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**Competitive verbal interaction in online minute-by-minute match reports**

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# COMPETITIVE VERBAL INTERACTION IN ONLINE MINUTE-BY-MINUTE MATCH REPORTS

This article analyses competitive verbal interaction between commentators and readers/other commentators in online minute-by-minute match reports. The text of MBMs frequently quotes other voices, which are conventionally reacted to by the commentator. The dialogism has a competitive nature, with the commentator striving to top the readers through humour or criticism. Such interpersonal gossip is linked with the non-serious elements of male discourse, and is explained as a strategy of synthetic personalisation.

## 1. Introduction

Online minute-by-minute match reports form a specific subtype of the genre of sports commentary. Despite being written, they incorporate numerous spoken features and are, thanks to emailed contributions from readers, partly structured as quasi-dialogical conversational exchanges. Communication within such structural segments, which follow the predictable pattern of a quote of an external voice and the commentator's subsequent reaction, pursues various topics often unrelated to the sports match itself. While the match provides the background (the primary thematic line), it is within the dialogical exchanges (the secondary thematic line) that various personal issues are discussed, trivial topics introduced, and humorous comments made.

Rather than to provide any substantial information, the staged conversations pursue the interpersonal function in developing and enacting a sense of pseudo-personal relationships within the imaginary community of people involved in the consumption of the minute-by-minute commentary as a media text. The interactions between the voices of the readers themselves on the one hand and between the readers and the commentator on the other, however, are not characterized only by a display of shared values, mutual agreement and assumed common knowledge typical of discourses existing for the purpose of social bonding. Much of the interaction takes the form of competitive discourse, in which the readers and the

commentators strive to provide funny comments, while occasionally putting each other down and criticizing the level of the others' contributions. This typically concerns the commentator's evaluations of the readers' emails or even comments by sports commentators in other media.

The competitiveness and mutual opposition, however, are only on the surface since they exist in the context of a light-hearted atmosphere, being typical of 'male gossip'. Direct and indirect pejorative evaluations of both each other and third persons constitute a part of a verbal game in which certain participants (typically the commentator) try to manifest their discursive superiority with the aim of amusing the audience, yet, at the same time, managing to tread the narrow line between causing amusement and not giving offence.

The analysis in this article is based on four online minute-by-minute commentaries of the following international football matches: the 2006 World Cup final between Italy and France (IT-FR, 1–1, 5–3 on penalties, commentary by Rob Smyth); the EURO 2004 final between Portugal and Greece (PO-GR, 0–1, commentary by Barry Glendenning); the EURO 2004 semi-final between Greece and the Czech Republic (GR-CZ, 1–0, commentary by Barry Glendenning); and the EURO 2004 quarter-final between England and Portugal (EN-PO, 0–0, 1–3 on penalties, commentary by Rob Smyth). The texts were written by professional commentators affiliated to the British newspaper *the Guardian*, and all appeared on *the Guardian Unlimited* website. (Since both commentators quoted in this article are male, as are other commentators appearing on *the Guardian Unlimited* website and commentating on football matches, the gender-specific pronoun *he* is used throughout this study to refer generically to this profession.)

## 2. Minute-by-minute commentaries

Online minute-by-minute match reports (MBMs) constitute an independent text type that may be classified as a sub-genre of sports reporting. In terms of Swales's (1990) classification, the genre of sports commentary is defined by: first, centrality of its purpose; second, its prototypical form and content; and third, the ability of the speech community to recognise and label the genre as such. Online MBMs satisfy all of these criteria: they exist for the purposes of informing and entertaining the audience; they manifest certain specific text-forming strategies, i.e. tactical choices used by the writer to make the text more effective (cf. Bhatia 1993: 19); and they are intuitively known by the readers to have not only a prototypical form but also some limits, i.e. the speech community is aware of the genre's conventions. Consequently, these commentaries may be considered as an independent sub-genre.

Online MBMs may be aptly described within the framework of register analysis (Halliday 1994, Eggins and Martin 1997), which specifies the situational circumstances of such communicative events in terms of field, tenor and mode. As regards field, online commentaries exist to provide a running commentary on

sports matches. Along the ideational axis, communication proceeds with a view to providing relatively factual information, as well as the evaluative assessment of events occurring on the sports field and a discussion of various issues related and unrelated to the sports event.

Within this information-providing function of MBMs, finer distinctions may be made: Crystal and Davy (1969), for instance, distinguish between three components of sportscasting: description, explanation and opinion. Similarly, Ferguson (1983) defines two phases in what he calls 'sports announcer talk' (SAT): the announcing (i.e. the description of the action) and the commentary (i.e. the filling of spaces between the action). For the purpose of this analysis, however, such distinctions are not crucial since they are essentially related to the primary thematic line of a sports commentary: this thematic line revolves around the framework of the match itself. What is more significant, however, is that there may exist parallel (secondary) thematic lines within the text of the commentary. These are traceable through various stretches of MBMs in which unrelated or independent issues are introduced and discussed as gossip.

In terms of tenor, MBMs depend on a particular relationship between the author of the text and its recipients. Although the communicative event is a mediated instance of mass communication to a diffuse group of anonymous recipients consuming the text in mutual isolation, MBMs utilise frequent means of synthetic personalisation (Fairclough 1989) to narrow the divide between the discourse participants. In this way, they create the sense of an imaginary community (cf. Talbot 1995). Since the audience of sports (football) online MBMs is mostly male, such a fictitious community is marked by textual practices connected with the construction of male friendship for the purpose of social bonding: the use of humour, male gossip, and language play (Benwell 2001: 20). As noted by Johnson and Finlay (1997), cited in Kuo (2003: 480) in connection with football talk on TV, the discourse genre of gossip is used by men to create solidarity within their social groups.

Finally, in terms of mode, MBMs differ from other kinds of SAT – specifically spoken TV and radio sports reporting – by being relayed electronically in writing. The MBMs analysed in this study were produced by professional British commentators on the Guardian Unlimited website officially attached to the British daily newspaper *The Guardian*. Owing to the medium of writing, the reporting is not exactly proceeding in real time: there is a slight time delay between the occurrence of an event in the field and its actual verbalisation, which may affect the immediacy of the commentator's reactions.

In addition, the specific nature of MBMs also consists in the modification of the traditional roles of discourse participants in mass media communication. Throughout the online reporting of a match, readers send their comments to the commentator by email (in one match report, they are literally invited to "*email pretty much anything about anything and anyone*", EN-PO). The commentator has a chance to include citations from the emails in his own reporting, thus the text of the match report comes to explicitly include other texts, as a form of 'manifest intertextuality' (Fairclough 1992: 104).

As a result, MBMs do not constitute one-way communication without the possibility of any feedback; on the contrary, they provide a forum for mutual interaction by means of pseudo-dialogical conversational exchanges. However, the medium is only semi-open: access is provided to other voices (Fowler 1991, Hartley 1982) but is strictly controlled by the commentator, who performs a dual function in this process: that of gate-keeping (by choosing whose discourse representations to include and in what form) and agenda-setting (by deciding when and in what context to allow the external voice to occur in his commentary). Obviously, the interpersonal exchanges and verbal interactions within MBMs are thus skilfully staged, rather than performed spontaneously.

## 3. Verbal competitiveness in MBMs

One of the most characteristic features of football MBMs, as a type of text consumed primarily by male audiences, is its mediated construction of masculinity. This consists, similar to men's lifestyle magazines (cf. Benwell 2001), in an artificial impression of interactiveness, created mainly through the adoption of a conversational and spoken style, and an encouragement of real interaction in which a few select readers are given voice within the otherwise synthetic and simulated interaction. In this sense, the sports reporting attempts "to imitate, in the public arena, their [male] talk in the private sphere" (Kuo 2003: 481) in order to achieve male bonding. Significantly, much of the interaction is competitive rather than cooperative and may be described in terms of a verbal contest staged for the amusement of the audience.

The sense of male friendship is enacted through gossip containing elements of competitiveness. As Benwell notes, synthetic personalization in male discourse differs from the 'synthetic sisterhood' constructed in, for example, women's magazines for the benefit of female readers (Talbot 1995). While the latter is based on non-ironic intimacy, emotional support, confidentiality and advice, male discourse typically draws on "humour which is both victimizing and self-ironizing" (Benwell 2001: 21). Such a light-hearted and non-serious attitude also underlies occasions of staged verbal conflict and mutual negativity between males who compete for verbal supremacy in minute-by-minute commentaries.

Features of synthetic personalization in MBMs, of course, do not derive only from humour and opposition. On the contrary; both mutual agreement and disagreement are used. Those parts of the commentary where readers' voices are accessed and the staged dialogism occurs are thus marked by agreement as well as display of conflicting opinions. In the example below, contradiction between the quoted reader and the commentator is indicated through the rhetorical structure of emphatic structural repetition (*It was…*).

> **76 mins** *"Replay showed Rooney didn't touch Carvalho's knackers," says Kevin Mackenzie. "Unjustly sent off. Yellow card at most." It was a stamp. It was violent conduct. It was a red card*. (EN-PO, 76 mins)

If the exchange is read as a dialogical pseudo-conversational sequence, then the commentator's disapproval of the reader's opinion constitutes, in terms of turn-taking analysis (Brown and Yule 1983), a dispreferred option. The preferred re-action would have been non-contradiction and agreement; as in the following example, where a reader's humorous comment invites an affirmative reaction by the commentator:

> **52 mins** *"I know the game is a bit dull, but think of it this way: England are possibly 45 minutes, and a goal, away from a humiliating exit and a disastrous World Cup performance," says Zulfi Shah. "That should cheer you up."* <u>You're right</u>: *if England lose after this performance they'll get* battered [original emphasis]. *Ah, the sweet feeling of coursing serotonin.* (EN-PO, 52 mins)

However, even the mutual agreement here rests on an underlying sense of conflict: At the beginning of the match, the commentator openly declared his wish that the England team should lose the match. In this sense, the commentator positioned himself in terms of 'deviant' values, opposite to those of the majority of the anticipated (English) audience. By adopting this negative stance, the commentator intentionally made himself the potential target of differing opinions. The desire that the national team lose, moreover, fits into a common English cultural stereotype where criticising the national team, the England coach and the individual players is not only possible and common but also something in which MBM commentators and readers actually seem to indulge in, as other frequent references indicate (e.g. the nomination *Our Brave Dullards* when introducing the teams, or the end-of-the-match comments after England lost on penalties: […] *and it's the same, same old story for England.* […] *England have found their level – the quarter-finals – and all the bluster and blame and bull\*\*\*\*,* […] *can't disguise it: that dullard idiot Eriksson has trousered Ł4m a year to do something that you or I could have done.* EN-PO).

Since the negative evaluative attitude may, to a certain degree, be assumed to be shared by the imaginary community, the negative positioning of the author may thus actually represent another strategy of claiming common ground with the readers. Articulating such a point of view may then increase the cohesion of the imaginary group – especially of males, who are often, in their discourse serving the role of social bonding, united in their opposition to various external factors.

Negativity and conflict, however, also depend on the construction of oppositions, typically formed through positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation (cf. van Dijk 1992). This may operate on the level of groups (i.e. the positively viewed ingroup as opposed to some 'outsiders') or on the level of individuals (i.e. the positively viewed author as opposed to 'others'). This, as illustrated below, is clearly the case in the verbal competitiveness in MBMs.

It has been suggested that such negative other-presentation may also be linked to gender. As Eggins and Slade (cited in Benwell 2001: 22) note, it is

male gossip that typically depends on the "pejorative judgement of the absent other". Gossip thus involves a third person focus, evidence of substantiating behaviour, and the pejorative evaluation itself. Such pejorative evaluation – in varying degrees of explicitness – underlies much of the pseudo-conversational exchanges between the accessed voices of readers and the commentator in MBMs. Although such negativity is mostly directed against the members of the imaginary group themselves (i.e. insiders rather than outsiders), this strategy, paradoxically, does not destroy the sense of togetherness since it draws on humour: it is thus representative of male bravado and good-natured, staged conflict, cf.:

> **10 mins** *"Pity Robben isn't playing," says Geertjan Wielenga. "And Van Persie. Then again, if they were, Holland would have won that match they lost. Damn." <u>This is the standard of gag so far. This is what we have to put up with.</u>* (EN-PO, 10 mins)

In this exchange, the contributor is critically put down by the commentator. By using the exclusive pronoun *we*, functioning as an ingroup designator, the commentator singles the contributor out against the imaginary community composed of the author and the other readers. He thus reinforces group cohesion at the expense of one of the group's members.

   Many of these negative reactions by the commentator have the metalingual function of criticising contributions sent in by the readers. By putting the accessed voices down, the commentator manifests his own superiority – which is, in any case, guaranteed by his gate-keeping and agenda-setting functions – as well as implicitly invites his readers to submit more imaginative comments. In this sense, negative reactions function as an invitation to participate in a verbal contest between the individual readers – a verbal competition in which imaginative, creative and humorous contributions are particularly appreciated.

### 3.1. Competition with TV commentators

The negative evaluation of other voices is not only limited to contributions provided by readers. Since MBMs are a parasitic text type – that is, they depend on a TV broadcast – they also incorporate intertextual references to the verbal commentary of TV commentators. The professional competition between the commentators from various media finds its vent in the airing of typically trivial comments made on TV. Their quotes are followed either by some witty reaction by MBM commentators or some negative evaluative statement, often of a metalingual kind. This is the case in the following example, where the TV commentator's voice is not even cited at all – we are provided only with an indirect quote that is so vague (*"San Miguel" joke*) that it is effectively meaningless to all who do not have access to the direct comment:

> **26 mins** *A lull, which Mark Lawrenson attempts to enliven by making a pa-thetical "San Miguel" joke that, were it up to me, would lead to him being instantly horsewhipped until he can bleed no more*. (EN-PO, 26 mins)

The ideational component of this short, self-contained text is rather limited: relying on the background knowledge of the identity of Mark Lawrenson as a former British football player and a famous TV commentator, the comment makes the trivial observation that he attempted a joke. However, the short text works interpersonally in making explicit the relationship between the two commentators – at least, what is publicly presented as such – i.e. the detachment of the writer from the joke and its author. Moreover, such 'pejorative judgement of the absent other' reinforces the values shared within the imaginary community of MBM followers, i.e. the existence of a presupposed agreement that certain jokes are 'off limits'. The emphasis on the unacceptability-of-just-any-kind-of-humour serves as a positive self-presentation at the expense of the 'other' (i.e. Lawrenson) and symbolically increases the cohesion of the imaginary group of MBM followers. The seriousness of Lawrenson's unmentionable verbal transgression is indicated by the harsh – and primitive – physical punishment suggested for him by the MBM commentator. It is something of a paradox that the commentator is highly critical of the quality of his colleague's contribution, yet does not refrain from articulating a joke that is similarly base. Though meant to be witty, the remark can, in this context, be hardly considered as funny.

On the interpersonal level, this open and harsh criticism also indicates the asymmetrical distribution of power: it is the more powerful person who can claim the right to escalate the criticism in such negative terms (disregarding that this is a strictly one-way communication about a third person who is absent and without a chance to either provide feedback or retaliate). In this respect, the verbal contests in MBMs differ from other forms of verbal duels (e.g. the 'sounding' identified by Labov (1997[1972]) among young African American males) in that the 'winner' is known in advance: the commentator.

Ironical and critical reactions to utterances made by TV commentators, forming a kind of intertextual dialogue, seem to be the rule rather than the exception in MBMs. Another instance is provided by the same match commentary, where the TV commentator John Motson makes a trite allusion to the famous song "I can't get no satisfaction" by the Rolling Stones:

> **106 mins** <u>Right, this is it</u>. *"There's Mick Jagger in the crowd," says Motson. "He'll be getting a lot of satisfaction from this,"* <u>deadpans Chucklebrother Lawrenson</u>. <u>Millions weep for a once funny and satirical country</u>. (EN-PO, 106 mins)

There is negative evaluation permeating all parts of the text uttered through the voice of the MBM commentator: the prefaced sentence (*Right, this is it*), the choice of the reporting verb (*deadpans*), the made-up attribute of Lawrenson

within the appositional phrase (*Chucklebrother Lawrenson*) in which capitaliza-
tion lends the nomination a quasi-nickname character and an aura of 'titleness'
– with the descriptive noun phrase elevated "to the rank of a quasi title" (Bell
1991: 195, cf. also Quirk et al. 1985). The final sentence – which needs to be read
as an indirect evaluation of the simplicity of the pun – is a biting attack on the
quality of Motson's word play, as well as an assertion of shared ingroup values
and an articulation of one's own discursive superiority.

   However, the verbal contest between the commentators, as well as between the
commentators and the accessed voices, is somewhat hypocritical, at least as re-
gards word play. MBM commentators, on the one hand, negatively comment on
punning and language-based humour. On the other, they resort to these rhetorical
devices themselves. Their own puns / language jokes (e.g. […] *asks Bambi, who
may or may not be a cute fawn*, PO-GR, 61 mins), similes (e.g. […] *you're about
as funny as a kick in the crown jewels,* GR-CZ, 57 mins), and hyperbolic exag-
gerations (*France, perversely looking the fresher despite their average age of 87*,
IT-FR, 87 mins) could be likewise regarded as trite, banal and simple – but there
is no one to make these evaluative statements and no other (imaginary) commu-
nity for whose benefit it could be made. Again – there is no 'sparring partner'
who might return the joke: the commentator is in an ultimately superior position
here.

   One might even be led to hypothesize that identical rhetorical tropes are per-
ceived in diametrically different ways – depending on whether they occur with-
in text segments of accessed voices or in the commentator's own voice. In the
former case, they serve as the springboard for negative evaluation by the com-
mentator, who thus manifests his discursive superiority. In the latter case, such
witticisms stand as evidence of the light-hearted and humorous approach by the
commentator. Whichever way, the commentator always 'wins' in this verbal con-
test, whoever his imaginary opponent is – another (absent) commentator or some
reader contributing his or her comment by email.

### 3.2. Competition with readers

Readers of MBMs are involved in verbal competition of two kinds. As mentioned
above, they are invited to make MBMs interactive by emailing funny observa-
tions about the game (and anything else that may win them the quote) to the
commentator, who reacts to selected contributions. The first aspect of contest
then concerns the invisible competition between the mutually anonymous readers
to 'get quoted', i.e. to submit a verbal comment deemed worthy of inclusion by
the commentator, who selects certain contributions over others. Readers are thus
implicitly competing with each other; the victorious ones (the most funny / trivial
/ original) are rewarded by being given a voice in an MBM.

   The second kind of competition involves a verbal contest staged between the
accessed voice and the voice of the commentator. As the more powerful discourse
participant, in charge and in control of the text of the MBM, the commentator can

evaluate, agree with, and disagree with the external voice, often trying to top the other person's contribution, cf.:

> *Get behind the sofa time: Here we go kids. "Do you reckon they will open the stadium roof before Becks takes his penalty?" chuckles Peter Duchek, <u>not allowing the fact that Beckham is off the pitch to spoil a half-decent joke</u>.* (EN-PO, 120 mins-penalties)

The commentator's motivation is to provide witty responses, often at the expense of the reader. As a result, the exchanges between the accessed voices and the commentator may come to resemble a comedy show filled with gossip, taunts and gibes. The commentator almost seems to engage in 'the art of repartee', as in the following example, where he draws attention to the apparent untruth of the reader's statement:

> **29 mins** *"Spencer Brown is not the only person in the office," writes Andrew Hockley. "I am too – and my office is in the US, so everybody else is out watching parades of fat old men in fezes drive round in little cars with flags on. I think I'll stay here."*
>      <u>*Working on Independence Day? Bah, humbug!*</u> (PO-GR, 29 mins)

If an outside voice is quoted directly, then the quasi-dialogical exchanges between the accessed voice and the commentator characteristically follow a set pattern consisting of two moves. The first move is a reader's contribution, cited on account of its humorous potential (or even triviality). The second move is the commentator's reaction, which is often explicitly or implicitly evaluative, typically pointing out the contrast between the two opinions and building up mutual tension. Through his reaction, the commentator asserts his discursive superiority, without giving the accessed voice any chance to retaliate and try to regain the initiative.

   The verbal contest is staged along the parallel thematic line of interpersonal gossip, although it is often embedded within the primary thematic line of the running online commentary. If fragments of MBMs are considered as relatively self-contained units of text pinned to concrete times along the timeline of the ongoing match, then one may even describe them in terms of a structure with three potential moves: an optional descriptive comment about the match (move 1, as an articulation of the primary thematic line), and the more or less obligatory sequence of playful interaction between the accessed voice (move 2) and the commentator's reaction (move 3). The interaction between moves 2 and 3 is typically unrelated to the primary thematic line – the events on the field, as in the following example:

> **70 mins** *"Trapped in the office finishing off the best alternative guidebook to a city ever," writes Andrew Losowsky in Barcelona. "If you point that*

*the L\*\*\*\*l G\*\*\*e will change your life, I'll buy you a falafel and a glass of port."* [accessed voice – move 2] *A falafel? A glass of port? You tight git! I don't come that cheap Andrew – you'll have to up the payola ante considerably to get your tome's name mentioned.* [(critical) reaction by the commentator – move 3] *Portugal substitution: Nuno Gomes for Pauleta.* [description of game – move 1] (PO-GR, 70 mins)

In the example, the placement of move 1, i.e. the descriptive comment about the game, also indicates the relative importance of the primary thematic line of the sports commentary in comparison with the gossip line: it serves as the background to a communication which is interpersonal and social rather than referential. It is more common for the text segments of the commentary to actually start with move 1 (see example below) and then switch into the secondary thematic line. Often, however, these text segments proceed entirely along the secondary thematic line and no comment on the game is even included.

The interaction between the accessed voice (move 2) and the commentator's reaction (move 3) is escalated by the commentator – in two echo questions expressing his disbelief (*A falafel? A glass of port?*) and the exclamative putting the reader down (*You tight git!*). The reader's joke – offering a bribe to get his book quoted – is shared by the MBM commentator by not refusing the suggestion but elaborating on it and pretending to complain about the worthlessness of the consideration.

Occasionally, the commentator's reactions may be quite strong, even up to the point of ridiculing the reader. In the next example (containing all three structural moves in the most usual order), the reader is initially co-classified among 'geeks and losers' and subsequently indirectly ridiculed due to what may be inferred as his infantile behaviour. This criticism is not directly addressed to the reader. Rather, it is addressed to all readers of this MBM (*Don't any of you blokes…*). In this way, the commentator avoids being too personal and potentially offensive:

**18 mins** *From a corner, Jan Koller gets a header on goal, but it's a lobbed effort that doesn't trouble Greek goalkeeper Nikopolidis unduly.* [move 1]
<u>*The geeks and losers are out in force tonight:*</u> *"Any ideas why Charisteas isn't playing for the Greeks?" asks Steve Tait. "I'm second in my fantasy leage* [sic] *and just transferred him into my team in the hope of catching the leader, only to go to your page and see he's not playing! I'm about as happy as Ger McNally (who I suggest should watch the highlights of Englands tournament to cheer himself up)."* [move 2]
<u>*Fantasy Football? Gah! Don't any of you blokes have girlfriends?*</u> *Incidentally, your man is playing, except the wires have spelt his name Haristeas.* [move 3] (GR-CZ, 18 mins)

The quote is significant, within the commentary of this particular match, in that it establishes an intra-textual link within the secondary thematic line of interper-

sonal gossip. This is achieved thanks to the fact that the reader wrote back and was quoted again. The second quote thus forms a continuation of the pseudo-conversation between the reader and the commentator, separated from the first exchange by an extensive stretch of intervening text of the MBM. Once again, the reader is disparagingly labelled (this time as a *nerd*), while he complains of the ridicule suffered from his friends as a result of being criticised within the MBM. Even in this case, the commentator uses the reader's quote as a starting point for a humorous reaction for the benefit of the other readers – and at the expense of the quoted man:

> **44 mins** *Fantasy Football loving nerd Steve Tait (18 mins) is back: "I'm now getting slated by my mates for being a girlfriendless geek," he whinges. <u>No change there then, I'll wager</u>.* (GR-CZ, 44 mins)

Moreover, the quote from the 18th minute further develops an existing parallel topic line: that of Ger McNally. In his accessed voice, the reader not only poses a question to the commentator (who answers it after an initial humorous swipe at the reader), but also compares himself to another reader (Ger McNally), to whom he even gives personal advice via the medium of the MBM. The initial citation from Ger McNally's email at the very beginning of the match provided the starting point for a special topic line running throughout the MBM. Together with the initial quote, this thematic line consists of seven references threading their way throughout the text (0, 18, 28, 35, 45, 45, and 54 mins).

In these parts of the MBM commentary, the gossip takes over, while the primary thematic line of the actual match report is backgrounded. While the presence of other voices and their playful and competitive interaction in MBMs are some of the characteristic features of online MBMs, it is up to the commentators to assess the degree to which the primary thematic line of the commentary yields to the secondary gossip line. At times, the development of the secondary thematic line of gossip may be so extensive that it even leads to a point where the boundaries of the genre of online sports commentaries are tested, as the following self-reflexive comment indicates:

> **57 mins** *The Czechs come close from a corner. Rosicky swings it in and Koller gets in Milan Baros's way at the far post. Unlucky. Now, a plea from the heart. My heart…*
> *If everyone who appears to have mistaken this commentary for a radio request show, not to mention those who keep mailing to point out (a) typos and (b) that this minute-by-minute report isn't actually* a minute-by-minute [original emphasis] *report, could sod off, my in-box would be a lot less cluttered and it would save me a lot of hassle. You all know who you are and you're about as funny as a kick in the crown jewels.* (GR-CZ, 57 mins)

## 4. Conclusion

Online minute-by-minute sports commentaries progress along several thematic lines: the primary line of the game commentary and the parallel line(s) of inter-personal gossip between the commentator and various accessed voices. On occasions, factual communication about the ongoing sports match is so backgrounded that the pseudo-dialogical exchanges staged in front of the anonymous mass audience take over and stretches of MBMs come to resemble casual conversations.

   Much of the internal dialogicality revolves around humour, irreverence, exaggeration, and irony, with an important role played by language play and other forms of creative utilisation of the code (cf. Carter 2004, Conboy 2006, Benwell 2001). The relationship between the accessed voices and the commentator is marked by not only harmonious communication and concurring opinions, but also frequent contradictions, strong disagreements, witty reactions and even personal offence.

   In these staged dialogues, the participants enact a form of verbal rivalry: the readers engage in a verbal contest in order to gain access to the text, and their eventual contributions are in turn directly contested by the commentator, who rules the communicative event and manifests his discursive superiority by putting the readers down and topping their jokes.

   Although these exchanges are based on conflict and competition, they are not manifestations of some hidden animosity. On the contrary; they form an inseparable part of typically male discourse, in which such linguistic behaviour is relatively common as a part of 'male gossip' drawing on oppositional and negativist attitudes. The ultimate purpose of such good-natured verbal competitiveness is to foster a sense of community among the discourse participants, i.e. to produce social bonding. In media contexts, in which the community of text consumers is merely imaginary, such behaviour may constitute an intentional strategy connected with synthetic personalization.

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