




Editorial

Rethinking Sports Journalism

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1. Changing Boundaries of Sports Journalism

In current digital media landscapes, sports journalism has lost its status as the undisputed playmaker in delivering sports-related information to audiences. Instead, the playing field of sports communication has become more and more confusing, and the superiority of established media is increasingly being challenged by competitors from the field's periphery. In recent years, new actors such as fan bloggers (McEnnis 2017), data specialists (Kunert 2020), and owned media (English 2021; Mirer 2022) have entered the scene, offering content that looks like journalism (Maares and Hanusch 2022). With the emergence of such functional equivalents (Schapals et al. 2019), the definition of what journalism actually is has become increasingly messy (Eldridge 2016). Obviously, the boundaries of the field are blurring and a crucial question arises: "What is sports journalism?" (Perreault and Nölleke 2022).

For some time now, such challenges to professionalism have not only been observed in the sports beat but also in the entire journalistic field. Theoretically, the Internet enables everybody to perform the journalistic functions of gathering and disseminating information online (Singer 2003), thus (seemingly) reducing society's dependence on professional journalism. Even though other social spheres such as science are also facing attacks on superior authority by new insurgents to the field (Gieryn 1983), journalism is experiencing a particularly tough time. While other professions have erected formal barriers, such as licenses and educational requirements, that secure the core against illegitimate entry, access to the journalistic field (at least in democratic societies) is deliberately unlimited: "To be a plumber requires a license; to be a journalist requires, in 2015, an Internet connection". (Carlson 2015, p. 8).

As a result, the digital age has seen the emergence of a variety of actors that "look like journalism in some ways but also very different in other ways" (Maares and Hanusch 2022, p. 1). Far from being a homogeneous group, such actors have been called "interlopers" (Eldridge 2019), "strangers" (Holton and Belair-Gagnon 2018), "pioneers", (Hepp and Loosen 2021), "insurgents" (Perreault and Bell 2022), and "parasites" (Von Nordheim and von Königslöw 2021). While their resources, role understandings, practices, and contents vary, they share one defining characteristic: they threaten the superior authority of established media at the journalistic core (Carlson 2007).

As a consequence, in digital media landscapes, established media organizations can no longer claim to be uniquely entitled to fill the occupational niche of providing accurate and relevant information to a wider public (Singer 2003). However, it is precisely this claim to exclusive responsibility for a professional elite upon which privileges such as access to sources, legal rights, and funding are based (Carlson 2015). In order to (re)claim authority and thus secure and regain such privileges, journalists strive to emphasize their occupational distinctiveness and added value to new entrants. Hence, they engage in boundary work which is essentially about "how journalism comes to be demarcated from non-journalism" (Carlson 2015, p. 2). By excluding or including others, boundary work strives to retain the definitional power over what can legitimately be considered



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journalism. Lacking objective characteristics that mark its boundaries, journalism tends to signal authority by invoking professional norms such as objectivity (Vos and Thomas 2018).

However, the plausibility of referring to journalistic norms varies across different journalistic beats. In this respect, sports journalism finds itself in a particularly unfavorable situation: Criticized for its normative, cognitive, and evaluative failure (McEnnis 2020), sports journalism has long held a rather dubious reputation within the journalistic field. Precisely because it is often denied the application of traditional journalistic norms, it has been dismissed as the “toy department” of newsrooms (Rowe 2007). For sports journalism, this reputation is bearable since, for a long time, it could rely on its importance as the economic muscle of the field (Perreault and Bell 2022; Perreault and Nölleke 2022). In Bourdieusian terms, while sports journalism has traditionally lacked the cultural capital of other beats, its legitimacy rests on its economic capital (English 2016). However, given the emergence of new actors on the periphery, the power of this muscle has been enormously weakened, making it increasingly urgent for sports journalism to (re-)claim professional legitimacy.

2. The Contested Legitimacy of Sports Journalism

There is no doubt that the power structures in the sports/media complex have changed significantly in the digital age (Daum and Scherer 2018; Suggs 2016). Historically, the relationship between sports and news media is described as “symbiotic” (McChesney 1989, p. 49): Individual and collective sports actors rely on media’s services to provide visibility and thus attract sponsors. In return, they grant media actors access to athletes, teams, and events, which enables sports journalists to produce content with mass appeal and thereby strengthen their position in the newsroom. Ultimately, the legitimacy of sports reporting has long been based on its close relationship with sports protagonists (Velloso 2022). And the privilege of access has long served as a boundary marker distinguishing professional sports journalism from other actors such as (amateur) bloggers (Mির 2022). In the digital age, however, sports have reneged on their part of the bargain, ultimately calling into question the superiority and distinctiveness of professional sports reporting. Athletes and teams have set up their own channels through which they bypass journalism and thus control the flow and shape of information (English 2021; Nölleke and Birkner 2019). No longer dependent on journalistic mediation, they increasingly deny journalists access to information (Sherwood et al. 2017) and sanction critical reporting (Suggs 2016). In this situation, sports journalism has become interchangeable or even inferior when it comes to providing exclusive insights into teams and athletes or behind-the-scenes views (Evans 2020). Furthermore, audiences are no longer dependent on professional media coverage to learn about match results. It seems, then, that it is sports, of all things, that have become sports journalism’s greatest rival in digital media landscapes (Nölleke and Perreault 2023) and the largest threat to its legitimacy.

To distinguish themselves from such partisan actors, journalists in other beats might now try to invoke professional norms such as objectivity. However, such a strategy to protect autonomy and, thus, to embark on the quest for legitimacy is particularly tricky in sports journalism: first, as its reputation as the toy department suggests, sports journalism has never been characterized by the pursuit of such norms; second, given the changing power relations in the sports/media complex, it risks losing access altogether when reporting critically; and, third, audiences—who ultimately grant or deny legitimacy—do not even seem to value the pursuit of normative claims by sports media (Mির and Harker 2021; Nölleke 2022). Consequently, previous research has found that while (digital) sports journalists are aware of the potential challenges posed by new entrants to the field, they struggle to define what makes themselves topically essential (Perreault and Bell 2022).

Given the blurring boundaries of the field, however, there is no doubt that sports journalism must somehow act to maintain and regain its professional legitimacy (Suggs 2016). The usual uncritical and event-driven approach that relies on exclusive access to protagonists seems neither sufficient nor feasible in digital (sports) media landscapes. Indeed, previous research has suggested that sports journalism is starting to respond to this challenge: it has begun to draw more strongly on the traditional norms, values, and practices of other journalistic beats (McEnnis 2020); takes more critical approaches than in-house publications of sports organizations (English 2021); and increasingly covers socio-political issues of events (Sadri et al. 2022).

3. Changes to Build Sports Journalism's Professional Distinctiveness

In the so-called "attention media society", in which engaging audiences and building communities appear to be the biggest challenge for media outlets (Wenzel and Nelson 2020), sports journalism faces increasing pressure from the adjacent fields (McEnnis 2021). Thus, considering all these challenges, what can sports journalists and sports newsrooms do to distinguish themselves from content creators and other peripheral actors in order to regain relevance and recognition as a professional field to remain legitimate? Editorial decisions based on innovation, but also on fundamentals, quality, and ethics, may pave the way to answer this question.

As "innovation in the media industry has become both more urgent and more challenging as the pace and scope of technological advance have increased" (Küng 2013, p. 9), sports news outlets have proven to be innovative when they decide to search for narrative solutions and test these solutions to better adapt themselves to the digital media ecosystem (Pavlik 2021). Media innovation, however, should be understood beyond that technological frame and seen as a result of a wider strategy followed by newsrooms, which also prioritizes relationships with audiences and creative newswork or infrastructures required to support journalism (Hermida and Young 2021). For this reason, innovation in sports journalism is not only about reshaping news coverage by exploring new formats and storytelling techniques to expand target audiences or drive subscriptions, but it should also focus on diversifying the agenda, reinforcing investigative reporting, or taking advantage of most of the new platforms to go beyond traditional sports desks as a way to reach younger fans.

In a scenario where new narratives, business models, and technological innovations are modifying the way news are produced, civic values and professional news standards are destined to play a decisive role in shaping the landscape in which the media will have to operate from now on (Butler-Breese and Luengo 2016). Thus, the reactivating power of ethical codes appears to be a solution for leveraging innovation in sports journalism. The practice in this field should be guided by the same professional norms, ethical standards, and demands for quality that apply to any kind of journalism (Rojas-Torrijos and Ramon 2021b).

Nevertheless, the media needs for innovative solutions to better connect with audiences do not always go accompanied by an awareness of quality in actual journalism practice (Gómez-Mompart 2023, p. 14). Quality journalism, based on the discipline of verification (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001) and criteria such as accuracy, facticity, and contextualized reporting, is what really adds value to those innovative solutions developed to tell stories differently, be more efficient, and attract people's attention. It is about embracing quality and ethical views and intertwining them with innovation as a distinctive element of sports content production. From this perspective, there is increasing professional awareness of informed citizenship as quality journalism's remit (Costera-Meijer 2020) and, consequently, there has been a change in journalists' attitudes toward audiences and even external actors from keeping them away from the "boundary work" discussion (Carlson 2015) to monitoring, approaching, and involving them in news production across different platforms. As Karlsson et al. (2023) suggest, this new scenario may cause professional journalistic norms and practices to evolve and incorporate other elements, such as aesthetics,

automation, distribution, engagement, or proximity, to be a part of an updated code of ethics that might help journalism to better fulfill its social mission and defend its legitimacy.

It seems clear that sports media should include innovative workflows as part of their core mission. This involves attracting and retaining talent; developing and sharing new capacities and skills across newsrooms; redesigning workflows and having a team of people (unit, lab, or department) devoted to thinking about the next ideas to be carried out; developing innovative reporting and storytelling practices to distinguish from competitors; and—why not?—trying to convert that innovation into content that can attract audiences' attention in order to be ahead of the game.

4. Broadening the Discussion on Trends and Challenges

The emergence of peripheral actors who expand the boundaries of sports journalism and, as a consequence of this, the reaction of professional sports journalists to defend their distinctiveness, as well as the impact of the heavy use of social media and disrupting technology in both communication flows and sports consumption patterns, have led to this Special Issue published by *Journalism and Media*. Nineteen authors from nine countries (Greece, Portugal, Spain, United Kingdom, Germany, Austria, Australia, Ireland, and Sweden) contributed eight papers to broaden the discussion about the current trends in the sports media landscape and the bigger challenges that sports journalists need to face in the years to come.

Among the topics addressed in this Special Issue, national case studies constitute an opportunity to better understand differences in media coverage and social considerations of sports regarding disciplines, protagonists, and approaches. [Spiliopoulos et al. \(2022\)](#) investigated the framing of the defeats of the Greek national men's basketball team during the EuroBasket championships from 2007 to 2017 in articles published by four Greek newspapers. This research shows the importance and potential impact of sports culture on the framing of news issues, and it comes to the conclusion that the frequent use of the "attribution of responsibility" frame in a critical sports reporting contrasts with the long-held perception of sports journalists as producers of cheerleading content in stories.

Far from being just a field characterized by floppy practices, sports journalism keeps evolving in response to technological developments and exploring new grounds to tell stories and present them to audiences ([Rojas-Torrijos 2020](#)). As [Canavilhas \(2022\)](#) points out in his work, artificial intelligence (AI) is a disrupting technology that has fully reached journalism, especially in the field of natural language processing and the (semi)automatic production of texts. This study, based on a survey sent to decision makers of Portuguese sports media, indicates that sports journalism in this country is very aware of the potential of AI, although this technology has not been used in newsrooms yet due to economic and professional constraints.

A challenging issue for professional sports journalism to differentiate itself from other actors and accomplish its social mission remains how to be broader and more diverse in its coverage by allowing the visibility of non-mainstream disciplines and sportspeople. This approach would help sports media outlets draw the attention of unattended niche audiences ([Domeneghetti 2021](#)) and deliver news to different communities of interest across all platforms. [Ramon and Rojas-Torrijos \(2023\)](#) examined the agenda diversity on Twitter offered during the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games by 15 public service media corporations in Europe. Despite significant imbalances observed among the different media organizations, both in terms of the volume of coverage and the attention given to various Paralympic sports and athletes, the results indicate PSM should take into account the importance of promoting inclusion and observe audiences' increasing interest in parasports.

Social media platforms, despite being disruptive for sports journalism practice by blurring the traditional lines between professionals and personal relationships (Reed 2011), tend to keep the same pattern of coverage as traditional media outlets (Rojas-Torrijos and Ramon 2021a). As McEnnis (2023) points out in his study on the influencer/sports journalist expert on soccer transfers, Fabrizio Romano, the coverage of major European football clubs is prioritized and consistent with the trajectory of sports journalism on digital platforms, while other relevant social issues around tournaments are not mentioned. This means that “the normative assumption that sports journalists should scrutinise power and/or highlight social injustice does not always apply to all practitioners in all contexts”.

In this context, Seeger et al. (2023) analyzed the publishing strategies of eight German newspapers across their Twitter and Facebook posts. The results of this study highlight how most of the content published by these news outlets aim to redirect users to the publications’ websites and increase their audience, rather than forging a new editorial space to push certain narratives and interact with users. Nonetheless, the emergence of the Internet and mobile video streaming services are changing how live sports are experienced, consumed, and shared across different kinds of screens (Hutchins et al. 2019). Kunert and Kuni (2023) examined the tension between journalistic and entertainment values in live soccer TV commentaries from the perspective of 28 interviewed German professionals. Most commentators value journalistic values over entertainment values, although they adopt the role of an “objective mediator” or an “emotional entertainer” in a balancing act.

As mentioned above, sports organizations are also challenging professional sports journalism practice by deploying a great deal of human and media resources to keep fans engaged with their teams and sports while trying to control the agenda and, if needed, obstruct media outlets’ access to athletes. In this regard, O’Boyle and Gallagher (2023) analyzed the insights of experienced sports journalists in Ireland and Britain about the “defensive mediatization strategies” used by sports organizations. Among several practices, they identified increased levels of in-house media, differential treatment of journalists, the hiring of professional sports journalists as internal communications advisers, and, overall, an increasingly competitive stance and mistrust toward journalism. Looking beyond mediatization, Broms (2023) investigated by what means sports federations in Sweden shape their social media affordances to create an increased understanding of how they interact with their audiences through social media.

The proliferation of actors and platforms in the current digital scenario does not only force us to rethink who should be considered a journalist, but also, above all, leads us to rethink how quality sports journalism should be done and how we should navigate the digital landscape without abandoning the best professional practices in the years to come. Quality, innovation, and ethics in sports journalism are precisely the professional safeguards that are called on to make a difference with respect to other content published without filter, verification, or reflection. Sports journalists should not pay so much attention to what others do from the periphery but focus on doing their best to remain essential.

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