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When different logics meet: the crisis communication of a national head coach in elite football

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ABSTRACT

Through a longitudinal study of how a national head coach in men's football defended and explained persistent losses, the following questions were addressed: What was the content of the media criticism, how did the coach react and why, and how did the media react to his response? Despite persistent losses, the coach praised his team and never admitted having done something wrong. The media, in turn, criticised the coach for his rhetoric, his lack of humility, and his lack of professional skills. He consistently responded with denials, which reinforced the media criticism. As such, he himself created a space for the 'media hunt'. Overall, this study illustrates the dynamics that arise when professional sports logic and media logic meet. It indicates that the 'media hunt', at least to some extent, can be avoided if coaches know media logic and which crisis responses are the most effective in different situations.

Introduction

Professional sports are commercial entertainment, and the interdependence or symbiosis between sports and the media is well known.¹ However, over the last ten years, the media have become more tabloid, the hero culture has exploded, and scandals have gained more attention.² In the aftermath, athletes have been put 'against the wall' and almost forced to publicly explain and defend their actions. Their response to media attacks, or crisis communication and reputation defence, has also captured the interest of researchers.³ Existing research mainly discusses crisis communication and defence related to criminal offences, be it doping, sex, or abuse.⁴ Studies dealing with other types of crises are virtually non-existent. Furthermore, most studies have focused on athletes and not on managers or coaches. One exception is Frandsen and Johansen's⁵ study of the Danish handball coach Anja Andersen's response to media attacks when she chose to withdraw her team in protest against unfavourable decisions made by two referees. There are also few studies of crisis communication and reputation defence in the field of football, despite a variety of crises in this field.⁶ The few that exist are studies at the organizational level.

This article discusses the dynamics between the media and a football coach in a situation where expected results were lacking, and the media's criticism of the coach increased. Specifically, this is a longitudinal study of how a Norwegian national head coach in men's football defended and explained persistent losses. What was the content of the media criticism, how did the coach respond and why, and how did the media react to his response? Can the coach's response be considered successful, given the context in which he operated? Here, context refers to conditions beyond

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a coach's control as well as conditions over which a coach has some control. On the one hand, context refers to the logic of professional sports in general, and professional football in particular because of the engagement it creates. The result of a football match tends to be more important to fans and segments of the public than political decisions because sports have a strong emotional dimension. They are both entertainment and something to believe in – a type of religion, even, to many.⁷ The importance of professional sports is also reflected in the comprehensive and intense media coverage of sporting events, their commercial value, the number of participants and the size of the audience, and the time spent on conversations among fans and the general public about sports performance and sports heroes.⁸ On the other hand, context refers to the situation that coaches themselves create through their communication and response to media criticism. In short, context also refers to the dynamics between media criticism and coaches' responses.

Basically, criticism of football coaches is the rule rather than the exception when results fail, as they are usually held responsible for wins and losses. In such situations, it is also quite common for football coaches to be replaced. Put differently, football coaches live with chronic job insecurity.⁹ Media criticism of football coaches is therefore not a crisis in the conventional sense, in that a crisis is usually understood as an unpredictable event.¹⁰ However, persistent media criticism can damage a coach's reputation and thus impair his or her future career. Persistent media criticism can also cause athletes to lose confidence in the coach or create internal noise within the team, which in turn may have a negative effect on match preparation, performance, and results. Furthermore, persistent media criticism can lead to a reputation loss for the organization that the coach represents and subsequently to loss of support from fans as well as other powerful and legitimate stakeholders. Therefore, any conflict between coaches and stakeholders represents a potential crisis.¹¹

Although crisis communication is an important skill for coaches in professional football, there are few, if any, studies of how professional football coaches communicate during a crisis and seek to defend their reputations. This in itself makes this study valuable. Since professional football is a high-profile media sport, and media criticism of professional football coaches is so common, it is important to gain knowledge of the effects of coaches' responses to media criticism. Nor has anyone studied the dynamics of this interaction: how the media's attacks and the coach's response mutually influence each other over time. This study, therefore, contributes to knowledge of why a coach responds as he or she does, the effects of a coach's response to media criticism, and the degree to which a coach's crisis communication and reputational defence can reinforce or reduce media criticism and thus the work environment of the coach and their team.

The media are always looking for a good story. They are carriers of a narrative logic where rational arguments often fight a losing battle against emotional narratives.¹² The narrative logic emphasizes suspense and drama. This, in turn, presupposes a certain level of conflict based on the struggle between opposing forces, be it between good and evil, weakness and strength, or guilt and innocence. The narrative logic also requires a solution in the form of a change. In football, the conflict is usually created by painting a picture of a crisis-like state when victories fail (over time), while the solution is usually that the coach retires or gets sacked. When it comes to professional football in particular, the media's narrative logic is reinforced by the fact that they are also carriers of a professional sports logic, which is primarily about winning, emphasizing team performance and good results. In this article, we understand logics as taken-for-granted perceptions, values, and beliefs of how the work should be carried out within a particular field.¹³

Theoretical approach

One of the most well-known theories of crisis communication, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, was developed by Coombs.¹⁴ Frandsen and Johansen¹⁵ describe Coombs as an exponent of the strategic or context-oriented research tradition in crisis communication, where researchers are concerned with describing and explaining how context affects and determines the form and content

of crisis communication: what is said, how, when, and where. The key to determining the most effective crisis communication is thus to understand the crisis situation and the reputational threat being posed by the crisis.

The reputational threat, in turn, is influenced by the crisis type, the crisis history, and the prior reputation of the person or organization in question. If a person or an organization has a history of facing the same type of crises or a poor reputation history, the attribution of crisis responsibility and the reputational threat are assumed to be high. When it comes to crisis types, Coombs¹⁶ divides them into three clusters: 'victim events' (natural disasters, accidents, rumours), 'accidental events' (caused by technical errors), and 'preventable events' (caused by human failure). In the case of 'victim events', the public will perceive the person or organization as innocent and, therefore, little responsibility is attributed. In the case of 'accidental events', the public will perceive the event as non-intentional, and the person or organization in question is attributed low to moderate responsibility. In the case of 'preventable events', the public will perceive the event either as a result of sloppy or deliberate actions. In such cases, the person or organization is attributed high responsibility. Coombs's point is simply that reputational risk increases with the degree of perceived responsibility for the event in question.

Based on this, Coombs¹⁷ developed a number of typical response strategies that can be used when crises occur and criticism strikes. These strategies are *denial strategies* that include denial, attacking the attacker, and scapegoating; *diminishment strategies* that include excuses by disclaiming responsibility and justification by minimizing the damages; and *rebuilding strategies* that include offering compensation, as well as a full apology. While denial strategies are intended to blur the connection between the event and the person or organization, diminishment strategies are intended to reduce the negative effects of the event. Rebuilding strategies, in turn, are intended to restore the reputation of the person or organization involved. Coombs¹⁸ has also supplemented the three main categories with three supporting strategies, so-called bolstering strategies. These too are intended to strengthen the person or organization's reputation, either by reminding critics about past relationships (positive relationship history), praising stakeholders, or positioning themselves as victims.

The three categories of strategies can be placed on a continuum from defensive (denial strategies) to accommodative (rebuilding strategies). The main rule is that the greater the individual's responsibility for the event, the more accommodative the strategies should be. Put differently, the responsibility the public attributes to a person or organization for a crisis should decide the strategy chosen. In general, however, Coombs believes that accommodating strategies will often be the most appropriate.

Method

To discuss the research questions, we chose to analyse the media coverage related to four matches from the qualifying periods where the results can be described as disappointing to Norway: two played for qualifying for the European Championship (Croatia, 28 March 2015; Azerbaijan, 12 June 2015), one play-off match (Hungary, 12 November 2015) and another played for qualifying for the World Cup (Azerbaijan, 8 October 2016). As such, we have followed a process over a year and a half, selecting four out of six qualifying matches for further scrutiny. We were thus able to highlight how the relationships between the media and the national coach were affected by the team's relatively poor performance. Specifically, we have focused on the dynamics between the media's reaction and the coach's communication (criticism–response–criticism–response). In addition, we interviewed the coach about his media strategy.

The media coverage includes the press conferences before and after the four matches. These were important since this was the arena where the coach met with the press, and it was through these 'meetings' that his communication and response to the media's questions became directly available to the public. The media coverage also includes searches in A-text/Retriever, which is a text archive

for Norwegian newspapers. In total, this archive contains articles from over 300 Norwegian newspapers, magazines, and news agencies.

In the search process, we followed a step-by-step process in which we used the same keyword, the name of the coach. We started by searching through the two largest Norwegian national newspapers that cover football, *VG* and *Dagbladet*. During the period in question, these two newspapers published 1701 and 1561 articles about the coach and the team, respectively. We then narrowed our searches to the period before and after the selected matches, specifically seven days before and seven days after each match. In this way, we not only captured the media's and the coach's reactions and responses after the matches but also the expectations in advance, which possibly helped to create expectations or tone them down. A total of 635 articles were identified. After reading preambles and content, 416 articles that did not deal with communication between the coach and the media regarding the match in question were excluded. In total, we ended up with 219 articles.

Finally, we used a theoretically-based coding strategy, placing the national coach's statements into the respective defence strategies. In parallel, we read through the media's response to the coach's statements. The person holding the position of head coach of a national football team for a given period of time, is a highly public figure and thus impossible to anonymize. The coach we have studied has given his consent to be referred to as the national head coach.

The main objective of our study has been to report the case as such, without giving too much thought as to how typical or representative it is. That said, we still think this may be a typical case when it comes to media intensity related to elite football and highly important and decisive matches, as well as the media's reactions to victory and loss. According to Flyvbjerg,¹⁹ a typical single case can provide knowledge that can be generalized and inspire new thinking beyond the case studied. The knowledge gained from this case is therefore believed to be transferable to other coaches and managers of high-performing sports teams, especially coaches 'enjoying' a high level of media interest.

Presentation of the data material

When 'our' coach was appointed in the autumn of 2013, his short-term goal was that the team should qualify for the European Championships in 2016. His long-term goal was a medal at the World Cup in 2018. These goals were to be achieved by changing the team's playing style. The enthusiasm in the media and among the Norwegian people was great. The new coach was highly merited and had a good reputation. He was also regarded as a slightly different football coach compared to his predecessors because of his visionary and development-oriented leadership philosophy, as well as his gentle communication style, which was highly appreciated by the president of the Norwegian Football Federation. The national football team also needed a coach who could (re-)build public enthusiasm and 'win back the Norwegian people'. The coach himself admitted that this would take time and that, 'I am an innovative person and want to put my personal mark on how the national team play football'. The qualification for the European Championship started well, with one loss and three victories, but after a loss against Croatia in the spring of 2015, the biggest in 30 years, the media's attitude changed from enthusiasm to criticism.

We start our empirical account with the media's comments and reactions before and immediately after the four qualifying matches.

Match 1: different expectations

Before the match

On 28 March 2015, Norway played its fifth qualifying match. The opponent were Croatia, a team few expected Norway to beat, as illustrated by this quote from one of the Norwegian national newspapers the day before the match: 'Nobody expects Norway to beat Croatia tomorrow night. And only a few people believe in points.'²⁰ The coach, in turn, said that he was impressed by the Croatian team. He also praised the Norwegian team and the way in which it had improved and developed, followed by

how Norway planned to control the upcoming match. In this way, he appeared as far more optimistic on behalf of the Norwegian team than the media. The media, in turn, replied by reminding its readers that victory was neither expected nor possible. Put differently, while the coach communicated high expectations on behalf of the team, the media did the opposite; however, they did so without directly criticizing the coach. Instead, the coach's optimism was attributed to his personality:

Because he so desperately wants to be faithful to the doctrine and the defined developmental goal, he plays with the idea of controlling a football match against Croatia. In the real world, and that is where we are now, he knows it's impossible. But he had not been (the coach's name) if the heart had not spoken about what the brain tells him will be tactical madness.²¹

After the match

Norway lost 5–1 to Croatia – their biggest defeat in 30 years. The media attacks came quickly. However, it was not the players' performance that was attacked but the coach's rhetoric after the match. Despite a historic loss, he expressed satisfaction. In *VG*, he was quoted as follows:

The fight was as we wanted it to be. It may sound strange when we lose 5–1, but there were a lot of things I'm satisfied with. 5–1 is not a nice result, but I think we succeeded with the match plan. We make mistakes we [were] severely punished for . . .²²

To *Dagbladet*, he elaborated on this by saying that we were 'unlucky with injuries and lost Per Ciljan Skjelbred (a key player) early. Then Croatia scored on its first chance'.²³ When *VG* asked if there was something he could have done differently, he replied, 'No'. He also consistently refused to comment on the performance of individual players, despite the media challenging him to do so. Finally, he emphasized that the month of March would be a challenge for the Norwegian team, since most of the players then were out of season, but added, 'We will be sharper towards the autumn. The team is going to develop.'²⁴ He also emphasized that the team was young and, thus, its performance would vary.²⁵

The criticism, however, came not only from the media but also from a former national team player as well as a former football coach: 'In my days, we were slaughtered after matches like this one.'²⁶ 'What's up? I've never lost 5–1 and bragged about the game . . . When you lose 5–1 you do not tell the media that this was okay.'²⁷ *VG* explained the criticism by emphasizing that this was about a coach who, given the result and the team's performance, should have been far humbler in his response:

Because people are provoked to hear that a national coach seems satisfied when the nation has just got five backwards. If you hear and read what (the coach's name) said after the game, the picture becomes much more nuanced. But most people only read and hear what they want . . . People don't want to hear what he said after 5–1. People want to hear a humble, national coach saying that this was not good enough, that the results were embarrassing for him as well as the entire nation.²⁸

The criticism continued. In the time that followed, the coach's personality and professional qualities were also under scrutiny.

Match 2: the big disappointment

Before the match

The 12 June 2015 was the first opportunity for 'revenge'. This time, the opponent was Azerbaijan, a team that the media referred to as a significantly weaker opponent than Croatia. This meant expectations of victory, or as *VG* wrote: 'Azerbaijan is an opponent Norway must beat to deserve a place in the play-offs.' The media were particularly concerned with the line-up and selection of strikers able to turn chances into goals. The coach was optimistic, stating that, 'we have strikers who have gradually improved, and I know we will score goals.'²⁹

After the match

The match ended in a goalless draw, and the media's verdict was clear. The match was not only 'disappointing' but simply 'a failure'.³⁰ The coach was criticized for his team selection and for substitutions coming too late in the match. This time, however, the media focused on the players more than after the match against Croatia. Despite creating many chances, they did not score. The coach expressed disappointment because of the lack of goals, but admitted no faults, despite the players themselves expressed great dissatisfaction with their own performance. They also started to blame each other: 'the team-mates at the front failed', as one of them said.³¹ The coach, however, defended his players:

I would choose the same team again. There are still some unanswered questions, but we are in a phase of developing the team ... We have many new players and none of them scores regularly internationally ... That's our challenge.³²

It was now three months until the next two matches. These would determine whether Norway would qualify for the European Championship, and the coach's future was seriously debated. The media speculation went so far that the president of the Norwegian Football Federation had to intervene: 'I have told him that he will continue, regardless of this match. The project extends beyond these qualification matches.'³³

During the next two matches, media criticism changed to praise. On 3rd September, Norway beat Bulgaria and three days later Croatia. The 'villain' suddenly became a 'hero' and the coach's rhetoric and football philosophy were now applauded:

First and foremost, it is time to praise the national coach for having stuck to his plan when the screaming choir has been at its worst and for convincing his players that things are improving even though the results were so terribly different just a few months ago.³⁴

In any case, the two victories gave the coach and his team some 'breathing space' until October, when the last two qualifying matches were to be played.

Matches 3 and 4: the criticism escalates

Before the matches

Norway finished third in its group and therefore got the opportunity to qualify for the European Championships by way of two play-off matches, home and away against Hungary. Hungary was ranked as a far weaker team than Norway, and optimism was great. So was the pressure on the coach. The outcome of these matches could determine whether he would be portrayed as a historical hero or a villain: 'If the team defeats Hungary in the play-off matches, he will enter the history books. Then he will be one of the greatest national football coaches we have had.'³⁵

After the matches

Norway lost both matches and as expected, the coach became the scapegoat. The media were ruthless: the team chosen was pure gambling, a real record boom, and the coach was dreamy and had acted naively. Again, the coach did not admit any faults. Instead, he said: 'There was no gambling, we were emphasising form players and chose the team we believed in. And we had a plan B and C, which we always have.'³⁶ Again, he emphasized that while the team was young and inexperienced, it was improving. At the same time, he emphasized his own personal qualities and those of his support system: 'we have done a very good job with a very young team.'³⁷ He also pointed out that the team had only been 17 minutes from victory against Italy, and with a victory here Norway would have qualified for the European Championship.

Within the next 24 hours, the media pressure escalated. The credibility of the coach was seriously damaged. The coach was criticized for his lack of football skills as well as his continuing developmental rhetoric:

When Norway needed good choices and a wise strategy, he just made mistakes. So many that his credibility has been severely damaged. After two losses for Hungary, it becomes only rhetorical . . . , project (the coach's name) is officially a failure when it comes to results. And [ultimately], the results are what matter in football.³⁸

The media commentators now agreed that Norway needed a new national coach. The Norwegian Football Federation, however, was still supportive, and the president stated that the present coach was the right one to lead the team towards the upcoming World Cup qualification.

Match 5: enough is enough

Before the match

The World Cup qualification started with Norway losing 0–3 at home against the reigning world champions Germany; a match no one had expected Norway to win. In the run-up to the next match, against Azerbaijan in October, the media expressed great distrust in the coach. At a press conference three days before the match, he was asked if he would consider his position if the team lost: 'And as usual, a (the coach's name) smile. We have matched ourselves against some of the better football nations to test the quality of our team.'³⁹ Again, he was attacked for his positive developmental rhetoric, illustrated by the following exchange of views between a journalist and the coach: 'Do you regret your rhetoric; the type of Norway playing attack football like Manchester City and [defending] itself as Atletico Madrid?'. 'I haven't said that'. 'You probably have'. 'I've probably used those names. But I have also said that sometimes I can be very ambitious. That's just how I am. I think that's why we took the Olympic gold.'⁴⁰

Furthermore, he was attacked for his lack of realism, self-criticism, and humility. It was felt that he should apologize for the bad results to the audience and the Norwegian people. Some of the criticism can also be read as a criticism of the coach's support system and organization, the Norwegian Football Federation:

Our national head coach cannot be accused of surrounding himself with too many geniuses, whether in terms of communication, elementary psychology, or ordinary folk wisdom. Admitting mistakes, humility, and realism are necessary and obvious when explaining miserable results. When the obvious truth is to be explained and overshadowed by the unrecognisable, all credibility and trust disappear, and the most important exam in (the coach's name) life became a total failure . . . A simple apology is the only recipe, and not an endless desert walk in constructed rhetoric, which few people understand and no one accepts.⁴¹

After the match

The match against Azerbaijan ended with Norway losing 1–0, and the demand for the coach's departure escalated. In addition, the newly elected president of the Norwegian Football Federation told *Dagbladet*, a few hours after the match, that he was terribly disappointed, adding that, 'there will be an evaluation earlier than we first thought'.⁴² To VG, he supplemented the statement by saying: 'The coach is evaluated by achievements and results. An evaluation must include all factors. Results are decisive, but the support from the team also counts.'⁴³

When the coach met the press, he began his analysis by once again emphasizing the positives, from this last and the previous matches, as well as by emphasizing that the team was still developing and that the results would come in the next match. He even claimed that the Norwegian team was far better than the opponent Azerbaijan, despite the loss, and that 'the match was as we had predicted'.⁴⁴ At the same time, he admitted that the team still did not have the necessary quality to score goals.

When the media asked if his strategy of putting team development and his own playing style before results would be 'his legacy', he replied: 'Results have been a challenge for us. When it comes to how to play football, I think that's the only way to develop as a nation.' Furthermore, when asked if he was going to lead the Norwegian team in the upcoming match, he answered: 'Yes, on that I am very sure.' He elaborated on his answer by emphasizing that Norway had played one of the best

European qualifications ever in terms of results, by achieving 19 points. In addition to criticizing the coach's rhetoric, both his and the players' lack of realism in relation to the players' performances and skills were commented on:

Even though he was clear enough this evening, all too often he has not addressed, has even denied, the negatives after bad matches. The human mind has an ego-oriented defence mechanism that distances itself from the realities that create a stress that rationality cannot cope with. It's called denial. It is in this denial that I feel both he and Norway have been stuck; neither the coach nor the players are able to see the fact, much less relate to it. We simply don't have good enough players to play like the good [teams].⁴⁵

Something has to be done. He can no longer hide behind nice words about success in the future ... We believed that for a while. But Norway just loses and loses.⁴⁶

In the midst of the negative media storm, however, there were some journalists defending the coach:

Stop the hassle of (the coach's name). Believe it or not, in adversity (the coach's name) has had the same results with the national team as (the name of the three former national coaches). It just doesn't seem like that while we wait for (the coach's first name) Messiah.⁴⁷

The reference to Messiah was a hint of the coach's personal emanation, his ambitious visions and the role he had acquired as a 'saviour' when he became head coach of the national team.

Then it was all over

Norway lost the match against the Czech Republic on the 11th, and on the 16th November it was all over. The coach resigned. The reason was that the pressure on the organization and the team had become too strong: 'I still believe in the players. However, eventually the pressure on the team and the organisation became so hard I felt that it was right to resign.'⁴⁸

The coach's media strategy

The national coach's media strategy was based on his wish to communicate enthusiasm and create (great) expectations. In this way, the Norwegian national team would again 'become the team of the people'. His task, he said, was to 'strengthen the self-confidence of the team, the media, the organisation, and the Norwegian people'. When losing matches, he described his role towards the media as focusing on facts in the form of numbers and statistics, which again should be followed up by meetings with the players and the support staff. The reason was, as he put it, that 'the media is so tabloid' and 'my job is to look past the results and talk about the facts by presenting numbers and statistics'. He furthermore claimed that: 'I repeat this to the players and show pictures from matches where they have succeeded in recreating what we have trained for.'

At the same time, he described his media strategy as characterized by a desire to 'keep himself intact' and be true to his own football philosophy and the way he perceived himself as a person and coach. In this regard, he argued that using the professional communication advisors of the Norwegian Football Federation was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, he felt that their time was a scarce resource and that they first and foremost represented the organization and not the coach and the team. On the other hand, he believed that by adhering too strongly to the type of general communication advice they could provide, he would lose a little bit of himself.

In the research interviews, as in the media, he said that he would not have done anything differently, be it his professional strategy or his media rhetoric. He admitted, however, that 'there are nuances in my language that could have been better'. He also described himself as non-tactical in relation to the media and admitted that he was aware he had challenged 'the media and the Norwegian people to the extreme' with his consistently positive rhetoric. 'I'm never going to criticize the players in the media,' he said. For him, the positive rhetoric was a strategy for creating distance from the external representations of himself and the team. At the same time, it was

a strategy to maintain calm before meeting the media, which he described as a situation characterized by strong emotions:

After a loss, it is so easy to get emotional when you are going to say something to the media. I get two minutes before I must say something to the entire Norwegian people about this particular match and the results. Afterwards, there is a press conference.

He concluded by saying that, 'I lost the fight against the media; when they go chasing in herds you are left without a chance.'

Analysis

The data show that the coach was criticized for lack of realism in evaluating the team's ability and opportunities, lack of humility when explaining why the team lost matches the media thought they should win, his (positive development) rhetoric, and his professional (football) skills. It also shows that his public response after the matches followed the same pattern throughout the period on which we have focused. Criticism from the media was largely met by denying that he could have done anything differently. In addition to denial, the coach's main response strategy was excusing, in that he referred to matters beyond his own and the players' control when the results failed. The results were due to accidents such as injuries, bad luck, too little playing time for players in their own club, and so on. He also tried to justify the results by pointing to mitigating circumstances, such as the players being young, inexperienced, and in a developmental phase. These justifications were supplemented by emphasizing the positive aspects of the team and its development, as well as the training programme, and by referring to his own past successes with other teams. In other words, the coach responded with a combination of denial strategies, rebuilding strategies, and bolstering strategies.

The criticism of the coach's professional skills was directed at different aspects, such as his match strategy and team selection, but also against the individual player's performance. Of these, a coach can only apologize for his match strategy without indirectly blaming the players. A coach who takes self-criticism for his team selection, or criticizes individual player's performance, disclaims responsibility and at the same time transfers (some of) the responsibility for the result to the players. Over time, however, the national coach's efforts to protect the players and never criticize them in the media seems to have reinforced the media's assertions that he lacked humility. This illustrates a dilemma: coaches must protect the players as well as respond to media criticism in ways that reduce rather than intensify the criticism. The two considerations are difficult to reconcile because they rest on different logics.

Initially, the media reacted with a certain indulgence to the coach and what was portrayed as a central and far-reaching positive feature of his personality. He entered the coaching role for the national football team with a reputation as a respected coach, one with several successes behind him and a different and more humanistic leadership style than is usually associated with professional football. At the same time, there were high expectations about results when he took over the team. However, as he held on to the same response strategies regardless of results, the journalists' patience ended. Instead, the criticism of his positive rhetoric, the repeated attempts to excuse the results by referring to conditions beyond his and the team's control, the attempts to convince that the team's development pointed to future success, as well as to his personality and professional football skills, increased. Eventually, the criticism was also followed by an almost united demand for his departure.

The initial denials resulted in the coach's subsequent denials being overlooked and not taken seriously, despite the fact that he presented figures and statistics confirming his claims about a team in positive development. In this regard, one of the media comments following the match against Azerbaijan during the 2016 World Cup qualification is particularly interesting, in that it emphasizes that important informative nuances in the coach's media comments were overshadowed by what was perceived as his lack of humility. Put differently, the coach's early denials and explanations

created a space for further criticism, which in turn became a frame of reference by which his later denials and attempts at justification were judged. They simply reinforced the possibility that the media, over time, could repeat their own narrative of an 'unrealistic', 'dreamy', and 'naïve' coach, and in the wake, the perceived crisis of the national football team.

It may seem like he almost offended the media by expecting them to accept that the development would lead to the desired results in the long run when it was not backed up with results in the form of goals and victories. In addition, when the media portrayed him as the one mainly responsible for the national 'crisis', the situation can be interpreted as a serious reputational threat for the coach and the Norwegian Football Federation.⁴⁹ Thus, the increased criticism of the coach cannot only be understood as a result of a symbiosis between the logic of professional sports and the media but also as a result of his responses to media criticism. This interpretation is supported by several examples of media statements, showing that some journalists defended the coach until the very end, partly by referring to the coach's results compared to those of previous national coaches, and partly by looking beyond the negative results and recognizing the coach's description of the team's positive development. There were also those who praised him for standing up to the media hunt when the storm was at its worst. Thus, the coach's media response cannot be understood as successful.

However, the apology is an ambiguous response strategy, for coaches as well as for managers in general. On the one hand, it can undermine a coach's authority as long as the criticism is directed at his or her professional judgements and choices. Loss of internal authority (players' trust) is far more detrimental to a coach's opportunity for productive leadership than loss of external authority (media narratives). But even the latter can represent a threat, in that it can make the work situation difficult and, in the worst case, lead to reduced internal authority. If the apology is to succeed as a response strategy, it must be perceived as truthful, genuine, voluntary, arrive at the right time, address all stakeholders, and be presented in an appropriate context.⁵⁰ The study of the response by the earlier mentioned Danish handball coach shows that her apology was unsuccessful, partly because it could not be perceived as genuine and voluntary. In our case, there is reason to believe that an apology after the first qualifying match, the one against Croatia, would neither have threatened the coach's professional authority nor be distrusted by the media, because of the credibility the coach had earned at this point in the process.

The coach himself had a clear strategy for his role towards the media and for how to meet the media's criticism when the results failed. While his positive media rhetoric was a result of a desire to create enthusiasm among the audience, it was also primarily directed at himself and the players. On the one hand, he wanted to be true to his own identity as the leader (or to his leadership philosophy). As such, his media communication appears as auto-communication; an indirect communication with himself, aiming to affirm and maintain his own identity.⁵¹ On the other hand, his media communication was also a form of indirect leadership of the players. He tried to maintain what Potrac et al.⁵² have described as an idealized image of himself to the players in a situation where there was little time for internal evaluations. He also sought to protect the players from the media narratives becoming an integrated part of their own self-understanding. His statement that he would never criticize the players in public must be understood in light of this. As such, he was acting in accordance with findings from studies of players' experiences with media coverage that show how public evaluations of results are perceived as a stress factor.⁵³ Both Pensgaard and Duda,⁵⁴ and Pensgaard and Roberts,⁵⁵ have found that athletes want minimal focus on results. In this regard, Kristiansen and Roberts⁵⁶ emphasize that coaches and administrative leaders should avoid making the same mistakes as the media, being too concerned about the results. Instead, the coach should protect the team from negative media attention, as well as putting media exposure into perspective. Put differently, the national head coach acted in accordance with established norms for 'good coaching behaviour'. At the same time, the coach's personal integrity and identity, and his care for the players, appear to have overshadowed the need to limit media criticism and thus protect his own reputation in the best possible way.

Overall, this case illustrates the dynamics that arise when different logics meet. The media adhere to commercial logic, seeing its ‘mission’ as one of creating saleable stories on a daily basis, and good sports entertainment is drama: strong emotions, high hills and deep valleys. Then, paradoxically, the colourful is painted in black and white, with heroes and villains, success and failure. It is the extreme and controversial that make good stories. Coaches, on the other hand, operate on the basis of a developmental logic, where the team, over time, step by step, should move towards better performances. The stories of the events along the way (the matches) are therefore shaped by fundamentally different logics. In our case, the media criticism was based on premises that the coach continually challenged and partly disputed. In other words, there was a struggle for how to ‘understand the reality’; how what happened should be re-counted. This is the terrain that coaches must navigate and seek to master in ways that can be accepted both internally and externally.

Painting the big picture, the coach’s media response can be interpreted as a ‘distancing strategy’, clarifying the distinction between media narratives on the one hand and the coach and the team’s self-understanding on the other. For media profiled teams, research has shown that active distancing from the media narratives is important not to become a ‘victim’ of external constructions based on the media logic.⁵⁷ If the distinction between media narratives and athletes’ self-understanding is weakened, the athletic improvement work that is the coach’s core task can be difficult to maintain. At the same time, the media narratives are so powerful that they are hard to ignore, which is confirmed by the present study of the Norwegian men’s football team.

Concluding remarks

This study shows how a media narrative trumped the story of a professional football coach, thus leading to an initial belief in the coach and the team being lost. Despite the coach trying to convince the media and the audience that, in the long run, he would be able to create a winning team, it was the media’s attack on his rhetoric as well as doubts about his professional football skills that won. As such, this appears as a classic example of the media’s power, when the narrative demands a solution and the media chase in herds; when coaches become victim to the ‘media-hunt’, the battle is lost.

However, the study also indicates that the ‘media-hunt’, at least to some extent, can be avoided. In this case, the coach had the ability to balance the consideration of his own and the players’ identities with regard to the media and the audience. He himself created a potential crisis with his initial media communication. This, in turn, influenced the interpretation of his subsequent media communication, weakened the patience of the media and the public trust in his development project, and as such reinforced the crisis.

An important challenge in the daily lives of professional football coaches is how to handle media attention and media communication, regardless of results. Therefore, media leadership becomes an almost integral part of their coaching role. It is thus important that coaches have knowledge of the media’s narrative logic and skills to adapt their responses to the various acts of such a narrative. This involves evaluating the context and its dynamics and thinking long-term about what ‘battles’ are worth taking on – for example, whether or not some version of the denial strategy is absolutely necessary. Although the context in which professional football coaches operate is often different from the scandals to which the theory of crisis communication has previously been applied, our study suggests that, in such a context, denial should also be used with caution and sensitivity.

Notes

1. Bruce and Tini, ‘Unique Crisis Response Strategies’, 108; and Rowe, *Sport, Culture & Media*, 1–8.
2. Carter, ‘Managing the Media’, 219, 238.
3. cf. Kitchin and Purcell, ‘Examining Sport Communications’, 662.

4. Benoit and Hanczor, 'The Tonya Harding Controversy', 416–433; Benoit, 'Tiger Woods Image Repair', 61–96; Bruce and Tini, 'Unique Crises Response Strategies', 108–115; Glantz, 'The Floyd Landis Doping Scandal', 157–163; Walsh and McAllister-Spooner, 157–162; and 'Michael Phelps Controversy', 157–162.
5. Frandsen and Johansen, 'The Apology of a Sports Icon', 85–104.
6. Manoli, 'Crisis-Communications Management in Football Clubs', 340–2.
7. Kruse, 'Apologia in Team Sport', 272.
8. Snyder and Spreitzer, 'Sociology of Sport'.
9. Bridgewater, *Football Management Trends*; and Arnulf et al., 'Heroic Leadership Illusions', 169–185.
10. Coombs, *Ongoing Crisis Communication*.
11. Manoli, 'Crisis-Communications Management', 347–349.
12. Fog et al., *Storytelling*, 188–190.
13. Thornton and Ocasio, 'Institutional Logics', 804.
14. Coombs, 'Ongoing Crisis Communication', 149–59.
15. Frandsen and Johansen, 86.
16. Coombs, 'Ongoing Crisis Communication' 149–59.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Flyvbjerg, 'Five Misunderstandings', 224–28.
20. Dagbladet, 27 March 2015.
21. Dagbladet, 25 March 2015.
22. VG, 28 March 2015.
23. Dagbladet, 28 March 2015.
24. Dagbladet, 28 March 2015.
25. VG, 29 March 2015,
26. VG/Dagbladet, 28 March 2015.
27. VG/Dagbladet, 28 March 2015.
28. VG, 29 March 2015.
29. NRK/VG, 9 June 2015.
30. Dagbladet, 12 June 2015.
31. VG, 13 March 2015.
32. VG, 13 June 2015.
33. VG, 2 September 2015.
34. VG, 6 September 2015.
35. Dagbladet, 10 November 2015.
36. Dagbladet, 16 November 2015.
37. Dagbladet, 16 November 2015.
38. Dagbladet, 16 November 2015.
39. VG, 30 September 2016.
40. One of his merits was Olympic Gold as head coach for the Norwegian female national football team.
41. VG, 7 October 2016.
42. Dagbladet, 8 October 2016.
43. VG, 8 October 2016.
44. VG, 8 October 2016.
45. Dagbladet, 8 October 2016.
46. Dagbladet, 8 October 2016.
47. Dagbladet, 7 October 2016.
48. VG, 16 November 2016.
49. cf. Coombs, 149–61.
50. Frandsen and Johansen, 90–100.
51. Christensen, 'Marketing as Auto-Communication', 199–219.
52. Potrac et al., 'Getting Respect', 183–202.
53. Kristiansen and Roberts, 'Media Exposure', 339–41.
54. Pensgaard and Duda, 'If we work hard,' 230–4.
55. Pensgaard and Roberts, 'Elite Athletes' Experiences', 57–8.
56. Kristiansen and Roberts, 363.
57. Ronglan, 'Håndboldens Medieeksponering', 296–301.

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