance as we can see in the case of the BBC, which rarely paid more than £250 in broadcasting rights (Whannel, 2009). Decades later, sport has become a much more complicated spectacle. Match day revenue accounts now for as little as one third of the annual income in a top European soccer club (Deloitte, 2014), while the media dimension has pervaded the whole sport sphere. Those same institutions – namely sport organizations, teams and sport governing bodies – that once thought media was reducing their business now embrace the global awareness and fan engagement media companies provide, coming to the conclusion that mediated sport in elite competitions not only does not jeopardize attendance (Forrest et al., 2004) but has been promoting it in the long run since less media-saturated times (Fizel and Bennett, 1989).

Today we are contemplating a new episode of media sport evolution, one that demands an expansion of its definition in order to further our understanding and transcend the media sport notion as the mere broadcasting of sport matches. The dilemma for the sports fan is no longer between on-site or mediated presence but about how to live an enhanced fan experience. The digital age has dramatically made this media sport enhancement possible by means of computers, video game consoles, tablets, smartphones, and more recently wearables; yet it would be a mistake to consider these devices solely as technological improvements instead of tools that turn media sport consumption into enjoyable experiences: social media discussion, second or third screens to multitask while watching a game, fan participation through online communities such as fantasy leagues and notoriously, online sports betting.

In the following pages we will discuss the role of the latter, online sport betting, in the European context and its implications in the reconfiguration of media sport ecology, particularly focusing on the case of elite European soccer. After an introduction to online sports betting in Europe as a whole we will focus on how soccer organizations and institutions along with media companies and their individual influencers have repositioned themselves and accommodate gambling companies in order to create synergies and in some cases, the convergence of media platforms. All in all, the aim here is to illustrate the intricate relations between sport bodies, media and online gambling industries and to what extent these intersections add to an enhanced media sport commodity for the fan.

In this article we will use the term betting to refer specifically to the activity of gambling for money on sports. Gambling, which also encompasses casino, bingo or

poker activities, will be used in a wider sense to refer to the industry as a whole, as many times gambling companies also include sports betting features. Gaming, on the contrary, consists in free-to-play games fundamentally via Facebook or other social online platforms. However, as Rebecca Cassidy notes, the boundaries between all these companies and their activities are 'contested and fluid' (2013: 75).

**Online sport betting and media interaction in Europe**

The intersection of gambling with media sport dates back to the origins of sport itself. In 1744 golf and cricket were codified in order to provide the bookmakers a set of consistent rules to facilitate bets (Forrest and Simmons, 2003). Some of the early media to report on sport, such as the *Boston Gazette* in 1733, included horse race fixture tables for wagers (Boyle, 2006: 31). While betting has formed part of British sports media culture since the 18th century (Jarvie 2012: 226), it is a relatively modern phenomenon in Spain, which began in the late 1940s with the consolidation of professional soccer and the the birth of the football pools (La Quiniela), popularized by General Franco himself. As Jarvie put it, the growth of popular gambling offered an economic rationale for the growth of the early sporting press (2012: 226). For many decades the commodification of sports (Giulianotti, 2005; Moor, 2007), fostered the commercialisation of items which were not part of the market logic until that moment. As sport industries increasingly exhausted the still-to-be-commoditised business areas, a need for exploring new territories was paramount. Betting as a confluence of media and sports institutions expanded with the advent of the digital platforms and dramatically transformed the relationships between the actors involved. This transformation could have an impact on the direction sport develops, with sport institutions adapting their game and business

to the needs of betting companies similarly as they did before when media companies dictated that development (Forrest and Simmons, 2003).

The sports media, in their traditional roles of informer and entertainer, have simply transferred this dual capacity to the world of online sports betting, providing the opportunity and the data for an informed betting decision but also, and more importantly, promoting gambling behaviour by building upon the primary impulses and deep involvement of soccer fans. These urges are essential today to sports betting practices. According to Andrew Garrood from Las Vegas Sports Consultants, bookmakers in the UK receive over 50% of bets made during the game (2014). Technology supports millions of gamblers waging concurrently and latency, the time elapsed between the placing of a bet until its acceptance by the system, has been reduced to less than 2 seconds in live matches (Griffiths et al., 2014), probably approaching the milliseconds employed in stock markets and thus opening the door to automated betting based on live predictive analytics in the near future. A bet cycle is now no longer than 150 seconds on average (Betradar, 2014), promoting an instant gratifications structure and reducing the appeal of long-term bets.

For live or in-play betting to be possible, fans require the broadcasting of the sporting event, either through traditional media or by online streaming. As Griffiths notes, 'gambling operators have capitalized on the increasing amount of televised sport' and turned betting into a 'natural side order to the live action' (Griffiths et al., 2014, p. 44). In-play betting, the fastest growing form of sports betting (Betradar, 2014), comes hand in hand with new technologies. One screen does not seem to be enough anymore to fully understand what is happening on the

field, and the audience needs to complete the viewing with practices such as social media discussion, fantasy leagues, picture sharing, as well as betting. The implementation of 'second screens' (Karppinen, 2013) in the form of tablets and mobile phones – increasing their size to optimize the experience – presents the necessary technological basis for these new practices.

In turn, the gambling industry funds sports media in different ways. First, media include banners in their websites to promote betting companies. Second, media websites become marketing affiliates and sub-affiliates for gambling companies. According to a report commissioned by Odobo, around 50% of the traffic on online gambling sites has been derived from affiliate sites (H2 Gambling Capital, 2013). Sports news sites play a major role in attracting these fans that will later be redirected through linking banners or promotions to gambling websites. Affiliate marketing represents a big revenue stream for media because, on average, betting sites share a commission of 30% of their net income with them (Affiliates United, 2014). Additionally, affiliates are encouraged to bring sub-affiliates to the pyramid scheme, monetising a small but not negligible share of the revenue generated.

**Soccer online betting ecology**

Sports bodies such as the English Premier League, the Spanish league or UEFA; media companies like Sky Sports, Canal +, British Telecom or Telefonica; and gambling businesses in Europe such as William Hill, Paddy Power, Bwin or 188 Bet, seem to understand the strength of their 'symbiotic relationships' as they mutually benefit from the continuing growth of elite sports and the subsequent growth in sports betting (European Gaming and Betting Association, 2014: 4). In Europe no direct payment is made from betting corporations towards sports

institutions or teams in terms of 'betting rights' over the content provided by those sports. However, these payments do occur in the form of shirt sponsorships, official betting partnerships, broadcasting rights for online streaming or land-based retails and advertising space in media, to name but a few.

In addition, data companies like OPTA, a subsidiary of Perform Group based in the UK, pay soccer leagues to include the data their competitions generate in online platforms that are sold later to betting operators. Media companies in turn buy this information from data collectors to build up compelling stories and narratives that emphasise the unique essence of what is happening on the field, the quantitatively meaningful and record-setting dimension of modern soccer (Lopez-Gonzalez, 2014). As an illustrative example of this commercial exchange, Perform signed in 2013 a 3-year deal with the English Premier League to become the official media data collection and distribution partner. These payments are made despite the EU court's ruling that fixture tables do not imply copyright protection (Court of Justice of the European Union, 2012), demonstrating the mutual benefit of a healthy relationship for both sides.

Probably the source of greatest apprehension for sport bodies, gambling and data companies and media companies is match-fixing, a disruptive element in the soccer betting ecology. Match-fixing has become an issue of such grave concern that Interpol has created an Integrity in Sports Unit (Asser Institute, 2014) divided into three complementary actions: i) the FIFA-funded 20 million dollar ten year program directed at the eradication of match-fixing under the supervision of Interpol itself; ii) the project known as the European Football United for the Integrity of the Game which commits itself to fighting sports corruption and match

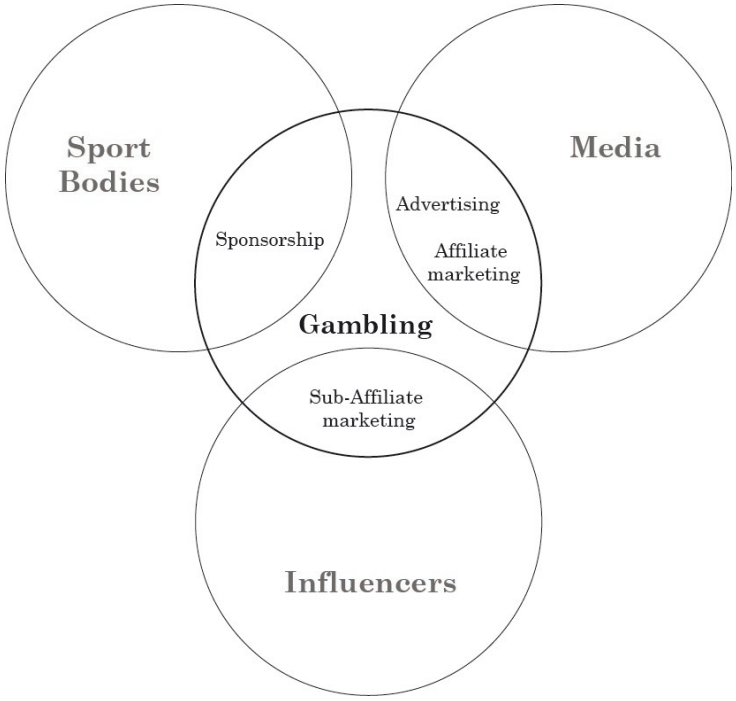
fixing; iii) the joining of force between Transparency International and the Association of European Football leagues (EPFL) to pilot an education and match-fixing program called Staying On Side. Some of the results of these early programs include Interpol's public denouncement in The Hague in February 2013 of a corrupt soccer betting network coordinated from Singapore but involving no less than 13 countries and some 380 matches (including World Cup qualifiers and Champions League group games) played between 2009 and 2011. The fraudulent operation necessarily involved the payment of bribes to over 400 people including players, referees and club directors. At a Spanish level, the President of the Spanish Football League, Javier Tebas, is also on the illegal soccer betting warpath and has raised accusations of match-fixing over end-of-season games since 2011.

The close connection between match-fixing and gambling has led to a number of initiatives in the area of sports betting aimed at controlling sports corruption such as the Sports Betting Intelligence Unit (SBIU) established in 2010 by the United Kingdom Gambling Commission. This special unit addresses criminal activity associated with match-fixing or sports corruption related gambling. The SBIU works with sports organizations to collect information from a number of sources, investigates allegations and develop intelligence on sports corruption related betting activities tied to the UK thanks to alerts from operators about suspicious activity on betting markets or tip offs through a confidential intelligence line.

Following on from here we want to present a media sport gambling ecology model that explains how gambling companies operate within the traditional framework of media and sport bodies and to what extent online gambling has penetrated and transformed these relationships. Figure 1 shows how the gambling industry is at

the intersection of sport bodies, media companies and the influencers that reach the fans and promote betting products.

**Figure 1. Soccer online betting ecology**




First, sport bodies are subsidised by gambling through sponsorship deals and official partnerships. Also, as part of their deals, sport competitions often show gambling ads in their stadia. Second, gambling companies buy ad space at online media outlets and in addition to that pay them affiliate quotas for every euro media consumers lose on their bets as a result of a link clicking on the media outlet's website. Interestingly, on several occasions illegal streaming sites promote regulated betting sites in their webpages, which illustrates the difficulty of enforcing a globally effective legislation on the confluence of online betting and sport. Finally, influencers might get affiliate or sub-affiliate quotas –depending on how they negotiated their commission with the betting operator, either through a

previous affiliate or by themselves – by following the same procedure as the media companies. In the end gambling companies attract fans to their sites in the hope that eventually they will get a return for their investment.

*Sports bodies*

Gambling has been ranked the seventh business sector regarding sport sponsorship worldwide, with an annual growth of 350% since 2007. This flourishing market can be summarized in the following staggering figure: the number of gambling operators as shirt sponsors in the top 5 European leagues grew from 1 in 2002/3 to 26 in 2010/11 (European Gaming and Betting Association, 2014). At this particular moment in time almost every major European soccer team has secured a gambling official partner as can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1. Top 20 European soccer teams and their gambling partnerships**

| Soccer club | Country | Revenue in m€[1] | Gambling partnership |
|---|---|---|---|
| Real Madrid | Spain | 518.9 | Bwin[2] |
| FC Barcelona | Spain | 482.6 | Betfair (cancelled) |
| Bayern Munich | Germany | 431.2 | Bwin |
| Manchester United | England | 423.8 | Bwin |
| PSG | France | 398.8 | PMU |
| Manchester City | England | 316.2 | 188 Bet |
| Chelsea | England | 303.4 | Coral |
| Arsenal | England | 284.3 | Paddy Power |
| Juventus | Italy | 272.4 | Bwin |
| AC Milan | Italy | 263.5 | Izi Play |
| Borussia Dortmund | Germany | 256.2 | - |
| Liverpool | England | 240.6 | 188 Bet, Misli, Betfair, Come on! |
| Schalke 04 | Germany | 198.2 | bet-at-home.com |
| Tottenham Hotspur | England | 172 | Marathonbet |
| Internazionale | Italy | 168.8 | - |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Galatasaray | Turkey | 157 | Nesine.com |
| Hamburger SV | Germany | 135.4 | Tipico |
| Fenerbahçe | Turkey | 126.4 | - |
| AS Roma | Italy | 124.4 | Mondogoal[3] |
| Atlético Madrid | Spain | 120 | - |

Notes: [1] Source: Deloitte. [2] Bwin is also a partner of Olympique de Marseille and Anderlecht. [3] Apparent ties but not officially disclosed as partner.

In the 2009/10 soccer season, when reliable data were last gathered, it was estimated that gambling companies paid for almost 17% of the overall shirt sponsorship revenue in top European soccer (European Gaming and Betting Association, 2014: 61). The table shows a tremendously dispersed gambling market with strong competition between the operators. This fierce competition is often cited by gambling operators to counter allegations of pocketing huge profit margins (Remote Gambling Association, 2010). The case of Liverpool FC is particularly noteworthy. The team has closed no less than four partnership deals with exclusive rights for different markets: Betfair for the UK, Spain, Bulgaria, Denmark, Italy and Ireland; Misli for Turkey; Come on! for Escandinavia; and 188bet for Brazil and Asia. This strategy has been termed a 'geo-targeted betting experience' (Garlitos, 2014) and seems to anticipate the complexity of regulatory frameworks in each member state of the European Union.

Soccer partnerships confer global visibility upon betting operators and facilitate fans with the necessary knowledge and access to their platforms (Hing et al., 2013). Gambling partners often have a spot on a team's website where visiting fans can eventually reach the betting sites. Nonetheless, sport organizations find themselves in an often problematic situation due to their need to harmonize their fans' emotional involvement with the team and their gambling partners'

commercial interests. Commercial attractiveness is a connatural element of commoditised sport and organizations try to promote it while preventing their fans from feeling disengaged from the game and disregarded by their team as mere paying customers. Arsenal's head of global partnerships, Vinai Venkatesham, after landing a deal with Paddy Power said 'our partnership will ensure Arsenal fans have access to unique betting offers *when backing their team*' (Arsenal FC, 2013). The end of this excerpt provides an instance of how teams and companies try to minimise their conflicting aims. The analytical reasons behind a betting decision collide with the fans' irrational and purely emotional desire to back their team; that is why Paddy Powers offers special deals to Arsenal fans provided that they bet on Arsenal to win.

*Media*

The foreseeable convergence of gambling and social gaming could benefit fans, who are believed to be more prone to participate in betting contests if they can compete against friends (Cassidy, 2013). Mark Griffiths (2014) adds to this debate by incorporating the concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic value of games. Gambling companies frame their core business increasingly in terms of entertainment, an intrinsic value that relates to the fun of the experience, the emotion and engagement with the soccer match, and the experience of sharing that moment with friends. The traditional extrinsic value of betting then, that is, making money, might be losing momentum in the complex and shifting gambling panorama. This idea is backed by Konik who points out that 'for a vast majority, sports' betting is just a form of entertainment' (Konik, 2014). The promotion of the intrinsic to the detriment of the extrinsic values in betting behaviour might have prompted the rise of personalized gambling, an enhancement for media sport spectacles that, for

some people, 'appears to be becoming part of the match day soccer experience' (Griffiths et al., 2014: 336).

Media companies play a fundamental part in this enhanced soccer experience as they embellish and expand the occasionally dull and brief 90-minute game. The commercial department of The Guardian newspaper claims that about a third of those who read about sport in print or online bet on horses and soccer (Elliot, 2014). Match broadcasting, both in radio and television, includes not only gambling advertising but also embedded betting tips. Sky Sports, one of the UK's largest sports media platforms and the leading pay per view operation for English Premier League consumption, developed the Skybet option. Fans are encouraged to transfer what they are learning through soccer broadcasting to the betting site, a mobile and tablet optimized application. To further engage the fans, OPTA, the data partner of the EPL, supplies throughout the 2014-15 season '880 data points per match to bookmaker clients that drive engagement and propensity to bet' (Perform Group as cited in European Gaming and Betting Association, 2014: 28). 880 betting options during 90 minutes – such as distance covered by a player, penalties conceded, red and yellow cards, corners kicked, and their combinations –lead to a huge sophistication of the betting industry since the time when the only *bettable* aspect of a match was its outcome.

This latter point relates to another important component of the connection between media and gambling. Sky Sports sealed a multi-year deal with Ladbrokes, one of the largest and oldest betting companies worldwide, to distribute its television signal to 2,488 betting shops across the UK and Ireland. The deal wants to improve the user experience and induce the 'bet in play in retail', a growing practice among

sport fans (European Gaming and Betting Association, 2014). This example shows that the implementation of remote technology does not necessarily imply the obsolescence of traditional land-based operators as fans might see an added value in sharing with like-minded people a digital experience in a real environment.

In addition to this perspective we can also see how betting operators have closed exclusive partnerships to provide Wi-Fi access in European stadia. Unibet signed in 2014 a commitment with Scottish club Glasgow Celtic to offer free Wi-Fi for live betting in the stands. Simon Hills, commercial director of Sports Revolution, commented that 'Stadium Wi-Fi has huge potential for commercial partners to offer services that enhance the match day experience for fans' (Sports Revolution, 2014). The same will happen in British stadia where Perform included as part of its deal with the EPL the right to distribute via Wi-Fi live data of the match so fans could rapidly access them and place their bet from the terraces. All in all, these innovations represent the centrality (Whannel, 2010) of the second and third screens for a full appreciation of sporting content and hence, the ubiquity of sports mediation, even in retail or stadium experiences.

*Influencers*

Influencers in gambling follow the logic of the two-step communication theory (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). Media, gambling companies and sports institutions filter their messages through individuals with whom fans have already established a lasting bond. They enact the normalisation of gambling behaviour in our society and add on the entertainment features of modern soccer. The celebrity culture and the focus on individuals rather than on groups, notably relevant in the sports world (Whannel, 2010) imposes patterns as to how media companies can reach their

public and influence their gambling behaviour. Popular faces such as former professional players and sportswriters can serve as intermediaries between betting companies and fans. If we closely examine the situation in Spain, for instance, we can see that sports journalists and betting operators are invariably linked. In Table 2 we can observe that not surprisingly every one of the ten most influential sportswriters has ties to the gambling industry in the form of endorsement deals. The cumulative audience of these ten journalists reaches 5.56 million users, a figure that blurs boundaries between personal and mass media. All these celebrities use Twitter as a parallel activity to their job by capitalising on the prestige they have obtained through media outlets in Spain.

The case of Mr Chip is worthy of mention. While the rest of the influencers on the list have a journalistic profile, he has a background in telecommunications engineering. Mr Chip decided to become a sports journalist later in his career and elaborated a huge database with almost every possible aspect of soccer included in it. His tweets reflect statistical expertise and rigour and therefore his predictions, supposedly based on data and not hunches, are taken as trustworthy ones. On his Twitter account he links his tips to thepicklounge.com, which can be accessed by subscription.

**Table 2. Top 10 most followed soccer journalists in Spain**

| Soccer journalist in Spain | Followers on Twitter in millions[1] | Gambling endorsement[2] |
|---|---|---|
| Mr Chip | 1.15 | thepicklounge.com |
| Guillem Balagué | 0.83 | Sportingbet |
| Julio Maldini | 0.67 | Betfair, crackreport10.com |
| Tomás Roncero | 0.57 | Luckia, asapuestas.com |
| Josep Pedrerol | 0.44 | Sportium |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Manu Carreño | 0.41 | LBapuestas (Ladbrokes) |
| Pipi Estrada | 0.40 | Sportium |
| Michael Robinson | 0.38 | Bwin |
| Manolo Lama | 0.36 | LBapuestas (Ladbrokes) |
| Sid Lowe | 0.35 | Bwin |

Note: [1] Retrieved in September 2014. [2] Endorsements since 2012.

One could think that gambling influencers would turn out to be more persuasive to fans to the extent that they can deliver accurate, computer-driven, analytical predictions. In reality, media companies in European soccer do not seek this kind of influencer profile and, in contrast, they favour the 'guy next door' factor which brings a certain charisma to the sport. In the UK, Skybet employs staff journalists – so-called *traders* – to present a podcast with betting tips. Paul Merson, former Arsenal FC midfielder and self-admitted alcohol and gambling addict, is the most commented tipster on Skybet. The Sun promotes Andy Totham and Nigel Seeley and redirects the fans to the Titanbet betting site. In similar fashion, The Daily Mirror uses Derek "the McGuv'nor" McGovern's tips in a cartoonish upbeat style to reroute fans to 666bet.com. Sometimes former players part ways from mainstream media outlets and create their own parallel betting platforms such as footballtips.com, a site joined by ex-Liverpool captain Jamie Redknapp and Welsh international Robbie Savage while former Irish internationals Tony Cascarino and Andy Townsend do the same at bashthebookis.com.

**Final remarks**

In this article the authors have tried to explore online sports betting as an enhanced experience of media sport consumption. Gambling companies have been at the centre stage since the beginnings of the media and sports industries in the 18th Century, a role that is increasing today due to the digital and technological

revolution. Fans of European soccer have developed ever more sophisticated ways of consuming sports and match attendance or game consumption on television does not now seem to be enough anymore. The gambling sector wants to capitalise on this trend and has expanded the opportunities and accessibility for fans in order to place a bet.

The intersection of the media and gambling industries offers an opportunity for growth as well as posing a threat. Forrest and Simmons (2003) speculate on the possibility of gambling companies dictating the future of sports competitions, in the same way media companies did ever since broadcasting rights became the primary source of revenue for sporting organizations. If, as they suggest, some sports succeed in organizing themselves and operating according to gambling-friendly structures, these sports could gain a significant edge over their competitors. The media industry forced changes in sports regulation (Turner, 2007) such as multiple timeouts, increased pace of the game, media access inside the locker room, international time schedule to accommodate foreign viewers, or 4-day long weekends in domestic leagues to boost media coverage. In the event of gambling companies merging or allying with media industries, sport organizations will arguably need to comply with their demands and adapt their game to meet the expectations of betting fans.

Looking into the future, we are now witnessing a partial and increasing convergence of betting and gaming industries, social and real-money gambling (Cassidy, 2013). Fantasy sports and other social games have enhanced the sport consumption experience. These forms of gambling are often considered games of skill and therefore avoid gambling regulations, as is the case in most US states

where online gambling is prohibited. These new forms of sport consumption enhancement might provoke major changes in the 'gambling ecosystem' (Cassidy, 2013: 78), since both traditional media actors – ESPN, SKY, BT, ITV, Time Warner…– as well as traditional gambling entities – Ladbrokes, William Hill, Bwin…– feel the threat of the already-announced appearance on to the market of players such as Google with Android or Facebook in the field of social gaming. These new gigantic actors could potentially inject millions of euros into the blurring boundaries between professional sport, media companies and both the real-money and free gambling–gaming sectors, forcing traditional actors out of the market.

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