

THE INFLUENCE OF NORTH AMERICAN OWNERSHIP ON THE BUSINESS,  
MANAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION MODEL OF SPANISH  
PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL: A CASE STUDY OF RCD MALLORCA (2016-2021)

**Abstract**

The objective of this article is to analyze the changes in the management model of RCD Mallorca, a LaLiga football club, with the arrival of a new, North American majority shareholder (ACQ Legacy Partners LLC) in 2016. It also analyzes journalists' perception of the new ownership. Our method is a case study design, using qualitative methodological triangulation: a focus group discussion with non-sports executives of the entity, non-participant observation, in-depth interviews with the CEO of RCD Mallorca and its Director of Communication, as well as semi-structured interviews with journalists that regularly cover the club's information. The results show how the club has developed its management model from one focused on the short-term to a rational and analytical one that incorporates long-term planning. Meanwhile, journalists criticize that they are experiencing a process of disintermediation, since the club ends up competing with them in content creation thanks to the potential of the new digital environment.

**Key words**

Football, sports journalism, Mallorca, corporative communication, globalization.

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## **Introduction**

In the 2021-22 season, RCD Mallorca is the only club in the First Division of LaLiga that is owned by a North American Company, ACQ Legacy Partners LLC, whose visible face is the businessman Robert Sarver and whose flagship in the US is the Phoenix Suns (NBA). While English football has been the gateway for US capital in European football (Ginesta, 2011; Wilson, Plumley & Ramchandani, 2013; Rohde & Breuer, 2016; Ludvigsen, 2019), and in the 2021-22 season 19 clubs were owned by North American companies (eight in the Premier League), LaLiga has remained outside the interest of North American corporations. Only RCD Mallorca in the First Division and Real Zaragoza and UD Alcorcón in the Second Division have a North American majority shareholder. In total, at the beginning of the 2021-22 season, 45 clubs in Europe had a majority shareholder originating from the United States (Trullols, 2021).

Regarding RCD Mallorca, in January 2016, the North American investment group ACQ Legacy Partners LLC bought 80% of the shares of the club for 20 million euros. Robert Sarver arrived in Mallorca in the year of the club's centenary, and after a period of significant institutional instability under the presidency of Utz Claassen (2014-2016). ACQ Legacy Partners LLC arrived at a club that had left behind its golden age, led by the main shareholder and owner of the Zeta group, the media mogul Antonio Asensio, between 1997 and 2001. During this period, it played the only European final in its history, the 1998-99 UEFA Cup Winners' Cup, which it lost against Lazio (1-2) in Birmingham (EFE, 2001; Vidal-Perelló and Vidal-Reynés, 2016). Since the 1997-98 season, RCD Mallorca played sixteen consecutive seasons in the First Division before being relegated to the Second Division A in 2013 and then Second Division B in June 2017, already under American ownership. It played one season in Second Division B

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and, in the last four seasons, two were in Second Division A and two in the First Division. In the 2022-23 season it will continue playing in the Spanish top division.

However, various authors assume that sports management in the United States is governed by different norms than in Europe (Sloane, 1971; Markovits & Hellerman, 2001; Andreff & Staudohar, 2002). On the one hand, while US franchises are public corporations, ownership models in European football are diverse: there is the model of the members' association (for example, FC Barcelona and Real Madrid in Spain), while other clubs belong to private companies, some of which are public corporations and, in the past, some football clubs were even owned by the state in some communist countries (Hamil and Dietl, 2020, p. 64-65). On the other hand, the closed competition model of the US, based on franchises and with mechanisms to improve the competitive balance (drafts, salary limits and centralized sale of audiovisual rights) has placed maximization of profits at the center of the model. This has not historically been the case in Europe, where the competitive pyramid, with demotions and promotions in category, led club managers to make the maximization of performance their highest priority, even though this meant their organizations falling into multiple debt crises (Szymanski, 2015).

Today, these differences are less noticeable. The globalization of capital flows, which has allowed multiple holding companies in the sports and entertainment sector to invest in foreign markets (Herman and McChesney, 1999), as well as the need to guarantee the survival of European competitions, has led to the belief that maximization of both profits and sports performance are guiding principles of sports management models in Europe - at least if we analyze how football has evolved, which is the maximum sporting expression of the old continent.

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Some authors have already analyzed the influence, from the point of view of management and the relationship with their target audiences, of the arrival of foreign capital in historic LaLiga clubs. Lobillo, Ginesta and Badia (2016) analyzes the relationships between FC Barcelona, Málaga CF and the emirate of Qatar; Ginesta, Sellas and Canals (2019) focus on the impact of the Chinese ownership in Atlético de Madrid, Granada CF and RCD Espanyol; and Menchén (2021) offers an updated overview of every owner or majority shareholder of the Spanish LaLiga. Menchén (2021, p. 99) concludes: “The current shareholding map of Spanish football is a consequence of the country's business fabric. Unlike other countries such as the United Kingdom or Germany, where many clubs arose in companies that are now multinationals, in Spain no project arose in this way and, during the process of becoming public corporations [in the 1990s], there were few cases in which a local businessman or company took over ownership with a focus on corporate social responsibility with their environment”.

The object of study of this research is the arrival of North American capital in Spanish professional football. We propose to: 1) analyze the changes in the management model of RCD Mallorca with the arrival of ACQ Legacy Partners LLC as the largest shareholder; and 2) determine the perception that sports journalists that usually cover information on RCD Mallorca have about the new management model introduced in the club by the US ownership.

The added valued of this study lies in the capacity to identify, from a qualitative point of view, the main changes that occur in the management model of an elite Spanish football club when an American owner, who is also a majority shareholder of an NBA franchise, arrives. Furthermore, first-hand information from executives and staff of the

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club, which is neither FC Barcelona nor Real Madrid, is valuable research material that contextualizes how the overall Spanish football industry has adapted to the global sport era (Maguire, 1999).

## Theoretical framework

### **Sport globalization theories: “corporate sport” and the “international modernization” perspective**

Various authors have questioned the possible Westernization and/or Americanization of professional sports in the era of globalization. However, there is no consensus on the nature of this Western cultural influence in sport (Klein, 1991; Eichberg, 1984; Bale, 1994 and Galtung, 1991). This theoretical position understands modern sport as being structured with a political economy in which there is a decisive influence of Western multinationals (Maguire, 1999). This perspective allows us to delve into the more concrete concept of Americanization of sport. Donnelly (1996) relates it to the idea of “corporate sport”; that is, the introduction of management routines in the running of sports organizations. However, this idea implies that sport has become less important in itself than in its ability to attract massive audiences (Bernstein and Blain, 2002). Furthermore, those authors assume that contemporary sports express ideas that have their origins in the United States, such as competition, excellence, corporate efficiency and what is necessary to do to win (Bernstein and Blain, 2022). From a critical perspective, then, concepts like Westernization and Americanization are regularly used to address the homogenization processes that occur in cultural encounters; even new neologisms more related to specific commercial brands are created, such as *McDonaldization*, which implies that fast food restaurants represent a contemporary paradigm of formal rationality (Ritzer, 2005), *Cocacolarization* (Bairner,

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2001) and *Disneyfication* (Bryman, 2004), which presupposes a sweetened vision of social problems based on a two-dimensional narrative of heroes and villains.

However, Bernstein and Blain (2002) consider the hypothesis of “Americanization” to be problematic since some sports like football (soccer) or some sport-mega events (like the Olympics and the FIFA World Cup) neither originated nor are based in the United States. Thus, according to Bairner (2001, p. 15), “it is surely not surprising that many sports sociologists have been reluctant to defend the theses of Americanization and, if some have chosen this perspective, they have modified it according to particular needs”. Wagner (1990) is the best-known representative of those who understand the globalization of sport from the perspective of “international modernization”, that is, “the accentuation of the abilities of people’s capacities to choose and remove as they wish the features of global culture of sport and see this development as a sign of progress” (Maguire, 1999, p. 27-28). According to Wagner (1990), what stands out is not only the flow of American influence outwards but also European influence transmitted through football. Football, according to Waalkes (2017), is a metaphor for the triumph of a global imaginary.

## **The ‘Disneyization’ of society as a reflection of new cultural and consumption habits**

Some authors start from figurational sociology to analyze the globalization of sport (Elias & Dunning, 1986; Maguire, 1999); that is, the need to focus on networks of power, balances and interdependencies between actors. They adopt a multidimensional perspective to address the problem, which enables them to understand the globalization of sport from a *glocal* perspective: considering the universalization of the particular and the particularization of the universal (Robertson, 1992, p. 130).

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Bryman (2004) relates *glocalization* to the process of *Disneyization* of society, and thus of sport.

Unlike the concept of *Disneyfication*, which arises from the critical tradition, Bryman (2004) places *Disneyization* as a process by which actors in a global and hypercommercialized society seek to differentiate themselves. Bryman (1999 & 2004), analyzing the operation and influence that The Walt Disney Company has had on contemporary society, identifies four basic dimensions of the process of *Disneyization* of society: the thematization of the consumer experience, which relativizes the objective quality of the product or service by the client and creates new narratives that enable its differentiation; the hybridization of consumption areas, spread out in various environments that encourage people to spend more, even compulsively; the rise of merchandizing, understood as a mechanism to take advantage of additional values and uses of previously known images; and, finally, the theatricalization of work or “emotional work” as the basis for treating clients.

However, twenty years later it would seem necessary to review this concept. Some social changes require us to do so: the digitalization of society and the rise of social media since 2004 (Sanahuja-Peris, 2012); the consequent consolidation of powerful corporate media that provide organizations –for example, football clubs– with the capacity to directly reach their audiences (Moragas et al., 2003; Ginesta, 2020); and, also, the change of CEO at The Walt Disney Company in 2005, when Robert Iger took over from Michael Eisner. Iger (2019) is responsible for positioning the company as the leading global entertainment holding company based on four keys ideas –content maximization, distribution maximization, technology maximization, and global brand management– that have been demonstrated to be central elements for the growth of all

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entertainment businesses, including sport organizations like football clubs (Soriano, 2009; Dixon, 2014; Menchén, 2021; Ginesta, 2021).

## **Football clubs as entertainment multinationals**

Even considering the local roots of football in Europe (James, 2019), the big football clubs compete in a global entertainment market where their competitors are no longer just the other clubs but, also, other multinationals like The Walt Disney Company, Comcast and Universal. We are experiencing a process of integration between sports, communication and entertainment industries, within the framework of a digital environment – a set of interrelationships and synergies between actors that has led some authors to consider it a “global media and sports complex” where the operation of one sector cannot be understood without the complicity and support of the other (Maguire, 1999; Harvey, Law & Cantelon, 2001; Rowe, 2004; Helland, 2007).

The big European football clubs have taken advantage of the opportunities of the new digital environment to open new markets and seek new audiences and sponsors. The pioneer was Manchester United, which already in 1999 used its subsidiary Manchester United International to become what some authors called the “first entertainment multinational” in the football industry (Rosaaen & Amis, 2004). It was followed by Real Madrid and FC Barcelona, among others like Bayern Munich and Manchester City, although the turnover of these clubs is still far from that of the main companies in the global entertainment sector. These football clubs have developed very global brands, but they have a very small turnover (Soriano, 2009).

Professional football in Europe grows from a capitalist logic (James, 2019). We could even consider whether it also embraces the same corporate dynamics that have historically governed the model of the major leagues in the United States –placing



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the maximization of profits before the maximization of sports performance— or, as Dixon (2014) and Ginesta (2021) proposed after analyzing the growth of The Walt Disney Company during the last 20 years, whether football has been *Disneyized*. The transformation of fans into prosumers thanks to technology (Crawford, 2004; Dixon, 2014), the search for increasingly familiar audiences, the transformation of clubs into content factories for the audiovisual industries (Ginesta, 2020 and 2021), the creation of new over-the-top media services (OTTs) belonging to the clubs in partnership with technologically-based companies, the new smart stadiums and their consequent monetization of time, and the model of football franchises of the City Football Group (CFG) are all examples that allow us to think that professional football has placed the maximization of profits at the same level as its historical will to maximize performance on the pitch (Menchén, 2021).

In fact, the consumption of sports products is marked by behavioral variables that are different from those of other sectors: sports have an emotional consumption and so there are no substitute products for a football team; the loyalty of the consumer or fan towards their club is not questioned (Ginesta, 2020). On the one hand, this is why we can say that sport, and specifically football in Spain, has become a driver (Whannel, 1992) for the business strategy of many companies in the communication and entertainment sector. On the other hand, here lies one of the basic premises of global entertainment promoted by the major football clubs, following the footsteps of Manchester United: the desire to create entertainment products linked to unquestionable loyalty of the users, the consumption of which generates sufficient income to then reinvest in improving the main product of the organization: the team (Soriano, 2009).

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There is, however, one caveat: compared to what happens in some competitions in the United States, for example the NFL, reducing the distance between the football stars in Europe and their fans continues to be a request fans make to the clubs, which the latter find very difficult to respond to (Ginesta, 2021). In the NFL, the experiences in the stadiums that allow fans to have contact with the players are among the most expensive, explains Ginesta (2021, p. 15).

## **The process of disintermediation in sports communication**

The new digital environment has substantially modified the relationship between the media and sports organizations (Moragas et al., 2003; Sanahuja-Peris, 2012; Lobillo-Mora & Muñoz-Vela, 2016; Lobillo-Mora & Smolak-Lozano, 2019). In a digital environment, the setting up of corporate media, first, and then the definitive conversion of clubs into content factories that create their own content and control its distribution to the final consumer (Mirer, 2021), as recommended by Disney CEO Robert Iger (2019), generates a distancing between sports information professionals and organizations, in what some authors define as a “process of disintermediation” (Price, Farrington & Hall, 2013; Becerra, 2014).

This leads to new relationships between sports organizations and their target audiences, which are much more complex and can also be more tense in some cases (Welch-Suggs, 2015; Junghagen, 2018). In fact, Becerra (2014, p. 4) highlights that the process of disintermediation of traditional media “consists of the progressive deprogramming of the social uses of media and a symbiosis between time spent living and time connected and exposed to networks, in which traditional media coexist, in a conflictive way, with services provided by new corporate actors and, in many cases, on a global scale (Google, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter)”. In other words, in the current

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digital context, apart from the media, other actors –such as sports organizations– produce multiplatform media content that is directly consumed by fragmented audiences (Rojas-Torrijos & Pérez-Curiel, 2020). As Mirer (2021) states, clubs' in-house reporters become essential to control the media agenda by sports organizations in order to not depend exclusively on the mediation of sports journalists to reach their supporters. Hence, new tensions between communication departments and sports journalists can rise due to the common wish to control the media agenda.

Ginesta, Sellas and Canals (2019) have analyzed the relationship between RCD Espanyol, owned by the Chinese holding company Rastar Group since 2016, and the Barcelona sports press. They conclude that, although the club makes efforts to balance complicity with the press and the necessary construction of its own narrative led by the club through its corporate media, there is a perception among sports journalists that, with the new Chinese ownership, the club has distanced itself from them and has become less transparent. For its part, the club believes that this distancing is a result of the professionalization of management structures, of the definitive transformation “of the football club into a company” (Ginesta, Sellas & Canals, 2019, p. 764-765). This article attempts to reflect, also, on this relationship based on the link between a US-owned club, RCD Mallorca, and the sports press of the island of Mallorca.

### **Methodology**

The method of this article follows a case study design (Wimmer & Dominick; Yin, 1994; Escudero, Delfin and Gutiérrez, 2008) using qualitative methodological triangulation. First, a focus group discussion with non-sports executives of RCD Mallorca was set up and held on 24 November, 2021, in Visit Mallorca Stadium. This focus group lasted one hour and a half and was digitally recorded for

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future transcription. As non-sport executives of the club, the authors include those members of the board of directors of RCD Mallorca focused on the areas of marketing, ticketing, fan engagement, corporate social responsibility, finance, operations and innovation. All of them report to the business CEO of the club, as shown in the results section. These participants are shown in Table 1.

[Insert table 1]

Second, this focus group was complemented with non-participant observation of the day-to-day activity of the entity on three days: 24 and 27 November and 9 December, 2021. During these days, two in-depth interviews were conducted: one with the Business CEO of RCD Mallorca (Alfonso Díaz), and one with the Director of Communication (Albert Salas). Furthermore, one of the researchers attended a LaLiga match between RCD Mallorca and Getafe CF at Visit Mallorca Stadium (27 November, 2021) to analyze how the club commodifies the matchday experiences offered to the fans.

Finally, six semi-structured interviews were carried out with a convenience sample of journalists that work in Mallorca and that regularly cover information about the club. We decided to do semi-structured interviews for two reasons: first, because it was impossible to coordinate a focus group with all these journalists at the same time (neither in person in Mallorca, nor online) due to their different work duties; and second, because a semi-structured interview offers the participant the possibility to be more sincere about his job due to the dialogue with the researcher and the fact that no other journalist from a competing news media took part in this conversation. These interviews are shown in Table 2.

[Insert table 2]

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In order to preserve the identity of the members of the two convenience samples selected for this research, the names of the participants in the focus group (participants 1 to 5) and the semi-structured interviews (interviewees 1 to 6) were coded. This encouraged greater sincerity on their part.

Once the focus group and all the semi-structured interviews had been transcribed, both researchers carried out a qualitative thematic analysis of the focus group and the semi-structured interviews using the following variables: positive aspects of the arrival of ACQ Legacy Partners LLC; negative aspects; influence on the corporate values of RCD Mallorca; professional routines that change in the club; professional routines that are maintained; characteristics of North American management; internationalization actions of the club; and actions related to the surrounding area.

For each case, a double-entry table was created to codify the discourses of each participant of the samples according to every variable: in one case, non-sporting executives valued the new US ownership management decisions in comparison with the previous owner; in the other case, journalists valued the media relations that the US ownership designed. The two in-depth interviews conducted during the field trip were used to contextualize the case study and to complement the other qualitative techniques.

In the following section we provide a global overview of the results, considering the most representative quotes of the participants and interviewees, and bringing them all together in relationship with the theoretical background.

## **Results and discussion**

### **The transformation of the club into a football company**

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In the last decade, poor sporting performance has gone hand in hand with a very delicate economic situation, with high indebtedness that led the club to insolvency proceedings that lasted eleven years until ACQ Legacy Partners LLC was able to settle the insolvency debt with ordinary creditors (2017) and Treasury (2021) (Palco23, 2021). At an organizational level, ACQ Legacy Partners has structured the club with a presidency (Andy Kohlberg) to which two CEOs report, a sports CEO (Pablo Ortells), who controls the entity's football structure (professional football, youth football and medical services), and another for business, in charge of the entire administration of the club and budgetary control (Alfonso Díaz). The Commercial and Marketing, Financial, Ticketing and Fan Engagement, Communication, Legal and Compliance departments, as well as Operations and CSR, all report to the business CEO. The figure of *Chief Revenue Officer* (CRO) has also been created, who leads an innovation area with the aim of uniting the Commercial and Marketing department with that of Ticketing and Fan Engagement.

In RCD Mallorca, the arrival of ACQ Legacy Partners puts into practice what Donnelly (1996), Bernstein and Blain (2002) and Menchén (2021) describe theoretically: the entity moves from management that is highly focused on the short term and depends on sports results to management that standardizes a map of processes, with medium- and long-term objectives and budget planning, with weekly virtual follow-up meetings of the CEOs and owners located in Arizona, and monthly appearances before the board of directors. One of the directors participating in the focus group explains: "One thing the American sports industry can teach us is that short-term results do not indicate growth" (Participant 3). Two other participants coincide: "Before we used to work without a budget" (Participant 2), but now "there are five- or six-year

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budgets, we have even worked with statistics based on ten years before. I no longer do projects without a plan for the future” (Participant 4).

The new owners have imposed management by objectives, but they have not implemented hierarchical relationships. In fact, one of the first decisions of the new owners was to radically change the design of the offices, creating open and coworking spaces for the workers. Before the new owners arrived at the club, there were “isolated people working in their small islands without knowing what their colleague at the table or in the office next to them was doing, without a specific project” (Participant 4).

Alfonso Díaz explains that “we are an organization that works collaboratively and openly” (A. Díaz, personal communication, 9 December, 2021), both within the organization itself and in relation to the other assets owned by the majority shareholders. For example, RCD Mallorca has benefitted from the know-how accumulated by the Phoenix Suns, one of the historic franchises of the NBA, both in attracting sponsorships (PayPal and Footprint), the actions, and in the generation of new experiences that can be marketed to different audiences.

Both the CEO Alfonso Díaz and the focus group participants also accept that the new ownership have respected the corporate identity of the club. “I think that they have respected the intrinsic value of the club and have adapted” (Participant 2); “we have defined the values with a three-year strategic plan, and they are resistance, persistence, integrity, health, sport and sustainability” (Participant 5). The CEO concludes: “We don’t have to be a clone of the Phoenix Suns, rather the owners adapt to the circumstances of our club” (A. Díaz, personal communication, 9 December, 2021).

### **RCD Mallorca and its revenue maximization strategy**

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Management by objectives also involves focusing the management of the departments on maximizing their income. As Soriano (2009), Szymanski (2015), Menchén (2021) and Ginesta (2021) illustrate, Participant 3 highlights that “The whole sports industry is moving towards a more business model”. In the case of RCD Mallorca, the new sources of income that the club has studied since 2016 are based on three areas, presented in the following three sub-headings.

## **The monetization of experiences and the deseasonalization of the product**

First, monetizing the experiences fans can have inside the Visit Mallorca Stadium. Apart from the 32 VIP boxes that have been in the stadium since 2016, other areas have been designed: a cocktail area in the presidential grandstand during the preview of the matches; a small club tunnel with an aperitif service so that the fans can accompany and photograph the players as they run onto the pitch before the match; a gastronomic area with Michelin star Majorcan chefs during half-time and served in the club’s trophy room; a conference room for business; and, finally, a VIP corner to follow the match from the same level as the pitch, with a post-match meet and greet area between fans and first team players. Ginesta (2021) explains how some of these services are already normalized in NFL stadiums and NBA venues, just as the Tunnel Club is one of the most valued VIP services at the Etihad Stadium of Manchester City. All this leads us to think that in the management of the stadiums, similar to what happens in a theme park, it is essential to think about how to monetize time and distance (Bryman, 2004; Ginesta, 2021): the more time fans spend inside the stadium, the greater the likelihood of increasing revenue per match day, as well as to understand that fans can pay more to reduce the distance between sports stars and the public.



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The monetization of these experiences is also attained by “deseasonalizing the club’s activity, going out to seek business abroad” (Participant 4). During the focus group with the club’s executives, it became clear that the owners will seek to link the club with Mallorca’s tourist business: “We know there is a lot of tourism and we have to work with tourist information points, hotels and restaurants. We had been working inside for years, without looking at what was outside, and this has changed in all the departments [with the new ownership]. We have RCD Mallorca information stands in more than 300 hotels on the island” (Participant 4). The change of name of the stadium, in agreement with the Palma City Council (which is the owner and has ceded it to the club for 50 years) from Son Moix to Visit Mallorca Stadium, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to encourage tourism in order to recover the island’s economy, is a declaration of the club’s intentions.

Likewise, the signing of the sponsorship with Specialized in February 2021, one of the main bicycle producers in the world, allows cyclotourism –one of the most important non-seasonal sports tourism offers on the island, with an average of 200,000 cyclotourist visitors a year before the COVID-19 pandemic (Barceló et al., 2010; López-Egea, 2017)– to be linked with the range of services that can be found at the RCD Mallorca stadium. A participant from the Commercial and Marketing department explains that: “In addition to offering the club as an institution, we offer the island as a tourist destination, and all this has to be accompanied by constant sponsorship activations so that the sponsors receive a tangible return” (Participant 2). The agreement with Specialized has also enabled the club to position itself as a club that supports sustainable mobility, encouraging fans to cycle from the city to the stadium (A. Díaz, personal communication, 9 December, 2021).

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**The internationalization of the club's brand to Asian markets**

Second, RCD Mallorca is facing a process of internationalization of its brand, specifically to Asian markets, taking advantage of the fact that in the 2021-22 season it has two players, one from South Korea (Kang-in Lee) and another from Japan (Take Kubo), who had already played for the club in the 2019-20 season. "We work together with LaLiga to be able to penetrate these markets, we are an opportunity for them. We are the most watched club in Japan after Real Madrid and FC Barcelona", explains the club's CEO (A. Díaz, personal communication, 9 December, 2021), who also confirms that the club and LaLiga are working to play matches during Asian prime time to facilitate Asian fans following the club.

Therefore, penetration into Asian markets is proving successful based on the audience figures for Mallorca's matches in South Korea and Japan and the number of followers on the club's social media: when the fieldwork for this research finished (December 2021), the club's Twitter account in Japanese had 21,500 followers, and the club also has a profile on Yahoo Sports. In addition, in August 2021 the club signed a sponsorship agreement with the Japanese technological innovation company Taica Corporation, which uses the front of the first team shirt to advertise its Alpha Gel multifunctional technology. Regarding the Korean market, RCD Mallorca and Tottenham Hotspurs agreed in March 2022 to play a pre-season match in Daegu. Both clubs have Korean players in their squad (Jiménez, 2022). However, RCD Mallorca had not opened a Twitter account in Korea when the field trip for this study was done.

**The transformation of the club into an audiovisual content factory**

Finally, the creation and marketing of new audiovisual content has also become a new source of income. Various authors have pointed to the transformation of

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clubs' communication cabinets into content factories (Sanahuja-Peris, 2012, Welch-Suggs, 2015; Ginesta, 2021), and RCD Mallorca is no exception. The communication department has its own audiovisual production company to generate content on YouTube and monetize it, including a special four-hour program *Venim a Ca Teva* (*We come to your home*) to comment on the first team matches, as well as maintaining specific playlists for Japan and South Korea; it sells its own audiovisual content for OTT platforms and television channels (the documentaries *The perfect plan* for Movistar Plus and the regional television channel IB3, and *From Paradise* for Amazon Prime Video); and markets sponsorship spaces for specific target audiences within the content of its social media and during its broadcast of the match on YouTube. In short: “We have to transform metrics into revenue” (A. Salas, personal communication, 9 December, 2021).

In addition, the club is developing its own pay-per-view audiovisual content platform (RCD Mallorca Plus) that is currently free in order to improve its positioning among the potential subscribers and sponsors. All of this, taking into account that “it needs to be disruptive in the language used, since we have to break the traditional audiovisual language so as to be able to adapt to the new audiences, including young people” (A. Salas, personal communication, 9 December, 2021).

## **RCD Mallorca and its disintermediation with the media**

The change in professional routine brought about by the arrival of American ownership at RCD Mallorca in 2016 directly affected the way in which the media and the club had historically related. The sports journalists interviewed in the field work explain that before the arrival of the current ownership, the relationship between the media and club was not very professional, with informal communication and a high

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level of leaks. In fact, the interviewees explain having had the telephone numbers of different members of the previous board of directors and easy access to the players and coaching staff.

In the very tense and strained atmosphere of the club before the arrival of the Americans, during the presidency of Utz Claassen, the journalists explain that “we had information about how the board of directors progressed before they ended because we communicated with the different directors inside by phone messages” (Interviewee 2). Likewise, accessing information on the health status of the first team players was simple: “Before, you rang the club and the coach answered, and later you spoke with the president” (Interviewee 4). Even so, the arrival of American ownership “modernized the club and its facilities” (Interviewee 5), “gave economic stability to the club” (Interviewee 3), solved old conflicts with fans’ clubs (Interviewee 2) and professionalized the relationship between the club and the media (Interviewee 6).

Since 2016, some journalists explain that the club has been going through a process of “bunkering information” (Interviewee 2), that it works with “absolute discretion” or that it lives “in a bubble” (Interviewee 4). Interviewee 3 recognizes that: “Although we can interview players, the club is much more formalized as a result of the arrival of the Americans and because it participates in the Spanish First Division”. Furthermore, Interviewee 4 points out that “Since the arrival of the Americans, there is less contact between journalists and football players. Currently, footballers only speak with us when a new sponsoring contract is signed”. However, the club explains that the control of information is normal “in a company” in the current football industry. For example, the club granted 500 interviews to journalists during the 2020-21 season and

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165 in the last quarter of the 2021 (A. Salas, personal communication, 9 December, 2021).

At RCD Mallorca, it is accepted that “the professionalization of the entity” –as Interviewee 6 describes– led by the American shareholders, forces the Communication department to change its work routines. The department is no longer passive and acts as a link between the media and the club to become an active department in the relationship with different audiences (media, fans, sponsors and content producers) and one that has to contribute to the generation of revenue. As Sanahuja (2012), Lobillo-Mora and Muñoz-Vela (2016) and Ginesta (2021) demonstrate, corporate communication is essential to bridge new relationships with different stakeholders (not only the media) that can help to develop the business of the club. In this way, “the Communication department has to create content that connects you with people, both nationally and internationally. We have social media to communicate directly. We do not want to eliminate the intermediary that the press represents, but the press must also understand that it has to reinvent itself. We have many other ways of reaching more people” (A. Salas, personal communication, 9 December, 2021). This approach is linked to the new expectations of the fans: “There are some fans who ask you for new things, who no longer just want to watch football” (A. Salas, personal communication, 9 December, 2021).

As Mirer (2021) pointed out, in this research sports journalists understand that “the communication cabinet has become just another means of communication. The cabinet does not work for the media but for the fans” (Interviewee 3). This interviewee also adds: “Before the arrival of the US shareholders, the communication cabinet needed the media to convey its messages. Not today: the club has become its own

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media, which transmits its own content and messages”. In fact, “the club’s corporate media is our competence; they don’t hold press conferences to present the players, they broadcast it in the media and we journalists take their statements from the club’s official channels” (Interviewee 2). Even so, they recognize that with the arrival of the Americans “new, more original communication tools that go beyond press releases” have been incorporated (Interviewee 2) and that the club follows the dynamic of other LaLiga clubs: “It is not something linked to the arrival of American capital, but rather to the new model imposed by LaLiga, empowering the clubs at a communicative level” (Interviewee 5).

As Ginesta, Sellas and Canals (2019) pointed out, following Welch-Suggs (2015) and Junghagen (2018), the transformation of football clubs into football companies, in a fully digitized environment, contributes to the disintermediation process. Furthermore, as Becerra (2014) highlighted before, the study case presented in this article points out how this disintermediation process can be conflictive and tense for actors in the current sports industry. At RCD Mallorca, another aspect is added: the current executive structure of the club lacks “an institutional spokesperson” (Interviewee 1) with a long Majorcan history that can link the club with its fans. “There is no figure that can come out when Majorcanism requires attention, there is no spokesperson. The Americans have saved the club from a very complicated situation, but they should have a more institutional voice to generate an emotional bond with the fans” (Interviewee 1).

## **Conclusions and future research perspectives**

RCD Mallorca has become the gateway of North American capital in LaLiga. This case study allows us to confirm the transformation of a football club into a

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football company, based on the implementation of a management model similar to the one that the maximum shareholders develop in their other sports assets in the United States, such as the Phoenix Suns (NBA). This boils down to the analytical and rational approach of its business model; that is, a medium- and long-term strategic approach that places profit maximization on the same level as sports performance maximization (Sloane, 1971). At RCD Mallorca, this balance is represented by its two CEOs, sports and business, who display the two dimensions of the entity: how to gross more in order to better invest in having a competitive team.

This research has verified that RCD Mallorca has changed its management model adopting dynamics typical of what Donnelly (1996) and Bernstein and Blain (2002) have called “corporate sport”, such as maximizing income and the search for new audiences. However, the arrival of the new ownership could also be analyzed based on some of the elements that Ginesta (2021) associates with the *Disneyization* of football, especially considering how the Visit Mallorca Stadium has increased its offer of VIP services and experiences for visitors and fans, creating a hybrid and themed consumption space. However, and after six years, it is still too early to consider RCD Mallorca, beyond its proven Americanization and the professionalization of its management model, to be a successful example of this process of *Disneyization* of society (Bryman, 2004).

This professionalization of the management model assumed by the club’s executives also occurs at a moment when corporate communication practices are changing because of the digitalization of society (Rojas-Torrijos and Pérez-Curiel, 2020; Mirer, 2021) and, as a consequence, a process of disintermediation between the media and sports organizations can take place. Just as Ginesta, Sellas and Canals (2019)

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found when analyzing the relationship between RCD Espanyol of the Chinese tycoon Cheng Yansheng and the Catalan sports media, in Mallorca there is a distance between the sports press and the club. On the one hand, the club's Communication department accepts that it has to diversify its work in order to attend to the different audiences (not just the media), as well as generate content that brings in income; on the other hand, the sports journalists interviewed understand that while the club has professionalized and the American ownership has provided economic stability, information has also been restricted and the club has become *demallorcanized* by not having an institutional spokesperson.

The analysis of the Americanization process of RCD Mallorca offers us new research perspectives. Firstly, from a sociological perspective, tensions between fans and the ownership should be deeply researched, above all when multinational corporations' global management practices influence and commodify local sports brands (Maguire, 1999; Ginesta and San Eugenio, 2022). The fact that sports journalists in Mallorca consider that the club has become *demallorcanized* establishes a new hypothesis to continue researching. Secondly, from an organizational studies perspective, we can question how long the owners will maintain the level of investment in the club within the framework of a competitive model of open leagues, with promotion and relegation, where the economic stability of sports organizations is intrinsically linked to sports performance (Andreff and Staudohar, 2002). Finally, from a marketing and communication studies perspective, we can ask how these new management routines will fit in a European society where going to a football match represents something more than simple entertainment, even a hobby, and the passion with which fans live the competition can be decisive in activating the consumption of



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football brands (Crawford, 2004). In conclusion, sport globalization requires a multidisciplinary approach to the current football industry due to the economic, social and communication implications of corporate sport and its rational business model.

Nevertheless, in five years the club has undergone a radical change in its routines, which has enabled it to amplify its ability to attract resources through new sponsors and consolidate itself in international markets. While it may be premature to consider it an entertainment multinational, along the lines defined by Soriano (2009) and Ginesta (2020), RCD Mallorca represents an example of how a change of ownership can reverse unprofessional management dynamics of a sports organization in the current football industry, although tensions with sports journalists have not disappeared and further research on fan engagement should be undertaken to monitor how fans perceive the evolution of the club's brand.

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