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EDITORIAL

Artificial intelligence and the professionalisation of sport

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Artificial intelligence (AI) is becoming a transformative force across almost all sectors.[3] For the sport industry, AI could represent the next phase in its ongoing and unique journey toward professionalisation. Recognising this potential, our aim with this editorial is to issue a call to action to the community of aspiring and established researchers associated with this journal. We encourage them to explore the profound effects AI can have for sport organisations, especially those facing the hurdles of professionalisation, alongside constraints in resources and expertise.

The notion of 'professionalisation' in sport management has been marked by definitional ambiguity.[4] Despite this, one of the most common perspectives has been to consider it as the adoption of increasingly 'business-like' practices.[5] This has traditionally involved the hiring of specialised staff, enhancing business processes and workflows, and implementing more sophisticated governance structures.[6] Today, it is AI that represents the cutting edge of 'business-like' operations, holding extraordinary power to advance ways of working. Professionalisation has been an ever-present theme in sport management and governance

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[3] Gatrell et al. (2024).
[4] Dowling et al. (2014).
[5] Shilbury et al. (2011).
[6] Ibid.

research,[7] and it seems imperative now that attention is given to AI's role in this ongoing journey.

What AI is, however, represents another area of definitional ambiguity.[8] In terms of reaching some consensus in understanding, the challenge is that as AI technology continues to advance its boundaries continually shift. The nature of what we define as artificial intelligence today may well shift as early as next week, and most certainly by next year and the following decade.[9]

The debate surrounding the definition of AI is driven by a range of perspectives. Technical viewpoints concentrate on the algorithms and computational models that underpin AI, whereas philosophical debates consider the nature of consciousness. In line with Wang (2019), we consider artificial intelligence as the emulation of human thought and decision-making by machines, especially computer systems. Essentially, we view AI as characterised by its ability to acquire knowledge from its environment, reflecting the human capacity for learning.[10]

AI in sport

The use cases of AI in sport are building and already impressive, ranging from the front office to the back office. On the field, AI-driven analytics provide coaches and athletes with unprecedented, evolving insights. This is enabling a new era of data-driven approaches to training and strategy. This extends to injury prevention, for example, where predictive models can analyse player data to forecast and mitigate potential health risks.[11]

Beyond the physical aspects, AI is making significant inroads into the administrative sides of sport. It is proving highly adept at what are complex logistical challenges, such as match scheduling and ticketing, with these roles now performed with incredible efficiency and minimal error margins.[12] In matters of integrity, AI applications like voice recognition and anomaly detection are being deployed to identify and address potential issues such as match-

[7] McLeod and Shilbury (2020).
[8] Wang (2019).
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Claudino et al. (2019).
[12] Glebova et al. (2023).

fixing and doping.[13] AI also promises to revolutionise fan engagement, personalising experiences through algorithms that understand and adapt to the dynamics of individual preferences. Fundamentally, this has the potential to transform how fans interact with their favourite sports.[14] These examples offer a snapshot into the applications of AI in sport and new possibilities are continually emerging.

In contrast to these areas, the exploration of AI's role in advancing the professionalisation of sport governance processes is still in its infancy. As we find ourselves on the cusp of a significant technological shift, it is essential for researchers to examine the potential impact, threats and opportunities AI presents to and for governance in the sports industry.

The current state of sport governance

Sport governance is broadly understood to be the responsibility for the overall direction and oversight of sport organisations.[15] This process, typically entrusted to a board of directors, is a core and institutionalised process of all sports, from the community level to the national and international levels.[16]

The perception of sport governance is marred by its reputation for being antiquated, with a structure that tends to concentrate power among a few individuals resistant to change.[17] This negative perception is reinforced by a continued lack of innovation, sluggish decision-making processes, and constitutions that are inflexible, making the adaptation to new conditions a prolonged and painstaking effort.[18]

The landscape of sport governance today is one that continues to rely heavily on the dedication of volunteer boards, whose passion for sport often drives their commitment.[19] This model has challenges. Among them is the limited availability of resources, with time being a particularly

[13] Hoy (2024).
[14] Dinca-Panaitescu and Dinca-Panaitescu (2023).
[15] McLeod et al. (2021).
[16] McKeag et al. (2023).
[17] McLeod and Star (2020).
[18] Parent et al. (2021).
[19] Doherty (2019).

scarce commodity.[20] There is a critical demand for specialised knowledge and skills to navigate the often-problematic landscape of today's sport industry. Yet, individuals such those capabilities are not always readily available in the context of a volunteer-focused governance culture. This, in turn, impacts the overall efficacy of sport governance, as the lack of professional expertise can lead to ill-advised and inefficient decision-making, as well as an inability to identify and take advantage of important commercial and strategic opportunities.[21]

Reflecting on these challenges, it is exciting to consider the potential AI holds for strengthening and enhancing governance in sport. Indeed, AI could represent a new frontier in sport governance, offering a solution for traditionally inefficient and volunteer-dependent organisations to advance to a new stage of professionalisation.

The next frontier

There now needs to be a concerted effort from researchers and practitioners to explore how AI can help improve governance efficiency. How can AI influence and refine boardroom decision-making processes, ensuring they are both swift and sound? In what ways can AI contribute to the strategic planning and analytical capacities of sports boards, bearing in mind the context of volunteerism? We must ask how AI can be applied in all areas of the governance process, including:

- monitoring real-time data to optimise board performance;
- optimising record-keeping and data collection, including board meeting minutes and board packs;
- advancing and streamlining risk management, auditing, and compliance processes; and
- proactively addressing challenges such as integrity and safeguarding athletes.

There is, of course, important ethical considerations for sport leaders to consider as we move into an era defined by AI. Privacy is at the top of these concerns, as AI systems often require comprehensive personal data from athletes and other stakeholders, raising the question of how

[20] Ibid.

[21] O'Boyle and Hassan (2016).

to protect this sensitive information adequately.[22] Each jurisdiction will typically have its own data protection legislation; however, sport federations should also have their own policies, and ensure that they are properly implemented. There is an increasing threat of cybercrime, and sporting bodies need to be weary of what data they are collecting (and why) and how they are protecting it. In addition to data privacy concerns, it is possible equitable access to AI technology may need to be considered to maintain competitive balance in professional sport.

Researchers can play an important role in deepening our understanding of these ethical challenges and contributing toward realising the efficiency potential that AI can yield in sport governance. Those at the forefront of research have the opportunity to shape our understanding and management of these issues.

From a practical perspective, modern boards will need to be cognisant of changing technologies and ensure that they appoint board members with specific technology expertise. In any event, all directors should educate themselves, to some extent, to changes in technology and how that might impact sport (in particular, their sport). This will help boards make strategic decisions with respect to evaluating risks and opportunities presented by AI.

From a policy perspective, legislators and national sport Ministries need to develop strong (and clear) ethical frameworks with respect to AI, generally, and in sport. These policies should be followed by federations. Again, researchers can play an important role in helping to shape and evaluate these policies.

In conclusion, AI represents a transformative and, at times, daunting technological shift with profound implications for the sports industry and its governance. Embracing this change offers a substantial opportunity for continued professionalisation, facilitating an improved sport experience for all involved. The critical task lies in harnessing its application to realise the full extent of its benefits and minimising risks.

[22] Hill et al. (2023).

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