

# Powerful owners and powerful legacies. What drives change in the World Rally Championship?

**Samuel Tickell, Hans Erik Naess & Tom Evens**

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## **Abstract**

This study seeks to identify the impact of a commercial turning point in the FIA World Rally Championship (WRC) in 1999 and the 2013 takeover by the current promoter's media strategies. Drawing upon 21 qualitative interviews with key stakeholders in the WRC coupled with theories of institutional logics, mediatization and strategic legacy, the findings demonstrate that the decisions and culture of the sport can be powerful as the new owners seek to influence the direction of sport in their own image. Sport managers who are dealing with change processes and sport management researchers should identify where an organization's self-reinforcing mechanisms and processes exist in order to balance sporting tradition with organizational culture.

**Keywords:** sports management, media-sport, path dependency, institutional logic, World Rally Championship

## 1. Introduction

Professional sports aspire to gain worldwide fandom and financialization. However, relying on the element of competition alone cannot deliver desired results. Rather, sport relies on a variety of elements to achieve high levels of popularity and financial success. Whether it be aspects like the spectacular mediatization of sports, showing super-human feats or spectacular scenery shown on broadcast media; an event creating a festival-like nature, or the amplification of rivalries sport managers have a wealth of tools at their disposal. Beneath the surface, however, sport-management has seen sports has undergone standardization, professionalization, ‘glocalization’ and ‘spectacularization’ to create a universal format for the production of sports media (see e.g. (Mean, 2017; Tomlinson, 2002; Wigmore & Wilde, 2019)). Together, this has left researchers of this ‘the sport-media complex’ (Rowe, 1999) focused on exploring how the global reframing of sports on the media’s premises initiated and impacted fan behavior, event management, and promotion. Yet there has been little research on how the media management of sport has affected its path to standardization, professionalization, ‘glocalization’ and ‘spectacularization’.

By exploring ‘strategic legacy’ (Ogbonna & Harris, 2001), sports entrepreneurship, and media-sport and applying it to a sporting context we can better understand the commercial turning points in sports and sports management. To explore this topic, this article uses as its case example the FIA World Rally Championship (WRC). Rallying existed since 1904 but it was not until 1973 that the WRC was formed under FIA governance and added the FIA driver’s championship in 1977, with the sport taking the form we know today. This means a competition where teams compete for a Manufacturer’s Title and a Driver’s Title throughout a season of 12-14 events around the world. Unlike track racing, WRC events are run car by car on 16-22 ‘special stages’ (closed roads) where the winner is the one who drives fastest through these

stages. Since the 1970s, the WRC has developed into a media-driven sport like other motorsport championships like Formula 1 and NASCAR. However, it was not until 1999 that the WRC's commercial owners transformed the qualities of the sport feeding both criticism and praise from a marketing perspective (O'Connor, 2004). In 2007 the sport was acquired by North One Sport (NOS) and in 2011 to Convers Sports Initiatives (CSI). Crucially, the sport faced a fight for survival at the start of 2012 after CSI's corporate collapse. It was an opportunity for Red Bull to become involved in the sport, taking the reigns with KW25 for the 2013 season. This new ownership structure heralded the joining of a sporting management company known for its culture for 'spectacularization' and a sport with a long cultural history. This transformation drew skepticism and optimism from fans; car manufacturers and other stakeholders (Author, 2014; 2016).

Emphasizing this aspect of the transformative power of the championship's development is relevant. Since 1999, each time the sport had new owners or managers, they imposed their preferred ownership structures, their operational preferences, and their organizational culture. But rallying's legacy remained powerful. Understanding how Red Bull Media House has been able to implement their focus to making the sport more spectacular, in line with their corporate objectives is important (Georgen, 2012; Næss, 2014). Depending on its implementation, the relationship between legacy and innovation may incur strategic 'inheritance' or 'hangover' (Ogbonna & Harris, 2001, 2014) or even organizational 'path-dependency' (Sydow et al., 2009) to subsequent generations of strategy formulators, 'thereby facilitating or restricting change' (Ogbonna & Harris, 2014, p. 669). As such, how did it play out in the WRC?

To answer, this exploratory article uses qualitative interview data to analyze the legacy's ramifications from the 1999 shift and the subsequent relevant promotional changes has had on

the WRC. We outline the history of the WRC as a commercial phenomenon before introducing our theoretical framework. Our methods and materials are outlined after the theoretical section before we turn to the findings. Successful commercial development of sports can be dependent on integrating certain aspects from media drivers for change (Skey et al., 2017; Sturm, 2015). As such, three dimensions are chosen as heuristic devices: 1) (re)creating the TV product, 2) (re)creating the event, and 3) (re)creating the fan expectation. After presenting the findings, we discuss to what degree these processes have become ingrained as path-dependent characteristics of the championship. Finally, the identification of theoretical and practical implications for other sporting organizations is drawn from the case dynamics between history, strategic thinking, and media developments.

## **2. Background**

Since the 1960s sport and media have had the ‘happiest of marriages, with the expensive exchange of exposure and rights fees for sport in return for compelling content and audience capture for the media’ (Rowe, 1999, p. 32). Rules, business models and sport consumption behavior changed due to media demands. It was not a one-way street. To maximize the financial benefit from sport, the media had to change, to facilitate sport's unique needs (Evens & Lefever, 2013; Skey et al., 2017, p. 590). For example, as Internet technologies emerged and *broadcast scarcity* gave way to *digital plenitude* (Hutchins & Rowe, 2009) opportunities for sports to take control of their broadcasting strategy emerged (Tickell & Evens, 2021). Companies such as Red Bull have excelled in meeting this demand by creating a brand and athletes that are identifiable and interesting, creating their own revenue through sponsorship, owned media services and event hosting (Brasel & Gips, 2011; E. Kunz et al., 2016; Hilzensauer, 2014).

The WRC failed to capitalize on the media successes other sports enjoyed. One explanation lies in its competition structure and traditions. Rallying is a decentralized sport that takes place over a large geographic area and over a long time period, often more than three days. These two issues make it difficult to televise and commercialize. Moreover, standardization of events and the championship's promotion did not occur at the initiation of the WRC. Rather, the FIA oversaw a group of loosely organized events, each with its own promotional and television agreements and rules ensuring a lack of media coverage consistency. While the WRC enjoyed brief moments of popularity, like the 1995 RAC Rally in the UK where an estimated crowd of 2 million people were in attendance, making it the single largest sporting event in the country, rallying's popularity could not be sustained (Page, 2019).

The first meaningful steps into standardization were in 1999 when David Richards, boss of the leading the championship-winning Subaru World Rally Team, saw potential in the promotional rights and purchased the commercial rights to the entire championship. Under his stewardship, research and an overhaul of the sport and television product occurred with increased standardization of the sport and the media product (Næss, 2014; O'Connor, 2004). His vision was to simplify access to the sport, improve safety, and facilitate television and media coverage. Changes included implementing a centralized service park and the 'clover-leaf format' for each event. Previously, rallies could snake their way through a country, with stages only used once and cars repaired on the side of the road. That would all change with every rally having a service park – meaning cars could only be repaired in this location, usually in a population zone; stages would be geographically closer to the service park and used multiple times (Næss, 2014).

However, attempts to make the sport profitable were unsuccessful for ISC. As previously discussed, NOS then CSI tried to make the sport profitable. However, CSI's wider corporate collapse led the WRC into a season of ad-hoc promotion, before the WRC Promoter GmbH was formed, existing within the Red Bull media ecosystem (*WRC Factbook 2020, 2021*). This was a pivotal move for the WRC as Red Bull made their success outside the WRC, creating a reputation as sporting-frame breakers. Outwardly, they had an immediate impact with the creation of a new broadcast model, moving away from a reliance on linear television and moving to an owned streaming product. It appeared to work well with increased media figures reported. For the 2019 season, the sport drew a cumulative TV audience of 863 million, 4+ million onsite spectators, 140 million online video views, and 1.4 billion online impressions; when compared with a TV audience of 607 million, 3.3 million onsite spectators, 6.5 million online video views and 499 million online impressions in 2013(*WRC Factbook 2020, 2021*). But the question remains, how did Red Bull influence the WRC and how much influence did the history of the WRC have on the path of the sport?

### **3. Theoretical framework**

#### ***3.1 Institutional logics***

As briefly reviewed, until the mid-1990s sporting traditions determined the nature of the content from WRC events and associated commercial activities. However, when Richards decided to mediatize the competition design, it set off a process that impacted WRC's viewer statistics, and importantly, it set off a process that impacted its *institutional logics*. That is, 'a set of material practices and symbolic constructions – which constitutes its organizing principles, and which is available to organizations and individuals to elaborate' (Friedland & Alford, 1991, p. 248).

Expanding from new institutional theory, which emphasizes how organizations change resulting

from external pressure, institutional logic looks inwards to organizations and points to how change is resisted or enabled (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). Generally, organizations are thus the cumulative consequences of the actions of many people over time (Chisholm, 1995), where ‘the formal structure must itself be seen as an adaptive product, responsive to environmental influences, including cultural definitions of propriety and legitimacy’ (Selznick, 1996, p. 273).

At the same time, not all changes are equally influential in impacting the logics or the institutional setup. Furthermore, not all changes happen for the same reasons or provide the same leverage to increase legitimacy. Crucially, the combination of logics is implemented differently in organizations as time and circumstances change. Previous research has pointed to three ways of relating to a plurality of logics: disconnection, compromise, or selective connection (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Pache & Santos, 2012). The former is about how the organization adapts to external expectations and internal wishes for follow-up of formal requirements and procedures, although in practice the implementation of changes that ‘proves’ that the organization takes these requirements seriously may be unclear. A much-debated example of this ‘solution’ is the growth of corporate social responsibility policies in businesses (Ioannou & Serafeim, 2015). The solutions are similar at first glance. Compromises can mean that the organization passively meets some of these requirements by making changes in the organization with the proviso of getting something in return, selective coupling is more active and strategic. The most innovative organizations redefine the relationship between the meaning of logic through proactively (instead of reactively) redefining institutional mechanisms, like stakeholder inclusion (Cloutier & Langley, 2013; Pache & Santos, 2012).

These combinations of logics and their relevance to sport are previously addressed in studies of specific fields, such as football (Allison, 2016; Gillett & Tennent, 2018), or in studies



on sport leadership and governance (Nissen & Wagner, 2020; Stenling, 2014). Although these studies demonstrate the relevance of analyzing changes in sport through the apparatus of institutional logics, none of them go in-depth on how these couplings affect or are affected by, the leverage of tradition on organizational development. To rectify this shortage, and to assess in what way the 1999 media turnaround impacted WRC's institutional logics, the concept of strategic legacy, defined as 'the enduring influence of the initial strategy of the founder of an organization over the actions of successive strategic decision-makers' (Ogbonna & Harris, 2001, p. 14), becomes central to our investigation. Whereas earlier research has argued that strategy legacy can be found in areas like value statements (Blombäck et al., 2013) and organizational identity (Boers & Ljungkvist, 2019), the concept of strategic legacy enables organizations to use the past to construct continuity and discontinuity (Boers & Ljungkvist, 2019, p. 91). Maielli (2015) draws upon Sydow et al. (2009) to exemplify this with his study of the Italian car industry, where institutional logics shape managerial discretion. The ability to innovate in this situation is dependent on the status of self-reinforcing mechanisms (generated by societal relations external to the organization, most notably the market selecting products) and processes (social relations internal to the organization) (Maielli, 2015b, p. 492).

### ***3.2 Management, media and sport***

It is useful to consider this backdrop as any changes in sport are not taken in a vacuum. Sport faces its own unique challenges in change management and adaptation to a changing market place and Rascher et al. (2019) provides suggestions on the unique challenges that sport faces which include, "the effect of rules to enhance competitive balance", "unique types of barriers to entry to these monopoly leagues", and "the product that sports sells" (p114). The challenges are clear when viewing the actions of Richards and Red Bull. When applied to the WRC, a change in

the technical or sporting rules can alter the competitive balance of the series; include or exclude competitors based on aspects like cost, availability of a suitable car and willingness to invest in the technology. Additionally, it can affect the sport and what they are selling. Event standardization can alter spectator cultures and behaviors (Næss, 2014). Finally, the WRC Promoter GmbH must consider the governing body, governments, environmental agencies, media, drivers, sponsors, individual events, automotive manufacturers among others when making decisions. The last point is important. Sports management must incorporate perspectives from stakeholders that may not be present elsewhere - like fans, sponsors, athletes, coaches or governments (Hammerschmidt et al., 2019, p. 842).

Furthermore, Red Bull's turn to an owned streaming service to broadcast the sport is the latest move in sport's opportunity recognition or the swift recognition of “new ideas for sports products, services or processes” (Ratten, 2018, p. 91). It has been a staple throughout sport media during the media neo-liberalization phases (Evens & Donders, 2018). Taking advantage of these changes is often due to the presence of entrepreneurial ecosystems in sports teams, where a core group of people can push for organizational change, even it is considered a risk (Ratten, 2019). Initially, this entrepreneurial process was led by Richards. By integrating promotional affairs as a structural part of the WRC, instead of delegating it to a marketing department, they adopted what Altheide (2004) names ‘media logic’. A key feature of this logic, which we argue first became entrenched with Richards’ WRC commercial revamp, ‘refers to the rules or “codes” for defining, selecting, organizing, presenting, and recognizing information as one thing rather than another’ (Altheide, 2004, p. 294). Later, this media logic was labeled as mediatization, where media actors ‘are a powerful and essential part of the change—because they are embedded in all the other institutional agents surrounding the world of sport’ (Frandsen, 2016, p. 398).

### 3.3 *Inheritance or hangover*

Commercial decisions before 1999 were made based on the WRC's sporting characteristics, derived from its geographical spread and competition format. The Richards era and beyond ushered a view where the format and communication of championship rallies needed to fit better with the current media developments in sport. When examining the Red Bull-era of the sport, in theory, it could have produced two versions of itself when it comes to the emergence of a media logic in the WRC's promotional affairs. The first is *inheritance*, which is demonstrated in the institutionalized collaboration between stakeholders for aspects like the composition of events and methods to enhance the sport to previously attained research (Ogbonna & Harris, 2014, p. 660). The other is *hangover*, which is embedded because it adheres to an institutional logic dominant in the promotion of sports, and partly because sponsors back up this policy in general (Ogbonna & Harris, 2014, p. 669). If either of the two is dominating the commercial strategy of a sporting organization, one can talk of 'path dependency'. Path dependency should not be seen as complete rigidity, but a processual development of action, reactions, intended and unintended consequences 'which takes us beyond the mere insight that past events influence subsequent actions' (Sydow et al., 2009, p. 690).

To analyze the presence of inheritance and/or hangover, and through that examine the level of path-dependency in the WRC's entrepreneurial activities since 1999, Sydow et al. (2009) three-phase model is therefore useful to organize our findings. This model is based on the assumptions that, evidence of path dependency tendencies can be identified through (I) singular historical events, (II) which may, under certain conditions, transform themselves into self-reinforcing dynamics, and (III) possibly end up in an organizational lock-in (Sydow et al., 2009, p. 691). Sydow et al. (2009) continues with the developments and dependencies progress, the

more normalized they become within the business context, rendering them harder to reverse. As both mechanisms and processes are linked to critical junctures in an organization's history, i.e. transitions between phases (Maielli, 2015b, p. 493). The following section explains what kind of data we have gathered to examine this topic with the WRC as a case.

#### **4. Data and methods**

Our methodological approach to the WRC's media developments is grounded in the argument by (Garcia & Gluesing, 2013) that organizational change is fruitfully explored qualitatively. It is especially true when grasping change dynamics and context-sensitive issues, where benefits shine through in 'considerations of complex multi-stakeholder organizing, how work practices and organizational structures and cultures evolve, and how organizations design and implement such changes to meet new challenges' (Garcia & Gluesing, 2013, p. 424) Connected to the call for further empirical studies on how institutional logics are affected and created, this article primarily relies on qualitative semi-structured interviews.

The qualitative approach of semi-structured interviews has been common in sports-media research with industry-leading researchers utilizing the approach, including Boyle (2006) and Hutchins (2016). In this case, the semi-structured interviews were tailored to make the most of the respondent's individual expertise and experiences, as well as heed a call from Alvesson & Ashcraft (2012) of integrating 'reflexive pragmatics' in qualitative interviewing, 'at once concerned with cultivating a conscious reflection on deeper epistemological, political and technical problems as well as expanding the repertoire through which these problems can be managed in practice' (p. 240). The reason is that in organizational studies, it is imperative to avoid 'assuming that interviewees are primarily competent and moral truth-tellers who will act in the service of science, serving up data that will reveal their 'interiors' or the realities of their

social institutions’ (Alvesson & Ashcraft, 2012, p. 245). For these reasons, Alvesson & Ashcraft (2012) promote the notion of theoretically informed interview practices (p. 246).

As some of the authors of this article have been professionally engaged with the WRC for some years, this critical perspective informed the preparations for the qualitative interviews by attending seven WRC rounds in seven countries over two years (April 2018-March 2020). The motive was, in line with arguments from Grecic & Collins (2013) and Alvesson & Ashcraft, (2012), to provide context and direction for the epistemological underpinning of the interviews as a source to fleshing out the changes related to the emergence of media logics in the WRC. This groundwork allowed greater depth to be gained in the interview data due to pre-existing trust with interview subjects and awareness of incorrect information (D. Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Hammersley, 2013). At the end of, and after, this participatory groundwork, we began conducting semi-structured interviews with insiders in the WRC. In total, 21 interviews were held (see table 1 for more information) with high-level stakeholders to produce a diverse picture of media-driven changes from government, management, technology, and content views.

TABLE 1: GUIDANCE OF INTERVIEWEES. DUE TO ANONYMITY REQUESTS, INDIVIDUALS CANNOT BE IDENTIFIED

Role of interviewee	Sample questions
Senior executive (eg, Chair of the Board, Managing Director, CEO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Governance and promoter body</li> <li>• Manufacturer-backed teams</li> <li>• Suppliers</li> </ul>
Media representatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Press officer for leading teams and equipment suppliers</li> <li>• On-air talent (television)</li> <li>• Permanently accredited journalists</li> </ul>

Other personnel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technology experts</li> <li>• Media rights sales personnel</li> <li>• Content experts like senior producers</li> </ul>
Organizations included but not limited to: WRC Promoter GmbH, Motorsport Network, M-Sport, Red Bull Media House, FIA, Toyota Motorsport and Hyundai Motorsport	

The interviews were generally conducted over a 30-40 minute timespan and, mostly, at a World Rally Championship event. When this option was not available, the interviews were undertaken via telephone. Sample questions can be found in table 1. The participants included 20 males and one female, all of adult age and professionals in their field. The participants were European and Australian. It should be noted that specific ages, geographic and ethnic backgrounds were not recorded as it is inconsequential to this research as professional experience is paramount. Each participant was chosen for their expertise in the operation of the World Rally Championship and its associated stakeholders. At the request of some participants, the data has been anonymized.

TABLE 2: SAMPLE QUESTIONS ASKED DURING THE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS. THESE ARE SAMPLES ASKED TO ALL PARTICIPANTS BUT NOT AN EXHAUSTIVE LIST.

Section	Sample questions
(Re)creating the TV product	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you view the WRC Live product?</li> <li>• The World Rally Championship has provided highlights packages to television networks. Now there is much more scope for storytelling over a longer period. How do you see the balance of the storylines and production of those operate on streaming and highlights?</li> </ul>
(Re)creating the event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What pressures have you seen from the streaming service to the operation of a rally event?</li> <li>• How did you legitimize the streaming solution with key stakeholders and internally at your organization?</li> </ul>
(Re)creating the fan expectation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community building online and the accepted norms of rallying - how do you think of social media in your or the rally community in the streaming products?</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you understand your fans? Insofar do you understand through a data-driven approach from the information taken from WRC+?</li> </ul>
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All participants were asked personalized questions to create the richest view of the WRC's management and media strategy as possible. Interviews were transcribed verbatim before we completed a descriptive coding of the content to assess its relevance to each of the three heuristic devices introduced at the beginning of this article. We then connected the results of the coding with the ethnographic experiences, secondary data and compiled historical data, to create what in Alvesson & Ashcraft (2012) spirit can be named a theoretically relevant set of themes. Recurrent immersion in the service park of the selected events allowed for observation over time, determining standard elements of events that were run in different countries and by different organizing bodies. Locations of service parks, procedures for media, media access to drivers and teams, locations of spectator zones and spectator facilities, for example, were noted and provided further information to the interview themes and secondary sources. The seven rallies consisted of five days each of attendance (35 days in total), with three-four days of rally competition and one-two days of pre-event setup. Through the notes and themes created from these experiences, we were able to delineate our discoveries, using Boyatzis (1998) definition of a theme, which is 'a pattern in the information that at minimum describes and organises the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon' (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 1). As our findings will clarify, themes surfaced to substantiate the three heuristic devices we identified at the beginning as key to the WRC's organizational dynamics. Therefore, we present our findings before discussing the presence of strategic inheritance or hangover, and to what degree the WRC's commercial owner is characterized by path-dependency.

## 5. Findings

Generally, the respondents all emphasized that the television product, the event and fan management were central aspects of the WRC's development that, when viewed through a management perspective and compared with historical contexts reveal how external pressures, sporting culture and corporate culture interact. We address these three elements in turn.

### 5.1 (Re)Creating the TV product

Central to the financialization of sport is the media product. With the invention of WRC+ AllLive, the owned streaming product of the WRC, all interviewees expressed an opinion on this aspect as it directly impacted their business and participation in the sport. Rallying was a difficult sport to televise in the age of broadcast scarcity, but it was well placed to take advantage of new broadcast models and technologies that came with the emergence of digital plentitude (Tickell & Evens, 2021). Continual change through technology has always existed in motorsport, helping define its culture, making fans more open to its pressures (Henry et al., 2007). It has allowed the sport to start the standardization of its events and culture. Some of the first changes came through a centralized servicing and the cloverleaf format which assisted the sport's safety and the media (Næss, 2016). It was confirmed that the media and financial aspects are important as additional sponsorship opportunities, television production and scheduling helped gain interest from mainstream media and create ease of access for spectators - and resulted from sporting changes (Participant 6). The culture of change continued with the current WRC Promoter GmbH who have established change within their corporate DNA but also noted *'the DNA of rally, we do not want to play around with the standard rules and regulations too much as we think they are pretty good'* (Participant 17). The highest-level change to the media was with the launch of the streaming product and a direct-to-consumer strategy, retaining the previous highlights packages designed for linear television networks (Tickell & Evens, 2021).



Key to the direct-to-consumer strategy was boosting WRC digital platforms and launching the WRC+ application. The direct-to-consumer product initially showed selected live stages, television highlight packages and additional products like on-boards from the leading WRC cars. Significantly, in 2018, every stage was shown live for the first time in the sport's history (Tickell & Evens, 2021). Rally sport had grown and it was a great shift since the 1990s when fans were offered a 30-minute highlights package delivered three days after the event (Næss, 2014). This change has represented conflicting pressures for the sport:

*'We have had ideas in the past to make it more snappy. But each sport is different. We have the FIA President in Jean Todt who wants the sport to be more traditional – he wants it to go across three different countries in one day. He wants the DNA of rally to be tough, arduous. We are coming from a slightly different side of the business. Now my side of the business is ding-ding-ding.'*

(Participant 5)

Here the fight between traditional forms of rallying and standardizing the sport became evident.

In other words, the balance between corporate culture, or what could be termed the 'redbullization' of rallying, against sport's traditions required attention, and the sporting management aspect will be explored later in the paper. However, the transition of the media product forced the sport to *'add viewing experiences for the hardcore fanbase as the sport is only as strong as its hardcore fanbase.'* (Participant 21) and Participant 16 noted that with so much live television, the show can become quite monotonous, leading to the need to introduce interactivity and for the TV product to *'provide its own peaks.'* The reinvention of the television product suggests a purposeful change from Red Bull that other sports, including other rally championships, have not been willing to take.

## **5.2 (Re)Creating the event**

Rally standardization started with ISC and continued through the WRC Promoter GmbH. The days when rallies could be significantly longer, like the Safari Rally in the 1980s, are gone but rallies have been able to keep their unique road characteristics like with fast gravel of Finland, winding tarmac of Monte-Carlo or rough roads of Turkey. These roads and country cultures have been captured by the WRC through transmedia storytelling campaigns like the RallytheWorld campaign from Volkswagen (Næss & Tickell, 2019). While it was considered that the change from linear TV to a streaming product enabled the media product to fit the sport, rather than the sport changing for the media, some media aspects resulted in sporting change. Changes from broadcast technology needs were evident.

However, the challenge of meeting the older cultures of the sport with the newer ones is difficult. Once controversial aspects, like the centralized service park, are normalized and essential to a team's corporate strategy. The need to entertain guests, media and fans in the service park was noted as important to Participants 4,6 and 18. Once, only tents and vans were seen in the sport, even for the richest of teams, however as professionalization and the promise of a central service park came to prominence, the ability to create large-scale corporate structures saw a change in the look and feel of the service park. The structures, once seen only in Formula 1, have gradually become the norm in motorsport including the WRC. Additionally, as 11 of the 13 WRC events held in 2019 featured city center stages, designed to enable greater accessibility for corporate guests and casual spectators, it is evident that these stages, and the people they entertain, have become ingrained in the sport. The tightrope that the WRC Promoter GmbH walks to honor the needs of financialization, the Red Bull culture and rallying tradition was spoken by a few participants with one succinctly outlining the pressure it faces.

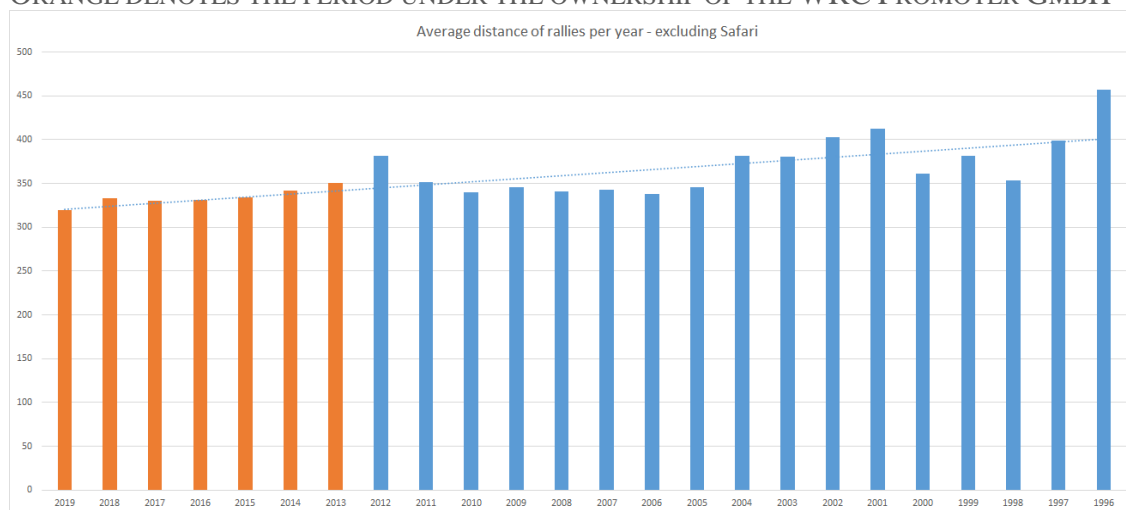
*If the sport wants to enjoy more media exposure, it cannot ignore habits of fans and the commercial broadcast partners. To a certain extent, however, we manage very well to merge those two aspects. Let's say the sport remaining as authentic as possible but still adopting a little bit today's and tomorrow's media needs. ' (Participant 10)*

This statement highlights the need for continual evolution for two primary reasons. Firstly, the streaming product offers the WRC's interpretation of the new media marketplace and a solution to the changing nature of how their fans watch sport. Then, the exploitation of increased financialization opportunities from city center stages and service park structure shows interpretation for the requirements of corporate guests. However, the need to remain cognizant of the broader fanbase over other lucrative financial opportunities still exists *'because people in motorsport live in a little bubble. We're sitting here in nice hospitality...and this is a very different experience than the guy that's out there in the camping ground. ' (Participant 12)*. That has manifested itself into other areas of rallying. The media needs and corporate accessibility have increasingly centralized the sport, to the extent possible. Stages are required to be closer to the service park for corporate guests, spectator and media access. Arguably, this pressure has caused a further knock-on effect, which can be traced through the ownership structures of ISC, North One Sport (NOS) and now WRC Promoter GmbH.

It aligns with other standardization aspects and seen through the competitive distances of the events. In 2019, for example, the longest event was 347.51km vs 304.28 for the shortest; when compared to 1998, the longest event was 1063.49km vs 359.19km for the shortest. The change is clear. The overall distances of the events have decreased as seen in figure 1. The figure details an overall decline in the distances of the WRC events throughout the period of

professionalization. As the volume of stages has remained stable at around 19-21 average per rally, the average stage length has decreased. However, the stats do not display a Red Bull driven change, rather a continuation of what happened in the past. The continuation of going to shorter events, with the longest event in 2019 being shorter than the shortest event in 1998, shows momentum from changes made by the series of previous owners, rather than a reversion back to previous eras of rallying. Therefore, from an event point of view, the ‘redbullization’ of the WRC event is a continuation of adapting to changing media needs rather than the cultural push of a single company.

FIGURE 1: AVERAGE DISTANCE OF RALLIES (IN KM), EXCLUDING THE SAFARI RALLY, PER YEAR 1996-2019 (SOURCES: [www.ewrc-results.com](http://www.ewrc-results.com); [www.juwra.com](http://www.juwra.com); FIA; WRC PROMOTER GMBH) ORANGE DENOTES THE PERIOD UNDER THE OWNERSHIP OF THE WRC PROMOTER GMBH



### 5.3 (Re)Creating the fan expectation

With the direct-to-consumer streaming product and a new media strategy, how the sport interacted with the fan groups, retained old fans, and create new fans was of particular interest to the interviewees. It was also evident in the operation of the rallies the need to provide more chances for the fans to directly interact with the drivers or view more media coverage online

existed. Other avenues to create fan interest was evident in one of the early decisions from the WRC Promoter GmbH under Red Bull ownership. They redeveloped the cars in the premier class of the WRC. The WRC Promoter GmbH had inherited a rulebook from the previous owners, NOS that was essentially derived from the second-tier machinery - the Super 2000 ruleset with some visual and performance enhancements. The World Rally Cars 2011-2016 ruleset was created to control costs and increase excitement and over its time saw interest from five manufacturers, though not all at the same time. However, anecdotally, conversations indicated that the cars were not exciting with continuing low interest and unequal competition (with Volkswagen winning 43 of 52 events they entered). Therefore, minds had turned to the 2017 ruleset and the *positive nostalgia* from previous eras and Red Bull style excitement (Næss, 2014). This attitude was reflected directly in the interviews:

*'The product has to be exciting and engaging and sportscars are exciting and engaging. Up until recently - the new WRC cars are excellent but prior to that, they were pretty boring. If you get the center of the action wrong, there is nothing to watch.'* (Participant 6)

The 'center of the action' was quickly changed by Red Bull, with a new car ruleset announced within three years of their ownership (Llurba, 2016). The 2017 regulations were reported as the 'WRC looks set for a return the glory days of Group B' (Llurba, 2016). It was a noted high point of the championship that had spectacular (if dangerous) cars, big (if poorly behaved) crowds, high levels of manufacturer interest and high levels of nostalgia (Davenport & Klein, 2011). As pointed out by Scola & Gordon (2019), that in many sports, consumers demand nostalgia and marketing practices that utilize it can increase brand loyalty. While the cars had become more

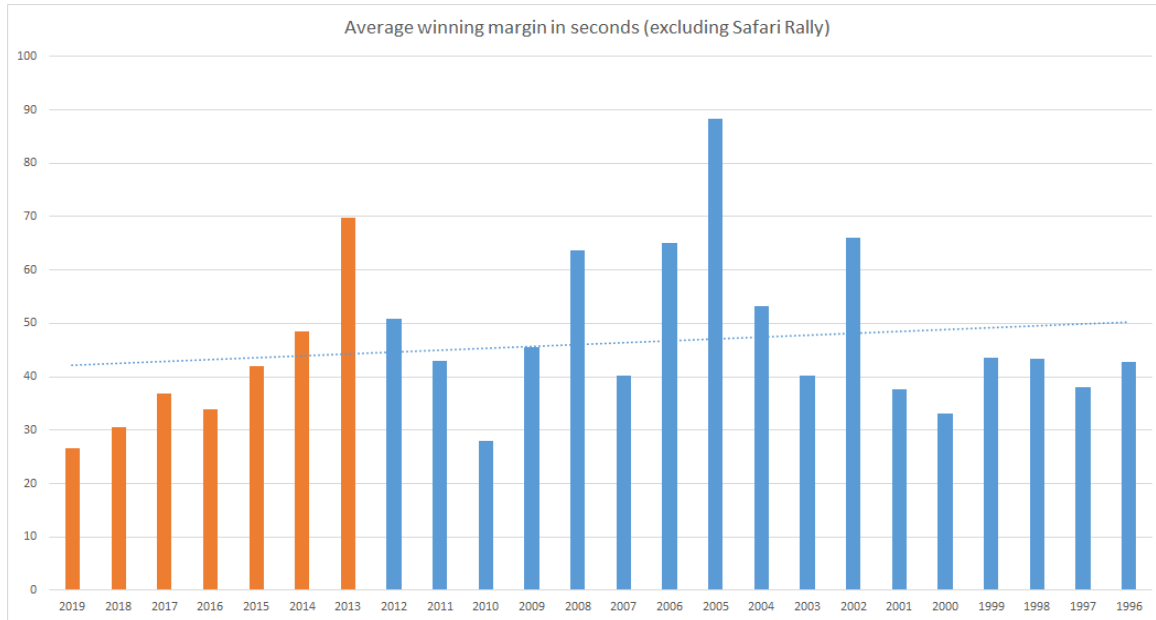
expensive, the need to create a set of technical regulations to match the mantra of the owners and fan wishes, balancing the future with the past was outlined.

*'It is moving as it knows it needs to move with the times and get new audiences. It can't just be this historic championship. There is nothing that winds me up more than a young person, their view on rallying and they tell you thoughts of an older person that said it is rubbish now, it used to be better 20 years ago. They are talking rubbish.'* (Participant 14)

Creating excitement in the cars, stages and media could all be seen in the Red Bull character. Upon further inspection, the changes make a difference on the sporting level. When examining rally results, the margin of victory has fallen from around 21 minutes in 1973 to 90 seconds in 2003 and 26 seconds in 2020 (WRC Factbook 2020, 2021). However, upon inspection of every WRC result from 1996-2019, the average winning margin under the ownership of Red Bull has decreased when compared to the ownership of ISC. Additionally, throughout 2017-2019, the period saw the introduction of new cars and the AllLive streaming product, the average winning margin decreased as seen in Figure 2. For each year in this period, the gap was under 40 seconds, the first time the WRC had achieved this feat for multiple consecutive years; and the 2019 Championship being the lowest margin ever - at 26.66 seconds. The cultural importance of this was noted as *'...when we look back at the 80s, the margins were six, seven, eight minutes and I laugh now because we're six or seven, eight seconds.'* (Participant 9). Theoretically, this aids storytelling and the media interest in the WRC as *'when the rally is close, and the championship is close, it's not very difficult to continue to build up a story. But it can be difficult if the sport is not helping you.'* (Participant 13). Overall, better stories equal more interest, which brings in more viewers and more income.

FIGURE 2: AVERAGE WINNING MARGIN OF ALL WRC EVENTS PER YEAR 1996-2019. NOTE THAT THE SAFARI RALLY, RUN UNTIL 2002 WAS SIGNIFICANTLY LONGER AND AS SUCH, HAS BEEN EXCLUDED FROM THIS TALLY.

(SOURCES: [www.ewrc-results.com](http://www.ewrc-results.com); [www.juwra.com](http://www.juwra.com); FIA; WRC) ORANGE DENOTES THE PERIOD UNDER THE OWNERSHIP OF THE WRC PROMOTER GMBH



Furthermore, the importance of an exciting conclusion has been at the heart of rally modernization. Introduced by NOS and altered by the current WRC Promoter, the ‘Power Stage’ now offers points and is shown on live television, on linear, streamed and owned platforms. This was an important move for the WRC as with the Power Stage, for the first time points were on offer for a single stage. The purpose was to create tension and give drivers a reason to push at the end. The importance to the sport was outlined.

*‘Having the Power Stage even more attractive, we continued to give it even more relevance with Power Stage points. In the beginning, we had a dispute that no one would risk a rally victory for 5 points. But the truth showed that they*

*love to have 5 points as that might make the difference at the end of the year.'*

(Participant 10)

There was not unanimous support for the move, with a participant pointing out that the *'that the winner gets the same points as the driver in seventh place'* (Participant 21). It was the unjust nature of getting the same reward for excelling over a single stage compared to a solid performance over an entire rally that irritated some participants. However, there were more radical changes suggested and, perhaps, it was the need to retain cultural elements of the sport that prevented their implementation. Three of the more public and extreme suggestions to be rejected were: to nullify the gaps and hold the final stage as a shootout between the top four cars; decrease the gaps between the crews to 10 percent of their original gaps; and to shorten most stages to under 10 kilometers (Evans, 2014, 2016, 2017). Events sort to generate interest and spectacular moments to distribute on social media. This approach was evident in Finland 2019 with a manmade jump at the end of the rally where the cars jumped more than 50 meters; or in Italy where a series of manmade jumps on the stages caused consternation within the driver community. Several participants confirmed this was a consequence of the changing media landscape. One suggested that such measures kept the DNA of rally while creating more excitement:

*'You have to exploit that and make it easy for people to be able to go and find stuff or link to stuff. If there's something on YouTube, like a big accident or an unbelievable drive, like Thierry Neuville drive in Sardinia on the power stage in 2018, it is still one of the cleanest drivers I have seen in my life. You might watch that.'* (Participant 11).



Unlike the structure of the events, the additional excitement created during an individual stage and the storytelling of an event suggests a link back to ‘redbullization’. The value placed on close finishes and more spectacular images, with arguably athletic feats more friendly to television and internet stories, is in line with other Red Bull-owned sports properties.

## **6. Discussion**

### ***6.1 Path dependency or a new road?***

The section above has unraveled how the 1999 media turnaround in the WRC has affected the Championship’s outlook on three areas where changes in its institutional logic are noticeable. Our data indicates that the commercial rights owners’ integration of different institutional logics into the WRC takes shape as ‘selective coupling’, discussed in the theory section, as ‘it keeps organizations from having to engage in multiple negotiations with institutional referents or from having to craft new practices that are a compromise between the practices promoted by each logic’ (Pache & Santos, 2012, p. 994). At the same time, managers cannot assume that because there is a new owner or entrepreneurial force, that the sporting legacy and legacy of previous management decisions will be replaceable just by re-coupling a set of logics and innovate the organization accordingly. Sport managers can learn more about the significance of legacy:

‘Given evidence of the existence and performance consequences of strategic legacies, it is possible to suggest that strategy formulators should include a historic audit of the strategy of their organization as part of the strategic planning process (...) such an analysis may assist in formally documenting the rationale for past and current strategic decisions which should prove valuable to current and future strategists’ (Ogbonna & Harris, 2001, p. 29).

Therefore, although selective coupling can appear ideal from a business point of view, it can backfire because the cultural dimensions of legacy matter more than anticipated. Conversely, paying too much attention to legacy as a premise for selective coupling may limit the organization's entrepreneurial potential. Breaking down the analysis in three categories – (re)creating the TV product, (re)creating the event, and (re)creating the fan expectation – we can, regarding the three-phased model by Sydow et al. (2009) introduced above, argue that the WRC show signs of path-dependency. Phase I began with the new ownership structure involving ISC in 1999 and is characterized by a decision that once made 'amount to a small event that unintentionally sets off a self-reinforcing process' (Sydow et al., 2009, p. 691). Phase II, commenced with the ISC having a greater say in the format of rallies and 'the product' the WRC is, focuses on the dynamics of self-reinforcing processes:

'A dominant action pattern is likely to emerge, which renders the whole process more and more irreversible. By implication, the range of options narrows, and it becomes progressively difficult to reverse the initial choice or the initial pattern of action— that is, a path is evolving.' (Sydow et al., 2009, p. 691).

Lastly, Phase III became visible when Red Bull Media House amplified the development started by the ISC and NOS, characterized by tendencies of lock-in, 'that is, the dominant decision pattern becomes fixed and gains a deterministic character; eventually, the actions are fully bound to a path (...) Even new entrants into this field of action cannot refrain from adopting it' (Sydow et al., 2009, p. 692). This last argument is clear from the findings above. Though the expertise of the strategically independent Red Bull Media House to generate spectacle, to build mediated sports and their own unique events, they could have revamped WRC entirely. Instead, they chose

to merge the lifestyle elements associated with ‘Redbullization’, not with original WRC traditions, but the new normal brought in by ISC and NOS.

### ***6.2 Self-reinforcement of old into the new***

To specify the reasons and the degree of path-dependency, and its impact on institutional logics, our data indicates that WRC’s organizational history since 1999 is characterized by what (Maielli, 2015a) claims as ‘specific actions [that] might lead to a critical juncture, where self-reinforcing mechanisms emerge so that new actions are increasingly influenced by previous decisions and progressively reduce the likelihood that path-changing events might emerge and unfold’ (p. 102). The consequences of handling these critical junctures in a particular way, initially with Richards’ 1999 media revolution, was exemplified by respondent 14’s view on nostalgia as ‘*rubbish*’. As the sentiment exists, adaption to the sports media landscape was essential for the WRC’s survival as a commercial entity and constituted a self-reinforcing mechanism. With a new ownership structure, involving a new entrepreneurial force, this juncture was followed simultaneously by self-reinforcing processes, which are ‘generated by social interactions (including agential pressures) internal to the firm’ (Maielli, 2015b, p. 495). This was seen via the continuation of highlights programs which was the ‘*style program for 20 years and that eureka moment hasn’t come out with a style of programming*’ (Participant 20) or an observation that ‘*it’s treated as a business but perhaps the wrong business. The Promoter was a TV right selling company, and it should have moved on from that*’ (Participant 20). As such, these self-reinforcement behaviors allowed cultures and products to maintain throughout multiple ownership and media structures.

These kinds of self-reinforcement often work to progressively exclude alternatives ‘to the extent that could potentially lead into resource-based and/or cognitive, and/or normative lock-in’ (Maielli, 2015a, p. 104). At the same time, it is the convergence of self-reinforcing mechanisms

and processes (Maielli, 2015b, p. 492) that has enabled the WRC to balance innovation with tradition. As stressed by respondent 11, the traditional action of the WRC needs to be combined with instant media access. To achieve that, the highlightable aspects of the WRC needs to be promoted and the WRC needs to be an organization that capitalizes on new media developments.

Rather than showing signs of lock-in or complete path-dependency, the WRC is characterized by ‘path constitution and continuation’. It is ‘characterized by the co-evolution of self-reinforcing processes generated by social interactions (including agential pressures) internal to the firm and self-reinforcing mechanisms generated by societal interactions external to the firm’ (Maielli, 2015b, p. 495). However, there are no clear patterns to conclude if this level of path-dependency was created by inheritance or hangover. The WRC has yet to experience,

‘how self-reinforcing processes might enable agency also in confirming routines that might not be in tune with market selection criteria, especially considering that within a path and its self-reinforcements, one or more agential projects might compete against each other,’ (Maielli, 2015b, p. 495).

One reason might be, as outlined by Ogbonna & Harris (2001) ‘that in different circumstances, a strategic legacy may vary in terms of focus, content and manner of communication’ (p. 28). In contemporary debates, media management research on single events, social media, generational differences, and even politics, all seem to tap into the notion of ‘platform power’ (Evens & Donders, 2018; McGillivray, 2017). That is from an institutional logics perspective and influences the sport-media rights owners on how to adapt, not only to their legacy (through institutional entrepreneurs), but to the legacy of sports business in general (due to changes in the sport business). For the WRC, this integration in a bigger media universe creates a need to consider whether to gain new fans or rely on the existing ones, and how to take advantage of the

external and internal conditions to make the transition as smooth as possible. Without being aware of how embedded this legacy is in the organization, however, the risk a lock-in may grow dramatically.

## **7. Conclusion**

This study has explored the FIA World Rally Championship (WRC) commercial development through its ownership changes since 1999. By qualitatively analyzing the infusion of media logic and the sporting history used by the WRC to develop the sport, through the lens of new institutional theory and organizational dynamics theories, the result is an empirically grounded statement on the importance of balancing sporting tradition with media innovation. Moreover, the outcomes associated with path dependency or inheritance can be useful for regional sport managers with promoters and teams that are undergoing ownership changes. All managers must be aware of how the interaction between sporting legacy and incoming corporate expectations is embedded in an organization's self-reinforcing mechanisms (external) and processes (internal). If the change leads to a loss of 'capability to adopt better alternative' (Sydow et al., 2009, p. 692), it may result in a negative spiral, which is more difficult to extract from than understanding the reasons for the path dependency. Depending on how this interaction is dealt with, it may lead the organization in significantly different directions.

The academic implications are that institutional logics theories are relevant to explain organizational change in a sport media context, in general, and to pinpoint the ramifications of strategic legacy, in particular. While in 2008, some organizational theorists felt the need to ask whether the power of institutional logics 'to explain organizational phenomena is withering in the light of its rather splintered proliferation' (R. Greenwood et al., 2008, p. 31). Others speculate whether the new institutional theory is having a 'mid-life crisis' (Alvesson & Spicer, 2019). This study supports those who argue that both trends are still applicable to exploring

changes in sport organizations (see e.g. Batuev & Robinson, 2018; Gillett & Tennent, 2018). We should point out the necessary conditions include that the theories on institutional logics connect with related theoretical advances and are used to explore empirically the blend of, or competition between, institutional logics. With that goal, this article provided a theoretical ‘nest’ that is useful to other sport researchers. Change is evident in other sports like in football (with changes in the offside rule to support the attacking teams), cross-country skiing (the invention of ‘Tour de Ski’ in 2006) and American ice hockey (where goalies’ leg pads were shortened to increase scoring before the 2013-14 season). This is just a handful of examples where a blend of logics could be fruitfully explored, using the theoretical and methodological frameworks of this article.

The limitations of this study are the ‘glocal’ features of the case example and its organizational setup as a commercial product. Although the balance between tradition and innovation is relevant to any sport manager, the WRC as media phenomenon demonstrates some particularly sensitive issues when it comes to the influence from large car manufacturing countries in Europe and what events the FIA should include in the shifting calendar. Other sports with debates on commercialization and tradition, such as the money-driven idea of establishing an International Swimming League (ISL), much to the anger of the International Swimming Federation (FINA) (Pavitt, 2021), probably rely more on the athletes’ say in the development than in the WRC. Yet change management procedures and organizational cultures are not exclusively affecting global brands and therefore lessons drawn from the WRC experience can be applied to local, national or regional contexts. Given the hegemony of a media logic in sport organizations, as examined here with the WRC as a case, we would therefore encourage researchers to explore the ways media has changed sporting competitions – not just in their coverage or strategies coming from their commercial rights owners.

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