

Code Flirting and Greg Inglis: Rabbitohs and Essendon Fan Response Online

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There is a gentlemen's agreement between the three major football codes in Australia that players will not be poached from one code to another. This agreement is referenced by O'Neill (2007), a former Australian Rugby Union CEO, who controversially broke during the period when rugby union transition from an amateur game to a professional one. The code poaching agreement was an underlying part of the shock in the international and Australian sport media during the winter of 2009 when Karmichael Hunt and Israel Folau left the NRL for AFL expansion teams. (Pearce, 2009, July 30) (Sky Sports, 2009, October 20) (Gould, 2010) (Bradshaw, 2009, July 29) Some of the media coverage at the time implied that code poaching was intended as a publicity stunt (Bradshaw, 2009, July 29) to help build the fanbase amongst rugby league fans in a traditional rugby league stronghold.

During the winter of 2009, when a few prominent NRL players left, one player that was discussed, as another code switcher was Greg Inglis, a Melbourne Storm player, who was being actively courted by Essendon. (Gould, 2010, June 10) (Bradshaw, 2009, July 29) Nothing came of this talk during the winter. Subsequently, the Melbourne Storm went through a major salary cap controversy that resulted in the club forfeiting all their games during the 2010 season. The Melbourne Storm had to clear space to get back into compliance with the league's salary cap. When the team wasn't trying to keep Inglis in order to continue their tradition of winning, the team was trying to get rid of him to clear salary cap space. (Marshall, 2010, July 21) (Johns, 2010, April 26) In November 2010, it looked like Inglis was going to move to the South Sydney Rabbitohs. (Badel, 2010, November 11) In mid-December 2010, the NRL refused to certify Inglis's contract, citing third party deals in violation of the salary as the reason. (Phelps, 2010, December 19). This led Inglis to talk to Essendon and switching codes. (AAP) Based on the author's observation, a number of people on Twitter felt that Inglis was talking to the team in order to leverage his contract situation with the NRL and Essendon was talking to Inglis to get positive media attention. If that was the case, it worked as the NRL dropped their objections and Inglis was signed to the Rabbitohs on December 24, 2010. (Mawby & AAP, 2010, December 24)

The potential code switch for Inglis had implications for two leagues, the NRL and the AFL, and three clubs, the Storm, Rabbitohs and Essendon Bombers. Everyone involved had their own agendas. Essendon and South Sydney appeared to want Inglis to bask in the player's reflected glory. The Storm probably wanted to clear their salary cap so they can gain back their reputation as winners. The NRL appeared to want to keep one of their best players. The AFL appeared to want to have an opportunity to gain audience share by poaching one of their competition's best players.

Based on the author's observation, Inglis's code change possibility was interesting enough to warrant a number of comments on Twitter. The agendas at play are worth exploring to see if they were realized: Did Essendon see an increased amount of interest in the club as a result of their discussions with Inglis? Did interest in South Sydney differ from the result of the potentially losing one of the league's premiere players? The social

media community often responds much more quickly than the offline community: It takes a real commitment to become a club member and such a decision is not likely to be made while a player's future is up in question. Given the speed of Inglis's Essendon exploration and termination before signing with Rabbitohs, the online analysis approach is best. This chapter will look at the that using Alexa, Facebook, Twitter and Wikipedia data to see how a potential player code change effects teams on both side of the decision.

Alexa

Alexa allows people to track the comparative amount of traffic to websites. It works using a toolbar that people install, which then tracks sites the people install. (alberto, 2009, July 13) Alexa is one of the few sites that provides traffic ranking for Australia. While it cannot tell people exactly how site visitors, it can give an idea of the site ranking amongst technology, public relations and social media friendly users. From December 4 to December 25, the world rank and Australian rank for the official websites of the Rabbitohs, Melbourne Storm, Canterbury-Bankstown Bulldogs, Sydney Roosters, Essendon Bombers, Geelong Cats and Collingwood Magpies were recorded. The Canterbury-Bankstown Bulldogs, Sydney Roosters, Geelong Cats and Collingwood Magpies were included as controls. The AFL and NRL sites were not included as a controversy involving St. Kilda Saints players occurred during the same period. That situation involved a fair amount of criticism for the AFL's response.

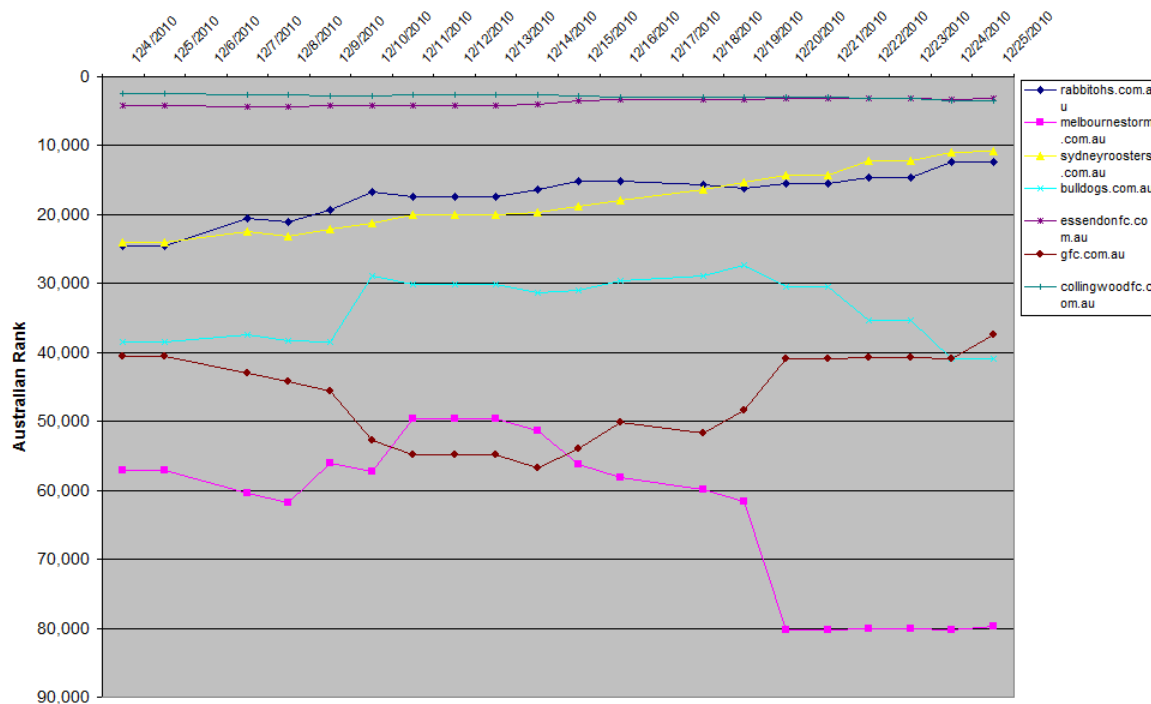


Figure 1. Alexa Australian AFL and NRL site rank from 4 Dec to 25 Dec.

News that Inglis was talking with Essendon began around December 18. The Rabbitohs saw a drop in traffic around that time, before it grew back. The day after the Rabbitohs officially signed Inglis was when they saw the most traffic during the Inglis

affair. During that same period, the Melbourne Storm's rank mostly fell, with a one-day spike the day after Inglis's official departure. As a point of reference, the Australian rank for Sydney Roosters steadily increased and the Bulldog's rank steadily decreased. Over in the AFL, Essendon saw a steady increase in traffic while Inglis was talking to the club. A drop in rank occurred for Essendon on the day the Rabbitoh's announced Inglis's official signing. During that same period, Collingwood's traffic rank steadily declined. Geelong's traffic stayed in the same general range, with a traffic boost on Christmas day.

World rank data, available in Appendix 10, shows the Rabbitohs rank had a greater fluctuation over that period. It went from 753,186 on December 18 to 772,298 on December 23 to 739,137 on December 25. Traffic appeared to drop off as it looked like Inglis may not sign, only to pick up again when people began speculating that Inglis's were a feint to get the NRL to agree to the contract. From December 18 to December 25, the world rank for the Melbourne Storm, Sydney Roosters and Canterbury-Bankstown Bulldogs all decreased. In the AFL during that same period, Essendon saw a steady increase in their traffic rank while Geelong and Collingwood saw a steady decrease.

Australian and world rank both suggest that Essendon benefited from an increase in site visitors in response to Inglis's talks with the clubs, while the Rabbitohs saw a decrease in traffic until it looked like Inglis was actually going to sign with the club. This suggests that Essendon's flirting with Inglis helped create interest in the team.

Beyond traffic rank, Alexa can provide demographic data about a site's visitors. On December 9, the information that Alexa provided about the Rabbitoh's website was:

Rabbitohs.com.au is ranked #717,638 in the world according to the three-month Alexa traffic rankings. This site is in the "South Sydney Rabbitohs" category of sites. The site is relatively popular among users in the cities of Invercargill (where it is ranked #132) and Sydney (#10,897), and visitors to Rabbitohs.com.au view an average of 2.8 unique pages per day.

Approximately 18% of visits to the site are referred by search engines.

Besides a little fluctuation in the numbers, the profile did not change by December 25.

Essendon's site visitors were described as follows on December 11:

There are 248,437 sites with a better three-month global Alexa traffic rank than Bomberland. While the site is ranked #4,157 in Australia, where roughly 84% of its visitors are located, it is also popular in Malta, where it is ranked #440. The demographics of the site's audience do not show substantial differences from internet averages. Bomberland's content places it in the "Essendon Bombers" category. Search engines refer approximately 6% of visits to the site.

Like the Rabbitoh's, Essendon's visitor profile did not change by December 25. While Essendon may have benefited traffic wise and the Rabbitohs may have been slightly punished for the potential loss of Inglis, in neither case was there enough of a difference to change Alexa's profile of visitors to the official club sites.

Facebook

According to Alexa, Facebook is the second most popular site in Australia. (Alexa Internet, Inc., 2010, December 25). AFL clubs were quick to start using the site; clubs in the NRL were a bit slower and not all of them had official fan pages until partway through the 2010 season.

Facebook fan page membership is a good way to measure comparative interest. Membership totals were recorded for the same clubs looked at on Alexa on December 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 9, 11, 15, 16, 21, 22, 23, 24 and 25. This data can be found in Appendix 10. Once this was compiled, the membership difference and percentage difference was calculated for the period between December 5 and 16, December 16 and December 25, December 16 and December 22, and December 22 and December 25. This data can be found in Table 1. These time periods represent a period before the code change speculation, during the whole of the code change speculation, the period before most speculation that the talk was a ploy, and during period where most of the speculation occurred.

Table 1

Growth for official NRL and AFL fan pages

Difference	South Sydney Rabbitohs	Canterbury- Bankstown Bulldogs	Melbourne Storm	Sydney Roosters	Essendon Bombers	Collingwood Magpies	Geelong Cats
5-Dec to 16-Dec	191	2,491	2,702	723	2,295	1,483	45
16-Dec to 25-Dec	142	832	1,856	566	1,265	1,042	35
16-Dec to 22-Dec	94	571	1,252	409	897	840	24
22-Dec to 25-Dec	48	261	604	157	368	202	11
% 5-Dec to 16-Dec	2.69%	5.39%	6.51%	2.38%	2.42%	1.38%	0.61%
% 16-Dec to 25-Dec	1.96%	1.77%	4.28%	1.83%	1.32%	0.96%	0.47%
% 16-Dec to 22-Dec	1.31%	1.22%	2.93%	1.33%	0.94%	0.78%	0.32%
% 22-Dec to 25-Dec	0.66%	0.55%	1.39%	0.51%	0.38%	0.19%	0.15%

The South Sydney Rabbitohs percentage growth was similar to that of the Bulldogs and the Roosters across all periods. They were outperformed by the Melbourne Storm, who were losing Inglis. For total growth, all the NRL teams looked at outperformed the Rabbitohs. Essendon outperformed its two AFL counterparts, both in total new fans and percentage growth. These differences do not change when the slope calculation is used. This data supports the idea that Essendon benefited from its brief flirtation with Greg Inglis, whereas Inglis's contract and potential contract did not provide the Rabbitohs with any benefit in terms of Facebook followers.

On December 23, a search was run on Facebook for unofficial fan pages about Inglis. Of the groups found, only one referenced the AFL. It can be found at <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Greg-Inglis-to-AFL/118712858169963>. Between December 23 and December 25, the page gained zero new followers, maintaining its fan level at 15. Based two links submitted to the page, it dates back to the earlier speculation that Inglis might have made a code switch. There were no fan pages that referenced his

possible signing by the Rabbitohs and two fan pages about his abortive move to the Brisbane Broncos. One of these pages, Im going to Brisbane Broncos, LOL JK!! Im Greg Inglis, saw an increase of two members between December 24 and December 25. This increase could be interpreted as annoyance over the continued issues regarding Inglis's perceived loyalties and willingness to keep promises to clubs/fans that he was perceived soon to be signing a contract with. Beyond that, the lack of creation of groups dedicated to Inglis and the Rabbitohs/Essendon could signal a lack of interest by Facebook fans of those clubs in having Inglis play for them.

Facebook growth indicates that Essendon benefited from the speculation that Inglis was going to switch codes and play for them. The Rabbitohs did not receive an answering bump. Fans were not motivated to join or create pages about the possibility of a code switch for Inglis. There was some benefit for Essendon, but if the latter had happened, it would have made a stronger case of Inglis being a benefit to the club.

Twitter

Twitter is a microblogging site, allowing users to share their thoughts in 140 characters or less to anyone who chooses to follow them. According to Alexa on December 25, 2010, it is the ninth most popular site in Australia. Like Facebook, it is popular with Australian sport clubs; every club in the AFL and NRL has an official account.

Like Facebook, one way to determine if the Rabbitohs or Essendon received any benefit from Inglis's code changing talk is to look at the official account for the team. This data was gathered every day from December 8 to December 25, with the exception of the 22, for the South Sydney Rabbitohs, Melbourne Storm, and Canterbury-Bankstown Bulldogs. As Sydney Roosters data was not gathered, the Newcastle Knights will be used for comparison purposes. Over that same period, data was collected for the Essendon Bombers and Collingwood Magpies. As Geelong Cats data was not, they have been replaced with the Western Bulldogs and Hawthorn Hawks. This data can be found in Appendix 10.

Once this data was collected, the difference, percent difference and slope was calculate for the period between December 11 and December 18, December 18 and December 25, December 18 and December 23, and December 23 to December 25. This data can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

Twitter Follower Statistics

Difference	TheRab bitohs	NRL_B ulldogs	MelbStor mRLC	NRLKnig hts	Essendon _Fc	Collingw ood_FC	western bulldogs	Hawthorn FC
11-Dec to 18-Dec	21	22	46	19	36	106	43	44
18-Dec to 25-Dec	22	24	51	25	90	107	25	44
18-Dec to 23-Dec	17	15	45	16	73	88	15	30
23-Dec to 25-Dec	5	9	6	9	17	19	10	14
% 11-Dec to 18-Dec	1.52%	1.49%	1.64%	8.56%	0.47%	1.05%	1.97%	1.12%
% 18-Dec to 25-Dec	1.57%	1.60%	1.78%	10.12%	1.16%	1.05%	1.13%	1.11%
% 18-Dec to 23-Dec	1.22%	1.01%	1.58%	6.72%	0.94%	0.87%	0.68%	0.76%
% 23-Dec to 25-Dec	0.36%	0.60%	0.21%	3.64%	0.22%	0.19%	0.45%	0.35%
Slope 11-Dec to 18-Dec	3.14	3.14	6.74	2.89	4.71	16.18	6.49	6.38
Slope 18-Dec to 25-Dec	3.01	3.63	7.43	3.65	14.21	16.67	3.79	6.62
Slope 18-Dec to 23-Dec	3.35	3.03	8.66	3.15	14.78	17.95	3.08	6.16
Slope 23-Dec to 25-Dec	2.50	4.50	3.00	4.50	8.50	9.50	5.00	7.00

Using the NRL other teams as a benchmark, the Rabbitohs did not derive a follower benefit as a result of the Inglis code change story. On the other hand, Essendon likely derived some benefit from the Inglis story as their percentage growth changed substantially from the period before the Inglis story broke, during the story, and after it was confirmed that Inglis signed with the Rabbitohs. Collingwood, Hawthorn and the Western Bulldogs had much more consistent, but smaller percentage and total growth over all periods.

Another way to look at the Inglis code change flirting on Twitter involves using a tool called Twitter Venn, found at <http://www.neoformix.com/Projects/TwitterVenn/view.php>. This tool allows users to input three terms. A venn diagram is then created using Twitter search to show how many times these terms were used together. This was done with the keywords Inglis, Essendon and Rabbitohs. The results are viewable in Figure 2. Another venn was created using the keywords Inglis, AFL and NRL. This venn can be found in Appendix 10.

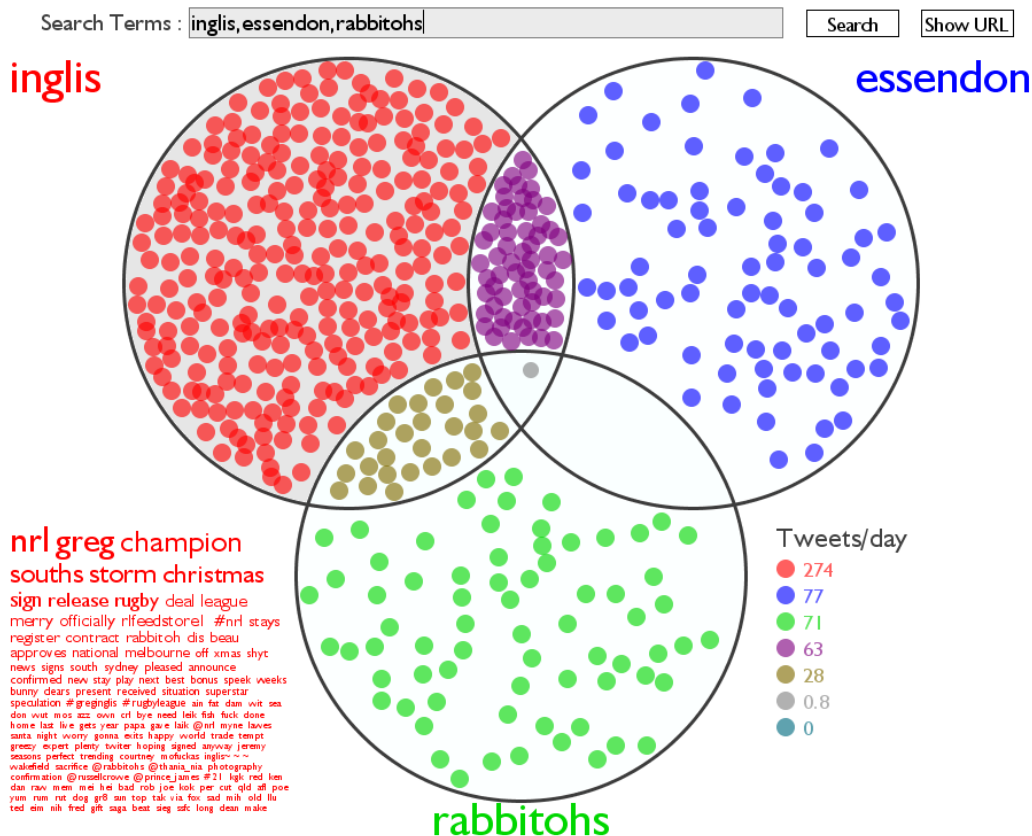


Figure 2 . 25-Dec Twitter Venn.

The Twitter venn suggests that people were more interested in talking about the possibility of Inglis joining Essendon than they were interested in talking about Inglis's contract with the Rabbitohs.

Both Twitter follower patterns and the Twitter venn suggest there was increased interest Essendon as a result of the possible code switch. The Rabbitohs did not benefit from increased followers, nor was there a similar level of conversation about the Rabbitohs as there was for Essendon. The code switch talks helped Essendon.

Wikipedia

Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia that anyone can edit. The English language version has over a million articles. According to Alexa (2010, December 25), Wikipedia is the eighth most popular site in Australia. There is an active movement by Australian Wikipedians to improve the quality of AFL and NRL related articles. Some of these articles have over 2,000 edits.

Wikipedia often acts as a major news portal when scandals hit and related articles often get a large number of page views. During the Akermanis and Monaghan controversies, there was an increase in views to the player's pages; there was a smaller increase in article views for the clubs the athletes played for. Unlike Facebook and Twitter, where users actively discuss a topic, or chose to identify with a club by

following or fanning them, viewing a Wikipedia article can be seen as a form of passive interest in that no one sees this expression of interest. Reading an article does not imply the same level of interest. Article view data is still worth examining in order to gage the level of non-fan interest around a topic, epitomized by the aforementioned Akermanis and Monaghan situations.

Article view data is available from Wikipedia article traffic statistics at <http://stats.grok.se/>. The page views per article for the period between December 1 and December 24, 2010 were recorded for the following articles: Melbourne Storm, South Sydney Rabbitohs, Newcastle Knights, Sydney Roosters, Essendon Football Club, Geelong Football Club, Collingwood Football Club, and Greg Inglis. This data can be found in Appendix 10. A line graph was created using this data for the period between December 10 and December 24 and can be found in Figure 3.

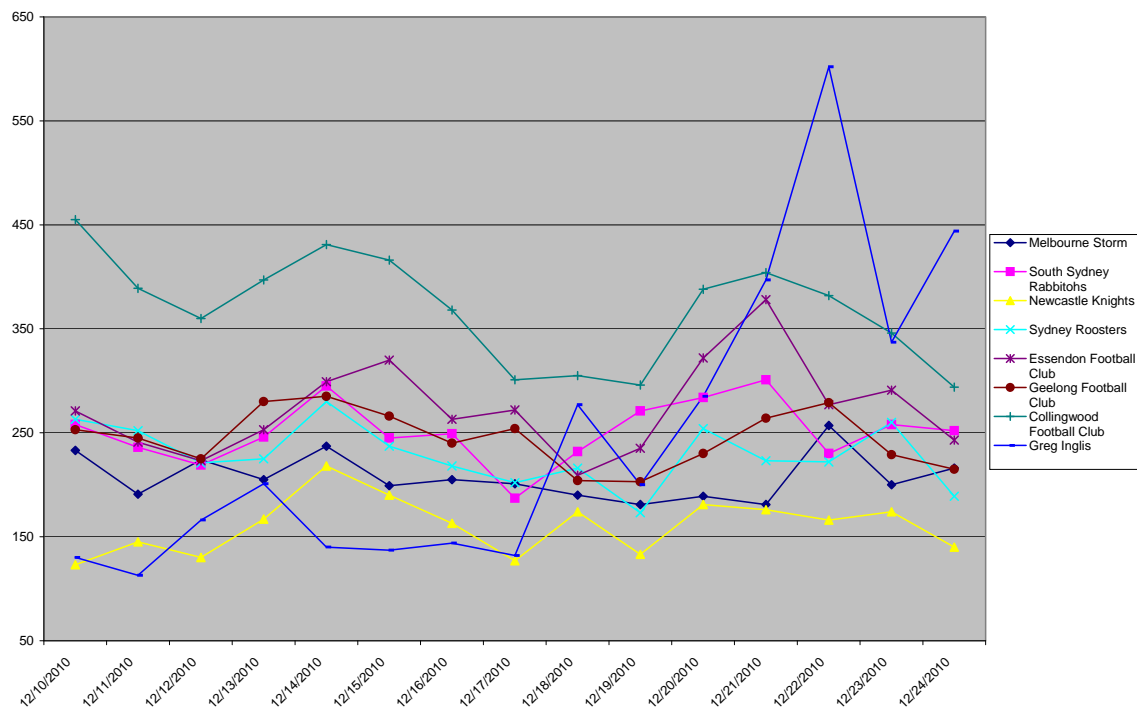


Figure 3 . Wikipedia Article Views.

Just looking at the graph, neither Essendon nor the Rabbitohs saw a large traffic increase on December 22, when the Greg Inglis article saw the greatest number of views. This observation can be verified by looking at the correlation between the club article and the Greg Inglis article. In the period between December 1 and December 24, the Inglis/Essendon correlation was -0.02 and Inglis/Rabbitohs correlation was 0.03 . This correlation is so small, it suggests a random pattern between the two. If the period is shortened to between December 18 and December 24, the period when speculation about a code change was at its greatest, the correlation for both strengthens a bit to 0.20 and -0.36 respectively. Still, these numbers still largely imply a random relationship. A meaningful correlation does exist between Essendon and the Rabbitohs in the period between December 18 and December 24: 0.76 . This says that views for the articles both

went up and down together. For the period between December 1 and December 24, the correlation was 0.45. While the Essendon/Rabbitohs correlation appears meaningful, the pattern of increasing and decreasing could relate to overall patterns increasing and decreasing interest in the AFL and NRL: There is a correlation of 0.83 between Geelong and Collingwood. Neither of these clubs was involved in any major trades or controversies during that same period.

Wikipedia correlations and the line graph suggest that neither Essendon nor South Sydney benefited with increased page views as a result of the Inglis code switch story. Put in the context of Facebook and Twitter, there was much less interest by the general public in this story. People on Wikipedia did not care much about Inglis's possible code change.

Conclusion

In mid-December 2010, Greg Inglis talked with Essendon's coach about the possibility of playing for the club as the NRL had refused to certify Inglis's contract with the South Sydney Rabbitohs. This topic was talked about on Twitter, Facebook and other places on the Internet. There was speculation that this was a play for media attention by Essendon, and that Inglis was using Essendon to strengthen his position with the NRL. Whether or not this speculation was on the mark, Inglis's actions had an impact on online actions taken by fans.

Alexa data suggests that Essendon benefited from talking with Inglis, while the Rabbitohs may have been punished with less traffic as a result of a major signing not happening. Alexa also suggests that despite traffic patterns changing, the web audience for both clubs did not change: The Rabbitohs and Essendon kept their established demographic patterns. Audience activation or deactivation was inside its own fan community pool.

Essendon also saw a bump in new fans on Facebook, where the Rabbitohs did not. Despite the increase in followers, Facebook fans did not create or join groups and fan pages to support Inglis joining their club. Essendon benefited on Facebook but not as much as they could have.

Twitter data show that Essendon again got a follower bump as a result of Inglis's code change flirting; the Rabbitohs did not. Beyond follower count, more of the discussion on Twitter involving Inglis mentioned Essendon than the Rabbitohs.

While Essendon saw an increase in followers and traffic on the previous sites, it did not see a similar bump on Wikipedia in response to Inglis's talks with them. Likewise, the Rabbitohs did not see an increase or decrease in article views as a result of the Inglis's actions.

Inglis's actions suggesting he might play for Essendon helped the club activate its fanbase, getting the team increased web traffic, more Facebook followers, more Twitter followers and generated more discussion on Twitter than Inglis and the Rabbitohs. The South Sydney Rabbitohs either were punished for Inglis's possible defection or had no change in fan community behavior. This sort of flirting might be a good thing for clubs who desire some short term attention online.

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