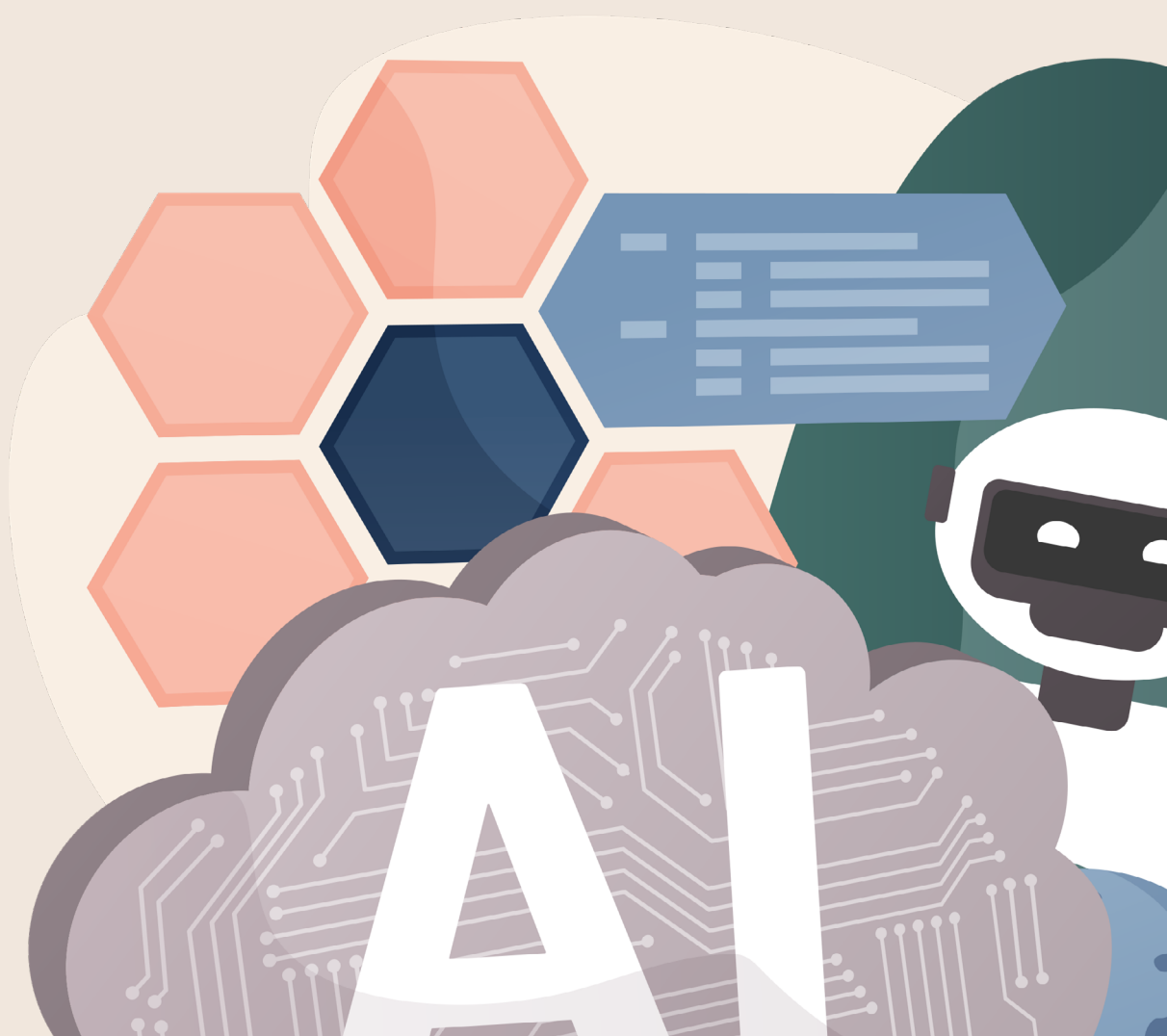


POSITION PAPER

# THREAT OR OPPORTUNITY?

Impact of digital technologies on grassroots  
sport with the focus on Artificial Intelligence



**Opinions on the digitisation of the sports industry differ widely, however, there is a general compromise among the stakeholders that “sitting out is not an option”.**

Many people argue that digitisation has drastically improved the sport experience for all the actors involved. For professional sport, fans usually consumed sporting events on traditional television just like they did other TV programs. The modern fans, particularly young people, are consuming sporting events on-demand just the way they consume all their entertainment on streaming services (e.g. Netflix, YouTube, Twitch etc.). They want to pause, rewind, forward, and enjoy their sport events with complete flexibility. Naturally, sports event organisers, being aware of the risk that these platforms pose to live game attendance, are looking for new mechanisms to improve the live experience and attract a younger audience.

Athletes rely heavily on sports equipment for their training and competitions. Digital equipment allows them to track their performance improvements, the effect of diet changes, the impact of change in the training regimen, with unprecedented precision. Coaches and professional athletes use high-tech safety equipment like digital helmets and pads to get a better understanding of the player's exposure to injuries, thereby allowing them to take better precautions. Using data obtained from such a variety of other equipment, the coaches and players can strategise better than ever before.

Technology is playing a larger role than ever in the lives of fans, opening the way for sport organisations to create new, innovative customer experiences. Partnering with broadcasters and new distribution platforms can give fans the experiences they want, and capture viewership across multiple devices, including mobile. Additionally, fans are much closer to the athletes, as they can connect with them through different social media channels, and engage directly with them. For example, children with cancer could greet their favorite football players via streaming when they arrive at the stadium via streaming platforms, as part of an UEFA Foundation project.

Digitisation of sports is also impacting on the “rules of the game”. Automatic and computer-aided referees are becoming a norm across all sports, for example, a system called Hawk-Eye Live, tracks each ball in World TeamTennis matches to figure out exactly where a ball

lands, then make the call. Similar systems also exist in football, basketball, handball, hockey, baseball etc. The views and athletes view these solutions as a support to make sure there are impartial and fair decisions made on the field, as referees being human can sometimes make flawed decisions. However, activists on digitalisation topics also raise concerns that computers are not impartial as well, because machine learning also learns from flaws and is able to replicate them.

In a world where big data predominates, sport organisations can gather athletes' and fans' data to better understand their habits, preferences, and demographics, ultimately unlocking new revenue streams by reaching fans in innovative ways—for example, by adding new services to existing offerings. They can also use data to improve core business operations, build and solidify partner relationships, and even develop entirely new business models. At the same time, value-based sports organisations should prioritise addressing the ethical concerns about privacy and data security, so that the new technologies are used to improve the experiences without jeopardizing the basic rights and freedoms.

**However, the questions remains if these various revenue opportunities by the digitisation in line with the value-based model of sports. How is digitisation impacting the grassroots sport, and can grassroots sport organisations follow the trends?**

Grassroots sport and recreation play a huge role in the lives of millions of people across the world. From school sport and local clubs through to community schemes, grassroots sport and recreation provide a diverse mix of opportunities for people of all backgrounds and abilities and, for a small few, also the foundation for a career at the elite level.

Grassroots sport matters for many reasons, as it provides the means for millions of people to enjoy the simple pleasure of taking part. But it also can provide much more than that. Grassroots sport is a means of delivering a much wider social impact: it helps people to lead healthier lives, to develop new skills for employment and to engage with their local communities.

Among the different technologies that we find nowadays, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is one of

the fastest evolving technologies and is having a direct impact on people's lives, being present in homes and businesses. The world of sport is no stranger to this technology. From sport governing bodies to grassroots sport, we are witnessing a commitment to the inclusion of AI systems to improve the performance of athletes, create new links and communication strategies with fans or increase the security of their events, among other applications. However, the lack of regulation and transparency of the use of these technologies, could have a negative impact on the rights of all actors involved. In addition to this, through commercializing sport and selling the data for increased revenues, sport organisations often focus more on the monetization part rather than on the development of the beneficiaries – in most cases young people.

Due to lack of education on digital platforms and their impact on daily lives, but also due to a set of technological, market, behavioral, and legal factors young people often make privacy decisions based on incomplete information and with cognitive biases at play[1]. The introduction of the GDPR in the European Union is a huge step forward towards better regulation and data safety, but it is not a magical solution which will fix all issues regarding digitisation in society. There is a bigger role of all civil society, educational institutions and data protection authorities to raise awareness about these standards and promote them with young people.

Young people and grassroots sport movements often do not have the capacity to assure that their information is stored safely, and by the pushed digitisation of the sports sector they often commit to "leaking" their data without even understanding it. There is a lack of capacities and knowledge for the small grassroots organisations to follow the trends and developments. However, this trend is not sustainable as it increases the divide among the young people with different opportunities, and reduces the opportunities for youngsters coming from disadvantaged areas. In addition, due to the specific information bias, the access to information and news about grassroots sports will be different for users who are already engaged, and those who do not follow such updates, creating yet a bigger information gap.

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[1] The Harvard Gazette, Interview with Harvard Law Professor Urs Gasser, executive director of the Berkman Klein Center

With the adaptation of the Resolution on the European Model of Sport, solidarity with lower levels of sport and the promotion of open competitions is recognized as a key feature, however more work should be done to assure that values in sport such as justice, solidarity, good governance, human rights and the voice of sportsmen in all sports organisations are safeguarded.

**Therefore, we as ENGSO Youth strongly take note and support the digitisation, however we caution that:**

- Youth participation – young people have been recognised as expert and legitimate stakeholders in internet governance processes such as the IGFs within the United Nations[2]. However, AI related decision-making processes are still being developed, and young people's voices as the main users of services powered by AI should be present at all levels. In sectors such as sports, young people's access to information, data privacy and quality of services are impacted directly.
- AI Literacy – there is common agreement that using and understanding what technology is, are two different things. For this purpose, there is a call to invest: in the capacities of young people to become responsible, yet active digital citizens; Grassroots sport clubs and sport organisations have to be better equipped in working with the digital natives' generation and in assuring that the human rights of their beneficiaries are protected while using different digital technologies.
- The sport sector should protect and follow its data flows better. Education about data is critical among the different sports providers. Understanding the value of personal data but also the way data collection works is essential in the AI fuelled world. Shifting from data as any other commodity to data as a highly important asset will require time and an intentional change of behaviour.
- Sport organisations should dedicate efforts to increase their capacities in digital technologies and incorporate different technological trends within their work. Where possible sport organisations should develop and/or use new AI tools, offer accessible resources to all young people, embrace techniques already used by the professional sports or

business sector to increase its efficiency, without losing its core mission and values of grassroots sports. For grassroots sports associations, the public authorities such as municipalities or regional authorities should provide easy-to-use online booking and management systems which will facilitate their operations, services and communication with the users.

- Continuous research needs to be supported in order to understand the full impact of AI and digitisation on grassroots sport. Considering the possible biases of AI and algorithms, research has an important role in providing rationale for policies and practices, before they produce harmful effects.
- When using online apps to improve sports performance and receive guidance, young people provide a lot of sensitive data such as information about their health and regular updates of personal health data. The national and international legislation penalise situations of misuse of this data and storing or sharing it with third-party platforms.
- Technology is potentially beneficial to improve transparency (e.g. of decision-making processes), solving critical problems (climate change, health) and innovate. This transformative power of technology cannot be denied, yet it has to be used in a mindful manner, with a focus on people and with respect to their human rights. Its affordability has yet to be addressed, as currently the access to advanced technologies still comes with a high price.

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[2] The Internet Governance Forum (IGF) is a multistakeholder governance group for policy dialogue on issues of Internet governance.



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