

Leisure Reflections Number 57: The Role of the Commodity Agent in the Serious Pursuits

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Daniel Yoder (1997) observed that the commodity agent can play a key role in serious leisure activities, as shown in his study of tournament bass fishing.

An influential collection of groups and individuals involved in the production, facilitation, and exchange of activity related commodities (herein referred to as commodity agents) are essential to the understanding of tournament bass fishing. Without high-tech bass fishing equipment and services, the sport would not exist in its current form. Groups and individuals have responded to, nurtured, and in some cases boldly claimed to have created a demand for fishing boats, tackle, electronic equipment, services and the competitive formats fundamental to the sport. (Yoder, 1997, p. 415)

As background, note that *amateurs* are found in art, science, sport, and entertainment, where they are invariably linked in a variety of ways with professional counterparts. These two types can be distinguished descriptively in that the activity in question constitutes a livelihood for professionals but not for amateurs. Furthermore, most professionals work full-time at the activity, whereas all amateurs pursue it part-time. Nonetheless, the two are locked in and therefore further defined, in most instances, by their place in a professional-amateur-public (P-A-P) system of relations, an arrangement too complex to describe further in this article (for details see Stebbins, 1979; 1992, pp. 38-41; 2002, pp 129-130).

Yoder's Study

Yoder's study (1997) of tournament bass fishing in the United States spawned an important modification of the original P-A-P model. He found, first, that some fishers here are amateurs, not hobbyists, and second, that commodity agent/producers serving both amateur and professional tournament fishers play a role significant enough to warrant modifying the original triangular professional-amateur-public (P-A-P) system of relationships. In other words, in the social world of these amateurs, such "strangers" are a critically important group consisting, in the main, of national fishing organizations, tournament promoters, and manufacturers and distributors of sporting goods and services.¹ Significant numbers of amateurs make, sell, or advertise commodities for the sport. And the professional fishers are supported by the commodity agents by way of paid entry fees for tournaments, provision of boats and fishing tackle, and subsidies for living expenses. Top professionals are given a

salary to promote fishing commodities. Yoder's (1997, p. 416) modification results in a more complicated triangular model, consisting of a system of relationships linking commodity agents, professionals/commodity agents, and amateurs/publics (C-PC-AP).

The new C-PC-AP model sharpens our understanding of some other amateur fields as well. Wilson (1995), for instance, describes a similar, "symbiotic" relationship between British marathon runners and the media. But, for amateurs in other fields of art, science, sport, and entertainment who are also linked to sets of strangers operating in their special social worlds, we shall see later that these strangers play a much more subdued role compared with the examples just mentioned. Thus for many amateur activities, the simpler, P-A-P model still seems to offer the most valid explanation of their social structure.

But note here that enactment of the core activity by the professionals in a particular field, to influence amateurs there, must be sufficiently visible to those amateurs. If the amateurs, in general, have no idea of the prowess of their professional counterparts, the latter become irrelevant as role models, and the leisure side of the activity remains at a hobbyist level (e.g., the pros are too rare or too obscure). This is an economic rather than a sociological definition of professional. As a result of this reasoning, I have redefined "professional" in (economic rather than sociological, Stebbins, 2007/2015, pp. 6-7) terms that relate better to amateurs and hobbyists; namely, as someone who is dependent on the income from an activity that other people pursue with little or no remuneration as leisure. The income on which the professional is dependent may be this person's only source of money (i.e., full-time professional) or it may be one of two or more sources of money (i.e., part-time professional). Although some of these professionals may be sociological professionals (as described in Stebbins, 1992), many economic professionals are in fields where professionalization is in the sociological sense only beginning.

We start with the serious leisure component of these pursuits. *Amateurs* are found in art, science, sport, and entertainment, where they are invariably linked in a variety of ways with professional counterparts. The two can be distinguished descriptively in that the activity in question constitutes a livelihood for professionals but not for amateurs. Furthermore, most professionals work full-time at the activity, whereas all amateurs pursue it part-time. Nonetheless, the two are locked in and therefore further defined, in most instances, by their place in a P-A-P system of relations.

Yoder's study (1997) of tournament bass fishing in the United States spawned an important modification of the original P-A-P model. He found, first, that fishers here are amateurs, not hobbyists (as I had classified them earlier), and second, that commodity producers and agents serving both amateur and professional tournament fishers play a role significant enough to warrant changing the original triangular professional-amateur-public (P-A-P) system of relationships first set out in Stebbins (1979). In other words, in the social world of these amateurs, such "strangers" are a highly important group consisting, in the main, of national fishing organizations, tournament promoters, and manufacturers and distributors of sporting goods and services. Significant numbers of amateurs make, sell, or advertise

commodities for the sport. And the professional fishers are supported by the commodity agents by way of paid entry fees for tournaments, provision of boats and fishing tackle, and subsidies for living expenses. Top professionals are given a salary to promote fishing commodities. Yoder's (1997, p. 416) modification results in a more complicated triangular model, consisting of a system of relationships linking commodity agents, professionals/commodity agents, and amateurs/publics (C-PC-AP).

Commodity Agents in Leisure

Commodity agents appear to be a significant force only in two areas of leisure; namely, in certain popular individual amateur/professional sports and in certain popular nature-challenge hobbies. By popular I mean sport or nature-challenge activities (NCAs) that draw large numbers of spectators to live, televised, and filmed competitions. That is, commodity agents want to sell products, which if successfully done, means finding a commercially viable set of spectators or viewers some of whom might become buyers. After all, a surfboard, shot gun, pair of running shoes, or bicycle has significant *éclat* when used by the best in the activity in question before the eyes of a multitude of spectators/viewers.

Popular sport includes golf, tennis, cycling, skateboarding, basketball, soccer (association football), and table tennis. In the collective sports such as soccer and basketball, commodity appeal is generated by what individual amateur or professional stars use and wear.

The NCA is leisure whose core activity or activities centre on meeting a natural test posed by one or more of six elements: 1) air, 2) water, 3) land, 4) animals (including birds and fish), 5) plants, and 6) ice or snow (sometimes both). A main reason for engaging in a particular NCA is to experience participation in its core activities pursued in a natural setting. In other words, while executing these activities, the special (aesthetic) appeal of the natural environment in which this process occurs simultaneously sets the challenge the participant seeks (Davidson & Stebbins, 2011). The NCAs include: surfing, fishing (e.g., bass, salmon, trout, walleyes), hunting (e.g., ducks, pheasants, deer), snowboarding, and alpine skiing.

How do professionals in these commodity-based sports and NCAs make a living? A few of them win prize money for placing well in competitions that offer such. As a source of remuneration this one, however, can be problematic; for example, participants must often travel nationally and internationally at their own expense and prize-driven competitive events are commonly few and far between. Individual sponsorships can help pay the bills here, though the first seem to be mainly about supplying needed kit manufactured by the sponsor, as in top-of-the-line shoes, skis, outerwear, guns, fishing rods, boats, and the like. Otherwise, these pros make ends meet by working outside their core activity teaching, repairing, or selling related skills and products or beyond this service function of social world strangers, they work in the local gig economy by driving taxis, serving meals in restaurants, delivering goods, and so on.

Conclusions

The critical role of the commodity agent seems largely, if not exclusively, limited to certain sports and certain competitive NCAs. In the amateur sciences of astronomy and ornithology, for example, sophisticated telescopes and binoculars are widely advertised in the amateur magazines. Yet, neither field is competitive in the sense used here, and there is insufficiently wide public interest in buying their kit. The same holds for amateur music and the purchase of instruments and amateur photography and the purchase of cameras. In the NCAs the kit of mountain climbers, river kayakers, and cross-country skiers is considerable and sometimes dear, but such activities fail to attract much public interest and the second two are often not even competitively pursued (i.e., nature provides the competition or, more accurately, the challenge). Turning to professional entertainment, magic may be the art that is most amenable to commodity agency. Nonetheless, the apparatus used by performers, though wondrously varied and extensive, appears to have insufficient commercial appeal in the wider public to give rise to commodification (Stebbins, 1993). In short, for many amateur activities, the simpler, P-A-P model still offers the most valid explanation of their social structure.

For certain sports and the competitive NCAs, however, commodity agents are important strangers in their social worlds for at least three reasons. One, is that they help advance the participant's leisure/work career, accomplished primarily by enabling some payment in-kind for necessities to pursue that person's passion as devotee work (defined as serious leisure from which a certain livelihood can be gained, Stebbins, 2004/2014). Two, these agents link leisure practice to the design and manufacture of kit. Thus, the outstanding participants – fishers, surfers, hunters, alpine skiers, and so on – often have ideas about modifications to their kit that could enhance performance in their core activity. Three, the agents and the companies they represent help advertise the competitive and nature-challenge events in which those whom they are sponsoring are participating.

Endnote

[1] Unruh (1979) defines strangers as intermediaries who normally participate little in the leisure activity itself, but who nonetheless do something important to make it possible. They include: booking agents; manufacturers, sellers, and repairers of kit; organizations; newsletters; websites; and more.

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