

Networks and the Organization of Identity: The Case of Norwegian Snowboarding

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Abstract

In this article a particular aspect of change in the organization of sport is addressed: the emergence of alternative, flexible types of sport organizations linked to lifestyle sports. Based on a qualitative case study of the Norwegian Snowboard Federation (NSBF) the article raises the questions of what characterizes such organizations and which challenges occur when they become part of more traditional sports organizations. Network theory is used in order to analyze NSBF's processes of establishing legitimacy within the snowboard community while at the same time having to adapt to the formal requirements of the Norwegian Olympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NOC). The paper demonstrates that networking activities may be used to create and sustain new social entities such as the NSBF. However, networks as organizational forms also create contradictions to traditional sport systems that need to be solved through bargaining, concealment or challenging.

Introduction

Within the literature on sport organizations 'change' has emerged as an important topic during the past two decades (Amis, Slack, & Hinings, 2004; Kikulis, 2000;

Kikulis, Slack, & Hinings, 1992; O'Brien & Slack, 2004; Slack & Hinings, 1992). In this literature, changing policies of the state and increasing commercialization are conceived as main sources of change in sport, often resulting in professionalization and bureaucratization. The main theme of this article is change in sport organizations, but from a rather different viewpoint. Using the Norwegian Snowboard Federation (NSBF) as a case study, the article focuses on the emergence of new sporting cultures that have become intertwined with traditional sports. A particularly interesting aspect of such new sporting cultures is the formation of strong communities based on a shared identity (Wheaton, 2004). This has implications for possible patterns of becoming organized and for the integration into established sports.

Snowboarding is often described as a lifestyle sport,¹ in which the expression and enhancement of a particular type of identity is central. A global community of snowboarders exists (Heino, 2000), in which the NSBF is embedded. Those who work for, or are the elected representatives of, the NSBF, maintain and make use of diverse sets of network ties to amateur snowboarders, event organizers, top athletes, media photographers and product producers, all of whom are part of the snowboarding community. The network is characterized by informal relations, and by the absence of formal leadership. On the one hand the NSBF is part of this snowboarding community; on the other it is a formal entity that needs to establish its own identity. This process of establishing the NSBF as a social entity, integral to but different from the snowboarding community, is complicated by the fact that it is federated in a large, traditional sports organization: the Norwegian Olympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NOC).

¹ 'Lifestyle sports' is a broad concept. Such sports are based around the consumption of new objects (like boards), demand commitment in terms of time, money, style of life and collective expression, and involve a participatory ideology that promotes fun, hedonism and involvement (Wheaton, 2004: 11-12).

This paper aims to contribute to an understanding of new types of organizing within the sports field as represented by the NSBF, and to shed light on the interaction between this type of organization and more established organizational forms, such as the NOC. In particular, the question of possible modes of organizing in relation to identity communities is put to the fore. It is suggested that network organizing is an apt form of organizing within such communities, but that this form of organizing also creates possible tensions with more formalized systems. In particular, network organizing makes the use of authority and hierarchy difficult.

Castells' analytic description of 'the Network Society' (Castells, 1996, p. 2004) provides a starting point for describing the network characteristics of the NSBF. A model of outward- and inward-directed networking activities (Montgomery *et al.*, 2007) is then used to discuss networking activities as part of processes where a new social entity seeks to establish an identity that will assure its legitimacy within a field. Taken together, these two perspectives provide the tools to discuss what is particular to NSBF's organizing as part of a community. Finally, in order to approach the problem of authority within network organizations that are also part of more formalized systems, a perspective on how the leaders of organizations cope with institutional contradictions is presented (Oliver, 1991).

The paper proceeds in the following manner. First, the combination of theoretical approaches is presented in more detail. Following the section on methods, the historical and cultural backgrounds of the snowboard community and the NSBF are outlined. In line with the aims of the paper, the analytical part addresses two questions: a) how does the NSBF establish legitimacy within the snowboard community by way of network organizing? b) how does the NSBF handle contradictions between a differentiated set of expectations and modes of organizing?

The paper closes with a discussion of the potential of network theory to analyse change in sport organizing related to new sport cultures.

Theoretical approach: networks, communities and institutional contradictions

As noted by Osborn and Hagedoorn (1997), the theme of the 'network' received increasing attention within organizational theory commencing during the 1990s. Even though this theme had been present in earlier contributions with a focus on strategic alliances and on transaction costs (Benson, 1975; Williamson, 1985; Gulati, 1995), the development of modern organizational life seemed to urge new theoretical efforts to understand networks. To an increasing degree, these efforts have been multidisciplinary, spanning economics, theories of corporate strategy and, more recently, institutional theory (Osborn *et al.*, 1997).

The current field of network research is hence voluminous and diverse, and encompasses a variety of conceptions of causality and unity of analysis (Borgatti *et al.*, 2003). In relation to the present case it seems apt to focus on the strands that have investigated networks as linked to communities, whether these communities are professional (Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings, 2002; Oliver & Montgomery, 2005) or non-profit (Castells, 1996; Putnam, 2001; Stevenson & Greenberg, 2000). Communities may be defined as social entities that have established symbolic boundaries around them (Cohen, 1985), and which share a social identity (Montgomery & Oliver, 2007). In studies of social networks, communities and networks are sometimes confounded (Dal Fiore, 2007). In the past two decades, there have also been influential attempts to redefine communities as networks (Piselli, 2007; Wellman, 1997). These perspectives seek to renew the community concepts of classical sociology (Durkheim, 1991; Tönnies, 2001), making the argument that present day communities are no longer bound to space and that they take the shape of

personal networks that transcend the local (Castells, 1996; Wellman, 1997). Within these perspectives, the network as a form is invested with particular social characteristics, thus making the network into a particular type of community.

In this article, however, I commence with the idea that the network organizing form may serve the establishment and maintenance of social identities *within* communities in particular ways. Communities and networks are thus conceived as different, but interlinked constructs. In establishing such a perspective I take my starting point from one of the influential contributions that have identified networks as a special type of community and then rework it through other contributions. In a widely cited text, Castells (1996) casts social movements as templates for new forms of network organization, one which implies new types of balance between diversity and coordination (Stalder, 2006). In more traditional organizations, the coordination of activities towards a goal has necessitated either hierarchical forms of regulation (bureaucracy), or strong homogeneity and identity (communes) (Stalder, 2006: 99). The new networks, on the other hand, coordinate their actions without having a central authority, and they may tolerate strong heterogeneity without losing the ability to reach shared goals. As a consequence, the network presents itself as open, with no clear cut boundaries (Stalder, 2006; Wittel, 2001).

In an interpretation of Castells' theory, Stalder summarizes Castells' understanding of networks in the following manner:

A network is an enduring pattern of interaction among heterogeneous actors that define one another (identity). They coordinate themselves on the basis of common protocols, values and goals (process). A network reacts non-deterministically to self-selected external influences, thus not simply representing the environment but actively creating it (interdependence). Key

properties of a network are emergent from these processes unfolding over time, rather than determined by one of its elements (emergence). (Stalder, 2006: 180)

In Castells' definition of networks four key elements are thus interlinked: identity, process, interdependence and emergence. From this definition, it may be deduced that social identity is central to the existence of networks, but also that networks contribute to sustaining and developing a shared identity. This raises the question of whether the network is a result of this social identity or whether social identity is an outcome of the interaction in the network (cf. Abbott, 1995). A second pertinent question is related to 'emergence' as a principle of coordination. This principle implies that the decisions of the organization emerge through interaction and not as a result of any particular leader's decisions. Castells' description of how networks operate thus seems to exclude the use of authority on the part of one or several particular nodes in the network. This raises particular problems when a network operates within the confines of a formal organization, as is the case with the NSBF. A formal organization is generally expected to have an identifiable hierarchy of authority (Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson, 2000).

In a recent paper, Montgomery and Oliver (2007) provide a specification of the relationship between networks and social identities, and thus a way of handling the problem of whether networks create identities or vice versa. Using professions as an example, they present a four-stage model for the development of social entities, and discuss how outward- and inward-directed networking activities contribute in a process of establishing a stable social identity (Montgomery & Oliver, 2007).

Outward-directed activities are those that introduce a social identity to new groups. They also include activities to get jurisdiction over a domain accepted within a social

context (Montgomery *et al.*, 2007: 664). Inward-directed activities imply pulling members closer towards the core of the group and 'making the social identity of members more salient to insiders and outsiders' (Montgomery *et al.*, 2007: 664). Outward- and inward-directed networking activities are assumed to play different roles in different phases of the development of a social entity.

In the case of the NSBF, processes of establishing legitimacy within the wider community of snowboarders may be described as an outward-directed networking activity. Simultaneously, the NSBF has a need to establish a clearly defined social identity linked to being a member, implying an inward-directed activity. This distinction between outward- and inward-directed activities will be used to analyse the NSBF leaders' strategies of operation in relation to sustaining and enhancing a social identity within the organization. This work, which has progressed through different phases, simultaneously links the NSBF to the wider snowboard community. The underlying assumption is that the NSBF defines itself as a social entity with a shared identity through its networking activity in relation to the snowboard community.

In order to approach the second question – the problem of emergence as a principle of coordination within an organization that is anchored in a community – I combine the perspective of Montgomery *et al.* with a perspective on contradictory institutional expectations (Meyer *et al.* 1991; Oliver, 1991). According to Oliver (1991), an organization's leaders may use a range of different strategies to enhance the position of the organization. Depending on the circumstances, strategies may be to 'acquiesce', 'compromise', 'avoid', 'defy' or 'manipulate' (Oliver, 1991: 152). Oliver specifies these strategies through a range of tactics, of which three are particularly focused here: bargaining, concealment and challenging. Bargaining, according to

Oliver, is an active form of compromise that involves obtaining some kind of concession from a constituent (1991: 154). Concealment involves 'disguising nonconformity behind a façade of acquiescence' (1991: 154). Challenging involves an active departure from rules, norms of expectations (1991: 156). In this paper, the latter term is used to describe explicit attempts to change existing rules and laws within the NOC. Applying Oliver's strategies framework to the different domains of operations of the NSBF will shed light on problems associated with authority and emergence within network organizations.

In the analysis of the NSBF case, it is necessary to be aware that only a limited time span is captured by the study. A major challenge is thus to assess whether the organizational forms and the strategies for handling of institutional expectations are merely expressions of a certain stage in the life of an organization, not an expression of emerging new forms of organizing. In the concluding part of the paper the model of Montgomery *et al.* (2007) is used to touch upon this question.

Prior to an analysis of the specific modes of operation of the NSBF, an account of the methodology underpinning the paper is provided. This is followed by a description of the cultural and historical context of the NSBF.

Method

The paper is based on a qualitative case study of the Norwegian Snowboard Federation. The study targeted the period from 1999, when the NSBF became a member of the NOC, to 2007. The case was selected based on theoretical criteria (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). More precisely, the ability of the case to shed light on new types of change processes within sport was considered crucial in selection. Lifestyle sports represent a broad type of societal change that has an impact on sports and are thus of interest. The fact that the NSBF had strong links to a lifestyle sports

community and was part of a traditional sports organization enabled the contradictions and interactions between traditional and life style sports to be examined.

A tripartite methodology, based on interviews, field observations and document analysis, was used in the study. Ten interviews were carried out with persons inside and outside the NSBF leadership. In-depth interviews with former and current presidents (three) were used as a central source of information on the different phases in the development of the NSBF. The interviews included questions about the major challenges in the period, the major task areas, the major stakeholders and the perceived tensions between demands from different groups. The interviews with the presidents were supplemented by several interviews with the general secretary (the same person through the whole period under study), and an interview with one employee who was in charge of catering for the clubs. Two interviews were also held with a person who had been member of the board of the NSBF, of the NOC and of the international governing bodies for snowboarding, the International Snowboard Federation (ISF), and later the World Snowboard Federation (WSF). This interview served to provide the broader institutional context of the NSBF. Finally, a group interview with the president, a board member and the temporary general secretary was carried out in order to shed light on a process of attempting to change NOC laws in 2007. Taken together, these interviews provided different perspectives on the modes of operation and the development of the NSBF. They also included the main actors and leaders in the organization in the period studied.

The relations between the NSBF and its environment are central to the analysis in the paper. In order to obtain an outside perspective of the NSBF, an interview was held with the leader of the elite sports unit of the NOC, *Olympiatoppen*, and with one

of the coaches in the same organization. One person who belonged to the network of leaders of the NSBF, but without having a formal function, was also interviewed. In retrospect, the participation of more people from the snowboard community in the study would have provided a broader data base, but field observations at a major snowboarding event, and at the General Assemblies of the NSBF and the NOC during the spring of 2007, served to provide a wider range of perspectives of the federation. At the general assemblies I took detailed notes of the discussions and votes. The General Assembly of the NSBF was particularly useful since clubs with clearly diverging opinions upon the strategies of the federation were present.

Document studies were also used to identify major events in the period from 1999 to 2007 and to analyse changes in modes of operation. The documents included all accounts of board meetings, general assemblies and central policy documents. They also included applications, formal letters and correspondence in relation to attempts to change the laws of the NOC in 2003 and 2007. Finally, the web pages of the NSBF through 2006 and 2007 were studied.

Gaining access to and information about the NSBF was a smooth process, and the interviewees were open and willing to share their experiences and opinions with me. One challenge in the study was its retrospective character, which made details of organizational processes difficult to acquire. In order to enhance the quality of the interviews I used documents to establish a time line with as many details as possible of major events. Such information was used to prompt the recollections of the interviewees. Another challenge was related to resourceful interviewees who were speaking from a positioned point of view. A problem may have been that they sought to legitimize their own previous and current actions. I tried to counteract this as much as possible by being an active interviewer (Andersen, 2007). This implied a

combination of open questions and an exploration of emergent research hypotheses that challenged the perspectives given. The major methodological challenge in this case study was still to cope with the sympathy created towards a new culture that seemed to be struggling to find its place within established organizational fields. The theory of Montgomery *et al.* (2007) was important in establishing a critical view in the analysis and in providing a counterbalance to Castells' optimistic view of social movements and networks.

The data were analysed through an iterative process where the first step consisted of identifying the major relations and major challenges of the NSBF within the time span covered (Huberman & Miles, 1994: 431). From this analysis, the theme of culture emerged as crucial in understanding the choices and dispositions of the NSBF representatives. The themes of networking, legitimacy and identity emerged as elements in this culture. In the next step, the coded material was analysed in relation to Castells' description of the characteristics of networks. This analysis was refined using the distinction between outward- and inward-directed networking activities taken from Montgomery *et al.* (2007).

The NSBF – from independent counterculture to National Federation within the NOC

Snowboarding is a relatively new sport. From the making of the first boards for commercial sale in the United States in 1977, the sport has been growing at a fast rate worldwide (Anderson, 1999). The snowboard culture has been characterized by a strong affinity to other 'board cultures' and shares some of their values. This implies an emphasis on individuality and play and a strong expressionism (Heino, 2000). A strong link has always existed with commercial interests, such as board and equipment producers, magazine publishers and filmmakers. It may be argued that in

cooperation with private event organizers, the snowboard industry has been a driving force in developing the snowboard culture. The nature of this culture is global, since magazines and products are distributed and consumed worldwide, and since events and films represent a modern 'circus' that continuously moves from one location to the next.

From the outset, snowboarders had a strong self-consciousness as forming a counter-culture to traditional sports. Snowboarders resisted the order, discipline and style of established sports, with skiing as the most pertinent example (Heino, 2000). A strong resistance towards participation in traditional sports competitions, such as the Olympic Games, was part of this. According to Heino, this resistance could be interpreted as an opposition to the discipline of bureaucracy and power (Heino, 2000: 189).

The global snowboard culture, as it emerged during the 1980s and 1990s, gradually developed its own institutional forms (Heino, 2000). An international federation, the International Snowboard Federation (ISF), was established in 1989, with the main task of organizing and developing rules for snowboarding events. An earlier board member of the ISF emphasised that the organization was directed towards creating good activities and competitions. The rules of the competitions were to emerge progressively through the community of snowboarders:

Snowboarding was a sport that from the outset was not particularly organized. But still we were running an internationally comprehensive work organizing competitions. And from the time when the first snowboard was seen on the slopes, we were innovators and created the culture and image around snowboard activities. But this was the snowboarders' own work; they

determined the rules. They were behind the development and very few adults interfered.

In line with existing research (Anderson, 1999; Heino, 2000), the interviews show that a global event culture developed in parallel and partly overlapping with the development of the ISF, and which integrated the best snowboarders, event organizers, media people, photographers and snowboard producers. This group was not organized in any formal sense, but represented a quite identifiable network that took the lead in the development of the sport. Several interviewees emphasised that this network represented a common cause and a collective counter-culture identity to traditional sport, even though some members represented commercial interests while others did not. A sharp line was drawn in the interviews between commercial actors that were not part of the snowboard culture and who seek to profit from it, such as banks or other commercial businesses that sponsor the NSBF, and commercial actors that belong to the snowboard network, such as board producers and magazines.

Heino (2000) argued that throughout the 1990s a mainstreaming of snowboard culture was taking place. She points out that snowboarding gradually lost its rebellious sting and became accepted; it was increasingly used in mainstream media and marketing, and in 1998 snowboarding was on the Olympic programme for the first time. On the organizational side, the inclusion into the Olympic family had consequences. Facing strong resistance from the ISF, the IOC appointed the International Skiing Federation (FIS) as the governing organization for snowboarding. In order to qualify for the Olympics, athletes must hence participate in competitions organized by the FIS. This was experienced as a threat to the identity of snowboarding and led to a boycott of the Olympics by some of the best snowboarders. A dual competition system currently exists where the competitions that are considered

the most important by the core snowboarding community take place outside the FIS and the IOC systems.

Important consequences of the entry into the Olympic organization ensued at the national level. In Norway, the NSBF (which until then had been an independent organization federated to the ISF) sought membership of the Norwegian Olympic Committee and Confederation of Sport (NOC) in 1999. The NOC is the umbrella organization for sport in Norway, and also represents IOC interests in Norway.

According to interviewees who were central to the NSBF at the time, a hard fight was fought in order to gain status as an autonomous federation within the NOC. The Norwegian Skiing Federation sought to incorporate the snowboard sport into their federation, arguing that Olympic snowboarding was organized through the FIS.

From 1999, the NSBF attained the status of a national federation within the NOC. On the one hand, this implied access to public funding and formal access to the Olympic Games; on the other, the NSBF now had to conform to the rules and laws of the NOC. An important requirement was that members must all be part of local sports clubs. These local clubs also had to follow a set of formal rules in order to be acknowledged. To date, the NSBF has spent much energy trying to ensure clubs conform to these rules, but it has encountered resistance at the grass roots level. The NSBF currently has 70 local clubs, 3800 members, and five full time employees. This makes it a comparatively small federation within the NOC, which has 12,000 clubs and 1.8 million members (NIF, 2006). According to their own accounts it also represents a very small percentage of active snowboarders throughout Norway.

In the following, the relation between this wider snowboarding community and the NSBF will be described. This is followed by an analysis of the handling of institutional constraints and expectations.

NSBF and the snowboard community: outward- and inward-directed networking activities

The relation between network activities and the establishment of a stable social identity is at the core of Montgomery *et al.*'s description of how social entities develop (Montgomery *et al.*, 2007). The NSBF is an organisation which is closely linked to an existing snowboard community, but its formal requirements of affiliation and membership also set it apart from that community. An important challenge to the leaders of the NSBF is to establish a distinct NSBF identity that can make people want to join the NSBF.

Among the central actors in the NSBF there is an awareness of the need to legitimate NSBF's existence and to prove its value to snowboarders. As stated by a former president:

An aversion exists among snowboarders to becoming organized. So you have to trick them by being a sort of facilitator who is not clearly visible to them.

Very few of the large number of snowboarders in Norway are organized in local clubs. One factor in the low degree of organization is the fact that many snowboarders are young and do not have the interest or the experience necessary for accommodating the very specific NOC procedures for establishing clubs. The leaders of the NSBF are aware of this fact, as is shown for example in a law proposal to the NOC:

Within snowboarding we experience that youth are very apt to be leaders and can participate in taking full or partial responsibility for their own activities. Unfortunately we experience that many young people don't end up starting clubs because of the bureaucratic cultures they are faced with in the NOC and

in the regional federations during the club establishment procedure.

(Proposition, General Assembly of the NOC, 2007)

More important, however, is the fact that the community of snowboarders described above was established prior to the NSBF, and remains the main source of development of the sport and the culture. One of the employees in the NSBF expressed this very clearly:

We have had to create our own magazines. We have made everything ourselves, made our own movies. There have been no heavyweight business or industry entrepreneurs to shape our sport with their billion dollar budgets. It has all emerged by itself. Only later have we become organized, at least in Norway. So you can say that the industry has always spurred snowboarding as a sport.

It is worth noting that this employee fully identifies with the snowboard community, as the use of the terms 'we' and 'our' show. The main identity anchor is thus this community, and the NSBF is a formalized extension of the community, resulting from the fact that the 'we' has become organized. This makes clear the very strong need in the NSBF for maintaining strong bonds with the snowboarding community.

In their four stage model for the development of social entities, Montgomery *et al.* (2007) hypothesize that outward-directed networking activities dominate in the early phases of development. A new social entity needs to establish legitimacy in relation to potential members and to other entities with domain claims before establishing firm boundaries between members and non-members (2007: 666). This description fits well with the situation of the NSBF. The networking activity is clearly

directed outwards, and the NSBF defines itself as representative not only of its members but of the whole community. In the words of one president:

We work towards being representative of the whole community: those who are members and those who are not. And we must also represent industrial actors because much power has been concentrated within the industry. For example, industrial actors have organized competitions, and they have been considered as 'cooler' than the competitions that we organized or organize ourselves.

This strategy of outward-directed networking activity seems to be the only viable one in the situation that the NSBF leaders face. The broad snowboarding community includes actors that are powerful in defining the values and the culture of this community, and the first major task is therefore to define NSBF into this core of the community.

As part of this, the NSBF takes on the task of promoting the culture as a whole. In the interviews with former and present presidents and staff, it is clear that the NSBF took on the task to protect and sustain the snowboard culture. When asked what the main priorities of the Federation were, the current president cited 'keeping and recruiting members, increasing media attention and establishing good sponsor relations'. He then concluded: 'But to sustain our culture is the overall concern'. From the totality of the interviews in the project it seems that this concern is unanimously shared; the topic emerges in many contexts, whether concerning sponsorship relations, Olympic participation or the relation to the larger confederation of sports.

In the framework of Montgomery *et al.* (2007) the development of social entities is based on the interplay and balance between outward-directed and inward-directed activities. As noted, the NSBF predominantly uses outward-directed strategies in relation to the snowboarding community, and does little to establish

boundaries between members and non-members. The NSBF employees and board do, however, spend considerable effort on catering and caring for their clubs, which must be termed an inward-directed activity. There also exist some benefits linked to membership, such as reduced prices on snowboarding equipment and free subscription to a snowboarding magazine. Many new projects directed towards children and youth, on the other hand, seek to include and reach unorganized groups, for example by creating local events on the slopes. Such events, in turn, are seen as tools for the local clubs to recruit members. In their inward-directed activities, the NSBF leaders do not create many exclusive arrangements for members, but rather prioritize broad facilitating activities.

So far I have used the terms outwards- and inwards-directed activities without linking them explicitly to network as an organizing form. Based on the descriptions above, the modes of operation in the NSBF correspond well to Castells' description of network organizations. In particular, the strong degree of interactivity in organizational processes, the informality and the preference for making decisions without the explicit use of authority are hallmarks of this type of community. Observations made at the general assembly of the NSBF in 2007 confirm the informality and the collective tone in the way the organization is run. Even though there were some issues with a clear division of opinions, such as the question of whether one should relate more closely to the International Skiing Federation, no issue was ever put to the vote. The typical solution in issues of disagreement was that the chairman suggested that one called a meeting at a later point to discuss the issue further and to find a solution. Any interested club would be invited to participate. In some cases, the general assembly trusted the board to take the issue further, but without any formal resolution. It is suggested that this *modus operandi* is based on an

aversion to the formalization of decision-making, accompanied by a trust in the board. This is remarkable, both because there was an overrepresentation of clubs that represent a more 'sportified' culture than the board (Guttmann, 2004), and because the board reported that the sponsor situation was critical at the time of the general assembly. During the meeting, it was repeated several times that in an organization such as this, informal and collective solutions must be found in case of disagreement.

Several interviews with the current leaders of the organization also identify network organizing as crucial. On the issue of recruitment of new members, the current president states very firmly that the use of a representative network is the main tool:

We actually know very well how to become representative of the whole community, because we have our network, and we know what is going on. There are people on our board who are up to date with what goes on in the community. Previously, that was perhaps less the case and then the board and the administration were met with a broader scepticism. The one thing is to bring in people that represent the whole community, including the industry, facilities and media actors, core media that is. That's one, and then the second is to facilitate activities in order to make them 'cool' so that they can be accepted. By doing this we may reach people that we were unable to reach previously.

In this perspective, the network thus serves an important legitimating function; it guarantees that the NSBF is acting in line with the core trends of the snowboard community. One of the employees also points out that using informal networks is the most viable form when working with young volunteers:

Since we are only five employed here in the office, and since we work to a large extent with volunteers and within a youth culture where much depends on informal networks, since many clubs and media are run by youth and so on, it is incredibly important to recruit employees that know the community well.

Network organizing is therefore fundamental both to the functionality and the legitimacy of the NSBF. By using this *modus operandi*, the NSBF conforms to the expectations of the snowboard community. Moreover, it is able both to keep track of expectations and developments within the community and to influence the interpretation of NSBF projects and actions.

It must be noted that these network activities are linked to individuals more than to the organization itself. Several interviewees emphasise the fact that the persons on the present board have strong and extensive networks involving the core of the snowboard community: the best athletes, event organizers, snowboard media and the snowboard industry. These personal networks, which do not emanate from the functions that these persons hold in the NSBF, still provide a legitimate basis for the organization. The possibility of networking activities on the part of the NSBF will hence be strongly influenced by the individuals elected to the board or employed in the administration.

In summary, the leaders of the NSBF employ a network mode of organizing to a large extent. The networking activities are mainly outward-directed with the aim of establishing the NSBF as a legitimate organized representative of the snowboarding community. This represents a major task area for the board and the employees of the NSBF. On the other hand, the leaders need to attend to the important task area of gaining legitimacy for the organization in relation to the NOC and its sponsors. This combination of tasks implies a fine balance:

We do think that the values of our culture, the potential that we have for reaching young people, provide an opening towards the NOC and towards potential sponsors. So if we are accused (by the snowboard community) of adjusting too much, I rather think that we try to enhance an understanding and a knowledge of our culture. But of course, this is all the time a matter of balance.

In order to fulfil its functions and to cope with different sets of institutional expectations, the NSBF is dependent on introducing instruments for controlling the development in certain areas of activity, hence using authority that may go against the emergent nature of a network-based community. In the following, examples of such instruments are described, and the ensuing dilemmas involved for the NSBF discussed.

Contradictory institutional expectations: network and authority

Institutional environments tend to be pluralistic. Hence an inconsistency between institutional requirements may follow when organizations seek external stability and support (Meyer & Rowan, 1991: 56). For the NSBF, the snowboard community represents one important aspect of its environment. In addition, the NSBF must relate to requirements from the NOC and from its sponsors. This demands a use of authority that goes counter to the inherent logic of the community and of network organizing, which in turn creates dilemmas. Two examples are discussed here, one pertaining to elite sport, the other to the relation between the NSBF and the local sports clubs.

The best athletes are important to the NSBF. They constantly create and move the snowboard culture forward, and hence hold an important key to legitimacy within the network. Simultaneously, athlete performance is crucial in building a public image

of snowboarding in Norwegian society and a necessity in order to establish sponsorship contracts. The dependency of the NSBF on such contracts is high. This is illustrated by the general secretary's clear statement that the most important environmental change for the NSBF in the period from 1999 has been the crisis of the sponsorship market.

A major problem, however, is to keep the elite athletes in line, and make them conform to the expectations of sponsors. Individuality and expressivity are core elements in the culture. This, combined with the initial resistance towards traditional elite sports, makes athletes reluctant to put on the straitjacket of the ordinary elite athlete. A former president puts it this way:

There have been lots of bad attitudes from the athlete side. And that becomes a difficult product to sell, because one would like to be something other than elite athletes. But elite athletes are the one thing one has to sell to sponsors.

An additional aspect of this is that the NSBF could gain from receiving support and funding from the elite sports unit of the NOC, the 'Olympiatoppen' (OT). However, the working methods of the OT are based on a tradition of systematic work and self discipline, which may go counter to the playful, individualist attitude of snowboard athletes (Augestad, Bergsgard & Hansen, 2006; Brekke, 2003). In order to become a partner to the OT, the NSBF has therefore had to try to discipline its own athletes in order to make them follow given agreements. Such an imposition of authority represents a breach with equal network relations, and is, as such, difficult to establish.

Following Oliver (1991), an organization may use a range of different tactics in order to reconcile contrasting institutional expectations and efficiency demands. Over time, the NSBF has employed combined sets of tactics in order to cope with the contrasting demands of its elite athletes, the OT and its sponsors. One increasingly

important tactic has been the tactic of 'bargaining' (Oliver, 1991). Where several of the earlier presidents described the defence of the snowboard culture as a central issue, it seems that the current presidency has acquired a tactic of translating and mitigating this culture to the Norwegian public, to sponsors and to the OT:

And then we have had this scepticism. Without it, we wouldn't have been where we are today. But now, somehow, we don't want others to be as sceptical to us anymore. Perhaps now we work more on breaking down the negative attitudes that people hold, attitudes that we have contributed to upholding in the past because we wanted to be rebels.

The general secretary throughout the past six years also describes a long and winding road in relation to the OT, where there is a perception that the OT is becoming increasingly aware of the strengths of snowboarders' ways of enhancing performance. This results from dialogue. This impression was confirmed through an interview with the current leader of the OT. The process has resulted in a more comprehensive cooperation between the NSBF and the OT, including the latter's financing of a national snowboard team coach.

However, assuring that athletes stay faithful to agreements and compromises made with sponsors or with the OT has remained a challenge. One previous president describes a situation which may be labelled one of 'concealment' (Oliver, 1991) towards the clubs. He states that in his period there was a lack of will on the part of the NSBF to enforce the correct attitude on the team of elite athletes. Considerable resources and effort were invested in the elite sports team, without this becoming clearly visible as a priority. According to this president, there was a verbal and symbolic focus on catering for the local sports club, while an excessive amount of the time and resources were spent on elite athletes. Moreover, nothing was demanded

in return from the athletes, as they were not sanctioned for not meeting the requirements of sponsors.

In contrast to this, the current strategy seems to be to use the network to enhance the legitimacy of doing elite sports among the best athletes. A major element of this has been to put a new head coach, partly financed by the OT, into position. This coach has the trust of both the snowboard community and of the OT. Therefore he can act as a mediator who guarantees to the OT that the snowboard elite athletes will act in a professional way. On the other hand the athletes see his employment as a guarantee that the OT's will to accept core values in snowboarding. Underpinning this solution, however, is the trust that has been built over time. This trust rests on the accountability of the NSBF on the one hand, and on the attentiveness of the OT on the other.

The relation between the NSBF and the local snowboard clubs

The emphasis put on local memberships is a central element in the traditional Norwegian organization of sports (Seippel, 2004). Hence, all federations that are part of the NOC must have member clubs (Enjolras, 2001). All individual members must be part of such a club. The number of members is used as a basis for distribution of financial resources within the organization. As a result of this system, a certain amount of formalization is required at the local level, i.e. registration, reports and annual meetings. For the NSBF, this system represents a fundamental problem because their local leaders are young and have a resistance towards rigid organization.

For the NSBF, establishing new clubs and getting them to fulfil the required formalities is imperative to its existence. At the same time, the federation is aware that the system is an impediment to a potential growth. A possible dilemma arises from

the need to propagate a certain system, while simultaneously being against it. In order to solve this dilemma, the NSBF uses a combination of tactics.

In relation to the clubs, the NSBF has used a tactic of 'bargaining'. Instead of enforcing rules and regulations, the members of staff have spent much time and resources on guiding clubs through the necessary procedures. Recently, a web-based club manual has been developed in order to facilitate the establishment and running of clubs. In several cases, members of staff have also ended up doing the work of filling out the forms on behalf of a club. Several employees point out the importance of keeping close contacts with the clubs by using the phone and visiting them in order to motivate them to fulfil formal requirements.

In addition to such facilitating activity, the NSBF has also used a tactic of translation of the rules and laws of the NOC, putting them into the language of snowboarders. In a study of the NSBF from 2003, Brekke quotes the NSBF's web-based guide to the NOC-laws:

Paragraph 3 in the basic law of the NOC states concerning membership that: 'All those who promise to act in accordance with the regulations of the club and of the superior sports governing bodies may become accepted as members' (Brekke, 2003: 65).

The web-guide comments on this paragraph in the following manner:

This means that you should use common sense and be just. The NOC has to write this because there are scoundrels everywhere and with this paragraph one may throw them out head first if necessary. (Brekke, 2003: 66)

When the NSBF used this tactic of taking the outsider's ironic view of the laws, while at the same time explaining them, the laws could be perceived as both more

comprehensible and more acceptable from the side of the clubs. Through this translation the NSBF was able to distance itself from the laws, but still stand behind them.

However, these strategies of compromising with the clubs have not been seen as a comprehensive solution to the problem of heavy formal requirements. Hence, the NSBF has used the tactic of *challenging* the NOC system by proposing changes to the laws. At the last ordinary General Assemblies, in 2003 and 2007, the NSBF proposed allowing direct membership in federations. In such a system, individuals could be members of the NSBF and of the NOC without having to be part of a local club. This would imply a breach with a very fundamental principle within Norwegian sport, i.e. that the club is the basic unit, from which democratic rights and duties emanate (Brekke, 2003). In 2000–2002, the NSBF was allowed a trial system of direct membership, and in this period the number of members increased significantly from 2600 to 4700, while the number of clubs also showed an increase (Brekke, 2003). When the NSBF proposed the change to the general assembly in 2003, it hence argued that direct membership would enhance the possibilities for recruiting new members, and that in turn these members might be led into club participation. The same arguments were presented in 2007, and the NSBF also stated that:

Pertaining to this case the Snowboard Federation experiences that the laws of the NOC set limits to the further development and organization of our sport (NOC; 2007).

Despite the urgency of the case of direct membership, as seen from the side of the NSBF, the federation did not achieve the change which it sought, either in 2003 or in 2007. In 2007, a weaker, alternative proposition was also pursued – the introduction of a ‘Club-light’ model – which would imply ‘reducing the bureaucratic and

administrative tasks in the club to a minimum' (NOC, 2007). Such a model would be based on an extensive use of information technology and electronic communication forms. This proposition was also rejected.

When the tactic of challenging and changing the laws did not win through in 2003, the NSBF developed a tactic which may be termed *concealment* (Oliver, 1991), which is close to Meyer and Rowan's understanding of 'decoupling' (Meyer *et al.*, 1991: 57). A club called the 'Free Rider Lodge' was established. This club fulfils the formal requirements of the NOC by having an elected board, an annual general assembly, and by fulfilling registration requirements. But the club has no separate activities directed towards the members; it merely channels information and offers from the NSBF. The 'Free Rider Lodge' does not have an independent web page, but uses the site of the NSBF as its official web page. Hence, the club may be seen as a *pro forma* entity, which allows a type of direct membership to exist.

The reasons why the NSBF did not succeed with their tactic of challenging and changing the club membership system are complex. One important factor is that such change was perceived as a threat to fundamental values of Norwegian sports, such as democracy and volunteerism (Brekke, 2003). Another factor is the complexity of alliances and power games involved in many types of change processes within the NOC (Steen-Johnsen & Hanstad, 2007).

Differences in institutional expectations and tactics: elite sport and the local club

The work domains of developing elite sport and of developing local sports clubs present different challenges and opportunities to the NSBF. In both cases, the federation has the problem of having to impose authority or regulation on organizational units or participants. The use of authority and regulation stand against core values of the snowboard community, such as the emphasis on freedom and

individuality. They are also difficult to handle within the network organizational form because they presume modes of interaction such as control or sanctions that do not fit with the egalitarian exchange inherent in the network.

In the case of handling elite athletes and the relation to the OT, the NSBF has more options for *bargaining* than in the case of the relation to the clubs and the NOC. There are several reasons for this. One is that the network ties between the board and the part of the snowboard community that involves the best athletes, the commercial actors and event organizers, seems to be stronger than the ties to the local clubs that are dispersed throughout Norway. One informant, who is not part of the board and the staff, points out that in recent years the core network surrounding events has become quite compact. People meet several times during the season and maintain relations quite regularly. Within this tightly coupled network, the board and the staff have established positions. This position lends legitimacy to strategies that might otherwise be considered as illegitimate, for example, the strategy of linking closely to the OT, thus making elite athletes conform to traditional training methods and ideologies. The second reason why bargaining has a greater potential in the case of elite sport is that the external stakeholders of the NSBF in this domain – the OT and sponsors – are quite flexible organizational units. In the case of the OT in particular, the NSBF has built relations over time, and has argued for snowboarders' values and understandings of how elite sport could be done. The leader of the OT is not bound by laws and regulations that would prevent him from adapting the values and needs of snowboard athletes. Hence, bargaining may lead to real results.

The case of making the clubs fulfil their requirements presents itself as much more complicated. On the one hand, the clubs represent a larger network requiring a stronger effort in order to be maintained. Even though the current president and staff

feel that they have increasingly strong ties to the clubs, a large and continuous effort is necessary in order to maintain these ties. The NSBF uses the web extensively in order to communicate with clubs, but finds that personal phone calls are necessary in order to maintain relations and, in particular, to encourage clubs to register. A second point concerning the clubs is that they represent a larger heterogeneity than that part of the network organized around events and elite performance. The position of the board and the staff in relation to this part of the network is therefore less clear. Consequently bargaining in order to change the clubs' attitudes is more likely to fail.

As mentioned, the NSBF has twice attempted to change the institutional expectations inherent in the laws of the NOC. One main problem is that such change must pass through a formal body – the general assembly of the NOC. Consequently, the NSBF must use the explicit tactic of *challenging* the rules and requirements of the NOC. This tactic has repeatedly failed. This proves the difficulty of imposing real change on a large system such as the NOC. To succeed, it seems clear that the NSBF would have had to use extensive resources on bargaining with important stakeholders within the NOC, thus preparing the deliberations upon law changes at the general assembly. According to the leaders of the NSBF, this is not a viable strategy. First, the support for spending time and effort on such political activity at the cost of catering for the clubs is very low within the snowboard community. Second, such an activity would easily be interpreted as a sign of having become co-opted into the traditional culture that the NSBF is supposed to oppose.

Concluding discussion

This paper has argued that network organization is predominant in the running of the NSBF. The board and the staff's outward-directed networking activity plays a major role in establishing social identity and legitimacy for the NSBF within the wider

snowboard community. This legitimacy makes it possible for the present leaders of the NSBF to use adaptive strategies in relation to organizations that are defined as being outside the snowboard community, such as the OT and sponsors.

Furthermore, it has been argued that the NSBF experiences tensions between different institutional expectations originating in the snowboard community, the NOC, sponsors and the OT. These tensions basically emanate from the inherent values of the snowboard culture, which include individuality, play and also a protest against formal systems of authority. While the network is an appropriate organizational form for a community that resists authority, it may be argued that it is less inclined to enforce rules and regulation on this community. Rather than enforcing such rules, the NSBF tends to use tactics of concealment, of bargaining or, when necessary, of challenging (Oliver, 1991). In the area of elite sports, this seems to have been a particularly successful combination of tactics. During recent years, the NSBF has established a solid relation to the OT from which it may obtain resources both in terms of money and competence. A necessary condition for this was that core athletes had to agree to participate in programs run by the NSBF and the OT. This represents a shift, where core figures in the snowboard community are approaching a mainstream, 'sportified' sports culture.

The overall line of development within the NSBF from the time when it entered the NOC in 1999 until today seems to follow two tracks. On the one hand, there is a harmonization with formal requirements of external stakeholders expressed, for example, in an increased accountability towards sponsors, and in the enhanced contact with the OT. On the other hand, there is an increased and more conscious use of the network form in order to maintain contact with the 'grass roots' and the core of the community. An overall analysis of this could be that this double development

represents a type of decoupling. The strengthening of the network form, which matches and ensures the inherent values of snowboarding, may serve to conceal a gradual integration into the values of mainstream sport as represented by the NOC and the OT.

In relation to theorizing change within sport organizations, network theory may be conceived as a contribution in two distinctly different ways. Castells' theory of the new network society provides tools to describe specific characteristics of network organizing, and how these differ from, and challenge, established ways of organizing sport. This perspective raises the question of whether the snowboarding culture represents a fundamentally alternative sports culture, a culture that represents future change that established sport will have to cope with and perhaps adjust to.

Against this, Montgomery *et al.* would argue that network organizing is not specifically linked to the present age or to new lifestyle cultures, but that networking activities tend to be used by emerging social entities in order to establish a stable social identity and clearly defined boundaries (Montgomery *et al.*, 2007: 664). In this perspective, the double process of harmonization of external requirements and of networking with the core of the snowboard community can be seen as two elements in a process of outward-directed networking activity. The goals are to claim domain, and to enhance legitimacy, which are both characteristic of social entities in an early phase of establishment. According to Montgomery *et al.* more established social entities will have a stronger equilibrium between outward- and inward-directed networking activities, thus using less effort on challenging and negotiating with influential parties in the field, and more effort on establishing structures for and caring for internal members. This perspective thus adds to our insights into how new social entities

emerge and seek to insert themselves within the field of organized sport, whether they are linked to lifestyle sports or to other types of sport.

Network theories have the merit of not taking social entities for granted, but as always potentially shaped and reshaped through networking activities. Moreover, network theories enable an examination of the links and relations that exist within a social field of practice, thus locating organizational change in a broader cultural and social field. Finally, the insight that networks are fundamentally linked to the maintenance of social identities seems particularly apt to capture important aspects of what drives the development of leisure organizations such as sport.

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