Sport, Twitter Hashtags and the Public Sphere: A Qualitative Test of Habermasian Discourse through a Curt Schilling Case Study

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After a series of controversial comments, former Major League Baseball pitcher Curt Schilling was fired from his position as an on-air broadcaster by ESPN on April 20, 2016. Schilling’s sudden firing prompted a spirited debate on the microblogging site Twitter through the use of the #CurtSchilling hashtag. Opinion was sharply polarized between those who felt Schilling’s firing was unjust, and those who supported ESPN’s decision. Utilizing a conceptual framework developed to analyze sport-themed, hashtag-enabled discourse through the lens of the Habermasian public sphere, a two-stage case study examination was conducted. Through an analysis of a day’s worth of tweets containing the #CurtSchilling hashtag, as well as a qualitative questionnaire given to users of the hashtag during that time interval, the study attempted to ascertain how the discourse reflects the ideals and principles of the Habermasian public sphere. The findings demonstrate that while users draw value from participation in the discussion, they are less inclined to desire interaction with other hashtag users, particularly those who disagree with them. This suggests that while issue-focused Twitter hashtags provide an open commons which meets the participatory requirement of the public sphere, they do not inspire the true the back-and-forth engagement that Jürgen Habermas suggests is pivotal to the generation of deliberative public opinion.