Special Issue Reprint

The Changing Boundaries of Sports Journalism in the Digital Era

Technological Disruption, New Actors and Professional Challenges

Edited by
José Luis Rojas-Torrijos and Daniel Nölleke

MDPI

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Editors

José Luis Rojas-Torrijos
Daniel Nölleke

Editors
José Luis Rojas-Torrijos
University of Seville
Seville, Spain

Daniel Nölleke
German Sport University
Cologne
Cologne, Germany

This is a reprint of articles from the Special Issue published online in the open access journal *Journalism and Media* (ISSN 2673-5172) (available at: https://www.mdpi.com/journal/journalmedia/special_issues/sport_journalism).

For citation purposes, cite each article independently as indicated on the article page online and as indicated below:

Lastname, Firstname, Firstname Lastname, and Firstname Lastname. Article Title. *Journal Name* **Year**, *Volume Number*, Page Range.

Contents

About the Editors

José Luis Rojas-Torrijos

Associate Professor of Journalism at the University of Seville since 2021; he also participates in the MA programs in Innovation in Journalism of Miguel Hernández University, in Journalism and Sports Communication at Pompeu Fabra University, the European University in Madrid, San Antonio Catholic University in Murcia, and Pontifician University in Salamanca, and in Political and Corporate Communication at the University of Seville. Beyond Spain, he has been a visiting lecturer to courses in Mexico, Colombia, Cuba, and Ecuador.

He holds a PhD in Journalism (2010) and a BA in Information Sciences (1994) from the University of Seville, and he is a member of the 'Communication & Social Sciences' research group at this university. His research focuses on sports journalism, quality journalism, media innovation, journalism ethics, and digital storytelling. He has published ten textbooks on journalism and dozens of articles in highly ranked scientific journals, such as *Journalism Studies*, *Media and Communication*, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, and *International Journal of Sport Communication*.

Before entering the academy, he worked as a journalist in several news outlets and communication departments in different organizations as well as a media consultant.

Daniel Nölleke

Since April 2022, Daniel Nölleke has been an assistant professor for "Sports Journalism and Public Relations" at the Institute of Communication and Media Research at the German Sport University Cologne. Before starting there, he worked as a postdoctoral researcher at the Journalism Studies Center at the University of Vienna.

He received a doctorate degree from the University of Münster in 2013 for his dissertation thesis on "Experts in Journalism". His main areas of expertise include sports communication, science communication, mediatization, and journalism studies.

His work has been published in peer-reviewed journals, including *Communication Theory*, *Digital Journalism*, *Journalism Studies*, *Journalism Practice*, *Journalism*, and *Communication & Sport*. From 2018 to 2022, Daniel Nölleke was the chair of the Journalism Studies Section of the German Communication Association. Since 2019, he has been acting chair of the ECREA Temporary Working Group "Communication and Sport". He is also one of the editors of the scientific journal *Medien Journal* and member of the editorial board of the *International Journal of Sport Communication*.

Editorial

Rethinking Sports Journalism

José Luis Rojas-Torrijos [1,*] and Daniel Nölleke [2,*]

1   Department of Journalism II, Faculty of Communication, University of Seville, 41092 Seville, Spain
2   Institute of Communication and Media Research, German Sport University Cologne, 50933 Cologne, Germany
*   Correspondence: jlrojas@us.es (J.L.R.-T.); d.noelleke@dshs-koeln.de (D.N.)

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

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 (Mirer 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 (Mirer 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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Article

The Framing of the National Men's Basketball Team Defeats in the Eurobasket Championships (2007–2017) by the Greek Press

Panagiotis Spiliopoulos [1], Nikolaos Tsigilis [1], Maria Matsiola [2,*] and Ioanna Tsapari [1]

[1] School of Journalism and Mass Communications, Faculty of Economics and Political Sciences, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 546 25 Thessaloniki, Greece; panspil@jour.auth.gr (P.S.); ntsigilis@jour.auth.gr (N.T.); tsapariioanna@hotmail.com (I.T.)

[2] Department of Communication and Digital Media, University of Western Macedonia, Area Fourka, 521 00 Kastoria, Greece

* Correspondence: mmatsiola@uowm.gr

Abstract: As the study of the negatively expressed news on sports constitutes a scientific area that has not received proper attention by researchers yet, the purpose of this study was to investigate the framing of the Greek national men's basketball team defeats by the Greek press. Articles (n = 178) concerning the Eurobasket championships from 2007 to 2017, published in three political newspapers and one sports newspaper, were analyzed through content analysis. Specifically, the research reflected upon (a) the existence of the primary framework of "attribution of responsibility", (b) the differences in framing among the newspapers, and (c) where/to whom the Media focused on regarding the defeats. The "attribution of responsibility" framing was found in all newspapers under study, both in the content and in the titles of the articles, primarily the day after the games. Regarding the defeats, the media were centralized around 12 factors and 8 subfactors as components of responsibilities, while a significant number of other frames were also identified as well as the four stages of the framing function. In conclusion, the finding that framing is significantly met in sports reporting contradicts the credited characterization of "cheerleaders" to sports journalists.

Keywords: frames; framing; attribution of responsibility; sports journalism; basketball; Eurobasket championships; Greek national team

1. Introduction

For many decades, media have been the main route of the dissemination of events and their evolution over time. According to the statute of the Journalists' Union of Athens Daily Newspapers (ESIEA 1979), the journalists' job objective is the collection, configuration, and presentation of the material published in newspapers, as well on the radio and television stations (Article 5, par. 4, p. 6). As stated in the statute of the Greek Sports Journalists Association (PSAT 2013), sports editors are "those whose main and exclusive profession is the collection, configuration and presentation of sports material, published in the country's daily sports, political and financial newspapers, in sports and of general interest magazines, or presented in the electronic media, the webpages and the news agencies" (Article 6, par. 6). Therefore, journalists working in media organizations specializing in sports reporting actively contribute to social development as producers and distributors of knowledge, mediating the sports reality (Mijatov and Radenović 2019).

Media are the key sources of information and news transmission; in exercising this role, their influence on the prevailing perceptions has been scientifically documented (Spiliopoulos 2020). Therefore, the field of media is empowered to affect people and situations through the topics presented and analyzed, to project specific aspects and eventually to shape the public consciousness (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Vernikou 2019). Sports media, as with any other kind of media within the communication field, hold an important

institutional role in shaping contemporary society's public opinion and dominant concepts (Villamar and Smith 2019). Professional and amateur sports media coverage, of both male and female athletes, has reached unprecedented levels and is growing exponentially (Lewis and Weaver 2015). Therefore, due to and via the ongoing coverage, media and journalists play a key role in the way an issue is shaped (D'Angelo 2019; McCombs 2005).

1.1. Successes of Greek National Teams and Media Coverage

The European Basketball Championship first appeared in 1935, and has been held biannually thereafter. The final ranking of the national teams constitutes the criterion for their participation in the final phase of the World Championship (Mundobasket) or the Olympic Games. The Greek national team competed for the first time in 1949, and in 1987 and 2005 won the championship against the Soviet Union and Germany in the final game, respectively (HBF 2021). As anticipated, these successes (as well as the win of the 2004 European football championship) were highly reported not only in the sports but in the political press as well (Vernikou and Mastrogiannakis 2020).

In Greece, a country in which media are a component of most people's daily lives, sports news is emerging as one of the most popular journalistic fields and even comprises a segment of the political press. It is remarkable that the country holds the world record for publishing daily sports newspapers (Spiliopoulos 2020) with more than a thousand specialized sports journalists. Specifically, basketball reporters present a unique characteristic; on the occasions that their coverage, regarding either the clubs or the national basketball team, according to their personal judgment, is perceived as "attacks" to the sport, they unite to protect it in a degree that is considered remarkable (Bourlakis 2019).

In February 2022, five daily sports newspapers were published nationwide; at the same time, a daily and a weekly published newspaper with headquarters in Thessaloniki (the second most populated city of the country) were available in northern Greece (Frontpages 2022), while another one was distributed free of charge in digital form (Sportime 2021). In addition, due to the advent and penetration of the internet, many sports websites have emerged and have been established. Sports news, either in the form of inserts or with a significant number of pages, is also included in almost all the national distributed political newspapers and likewise in the provincial ones.

The following paper is a content analysis that uses framing to examine attribution of responsibility in Greek political and sports publications' coverage of 20 Greek national men's basketball team defeats. This research is important since, to the authors' knowledge, the subject is scarcely investigated globally, and it may constitute a stimulation to other researchers in the field, contribute to the extension of the framing theory, and cover the void in the existing literature.

1.2. Framing Theory

A frame placed around a painting is carefully chosen by the artists because it potentially affects the way people view and interpret its substance (Tewksbury and Scheufele 2009). Thus, the visual artist hopes that the public will see the contents of the painting through their own preferable way. Framing in Media works just like a painting frame; by isolating and delimitating the image, it makes it special in relation to others (Kotsanti and Tsigilis 2020). The media's scope is to provide to the public a specific interpretation of a topic; consequently, journalists select the approach of the news presentation to influence the interpretation and evaluation processes of the issues brought to their audience's attention (Ramadan and Prastya 2019).

As Reese (2007) states, the metaphorical concept of framing is credited, by the sociologist Erwing Goffman, to the anthropologist–psychologist Gregory Bateson. Goffman, in his book "Frame Analysis" (Goffman [1974] 1986), dealt with the "organization of (human) experience" (p. 13) and transferred this concept to the social sciences, where it was used for communication analysis (Kreuter 2021). Since then, various scholars have evolved

this concept, considering it as a separate approach to Media research (D'Angelo 2019; D'Angelo and Kuypers 2010; Entman 1993; Gitlin 1980, 2003; Tuchman 1978).

Goffman ([1974] 1986, pp. 21–39) identified two types of frames: (a) the primary frameworks or otherwise natural frameworks, and (b) the secondary or social frameworks (Goffman [1974] 1986, pp. 21–22). In the first case, the primary contexts attempt to administer an essence to events and actions that otherwise would not have any meaning; through these contexts, people interpret what is happening in the world (Davie 2014). In the second case, the secondary contexts are based on the primary, though they present an operational difference (Davie 2014). The sociological foundations of the framing theory were established by Goffman (Tewksbury and Scheufele 2009), and it is one of the most fundamental theories in the communication research field (Kotsanti and Tsigilis 2020; Weaver 2007), and for that reason selected for the present study. However, the two concepts (frame and framing) are not necessarily synonymous (Johnson-Cartee 2005), and therefore a relative clarification is needed for the research objectives. This study adopts Davie's (2014) definition of frame, which refers to the manner in which a topic is presented to the public, while framing is refers to the process by which "a news organization defines and constructs an . . . issue" (Nelson et al. 1997, p. 567).

1.3. The Primary Frames in the Media and the Persuasion Processes

According to Tewksbury and Scheufele (2009), the primary frames in communication research present a twofold significance; on the one hand, they are socially constructed categorization systems, used to process information between journalists and between citizens as well, while on the other hand, they are used by the media to influence the targeted audience interpretations. In other words, framing initially shapes and sequentially alters the audience's interpretations and preferences. This is achieved as the frames, in the first phase, are employed to bring the audience's attention to certain events, making them more noticeable, important, or memorable, thus defining the daily agenda (first function/function of the first level of framing). In the second phase, they increase the apparent significance of certain ideas or features of these events (next function/function of the next level of framing). Such an increase in emphasis enhances the likelihood of processing and storing in the memory the meaning of events by the recipients (Entman 1993). In this way, the media activates schemes that encourage the targeted audience to think, feel, and decide in a specific way (Entman 2007; Weaver et al. 2004). Media producers know in advance that this endeavor will be achieved, as people are not well informed and rely on the media to acquire information and knowledge, to cultivate attitudes and create behaviors (Entman 1993). McGuire (1986) has extensively explained the process by which attitudes (that precede behavior) guide our thoughts, choices, and decisions for action. Formation or alteration of attitude is the most frequently studied result of framing. On this basis, Nelson and Oxley (1999) found in their research that the frames in financial news reporting influenced the perceptions of students. In short, the effect of framing is mainly an effect of interpretation. The messages that comprise Media framing are specially designed to change the perceptions or attitudes on specific issues that the Media undertake (D'Angelo 2017).

1.4. Sports Journalism and the Effects of Framing

According to Neuman et al. (1992), news frames are "conceptual tools on which Media and individuals rely on to convey, interpret and evaluate information" (p. 60). Therefore, many researchers agree that framing is a necessary tool in news reporting that is used (a) to reduce the content complexity in the aspect of news transmission (Corcoran 2006; Hearns-Branaman 2020; Karlsson and Clerwall 2018; Knight 1999; Marland 2012) and (b) to lead the audience in specific ways of thinking and dealing with situations (Cassino 2007). Sports journalists, as Media "gatekeepers", decide the features and the approach by which athletes and coaches (male and female) are represented in their stories. Thus, news on sports topics and events contains information and frames (Tewksbury and

Scheufele 2009). As a result, this could affect the consumers' thoughts, feelings, and attitudes (in the sense of the degree of favor or disfavor as defined by Eagly and Chaiken (2007) and behaviors (in the sense of responses). Consequently, it could also affect the way consumers will react and/or make subsequent evaluations of sports protagonists (Price et al. 1997). The journalists' judgements regarding the coach and his/her choices of athletes, the performance of the athletes, the decisions of the referees, and also the actions of a team's management members, such as the attitude towards authorities concerning the appointment of referees, the selection of a coach, and the acquisition of players, are presented daily in sports news. Spectators and fans are emotional by nature, and their exposure to media posts, depending on the type of coverage, may affect their future support for the athletes (Lewis and Weaver 2015). Thus, lately, the sports reporters' approaches and processes as they create their stories and the framing they set have been investigated.

Lecheler and De Vreese (2019) named a framing effect as the process by which "a frame in communication affects an individual's frame in thought" (p. 13). A framing effect occurs "when a phrase, image, or statement suggests a particular meaning or interpretation of an issue" (Simon and Jerit 2007, p. 20). However, almost always, the framing effects of the Media are dependent on the basic, individual assessments of the frames (Bazerman 1984; Nelson et al. 1997; Shen and Edwards 2005; van Gorp 2007). Nonetheless, the sports media audience is rarely aware of the presence of frames and the influence they can exert on the creation of their own frames of interpretation (Tewksbury and Scheufele 2009).

1.5. The Attribution of Responsibility Frame

Gitlin (2003), while describing media frames, characterized them as "silent, to a great extent" (p. 7) as they are not easily recognizable. He emphasized that they emerge as persistent patterns that combine the selection of topics, their presentation, and the preferred interpretation by the audience that is dependent on the Media news provision. With the use of frames, the journalists initially locate the news, then classify it (Tewksbury and Scheufele 2009), process it with editorial room practices, and make it ready for retransmission to their audience. Sports journalists extensively use such frames that emphasize specific aspects of their stories (Lewis and Weaver 2015); they are the paths through which they choose to highlight and disseminate specific information, in order originally to provoke and afterwards to maximize the audience interest. Due to time and space constraints, as news gatekeepers, they select certain stories for publishing, rejecting others (Shoemaker and Vos 2009). In addition, as they seek to be objective and do not necessarily possess a common understanding of the essence of framing, they often allow communicators or skilled media operators/manipulators to impose (their own) dominant frames in their texts (Entman 1993). Considering that frames "draw the attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring other elements which might lead audiences to have different reactions" (Entman 1993, p. 55), framing theory is applicable to the content of news media (Hearns-Branaman 2020). The present research is based on the theory of framing (Villamar and Smith 2019).

Following the evolution of theory in the field, the authors acknowledged and utilized the newest two-stage model of framing that was processed and proposed by Scheufele (2004). The model proposes that in the first stage, Media framing affects the awareness of the audience, while in the second, it influences the way information is processed (Davie 2014). Therefore, it presents an impact on the judgments, attitudes, opinions, emotions, and decisions of the audience, as recipient of the journalistic messages. Furthermore, the present study adopted, as predetermined frame for investigation, the primary frame of attribution of responsibility of the five-point typology formulated by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000).

This context has been found, by certain studies, to be dominant in the field of sport. Specifically, it has been found in the coverage of sport for development and peace (SDP) by English-language newspapers (Harrison and Boehmer 2020), in the coverage of the

doping phenomenon both in Germany (Starke and Flemming 2017) as well as in Greece (Kotsanti and Tsigilis 2020), and in an organizational crisis at the 2010 Delhi Commonwealth Games (Carey and Mason 2016). In particular, in a similar study to the present one, Dumitriu (2013) studied the existence of the "attribution of responsibility" frame in the 2010 European Women's Handball Championship (7–19 December 2010) and in the 2011 World Women's Handball Championship (2–18 December 2011), examining two general newspapers—Adevarul and Evenimentul Zilei—and two sports newspapers (Gazeta Sporturilor and Prosport1). She concluded that this frame comprises the main strategy of the print media for creating an evaluative position and also for deciding who should be "blamed for the competitive effects" (p. 79).

Therefore, in this research, the existence of "attribution of responsibilities" was investigated, as a primary frame, in the coverage of the defeats of the Greek national men's basketball team. Sports journalists tend to personalize their criticism and, following team defeats, link responsibilities with coaches, players, management, or refereeing. They also pose ethical dilemmas for the acceptance of responsibilities, dismissals or resignations of coaches and executives, as well as the punishment of referees. All the above constitute structural features of the news in sports reporting (Matthes 2009). The specific model and the typology were adopted in the context of a pluralistic approach (D'Angelo and Shaw 2018; Reese 2007), which attributes increased validity and reliability to the study. Moreover, it was adopted since the approaches are compatible with each other, while they provide consistent information for the study of frames (Kreuter 2021). For the scope of the study, frames are comprehended as subtractions that are used to organize or structure the meaning of the message (Davie 2014).

1.6. Aim of the Study and Research Questions

Through an extensive literature review (Reese 2007), it was revealed that the relationship between successes in sports and journalism has been researched (Lewis and Weaver 2015; Wenner 2003); however, the case of defeats has not been studied. On this ground, Lewis and Weaver (2015) suggest that the negative sports news should be examined, as it consists of "another area ripe for research" (p. 234). The purpose of this study was to investigate how the Greek media presented the defeats of the Greek men's basketball team in the Eurobasket championships by examining the decade 2007–2017. As suggested by Dumitriu (2013, p. 63), "international sports competitions constitute a resourceful context for analyzing the media framing of responsibility".

In particular, researchers examined the type of framing employed by the Greek print media, starting from the day following each game of the Greek national men's basketball team and continuing up to three days later. As suggested by Dimitrova et al. (2005), despite the large number of studies "there are still gaps in what we know about framing" (p. 25). Thus, the first research question concerned the use of a specific framing by the print media (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000):

RQ1: Does the primary frame of attribution of responsibility appear in the titles and the content of publications?

The second research question focused on the existence of differences in framing among the political publications and also between them and the sports newspapers. Therefore, the second research question was expressed as follows:

RQ2: Are there any differences in the specific framing (attribution of responsibility) among the political publications and also between them and the sports newspapers?

The third research question examined with whom and what the media linked the causes of the defeats:

RQ3: Regarding the defeats, on which causes does the content of the articles focus and with which factors and persons does the Media link the responsibility?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Method Selection

Content analysis was selected as the appropriate research method (Coombs et al. 2017; Entman 1993), which is frequently applied for research in journalism (D'Angelo 2019) since it can be applied to different aspects and types of messages (Weaver 2007). As a research method it is considered extremely flexible and has been widely used for a variety of research purposes and objectives, both quantitative and qualitative, and most, if not all, of the studies on framing and journalism focus on content analysis of media content (Hearns-Branaman 2020). White and Marsh (2006) have defined content analysis as "a systematic, rigorous approach to analyzing documents obtained or generated in the course of research" (p. 22). The articles from the print Media examined by the present research fall under this category. The specific analysis combines reliable findings in the quantitative part with the qualitative method, which is necessary for a deeper understanding of their meaning and interpretation, and this seems to be the ideal approach (Macnamara 2005; Villamar and Smith 2019). The constructivist (ontological and episte-mological) assumption of the researchers reinforces and justifies the qualitative part of the method (D'Angelo 2019).

2.2. Selection of Approach—Research Validity

Regardless of the approach employed, the reliability and validity of every study is largely dependent on the transparency in the export of the frames, so that they may be considered as "Media frames" instead of "researcher's frames" (Matthes and Kohring 2008, p. 260). Therefore, to avoid being found in front of a methodological "black box" (Matthes and Kohring 2008, p. 262), the present study employed a pluralistic approach, namely, a combination/triangulation of methods (Bryman 2017; Semetko and Valkenburg 2000; Willig 2015).

The deductive approach (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000), which can easily detect differences in framing between different media types, was employed in this study. In our case, the analysis unit was the publication, and the frames were known in advance and were derived from the literature. Specifically, content analysis examined whether in the articles under investigation, the predetermined primary frame of "attribution of responsibility" (Matthes and Kohring 2008, pp. 260–63), which has been repeatedly examined/checked in the literature, was presented.

The deductive approach is applied over time and is unreservedly suggested by many scholars (Camaj 2010; Dimitrova et al. 2005; Igartua et al. 2005; Rendon et al. 2019); Cacciatore et al. (2016) argued that after 40 years of research on framing, researchers are expected to "at least partially operate abductively and explore frames that previous research has indicated as applicable" (p. 14). In this case, it was applied to the field of sport journalism. The researchers, who are specialized both in media and in sports, had a clear idea of the types of frames that might be found in media texts (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000).

To satisfy the study objective, the frame was defined as the method by which the sports sections of the political newspapers, as well as the editorial office of the sports newspaper, investigate, decide, organize, and present the ideas, facts, and topics they cover (Davie 2014). The attribution of responsibility frame introduces an issue with a certain approach so as to attribute responsibility for the cause or its solution either to the State or to an individual or group (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000). Sports journalists, after defeats, link the responsibility with the coach, or with the players, or with the refereeing, and less often with other noncompetitive factors (Lewis and Weaver 2015; SDNA 2021; Newsbeast 2021). Attribution of responsibility is defined as a frame that emphasizes the assumption or attribution of responsibility for a defeat by/to an individual, or more persons.

The researchers also considered the advice of Matthes (2009) that the general frames cannot convey useful information and the term frame must be used carefully. In addition, they appraised/adopted the aspect/directive of Matthes and Kohring (2008), who pointed

out that it is critical that the frames, which are known in advance, be in line with the phenomenon under investigation.

Thus, with a clear/specific picture in mind of the usual types of frames found in media sports texts (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000), the use of a frame that was "tested/checked" in several previous surveys, that of "attribution of responsibility", was selected. This decision, as well as the careful description of the research process, is an essential element to convince the readers of the reliability and validity of the research (Downs 2002). Therefore, the audit trail of the study towards the findings and their extraction is considered necessary and will be reported in detail (Carcary 2009).

2.2.1. Material Selection and Recording Procedures

To accomplish the study's objectives, the material was collected from the newspaper archive of the library of the Municipality of Thessaloniki, Greece. The selection criteria of the newspapers were as follows: (a) to be a political or sports newspaper, (b) to be indexed in the municipal library of Thessaloniki with the availability of all the issues for the period 2007–2010, and (c) to have a wide circulation and readability. Based on the above criteria and in combination with the selection of newspapers for the global survey International Sports Press Survey (ISPS) 2011 (Panagiotopoulou 2013), the political newspapers "KATHIMERINI", "TA NEA", and "ETHNOS", as well as the sports newspaper «METROSPORT» were selected. In these four newspapers, 178 reports in total that referred to the defeats of the Greek men's basketball team, up to three days after each game, were identified. The corresponding newspapers were located in the archives, and the articles referring to the 20 defeats of the Greek national basketball team were retrieved. The texts were categorized according to each newspaper, but also by the chronological order by which they were published. The creation of quantitative analysis tables followed, and the procedure was completed with the qualitative analysis of the texts, thus applying a triangulation of methods to increase the validity of the research (Bryman 2017; Willig 2015).

2.2.2. Frame Measurements

To measure the apparent extent of the "attribution of responsibility" frame in the newspaper reports succeeding the national team defeats, a scale of 4 items was developed as follows: (a) was a player attributed the responsibility or was he blamed by the journalists? (b) was a coach attributed the responsibility or was he blamed by the media? (c) was an administrative agent attributed the responsibility or was he blamed? and (d) was a referee/secretariat/commissioner/other factor of the match (e.g., international federation, organizing authority) attributed the responsibility or was he blamed? At this point, it must be noted that there were no female coaches during that decade and there were no women journalists that signed the publications under study. In Greece, sports journalism is a stronghold of men (Spiliopoulos et al. 2020), and women's work is limited to covering unpopular sports. The encoder answered "yes" (1) or "no" (0). For a frame to be considered, there needed to be a positive answer (yes (1)) to at least one (or more) of the questions. A higher score (i.e., more positive responses) in the distribution of the scale of attribution of responsibility indicated a higher level of responsibility of the one who is accountable for causing the defeat (Pan and Kosicki 1993). In addition to the above, the selection of that particular frame was made because "in essence, frame analysis examines the selection and salience of certain aspects of an issue by exploring images, stereotypes, metaphors, actors, and messages" (Matthes 2009, p. 349) while, in addition, it aims to provide "more systematic (and) fine-grained knowledge" (p. 359).

2.2.3. Reliability Coding

To ensure coding reliability, two coders, who checked 20 randomly selected articles, five from each newspaper, were used. According to Lombard et al. (2002), intercoder reliability, or intercoder agreement, "is a measure of the extent to which independent judges make the same coding decisions in evaluating the characteristics of messages"

(p. 587). Cohen's *k* (Cohen 1960, pp. 39–40) was used to test the reliability/agreement, and the formula for the calculation is k = (Po − Pc)/(N − Pc), where N is the total number of judgments made by each encoder, Po is the observed agreement percentage randomly expected by the encoders, while Pc is the agreement percentage after discussion. The coders agreed for 17 texts, and 3 more decisions were made after discussion, resulting in k = (17 − 3)/(20 − 3) = 0.8235. According to Lombard et al. (2002, p. 600) and Coombs et al. (2017), values above 0.80 suggest high levels of agreement and are acceptable in most situations. Banerjee et al. (1999, p. 6) reinforce the above, stating that values greater than 0.75 can be considered to represent an excellent agreement.

3. Results

Prior to the results analysis, it is considered mandatory to clarify the language of the Greek sports texts. Therefore, it has to mentioned that the language itself, and especially the writing on sports, in this case of basketball, is filled with special terms and extensive borrowing of words mainly from the English language, which essentially constitute a "special dialect" (Androulakis 1997, p. 337; 2008). Thus, the journalistic discourse, and consequently the writing of sports news, due to the external interventions it has undergone over time, ends up being polyphonic and loaded with elements of intertextuality (Politis 2001, 2008). Hence, the titles of the print media are discerned for (war) metaphors, cliché phrases, elliptical sentences, grammatical and rhetorical forms, as well as metonyms, in order to state certain situations and actions (Xanthiotis et al. 2020), easily ascertained in the results analysis of the present research. This is why in many cases the title does not seem to be relevant to the text. This comprises common practice of the editorial office and is also a serious disadvantage of sports journalism. The titles are not usually suggested by the text authors; they are set by the editor-in-chief or the director of the Media, who has his own opinion on the facts.

3.1. The Attribution of Responsibility Frame

The first research question concerned the detection of the attribution of responsibility frame, which was found in all the print media under study, not only in the content but also in the titles of the articles. It was met 63 times out of the total 178 publications (titles and content) that were investigated, reaching 35.4% (Figure 1).
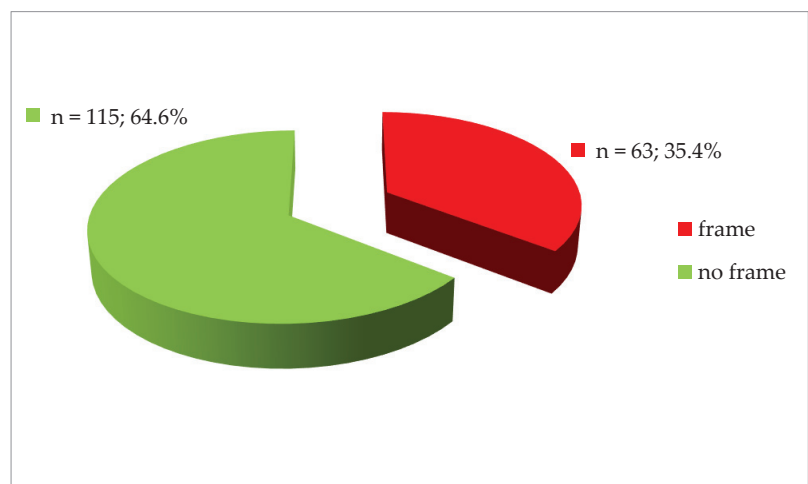
Figure 1. Appearance of the "attribution of responsibility" frame in titles/content (overall).

However, the day succeeding the game, the "attribution of responsibility" frame appeared in 45 of the 63 titles and content of articles or other reports, which accounts for 71.4% (Figure 2).
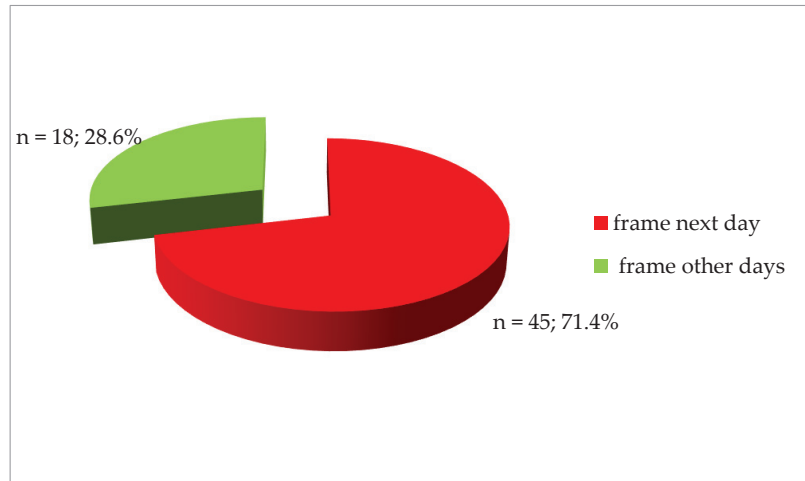
Figure 2. Appearance of the "attribution of responsibility" frame in the titles/content the day succeeding the game.

3.2. The Differences in Framing between the Newspapers

The second research question of the study concerned the detection of the differences in the articles' framing, between the political newspapers, as well as between them and the sports newspaper. Regarding the differences identified in framing, which were derived from the quantitative analysis, the attribution of responsibility frame was found mainly in the titles and the content of "METROSPORT" articles, both overall (n = 40, 63.5%) and on the day following the game (n = 33, 73.3%). In the political newspapers, it was met to a greater extent in the newspaper "TA NEA", both overall (n = 11, 17.5%) and the following day (n = 9, 20%), and to a smaller degree in "KATHIMERINI", overall (n = 4, 6.3%) as well as the day succeeding the game (n = 1, 2.25%). The newspaper ETHNOS was between the two political newspapers, with the above frame being found in the titles and content of its articles a total of eight times (2.7%), while on the day succeeding the game it was found twice (4.45%), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Appearance of the "attribution of responsibility" frame in the titles.

Newspaper	Frame Appearance Frequency (Overall)	Frame Appearance Frequency (the Day after the Game)
METROSPORT	40 63.5%	33 73.3%
KATHIMERINI	4 6.3%	1 2.25%
ETHNOS	8 12.7%	2 4.45%
TA NEA	11 17.5%	9 20%
TOTAL	63 100%	45 100%

Overall, the "attribution of responsibility" frame was found in more than six out of ten publications in the sports newspaper METROSPORT (63.5%); that is, ten times more than

the appeared frequency in KATHIMERINI (6.3%), five times more than the corresponding frequency in ETHNOS (12.7%), and four times over the percentage found in the newspaper TA NEA (17.5%). Furthermore, on the succeeding day of the game, it was detected in almost three quarters of the overall number of the articles in METROSPORT (73.3%), which accounts for triple times over the total number of all the other political newspapers articles. Specifically, the ratio of the publications where the "attribution of responsibility" frame was found in METROSPORT compared to KATHIMERINI was 33/1, compared to ETHNOS was 33/2, and compared to TA NEA was 33/9. Finally, an important difference that was found between the political publications is that in the newspaper TA NEA, the overall appearance of the frame under investigation was the same as the additive appearance in the other two political newspapers (11/12), while for the succeeding day of the match, the frame was found three times more often than in the other two newspapers additively (9/3).

3.3. Defeat Causes Focused on, and Agents and Individuals Blamed by the Media

The third research question examined the defeat causes that the content of the articles were focused on and the agents and individuals linked to relevant responsibilities by the Media. It has to be noted that, for the purposes of the present study, the titles of the newspapers have been translated by the authors, from the Greek language to the English language. In this regard, Figgou (2020) pointed out that "unavoidably, a translation involves the danger of losing subtleties of meaning" (p. 206). The qualitative analysis of the publications front-pages revealed that the causes and the responsibilities were linked with (the classification is made according to the significance order as traced in the reports):

(1)   The players' weaknesses in the game (METROSPORT 2007a).
(2)   The players' mistakes in the game (METROSPORT 2009b, 2017a).
(3)   The fatigue and the loss of strength by the athletes (KATHIMERINI 2017; METROSPORT 2009c; TA NEA 2007a).
(4)   The players' stress (METROSPORT 2013b).
(5)   The viruses that afflicted the players (ETHNOS 2007).
(6)   The losses of players caused by injuries (METROSPORT 2011).
(7)   The athletes' decision not to participate in the championship (KATHIMERINI 2011).
(8)   The lack of:
    a.   Focus of the basketball players in the game (METROSPORT 2013c, 2017c);
    b.   Faith in their abilities by the athletes (METROSPORT 2015);
    c.   Passion in their game (METROSPORT 2017b).
(9)   The coaches' mistakes (ETHNOS 2013; METROSPORT 2007b).
(10)   Bad refereeing (METROSPORT 2009a).
(11)   Off-field factors, such as:
    a.   The uproar in the stadium (METROSPORT 2007c);
    b.   The bad scheduling of the championship that deprived the players of rest (TA NEA 2007b);
    c.   Even in . . . superstitions! (METROSPORT 2007d; TA NEA 2015).
(12)   The wrong handlings by the Greek Basketball Federation administration members, such as:
    a.   The coach selection (METROSPORT 2013a);
    b.   Other decisions and actions both by its president George Vasilakopoulos[1] and by the general secretary Panagiotis Tsagronis[2], such as the improper scheduling/bad scheduling (TA NEA 2017).

3.4. Other Frames and the Framing Function

Although the purpose of the research was to study the existence of a specific framework, that of "attribution of responsibility", during the analysis the researchers constantly reflected that by applying the predefined frames, there was no assurance that other important frameworks that could emerge from an inductive analysis would not be omitted

(Matthes and Kohring 2008; Semetko and Valkenburg 2000). Thus, the existence of other frames was identified; they are presented here, in an effort to reduce the weaknesses of the research. An important finding was that in the articles that were published before the games, as a pre-announcement of them, no hypertonicity of Greek nationality was found, as it happened after the victories (ETHNOS 2005); even after the defeats, the reports praised Greekness. Furthermore, the coverage of the defeats suffered by the Greek national team, by the national teams of neighboring countries, such as FYROM[3], were not constrained by METROSPORT to the sporting event, but also referred to the national and political disputes of Greece with each country (e.g., Turkey and FYROM).

The other frames that were identified were the following: audience involvement (see uproar), an athlete's individual action (e.g., the praise of Antetokounmpo, Papaloukas[4]), goals and ambitions (such as qualifying for the national team), consequences (i.e., exclusion from the continuation of the games), human interest (e.g., the way the national team competed in order to choose an opponent for the next stage of the tournament (Vetakis 2009, p. 46), conflict (i.e., various disputes of the team), attention deflection and distraction (e.g., emphasis on wrong-doings or stealing of the ball), and health (focusing on athletes' health effects individually and over the team). Finally, through the coding of the attribution of responsibility frame, all four basic functions of the framework proposed by Entman (1993, p. 52; 2007) emerged, in relation to their nature (Camaj 2010).

These functions are as follows: (1) the problem definition, such as defeat/victory, (2) the diagnosing of causes that explain the reasons for qualifying or exclusion from the continuation of the games after a defeat/victory, (3) the moral judgments when there is criticism of the athletes' and coaches' performance, (4) the treatment recommendation by sports editors and media in order to deal with a situation, such as the removal of the coach or the attention that should be paid by the Greek Basketball Association in the forthcoming events.

4. Discussion

The purpose of this research was to investigate the framing of the Greek national men's basketball team defeats in the European championships in the decade 2007–2017, by the Greek Press. Towards this end, the content of 178 texts was located and analyzed in the light of the framing theory, in relation to (a) the primary frame of "attribution of responsibility", (b) the differences among the political newspapers as well as between the political and sports newspapers, and (c) the causes that the articles focused on and the agents and individuals where/with whom they linked the responsibilities. Moreover, as it emerged during the analysis in the journalistic texts, other frameworks were met as well, while the framing functions according to Entman (1993, 2007) were also found.

The first research question investigated whether the "attribution of responsibility" frame was observed/appeared in the journalistic articles. This frame was observed in all publications, especially the day succeeding a defeat. It is anticipated that, the succeeding day of a game, the journalists who covered it wrote their text immediately after its end, while they had still fresh memories and impressions, to criticize and evaluate the defeat in the media. The text of the reporting was then submitted for publication, in combination with the statements made by the coach and the players after the end of the match, both in the press conference and in the mixed zone. Frequently, players and coaches, in their account of the defeat, either took responsibility for the various situations that led them to the loss of the match or took their own responsibility for the negative end result, which journalists considered when writing texts/reports.

According to unpublished data of the International Sports Press Survey (ISPS) 2021, conducted in Greece, the coverage of a match published the next day covers a little less than the one-third of the total content of the sports pages in a political newspaper (28.12%) and is the primary "main factor" of the content of the articles. This explains the high presence of the "attribution of responsibility" frame, which was observed in all media texts, mainly the next day of the match.

As the days go by from the end of a game and as the next game approaches, the journalistic interest in a game decreases significantly. Therefore, the assessment of the defeat is not the dominant news element for the media. For this reason, the "attribution of responsibility" frame was found to be significantly reduced on the second and third day after the defeat (18.6%).

The articles published on a game's eve, and on the day of its conduct, include the preparation of the team for the (next) game, any absences of players, and especially its announcement. According to ISPS 2021 for Greece, the pre-announcement of matches covers 19.7% of the total content of the sports pages of a political newspaper and is the third "main factor" of their articles content. The importance of the game's pre-announcement is shown by another finding of the same study, as it constitutes the secondary "main factor" the succeeding day of a game, covering 14.75% of the newspaper material. Therefore, as the day of the game approaches, more space is devoted by the press to its pre-announcement, and therefore the appearance of the "attribution of responsibility" frame on the second and third day after the defeat is limited.

The "attribution of responsibility" frame emerged as a recurring pattern in journalistic texts, combining the audience's preferred interpretation, which is based on the media for news acquisition, as described by Gitlin (2003). The finding is consistent with Tewksbury and Scheufele's (2009) proposals that news on sports and events contains information and frames and reinforces the findings of Starke and Flemming (2017) and Kotsanti and Tsigilis (2020) on doping coverage in Germany and Greece, respectively. It is also supported by the findings of Dumitriu (2013) in a similar sports environment, the European Women's Handball Championship. It seems that the "attribution of responsibility" frame is, for Greece as well, the main strategy of the print media, which aims to influence the processes by which the public interprets and evaluates the issues raised (Ramadan and Prastya 2019) so as to consequently decide who is to blame for the negative results of the national basketball team (Dumitriu 2013).

In addition, the validity of the finding is enhanced by the satisfactory intercoder reliability found in Cohen's k = 0.8235 (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000), as well as by the careful and in-depth description of the "attribution of responsibility" frame (Downs 2002).

4.1. Differences in Coverage

The investigation of the existence of differences in the framing, between the political and sports newspapers as well as among the political newspapers, concerned the second research question. The differences identified are typical.

The attribution of responsibility frame was found mainly in the titles and in the content of "METROSPORT" sports newspaper articles, both overall and on the day following the game as well. In the political newspapers, it was met to a greater extent in the newspaper "TA NEA", both overall and the following day, and to a smaller degree in "KATHIMERINI", overall as well as the day succeeding the game. The results on the newspaper ETHNOS were placed between the other two political newspapers, with the above-mentioned frame being found in the titles and content of its articles eight times overall, while on the day succeeding the game, it was found two times.

Overall, the "attribution of responsibility" frame was found in more than six out of ten publications in the sports magazine METROSPORT (63.5%); that is, ten times more than the appeared frequency in KATHIMERINI, five times more than the corresponding frequency in ETHNOS, and four times over the percentage found in the newspaper TA NEA. Furthermore, on the day succeeding the match, it was detected in almost three quarters of the overall number of the articles in METROSPORT (73.3%), which accounts for triple times the total number of all the other political newspapers articles. Specifically, the ratio of the publications where the "attribution of responsibility" frame was found in METROSPORT compared to KATHIMERINI was 33/1, compared to ETHNOS was 33/2, and compared to TA NEA was 33/9. Initially, this can be explained by the kind of the publication, as it is a purely sports newspaper. As such, a sport newspaper can dedicate

multiple space both on its front page and on its internal pages, to highlight the issues of the Greek national basketball team. Usually, the result of the national team game is the central theme on the front page and the dominant theme on more than one internal page, with the quotations of several independent texts (articles). For example, in addition to the coverage of the game, there are special columns that deal exclusively with basketball as well as articles/commentary columns that escort the games. In these cases, captions over and under the articles, as well as those on the photos, along with the journalists' opinion, many of whom claim to be fans of the national team, may often include the context under investigation. On the contrary, political newspapers rarely devote space on the front page to host the result of a sport event, especially when it is unfavorable. Equally limited space is occupied by the game reporting on their internal pages. Consequently, the appearance of the "attribution of responsibility" frame is less often.

An important variation that was found between the political publications is that in the newspaper TA NEA, the frame under investigation was met in total as many times as in the other two newspapers additively (11/12), while in the next day of the game, the frame was met triple times compared to its appearance in the other two newspapers additively (9/3). This can be explained by the fact that the newspaper TA NEA had a special sport insert named "OMADA (TEAM)", with several pages dedicated to basketball and the national team games. Of course, the newspaper ETHNOS also had a special sport insert (ETHNOSPORT) in which the frame was found to a satisfactory degree (n = 8, 12.7%); however, not on the next day following the game (n = 2). This constitutes an opposing finding of the investigation and can be explained by the fact that the newspaper content was finalized early, the journalists had already delivered their articles and there was no time to analyze the match; thus, the analysis apparently was performed on the second or third day after the conduct of the game. This finding is consistent with Shoemaker and Vos (2009) argument that the journalists, as news gatekeepers, due to time and space constraints, select a certain number of stories for transmission, while rejecting others.

The common finding was that the newspapers always blamed someone for the loss of the victory. The "attribution of responsibility" frame in all four publications was basically heading in the same direction. However, in contrast to the political ones, the sports newspaper METROSPORT deepened the competing part and referred to the coach's Trinkeri selection of only one system to be applied by the team during the 2013 games. Furthermore, the accusations of the sports medium against the Greek Basketball Association administration for its selections before the championship were intense. On the contrary, only one political newspaper referred to the Hellenic Basketball Federation.

The findings are supported by Dumitriu (2013), who suggested that the coverage of the negative issues in the media "seems to be more rational, highlighting a more critical and argumentative reason". Furthermore, they are in line with the sports editors' principles of ethics for the practice of journalism "conscientiously and in good faith" (Statute of the Greek Sports Journalists Association, article 8, par. A and par. B), complying strictly with its basic principles, which are the independence and freedom of the press, to ensure the full information is provided to the citizens (Statute of the Journalists' Union of Athens Daily Newspapers, article 2).

4.2. The Focus of the Articles on the Defeat Causes and the Agents and Individuals the Responsibilities Were Linked with

The Media frame also invites people to use the information and concepts offered by the journalists to interpret the issues/topics they are concerned with (Tewksbury and Scheufele 2009). This explains the fact that to the larger extent, the attribution of responsibility to agents and individuals investigated by the third research question referred to the mistakes of coaches, players, and referees. To a lesser extent, responsibilities were linked with the players' illnesses and absences, and with the improper scheduling of the host country as well as with the erroneous actions of the Greek Basketball Association administration prior to the event.

This diversity arises because illnesses and absences were not encountered in every defeat; however, the responsibilities for the loss of the victory were linked with players, coaches, and referees every time after the defeat. All these accusations have one thing in common: they were made by the journalists on the day immediately after the end of the games, and the reports they prepared were published in the newspapers the succeeding day. On the contrary, the accusations against the host country for bad scheduling, which led to the exhaustion of the Greek athletes due to fatigue, appeared in reports at the end of the championships, and these complaints were made by the athletes themselves. Finally, the statement/evaluation of the administration's actions was performed according to the judgment of the journalists, also a posteriori and as a consequence of the negative results. With regard to the framing of the Media in relation to the "attribution of responsibility" frame, Dumitriu (2013) has suggested "a personalization effect, which is addressed mainly to individual players" (p. 79).

As the responsibility for provoking or solving social problems could be attributed to the individual (athlete or coach), to members of the Greek Basketball Federation administration, or to the organizing authority, when studying the texts it was observed that a considerable part of them link the responsibility for the defeats with specific individuals following confrontational journalism (Johnson-Cartee 2005). Many of the published articles were not limited to the transmission of facts and commentary, but took a clear stance, in favor of one side, or against the other. There were articles that blamed the defeats on the coaches, and on specific athletes too, attributing various derogatory descriptions to them, or asking for their removal from the national team.

For example, the basketball player Papaloukas was characterized as "prone to mistakes", and his teammate Diamantidis as "hesitant", while the team's coach, Trinchieri[5], was blamed for his decision to choose only one system that the team applied during the games throughout the tournament, and the issue of dismissal was directly raised (ETHNOS 2013). In the case of athletes, the findings are consistent with the research of Lewis and Weaver (2015), who noticed that the performance of athletes in the games interests the sports audience and is an important element of journalists' stories, while in the case of coach Trinikeri, they are in line with the findings of Dumitriu (2013) that the media with the practice of personalization builds up "scapegoats" when negative results occur.

In some articles, the attribution of responsibilities concerned the refereeing of the matches, which was accused of favoring the opposing teams. The host country was also blamed for bad scheduling of the games, which led to lack of rest for the Greek athletes, meaning the national team did not have the necessary breaks needed to relax, unlike its opponents. As suggested by D'Angelo (2019), frames, through continuous media coverage, offer to the audience interpretive schemes for the comprehension of the articles. This seems to have been performed by the Greek journalists who covered the games for their newspapers.

Furthermore, in 2007, an article that blamed the defeat on the uproar that existed on the court was recorded. This finding became more understandable in the football World Cup that followed in 2010 in South Africa, when the sound of the famous vuvuzela disturbed the athletes (Bairaktaris 2014). Later, this event led the Federation International of Basketball Associations (FIBA) to ban vouvouzelas from the Mundobasket Championship held in Turkey in 2018 (STAR 2018).

In addition, the alleviation of responsibilities for the national team was via the illnesses faced by the players, and also the absences of some of so-called "key members", which forced the Greek national team to play in the championship with significant shortcomings (METROSPORT 2007c). The attribution of responsibilities also included the Greek Basketball Federation administration and especially the president and the general secretary, who were accused of making wrong choices regarding the selection of coach Trinkeri, and in general of bad planning in view of the games. This finding is also supported by Dumitriu (2013), who identified a corresponding imputation of responsibility to the Ro-

manian Handball Federation, for the defeat of the women's national team in the 2011 European Championship.

The two-step model of framing (Scheufele 2004), in which it is stated that frames constitute methods that the sports editors choose in order to highlight and disseminate specific information on issues, initially by provoking and then by maximizing the interest of the audience, interprets the case of the athletes, of the coach, and of the executives of the Association administration as well. Although the study did not investigate the impact on the sports audience, it cannot be ignored that Media framing in the first phase affects the awareness of the public, while in the second it affects the way information is processed (Davie 2014). Thus, it has an impact on the judgments, attitudes, opinions, feelings, and decisions of the audience, which is the recipient of the journalistic messages.

Especially in the case of athletes, since it has been documented that the frames aim to change attitudes and consequently behavior (Nelson and Oxley 1999), athletes' statements and the attribution of responsibilities by them to noncompetitive factors could affect the thoughts and feelings of the audience, and hence the degree of sympathy towards them (Eagly and Chaiken 2007). The fact that journalists have published athletes' statements linking responsibility with noncompetitive factors could potentially affect the way that the audience will react and/or make subsequent evaluations of the sports protagonists (Price et al. 1997).

In conclusion, the focus of the articles that linked the responsibility for defeat to a large number of actors and individuals "explains the team's failure, as cumulus of all these negative inputs" (Dumitriu 2013, p. 79).

4.3. Other Frames and Framing Functions

The hypertonicity of Greek nationality after the victories of the National team, the reference of METROSPORT to the national disputes of Greece with respective countries (Turkey and FYROM), relates to the primary frame of culture/nationalism, which was identified in the research of Alabaster (2017), which was conducted in Japan. In the sports field, and particularly in the sport of basketball, the specific frame was found as a primary frame in the research of Ličen and Billings (2013), who examined the framing of the Slovenian journalists' televised speech for their national team, in the organization of Eurobasket 2007. A similar trend was observed in a study regarding basketball games as well, by Ličen and Topič (2008), for the televised speech on the Euroleague organization at the level of professional clubs, uttered by both the Slovenian and the Croatian journalists.

The frames, which were also found to exist in sports journalism in Greece and which have been identified by other researchers in journalistic texts (Coombs et al. 2017; Dimitrova et al. 2005; Mikelonis 2017; Robeers 2019), fall under the following categories: (a) "public participation" (effect of noise from the crowd on the stadium stands), (b) "individual action" related to the performance of athletes in the game, (c) "goals and ambitions" for the continuation of the games or the future of the national team, (d) "consequences" from the exclusion of the remaining games, (e) "human interest", such as the team's deliberate performance in selecting an opponent in the next game, (f) "conflict", such as the various disputes that arose in the team after conflicting statements by athletes (TA NEA 2017, p. 15), (g) "deviation and distraction" from the players during the match that leads to mistakes, and (h) "health", such as illnesses and injuries of athletes with effects on the team's performance. The four framing functions (Entman 2007) have also been found in previous sports media studies, such as those of Kozman (2017), Lewis and Weaver (2015), and Smith and Pegoraro (2020).

According to the literature review, the use of frames is intentional, as media content producers offer to the public preferred interpretations (Entman 1993) of the news, as opposed to the audience who is unaware of their existence (Tewksbury and Scheufele 2009). However, most of the Greeks sports journalists are not university graduates of Journalism Departments so they lack theoretical/academic knowledge of the frame functions (Matsiola et al. 2022; Spiliopoulos 2007). The professional experience of the first researcher

led to the conclusion that they "feel"/"sense" them more empirically, rather than being aware of or perceiving them, which contradicts the literature. The Greek journalists do not intentionally use frames/framing, they do it empirically, or rather, instinctively, as this is a practice of the editorial room and is taught by the older journalist to the younger.

As a future study subject, it would be important to compare the coverage approaches by the Press to the successes and failures of the Greek national men's basketball team, and also to expand the research to other popular team sports, such as football. In addition, the research should include the morphological characteristics (extent) and the practice (tone) of the coverage. Moreover, by examining articles in digital media, which in recent years tend to constitute the majority, the research could lead to safer conclusions regarding the subject of the study, in the above or any other predefined frameworks, as encountered in the present study. It is also proposed to investigate more analytically the operational mechanisms of framing, as well as the inductive coding of articles, to determine the kind of frames that may arise (Bell and Hartman 2018; Semetko and Valkenburg 2000). Finally, research on the impact of framing on the audience, which was outside the scope of the present work, should be included in future research in order to gain the most integrated insight of the subject under investigation.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, "attribution of responsibility" is a common phenomenon in journalism, and a basic (primary) frame in the media, forged in the editorial room (D'Angelo 2019). For this reason, it was chosen to be examined in the present study, which proved that the phenomenon is also observed in sports journalism, in all of the print media under study. This finding agrees with the study on doping by Kotsanti and Tsigilis (2020) in Greece, but also with other international research, as mentioned in the theoretical section of the study (Carey and Mason 2016; Harrison and Boehmer 2020; Semetko and Valkenburg 2000), and is an important finding for the field of sports journalism in general. Sports journalists are often accused of being/seen as "cheerleaders" of the team and not as serious as other journalists; even the kind of news they deal with is characterized as soft compared to the hard news of political reporting (English 2017).

The articles that were studied showed that the journalists chose to frame the defeats by attributing responsibilities primarily to the players, the coaches, the Federation administration, and the host country. On a second level, the responsibility was linked with the players' illnesses and injuries ("health" frame), and with external, in relation to the competition, factors such as the unbearable noise on the field from the vuvuzela ("public participation" frame). The ascertainment of the attribution of responsibility frame in all the studied media suggests, on the one hand, the importance and potential impact of sports culture on the framing of news issues (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000), while on the other hand, the presence of the other frames ("individual action", "goals and ambitions", "consequences", "human interest", "conflict"), as well as the framing functions (Entman 1993, 2007), is suggested, in the international literature, to guide the audience in preferable interpretations (Lewis and Weaver 2015).

Nevertheless, the general evaluation of the publications related to basketball in Greece should be made with caution, since the reporters of the specific sport are characterized as "Masons" in the slang of Greek sports editors. This is appointed to them in the sense that "with a conscious choice in the interest of basketball" they act as members of a "stoa" (Apodytiriakias 2016), hiding many of the wrongdoings. In the harsh occasions or in the cases that according to their personal judgment are perceived as "attacks" in the sport, they unite, creating ad hoc alliances in order to protect it (Bourlakis 2019). This alludes to the "Bedouin Syndrome" (Dunning et al. 1986, p. 230)[6], and as a phenomenon or as a pattern of behavior, it is particularly encountered in the Greek basketball reporters; therefore, they are perceived by the sports audience as acrobats between (hall of) fame (https://doubleteam.gr/hall-of-fame/ accessed on 20 February 2022) and (hall of) shame (https://doubleteam.gr/hall-of-shame/ accessed on 20 February 2022). This uniqueness

regarding Greek basketball journalists is in accordance with the stereotypes of other sports journalists (English 2017), but perhaps in a worse way.

The present study employed the predefined "attribution of responsibility" frame to investigate whether it existed in the texts examined. This would involve a relative limitation, as Matthes and Kohring (2008) have identified and warned about, if the research did not identify other important frames or did not identify the four basic framing functions as posed by Entman (1993, 2007) and as met in other studies (Kozman 2017; Lewis and Weaver 2015; Smith and Pegoraro 2020). The researchers had a clear idea of the probable types of frames present in the articles, and although they chose to investigate the primary frame of the "attribution of responsibility", at the end they did not overlook other equally or less important frames (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000), thus drastically decreasing this limitation.

Notes

[1] George Vasilakopoulos was the president of the Greek Basketball Federation.
[2] Panagiotis Tsagronis was the General Secretary of the Greek Basketball Federation.
[3] This is the country with the current name Republic of North Macedonia, as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) was renamed with the Prespa agreement on 12 June 2018, a name which it used in the event studied in this paper.
[4] Giannis Antetokounmpo and Theodoros Papaloukas were basketball players of the Greek National Team in 2009 Eurobasket Championship
[5] Andrea Trinchieri was the National Team coach in the 2013 Eurobasket Championship.
[6] As "Bedouin Syndrome" in football, Paul Harrison (1974) refers to the tendency to form ad hoc alliances according to the principles: a friend's friend is a friend, an enemy's enemy is a friend, an enemy's friend is an enemy, a friend's enemy is an enemy.

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Artificial Intelligence and Journalism: Current Situation and Expectations in the Portuguese Sports Media

João Canavilhas

Department of Communication, Philosophy and Politics, University of Beira Interior, 6200-001 Covilhã, Portugal; jc@ubi.pt

Abstract: With an important presence in various sectors of activity, Artificial Intelligence has also reached journalism, mostly in the field of natural-language processing, in the detection of informational trends or in the automatic production of texts. The fact that sport is one of the first to test AI is not a coincidence: it is a subject in which there is a lot of information online and where data is essential, so it is simpler to resort to natural language processing to transform them in texts with little or no human intervention; this work sought to understand if Artificial Intelligence is already used in Portuguese sports media, but also in mainstream media sports sections, whether they are newspapers, radios, TVs or online natives. A survey was sent only to decision-makers, that is, editors and coordinators. The study seeks to understand to what extent journalists expect AI to help journalism, what are the greatest difficulties of its use and what threats it represents. We can conclude that Portuguese sports journalism is aware of the potential of AI, although for now it is not used in newsrooms due to economic and professional constraints.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; journalism; sports; newsrooms; Portugal

1. Introduction

The so-called "perfect storm" (Jukes 2013) experienced by journalism in the last 15 years is the result of the simultaneity of three phenomena: a technological revolution, the emergence of new unconventional information platforms and a global economic recession.

Plunged into an unprecedented crisis, media companies were forced to make spending cuts that, depending on the situation, took drastic forms. TVs closed some of their channels, newspapers suppressed paper editions by going exclusively digital, and in general, all media companies laid off professionals.

To compensate these cuts in human resources, some companies turned to technologies, because one of the goals of their introduction is to explore new opportunities (Hannan and Freeman 1984): and this is where Artificial Intelligence comes in. The possibility that some human activities can be done by machines, with economic and time gains, places AI as good alternative to answer the crisis that affects the sector, putting journalism in the fourth industrial revolution (Schwab 2016); this potential may worry journalists because it could mean more job cuts, but the truth is that AI can make their work faster, freeing them from routine tasks so produce articles with more quality (Galily 2018).

The use of AI in journalism can occur in the various stages of the news production process, from the search of news trends, (Steiner 2014), to the collection and organization of information (Diakopoulos 2019), the automatic production of texts (Carlson 2015; Lokot and Diakopoulos 2016) or the personalized distribution through recommendation systems (Helberger 2019). For this very reason, the vast field of application of AI has aroused the interest of journalists themselves, who in some countries positively accept its use in newsrooms (Thurman et al. 2017; Schapals and Porlezza 2020) not seeing it as a threat to their work (De la Torre 2020).

Although the interest in this area is growing, its use is still quite small. In part, because the implementation of AI projects is associated with investments, one of the areas

most affected in periods of crisis; moreover, because there is a relative lack of knowledge regarding its potential, both among journalists and decision-makers. In this work we seek precisely to know what directors and editors of sports media think about AI: the choice of this sample is important because their decisions influence the way organizations face the adaptation of new technologies (Westphal et al. 1997). Our aim is to draw the current scenario in the adoption of AI in Portuguese sports newspapers, but also to understand what the expectations of these decision-makers regarding the use of AI in sports media are.

To this end, the paper seeks to answer three research questions. The first one seeks to know if the Portuguese sports media already use Artificial Intelligence. Knowing empirically that the usage is still low, as it is in other countries, the next question seeks to know in which kind of activities AI is used. Finally, the third research question tries to understand how decision-makers perceive the future support that IA can provide to sports journalism.

To contextualize the subject and answer these questions, this work begins by addressing the specificities of sport as a thematic area of journalism, also presenting the sports media offering in the country where the study took place: Portugal. In the next point, a brief historical review about the uses of AI in sports journalism is made with the purpose of presenting some fields in which it can be used, but also to justify the options used in the closed questions of the survey.

2. Specialized Journalism: The Case of Sports

Specialization in journalism can occur in two dimensions: in the type of medium (press, radio, television, Web) or in the content (Culture, Sports, etc.). About contents, the part that interests the scope of this paper, specialized journalism can be defined as that whose process of collection, processing and distribution of information concerns a specific area of journalism (Romano 1984).

Journalistic specialization is not a recent phenomenon: it was born after the Industrial Revolution, thanks to the technological advances that led to the increase of print runs to meet the growing demand for information (Álvarez Fernández and Aguilera 1989). In the first moment, newspapers tried to organize themselves into thematic sections to respond to the most demanding public, and this solution ended up working for decades. With the appearance of radio and television, the press was forced to look for weapons to fight against faster media and one of the solutions was to increase specialization to meet the audience's demands. Thus, specialized publications appeared, initially dedicated mainly to Culture, but later extended to Sports and many other areas.

The birth of the specialized press is, therefore, directly related to the emergence of audiences interested in specific themes and more demanding in relation to the rigor and depth as these themes should be reported (Berganza Conde 2005). With the emergence of online information and globalization, these audiences have gained an even greater scale, reinforcing the role of specialized newspapers and magazines.

Journalistic specialization necessarily leads to an increase in the quality of the final product because the journalists are experts in the field and the audience to whom the content is addressed is knowledgeable about these matters; however, sports journalism seems to be a special case as it is considered a soft form of journalism because it is dedicated to secondary issues and has little influence on society (Boyle 2017). Despite this, the importance of sports journalism is growing both in scale and intensity (Real 1998). In the first case with an impact on commercial success: in Portugal, the number of daily sports newspapers (A Bola, Record and O Jogo) is almost identical to the number of mainstream newspapers (DN-Diário de Notícias, Correio da Manhã, JN-Jornal de Notícias and Público). The case of television is also illustrative: the country has four generalist channels (SIC, RTP, TVI and CMTV) and three sports channels (SportTV, Eleven and Canal11); it should also be noted that the presence of sports, especially soccer, on the generalist channels is increasing and that the largest sports clubs in the country also have their own TV channels.

In part, the criticism directed at sports journalism is more related to the commentary than to the activity itself. The growing presence of opinion-makers on television, and the heated discussions that occur there because they are representing clubs, is one of the reasons for this decrease in the prestige of sports journalism, but the truth is that these commentators are not specialists. Another common criticism is the association of newspapers to certain clubs, a situation that would condition their evaluation, but this situation is similar in other areas without the same criticism. In fact, the similarities between sports journalism and other specialties are more than the journalists themselves admit (Boyle 2006), but because it is a sport, it ends up involving more emotions (Real 1998).

Regardless of all the criticism, sports journalism is an activity whose production and distribution process are identical to that of general journalism, and so are its technical needs, being sometimes more demanding due to the growing variety of existing sports.

3. Sports Journalism and Artificial Intelligence

The excess of information received in newsrooms and/or the lack of human resources has led journalism to look for solutions to maintain its information flow, despite the cuts in the newsrooms. One of the solutions found was the automatic production of texts, also called "algorithmic journalism" (Dörr 2016) "robot journalism" (Kim and Kim 2018) or "automatic journalism" (Graefe 2016).

Regardless of the name by which this process is known, we are talking about the use of computer systems to transform structured data into texts, and that's why robot journalism is in use mainly in areas where data is a determining factor, such as Economics and Sports (Dörr 2016). The case of sports is especially appetizing because there is a lot of statistical data to feed the algorithms (Lewis et al. 2019) and where it is possible to use a variety of templates easily adaptable to the results (van Dalen 2012); hence, it is not surprising that sports journalism has pioneered the use of Artificial Intelligence in the process of news production.

3.1. Journalist's Perceptions about IA

Although the scientific production on Artificial Intelligence in journalism has increased in the last four years, studies on journalists' perceptions regarding the use of AI are still scarce. For this work we selected some studies that have sought answers to questions such as those in this paper.

In a study with 10 journalists, three of which were sports journalists, Thurman et al. (2017) found that professionals did not like the texts produced by the software, with one sports journalist pointing out the lack of analysis, context, and expert quotes. Despite this, sports journalists considered that AI will be a good aid for their work, giving as an example the data processing to identify subjects with interest or the increase in the speed of content production.

In another study, this time with a sample of 366 Spanish journalists, Túñez-López et al. (2018) sought the opinion of these professionals regarding the use of AI in journalism. In the parts that are of interest to this work we highlight the recognition by journalists that the application of AI will allow for increased production, decreasing production costs. Still, most say that AI could be applied in news distribution, while only 21.3% mention its usefulness in content production; furthermore, noteworthy is the ease in data processing, an option pointed out by 30% of respondents.

In a report produced by the London School of Economics and Political Science (Beckett 2019), researchers interviewed 71 professionals from 32 countries, including Portugal, and concluded that journalists believe that AI can help them produce more and better information, thus helping in the economic sustainability of the media and regaining trust with the public. Despite this, respondents recognize that the implementation of AI implies heavy investments, both in emerging technologies and human resources, which hinders the process. Among the many data collected, we highlight those that coincide with the present study. About the advantages of using AI, the reasons most mentioned were to make

journalists' work more efficient (68%), to deliver more relevant content to users (45%) and to improve business efficiency (18%). Regarding the future, respondents expect AI to help journalists in data extraction and information gathering, automatic content production and personalized content distribution. A note should also be made that respondents consider the collaboration of universities in the development processes of AI in the media to be fundamental.

In a recent study, Lara-González et al. (2022) interviewed 21 professionals from various Spanish media and concluded that in 50% of the cases AI is already used, although mostly in experimental projects related to trend forecasting and decision making, content generation and development of tools to support journalistic work. Regarding the future, the interviewees consider that AI will help process large amounts of data, which will help both in the search for trends and in the fight against misinformation and will also be a support for journalists, who will be able to free themselves from routine tasks to instead devote themselves to research.

The last reference is a study developed in four countries (the USA, UK, Germany and Spain), in which Noain-Sánchez (2022) interviewed journalists, media experts, and academics about the use of AI. Among the various conclusions, there is the recognition that journalists and the media can benefit from AI: the former because they are freed from repetitive and routine tasks, and the latter because they gain efficiency, producing more with fewer human resources. Regarding the areas in which AI should be applied, the interviewees highlight automated content production and personalized distribution. As for the future, the interviewees emphasize the obligation to always have human beings supervising the content produced by the algorithms and stress the need for universities that train journalists to teach the principles of AI.

3.2. AI in Sports Journalism: Some Experiences

One of the first experiments in the field of sports news automatic production occurred in 2010, the year that The Big Ten Network launched a service using software from Narrative Science (Lohr 2011) that automatically produced baseball news using statistical data (Latar 2018).

Still in the field of automated production, in 2016, the Associated Press (AP) started covering Minor League Baseball (MLB), tracking the results of 142 teams spread across 13 state leagues. Instead of the hundreds of journalists it would take, AP turned to Wordsmith software from Automated Insights to automate news production based on the statistical data received. To make the automated texts make sense, the AP's sports editorship tested the software for a year (McCormick 2016).

But the use of Artificial Intelligence does not only happen in automatic text production, although this is the one that has had more visibility.

In Brazil, the portal UOL has been using AI in several areas of journalism and in the field of sports. Since the end of 2017, they are producing news using a robot, but AI also helps choosing the most searched words (Google Trends) to use in the news and in the titles produced by journalists, in the places where videos and photos should enter in online news, and even in the best times to publish or republish the news.

Comment moderation has been another area where AI has been used, and sports is probably the section where there are the most comments. In 2019, the Spanish newspaper El Pais implemented an online system where comments started to be watched by the Perspective API, a free application developed by Jigsaw. If someone posts a comment considered "toxic," the system warning the author to change the text, not publishing until this occurs. In parallel, they used a system to analyze sentiment and look for toxicity relationships between authors, texts, and comments (Delgado 2019).

Also in 2020, Reuters, together with the company Symthesia, launched the first fully automated news summarization service driven by a virtual and programmable presenter, but with a human-like image. The content included videos, photos, live game data, and commentary, without any human intervention. (Chandler 2020).

Back to automatic text production, the Dutch local media group NDC, which in 2021 started using robots in the production of sports news related to amateur soccer, proposed to cover 60,000 games in a season. To achieve this goal, NDC turned to Swedish technology company United Robots: the company has developed an algorithm based on crowdsourcing that combines structured data provided by soccer associations with information sent by coaches or officials in response to a message sent by the system. NDC believes that the automatic production of texts about amateur soccer will make it possible to cover games that generally lack media attention, which will attract an audience for free content that will in time become subscribers (Rizzoli 2021).

This set of experiments is just a small sample of what Artificial Intelligence already does in sports journalism, but what is the situation in Portugal? That's what we will see next.

4. Methodology

This paper seeks to find out whether AI is used in Portuguese sports media, what are the biggest obstacles to its use, and what are the expectations of the decision-makers. Three research questions were prepared: RQ1: Do Portuguese sports media already use Artificial Intelligence? RQ2: In what kind of activities? RQ3: How can AI help journalism in the future?

Methodologically, we use a survey, a technique composed of a set of processes that aims to obtain data based on the information provided by a representative sample of the object of study (Cea D'Ancona 1992; Bosh and Torrente 1993). First of all, a survey of the Portuguese sports media decision makers was carried out. Twenty-five media and one news agency were identified: general information newspapers (Correio da Manhã, Diário de Notícias, Expresso, Jornal de Notícias, Jornal I, Público), sports newspapers (A Bola, O Jogo, Record), radio stations (Antena 1, Rádio Renascença, TSF), generalist televisions (RTP, SIC, TVI, CMTV), sports televisions (Canal 11, Eleven Sports, SportTV), native online (Bancada, pt, Futebol 365, Maisfutebol, Observador, Sapo, ZeroZero) and the news agency LUSA.

The questionnaire, which used some options previously tested in the London School of Economics and Political Science report (Beckett 2019) was divided into four parts, A hybrid model was chosen, with groups of closed questions, and using Likert scales, although some answers were not used in this work. The first group of three questions was related to the characteristics of the participants, namely gender, age, and the media in which they work. The second group of multiple-choice questions sought to find out whether AI is used in the media and, if so, in what activities, since when and for what purpose. The third group of questions used Likert scales to find out to what extent editors think AI can help journalism, and ten activities that are part of the news production process were suggested. The fourth and last group of questions, again a closed multiple choice, sought to find out the obstacles to the implementation of AI in sports, but also the editors' expectations regarding its use.

Sample

This work is an exploratory investigation, which does not intend to reach generalizable conclusions, but rather to contribute to consolidate the scientific production on the subject. We chose to collect information from media editors and coordinators because they are the decision-makers, i.e., the ones that advise publishers on technology strategies and this is a study that seeks to know the current situation, but also to anticipate what might happen in the future. The contacts were collected from the media websites and reaching a universe of 55 potential participants. The emails were sent between September and October 2021. One address rejected the emails, one of the respondents declined the invitation for "not knowing anything about new technologies" and two were general emails from the publication and no response was obtained. Whenever possible, editors who did not reply to the emails were also contacted through social networks. The universe was thus reduced to 51 contacts from which 32 responses were obtained (response rate: 62.7%).

A first observation is that women (9.4%) are still under-represented in sports journalism, especially among the decision-makers; this data is worth mentioning because nowadays women are already the majority of journalism students. In terms of age (Figure 1), groups above 40 years old total about 72%, which is not strange given that the respondents are editors/directors, positions that are rarely occupied at the beginning of a career.
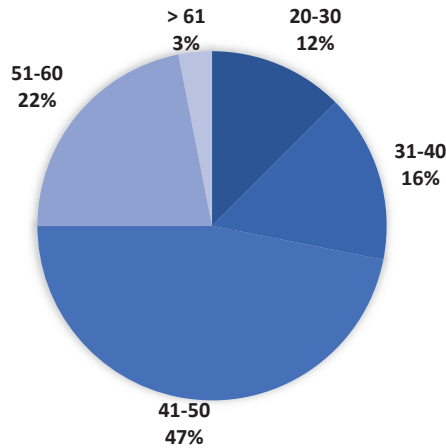
Figure 1. Age distribution.

All media present a similar age distribution, which contradicted expectations as it was expected that online media would have a much lower average age.

In the answers by media (Figure 2), sports television (28.1%) stands out, followed by sports newspapers (25%) and native online publications (18.8%), in the latter case because they are mostly sports websites.
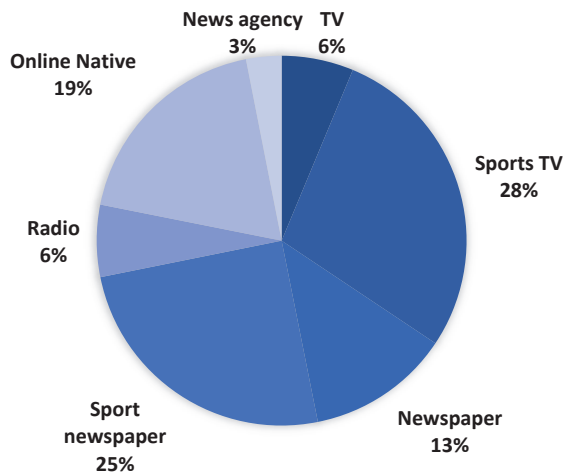
Figure 2. Media distribution.

These data are considered normal because we are talking about specialized sports media, having, therefore, a greater number of editors: usually, in the mainstream media, there is only one editor.

5. Results and Discussion

The first question sought to know to what extent the Portuguese sports media, or the sports editors of the generalists, use Artificial Intelligence. The answers show that only in 34.4% of the cases this already happens. Questioned about the activities in which it is used (Figure 3), 54.5% answered that it is in archive search, 45.5% in data processing, and 36.4% in the automatic production of texts.
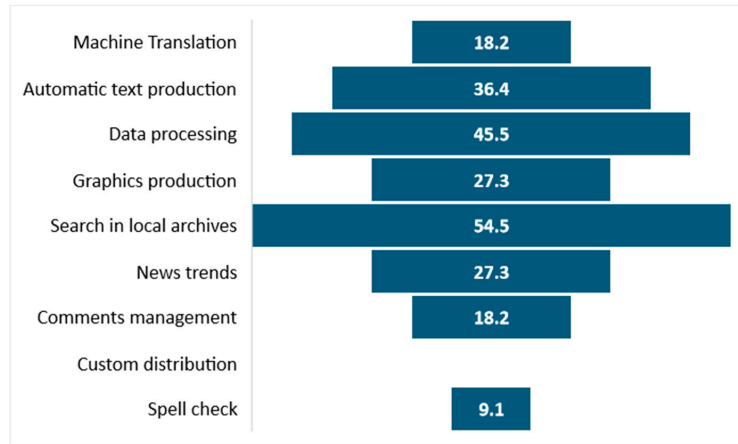
Figure 3. AI uses in the newsrooms.

The fields in which AI is most used in Portugal are considered of low complexity and have been on the market for many years. The third one—the automatic production of text—is more demanding and has one of the most successful uses.

Since it is an anonymous survey, we cannot link the answers to a specific media, only to their typology. Even so, it is possible to verify that online native users are the ones who most use AI in newsrooms, especially for the automatic production of texts; it should also be noted that only one mainstream media claim to use AI. The first use of AI in Portuguese journalism seems to date from 2010 and started in a newspaper. The first use of algorithms for automatic production of texts occurred in 2015 in a native online, however there are more recent experiences (2019 and 2021) in sports newspapers.

When asked about the reasons that led to the adoption of Artificial Intelligence (Figure 4), the most mentioned were saving time and making the journalists' work more efficient. The answers confirm trends obtained in previous studies (Thurman et al. 2017; Schapals and Porlezza 2020) and prove that the use of AI seeks to increase productivity.

Looking for a correlation between the uses of AI and the reasons for its use we find that: (1) machine translation is associated with timesaving, automatic production of texts, research (news trends and archives); (2) automatic spelling correction of texts are associated with the more efficient work of journalists; (3) the production of graphics is associated with the delivery of more relevant content. Interestingly, audience involvement in the news process appears associated with almost all uses.

Finally, participants were asked about the importance of AI in supporting journalism, using a scale from 1 (not important) to 10 (very important). The average achieved is 7.2, with a mean deviation of 1.5. In terms of age (Figure 5), the group that gives most importance to IA is those over 61, but this result is misleading because the sample only had one participant of that age. Thus, the age group 31–40 is the one that most recognizes the importance of AI in journalism and the most skeptical are the age group 51–60, though the difference is not significant.
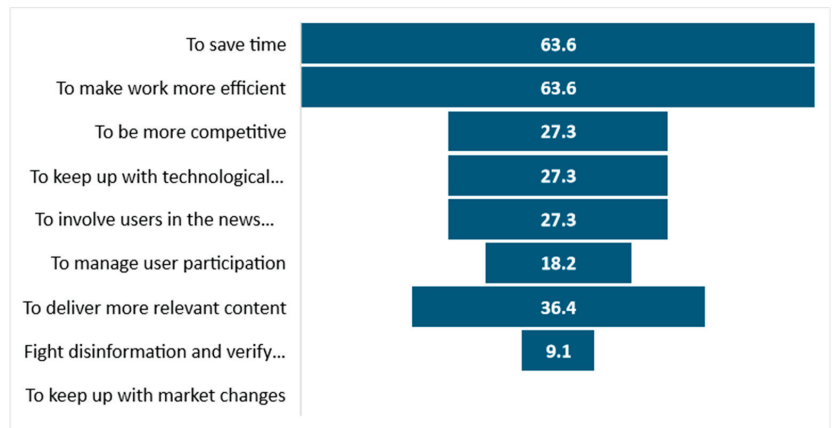
Figure 4. Reasons to the use of AI in the media.
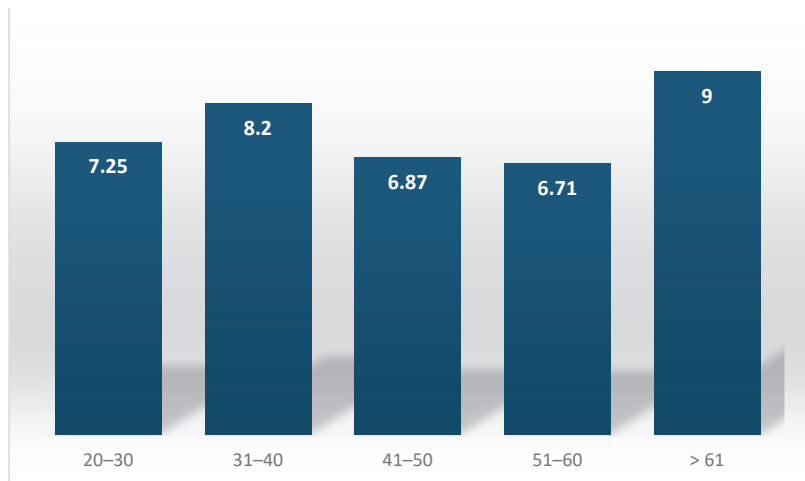
Figure 5. How AI can help journalistic work (scale: From 1 to 10).

In the analysis by media (Figure 6), those who most value the role of AI in journalism are native online media professionals (8.17), followed by news agencies, but we should not overestimate this second fact since there is only one news agency; this trend is natural because online natives are the media where technology has the strongest presence in the entire production process.

The results are within expectations since online natives are also the ones who use AI the most. Another interesting fact is that editors of specialized media value AI more than journalists of mainstream media. In the case of TV, the average is 6.8 versus 3.5, while in print it is 7 versus 6.75.

The participants were also asked about how they foresee AI helping journalism in the future (Figure 7).
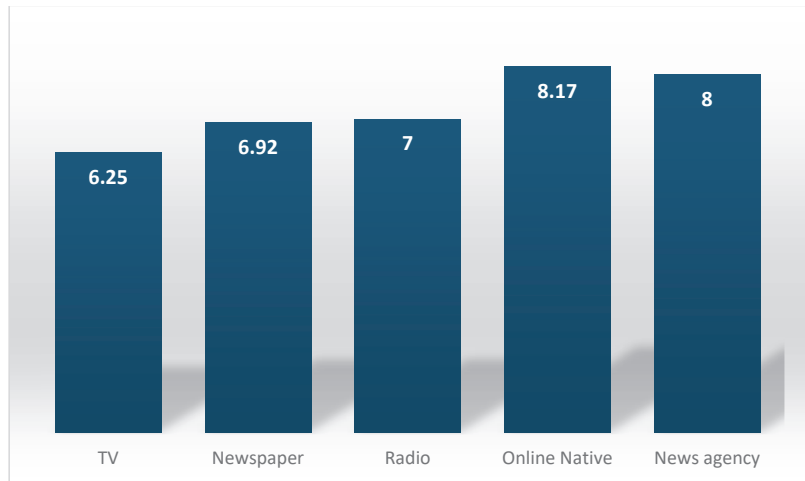
Figure 6. How AI can help journalistic work (scale 1 to 10).
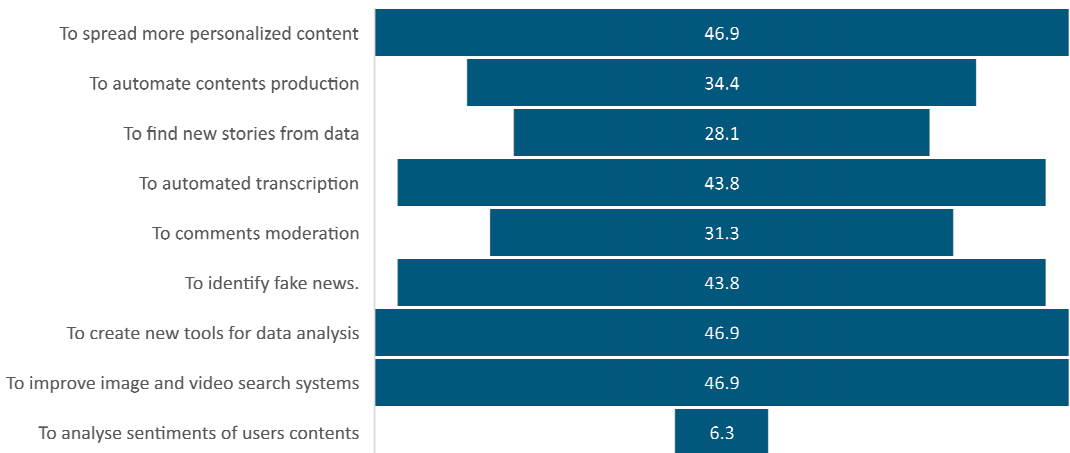
Figure 7. How IA can help journalism in the future.

Having this expectation in relation to the use of AI, we tried to find out why most of the media does not use it yet. The lack of financial resources (59.4%), some lack of knowledge about its potential (56.3%) and ethical issues (31.3%) are the reasons most pointed out by decision makers in sports media, nothing that the ethical concerns are related to the automatic production of texts. Another interesting fact is that editors of specialized media value AI more than journalists of generalist media. In the case of TV, the average is 6.8 versus 3.5, while in print it is 7 versus 6.75.

6. Conclusions

This paper aims to know if the Portuguese sports media are using Artificial Intelligence, why they do it and what expectations they have about future uses.

Concerning the first research question, the data shows that AI is still little used in sports media (34.4%), a lower value compared with Spain where 50% of the media already use AI (Lara-González et al. 2022). The media that uses AI do it to support journalists' work, making them more efficient, something that confirms data obtained in other studies

(Túñez-López et al. 2018; Beckett 2019; Lara-González et al. 2022). This identifies a relationship between AI and productivity, something common to other sectors of the economy. The notion that AI increases productivity does not seem to be enough for companies to invest in this area, since the lack of financial resources is the reason most often mentioned for its reduced presence in sports media; this apparent contradiction—AI makes work more efficient by freeing up resources, but not enough to lead media to invest in it—may also be related to the assumed lack of knowledge regarding its potential a trend already found in studies conducted in other countries, especially among journalists (Noain-Sánchez 2022).

About the activities in which AI is used in Portuguese media, the second research question, the results show that it occurs in activities of low complexity, like research in archives and data processing. The automatic production of texts, one of the possibilities with the most potential, appears in third place, but only an online native stands out in this field.

Finally, the third research question sought to know in which areas AI can help sports journalism, and decision-makers recognize that in the future AI will be a valuable aid to journalistic work. The higher expectations are placed on data analysis, multimedia content search, personalized content distribution, machine translation, false information detection, and automatic text production. If the automatic production of content and data processing was something expected because they are the areas with the highest visibility, it was surprising to see the importance given to personalized distribution, something that appears in three of the five studies referenced in this work; this seems to indicate that decision-makers seek to imitate the distribution models used by social media algorithms, which shows their attention to online trends. The weak presence of more complex applications is related to the lack of financial resources pointed out by six out of ten respondents, since the small size of the IT teams would force them to buy this service from external companies. Perhaps because of this, 97% of respondents believe that higher education institutions can play an important role in the study and development of Artificial Intelligence solutions for newsrooms; this approach between universities and the media has also been identified in other studies (Beckett 2019) that advocate the integration of AI in teaching programs.

A limitation of this study was the impossibility of confronting decision-makers with the conclusions and looking for explanations for some trends; this limitation is related to the anonymity of the questionnaire, something that was important to obtain more responses. In future investigations, the results will be presented to decision-makers, whether or not they participated in this study, to clarify some doubts arising in the interpretation of other data from this study not used in this work.

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Article

European Public Service Media, Disability Sports and Cultural Citizenship in the Digital Age: An Analysis of Agenda Diversity in the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games

Xavier Ramon [1,*] and José Luis Rojas-Torrijos [2]

[1] Department of Communication, Pompeu Fabra University, 08018 Barcelona, Spain
[2] Department of Journalism II, University of Seville, 41092 Seville, Spain
* Correspondence: xavier.ramon@upf.edu

Abstract: In the current cross-media ecosystem, which is characterized by technological disruption, the prominent relationship between public service media (PSM), sport and cultural citizenship is undergoing a profound transformation. Currently, PSM can utilize its myriad platforms, channels and services to transcend the constraints of linear broadcasting, find new ways of advancing diversity and overcome the perception of disability sport as a media 'blind spot'. Through content analysis, the objective of this research has been to examine the agenda diversity on Twitter offered during the timeframe of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games by 15 PSM corporations in Europe. This comparative analysis of 6072 tweets demonstrated the uneven attention devoted by European PSM to the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics. In the aggregate, 39.42% (n = 2398) of the messages focused on the event, although significant imbalances can be observed among the different media organizations, both in terms of the volume of coverage and the attention given to the various Paralympic disciplines and protagonists. From a theoretical perspective, the article adds to the existing literature on the nexus between media, sport and cultural citizenship, signaling the need for PSM to reimagine its social media strategies to counteract the limited visibility of different societal groups and to adequately contribute to enhancing cultural citizenship in the digital age. The results can also inform media practitioners. Despite that the conditioning factors and trade-offs linked to the commercial nature of social networking sites cannot be overlooked, PSM should take into account the importance of promoting inclusion and observe audiences' increasing interest in disability sport.

Keywords: public service media; sports; cultural citizenship; sports media; sports journalism; disability; Tokyo 2020; Paralympics; diversity; Twitter

1. Introduction

In the current cross-media ecosystem, which is characterized by technological disruption and the proliferation of digital channels and platforms (Glebova et al. 2022; Zheng and Mason 2022), the core relationship between public service media (PSM), sport and cultural citizenship is undergoing a profound transformation. In contrast to private sector media, PSM refers to organizations that are "publicly funded, less commercially driven and have a distinct public service mission" (Sehl and Cornia 2021, p. 1470). This public service mission is based on crucial obligations and values such as diversity, innovation, independence, excellence, universality, accountability, media literacy and social justice (Cañedo et al. 2022). Founded as radio and television entities, Public Service Broadcasters (PSBs) have transitioned into PSM over the last few years, "meaning that its contents are no longer distributed only through radio and TV (broadcasting), but through all possible platforms, especially the Internet" (Sehl 2023, p. 3).

Throughout history, PSM has played a unique role in building and developing cultural citizenship through sports (Røssland 2017; Scherer and Sam 2012; Smith 2017; Taylor and Thomass 2017). The news coverage of sports through different formats, as well as the

free-to-air broadcasting of national and international competitions, has long allowed PSM to achieve "mass attention and thereby, public legitimacy" (Lünich et al. 2021, p. 289), while offering citizens the opportunity to fully participate "in the collectively oriented public culture environments that constitute the social" (Hutchins et al. 2019, p. 989). In the process, public broadcasters have played a crucial role in creating and sustaining the cultural heritage of nations in relation to sport (Ramon and Haynes 2019). Thus, the strategies, practices and output delivered by PSM have been essential in preserving "the rights and responsibilities regarding access to and representation in, sports culture" (Rowe 2018, p. 12), which are deeply embedded in the notions of cultural citizenship.

Nevertheless, PSM's use of sports content to enhance cultural citizenship through linear broadcasting is increasingly threatened by the significant tensions and pressures that arise from digitization, globalization and commodification (Hesmondhalgh and Lotz 2020). Around the world, the escalating costs of sports broadcasting rights is threatening the provision of free-to-air content (Smith 2017). Major events legislation is still in force in many countries to "ensure that citizens are able to engage with these culturally significant occurrences" (Phillips and Martin 2020, p. 587). However, the expansion of over-the-top and on-demand services has deeply complicated the regulation of the digital sport broadcasting market, while raising important concerns about the future preservation of cultural citizen rights (Evens and Smith 2022; Rowe et al. 2022).

In this troubled context, PSM can utilize its myriad platforms and services to transcend the constraints of linear broadcasting and find new ways of advancing cultural citizenship (Hermes 2020). Digital spaces provide new opportunities for PSM to promote diverse and inclusive coverage that gives a broader recognition to those areas, topics and voices that are "often neglected by the commercial media" (Cwynar 2017, p. 135). New destinations can help PSM to provide "variation in content" (Morlandstø and Mathisen 2022, p. 2) and make various "societal groups visible" (Steiner et al. 2019, p. 102). In the field of sports, modern digital technologies have significantly altered the way in which sport is globally transmitted and consumed, offering new opportunities for flexibility and inclusivity (Glebova et al. 2022). Particularly, digital technologies can bring "less prominent professional or even recreational sports to the forefront" (Zheng and Mason 2022, p. 8) and "make it easier to give visibility to groups or initiatives that previously did not have access to distribution channels" (Glebova et al. 2022, p. 5). Thus, digital platforms—including social media—can be instrumental in showcasing "traditionally underrepresented sports and protagonists, including sportswomen and athletes with disabilities" (Ramon and Rojas-Torrijos 2022, p. 919).

Focusing on the latter issue, for many public and privately-owned media organizations, disability sport has "not been considered relevant, important, interesting, accessible or timely enough to be routinely prioritized on the broadly mediated agenda" (Sjøvaag and Kvalheim 2019, p. 292). For such reasons, disability sport can indeed be considered a media 'blind spot' (Morlandstø and Mathisen 2022). The proliferation of platforms and channels "affords a degree of cultural oxygen" (Goode 2010, p. 533) for athletes with disabilities, who remain far less visible in the media than their able-bodied counterparts (Brittain 2017; Solves et al. 2019).

However, as is rightly noted by Goode (Goode 2010, p. 532), new media destinations do not automatically 'translate into a guarantee of greater visibility or recognition' for all social groups. Previous research on the use of sports-centered Twitter accounts by European PSMs such as the BBC, RTVÉ, RAI, FranceTV and RTÉ demonstrated that platforms such as Twitter offer new opportunities to deliver high-quality sports content and engage with new audiences (Ramon and Rojas-Torrijos 2022; Rojas-Torrijos and Ramon 2021). Nevertheless, the findings also indicated that content for disability sport offered by PSM sports desks remains remarkably scarce, demonstrating "a continued lack of agenda diversity in routine digital media coverage" (Antunovic and Bartoluci 2023, p. 170).

Considering the power of media narratives to shape society's perceptions of disability, important questions arise: beyond routine coverage, are social media platforms being

leveraged by PSM to lend recognition to athletes with impairments during major mega-events, such as the Paralympic Games? Does content during the Paralympics help raise awareness of the diverse Paralympic disciplines and protagonists and, therefore, contribute to an enhancement of cultural citizenship?

Bearing these questions in mind, the purpose of this study was to examine the agenda diversity on Twitter offered during the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games by 15 PSM corporations in Europe. The article first provides an overview of the media coverage of disability sport and scrutinize the best practices involved in the reporting of the most recent Paralympic Games. Our attention will then turn to the affordances provided by new platforms and social media channels to improve the visibility of athletes with any sort of impairment. Our analysis of 6072 tweets considers the unequal attention devoted by European PSM during the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics, both in terms of the volume of coverage and the attention given to the different Paralympic disciplines and protagonists. The results have clear implications for media practice, signaling the need for PSM to reimagine its social media strategies to counteract the limited visibility of disability sport and adequately contribute to enhancing cultural citizenship in the digital age.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Media Coverage of Disability Sport and the Paralympics

According to the literature review of the existing research on the coverage of disability sport, it can be noted that, with a few exceptions, the visibility and representation of people with disabilities can still be considered scarce. This situation reinforces the idea that disability sport remains a media 'blind spot' (Morlandstø and Mathisen 2022; Sjøvaag and Kvalheim 2019). As Brittain (2017) asserts, "a lack of understanding towards and coverage of, disability issues within the media is not limited to just disability sport, but to disability in general" (p. 242).

Despite the growing interest in media and sport and the large number of studies of media and the Olympics over recent years, disability has remained "almost entirely invisible in the mainstream of this scholarship" for many years (Goggin and Newell 2000, p. 73). The intersection of disability and mass media, however, is increasingly resonating as a crucial topic in the modern world, precipitating the expansion of research and publications on disability across many scholarly disciplines (Ellis and Goggin 2015).

As a consequence of this growing concern around disability, research focus has shifted over time from traditional media studies to other interdisciplinary approaches, enabling a deeper understanding of the nature of disability and its visibility in the media-sport world. In this context, "media-focused scholarship has identified different ways that sport articulates, perpetuates and can challenge ableist views of disabled bodies" (Cherney et al. 2015, p. 9). One of the main conclusions reached by several authors is that sports media outlets have been complicit in perpetuating those ableist narratives in their coverage of disability and disability sport events that are commonly associated with perceptions of inferior ability and performance (Pullen et al. 2019) and with representations of what has been termed a 'supercrip' narrative about the athlete heroically overcoming the barriers posed by a disability (McGillivray et al. 2021).

Despite these perceptions, recent media coverage of athletes with impairments has evolved from traditional to progressive (Schantz and Gilbert 2008). As noted by Pate and Hardin (2013), progressive coverage, which is more focused on abilities and athletic accomplishments than on disabilities and overcoming adversities, is an example of the best media practice when reporting on the Paralympics and other disability sport events, as is the case for the best coverage of able-bodied sport.

Unlike other sporting competitions, the Paralympics stands out as a global sports mega-event that receives ever-increasing media attention and, consequently, plays a key political and cultural role in showcasing athletes with impairments, leaving stereotypes behind and, ultimately, in changing people's attitudes about disability (Kolotouchkina et al. 2020). As a result of this, the extraordinary and hyper-visible achievements of Paralympic

athletes emerge in discourses of national identity (Bruce 2014), in which the enhanced abilities of disabled bodies have become socially accepted and politically celebrated as symbols of inclusion and integration (Howe 2008).

It is widely agreed that London 2012 proved to be "a game-changing moment in the history of Paralympics sports coverage" (Bradshaw and Minogue 2019, p. 145), thanks to unprecedented media exposure and, most notably, the dedicated approach of the official broadcaster, Channel 4, to promote both the event and its main protagonists (Pullen et al. 2020b). This coverage brought disability sport into the mainstream, impacted citizens' perceptions of Paralympic athletes and elevated the profile of the Games as an elite sporting event by capturing huge audience numbers (a 400% increase since the 2008 Beijing Paralympics) and also establishing its commercial success (Pullen et al. 2022, p. 369). Since London 2012, the level of coverage of the Paralympic Games has been on the rise, but the amount and quality of this coverage varies greatly among territories and even within different media outlets in the same country (Brittain 2017).

After parasports claimed space in high-impact sports news during the Rio 2016 Paralympics (Menezes dos Santos et al. 2022), the technologically enhanced media coverage of Tokyo 2020 "crossed-over to mainstream audiences more often and in more interesting ways, than previous Games" (Goggin and Hutchins 2021, p. 136). Pullen et al. (2021, p. 82) refer to these Paralympic Games as "the most digitally accessible and savvy" because of the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) strategy that focused on providing live streams of events on its own Paralympic mobile app, as well as on YouTube and Facebook, and delivered extra content on social media such as Snapchat, Instagram and TikTok in a bid to reach younger audiences.

Although there have been signs of improvement in media representations of the Paralympics since London 2012, some studies note that the quantitative and qualitative imbalances between the representation of able-bodied sport and disability sport mega-events are still in force (Goggin and Newell 2000; Howe 2008). The persistence of condescending narratives and stereotypes (Bruce 2014; Cherney et al. 2015) shapes representations of athletes with an impairment, which, to a certain extent, seem to remain biased and anchored in stigma (Kolotouchkina et al. 2021).

2.2. Best Reporting Practices on the Paralympics

In contrast to the longstanding invisibility and stereotyping of athletes with disabilities, recent Paralympics have offered outstanding examples of news outlets providing respectful media coverage that represents Paralympians as athletes first (Page et al. 2022). Apart from Channel 4's abovementioned broadcasting strategy in Great Britain, the heritage of the Rio Paralympics is still present in *Globoesporte.com*, one of the most accessed sport information sites in Brazil; this website has a section exclusively dedicated to news on Paralympic sports (Menezes dos Santos et al. 2022). Similarly, the Spanish sports daily *Marca* has substantially increased its coverage of Paralympic sports and athletes since London 2012 and now publishes stories and interviews on a daily basis thanks to the financial support of the Spanish Paralympic Committee (Solves et al. 2019).

In the context of the 2020 Tokyo Paralympics, Japan's public broadcaster NHK offered innovative coverage both during the pre-games period and during the actual event, featuring a news program conducted by three anchors with different kinds of impairment. This corporation also launched an animated series that introduced anonymous and famous Japanese para-athletes of 11 Paralympic sports categories with anime-style narratives to provide an entertaining experience and, at the same time, explanatory content about the specifics of each para-sports discipline (Kolotouchkina et al. 2021, p. 105). NHK offers an example of how a PSM corporation may effectively contribute to ensure diversity and promote cultural citizenship through the coverage of underrepresented sports and athletes with disabilities (Rojas-Torrijos and Ramon 2021).

After reporting on the Tokyo Games for Czech Television, Macková (2021) notes that, as Paralympic sport becomes more professional, journalists are changing their style by

reporting on athletes as professionals and by focusing more on the event and less on the life stories of athletes with disabilities. However, journalists still find that "the stories of what happened to athletes, how they came to their disability, how they overcame it, can educate the public on disability-related issues" (Macková 2021, p. 54).

Taking all recent media coverage of Paralympics into account, Antunovic and Bundon (2022) propose a reconsideration of professional journalistic values in order to ensure the responsible coverage of this mega-event and any disability sport in the future. These authors recommend that sports journalists develop merit- and sport-focused coverage of the Paralympics as a top-level, international sporting event, to act ethically and challenge stereotypes and to include diverse perspectives, as well as contextualizing their reporting by intertwining sports with other larger social issues.

2.3. New Platforms and Social Media Channels: New Avenues for Improving the Visibility of Athletes with Disabilities?

As seen above, while coverage and global audiences of the Paralympics are experiencing constant growth, several challenges still impede the representation of disability in sports. For sports media professionals, some of these challenges are directly related to the ways they use digital platforms and social media channels to improve the coverage of athletes with impairments as a means of enhancing their visibility and transforming citizens' perceptions of them.

Goggin and Hutchins (2017, p. 230) state that "the London Paralympics saw social, mobile and online media fully incorporated into the media enterprise" and, since then, the attention paid to these high-impact platforms has been heightened by sports media outlets in their coverage of the mega-event. In the context of networked digital media, there has been an expanding line-up of popular and accessible sports media, not only produced by the industry but also by users and athletes; this development has been accompanied by the proliferation of niche channels and sources of digital sports media (Hutchins and Rowe 2012).

Nevertheless, although social networking sites clearly have the potential to increase the visibility of Paralympians and promote social inclusion, these platforms sometimes replicate the exclusionary and discriminatory attitudes that, more often than not, people with disabilities experience offline. As noted by Ellis and Kent (2017, p. 1), "social media has the potential to both enable and further disable people with disability". This may become a 'double-edged sword' for sports media outlets. As a matter of fact, they do not always make the most of social media platforms' potential to produce a more diverse and multi-faceted sports news agenda that ultimately contributes to enhancing social inclusion and cultural citizenship (Ramon and Rojas-Torrijos 2022; Rojas-Torrijos and Ramon 2021).

In any case, digital platforms such as blogs, podcasts and social media channels represent new avenues for amplifying the scope of sports media coverage and for filling gaps that still exist in current mainstream sport journalism. According to Domeneghetti (2021, p. 176), those gaps "are symptomatic of the tendency among legacy sports media and their staff, to shy away from reporting on complex issues"; these issues demand and deserve a higher level of attention from sports journalists than they currently receive.

3. Method

This research examines the agenda diversity on Twitter offered during the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games by 15 European PSM companies: RTBF (Belgium), Česká Televize (Czech Republic), Yle (Finland), France TV (France), ZDF (Germany), RTÉ (Ireland), RAI (Italy), LTV (Latvia), NOS (The Netherlands), NRK (Norway), TVP (Poland), RTVE (Spain), SVT (Sweden), RTS (Switzerland) and Channel 4 (United Kingdom). Three research questions guided the study:

- RQ1. What is the volume and frequency of content on the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics published by European PSM companies on Twitter? What engagement figures (retweets and favorites) are obtained by those publications?

- RQ2. What agenda is delivered by European PSM companies regarding the proportion of coverage devoted to different Paralympic sports? How much coverage is devoted to sportswomen?
- RQ3. Which multimedia elements are deployed by European PSM companies on Twitter?

To identify a suitable sample, researchers filtered the list of the IPC's official broadcast partners to select Europe-based companies. In the process, PSM companies that did not have a sports-centered account (such as RTP in Portugal or LTR in Lithuania) or whose Twitter accounts were not updated (such as *@DRSporten* in Denmark or *@ERTsports* in Greece) were discarded from the sample. To ensure comparability, in countries where two or more official Paralympic broadcasters exist (such as Germany and Switzerland), one account was selected. Finally, broadcasters from 15 countries, representing diverse regions and models of media systems (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Castro-Herrero et al. 2017), were selected. According to the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022*, the selected countries have high levels of internet penetration (surpassing 95% in the cases of Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the UK) and between 32% and 56% of the populations of these countries use social media as a source of news (Newman 2022).

All of the examined broadcasters created their sports-centered Twitter accounts between 2007 and 2012, except for RTVE, which created its profile *@deportes_rtve* in 2014. So far, the most prolific accounts have been *@BTBFsport*, *@francetvsport* and *@RTEsport*, followed by *@sport_tvppl* and *@RaiSport*. *@Sportstudio* (the account of news and updates from the ZDF sports department) has the highest number of followers (618,649), followed by the Twitter accounts held by PSM in the Netherlands, France, Italy and the Czech Republic (Table 1).

Table 1. Contextual data for the accounts examined.

Country	Account	Joined Twitter	Tweets	Following	Followers
Belgium	@RTBFsport	1 December 2009	169,437	1070	133,592
Czech Republic	@sportCT	19 July 2011	67,334	454	212,969
Finland	@YleSporten	10 February 2010	55,597	2039	4100
France	@francetvsport	4 May 2010	147,761	1295	268,460
Germany	@sportstudio (ZDF)	16 January 2009	60,204	1528	618,649
Ireland	@RTEsport	19 September 2007	138,750	1363	125,858
Italy	@RaiSport	30 November 2011	109,487	709	245,489
Latvia	@ltvsports	4 November 2011	37,652	37	8231
The Netherlands	@NOSsport	22 December 2010	89,782	79	346,060
Norway	@NRK_Sport	19 August 2009	53,642	6077	82,031
Poland	@sport_tvppl	22 January 2010	118,141	1405	124,339
Spain	@deportes_rtve	22 May 2014	53,223	196	94,506
Sweden	@SVTSport	20 January 2010	78,760	4001	164,390
Switzerland	@ RTSsport	16 December 2012	65,372	223	25,220
United Kingdom	@C4Sport	9 March 2010	4719	338	140,287

The tweets published by the sampled PSM companies during the timeframe of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics (24 August 2021–5 September 2021) were analyzed. Posts were gathered using Twitonomy (http://twitonomy.com, accessed on 6 September 2021), a web-based software program created by Digitonomy, which accesses data via Twitter's application programming interface (API). This specialized tool has been extensively employed in scholarly research on sports communication over recent years (Grimmer and Horky 2018; Ramon and Rojas-Torrijos 2022; Rojas-Torrijos and Ramon 2021). To ensure the retrieval of all of the content published during the examined timeframe, data were extracted on 6 September 2021. The total number of downloaded tweets was N = 6072.

Once the Twitter posts were downloaded, they were processed using Microsoft Excel and subsequently examined using the content analysis technique. Content analysis was defined by Berelson (1952, p. 18) as "a research technique for the objective, systematic and

quantitative description of the manifest content of communication". Due to its flexibility and broad applicability, content analysis has been increasingly used to scrutinize content published by different actors on social media platforms (Clark et al. 2021). By employing "a uniform system of categories" (Franklin et al. 2005, p. 46), we applied this technique to tweets published by PSM companies on their sports Twitter handles, to contrast the research questions (RQ1–RQ3) with the empirical data obtained.

The content analysis codebook included the following variables: date of publication; retweet count; favorite count; Paralympic-themed tweet or not; Paralympic sports covered; gender of protagonists; and the multimedia elements included in each tweet. These variables were informed by previous research focused on the nexus between PSM, sport and agenda diversity on social media (Ramon and Rojas-Torrijos 2022; Rojas-Torrijos and Ramon 2021), as well as by previous literature involving the news coverage of the Paralympic Games (Kolotouchkina et al. 2020; Solves et al. 2018; Solves et al. 2019). Content was coded in two stages. In the first stage, to answer RQ1, all the analysis units (N = 6072) were classified into tweets that were either focused on the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games or not focused on them. In the second phase, the Paralympic-themed tweets (n = 2398) were coded to scrutinize both the agenda diversity and the range of multimedia elements offered by PSM accounts during the event.

4. Results

4.1. Volume, Frequency of Publication and Engagement (RQ1)

The comparative analysis of 6072 tweets demonstrated the uneven attention devoted by European PSM companies to the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games. In the aggregate, 39.42% (n = 2398) of the messages focused on the event, although great imbalances can be observed among the different media organizations. Paralympics coverage represented 86.06% of the content posted by Channel 4, confirming the ongoing commitment of this right-holder to disability sports (Pullen et al. 2020a). Adopting an inclusive approach, content on the Paralympic Games exceeded 60% of the output published by PSM companies in France, Spain and Germany. Conversely, in other countries, such as Ireland, the Netherlands, Italy and Poland, this content only constituted between 20% and 30%. The proportion of tweets devoted to the Paralympics was smaller still in Switzerland (9.87%), Finland and the Czech Republic (9.55%) and Norway (8.33%) (Table 2).

Table 2. Volume and frequency of the analyzed tweets.

Country	Account	Tweets	N Paralympics	% Paralympics	Paralympic Tweets/Day
Belgium	@RTBFsport	773	111	14.36%	8.54
Czech Republic	@sportCT	356	34	9.55%	2.62
Finland	@YleSporten	157	15	9.55%	1.15
France	@francetvsport	580	402	69.31%	30.92
Germany	@sportstudio (ZDF)	205	127	61.95%	9.77
Ireland	@RTEsport	453	131	28.92%	10.08
Italy	@RaiSport	304	80	26.32%	6.15
Latvia	@ltvsports	129	26	20.16%	2.00
The Netherlands	@NOSsport	355	100	28.17%	7.69
Norway	@NRK_Sport	48	4	8.33%	0.31
Poland	@sport_tvppl	474	95	20.04%	7.31
Spain	@deportes_rtve	1400	938	67.00%	72.15
Sweden	@SVTSport	237	57	24.05%	4.38
Switzerland	@ RTSsport	314	31	9.87%	2.38
United Kingdom	@C4Sport	287	247	86.06%	19.00

Although athletes with disabilities were indeed featured in the agenda in many cases, their position was diluted due to the overabundance of content related to other high-profile sports and competitions. To illustrate this point, in Belgium, *@RTBFsport* devoted a significant part of their output to reporting on Formula One, the US Open, two major cycling events (La Vuelta and the Tour de Benelux) and the national men's football team's (the Belgian 'Red Devils') qualifying matches for the Qatar 2022 World Cup. A similar pattern can be observed in the case of *@NOSsport* in the Netherlands, where news updates about the domestic top-flight football league (Eredivisie) dominated the agenda, followed by detailed attention to Formula One and the major international tennis and cycling events that occurred during the relevant timeframe.

With regards to the frequency of publication, it should be highlighted that *@deportes_rtve* published 72.15 tweets per day on the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics. The French broadcaster *@francetvsport* offered 30.92 Paralympic-themed tweets on average per day, followed by *@C4Sport* (19) and *@RTEsport* (10.08). These accounts greatly capitalized on the "nowness" of sports (Rowe 2018), offering a continuous stream of information consisting of minute-by-minute updates of events, live scores and Paralympic-themed news.

During the timeframe of the study, the following accounts engaged unevenly with Twitter users. Notably, in the cases of *@francetvsport*, *@RTEsport*, *@RaiSport*, *@ltvsports*, *@deportes_rtve* and *@C4Sport*, Paralympic content achieved higher engagement figures (retweets and favorites) than non-Paralympic content (Table 3). This demonstrates that, in different countries, Paralympic information generated high interest among the public and even surpassed the figures obtained by tweets devoted to other sports and competitions.

Table 3. Engagement figures obtained for Paralympic-content and non-Paralympic content.

Country	Account	Paralympic Content			Non-Paralympic Content		
		N	Retweets	Favourites	N	Retweets	Favourites
Belgium	@RTBFsport	111	67	419	662	490	2368
Czech Republic	@sportCT	34	98	3257	332	2784	28,846
Finland	@YleSporten	15	0	12	142	17	150
France	@francetvsport	402	13,165	83,253	178	802	5395
Germany	@sportstudio (ZDF)	127	227	2638	78	253	3799
Ireland	@RTEsport	131	2493	24,965	322	1718	13,405
Italy	@RaiSport	80	2253	22,517	224	1243	16,127
Latvia	@ltvsports	26	105	844	103	72	355
The Netherlands	@NOSsport	100	632	10,430	225	901	11,408
Norway	@NRK_Sport	4	2	20	44	20	276
Poland	@sport_tvppl	95	1189	9845	379	1917	30,290
Spain	@deportes_rtve	938	13,129	54,314	462	2028	7383
Sweden	@SVTSport	57	142	2645	180	280	6868
Switzerland	@ RTSsport	31	28	251	329	110	1190
United Kingdom	@C4Sport	247	10,370	59,830	40	379	5245

4.2. Diversity Agenda: Sports and Gender (RQ2)

Our findings reveal that, in Tokyo 2020, European PSM companies gave prominence to highly commodified Paralympic sports while minimizing the exposure of other disciplines, thus reinforcing the diversity imbalances observed in legacy media (Pullen et al. 2020a). Leaving aside 'multisport' posts (19.30% of the sample), three Paralympic sports had a significant presence and accounted for half of the sample: swimming (n = 503; 20.98%), athletics (n = 449; 18.72%) and cycling (n = 257; 10.72%). Those three sports were followed by wheelchair basketball (n = 130; 5.42%) and table tennis (n = 125; 5.21%) (Table 4).

Table 4. Paralympics sports agenda.

Sports	N	%
Archery	22	0.92
Athletics	449	18.72
Badminton	24	1.00
Boccia	18	0.75
Cycling	257	10.72
Equestrian	40	1.67
Five-a-side football	46	1.92
Goalball	9	0.38
Judo	30	1.25
Paracanoe	26	1.08
Powerlifting	16	0.67
Rowing	15	0.63
Shooting	30	1.25
Sitting volleyball	9	0.38
Swimming	503	20.98
Table tennis	125	5.21
Taekwondo	7	0.29
Triathlon	67	2.79
Wheelchair basketball	130	5.42
Wheelchair fencing	10	0.42
Wheelchair rugby	30	1.25
Wheelchair tennis	70	2.92
Multisport	465	19.39
Total	2398	100.00

Many events and protagonists did not receive the wider visibility and recognition that social media platforms can easily afford. The emphasis on hyper-commodified Paralympic sports came at the expense of other minority disciplines. In fact, eight sports (archery, boccia, powerlifting, rowing, goalball, sitting volleyball, taekwondo and wheelchair fencing) were barely visible across the sample: they did not reach 1% of the coverage and received a total number of 106 tweets combined.

The scope of accounts such as *@francetvsport* (20), *@C4Sport* (18) and *@deportes_rtve* (17) was remarkably diverse, as the three corporations covered a wide range of Paralympic disciplines (Table 5). Those accounts were followed by *@sportstudio* and *@RaiSport*—which covered 13 sports each—and *@RTBFsport*, *@NOSsport* and *@SVTSport*, which delivered news on 12 individual and team sports. PSM companies in Finland, Latvia, Norway and Switzerland demonstrated a lower level of diversity, showcasing five or fewer Paralympic sports in their timelines. In those countries, attention was concentrated on those sports that achieved more medals, such as athletics in the cases of Finland and Switzerland, or equestrianism in the case of Latvia. It should be noted that, in nine countries across the sample (the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Poland, Ireland, the Czech Republic, Finland, Norway and Switzerland), the total number of Paralympic sports covered by PSM companies was lower than the number of Paralympic sports in which their home athletes competed.

The diversity imbalance of these accounts in relation to Tokyo 2020 also had a gendered dimension. Table 6 demonstrates that the Paralympic information disseminated by PSM companies on Twitter primarily focused on male athletes (n = 1057; 44.08% of the sample). Female participants were featured in 746 posts (31.11% of the sample), while nearly a quarter of the posted Twitter messages were devoted both to male and female competitors (n = 595; 24.81%). Notable exceptions to this trend can be found in the cases of *@RTEsport* (Ireland), *@RTSsport* (Switzerland) and *@SVTSport* (Sweden), where publications devoted to female athletes exceeded half of their output. In those countries, the successes of female competitors such as Ellen Keane (swimming), Katie-George Dunleavy, Anna Beck and

Louise Jannering (cycling), Manuela Schär and Catherine Debrunner (athletics), or Louise Etzner Jakobsson (equestrian) drove a great part of the PSM coverage on Twitter.

Table 5. Number of Paralympic sports covered by PSM companies and competitors in each country.

Country	Account	N Paralympic Sports Covered	Competitors
France	@francetvsport	20	61 in 13 sports
United Kingdom	@C4Sport	18	227 in 19 sports
Spain	@deportes_rtve	17	139 in 13 sports
Germany	@sportstudio (ZDF)	13	134 in 18 sports
Italy	@RaiSport	13	115 in 16 sports
Belgium	@RTBFsport	12	31 in 10 sports
The Netherlands	@NOSsport	12	72 in 12 sports
Sweden	@SVTSport	12	26 in 11 sports
Poland	@sport_tvppl	11	89 in 12 sports
Ireland	@RTEsport	9	31 in 11 sports
Czech Republic	@sportCT	7	28 in 8 sports
Finland	@YleSporten	5	16 in 7 sports
Latvia	@ltvsports	4	7 in 4 sports
Norway	@NRK_Sport	3	15 in 7 sports
Switzerland	@ RTSsport	3	20 in 9 sports

Table 6. Gender of protagonists.

Country	Account	Male		Female		Mixed		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Belgium	@RTBFsport	49	44.14	24	21.62	38	34.23	111	100.00
Czech Republic	@sportCT	22	64.71	3	8.82	9	26.47	34	100.00
Finland	@YleSporten	9	60.00	5	33.33	1	6.67	15	100.00
France	@francetvsport	252	62.69	77	19.15	73	18.16	402	100.00
Germany	@sportstudio	55	43.31	35	27.56	37	29.13	127	100.00
Ireland	@RTEsport	42	32.06	70	53.44	19	14.50	131	100.00
Italy	@RaiSport	22	27.50	35	43.75	23	28.75	80	100.00
Latvia	@ltvsports	11	42.31	7	26.92	8	30.77	26	100.00
The Netherlands	@NOSsport	36	36.00	35	35.00	29	29.00	100	100.00
Norway	@NRK_Sport	1	25.00	2	50.00	1	25.00	4	100.00
Poland	@sport_tvppl	37	38.95	38	40.00	20	21.05	95	100.00
Spain	@deportes_rtve	398	42.43	300	31.98	240	25.59	938	100.00
Sweden	@SVTSport	15	26.32	29	50.88	13	22.81	57	100.00
Switzerland	@ RTSsport	10	32.26	16	51.61	5	16.13	31	100.00
United Kingdom	@C4Sport	98	39.68	70	28.34	79	31.98	247	100.00
	Total	1057	44.08	746	31.11	595	24.81	2398	100.00

4.3. Deployment of Multimedia Elements (RQ3)

The use of multimedia elements across the board facilitated audiences' appreciation of Paralympic sports and protagonists who tend to be ignored in mainstream media. As Table 7 reveals, 98.87% of the posts that constitute the sample included multimedia elements. Most of the accounts—with the sole exception of *@RTSsport* in Switzerland—made extensive use of multimedia components, being fully aware of their value when it comes to mobilizing users' attention and enhancing the completeness and quality of the information provided (Naraine and Parent 2017). The 'Link + Photograph' format was the most employed across the sample (45.50%), followed by 'Link + Video' (23.19%).

Table 7. Deployment of multimedia elements.

Multimedia Component	N	%
Link + photograph	1091	45.50
Link + video	556	23.19
Video	346	14.43
Link	267	11.13
Photograph	64	2.67
Link + photo gallery	34	1.42
No multimedia	27	1.13
Photo gallery	12	0.50
Audio	1	0.04
Link + audio	0	0.00
Survey	0	0.00
Total	2398	100.00

The outlets that made greater use of video in their Paralympic-themed tweets were *@francetvsport* (n = 302; 75.12% of its output), *@C4Sport* (n = 208; 84.21% of its content) and *@deportes_rtve* (n = 597; 63.65% of its production). In a similar vein to the findings from other studies (Rojas-Torrijos and Ramon 2021; Ramon and Rojas-Torrijos 2022), the audio format was nearly absent from the PSM Twitter timelines: only *@RTSsport* published one audio-based post focused on the Swiss para-athlete Sofia Gonzalez. Other formats, such as surveys, were not displayed during the studied timeframe.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

As Rowe (2004, p. 385) highlights, "questions of access and equity in sports participation have been historically and continually prominent". Likewise, the access and proper visibility of athletes with impairment in sports media is an area of heightened importance for PSM, given the affordances provided by social networking sites. Free from "the restrictions of television programming" (Antunovic and Bartoluci 2023, p. 170), digital spaces can easily allow media outlets to provide expanded coverage of Paralympians, contributing to enhancing their social recognition and valorization.

Phillips and Martin (2020, p. 584) remind us that the coverage of sporting events "can attract the attention of millions of viewers and can also help to shape community identities, affect imaginaries of place and can become deeply inscribed in a public's memory". As one of the largest sporting mega-events in the world, the celebration of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games offered PSM outlets a crucial opportunity to broaden the agenda while affording space to diverse Paralympic sports and protagonists through their myriad platforms.

However, as can be seen from the present analysis of the European PSM sports-centred Twitter accounts, these opportunities were not fully met. It is true that different PSM outlets, such as Channel 4, France TV, RTVE and ZDF, provided consistent reporting on the Paralympic Games on Twitter, leveraging the potential of multimedia elements to provide the most comprehensive coverage possible and enhance the visibility of Paralympians. That said, considering the whole sample, it can be argued that the overall visibility of athletes with impairments was limited during the timeframe of the Paralympic Games. European PSM coverage on Twitter during the event remained focused on mainstream and able-bodied sports, thus confirming the findings of previous research that indicate that PSM sports coverage on social media "reinforces, rather than counteracts, the long-standing diversity imbalances present in the analogue age" (Ramon and Rojas-Torrijos 2022, p. 290).

Considering the proportion of tweets devoted to the Paralympic Games, it can be argued that, in certain countries, PSM did not offer coverage that counteracted the idea of disability sport being a media 'blind spot' (Morlandstø and Mathisen 2022; Sjøvaag and Kvalheim 2019). In contrast to routine Twitter news flows (Rojas-Torrijos and Ramon 2021),

the gender gap in the coverage proved to be narrower in Tokyo 2020, but inequalities in the space allocated to both male and female athletes persisted across different territories.

In addition, several PSM outlets across the sample did not engage with a wide range of Paralympic sports, but rather reproduced the hegemonic position of highly commodified disciplines, thus reinforcing the findings of previous research (Pullen et al. 2020a). This approach, which replicates the same agenda model that can be found in the coverage of able-bodied sports, limited the visibility of different minority disciplines.

It should be noted that the amount and type of coverage varied from country to country, depending on different factors such as the sports culture in the respective territories, the national relationship with the Paralympic Games throughout history, the number of competitors who took part in each discipline and the total number of medals obtained by national athletes in Tokyo 2020. For instance, *@C4Sport* has offered sustained coverage of the Paralympics over recent instances of the event (Pullen et al. 2020a), while giving recognition both to the large size of the British delegation (227 competitors in 19 sports) and their success in Tokyo with 124 medals (Great Britain finished second in the medal rank, after China). Arguably, the Paralympic coverage offered by PSM outlets such as *@sportCT*, *@YleSporten* and *@NRK_Sport* was also influenced by the figures from their home countries participating in Tokyo (Czech Republic: 28 competitors in eight sports, eight medals; Finland; 16 competitors in seven sports, five medals; Norway: 15 competitors in seven sports, four medals).

In addition, as Humprecht et al. (2022, p. 2) stress, "media systems are increasingly shaped by the rise of information and communication technologies". Across Europe, PSM companies "highlight the strength of Twitter for informing highly news-interested users and its speed in breaking news situations" (Sehl et al. 2018, p. 17). However, differences between the use of Twitter in the countries that integrate sample should be considered. For instance, the high volume and pace of publication displayed by *@deportes_rtve* can be related to the prominent position of Twitter in the Spanish media landscape, where according to the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022* it is currently used by 19% of citizens for news purposes (Newman 2022, p. 103). Arguably, both the lower volumes and slower paces of publication shown by PSM in countries such as Czech Republic, Norway and Switzerland can be linked to the relatively limited usage of Twitter for news among citizens in those territories (Newman 2022).

It should be noted that, in a similar vein to coverage of the Olympic Games, coverage of the Paralympics tends to focus on those athletes "who bring glory to the nation" (Bruce 2013, p. 128). This trend, along with the conditioning factors and trade-offs linked to the commercial nature of social networking sites, cannot be overlooked (Steiner et al. 2019); however, the diversity imbalances observed here raise important questions for the construction of cultural citizenship in the digital age. As Antunovic and Bartoluci (2023, p. 169) remind us, "the media do not simply reflect values of society, but play an important role in determining which sports, stories and voices become dominant". Additionally, as Morlandstø and Mathisen (2022, p. 4) contend, media 'blind spots' "have implications for democracy, citizenship and public sphere". With disability sport not being considered relevant to the agendas of many countries, the scarcity of content contributes to "systematic gaps in public knowledge" (Morlandstø and Mathisen 2022, p. 5), while also restricting Paralympians' opportunities to achieve wider "social recognition and institutional support" (Ramon and Rojas-Torrijos 2022, p. 934).

Considering the societal, economic and sporting impacts of editorial decisions, PSM outlets should take into account the importance of promoting inclusion. In the process, PSM should not neglect audiences' increasing interest in Paralympic sport. As noted in the results, in countries including France, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Latvia and the UK, Paralympic-themed content garnered higher engagement figures than non-Paralympic content. With this in mind, PSM outlets should capitalize on this growing social interest and provide more diverse coverage that helps to raise the profiles of athletes with disabilities among

the wider population, thus contributing to the enhancement of cultural citizenship through sports coverage.

As with any project, this research has limitations that open up possibilities for future studies. First, while Twitter remains a central platform within the sports-media complex, future studies should also examine the portrayal of disability sport on other social networking sites such as Instagram, Facebook and TikTok. Second, future research should continue examining the coverage of disability sport offered by PSM during the forthcoming Summer and Winter Paralympic Games (Paris 2024, Milano Cortina 2026, Los Angeles 2028 and Brisbane 2032), as well as the routine coverage developed in the periods between Games. Future works on the Paralympics should consider broadening the sample to incorporate other European PSM, like ARD (Germany) and SRF (Switzerland) as well as PSM outside of Europe.

Third, subsequent studies on content could also benefit from embracing a qualitative approach that examines the language embedded in Paralympic-themed tweets. This approach could be particularly helpful to better understand whether digital platforms contribute to fostering progressive coverage of Paralympians that steers away from longstanding ableist narratives and stereotypes (Cherney et al. 2015; Kolotouchkina et al. 2021; Macková 2021; Pate and Hardin 2013; Schantz and Gilbert 2008).

In addition, the adoption of other methods, such as in-depth interviews with social media managers and editors, could be a productive means of deepening our understanding of the newsroom cultures, editorial priorities and conditioning factors involved in the production and transmission of Paralympic-themed content on digital platforms. Moreover, other qualitative methods, such as focus groups with audiences, could provide researchers with detailed insight into citizens' perceptions of and expectations for the coverage of disability sport.

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Article

There He Goes: The Influencer–Sports Journalism of Fabrizio Romano on Twitter and Its Implications for Professionalism

Simon McEnnis

School of Art and Media, University of Brighton, Brighton BN2 0JY, UK; s.mcennis@brighton.ac.uk

Abstract: Fabrizio Romano's sizeable social media followings and role as influencer–sports journalist warrant attention. Romano, known for his catchphrase 'Here We Go', specialises in football transfers and produces multi-platform content. This study investigates how Romano's Twitter practice informs professional understandings of sports journalism. A content and textual analysis (n = 494) was conducted of one month of Romano's tweets and replies. Tweets were categorised according to markers of sports journalism practice. Results show Romano is professionalising sports journalism on social media and subverting understandings of personal branding through favouring objective news over subjective opinion and focusing on the professional rather than the personal. Romano's transfer news prioritises major European football clubs, which is consistent with the trajectory of sports journalism on digital platforms. Play-by-play commentary is a minor aspect of Romano's Twitter output, which contributes to the debate on the significance of game coverage to contemporary sports journalism. Tweets did not mention the human rights issues surrounding the World Cup starting in Qatar, even though this was a key talking point. This finding suggests 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, particularly where ultra-specialist settings are concerned.

Keywords: sports journalism; social media; digital journalism; influencer; Fabrizio Romano; professionalism; Twitter; personal branding

1. Introduction

> *"I can imagine my life without water and food, I can't imagine my life without Twitter"*—*Fabrizio Romano on Twitter, 18/11/22*

Social media have enabled sports journalists to increase their profile and visibility while attracting large followings that are, in some instances, exceeding the readerships of the news organisations they work for. The Italian football journalist Fabrizio Romano stands out from a crowded landscape with particularly sizeable social media followings. Romano, whose catchphrase 'Here We Go' is used to confirm transactions, has followings of 13.6 million on Twitter, 11 million on Instagram, 8.2 million on Facebook, 1.3 million YouTube and 524,000 on Twitch at the time of writing. He works or has worked for a range of media organisations including Sky Sport Italia, The Guardian, and CBS Sports.

This article explores Romano's Twitter practice to provide a vital insight into how an influencer–sports journalist approaches professionalism. The sociology of professions has emerged as an important conceptual framework in understanding journalism change in the digital age (Aldridge and Evetts 2003; Waisbord 2013; Carlson and Lewis 2015). Professionalism is a central concern to sports journalism (Salwen and Garrison 1998) that stems from its lowly reputation within wider newsroom culture as the toy department (Oates and Pauly 2007; Rowe 2007). The migration of analogue to digital platforms has been a source of anxiety for sports journalists, who have had to both protect and adjust their practices in new media environments while attempting to elevate them to disprove the toy department claim (McEnnis 2020). Sports journalism has become a 'leaking craft' with its practices and practitioners becoming increasingly porous and diffuse in a complex

sports media landscape (Hutchins and Rowe 2012). Scholars therefore face a challenge in mapping the composite approaches and practices that formulate the professional field of sports journalism in the digital age.

This paper focuses on the emergent practice of influencer–sports journalism, using Romano as a case study. Sports journalism research design tends to focus on groupings in samples, either among the occupational community through interviews/surveys or of news content across a range of organisations via a media analysis. This study takes an individualised, case-study approach to reflect an increasingly atomised profession whereby social media have allowed sports journalists to detach from the organisations they work for and, in instances, become a news brand (McEnnis 2021). A comprehensive understanding of sports journalism professionalism in the digital age can only be understood through considering the individual as well as the collective. It is against this backdrop that Fabrizio Romano enters the fray. This study used a content and textual analysis of Romano's tweets and replies to consider the approach to Twitter practice of an influencer–sports journalist.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Who Is Fabrizio Romano?

Romano has been described within the industry as a 'transfer window superstar reporter' (Jones 2020) and football's 'prophet of the deal' (Smith 2022). Sports journalists consider themselves as generalists and believe they do not have time to concentrate on one niche topic, unlike bloggers (McEnnis 2016). However, Romano's sports journalism focuses on a specialism (transfer stories) within a specialism (football journalism) within a specialism (sports journalism) in journalism.

Romano was born in Naples in 1993 and is a freelance Italian journalist who has worked for various media companies such as Sky Sport Italia and The Guardian in the UK. Romano started writing stories and sending them to websites for free (Smith 2022). Romano was then contacted by an aspiring football agent working at La Masia, Barcelona FC's youth academy, who wanted him to write an article on players Gerard Deulofeu and Mauro Icardi (Sprung 2021; Smith 2022).

Following this initial contact, the journalist–source relationship developed between Romano and player agent, particularly on Facebook messenger (Sprung 2021). Romano broke the story that Icardi was joining Sampdoria from Barcelona in 2011 and then, more notably because by then Icardi was an established player, he moved on to Inter Milan in 2014 with Romano breaking the news on a fan site (Sprung 2021; Smith 2022). This scoop effectively launched his journalism career as he took a job at Sky Sport Italia. Romano came to international attention in 2020 when he confirmed that Bruno Fernandes, the Portuguese midfielder, had signed for Manchester United. To confirm the deal had been concluded, Romano used the statement 'Here We Go' that has since become his iconic catchphrase (Jones 2020; Sprung 2021; Smith 2022). Romano's announcement provided finality in a genre of transfer stories where fact and fiction are often difficult to separate amid a swirl of rumour (Smith 2017; Rojas-Torrijos and Mello 2021).

Romano has since become a major cross-platform presence whereby 'when Romano is not submitting transfer stories to The Guardian or Sky Sport, he is uploading them to Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and YouTube, or he is talking about them on his podcast or his Twitch channel or in his latest role . . . with CBS Sports' (Smith 2022).

2.2. Sports Journalism and Professional Change in the Digital Age

Journalism is an anomalous profession because it lacks the features of occupational closure such as licensing and clear entry routes that are present in more established and recognised professions such as medicine and law. However, it is seen as a profession in that providing an obligatory service to the public is strong in the occupational ideology (Aldridge and Evetts 2003). Historically, journalists' difficulties in securing jurisdictional control over practice—through, for example, the proximity of public relations—have undermined attempts to raise status and standing (Abbott 1988). Professionalism is a prominent

occupational concern within sports journalism that stems from its toy-department label (Salwen and Garrison 1998). To improve its professional reputation, sports journalism must pay close adherence to occupational values and principles, such as objectivity, impartiality, autonomy and public service (Deuze 2005).

Sports journalists must also show a commitment to quality journalism via practice through critical and inquiring approaches (Boyle 2006). They are expected to adopt independent stances that enable them to draw attention to both corruption and abuse of power (Rowe 2017) and social justice issues (Weedon et al. 2018). These can be source-driven investigations, such as Andrew Jennings' work on the FIFA corruption scandal (Rowe 2017), or more distanced commentator positions, for example, U.S. sportswriter David Zirin 'consistently addresses sport-related social issues (e.g., power relations inequality and human rights in sport) in his blog, books, and also in mainstream venues like Sports Illustrated' (Forde and Wilson 2018, p. 68). Sports journalists are encouraged to use their power, privilege and audience reach to give a voice to marginalised and under-represented groups (Forde and Wilson 2018). However, sports journalists must strive to achieve quality journalism when the forces of the digital age have challenged the very foundations of their occupational base (Hutchins and Rowe 2012).

Sports journalists have been unable to maintain exclusivity over their practices with fans themselves now offering opinion and analysis on sports events (Hutchins and Rowe 2012; Bradshaw and Minogue 2020). Sports journalists' reputation for being 'fans with notebooks' and the perceived lack of professional distance with sources and criticality in reporting have called into question their distinctiveness and difference from bloggers (McEnnis 2017). Sports journalists have also increasingly found themselves disempowered within a narrow source environment of professional sports that has left them exposed to attempts to censor and control their work, mainly through threats of expulsion and excommunication from press briefings and conferences (Sugden and Tomlinson 2007; Sherwood et al. 2017a). Boyle (2006, p. 43) notes that journalists used to enjoy close access with athletes, but this ended in the 1980s 'As money flowed into the higher echelons of professional sport from television, the cultural and financial gap between journalists and sports stars grew apace'. Football clubs have since become more brand and publicity conscious, which has resulted in close media management and policing of journalists (Sherwood et al. 2017a). For example, Bradshaw and Minogue (2020) describe how the Newcastle Chronicle was banned by football club Newcastle United in the UK in 2013 for covering a fan protest against the owner, Mike Ashley.

Clubs have also invested heavily in their own media operations to drive their aggressive global commercial strategies (Bradshaw and Minogue 2020). These shifts have had implications for sports journalists' access to professional sportspeople as sports clubs and organisations have now become competitors as well as sources (Sherwood et al. 2017b). Sports journalists' boundary work to distinguish themselves from public relations has also proved to be a struggle with established newspaper sports journalists becoming 'poachers turned gamekeepers' and moving into team media roles (Mirer 2019, 2022; Perreault and Bell 2022).

Sports journalists' attempts to improve standards in practice have become more difficult to achieve in digital settings where clickbait is currency (Ramon and Tulloch 2021) and work routines have intensified (Moritz 2015). Practitioners must now write stories, post blogs, curate social media and produce video in a 24/7 rolling news environment (Moritz 2015; Daum and Scherer 2018). The online sports desk has become a 'toy department within a toy department' as the office-based routines of digitally native sports journalists contradicts the notion of fieldwork as central to the professional culture (McEnnis 2020). Historically, sports journalists' reportage of live events has been a central aspect of practice. However, sports journalists now live blog and/or live tweet the spectacle due to the immediacy offered by digital and social media (McEnnis 2016; Bradshaw and Minogue 2020). Technological disruption has led Randles (2021) to wonder whether the match report, a more traditional form of practice, is now redundant. Coverage of off-field issues has

taken hold in sports journalism with Moritz and Mirer (2021, p. 139) noting, 'There's no professional currency in being the first to report that the Yankees beat the Red Sox, 3-2, in a game. There is professional currency in being the first to report that Aaron Boone will be fired as the Yankees manager'.

Shifting digital-media dynamics have also led to changes in the decision making of what is covered and how. Stories have become increasingly shorter due to fear of attention spans among digital audiences, which means depth, detail and context are sacrificed (Bradshaw and Minogue 2020). There are concerns about journalists plagiarising from other news outlets, with the need for ethical observance in attributing sources becoming more acute (Hutchins and Rowe 2012). Also, editors—in the pursuit of clicks—have centralised coverage around major sports and the elite teams within them (Cable and Mottershead 2018). For instance, in football, the top professional leagues in Europe—England's Premier League, Germany's Bundesliga and Spain's Primera Liga—have become hyper-commercialised in recent years. Substantive TV rights deals, driven by satellite technology, have presented opportunities for commercial growth in sponsorship, advertising, and marketing (Boyle and Haynes 2009; Hutchins and Rowe 2012). In this context, sports journalism serves an ideological role as a promotional vehicle for hyper-commercialised sport (Lowes 1999). The result is homogenous content and a lack of plurality in the mainstream media (English 2018).

2.3. Sports Journalism and the Transfer Story

The transfer (or transaction) story is an established practice in football journalism that consists of 'the hiring and firing of coaches and other team personnel, a player changing (or wanting to change) teams via trade or free agency, or an update on a player's injury and availability' (Moritz and Mirer 2021, p. 139). Player movement started to become more frequent in the 1990s due to regulatory shifts such as the relaxing of homegrown player quotas in Europe and the Bosman ruling that allowed players freedom to move clubs upon expiration of their contracts (Chadwick 2013). Football transfer news has intensified periods of the year that correspond to the January and August transfer windows (Chadwick 2013). Transfer stories make a significant contribution to the always-on sports consumption in a 24/7 news culture by providing sustenance for football fans between sports events (Sugden and Tomlinson 2010). The genre exists in other sports, particularly in the United States where trade deadlines and free agency occur (Reed and Harrison 2019).

Transfer news fuels chatter and gossip within fan communities and are 'among those quick online stories that provide metrics to media organisations' (Rojas-Torrijos and Mello 2021, p. 626). However, the transfer genre raises questions for the veracity and reliability of the stories produced (Smith 2017; Reed and Harrison 2019; Rojas-Torrijos and Mello 2021). Speculation that fails to materialise is not later corrected by news outlets but is instead quietly forgotten (Silverman 2015). Transfer stories are part of a narrow sports news agenda that is likely to lead to speculation on a handful of big European clubs (Stanton 2016). Sports journalism places the act of verification and 'truth-holders" in the hands of the clubs themselves, thus further cementing their power and control (Sherwood et al. 2017a).

Reed and Harrison's (2019) content analysis of NBA trades found unsourced transactions dominated over sourced ones. Rojas-Torrijos and Mello's (2021) study of Twitter posts and news stories across four major European news outlets in the 2020 winter transfer window discovered that an average of 45.1% of transfer stories on Twitter materialised with only 41% on websites. These news outlets 'had no qualms about publishing a number of tip-offs, speculations and statements coming from anonymous sources' and 'offered more analysis, opinions and statements on rumours about three or four teams in each league than factual news about transfers/loans relating to them' (Rojas-Torrijos and Mello 2021, p. 636).

2.4. Sports Journalism and Twitter

Sports journalists use Twitter for a range of activities, including publishing news and opinion, sourcing stories, and promoting work (Sheffer and Schultz 2010; Price et al. 2012;

Reed 2013; Shermak 2018; Oelrichs 2020). However, Twitter's accessibility, in which any user can post opinions on sports, has raised questions over professional expertise and distinctiveness (McEnnis 2013).

Sports journalists have realised that certain established norms and values do not map effectively onto social media. For instance, the scoop, a story that has not been reported on before, has a short lifespan on social media before the competition reacts (Moritz and Mirer 2021). Sports journalists, in their early adoption of Twitter, tried to hold on to scoops for the morning newspaper (McEnnis 2013), but these stories now tend to be published on Twitter with core news platforms focusing on contextualisation and analysis (Moritz and Mirer 2021).

Twitter has, in turn, reshaped approaches to sports journalism with scoops now being the domain of a few elite practitioners who possess excellent contacts rather than a general expectation (Moritz and Mirer 2021). Reporting on play-by-play outcomes does not generate much interest on social media in likes and retweets, unlike analysis, opinion, and visual content (Shermak 2018). Sports journalists are therefore incentivised to focus on subjectivity and opinion on Twitter. Sheffer and Schultz's (2010) content analysis revealed opinion dominated even though sports journalists thought they prioritised breaking news on Twitter.

Sports journalists are now expected to engage with audiences across Web 2.0 platforms (Sherwood and Nicholson 2013), but this interaction is particularly intense on Twitter because of constant real-time updates (Price et al. 2013). This engagement could potentially bring sports journalists closer to audiences and provide a public service by stimulating healthy debate (McEnnis 2018). However, sports journalists often have a fractious relationship with audiences in contending with vitriolic abuse and accusations of bias (Antunovic 2019; Kilvington and Price 2021; Rushden 2023).

2.5. Social Media, Personal Branding and Influencing

Social media have led to greater individualisation and autonomy for sports journalists as editors and news organisations have struggled to retain control and surveillance (McEnnis 2021). Journalists are now expected to develop their own personal brands on social media (Molyneux and Holton 2015; Olausson 2018). Brand building can be defined as journalists adopting and adapting marketing techniques that involve not only 'how their reporting is perceived but also on how they themselves are perceived' (Molyneux and Holton 2015, p. 236). These marketing and celebrified features include providing insight into personal lives in addition to professional ones and building communities, talking about themselves, drawing attention to praise they have received, and making connections with audiences based on emotion, interaction and, potentially, collaboration. (Molyneux and Holton 2015; Olausson 2018).

Brand building also involves developing a clear persona (such as Romano's identity as a transfer specialist) that allows for self-commodification, which translates into market value (Brems et al. 2017). Further, celebrified journalism features a coherent and ubiquitous self-presentation across social media sites (Olausson 2018), which speaks to Romano's own multi-platform and multimedia approach. Consequently, journalists prioritise subjectivity over objectivity in the brand-building process as 'journalists . . . use Twitter primarily to argue with others and to share their opinions' (Brems et al. 2017, p. 452). This emphasis on subjectivity in personal branding has prompted the suggestion that there has been a turn to emotional journalism (Beckett 2017).

The notion of 'influencer' and 'influencing' goes beyond personal branding and brand building in that it involves commercial relationships and makes advertising a form of content (Duffy 2020). Romano adopts strong influencer elements in addition to traditional journalistic ones in that he is utilised by both news and non-news organisations. For example, in August 2021, Romano appeared in a short video on the Spanish football club Valencia's Twitter account as part of the announcement that Brazilian striker Marcos Andre had joined from Real Valladolid, thus blurring the distinction between team media and

journalism. Romano can also be considered an influencer in his impact among industry and audiences because his catchphrase, 'Here We Go' has become definitive for when a deal is complete (Smith 2022).

Brand building and influencing have created professional challenges for journalists. Molyneux and Holton (2015, p. 226) note that self-promotion 'does not fit with long-held notions of journalistic objectivity and the separation of editorial and advertising practices'. Brems et al.'s (2017) study found a tension between traditional one-way information providing and networked, interactive communication, balancing facts with opinion, and combining the personal with the professional.

3. Research Design

3.1. Research Objectives and Questions

This study analyses an influencer–sports journalist's approach to Twitter practice to assess how it informs professionalism in the digital age. Professionalism is defined as close observance of principles such as objectivity, impartiality, autonomy, and public service as defined by Deuze (2005) combined with high standards of practice, which include the prioritisation of news over opinion (Sheffer and Schultz 2010) and the need for critical and inquiring sports journalism (Boyle 2006; Rowe 2017; Forde and Wilson 2018; Weedon et al. 2018). There were two research questions:

(RQ1): How does Fabrizio Romano use Twitter in the context of sports journalism practice?
(RQ2): What does Fabrizio Romano's approach to Twitter mean for understandings of sports journalism professionalism as defined by the relationship between principles and practice?

To answer these questions, a content and textual analysis was conducted on Fabrizio Romano's tweets and replies during a one-month period. Twitter is only one aspect of Romano's journalistic output. However, Twitter has become a significant aspect of sports journalism practice and has been integral to Romano's brand building.

3.2. Method

Content analysis is a common method used in exploring sports journalism practice in the digital age (e.g., Hardin and Ash 2011; Rojas-Torrijos and Mello 2021). The representative sample chosen for this research, taken across a month (November 2022), was influenced by Rojas-Torrijos and Mello's (2021) study that considered tweets and articles across four news organisations within the same period. November was selected as a representative month because it occurs during the football season, although the transfer windows of January and August are likely to yield different results based on the more intense focus around player movement. A month was considered a sufficient period for data collection due to the likely prolific tweeting from a sports journalism influencer.

Sports journalism practice was coded and categorised according to themes synthesised from the literature review. Specifically, the categories that related to transfer news and confirmation trades emerged from the issues of attribution and sourcing explored in the relevant literature (Hutchins and Rowe 2012; Reed and Harrison 2019; Rojas-Torrijos and Mello 2021). The categories on news and opinion arose from professional concerns that sports journalists prioritise subjectivity over objectivity (Oates and Pauly 2007; Sheffer and Schultz 2010). Play-by-play reporting related to how social media is now used to convey live game action (Randles 2021), and the reply and retweet categories reflected Twitter's communicative and architectural functions (Shermak 2018).

The personal and promotional categories emerged from the exploration of influencer culture (Molyneux and Holton 2015; Brems et al. 2017; Olausson 2018). Journalists are now expected to build a brand via tweeting about their personal lives and promoting their work and the organisations that employ them. These categories can potentially be a source of tension for traditional understandings of professionalism, which require journalists to be objective, distanced, transparent and editorially independent (Molyneux and Holton 2015). Sports journalism practice was coded and categorised as follows:

*Transfer News (unattributed***)** is a composite of two sub-categories as follows:

Transfer News (sourced): This category speaks to Romano's reputation as a football transfer specialist and involves tweets that meet Moritz and Mirer's (2021, p. 139) definition of transfer and transactional news as 'the hiring and firing of coaches and other team personnel, a player changing (or wanting to change) teams via trade or free agency, or an update on a player's injury and availability'. These tweets needed to indicate the source of the story through naming or quoting.

Transfer News (unsourced): This category involves tweets that related to the same definition of the transfer story, but the source was unnamed and undeclared.

Transfer News (attributed): Authored tweets on a topical transfer development that was originally reported by a different news organisation or journalist. The original source was then attributed in the tweet.

Confirmed: Transfer news that has a concrete and final outcome: e.g., a player signing a contract or a manager joining a new club.

Other News (unattributed): Football news tweets not related to transfer stories and not attributed to another news organisation or journalist.

Other News (attributed): Football news tweets not related to transfer stories and attributed to another news organisation or journalist as the source of the information.

Play-by-play Reporting: 'Live' tweets of occurrences during sports events, delivered in an objective, factual and neutral commentary. Subjective comments on the live sports event were filed under Opinion.

Replies: Responses to other tweets or replies to comments on one's own tweets.

Retweets: Retweets of tweets posted either from one's own or other accounts.

Opinion: Tweets that pass a subjective view or opinion.

Personal: Tweets that relate to personal circumstances rather than football coverage.

Promotional: Tweets that are recognisably promotional of a service or product.

4. Results

The 2022 World Cup started on 20 November, which was within the data collection period. The draw for the Champions League knock-out stages also took place in this timeframe, with eight consecutive tweets that announced the fixtures being filed under Other News (unattributed).

A major sports news story in this period concerned Manchester United player Cristiano Ronaldo being interviewed for a Piers Morgan TV show episode, which subsequently led to his departure from the club. During November 2022, Romano tweeted at least once every day with an average of 16.5 tweets per day and 0.7 per hour. The fact that Romano tweeted nearly once per hour on average speaks to an intensification of sports journalism practice (Moritz 2015) and the demands and expectations that social media have placed on practitioners with the need to be constantly tweeting and retaining visibility (McEnnis 2013).

Data collection uncovered potentially blurred areas of categorisation. For example, Romano seems to have invented his own genre of sports reportage whereby he will mention a footballer who is doing something significant on the field of play at that moment and then will indicate the player's transfer or contractual status. These were not considered as transfer stories as the transactional aspect of the tweet was incidental. Instead, these tweets were classified as either play-by-play commentary or opinion depending on which category's criterion was met. A tweet was filed under Play-by-Play Reporting if it contained straight reportage without subjective comment ('First game, first start, first goal for Denis Zakaria as Chelsea player/ on 2/11), whereas it was filed under Opinion if there was an element of subjective commentary ('Three goals in three World Cup games for Marcus Rashford—looks a completely different player in the last few months' on 29/11).

There was one promotional tweet recorded ('Are you ready fo (sic) to Defy The Noise? Here we go #ad') (see Table 1). However, there were promotional elements within the Retweets category. There were also crossover elements with responses to users constituting

an opinion expressed but these tweets were still filed under Replies to avoid subjective researcher judgments.

Table 1. Fabrizio Romano's tweets in November 2022 categorised by markers of professional practice.

Tweeting Category	No. of Tweets	Tweet %
Transfer news (unattributed)	120	24.3
Transfer news (attributed)	83	16.8
Confirmed	32	6.5
Other News (unattributed)	102	20.6
Other news (attributed)	30	6.1
Play-by-Play Reporting	10	2
Replies	49	9.9
Retweets	52	10.5
Opinion	11	2.2
Personal	4	0.8
Promotional	1	0.2
Total	494	100

Retweets with comments were also a problematic area for recording purposes, and it needed to be determined whether these posts constituted a properly authored tweet or were incidental to the retweet. A judgement was therefore made on the substantive nature of the comment. For example, on 25 November, Romano retweeted his own tweet from October 8 saying that Chelsea will appoint Christopher Vivell as new technical director with the comment '. . . just matter of time'. This tweet was not considered to be a meaningful update to the transfer story in either length or content so was filed under retweet. However, on November 15, Romano retweeted his own tweet from four days earlier stating Sporting Lisbon has reached full agreement to sign Mateo Tanlongo from Rosario Central with the comment 'Sporting will complete Mateo Tanlongo deal in the next hours. Deal done and sealed, full agreement in place since last week. Tanlongo will join Sporting in January from Rosario Central'. Because of the substantive nature of this comment in length and content, this tweet was filed under Transfer News (unattributed).

Further, tweets filed under the Transfer Story (unattributed) and Other News (unattributed) categories cannot be considered as solely consisting of originally sourced tweets that derived from Romano's primary newsgathering (although they would contain them). For example, Romano was actively tweeted about a breaking story about Cristiano Ronaldo giving an interview to the TV presenter and journalist Piers Morgan on the ITV show 'Cristiano Ronaldo meets Piers Morgan' on UK television. The interview included outspoken comments from Ronaldo about his club, Manchester United. These tweets were generally attributed to the show as their source, and so they were filed under Other News (attributed). However, Romano tweeted comments from Ronaldo that were not attributed, and so these needed to be filed under Other News (unattributed). It cannot be interpreted with certainty that these quotations came from the same secondary source, even though it is very likely.

This ambiguity points to a potential new ethical order in sports journalism where there are two interpretations here. On the one hand, the tweet can be considered unethical for not enacting the ethical norm of attribution, but it could be argued that attribution was implied due to the context of other connected tweets around it that were attributed.

The results showed that football news dominated Romano's Twitter output in November 2022 with the top five news-related categories registering 74.3% of tweets (see Table 1). In comparison, Opinion—which previous research has found to be a prominent activity by sports journalists and brand builders (Sheffer and Schultz 2010; Brems et al. 2017) on Twitter—constituted 2.2% of tweets (see Table 1). This finding is significant in that sports journalists' emphasis on subjectivity rather than objectivity is a key reason for their lowly toy-department reputation (Oates and Pauly 2007).

The Other News (attributed) and Other News (unattributed) sections predominantly related to team and player news. Aside from the Cristiano Ronaldo television interview mentioned above, topics mainly consisted of the Champions League knock-out draw, World Cup squad announcements and player withdrawals through injuries from these squads.

Notably, there were no tweets about the controversy of the World Cup starting in Qatar, a country with human rights issues, which was a key talking point in sports journalism during the data collection period. For example, the BBC's Gabby Logan and Gary Lineker both produced blogs stating their conflicted positions in covering the World Cup (Lineker 2022; Logan 2022). The closest that Romano's tweets came to critical journalism, relating to off-field issues and as defined in this study, were tweets on a Manchester United board of directors' statement into exploring strategic alternatives for the club (Nov 22), the Juventus board resigning (28/11), and that a pitch invader at the World Cup had been released by police (29/11). The Opinion category generally involved positive comments on player performance rather than offering a critique on the world of professional football.

Transfer News (attributed) and Other News (attributed) are reflective of the move towards sharing and reposting information from other news sources (Hutchins and Rowe 2012). These tweets seemed to help sustain regular updates from Romano's Twitter account in between authored Transfer News (unattributed) and Other News (unattributed) posts. The Confirmed category was a minor percentage of tweets at 6.5% (see Table 1) because of the timing of this study being outside of football's transfer-window deadlines in August and January. These confirmations often related to footballers signing new contracts with existing employers, pre-contract agreements with new teams or managers leaving or joining teams.

Play-by-play Reporting, considered to be a staple of sports journalism practice, registered only 2% of tweets (see Table 1). This finding speaks to the changing relationship between sports journalists and live events (Shermak 2018; Moritz and Mirer 2021; Randles 2021).

Personal tweets registered 0.8% of the total dataset (see Table 1), a finding that does not conform with expectations of brand building (Molyneux and Holton 2015; Beckett 2017; Olausson 2018). Personal tweets were oriented towards brand development in that they were related to awards. These tweets involved Romano being nominated for, and winning, the Globe Soccer best football journalist award and the Football Content Award for best influencer. There were also replies relating to these personal developments with Romano thanking Twitter users who were congratulating him.

Replies constituted 9.9% of total tweets (see Table 1), which showed there was a willingness to engage with users, although this was not a prominent category in Romano's approach to Twitter. The results showed that 18.4% of replies to users (9 of 49) were responses to comments on Romano's journalistic prowess and performance. A key element of brand building is journalists talking about and drawing attention to themselves (Molyneux and Holton 2015). In these scenarios, Romano conducted boundary work to defend his journalistic reputation. One Twitter user posted 'fab knows nothing about Arsenal he's not reliable for Arsenal just repeats what other people say'. Romano responded by retweeting a post that attributed him with reporting that Arsenal have asked for information on Mykhailo Mudryk with the comment 'probably you forgot this call on Mudryk and Arsenal last summer mate (winking emoji) August 29 . . . I'll update you if Arsenal will make an official proposal. No update yet' (19/11). However, there were also replies to positive tweets from users. One Twitter user posted: 'he doesn't make up fake stories or throw links to random players unlike many other journalists' to which Romano responded, 'thanks mate—I don't like fake news or stories . . . this content was not to push any transfer or signing, just to explain the project and the whole process' (8/11).

Sourced transfer stories are a marker of ethical and transparent practice within the genre (Reed and Harrison 2019; Rojas-Torrijos and Mello 2021). The data showed that 61.7% of Romano's authored tweets (see Table 2) were unsourced (i.e., they did not indicate a source), which is slightly lower than Reed and Harrison's finding of 66.4%. According to these findings, Romano is injecting more, but not significantly greater, sourcing into transfer stories than what previous research has found.

Table 2. Number and percentage of sourced and unsourced tweets under the Transfer News (unattributed) category.

Transf. News (Unattributed)	No. of Tweets	Tweet %
Sourced	46	38.3
Unsourced	74	61.7
Total	120	100

Romano did mention agents as sources, such as a tweet about Napoli player Khvicha Kvaratskhelia that also contained a link to an interview with agent Christian Emile on Romano's YouTube channel. The naming of sources could be impacted by the 280-character limit on each tweet. Romano's named contacts consisted of player agents, players, managers, directors, and chief executives, which does not represent a departure from traditional understandings of 'official' sources (Sherwood et al. 2017a).

Romano's tweets related to men's football and his authored transfer tweets focused on the wealthiest clubs in the main European leagues of England, Germany, Italy, and Spain. This finding is consistent with previous research that has discovered sports journalists are operating in an increasingly narrow sports news environment that prioritises major football clubs (Cable and Mottershead 2018).

In some cases, clubs were mentioned on only one occasion because their player had attracted interest from one of the leading European teams. Palmeiras, a Brazilian club based in Sao Paolo, was mentioned three times (2%—see Table 3) due to the story being circulated that its player Endrick was attracting interest from Real Madrid, Chelsea, and Paris-Saint Germain. Other clubs were mentioned once because of noteworthy developments, such as highly rated midfielder Pablo Marin about to sign a new contract with Real Sociedad (6/11).

Table 3. Number and percentage of times that clubs were mentioned in the Transfer News (Unattributed) category.

Club	No. of Mentions	Mention %
Barcelona	14	9.3
Chelsea	12	8
Real Madrid	11	7.3
Manchester United	10	6.6
Paris Saint-Germain	9	6
Arsenal	7	4.6
Inter Milan	6	4
Manchester City	5	3.3
Bayern Munich	5	3.3
AS Roma	5	3.3
Liverpool	5	3.3
AC Milan	5	3.3
Borussia Dortmund	4	2.6
Brighton & Hove Albion	4	2.6
Inter Miami	3	2
Newcastle United	3	2
Palmeiras	3	2
Tottenham	2	1.3
Napoli	2	1.3
West Ham United	2	1.3
Lazio	2	1.3
PSV Eindhoven	2	1.3
Sporting Lisbon	2	1.3
Dynamo Moscow	2	1.3
Other (clubs mentioned once)	26	61.7
Total	151	100

Romano's approach to transfer stories is international in scope, which demonstrates how sports journalism practice has globalised (Boyle 2006). Sports journalism is classically organised according to the beat system whereas sports journalists concentrate on one team. Romano's sports journalism is versatile and agile, which enables him to develop contacts across multiple clubs. He is effectively operating as his own news brand and is not anchored to the physical constraints of covering the press conferences and live events of a particular club.

Although promotional authored tweets were low at 0.2 per cent of the overall sample (see Table 4), Romano's highlighting of his journalistic work was predominantly through retweets. Accounts retweeted on more than one occasion were outlets where his work was being published or his own previous tweets that either repeated recent news in case users missed it the first time or to remind audiences that he was first or correct with stories. There were signs in Romano's retweets that his broader journalistic output contained subjective opinions, such as an 888 Sport post that linked to one of his articles and stated: 'Juventus are a mess and the club needs a long term solution. Here @FabrizioRomano pens his thoughts on Juve and what they will do to solve their current problem' (30/11). Two retweets involved non-journalistic promotion, which is where brand building crosses into influencing. One was from the Sorare account, a fantasy football game, that posted: 'Look who's ready for the Global Cup! Our man @FabrizioRomano gives you 5 breakout candidates to consider for your Sorare #GlobalCup22 team. Sign up now, it's completely free to play! (link inserted)' (15/11). The other retweet was from Hisense Sports, an electrical appliances company sponsoring the World Cup, that read: 'The Hisense #PerfectMatch Tour will be launched on Nov. 21 at the City Walk in Dubai, HERE WE GO! Follow @hisensesports for a behind-the-scenes look at our journey to the #FIFAWorldCup Qatar 2022 and exclusive content from everyone's favorite leged @KAKA!' (19/11).

Table 4. The Twitter accounts retweeted by Fabrizio Romano.

Retweeted Accounts	No. of Tweets	Retweet %
Caught Offside	22	43.1
Own Twitter Account	18	35.3
888 Sport	3	5.9
Other (retweeted once)	8	15.7
Total	51	100

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study focused on a key influencer in sports journalism who specialises in football transfers with an international reach and significant social media following. Romano's approach to sports journalism practice is situated in classic norms and values of contacts, scoops, and transfer stories. However, this traditional outlook is adapted to a fast-paced and interactive 24/7 social media environment.

The research found Romano's tweets were situated in the hyper-commercialised aspects of sports journalism, that of transfer news involving mainly prominent football clubs. Romano is professionalising sports journalism activity in the move away from subjectivity towards objectivity and the focus on news rather than opinion. Romano's persona is built on professional activity rather than personal insights. Romano therefore subverts understandings of personal branding and influencing that emphasise the personal, subjectivity, and opinion (Molyneux and Holton 2015; Brems et al. 2017; Olausson 2018).

Romano displayed elements of influencer culture in the retweets from the accounts of products or services, specifically Sorare and Hisense. Journalistic brand building was evident in retweets of his work on other platforms and interactions with followers as he defended criticism and highlighted praise for his work. One authored tweet indicated that the post was an advertisement, although the retweets for Sorare and Hisense did not clearly separate the advertising from the editorial, which arguably could have been addressed with

a comment on the retweet to indicate its commercial nature. The use of Romano's 'Here We Go' catchphrase in the Hisense Sports retweet suggests it is employed as an advertising slogan as well as a journalistic one.

Romano adopts the ethical practice of attributing news from other journalistic sources to help sustain his prodigious rate of tweeting, which is indicative of the intensification of sports journalism practice (Moritz 2015). The republishing of or linking to others' work is not unique to Romano and has become a widespread sports journalism practice in the digital age (Hutchins and Rowe 2012). On the one hand, a prominent sports journalist such as Romano can divert attention away from other practitioners, including the original sources of the story who deserve to receive credit. Conversely, it can be argued that Romano's posting of attributed tweets raises visibility and attention to the work of those journalists. Romano was prepared to compliment other news sources for their scoops. For example, Romano tweeted 'Great One' in reply to CBS Sports reporter James Benge posting the exclusive that Al Nassr was the first club to offer Cristiano Ronaldo a contract following his departure from Manchester United (30 November).

Romano's tweets included very little play-by-play commentary, which adds to the debate on the continued significance of game coverage to contemporary sports journalism practice (Shermak 2018; Moritz and Mirer 2021; Randles 2021).

The tweets did not highlight the controversy of the World Cup taking place in Qatar with its human rights record, even though this was a key talking point within sports journalism during the data collection period. The unattributed tweets did not contain either investigative sports journalism (Rowe 2017) or social justice commentary (Forde and Wilson 2018; Weedon et al. 2018). It may be that Romano adopts this approach beyond the scope of this study, such as in his broader journalistic output or at other times on Twitter. This finding should prompt discussion on whether subjectivity and opinion are desirable on social media, as these approaches allow sports journalists to speak truth to power and draw attention to social injustice.

Romano's approach to professionalism is highly influential on the future trajectory of sports journalism, as it provides practitioners and news organisations with a roadmap to significant followings and audiences. However, this study raises concerns that a shift towards ultra-specialised labour means the responsibility for challenging power and highlighting social justice issues becomes less clear. If the obligation for critical and inquiring sports journalism does not always apply to *all* its practitioners in *all* contexts, then *who* does it apply to and under *what* contexts, conditions and circumstances?

A limitation of this study is that it does not explore whether Romano's transfer stories in the sample materialised. There are indications that Romano was producing scoops that came true, such as the Swedish winger Dejan Kulusevski returning from injury to play for Tottenham (6/11). However, a longer-term assessment of stories in the Transfer News (unattributed) category would have to be made, particularly once the transfer window opened in January, and would warrant a follow-up study. Another limitation is this study specifically analyses Twitter, which constitutes only one aspect of Romano's overall sports journalism practice. Therefore, the data only provide a partial picture of Romano's output, albeit an important one, given the prominence of the platform in sports journalism and its centrality in providing a platform for practitioners such as Romano to substantially grow and develop their profiles.

Romano is not the only sports journalist with more than a million Twitter followers who specialises in transfer stories. For example, ESPN's NFL journalist Adam Schefter, The Athletic's NBA reporter Shams Charania and ESPN's National Basketball Association (NBA) journalist Adrian Wojnarowski, are prominent in this practice, with the latter, like Romano, having a catchphrase 'Woj Bomb' (Sprung 2021). In football, The Athletic's David Ornstein and Sky Sport Italia's Gianluca Di Marzio have earned similar reputations as elite transfer journalists through cultivation of contacts.

Like Romano, these prominent story-getters have significant social media followings (Schefter 10.1 m on Twitter, Wojnarowski 5.7 m, Charania 2 m and Ornstein 1.1 m). This

article shows the benefits of taking a case study approach to sports journalism practice and professionalism in a social media age of highly visible and influential practitioners.

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Article

Social Media Publishing Strategies of German Newspapers: Content Analysis of Sports Reporting on Social Networks by German Newspapers—Results of the 2021 Social Media International Sports Press Survey

Christof Seeger [1], Thomas Horky [2,*], Jörg-Uwe Nieland [3] and Peter English [4]

[1] Faculty of Printing and Media, Stuttgart Media University, Nobelstraße 10, 70569 Stuttgart, Germany
[2] Faculty of Culture, Media, Psychology, Macromedia University, Gertrudenstraße 3, 20095 Hamburg, Germany
[3] Institute for Media and Communication Science, University of Klagenfurt, Universitätsstraße 65/67, 9020 Klagenfurt am Wörthersee, Austria
[4] School of Business and Creative Indsutries, Sunshine Coast University, 90 Sippy Downs Dr, Sippy Downs, QLD 4556, Australia
* Correspondence: t.horky@macromedia.de

Abstract: Newspaper sports departments in Germany are reacting to changes in social media by expanding their offerings and employing a variety of publishing and engagement strategies. In this constantly evolving media environment, it is important to understand how newsrooms utilize social media to inform their audiences. This study examines the approaches German newspapers apply to publishing sports content on social media, and outlines how users interact with these posts. In analyzing these aspects, this paper applies theoretical elements of agenda setting and audience engagement, gender in media, and quality and diversity of published content. Social media posts were examined across eight German publications, totaling 3633 posts from Twitter and Facebook. Results in the study, which is part of the global 2021 Social Media International Sports Press Survey, highlighted how most of the content published by German newspapers on social media aimed to redirect users to the publications' websites. The findings also reflect how social media is used less as an editorial space and more as part of a campaign to increase the audience. These results demonstrate challenges for the quality of sports coverage distributed via social networks in Germany.

Keywords: social media; sports journalism; audience engagement; agenda setting; diversity; quality; International Sports Press Survey

1. Introduction

Social media is playing an increasingly important role in sports communication (Billings and Hardin 2016) and sports journalism across the world. In Germany, the sports departments of newspapers are reacting to this change by expanding their offerings on social media by using a variety of publishing and engagement strategies. These possible strategies range from simply distributing the content published in print to changing it into special online content, to content created specifically for social media channels. The connection with club and association, league, or competition content plays a special role. The use of fans, clubs, or athletes on social networks has been studied worldwide (cf. Abeza et al. 2021; Grimmer 2019) and, as a result, social media can be understood as a new form of distribution by digital media companies (Schneider 2013) and newsrooms. This expansion differentiates the program of sports journalism with regard to digitization (Newman 2011), with the content contributing to the digital business model of formerly exclusively analog newspaper brands, mostly in an uncertain way (Wikström and Ellonen 2012).

Newspaper editors seem to use different strategies when distributing content via social networks. On the one hand, the goal can be to increase the reach of an article; on

the other hand, there is an opportunity to increase journalistic diversity and ultimately, the quality of sports journalism. The first function can be understood as addressing the audience in the sense of audience engagement. Changes, including the expansion of topics, the focus of content, sources, or different authorships, would mean an increase in diversity in newsroom coverage. In the constantly changing media environment, it is important to understand how newsrooms are utilizing social media to inform and engage with their audiences and which kinds of strategies are used by newsrooms. The results can help assess the importance of digital content in sports journalism. As a result, this study examines the strategies newspapers in Germany apply to publishing sports content on social media. It also describes how users react to this content through their interactions with the newspapers' social media posts. In examining the types of posts and the proportion of photos or videos, as well as the interaction with users in the form of answers, likes, shares, or retweets, these results have been utilized to evaluate the relevance of social media for sports reporting in traditional newspapers in Germany.

In summary, the study analyzes the following research question: How do traditional newspapers in Germany distribute the content of sports reporting via social networks? Special focus is placed on the form of audience engagement and the variety of reporting. In order to answer the question, the study on the global comparison of sports reporting in print media, the International Sports Press Survey (ISPS), was expanded to include social networks as a form of distribution.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Approach

Sports journalism and media scholarship have often focused on content, including in previous versions of the ISPS (Schultz-Jorgensen 2005; Horky and Nieland 2013; Rowe 2007, 2013). While this approach continues to be important in tracking changes in sports publishing, it is also vital to examine social media content to understand how official organizational publishing is applied on this growing platform that can be increasingly important to some media. In the evolving digital environment, newspapers have been described as "multi-platform enterprises" (Ju et al. 2014, p. 3), with their journalists operating as "multi-media gatekeepers", by determining which content is directed to print, online, or social media, and which information is ignored (English 2017, p. 493; cf. Nölleke et al. 2017). The roles of journalists and editors have been expanded to include social media on top of traditional routines (Abisaid and Li 2020), with duties including publishing news, stories, and various content on these newer types of platforms to increase readership and hits, allow direct contact with users, and receive reactions such as likes, shares, or replies.

Pavlik (2000) examined the influence of new technologies, such as social networks, on journalism and was able to identify four changes: "(1) how journalists do their job, (2) the content of news, (3) the structure of the newsroom and the news industry, and (4) the relationship between news organizations and their publics" (p. 236). Wilson (2008) demonstrated the importance of Facebook for journalism in the early years after its launch in 2004, and, in her analysis of the different production of sports news in print and online, Reed (2013) examined Facebook and Twitter and identified different strategies of news gathering and their impact on the profession. Schultz and Sheffer (2010) were able to show how, in sports journalism, the social network Twitter, in particular, was used for distribution and thus for increasing reach.

Burggraaff and Trilling (2020) examined the strategies of distribution using a quantitative content analysis of Dutch online and print news articles. The focus of the automated analysis of nine media was on news production and the different news values in print and online. They found "significant differences between online and print news" and argued "that they can be explained by focusing on the journalistic routines" (p. 125). Some editors even published more reports online than offline (in print), and the authors referred to the faster way of working in these evolving newsrooms. Reference was made to the thematic focus in terms of the different quality and the variety of sources. As a result, the authors

concluded, there were "visible differences between online and print news in terms of news values" (p. 126).

2.1. Audience Engagement

Media content is distributed via digital media, such as social networks, in order to reach a larger audience. Media organizations utilize social networks primarily to bring topics to a broader public, to increase the audience, and start a dialogue with the audience. In addition to the possibility of reaching a younger audience, Cassilo (2021) describes various strategies for audience engagement in the field of sports journalism and social media:

> "[...] successful engagement strategies on social media allow news organizations to spread their content to a wider audience, including people who do not normally visit that publication's website . . . Furthermore, by engaging with an audience via social media, journalists and media organizations will foster a relationship with their audience. [...] Finally, engagement helps sports journalists do their reporting" (pp. 293–94).

From this perspective, various questions arise, such as the frequency, type, and form of presentation of the topics that are disseminated in sports by traditional media via social networks. Furthermore, it is important to understand which topics attract the greatest attention from the audience and which types of posts receive the most interaction from readers.

This form of media content dissemination to reach a bigger audience can also be explained by the theory of agenda setting (McCombs 2004). Fortunato (2008) and Zimmerman et al. (2011) employed this approach to examine sports organizations and, since the existence of social networks, there has also been analysis of agenda setting in digital media, including intermedia agenda setting (Anderson and Caumont 2014; Sayre et al. 2010; Groshek and Groshek 2013). The theory of agenda-setting in the field of social networks has also been examined several times in relation to sports (Abeza and Sanderson 2022). In contrast to athletes, clubs, or associations, media organizations have rarely been the focus of attention (Oelrichs 2022).

Another shift in contemporary media is that journalists—and sports journalists—have become an important target group for social media content, especially in relation to human interest stories on athletes (Oelrichs 2022). Sportspeople are a key component of sports coverage (see Horky and Nieland 2013; Rowe 2013; Schultz-Jorgensen 2005), and with their increased presence on social media—and, in some nations, reduced traditional media appearances—their posts can be repurposed as news content, with social media becoming a source (Oelrichs 2022). Abisaid and Li (2020) note how social media is a more relaxed style of communication by journalists, especially compared with the more rigid rules based on objectivity in traditional sports media. Other studies have examined social media as a means of self-portrayal by athletes, clubs, or associations (Lebel and Danylchuk 2012), as a form of distribution to circumvent the traditional information service of sports journalism (Nölleke et al. 2017), or with different content and forms of sports reporting (Kian and Clavio 2011). Social media is often understood as a marketing tool to spread information and engage fans (Bowman and Cranmer 2014; Boyle 2012). Moritz (2015) analyzed the influence of digital media on the flow of news (cf. Wigley and Meirick 2008).

Twitter has been found to be a popular and effective tool for reporting in sports journalism, with the platform's ability to break news quickly, providing commentary and opinion being quickly recognized by journalists (see Abisaid and Li 2020; English 2016; Nölleke et al. 2017; Schultz and Sheffer 2010; Oelrichs 2020, 2022). Ju et al. (2014) examined the social media accounts of 66 American newspapers, finding Twitter to be the most influential social media network, with a greater audience reach than Facebook. However, editors doubted the effort and subsequent results of including social media in the journalists' roles and routines. Oelrichs (2022) notes how German journalists generally appeared reluctant to utilize social media compared with other nations and that this approach also applied in sports. Previously, Oelrichs (2020) outlined that German sports

journalists were reserved in their Twitter and social media usage (see also Nölleke et al. 2017), with low use of personal accounts, and the conclusion that sports journalism in the nation was less controversial and less suited to social media than political reporting. Despite the journalists' apparent reluctance to use social media, Oelrichs (2022) found that 16.1 percent of articles in three online German publications contained social media as a source. The rate of usage was lower in soccer, other team sports, and winter sports. In India and Australia, English (2017) found that sports journalists balanced the demands of giving their opinion and reporting factual information on Twitter, despite little formalized organizational guidelines or controls. However, more opinion was included in their social media posts, compared with content in traditional media stories. It is important to note that in this area of sports media, less is known about how news organizations utilize social media platforms for their publishing and engagement and it is a key reason for this study.

2.2. Quality and Diversity

Examining the quality and diversity of sports media is another important aspect to consider in contemporary sports media research. Voakes et al. (1996) noted diversity as an enduring concept in the context of mass media. They introduced a variety of sources and topics as the main elements of diversity in newspapers of different sizes and scopes. Looking from the recipient's perspective, Urban and Schweiger (2014) explained diversity, relevance, ethics, impartiality, objectivity, and comprehensibility can be employed to define the quality of news. The issues of quality and diversity are particularly important in the changing media environment, which in the different market conditions, has involved combining editorial desks and experimenting with new business models. For example, the general global decline in readership, subscriptions, and advertising seems all but irreversible. The intermedial competition, including live reporting on television and the constant potential for online and social media reporting updates, place an additional burden on the work of newspaper editors and staff. As a result, they have to generate content and illustrate perspectives that have not been previously provided to viewers. In this environment, newspapers have to include important background details in stories and offer more information than purely live commentary, otherwise, the existence of print journalism will be endangered. By examining the types of posts newspapers publish on social media, this study provides an indication of the relevance of this medium in German sports journalism.

The variations in coverage of genders in sports reporting can be described as an important aspect of diversity and also quality. In research, gender diversity has already been examined several times with regard to the authorship of articles and as a thematic focus of reporting. The male dominance of sports reporting and sports content has been a regular focus in media research, including in newsrooms and reporting. Based on the ISPS, Rowe (2013, pp. 235–9) wrote about the "under-representation of female sports writers" and "a profound masculine bias" in sports journalism. This theme has been consistent across media across the world, including Germany, the US, Spain, and Australia (Abisaid and Li 2020; Horky and Nieland 2013; Ihle 2022; Kian and Clavio 2011; Ramon 2016; Rowe 2013). For example, in German television news, less than 10 percent of coverage has been dedicated to women's sport, reflecting the organizational view that there lower overall newsworthiness for female athletes and competition (Ihle 2022). This finding is consistent with previous work examining gender inequality in sports, with Ihle (2022, p. 22) concluding there is a "systematic disadvantage" in women's coverage. The disparity between male and female content in sports was also found on social media. Abisaid and Li (2020) examined Twitter usage by male and female sports journalists in the US to investigate how they communicated with their audience. They found that while both sets of reporters tweeted at the same rate, statistically, they employed the social media platform in different ways as part of their reporting routines. Male journalists were more likely to post about sports, but less likely to tweet about women's sports, and applied an "assertive language style" (Abisaid and Li 2020, p. 769). Female journalists were more reluctant to post about

sports and used less assertive language. They found that only 2.3 percent of sports tweets were about female sports and athletes.

> "One of the most promising and touted features of social media is its potential to democratize information to the masses. In the case of sports journalism, this would mean that women's sports would be given equal consideration with men's sports. This has proven not to be the case" (Abisaid and Li 2020, p. 772).

This previous research allows for important comparisons with how German newspapers utilize social media in relation to the diversity by gender of athletes and teams.

3. Methodological Approach and Survey Design

Since it was founded in 2005 (Schultz-Jorgensen 2005; Horky 2010), the ISPS has been providing data on the quality and structural diversity of sports reporting by print media. In the 2011 survey, a worldwide international comparison was provided with an analysis of 81 newspapers in 14 nations. The central findings were that men report on male sports, topics apart from current event reporting played a minimal role, and the quality of research was low (Horky and Nieland 2013). How about the situation ten years later? Could there be any changes or development? When considering the sports events and coverage within this decade, there appear to be significant challenges and a shift in the quality of reporting. Major events during this period include the first World Cup on African soil in 2010, the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics in Brazil, and the 2018 World Cup in Russia. Each mega-sport event opened up a debate on sports reporting and its contents. More and more investigative reporting, including doping scandals and corruption by FIFA, was visible and gained increased focus on the impact of sports journalism. Taking these changes and developments into account, it is worth examining the situation ten years later to provide comparisons and outline changes in the industry.

In 2021 a new edition of ISPS was initiated, with a quantitative content analysis of sports reporting in print media. At least one country was included from each continent in the period from April to July 2021. At least three publications were selected from each country: One nationwide distributed (quality) newspaper, one tabloid, and a regional newspaper. For Europe, there were 14 papers coded (8 for Germany, 3 for France, and 3 for Greece). For the 12 participants plus coding teams, a good intercoder reliability coefficient, according to Holsti (0.94) was calculated after a pretest and several training sessions (Krippendorf 2018). The analysis of the entire sports coverage (not just the sports section) comprised 18 variables on a structural and content level. These 18 variables are the same as those used (and tested) in the previous ISPS studies. The 2021 data set of eight countries contains a total of 6720 articles (2011: 6452, see: Horky and Nieland 2013).

Related to this examination, for the first time, an additional quantitative content analysis of social media accounts was conducted by examining eight German newspapers, called the 2021 Social Media International Sports Press Survey (SM-ISPS). Facebook and Twitter, two of the most popular social networks in the German population as a whole, were selected for the analysis. Facebook, as a network for public discussion, is the biggest social network in the country by number of users, while the social messaging service Twitter is very often used in the context of (sports) journalism like a news agency (Grimmer 2019). The implementation of the SM-ISPS was applied in the same way as the print study, within the same investigation period, carried out by the same group of coders as at the ISPS. The intercoder reliability for this social media analysis was as good as the print analysis, according to Holsti (0.94), and was calculated, depending on the variables, between 0.7 and 1.0. The analysis of 3633 articles posted by the newspapers on Facebook and Twitter included 11 variables taken from the print ISPS. These were the form and content of the contributions and the distinction between text, video, or photo content covering athletes or teams, as well as the type of sport, the authorship of the contributions, including gender of authors (i.e., named journalists or news agencies), different topics, such as fans or results, the importance of nationalism, and the type and number of sources. These variables

enabled us to describe the characteristics of the posts on the social networks on the one hand, and to draw a comparison with the print posts on the other.

Similar to the ISPS, the data were collected between 15 April and 2 July 2021 on an artificial week on 14 coding dates. If the article on the social networks linked to an article on the homepage, this article was analyzed. The analyzed media brands were selected by deliberate sampling. The media studied were also selected by deliberate sampling, taking into account the various media genres in Germany, from national titles to regional newspapers. The media brands contain the nationwide paper, the tabloid BILD, and the quality (broadsheet) papers *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, as well as the left-wing *tageszeitung*, and regional papers *Hamburger Abendblatt*, MOPO (Hamburg), *Stuttgarter Nachrichten*, and *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*. The newspapers with the highest circulation were selected in each category, representing the newspaper landscape in Germany. For each media brand, the accounts of the sports department on both networks were analyzed. The posts were collected manually, and after 24 h, each post was examined for user reactions. To evaluate these interactions, the number and type of reactions by users were counted. The study period was after the COVID-19 sports lockdown in Germany, but the ongoing pandemic likely had an impact on the results for sports journalism (Finneman and Thomas 2022).

Applying these guidelines allows an analysis of the development of sports reporting in this 10-year time frame and provides an understanding of the challenges of print media due to distribution channels like social media, including decreasing circulations and income and the increasing impact of digital technologies.

4. Results

The entire sample contains 3633 posts on social media. When looking at the number of published posts on Facebook and Twitter, it is striking that 71.7% of the articles were published on Twitter, while 28.3% were published on Facebook. Even if the number of published articles were very different in relation to the different media houses (e.g., BILD: 1703 articles and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 229 articles), Twitter posts were more frequent (see Figure 1). Due to the large differences between the number of posts in the individual newspapers, a comparison of the different strategies between the individual editorial offices will not be made in the following results.

The content of the posts was rarely created exclusively for social networks, with most referring to existing articles: In 96.0% of the cases, the online articles are not original content, but the user is redirected to the publisher's homepage. About 2.0% of the posts on social media were a link to a video that had already been published online. Less than one percent represented articles created exclusively for social media. The visualization of the articles was mostly to be described as traditional, with 87.5% of the articles on social media illustrated with a photo and only 5.5% with a photo and a video.

In addition, another 15.0% of the linked articles were behind a paywall and could not be read without a paid subscription. Almost every second article was marked with a name and thus written by a journalist (48.7%), 11.7% of the articles were agency news, while 87.2% of articles had a picture, and only 5.5% had an additional video.

Similar to the study of print editions (ISPS), there is a very large imbalance in terms of the gender of the authors in the SM-ISPS. 90.9% of the articles could be assigned to male authors, and only 5.3% were by females. While the number of articles by male authors is significantly higher on social media than in print media (72.6%), there is minimal difference for female authors compared with print media articles (5.9%).
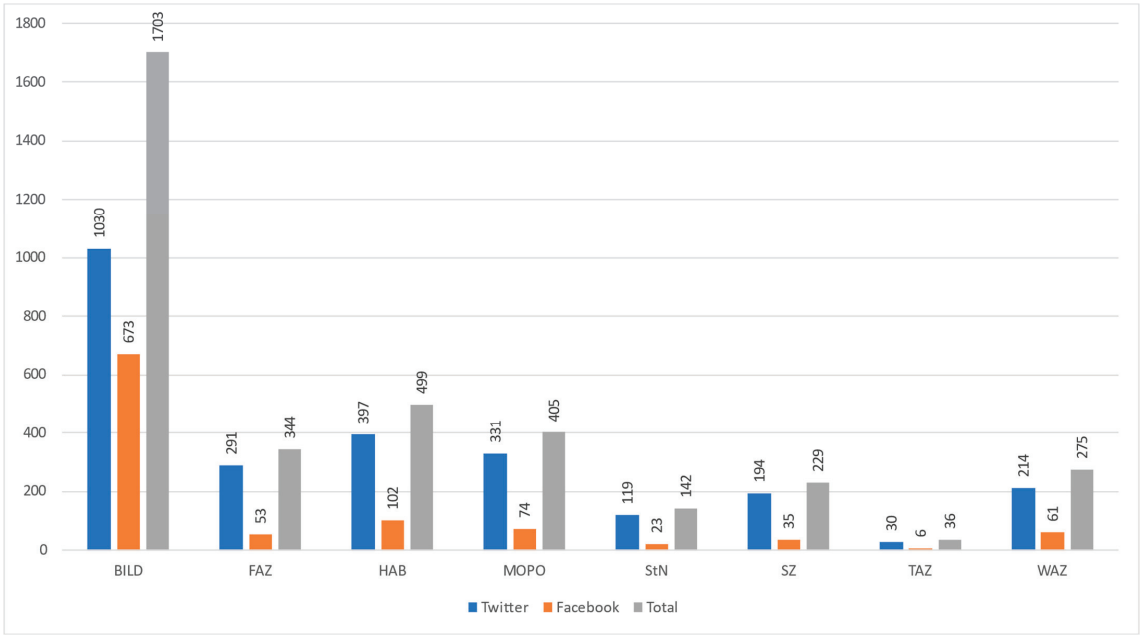
Figure 1. Sample of 2021 SM-ISPS.

On social media, 38.6% of the articles reported on individual athletes, while 32.6% reported on a team. Sports officials, such as coaches or managers, were reported on in only 13.9% of the articles (see Figure 2). On the other hand, sports officials were identified as sources in 47.9% of the articles, and athletes themselves were identified with similar frequency (47.0%). The gender imbalance of named authors can be found with athletes too: 94.5% of the individual athletes were male, most of them obviously soccer players or men's teams. These results thus confirm the results of the 2021 print study of the ISPS.
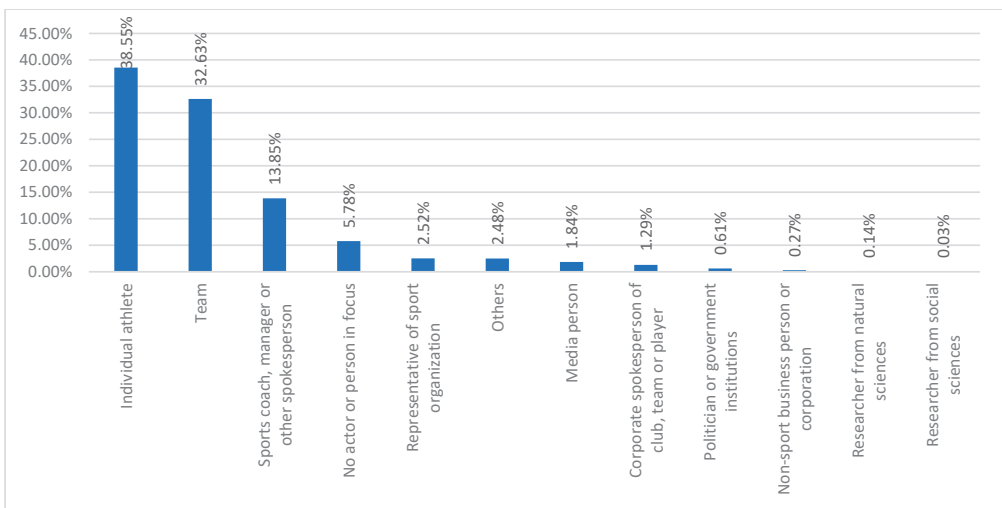

Figure 2. Focus of reporting (2021 SM-ISPS).

Regarding the quality of articles on social media, the number of sources found in the coverage was low. In 52.5% of the articles examined, one source was quoted, 19.8% named two sources, and 17.6% no source at all. The sources of the contributions came mainly from the sports system itself. Sports coaches, managers, or other spokespersons (47.9%) and individual athletes (47.0%) were the most cited sources in the articles examined, with all other sources below ten percent. This result, with regard to the sources, is also comparable to the 2021 ISPS.

An interesting aspect could be observed in the selection of the reported sports (see Figure 3). In print and on social media in Germany, there is a strong focus on football/soccer as the main media sports in the country. However, with ISPS and SM-ISPS, both examinations show an interesting difference. While in the print publications, every third article was not about soccer, this is different on social media. 80.7% of the examined articles had soccer as a topic, followed by tennis (2.9%) and basketball (2.5%). In the analysis of the print editions, football accounted for 66.0% of content (Horky and Nieland 2013).
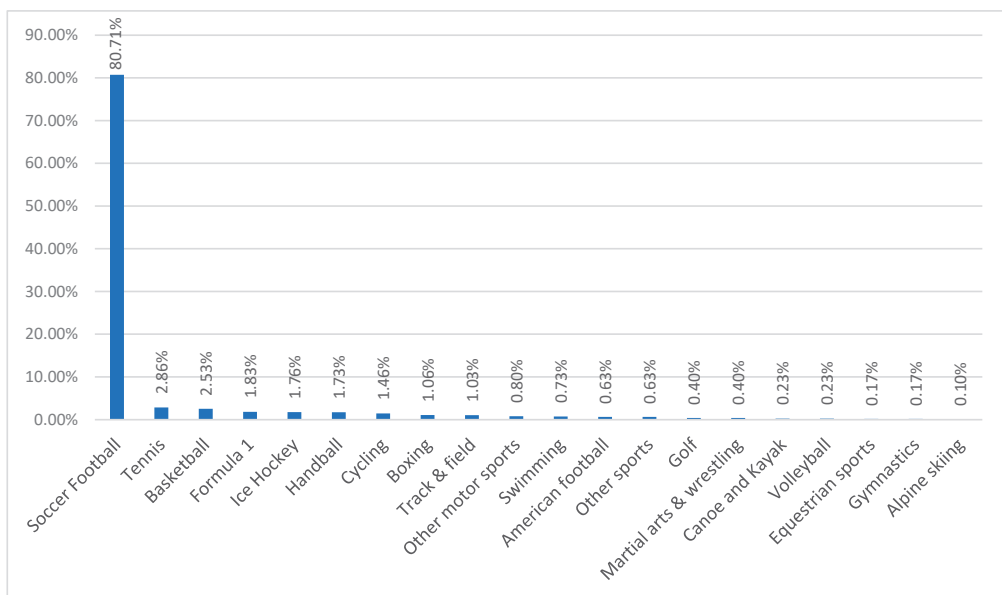
Figure 3. Covered sports disciplines on social media (2021 SM-ISPS).

A feature of social media posts is they offer the audience ways to react to articles. The most frequently used function for interaction is a like to express that the user likes the published article or just wants to keep the focus on it. The opposite can also occur, with a dislike, if the article is most obviously not liked. Disliking on Twitter does not exist as a function, but there were 11 dislikes on average on articles posted on Facebook.

With reference to the PESO approach of paid, earned, shared, and owned media (Kost and Seeger 2020; Xie et al. 2018), the forwarding and sharing of content as another form of interaction is particularly interesting. Publishers use social media to increase the reach of the core digital product as a form of audience engagement. Even though 7 out of 10 articles have been published on Twitter, the interaction rate with five average likes per article is significantly below the average of 108 likes on Facebook.

Posts with high audience engagement, i.e., a large number of interactions, can be an indication of importance for strategic decisions of the newsrooms. By far, the article with the most interactions and with that the biggest audience engagement in the sample, was a post by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on 21 June 2021 (see Figure 4). The post is a satirical topic of problems for the European Football Association (UEFA), with fans showing the rainbow

colors of diversity and tolerance inside stadiums (translation of headline: "Perceived Truth. Which UEFA has a problem with" . . . "traumatized teams continue to play despite a player suffering cardiac arrest", "an autocratic ruler can hold EM games in the Near East for his own PR", "open right-wing hooligans form a "black block" in the stadium", "packed spectator tiers without distance or masks during a pandemic", 100%: "A stadium should light up in rainbow colors as a sign of tolerance"). The post on Twitter received 15,534 likes and was shared 3868 times. The post is part of a very popular series of posts like this published by the editorial department. It is part of a series of humorous, politically motivated posts that are very popular in Germany in this newspaper. With its large number of likes and shares, it represents an exception in the study. All in all, posts about popular football got the highest rates in audience engagement, mostly by liking the post.

Figure 4. The post with the most interactions. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Twitter, 21 June 2021 (2021 SM-ISPS).

5. Discussion

The analysis of articles on social networks as part of the International Sports Press Survey proved, above all, the high function of the audience engagement of the newspapers examined. As described by Cassilo (2021), an essential publication goal is to increase the reach of articles already published on the website (and, often, already in print). Results in Germany show that most of the content published by newspapers on Twitter and Facebook aims to redirect users to the publication's website and that social media is used less as an editorial space and more as part of a campaign to increase the audience. The ways the news publications post content on social media provides a strong indication that there is no explicit social media strategy in the editorial offices but that these channels are only used for traffic generation, and thus, as reach suppliers. This is confirmed by the results of Oelrichs (2022), who called the process of utilizing social media as one of "copy and paste".

Regarding the interaction on different social networks, one explanation could be that there is more content in a Facebook post than on Twitter due to the possible publication size (number of characters)—but at least enough for the user to make an assessment of whether they want to like, dislike, or share. Another explanation is the sociodemographic characteristics in the respective social media. Facebook reaches a rather bigger and with that older target group, which may also be closer to newspaper subscribers, and therefore, this part of the audience may identify more with the topics being posted about. Twitter, on the other hand, has a proportionally younger demographic in Germany (Koch 2022). As a result, the willingness to interact might be higher on Facebook. This is also reflected in the comments left on posts (an average of 51 on Facebook and 1.5 on Twitter), as well as in the forwarding, retweeting, and sharing of posts. However, it is difficult to make an overall statement about these user engagements as the interactions differ greatly between the various brands. However, this form of audience engagement can be described as a strategy for distribution.

In addition, the results on interactions also highlight a form of audience engagement, with the reach being increased primarily through content from the entertainment and satire sectors. The post with the most interactions confirmed the results of other examinations about agenda setting by satirical websites during the 2014 Sochi Olympics (Nölleke et al. 2017). Satire seems to be a very successful style for posts to produce an intense interaction and increase the reach of articles through social media. However, the post of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, which had a particularly wide reach, highlights an important example of audience engagement that is usually lacking in the newsrooms.

The strong thematization or the intensive focus on football/soccer when comparing sports is evidence on the one hand of the high level of mediatization of football in Germany, and on the other hand, of the audience building and social media agenda setting (Wiske and Horky 2020). The agenda of sports on social media in Germany is set by football, with the game dominating coverage. Additionally, when analyzing the coverage of different sports, the Corona Pandemic could have had a small impact because, unlike professional football, many other sports have been affected by the sports lockdown.

We would like to speak here of a *Narrowing Effect*. The mediatization of soccer also helps this sport in terms of digitization. In the day-to-day editorial work of digital newsrooms, not only have the classical models and methods based on news values (Burggraaff and Trilling 2020) long been used but much of the newsroom's roles and routines are controlled by key performance indicators (KPI) like page impressions, number of unique users, number of shares and likes. In other words, the topics published tend to be those that are also clicked on most by the user community. This inevitably leads to a reduction in the range of topics and supports the effect of echo chambers since the selection algorithms only suggest what is read. However, on the other hand, only what is suggested on a user's timeline can be read. The conclusions of the editors in the selection of topics are then possibly distorted. One can say serendipity, i.e., the accidental confrontation of a user with content that they had not initially thought of but which he might nevertheless find interesting, is becoming increasingly unlikely.

In summary, these results show that newspapers largely lack a strategy when it comes to distributing their content via social networks and that there are challenges for the quality of sports coverage distributed via social networks. In addition to the thematic narrowing, there is also a clear lack of diversity, and thus, quality in the number and type of sources used and the type of contributions in terms of forms of presentation or visualization. The results of the social media study are similar to those of the print study, this means that the opportunity to improve quality through the other form of distribution via social networks has not been used. The narrowing effect, in the sense of thematization through the focus on high-click media topics such as football, leads to a further loss of diversity. Men's football, which is mostly observed journalistically by men (Horky and Nieland 2013; Rowe 2013), also contains a strong focus on male authors in terms of gender diversity. This is

particularly significant when one considers the fundamental infinity of digital editorial space, and thus, of journalistic offerings when distributing content via social networks.

Overall, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic during the SM-ISPS seemed to be small, with nearly all professional sports leagues covered in the German newspaper running competitions. However, there is an effect related to the 2021 Football European Championships, which dominates the coverage—particularly in Germany. This impact might also help explain the dominance of soccer in the survey of social media content.

To answer the research question, this study demonstrates that there is a missing strategy for distribution of sports reporting via social media. Thus, the study provides valuable insights for consideration and assessment of future distribution of sports reporting via social networks, with audience engagement as a main factor. Furthermore, in terms of diversity, the study highlights a comparable lack of quality in sports journalism when it comes to distribution via social media.

6. Conclusions and Limitations

This is the first time since the start of ISPS that the SM-ISPS has been included, with the addition of a survey on distribution of articles on social networks. The main purpose of this additional examination was to demonstrate strategies for distribution and the influence of digitization on sports journalism. A difference in quality, variety, distribution, and reception was detected between the print editions and the articles shared on social networks. The differences mainly related to the issue, which is triggered by paying particular attention to KPIs on social networks. This narrowing effect entails subsequent problems, such as less variety in terms of topics, authors, and thus, overall quality.

It is also apparent that there is a missing editorial strategy in the distribution of articles via social networks: Editorial decisions are rarely made by sports journalists but rather by editorial management, which is primarily intended to increase audience engagement. In the future, this result should be the focus of quality research with regard to journalistic content on social networks.

Of course, this SM-ISPS study has some limitations. Only German newspapers were examined as media brands, and the situation seems to be significantly different in other countries and continents. Although different editorial departments and their strategies were examined with national quality and tabloid newspapers, as well as several regional newspapers, the market for sports information is significantly more extensive and other organizations like associations, federations, or athletes, could have different distribution strategies.

In addition, the quantitative analysis was limited to the frequency of content and, as a result, the reasons for the decisions to post could be very different (human or economic resources). In addition, the study was limited to an investigation period in which mainly so-called summer sports have their competition events, so no statement can be made about winter sports. A reproduction over a longer period of time and with a more extensive sample would be desirable.

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Article

Tension between Journalistic and Entertainment Values in Live Soccer TV Commentary: The Commentator's Perspective

Jessica Kunert [1,*] **and Peer Kuni** [2]

1   Department of Journalism/Department of Communication, Faculty 02 Social Sciences, Media, and Sports, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, 55116 Mainz, Germany
2   Sky Sport, 85774 Unterföhring, Germany; peerkuni@aol.com
*   Correspondence: jessica.kunert@uni-mainz.de

Abstract: This article examines the tension between journalistic and entertainment values in live soccer TV commentary from the perspective of German commentators. We situate journalistic and entertainment values within the commentators' wider understanding of their roles as sports journalists and commentators, looking at a specific type of sports journalist who has different responsibilities from the general sports reporter. We asked how soccer commentators assess the role of journalistic and entertainment values in their work, and what constraints they face, such as how the perceived expectations of their employer affect this assessment. We interviewed 28 TV commentators, one radio commentator, and one expert working for relevant German TV channels and streaming platforms, such as ZDF, Sky, and DAZN. While all interviewees see themselves as companions telling the story of the match, most commentators in the sample value journalistic values over entertainment values, a surprising finding in the hyper-commercialized world of sports television. Well-founded journalistic expertise and soccer knowledge are considered most important. However, this assessment depends on factors such as the broadcaster's guidelines and the nature of the match. In summary, the role of the commentator is either an 'objective mediator' or an 'emotional entertainer', but this is a balancing act.

Keywords: entertainment; journalistic roles; live commentary; sports journalism

1. Introduction

This article studies how German live soccer TV commentators perceive the tension between journalistic and entertainment values in their work. We thereby looked at a special type of sports journalist who has a major influence on how the audience perceives a match as it unfolds (Barnfield 2013; Danneboom 1988; Schaffrath 2003). As commentators accompany a soccer match, they provide information about the match and thus fulfill an orientation function, but they also express their own opinion and entertain the audience (Bölz 2018, pp. 107–8), essentially mixing the journalistic forms of factual reporting and subjective commentary (Wiske 2017, p. 26). In this way, they influence the memory and evaluations of the audience (Schaffrath 2003; Vögele and Gölz 2016, pp. 35–36). While previous research on German live soccer commentary has focused on the characteristics of a 'good' commentary (e.g., Schaffrath 2018, 2019; Wiske 2017), this study focuses on how journalistic and entertainment values are incorporated into commentary and how the tension between them is evaluated by commentators. On the one hand, journalistic values are, for example, objectivity, balance, precise expression, and conciseness (e.g., English 2017; Wiske 2017, p. 27). Furthermore, we operationalized Mast's (2004, p. 476) four basic journalistic skills as journalistic values (expertise, technical competence, mediation competence, and organizational competence; more on these values below). Entertainment values, on the other hand, include emotionality, storytelling, providing inside information, and partiality (e.g., Kroppach 1978, p. 137; Schaffrath 2007; Scheu 2007). Subjectivity

and opinion cannot be classified as either/or because it depends on how the subjectivity or opinion is expressed. Both can be conveyed with journalistic value in mind, i.e., in an analytical matter, or with the goal of entertainment, for example with great emotion (Lang 2009). Therefore, these values appear in both categories in the course of the analysis. In addition, we investigated which constraining factors affect the commentators' evaluation of these values for their commentary, such as the context of their broadcaster. As live soccer commentary is a hybrid form of journalism, it usually contains both journalistic and entertainment values, but we are interested in the evaluation of the respective importance of these values for the live commentary.

We chose Germany as the context for our case study. Here, the competition in live soccer broadcasting has increased sharply since 2017: soccer broadcasting rights for all German leagues and the national team matches are now distributed between multiple TV broadcasters and streaming services, down to splitting individual match days between platforms (Heinrich 2017; Sport1 2019). Furthermore, with the exception of the national matches and a few special leagues matches, soccer matches can only be watched for a subscription fee. Thus, the increasing fragmentation of channels means that there is a competition for audience attention (and wallets). As the commentators play a major role in shaping the soccer viewing experience, it is appropriate to study how they commentate on the matches and the devices they use.

We shed new light on the role of the commentator, a special type of sports reporter, and show that journalistic values are important to commentators' work. However, there is no uniformity in the sample, and the self-conceptions follow individual considerations that depend, for example, on their own views and the guidelines of their broadcaster.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Tensions in Sports Journalism

Sport has certain characteristics that lend themselves to making a product that warrants journalistic and entertainment treatment. As such, sport is characterized by "conflict, excitement, variety, physicality/personalization, strategic and tactical actions by soloists and teams, simple rules, open and measurable outcome, seriality of competitions" (Stiehler 2003, p. 164, translated by the authors; Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 2009)—a mix that audiences were found to enjoy in their spare time and get emotional rewards from (Raney 2006).

While sports journalism gathers great "economic capital" (English 2016) and has done so since the beginning of the mass media (Whannel 2009), insofar that it drives audience metrics and advertisement sales and is often prominently placed in print products and on media outlets' websites, sports journalists generally do not hold much prestige in the newsroom (Boyle 2006, 2017; English 2016; McEnnis 2020; Rowe 2007). The argument, especially made by journalists from other beats, is that sports is said to be trivial 'soft' journalism (Boyle 2017), with its journalists acting as uncritical 'fans' (Boyle 2006, 2017). Sports journalism has even been called "the world's best advertising agency" (Schultz Jørgensen 2005)—namely due to descriptive reporting of sports events, working with only few sources, and being more concerned with subjectivity than objectivity (Boyle 2006; McEnnis 2020; Schultz Jørgensen 2005).

This positioning of sports has direct effects on sports journalism and impacts the journalists' self-perceptions. Sports journalists reject that their beat is often derogatorily called "the toy department of the media" (Garrison 1989; Rowe 2007) and persist in claiming that they also hold journalistic capital in terms of holding power to account and investigative stories and are thus not simply 'fans' with access to sports venues and stars (English 2016, 2017, p. 537; Perreault and Bell 2022; Rowe 2007).

We can thus note a tension between journalistic and entertainment values in sports journalism. While the sports journalists' main desire has been found to inform their audience in a neutral and precise way, like their counterparts from other beats, providing entertainment and relaxation to the audience is also a high priority (for an overview over

studies of German sports journalists, see Schaffrath 2020, p. 53). Studies have found that, more often than not, 'light' reporting is the main output of sports journalism which caters towards the taste of the audience (Rowe 2007) and that storytelling features that takes audiences "behind the scenes" (Perreault and Bell 2022, p. 407). This does not have to be a negative point per se—live blogs, for example, are one of the most-read contents (McEnnis 2020, p. 1426)—but 'hard' journalism, such as investigative stories, do take the backseat. Moreover, sports journalists were also found to consciously emphasize entertaining and "enriching" (i.e., inside information) elements in their work (Perreault and Bell 2022, pp. 407–8). In summary, there is a tension between economic realities (i.e., drawing large audiences in with entertaining stories) and journalistic pursuits, mostly driven by further commercialization (McEnnis 2020).

Elements that drive this tension are developments such as the competition for sports rights, the limitation of the media to a few telegenic sports, and the tabloidization and the dominance of live reporting (Haynes 2019). Moreover, new players enter the (digital) stage, and thus, for example, new streaming services are founded, which offer broadcasts from previously underrepresented global sports and leagues to "tiny audiences . . . [that] generate much subscription revenue" (Whannel 2009, p. 210). Moreover, "insurgents", such as bloggers and team media (Perreault and Bell 2022), are coming to the fore, all of which requires journalism to adapt (Perreault and Bell 2022, p. 409). As the competition increases, this inevitably leads to an increasing entertainment orientation on the part of program creators, while information is being replaced by dramaturgically staged elements (Dohle and Vowe 2006). Thus, media sports like soccer, i.e., primarily top-level sports, are presented in an event-centered and often dramatized way—preferring events, topics, and people that offer an entertainment factor (Bertling 2009, p. 13).

2.2. The Live Report

The dramatization of an event is particularly true for live sports events, which are said to be largely responsible for the appeal of television (Wiske 2017, p. 95) (even for selling television sets, see Whannel 2009, p. 209) and are lauded as the "last bastion of the experience of simultaneous communal viewing" (Whannel 2009, p. 216) in an era of fragmented (media) experiences.

The live report provides authenticity for those at home: with the generation of tension, the feeling of being there in person, and technological aspects such as replay and slow motion which may make the media-mediated experience even "superior to the experience of live spectatorship" (Whannel 2009, p. 209). As Wiske (2017, p. 101, translated by the authors) says, "with an illustrative and image-rich broadcast, television uses the effect that the viewer can identify with the event and the athletes and put himself in their shoes". That the entertainment aspect plays an important role here is shown by the structure of a sports program alone. Live coverage of the actual soccer game, for example, accounts for only 45 percent of the total broadcast. The rest is made up of pre- and post-game coverage, for instance interviews, analyses, super slow motion, home stories of individual players, competitions, and sponsoring, essentially blurring the boundaries between journalism and entertainment (Wiske 2017, p. 48). However, unlike fictional entertainment, sport delivers a factual event, even though it is treated with sophisticated storytelling modes and dealt with as a spectacle with dramatic impact (Barnfield 2013; Whannel 2009). This approach provides entertainment in addition to journalistic information and opinion formation, allowing sports to address the audience on the level of affective and informative needs (Schauerte and Schwier 2002, p. 44). However, Grimmer and Horky (2011, p. 4) warn against entertainment values becoming too prominent. They note that more and more airtime around the actual sporting event is being filled with stories, leading to a lack of what they believe sports journalists should also be doing, which is to control and critique what they are covering. In addition, they criticize exaggerated forms of presentation, a reduced variety in the preparation of topics, and programming that is overall determined by emotional factors.

2.3. The Role of the Live Commentator

The live commentator is a special type of sports journalist with a different set of tasks compared to their colleagues at the news desk. In the second half of the 20th century, sports commentators were even found to set themselves apart from sports journalism, highlighting their pledge to be neutral and thus traditional journalistic values, even calling themselves 'broadcaster' instead of 'journalist' (Boyle 2006, p. 61). This stark notion is watered down or even gone with the increasingly commercialized sports environment since the 1990s, with entertainment and partiality coming to the fore (Boyle 2006, p. 63). In fact, a live commentator, especially on TV, may become a household name and thus a 'sports star' in their own right (McEnnis 2018). Live TV commentators might thus achieve high status with the audience, which may depend on the events they commentate on (e.g., national matches with high viewer interest) and the reach of the broadcaster they work for (see English 2016, p. 1012).

The commentator has a huge impact on how viewers perceive a soccer match. Thus, a reality of the sporting event is constructed that is dependent on the commentary (Bryant et al. 1977; Schaffrath 2003), as the commentator sets the frame of the match (Barnfield 2013, p. 331). However, the commentator is not solely responsible for the viewers' perception of the match. One intervening factor is the nature of the match, i.e., whether it is a match by the national team or by an unknown sports club. The problem here is that, even depending on the match, it is difficult to anticipate and satisfy the tastes of the viewers in front of the screens. Therefore, the commentators have to decide what style and what aims they want to achieve.

Soccer commentary is a hybrid of two forms of journalistic presentation. On the one hand, it is factual; on the other hand, it reflects a subjective view with an opinion. According to Mast (2004, p. 476), four basic journalistic skills are indispensable for commentary: expertise (e.g., on the topic and orienting knowledge), technical competence (e.g., basic journalistic skills such as research and writing), mediation competence (e.g., presentation format for the appropriate audience), and organizational competence (e.g., insight into production processes). As Barnfield (2013, p. 331) says, "commentary of a soccer match that is broadcast live on television is a complicated process" due to the multimodality of the medium: The focus is on the verbal accompaniment of the soccer match for the audience and in this context, the commentator should meaningfully complement the TV image with their descriptions. This includes supporting the picture's message with background information, explanations, their own opinion, the reproduction of the atmosphere as well as personal information about the players and well-dosed statistics, all within a carefully weaved triad of "chronicle [detailing the events], mimesis [detailing the events vividly and with presence] and plot [the overall narrative]" (Barnfield 2013, p. 331)—and thus both journalistic and entertainment elements. The commentator should be able to explain, convey, and judge quickly as well as be original (Zimmer 2016). Through their language, the commentator can excite and entertain the audience as well as enhance the overall product. This includes, but is not limited to, forms of intensification, emotional expression, and linguistic hysterization (Kroppach 1978, p. 137). In fact, entertaining elements such as side stories or dramatic elements, or 'color commentary', has been found to increase the audience's intention to watch other events "on the same channel or with the same commentators" (Lee et al. 2016; Bryant et al. 1977). As Lee and Bulitko (2010) noted, while color commentary may be added by one single commentator, along with play-by-play information, it is most often provided by experts, such as former professional players, who may add their past experiences or any kind of trivia that fits the situation at hand (Kuiper and Lewis 2013, p. 39). In slow phases of a match, the commentator and the expert might even "sound as though they are having a conversation in a private club" (Kuiper and Lewis 2013, p. 35). While this is a US- or UK-centric view, as two commentators are not the norm in Europe, this model of having an expert as a sidekick is being experimented with by German broadcasters such as DAZN. All in all, color commentary adds a "subjective and broad" view (Lee and Bulitko 2010, p. 253) to the experience of the audience through

storytelling and giving their own opinion (Lewandowski 2012, p. 68). Thus, entertainment elements have their firm place in the quality criteria catalogue.

The difficulty for the commentator is to bring the events directly to the point in their own words: "In sports journalistic reporting, events are broken down into actions and conveyed as experiences. The aim is to be able to translate the immediacy of sport into immediate language" (Bölz 2018, p. 175, translated by the authors). In doing so, the commentator must be able to absorb information quickly, i.e., be quick to act, and attempt to transfer his or her sensory impressions into words. Accordingly, the commentator's work is not only precise, but also fast. Due to this high load, the commentator should have a high ability to concentrate. Under this enormous pressure, ethey must show maximum performance. According to Wiske (2017, p. 127), this means that they must be linguistically original, quick-witted, spontaneous, and able to convey a portion of humor and entertainment in addition to their knowledge. Derived from this, it can be said that the ultimate goal of the commentator is to report on the match in such a way that the audience participates sensually and directly in what is happening (Mast 2004, p. 195).

Even when the match is interrupted, the commentator is called upon. Here the commentator has to deliver narrative text passages and, if necessary, fill the breaks with background information. To do this, the commentator should be prepared for all eventualities and know everything about the match, including all the relevant players. In addition, he or she must know the entire set of rules, i.e., have a lot of basic knowledge, and recognize events that the audience does not anticipate (Wiske 2017, p. 47). In addition, the commentator must be able to convey what they want to say in a structured way that is comprehensible to the viewers.

2.4. The 'Good' Commentary

Whether or not the audience enjoys listening to a soccer commentator is very subjective and is thus subject to tension. However, there are some criteria in the literature that make a 'good' live soccer commentator. These include rhetorical competence, i.e., being able to express oneself with a good choice of words on the subject, and the euphony of the commentator's voice—which is subjective to the taste of the viewers—all without overloading the audience (Schaffrath 2007, 2018). According to Wiske (2017, p. 27), further quality characteristics for a soccer commentator are neutrality, distance, and credibility, in addition to precise expression, concise analyses, originality, and spontaneity, as well as a low number of errors (Lang 2009, pp. 71–73). According to this, the commentator should report on the soccer match in a journalistic and unbiased manner and come across as credible and serious due to their broad soccer knowledge. Although they must be neutral, i.e., not sympathetic to a team and thus no "cheerleader" (English 2017), he or she should provide subjective evaluations and assessments of the match that put it in the viewer's perspective (Lang 2009).

The aforementioned quality criteria contradict the finding that it does not matter if the live commentator exaggerates or steps out of line, as in contrast to journalists from other beats, they may "violat[e] the norms of neutrality, balance, etc., in favor of audience loyalty and appeal" (Stiehler 2003, p. 165, translated by the authors). Accordingly, the commentator must cultivate a style to engage the viewers in front of the screens, even polarize, so that the viewer hears a clear opinion from the commentator (Schaffrath 2018, p. 55). In fact, this approach may even increase their level of recognition, especially in the mass medium of television, resulting in positive effects for them as sports journalists (Digel and Burk 2001, p. 27).

Audiences mostly appreciate a mix of journalistic quality combined with entertaining emotionality, especially in terms of receiving background information and match analysis alongside enthusiasm, emotion, and, depending on the type of match or event, partiality towards the national team (Klimmt et al. 2006). The latter, for instance, allows for striking up a relationship between commentator and audience, leading to parasocial interactions (Bölz 2018, p. 229).

All in all, the audience's expectations of the commentator are high, as they should fulfill many criteria from the audience's point of view. As Flügel (2009, p. 212, translated by the authors) says, "The commentator's biggest problem is usually that too much is expected of him from the outset. He should know as much as possible, see everything, and assess everything correctly—in a matter of seconds". Meeting all these requirements to the letter is utopian because "the perfect commentator does not exist" (Flügel 2009, p. 212).

In light of the literature above, our research questions are as follows:

- **RQ1:** How do live soccer TV commentators perceive the tension between journalistic and entertainment values in their work?
- **RQ2:** Which constraining factors affect this assessment?

3. Method

We used semi-structured interviews, asking interviewees about the importance of journalistic and entertainment values in their work and the constraints they may face. We analyzed the interviews using qualitative content analysis (Schreier 2012).

3.1. Sample

We interviewed 30 live commentators (including one woman). There is a severe gender imbalance in German sports journalism, with the proportion of women in sports newsrooms being around 10 percent (Schaffrath 2020, p. 49). The imbalance is even more pronounced in live soccer TV commentary, which is why only one woman could be included—there was only one woman active in professional soccer in 2019 (Schwaiger 2022). Of the interviewed commentators, 28 were soccer TV commentators, one was a soccer radio commentator, whose views are clearly signposted in the results section, and one was a soccer TV expert. In addition, a pretest was conducted with two soccer journalists. Soccer commentators were chosen because soccer is the most popular sport in Germany and the broadcasts regularly achieve the highest TV ratings of all available content (Gerhard and Zubayr 2014).

All commentators work for relevant German TV channels and streaming platforms broadcasting soccer matches from the most popular leagues and competitions, namely ZDF (3), NDR (1), WDR (1) (all public service broadcasters), RTL (1), Eurosport (2), Sport1 (2), Sky (8) (all private broadcasters), Magenta Sport (2), sportdigital (5), DAZN (8) (all streaming platforms), and for radio ARD (1) and BR Fußball (1) (both public service broadcasters). As some commentators work for more than one channel, the sample size does not add up to 30.

In the results section, the interviewees are pseudonymized with numbers from 1 to 30 and their broadcaster.

3.2. Procedures and Interview Questions

The interviews were divided into four thematic blocks. Starting with the personal career path of the interviewee, the aim was to find out what experience the interviewee had as a soccer commentator and for which broadcasters they worked during the 2018/19 soccer season (1 July 2018 to 30 June 2019). The second block of questions deals with the commentator's own understanding of their role on their own function and tasks, as well as the quality criteria for a soccer commentator. It also deals with the personal commentary style. The third block focuses specifically on journalistic and entertainment values, such as the commentators' perception of what the audience expects regarding entertainment and the extent to which they intentionally include entertaining factors in their commentary. The fourth block asks about influences that arise from the commentator's working context.

All interviewees were approached or contacted either through personal contacts, email, Facebook, through other interviewees, or by contacting relevant sports broadcasters. Overall, the interviews were conducted by telephone between 22 May 2019 and 27 June 2019, with the last interview conducted on 6 August 2019. Telephone interviewing was evaluated as being as data-rich as in-person interviewing, especially for semi-structured interviews

with otherwise hard-to-reach participants, such as the geographically dispersed and very busy commentators in this study (Cachia and Millward 2011). In addition, interviewee 2 answered the questionnaire by e-mail due to restructuring work at their broadcaster; they answered the questions in a short yet precise manner, which points to an effective e-mail interview (Meho 2006). The interviews lasted between 15 and 45 min, with an average of 30 min. All interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed.

3.3. Coding

The coding initially proceeded according to the interview guideline. During the coding and the analysis, the following overarching themes emerged: for RQ1 'main goals of commentating' (overarching category; coded inductively), 'professional values' (e.g., with the sub-codes 'journalistic values' (with sub-sub codes, e.g., neutrality, analysis, balance) and 'entertainment values' (with sub-sub codes, e.g., storytelling, stylistic elements, use of expert)) and for RQ2 'professional constraints and influences' (e.g., nature of the match, broadcaster guidelines, audience expectations; mostly coded inductively).

3.4. Limitations

The interviews covered only one point in time, and perceptions may change with broadcaster guidelines. In addition, we studied only one country, which, as we will see below, has its own overarching commentary conventions, so we cannot generalize our findings beyond the German sample or beyond the sport of soccer. Other sports, which are less medialized and thus commented on in a different context, may show different approaches.

4. Results

The The main goal of the interviewed commentators is to provide orientation. As interviewee 11 (Sky) says, they see their job as guiding the viewer through the match: "As a commentator, I'm actually the one who takes the viewer by the hand. I don't just provide them with information and know-how, but I'm also ultimately responsible for making sure they understand the match without overloading them with useless information". Interviewee 2 (WDR) describes the job "as a mediator between the stadium and the audience at home. I classify things that can be seen. Things that can't be seen [i.e., emotionality in the stadium, events away from the camera images], I verbalize". In this way, the audience gets an overall picture of what is happening on and off the pitch without being there. Interviewee 18 (sportdigital) says they set the scene: "I see myself [. . .] quite clearly as the one who leads through the evening in the sense of: 'Look, that's the concert, that's where the oboe sits, . . . '. So you always start off small and step by step, like a museum director explaining the museum". For commentators, then, it is important to accurately describe and analyze the situation, as well as to interpret and communicate their own thoughts about it. As interviewee 24 (DAZN) sums it up: "I want to find a phrasing that goes beyond that [description]. So I have to take the picture and my way of commentating to another level. I'm trying to reach a level that goes beyond what you see".

For interview 5 (DAZN), the commentator has another important role to play. They try to be a support for the audience who might not immediately recognize which player is on the ball, and someone who explains things to the audience, such as tactics and background information. However, this service to the viewer is not necessarily value-free and objective, as interviewee 19 (ZDF) believes: "Commentating also means expressing an opinion. (. . .) I would also say to always be the third and fourth eye of the TV audience, because of course you [as a commentator who is at the stadium] can look beyond the edge of the screen (. . .). That means I . . . try to keep an eye on the whole pitch". Thus, entertainment is also a part of the commentator's role, but the intensity varies across the sample.

4.1. The Tension between Journalistic and Entertainment Values (RQ1)

Two types of commentary styles emerged from the interviews: the emotional entertainer and the objective mediator. Of course, these are ideal types, and lines may be blurred

(see Table 1). What can be seen is that half of the commentators in the sample can be classified as objective mediators (15/30), while six can be seen as emotional entertainers. For nine commentators in the sample, this distinction cannot be made clearly, as they show characteristics of both. What can be noted is that all commentators who work for public service broadcasters see themselves as objective mediators (except for interviewee 8, who works for radio and thus constitutes a special case). Apart from this finding, there are no clear patterns following broadcasters, showing that the commentators maintain their unique styles away from who and which leagues they provide commentary for.

Table 1. Classification of interviewees.

Emotional Entertainer	Objective Mediator	Mix of Both
8 (ARD radio)	1 (sportdigital)	5 (DAZN)
9 (Sport1, DAZN)	2 (ARD)	6 (Sky)
18 (sportdigital)	3 (RTL, DAZN)	10 (sportdigital)
23 (Sky)	4 (Sport1, Magenta Sport)	11 (Sky)
25 (Sky)	7 (Eurosport, BR Fußball (radio))	13 (Sky)
27 (Sky)	12 (DAZN)	24 (DAZN)
	14 (Magenta Sport)	26 (DAZN)
	15 (sportdigital)	28 (Eurosport, DAZN)
	16 (ZDF)	30 (Sky)
	17 (DAZN)	
	19 (ZDF)	
	20 (ARD)	
	21 (Sky)	
	22 (ZDF)	
	29 (sportdigital)	

4.1.1. The Emotional Entertainer

Interviewee 27 (Sky) emphasizes that soccer is not a serious matter but should be fun, especially for those who pay money by subscribing to pay TV: "Soccer is like cinema, and soccer has always had this basis of wanting to entertain people". Interviewee 9 (Sport1, DAZN) said they were "an entertainer. I have to make people happy, of course I have to inform them about the most important things [...]. Apart from that, I see myself as an entertainer, as someone who gives pleasure, who transports the love for this sport". For them, commentators who do not focus on the entertainment aspect are out of place. Interviewee 11 (Sky) agrees, as they see entertainment as a central element "in today's age, in today's everyday soccer". However, it must always be authentic, they say, because the commentator must be able to 'feel' the match and then convey it in an entertaining way.

Other commentators also consciously focus on entertainment. Interviewee 27 (Sky) reports they are in a unique role: "I am actually the extended arm of the fan. I sit there like a fan who is looking forward to VfL Wolfsburg vs. Schalke 04 and has a certain expectation of the match". They then commentate on their soccer matches with this expectation; with journalistic care, without expletives, but with soccer language. Interviewee 10 (sportdigital) sees it similarly: "A little bit of being a fan comes through, at least sometimes, when someone has their soccer fan heart in it, that's also a very important aspect for me, it has to be passionate. I just want to pass on the fun I have with soccer and share it with people". Interviewee 9 (Sport1, DAZN) sums it up: "You have to feel the match and this moment, this event [...]. It builds up over 90 min and you have to accompany it. People have to get goosebumps when they listen to you". This is especially true for "big events, European championships, world championships", says interviewee 23 (Sky).

The interviewed commentators agree that an expert can bring entertaining elements to the commentary that only a former professional player can know, even though a pair of commentators is still something new and unusual for the German audience (interviewee 27, Sky). As interviewee 10 (sportdigital) says: "If you have a former player who maybe played with a player in the match and then says: 'Hey, that was a guy who just hung out

at his PlayStation in the evenings', that's a super added value that you would never find out yourself because you just don't know the player like that and you weren't there at training camp". DAZN relies on an expert for many matches to increase the entertainment factor, according to interviewee 5 (DAZN): "The goal is to offer added value in terms of entertainment. That's what we're looking for when we select the experts and analyze their feedback. To put it very casually: We don't put them there if they don't add value. Then you can save the money and put a commentator there on their own". Interviewee 13 (Sky) agrees, and for them, the dialogue with the expert has something natural about it and adds zest to the commentary. This is especially true when they get along well, as interviewee 25 (Sky) points out. Moreover, a good interplay with an expert may even elevate the commentator: "if I do a good job of . . . nudging the expert along and getting them involved, I can raise myself another notch as an authority because of the expert's authority" (interviewee 1, sportdigital). Interviewee 17, an ex-professional player and expert for DAZN, believes that the higher an expert has played actively himself, the better the prerequisites of being a good expert: "I played professional soccer for many years. I have a lot of friends who are still active and play internationally or for the national team. I always join in there and try to listen in a little bit". In addition to a basic understanding of soccer, rhetorical skills are also important. Interviewee 17 also attaches great importance to knowing how a soccer match is structured by the media in order to have good timing and to speak at the appropriate moments.

Interviewee 23 (Sky) describes their role as a storyteller: "One match, 22 people. There is a result, which is exciting, but the story around the match is more interesting. When we move away from the pure result, from the pure game of tactics, of who against whom, I like to work out things that are not otherwise so common as you would expect". The same goes for interviewee 14 (Magenta Sport), who says that "I might tell that five years ago the player was a master butcher and now he's in the third division, that can be an entertaining factor". Especially in DFB-Pokal matches (the DFB-Pokal is an annual knockout competition held by the German Football Association, the DFB), in which virtually unknown amateur teams compete in the early rounds, these colorful stories are especially appropriate and in demand.

Entertainment factors are especially needed in radio, where there is no image to rely on, and where "the listener must trust the reporter" (Interviewee 8, ARD). As they say, "We need more stimuli . . . . And if we only have the audio way to create any kind of stimulus, then we have to try to compensate for that with all kinds of little exciting episodes, stories, impressions, puns, jokes"—and a good "goal shout", they say. In contrast to their TV colleagues, the ARD radio commentators do not actually commentate on the match for 90 min straight. Instead, they are repeatedly called in by various ARD stations throughout the match. As a result, they have to keep summarizing what is happening on the pitch, while still keeping their listeners up to date on what is happening.

The main entertainment elements mentioned by the 'emotional entertainers' are voice, language, intonation, emotions, and unexpected or interesting facts or stories. For interviewee 28 (Eurosport, DAZN), statistics are far too dry and tend to turn people off—it is all about balance. For interviewee 30 (Sky), eloquence is of high importance: "You should have certain rhetorical strengths so that you don't come across as monotonous".

4.1.2. The Objective Mediator

The majority see themselves as 'classic journalists', guiding the viewers through the match by providing information to help them better understand and explaining the rules, with entertainment as a secondary aspect.

For interviewee 16 (ZDF), soccer commentary is reporting on a socially significant event. Like some of their colleagues, they therefore see themselves in a more descriptive and analytical role: "I see myself in soccer commentary less as an entertainer, and more as someone who analyzes, I mean journalistic analysis, but I still think entertainment is allowed and legitimate". Interviewee 14 (Magenta Sport) say they are in a similar role

(even though this interviewee is very much in favor of entertaining elements): "I'm a reporter. So I report on what's happening on the ground. That's my job". Interviewee 12 (DAZN) explains their role even more soberly: "I see myself as a journalist. Plain and simple in the service of the audience". Accordingly, these commentators are less concerned with entertainment than they are with clean journalistic reporting. For Interviewee 22 (ZDF), entertainment does not play a major role in their commentary, but it is an important one. They report themselves as having "the function of infotainment . . . with a bit of entertainment. The focus is on information, commentating on what's happening, not describing it, but evaluating". Moreover, interviewee 7 (Eurosport, BR Fußball) explains: "That is the great art and the most difficult thing for a commentator in general, that they learn that what they have acquired in days or weeks of preparation, that they convey it in a measured way and that they do it in a mixture with entertainment".

In this light of clean reporting being of prime importance, having a separate expert at the match, who comes from professional sports rather than journalism, can be detrimental to the quality of the commentary. Interviewee 12 (DAZN) says: "Most of the time you have someone sitting next to you who is not a trained commentator, who is not a trained journalist [. . .] because they haven't been trained as a journalist or simply don't have any TV skills. And sometimes that makes your job more difficult". Working with an expert may become a skill in itself, as interviewee 27 (Sky) says: "If you commentate in pairs, you have a lot of help [. . .] you don't have to do so much on your own, to put it bluntly. However, you have to be very considerate, also give the expert space, respond to them, maybe you don't always agree with their opinion, that is advantageous and disadvantageous". Interviewee 20 (NDR) (as well as interviewee 15 (sportdigital) and interviewee 9 (Sport1, DAZN)) agrees and sees another problem: "You also see these experts, no matter how well they've once played, they can't necessarily bring this expert knowledge to the table that well and then they often end up in platitudes". As interview 9 (Sport1, DAZN) puts it: "Experience has shown that there are not enough well-trained experts". Interviewee 14 (Magenta Sport) summarizes the relationship between the expert and the commentator like this: "(The expert) must also have a sense for it: What's happening in the commentary, when do I say something, when not. That's a very sensitive interplay that not everyone can master" (also interviewee 24 (DAZN) and interviewee 16 (ZDF)).

Interviewee 6 (Sky) believes that it is not the commentator's job to provide entertainment: "First and foremost I see the product (i.e., the match) being the focus and that is then either entertaining, sometimes less so. There are also matches where the entertainment factor doesn't matter at all because the match is just bad". However, they say that many commentators would find it increasingly difficult "to call a spade a spade and describe a really bad match as such". Moreover, a commentator is not the reason why a viewer turns on the TV to watch sports; it is the match itself, says interviewee 20 (NDR). They see the match as the foundation and try to accompany it authentically: "So, Idon't say after 20 boring minutes: 'But now I have to step on the gas, yell around here or have to scandalize some foul play, which isn't worth it at all", which is supported by interviewee 21 (Sky), who says "I don't turn every 0:0 in the Bundesliga into a World Cup final". As interviewee 29 (sportdigital) sums it up: "A sports commentator is a little more than a good waiter. That means they stand out a bit, in a positive way, but they don't push themselves too much into the foreground". Interviewee 3 (RTL, DAZN) also makes it clear that commentators who consciously see themselves as entertainers should not get carried away: "It shouldn't get out so of hand that commentator only sees him- or herself in the role of entertainer and only tries to make jokes and maybe takes themselves more important than the soccer match". Alternatively, as interviewee 26 (DAZN) says: "If I think I have to play first fiddle as a commentator, then I can do stand-up comedy instead".

While being an emotional entertainer or an objective mediator is something the commentators often attribute to their own style, there are constraints that influence their choice of commentary style.

4.2. Perception of Constraints (RQ2)

There are two factors that constrain the commentator: the nature of the match and the context of the broadcaster.

4.2.1. Nature of the Match

It should be noted that the commentary for a soccer match varies depending on the team pairing and the competition. For example, public service broadcasters and RTL often show matches involving the German national team. Ratings are above average, especially during World Cup and European Championship tournaments, and many people who are otherwise not so enthusiastic about soccer tune in. As interviewee 3 (RTL, DAZN) says: "You can't assume that all people at home have that much knowledge. You have to focus more on entertaining elements, because a lot of people do not watch for the sport, but for the entertainment. Especially during the world and European championships".

This approach is different for matches that are mostly watched by fans of the teams. Interviewee 21 (Sky) puts it in a nutshell: "I broadcast (...) two Bundesliga club teams, then there are two fan camps. So I have Frankfurt on one side and Schalke on the other, they know one hundred percent what is going on. They know the match, they know the rules, they know the table, they know all the players. In that respect, I don't have to explain as much as perhaps other colleagues who work for public television". Interviewee 28 (Eurosport, DAZN) agrees: "Most people can easily commentate on Bayern vs. Dortmund. I do not even need to have the line-ups in front of me. I know everything about the teams and around that match ...I do not need to be able to do magic there".

On the other hand, for matches in lower leagues the commentators have a different approach. Interviewee 14 (Magenta Sport) explains: "If I have a match with two unknown teams from a lower league ...I try to introduce the players more to the viewers and also show the attractiveness of these teams with entertaining background stories". Interviewee 9 (Sport1, DAZN) has a vivid example: "When you're doing matches like that, you're trying to find out if there's a collapsing bratwurst stand or whatnot". However, according to interviewee 13 (Sky), the commentator should always go into a match with the same approach as for a big match and not belittle or ridicule an encounter with weaker teams. At smaller broadcasters, i.e., broadcasters that generate less reach as they do not broadcast the most popular matches or leagues, namely Sport1, Eurosport, Magenta Sport, and sportdigital in the sample, the audience is even more diverse. There are viewers who tune in specifically to follow their club from foreign leagues, such as from the Netherlands or Portugal, or even from Russia or India—they know their team and do not need much guidance. However, there are other viewers who are not as familiar with these teams and who also tune in to watch the match. Bringing these audience expectations together is a difficult task for interviewee 18 (sportdigital) and his colleagues. Interviewee 18 says the commentator is "an informer who first has to make sure that the audience can follow them". In the commentary, entertaining and unusual aspects are particularly suitable for highlighting something special and thus inspiring the viewers and keeping them tuned in.

4.2.2. Context of the Commentator

It is also important whether the reporter covers the match from the stadium or remotely. In the stadium, the reporter is able to emotionally involve the audience in the event, talking about fan chants, stadium choreography and emotions. However, the Sky commentators, for example, are often not at the stadium, but at Sky's headquarters in Unterföhring near Munich, and they cannot convey the atmosphere in the same way.

It is also more difficult to get information when commentating remotely. At smaller broadcasters such as sportdigital, who report from a studio in Hamburg rather than from the field, the commentators have to make sure that the relevant information is correct before the match starts, as they often have to rely on data from the internet, such as the line-ups of foreign leagues, which they sometimes do not receive until shortly before the match. As interviewee 10 (sportdigital) says: "You don't get any statistics from OPTA [soccer data

provider], you don't get a folder with 80 pages, you have to look for everything yourself and then you have to do a lot of research to know: 'Where do I find my information?' This is also true for our sometimes very exotic leagues. From my point of view, it's very important, especially for us, to be a little crazy about it". This also applies to regional matches, as interviewee 4 (Sport1, Magenta Sport) reports: "Regional league means a lot of phone calls, a lot of preparation, asking for help: 'Can you give me some information? Where can I read up on this? What can you guys tell me? When can I call the coach¿". The commentators from the smaller broadcasters thus consciously set themselves apart. They make sure they know the basics about the foreign leagues they commentate on through intensive research of many details about teams, players, stadiums, cities, and fans. They also consciously make use of entertainment elements, more so than their counterparts from the bigger broadcasters. They tell side stories, focus on star players, tell anecdotes about players, and make references to Germany where appropriate. As interviewee 18 (sportdigital) elaborates: "Sure, you have 22 players and a result, but the whole package around it always looks different. [...] You can pick out something everywhere, which initially also makes the difference to watch us [i.e., sportdigital]. It's almost compulsory, because we can't keep up with Sky and the like, with the Bundesliga". They thus, for example, focus on star players: "The audience doesn't necessarily watch the Chinese league because Chinese soccer is so great, but because international stars play there and the focus is then more on them" (interviewee 29, sportdigital), or on a relationship with German soccer: "If, for example, he (a player) played in the Bundesliga, that will make people's brains click: 'Ah, the name somehow still means something to me and now the commentator tells me that he played for FSV Frankfurt in 2010'" (interviewee 10, sportdigital). In fact, interviewee 18 (sportdigital) comes to the following conclusion: "Iff you really look at it, you can really get a lot out of it [i.e., side stories]. Just [stories] away from soccer. I think we, as a small private broadcaster, have to pay even more attention to that".

The style of commentary also depends on the broadcaster's guidelines and the audience. In particular, the way the audience is addressed varies from one employer to the next. Interviewee 26 (DAZN) must adapt depending on the channel they are commentating for: "From the beginning, the rule was: We address the audience at DAZN in an informal way [German 'Du']. I know it is different from BR [Bayerischer Rundfunk], they address the audience in a formal way [German 'Sie']". The formal address of the audience is a clear specification at ARD and ZDF in order to convey distance and professionalism (interviewees 19 (ZDF) and 20 (ARD)). Interviewee 5 (DAZN) explains that DAZN is concerned with addressing the audience and the commentators in a consistent way: "I created this with my colleagues at the time when DAZN was founded, a kind of guideline, a commentator's guide. And of course we used it to think about how we wanted to do commentary at DAZN. How we wanted the commentators to work. But it's just a rough guideline". Sky also has guidelines for commentators. However, according to interviewee 23 (Sky), this only has a minor influence on the style of the commentators, such as not calling colleagues by their nicknames, which is perceived as being too chummy with the audience (also interviewees 11 and 13). DAZN is the only broadcaster with a written commentator guide, and all other broadcasters in the sample only have verbal directions—if any at all, as Eurosport, Sport1, Magenta Sport, and sportdigital do not regulate their commentators' style. All in all, no commentator feels limited in their choice of words. There is, of course, a limit concerning sexist and discriminatory language.

The audience does not play the biggest role for the commentators, as interviewee 15 (sportdigital) says (also interviewee 20, NDR): "So you can't please all viewers, it is what it is. In this respect, you can only broadcast what you yourself consider to be good entertainment or good company". Interviewee 16 (ZDF) said that they received many letters, some of which express completely contradictory wishes regarding the type of commentary. On the one hand, there are viewers who want stories, slogans, and additional information, but on the other hand, there are many viewers who do not want any of that.

According to interviewee 16, it is important to find a middle ground while remaining true to one's own style.

Some commentators compare their commentary style and that of their colleagues with styles from abroad and find clear differences in how the role of entertainment is handled. They find that live commentary in other countries is more emotional than in Germany, and interviewee 3 (RTL, DAZN) believes this is because it is socially accepted in countries like the U.S.: "We are in a country that watches and perceives soccer a little bit differently than other countries or spectators in other countries. We don't go crazy for 90 min". Interviewee 1 (sportdigital) used to do commentary for an American sports channel and found that "they always have a co-commentator, they always make a big show out of everything. . . . The presenter, the host, really tickles the ivories before the start of a show and says: 'This and that is what you can expect. We're going to get to the moon today and show you this and that, and these superstars are coming'". They say the U.S. has a much closer relationship between athletes and the media in their sports, resulting in more entertaining content because of access to behind-the-scenes coverage. Interviewee 1 (sportdigital) compares this to Germany: "That's what the Americans do, and that's what's so rigid in our country, which is unfortunate".

All in all, although each commentator has a unique commentary style, they also have to take a few things into consideration to adapt to the circumstances of the match.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

A central result is the assessment of the importance of journalistic values over entertainment values (RQ1). While all interviewees see themselves as a companion who narrates the match, entertainment is only of primary importance for a minority. The role of the commentator ranges from 'emotional entertainer' to 'objective mediator'. Entertainment-oriented commentators want to excite and engage viewers through their voice, language, and emotions. Reporters who see themselves more in the role of a 'classic journalist' use significantly less entertainment elements in their commentary and do not want to elevate an otherwise boring match just for the sake of entertainment (see Grimmer and Horky 2011). Surprisingly, the majority of the sample can be classified as the latter. They thus do not see themselves as 'fans' (see Schultz Jørgensen 2005), but rather as journalists who happen to be enthusiastic about the game and who see the journalistic reporting of the match as paramount (Bölz 2018, pp. 107–8; Wiske 2017, p. 26).

However, entertainment—in small doses—is also part of the toolbox of the objective mediators. What can be attested here is that the objective mediators seem to assume the "enriching" value (Perreault and Bell 2022), using entertaining inside information when needed, but not putting it front and center. Thus, as a commentator, one has to be a jack of all trades, trying to fulfill not only an entertaining role of being original, quick-witted, or spontaneous (Wiske 2017, p. 127), but also Mast's (2004, p. 476) four basic journalistic skills of expertise, technical competence, mediation competence, and organizational competence. Therefore, a balance is needed in order to narrate the match with broad soccer knowledge and with concise analysis, which may include one's opinion (Lang 2009).

With the increasing competition over broadcasting rights, which has also reached the German TV live soccer market, the majority of the commentators in this study do not follow the path of prioritizing entertainment over journalistic values, as can be found in other sports and countries (see Whannel 2009). This is also true for the commentators on streaming services that rely solely on subscription revenue and would have every reason to respond to economic pressures with more dramatized forms of commentary. Thus, the majority of the interviewees challenge the notion of the "toy department" (Rowe 2007), for example by emphasizing the amount of careful research that has to be done before the match, especially for leagues from abroad.

In terms of constraints, the context of the match, i.e., the nature of the match, and the context of the broadcaster, i.e., resources and commentary guidelines, must be taken into account by the commentators, and are decisive criteria for how much entertainment

is included in the commentary (RQ2). For example, matches with lesser-known teams may require more explanation, or even more colorful facts, and thus more preliminary research that commentators might have to conduct themselves—again, these are classic journalistic tasks that require the respective skills. Smaller broadcasters, who are increasingly broadcasting matches from lesser-known leagues, must therefore focus more on the entertainment factor and find interesting information outside of the match—the frame of the match (Barnfield 2013) shifts in an effort to draw audiences in (and keep them in front of the screen). In addition, the broadcaster's guidelines affect the commentator's approach, regulating issues such as how to address the audience, as it is the case with DAZN.

All in all, we found that providing just the right amount of journalistic and entertainment values in a commentary is a subjective phenomenon that can never be done 'right' because it is never possible to satisfy the entire audience. Who to serve? This is a crucial question, and one that always involves a trade-off: one cannot commentate to everyone's satisfaction, as the interviewees note, because viewers' assessments of the same commentary and the tools used often diverge widely—because expectations diverge, commentators are expected to do everything perfectly, which is doomed from the start (Flügel 2009, p. 212). It is perhaps easiest with national team matches, where many casual fans watch to be entertained, not to be lectured on tactics or player histories—these matches embody modern live media sport and its event-centered nature (Bertling 2009). Thus, drawing in audiences for smaller matches might be harder at first sight—however, as said by the interviewees of the smaller broadcasters, they serve small, yet "soccer crazy" audiences, and they gladly do their intense research of players and club abroad for them, in the interest of providing interesting color commentary which is supposed to keep audiences with their channels (see Lee et al. 2016). Developing strategies which set broadcasters und streaming services apart will become of even higher importance the more soccer broadcasting becomes fragmented, as, for example, even more streaming services buy rights. However, broadcasters and streaming services might have to think about their own added value for the audience even more, but individual commentators may also strive to become their own brand. Of course, this might not apply to these objective mediators, who are firm in taking a step back and see the soccer match in the foreground, but may apply for the emotional entertainers. Objective mediators—and those broadcasters who favor this type of presentation—might rely even more on 'classic' reporting to stand out.

In any case, soccer is the number one sport on German TV, so from the point of view of sports journalism and sports communication, it is essential for live TV commentators to think about how to use their craft and how to engage the audience. Entertainment values do have their firm place for the commentators in the sample, but are not the main focus. In fact, it seems that compared to their colleagues from other countries, German TV live commentators generally seem to be reserved when using entertainment and use it in small doses, indicating that there is indeed a German commentary style (for the opposite approach, see Lee et al.'s 2016 recommendations for the Republic of Korea). This can also be seen in the reluctance when using an expert as a co-commentator, which is a staple in other countries—only DAZN regularly makes use of them, and they say that many variables have to be satisfied for this to work. We thus propose further systematic research into different commentary cultures, which many of the commentators are aware of, especially when they have worked abroad, but which have not been thoroughly examined by academic studies. Moreover, we would like to propose taking a deeper look at the 'objective mediators' and how they shape TV sports commentary practice, as they seem to be a journalistic stronghold in a medium that increasingly favors entertainment aspects.

How to present oneself and which values to uphold is of clear importance to the interviewed commentators. This is crucial because a commentator can make TV history: Tom Bartel's commentary on Mario Götze's winning goal in the 2014 World Cup final is known to many Germans and will probably never be forgotten by soccer fans, and the same applies to the words of Herbert Zimmermann in 1954, of Rudi Michel in 1974, and of Gerd Rubenbauer in 1990, who all commented on the World Cup finals won by Germany.

The next TV reporter to commentate on a German World Cup victory is also likely to create a collective memory with his or her words.

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Article

Sports Organizations and Their Defensive Mediatization Strategies: The Sports Journalist's Perspective

Neil O'Boyle * and Aaron Gallagher

School of Communications, Dublin City University, D9 Dublin, Ireland; aaron.gallagher62@mail.dcu.ie
* Correspondence: neil.oboyle@dcu.ie

Abstract: This article provides empirical evidence of 'defensive mediatization strategies' in the field of sport. These are strategies used by actors individually and collectively to control and sometimes avoid media publicity—for example, by refusing requests for media interviews, or in the case of an organization, by making media literacy training available to its staff. In this article, we use the concept of defensive mediatization strategies to identify and illuminate some of the challenges facing professional sports journalists in the postbroadcast era. The article draws on findings from an ongoing study of the relationships between professional sports organizations, athletes, and journalists, but reports only on interviews conducted with experienced sports journalists in Ireland and Britain (*n* = 16). Our analysis identifies a number of defensive mediatization strategies used by sports organizations, including increased levels of in-house media, differential treatment of journalists, and an increasingly competitive stance towards journalism generally. We also consider a potentially more pernicious strategy: the hiring of professional sports journalists as internal communications advisers—a switching of role positions that might be termed 'poacher turned gamekeeper'. The article organizes findings according to the three categories of defensive mediatization strategies identified in the extant literature (*persistence*, *shielding*, and *immunization*) and proposes a fourth category, which we label *steering*.

Keywords: sports journalists; sports organizations; defensive mediatization; Ireland; Britain

1. Introduction

What sports journalism is, how it should be defined, and how this particular area of work within the news industry is being shaped by emerging technologies are matters of ongoing debate, discussion, and investigation within the sports studies field. If digital networked technologies are widening and altering the nature of participation in sport (by fans, athletes, etc.), they are also transforming how sports journalism is produced, circulated, and consumed. For example, Frandsen et al.'s (2022) notion of 'participatory liveness' points to the centrality of social media in the shaping and coverage of media events, including sporting ones. To some extent, social media enable users to bypass and circumvent traditional journalism and, therefore, might be viewed as competitors to it. For example, Hutchins and Mikosza's (2010) study of the 2008 Beijing Olympics describes how traditional broadcasting strategies at this event collided with the networking capacities of Web 2.0 and 'social software' (blogs, video-sharing sites, and social networking sites), resulting in different and sometimes much more critical assessments of the unfolding event entering the public domain (p. 284). However, Nölleke et al. (2017) argue that suggestions that social media are *competitors* to traditional journalism are too simplistic and that the relationship between sports journalism and social media is largely complementary. For example, they find that the social media accounts of athletes often act as news sources for sports journalists, enabling them to gather 'inside information'.

In recent years, a number of sports scholars have turned to the concept of 'mediatization' as a theoretical entry point for analyzing the direct, indirect, and structural

effects of media. Mediatization describes increasing relations of interdependence across social domains that depend, in large part, on media-related processes. 'Through these relations, the role of 'media' in the social construction of reality becomes not just partial, or even pervasive, but 'deep': that is, crucial to the elements and processes out of which the social world and its everyday reality is formed and sustained' (Couldry and Hepp 2017, p. 62). Mediatization is consequential for all actors, from individuals to largescale organizations, and its effects are sometimes ambivalent or double-edged. For example, Frandsen and Landgrebe's (2022) study of the introduction of the Video Assistant Referee (VAR) to the Danish Superliga draws on the concept of mediatization to reflect on how football 'is becoming ever more closely tied to the technological and institutional logics of media' (p. 816). These authors argue that the introduction of VAR instigated complex processes of change that not only decreased football's institutional autonomy but also created inequalities between larger and smaller leagues within Europe's football structure. On a much smaller scale, Birkner and Nölleke (2016) investigated how athletes perceive media influence and logic and how such perceptions shape their media-related behavior, finding that engagement with media can bring considerable financial reward but also interference in one's private life. Studies have also examined social relations and communicative behavior *around* sports. For example, Skey et al.'s (2018) 'bottom-up' study of the mediatization of football demonstrates how digital networked communications technologies have significantly transformed the ways in which sport is accessed, enjoyed, and participated in—for example, through the use of streaming services, social media, and online gaming. These and other studies make clear that mediatization is an uneven, nonlinear, and multidimensional process (Birkner and Nölleke 2016), and that it does not occur in a uniform way across all social domains and cultural contexts (Frandsen and Landgrebe 2022; Ličen et al. 2022).

To date, studies of the mediatization of sport, including those already mentioned, have documented the transformative effects of this process and the strategies used by actors individually and collectively to adapt to media attention and gain public visibility. For the most part, they describe accommodations *toward* media and generally paint a picture of decreasing institutional autonomy. As Frandsen and Landgrebe (2022, p. 812) put it, 'All processes of mediatization involve negotiations of values, roles, and practices among agents in the field in question; and ultimately, all imply a decrease both in individual and in institutional autonomy' (Frandsen and Landgrebe 2022, p. 812). However, Nölleke et al. (2021) argue that studies of mediatization sometimes overlook or disregard the ways actors *avoid* and *control* media publicity and thereby 'protect established structures and practices against media demands' (2021, p. 738)—what they term 'defensive mediatization strategies'. This concept does not imply wholesale resistance to, or a refusal to engage with, media. Rather, it highlights that mediatization is never a simple one-way process of accommodation and typically entails a mix of offensive and defensive strategies.

Nölleke, Scheu, and Birkner suggest that defensive mediatization strategies are evident in all domains of society. Indeed, one can argue that they are also evident at the level of nation states—for example, when oppressive regimes impose bans on journalists, and disrupt or even 'cut off' internet services (see Lengel and Newsom 2014)—arguably the most extreme defensive mediatization strategy possible. Based on a secondary analysis of data from previous research projects, Nölleke, Scheu, and Birkner describe three categories of defensive mediatization strategies (*persistence*, *shielding*, and *immunization*), which are mutually reinforcing and operate at the levels of individual actors, organizations, and a social system's routines and norms. *Persistence*—or more precisely, persistence in 'pre-mediatized behavior' (p. 746)—describes attempts by actors to push back against the demands of media and persist with established structures and practices. For example, an organization might decide not to invest in public relations even though its competitors are. *Shielding*, as the name suggests, involves active attempts to block media. For example, an organization might simply refuse requests for media interviews. Finally, *immunization* describes efforts to develop capacities in 'handling' the media. For example, an organization

might make media literacy training available to its staff members. Again, it is important to stress that individuals and organizations are never *wholly* defensive in their responses to mediatization: 'In practice, most social actors probably see both benefits and risks to media publicity and public attention and will therefore implement a mixture of offensive and defensive mediatization strategies' (ibid., p. 740).

Like Nölleke, Scheu, and Birkner, our approach to mediatization is *institutionalist*, which is to say that it approaches society as an interinstitutional system and analyzes how media penetrate and shape but do not *colonize* other institutions. As Hjarvard (2014, p. 202) argues, mediatization is a *reciprocal* process and 'concerns the co-development and reciprocal change of institutional characteristics of both media and other domains'. Put differently, this approach acknowledges that institutional structures are both stable and dynamic and that institutions have their own unique 'logics' (rules and resources). Accordingly, an institutionalist approach to mediatization 'allows for an understanding of how the logics of the media intersect with the logics of other institutional domains' (ibid., p. 203). This theoretical orientation is useful because it enables us to consider how actors *proactively shape* mediatization processes, whilst also acknowledging that different actors can have different understandings of how media publicity works (or fails to work).

While defensive mediatization is a relatively new theoretical construct, previous research has identified strategies and actions by sports organizations that align with this perspective and tell us much about the challenges contemporary sports journalists face. For example, Borges' (2019) study of the emergence of club-owned media in the context of European soccer finds that this development coincided with a tightening of press access to players and coaches. Similarly, Suggs' (2016) research on American intercollegiate athletics finds that access to athletes has become more restrictive for journalists and that some have been sanctioned for what sports organizations have perceived as inaccurate or unflattering reporting. His research also finds that some athletic programs and associations have imposed limits on real-time blogging and social media posting on the grounds that such work 'infringes on broadcast rights' (p. 263). Research has also found that many sports organizations are increasing their communications budgets, hiring more media personnel, and channeling increasing funds into maintaining websites, producing social media content, and other media-related activities (Grimmer and Kian 2013; Frandsen 2016; Borges 2019; Mirer 2019). For example, Frandsen (2016) finds that Danish national sports federations now spend almost three quarters of their communication budgets on maintaining websites and social media. Hutchins et al. (2019, p. 981) similarly report that 'a growing number of clubs, leagues and associations are also partnering with video streaming technology providers'. For example, Major League Soccer has established a partnership with Apple TV, while the Premier League has partnered with Amazon Prime. Of particular concern for journalists—as we examine further below—is the significant rise in 'in-house' or 'team' media within sports organizations, a development that, on one hand, bypasses independent media and, on the other, blurs the boundaries between journalism and public relations (English 2022; McEnnis 2021). As McEnnis (2021, p. 10) suggests, team media are ultimately concerned with 'brand image rather than public service'. This can also be seen in the often dull and 'safe' interviews given by athletes and officials, who are in some cases obligated to follow corporate briefs or use specific lines (Sherwood and Nicholson 2017). Studies have also found that public relations practitioners sometimes even attempt to impose restrictions on what *parts* of an interview are published (Grimmer and Kian 2013). Such developments are clear exercises in agenda setting, although this is hardly new. For example, in 2000, Fortunato concluded that 'much of the creation of NBA related mass media content is directed by the NBA *itself*' (p. 481, our emphasis). In this article, we attempt to identify and illuminate some of the challenges facing professional sports journalists in the postbroadcast age while also responding to Nölleke, Scheu, and Birkner's call for empirical studies of defensive mediatization strategies. Such strategies are used by sports organizations to exert more control over media narratives, but also have the effect of creating a less hospitable environment for sports journalists and can ultimately

hinder their ability to perform their role as the Fourth Estate. Evidence suggests that even new videoconferencing technologies, such as Zoom, are being used to limit and control access, with some journalists expressing concerns that the platform is being used even when in-person interviews are possible (Gentile et al. 2022). In what follows, we present findings from an ongoing study of the relationships between professional sports organizations, athletes, and journalists. The larger study includes interviews with all three parties and a documentary analysis; however, our analysis here derives solely from interviews with journalists working in Ireland and Britain. In the conclusion, we reflect on the limitations of such an approach.

2. Materials and Methods

Like Frandsen and Landgrebe (2022, p. 818), our primary research interest is in the reflections of 'core actors'—in this case, sports journalists—with a view to providing 'a more nuanced understanding of mediatization' (Nölleke et al. 2021, p. 739). The next phase of the larger study, of which the findings presented here form part, will include interviews with US-based sports journalists; however, our analysis in this article is limited to data garnered from interviews with journalists working in Ireland and Britain (*n* = 16). These proximate states share many characteristics as journalistic cultures and media systems (e.g., a strong public service broadcasting ethos, high levels of professionalization, considerable levels of newspaper circulation, etc.). British media also command a substantial share of the Irish media market; though it is worth noting that Irish media content—especially sports content—is also popular with British audiences (see Dwyer 2020).

The study reported here uses key informant sampling (Oliver 2021)—a form of sampling in which participants are selected based on their specialized knowledge or role. Given his background in sports journalism, the second author drew up a list of potential interviewees, which was reviewed by the first author. The list included only those individuals with five or more years' work experience. We were also careful to include female sports journalists, given the underrepresentation of females in the sports field generally—i.e., as journalists, pundits, managers, coaches, and policy decision-makers (Liston and O'Connor 2020). On this point, it is worth adding that even the sports-related output of public service broadcasters such as the BBC often reinforces this male-centeredness (see Ramon and Rojas-Torrijos 2022). Despite our efforts, only two female sports journalists agreed to be interviewed.

Interviews were carried out between November 2022 and March 2023. Fourteen informants were male, two were female, and all gave their informed consent. Depending on the availability and work schedules of informants, interviews were conducted via Zoom (*n* = 14) or face-to-face (*n* = 2). Interviews followed a semi-structured, topic-orientated format and averaged forty-five minutes in duration. The second author transcribed the interviews and checked them for accuracy, and both authors independently and manually coded the transcripts. Coding of the raw data was partly deductive and guided by Nölleke, Scheu, and Birkner's theorization of defensive mediatization. Like these authors, we paid special attention to interview data that referred 'to the objective of protecting against or avoiding media attention' (Nölleke et al. 2021, p. 744). Coding was also partly inductive—i.e., open and generative of theory. We used reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) to code, categorize, and thematize findings, following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six-step framework (familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, search for themes, review of themes, defining and naming themes, and production of the report). Along with independent coding, we discussed and compared our respective interpretations and reviewed codes and themes on an ongoing basis—as per Clarke and Braun's instruction that the six steps are recursive and not intended to be completed in a linear fashion. The core task of our thematic analysis was to *reframe* and *reinterpret* informant responses in terms of defensive mediatization strategies (see Kiger and Varpio 2020, p. 3). In doing so, we constructed a number of thematic maps, which enabled us to connect elements in the data and also locate strategies in terms of institutional levels—i.e., micro, meso, and macro.

3. Results

In interviews, informants were asked to reflect on sports journalism as a practice and profession in the context of wider changes affecting the news media, to comment on the profession's evolving jurisdiction—or more precisely, on 'jurisdictional disputes' (Covaleski et al. 2003)—and to describe their interactions and relationships with the sports organizations they report on. Our analysis here focuses primarily on the last of these themes, though clearly all are interconnected, and is guided by the concept of defensive mediatization strategies.

Nölleke, Scheu, and Birkner present their findings under three headings—microlevel strategies, mesolevel strategies, and macrolevel strategies—and we follow suit here. Figure 1 shows examples of each category of defensive mediatization strategy at each institutional level. The use of circles (concentric and Venn) is deliberate and indicates that strategies and institutional levels overlap and intermingle. As explained below, our analysis also suggests an additional category, which we label *steering*.
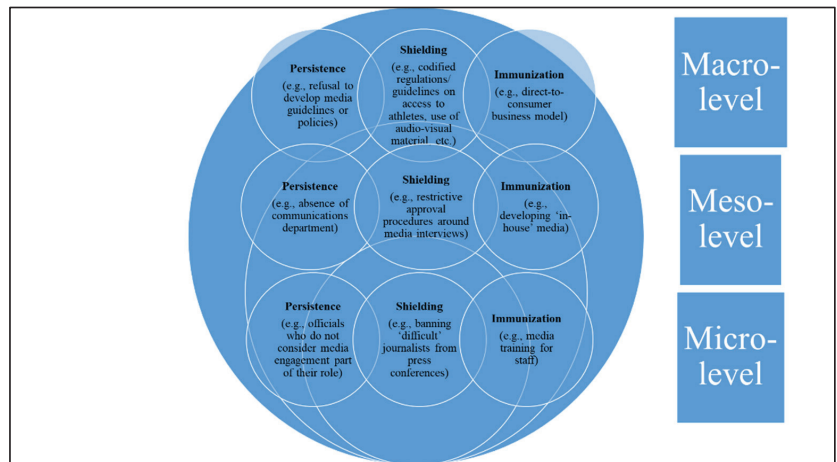
Figure 1. Defensive mediatization strategies at each institutional level.

3.1. Microlevel Defensive Mediatization Strategies

Interviews with journalists pointed to a number of defensive mediatization strategies operating at the microlevel, though few offered clear examples of *persistence*. Some suggested that while most sports officials are willing to engage with media *on some level*, a small number simply do not view it as part of their remit, which obviously makes the job of journalists more difficult, given their reliance on such gatekeepers. More commonly, informants described efforts by sports organizations to actively block journalists at the microlevel—i.e., *shielding*. Indeed, a journalist at SportsJOE fittingly commented, "Some media managers are what we like to call *blockers* where they want to control absolutely everything." A sports journalist at *The Daily Telegraph* similarly claimed that restrictions around access are often less to do with athletes and coaches and more to do with media managers who "overestimate the importance of their role" or simply wish "to be *seen* to be in charge". Informants also complained that some press officers/media managers ignore their requests for interviews, refuse to respond to their emails, and sometimes offer few if any explanations for why interview requests were rejected. For example, a sports journalist at *The Daily Telegraph* remarked, "I would just like a bit more transparency from sports organizations in terms of us putting in interview requests and being granted access. It can be frustrating when you request an interview and you don't hear back from them, or they don't give you a reason for not granting access." Some also suggested that a journalist who might be perceived as 'difficult' might be banned from a press conference, briefing, or the

mixed zone—an example of what might be termed *disciplining*. For example, a broadcaster at RTÉ Sport (Ireland's public service broadcaster) suggested that the well-known Irish journalist and sports pundit Eamon Dunphy was a "thorn in the side of Jack Charlton" (the Republic of Ireland's football manager between 1986 and 1996)—or a 'persona non grata', to use Suggs' (2016, p. 263) term. The informant claimed that Dunphy "was removed from the press pack", but insisted that "less has changed in that sense than people like to think".

Responses by informants also revealed evidence of *immunization* at the microlevel. *Immunization* describes efforts by individuals and organizations to develop capacities in handling the media, and thereby (it is hoped) avoid or lessen 'dysfunctional consequences' (Nölleke et al. 2021, p. 745). Almost all our informants mentioned media training, especially on the part of athletes. For example, a sports broadcaster at Virgin Media commented, "if a sports organization is reasonably sophisticated in how it handles its media side of things, it will have trained its athletes and players and staff to say as little as possible." Likewise, a sports journalist at *The Irish Times* commented, "Athletes are absolutely much more media trained nowadays. Answers are more bland, they are more careful in what they say ... The majority of athletes, because of the media training they receive from a very young age, tend to be more corporate in the way they speak".

3.2. Mesolevel Defensive Mediatization Strategies

Interviews with journalists pointed to a number of defensive mediatization strategies operating at the mesolevel of departments and resources; however, none of our informants provided clear examples of *persistence* at this level. A possible reason for this is that our research focused on experienced sports journalists, who, in most cases, are accustomed to working with relatively large sports organizations with well-developed media functions.

Informants described various efforts by sports organizations to block journalists at the mesolevel—i.e., *shielding*. For example, a number spoke about increasingly restrictive procedures around the conduct of media interviews and the stifling effect this had on interactions between journalists and athletes. For example, a sports journalist at The Athletic UK claimed that more often than not, there is "a comms officer breathing down your neck" when conducting interviews. He added that journalists are unlikely "to get great quotes in that environment, because everybody is on edge". Likewise, a football columnist at *The Times UK* remarked, "It can be difficult when a media manager sits in on an interview. It happens a lot when you sit down to do a one-on-one feature interview with Premier League footballers, and it doesn't make for the best environment for an interview, in my experience. They do want to control things a lot".

In respect of *immunization*, almost all our informants commented on the rise of 'in-house' or 'team' media. While in one sense, in-house media offer a 'shield' against journalists, arguably their primary function is to bypass external media where possible and develop internal media capabilities. For example, a sports broadcaster at Virgin Media commented, "Sports organizations producing their own content is visibly a part of the landscape now ... And I think that is a factor in why these sports organizations are being a little bit more uncooperative with us in the traditional print and broadcast media. They realize that they can create their own content, so why would they bother cooperating with us." Similarly, a sports journalist at The Athletic UK remarked, "as journalists, we have now come to expect that when someone at a club wants to say something, they will use the club's in-house media channels to say it". He added that his main concern around this development is that it "impacts how often we can sit down with high profile players and managers, because clubs can do a lot of that content themselves".

3.3. Macrolevel Defensive Mediatization Strategies

Our interviews with journalists were of limited use when it came to identifying defensive mediatization strategies operating at the macrolevel of sports organizations. This is perhaps unsurprising. As Nölleke et al. (2021, p. 749) point out, 'self-reports seem rather problematic when it comes to investigating the macro-level of mediatization'. Once again,

our research found little evidence of *persistence* at the macrolevel, presumably because most if not all the sports organizations described by informants had already undergone significant levels of restructuring to accommodate media. Nevertheless, while they did not go so far as to suggest increasing levels of *hostility* towards journalists, a number described what could be interpreted as increasing levels of *shielding*—by large sports organizations in particular. For example, informants described increasingly restrictive rules around schedules, press conferences, the use of audio-visual material, and access to athletes. Some claimed, possibly due to the emergence of in-house media (see above), that some sports organizations are becoming more defensive towards journalists, not because they perceive them as a sort of necessary nuisance but because they view them as *competition*. For example, an online sports journalist at RTÉ Sport commented, "Some sports organizations do view the media as competition for content and stories and clicks and views. Sports teams realize they can produce content themselves and they don't need us as much as before." Likewise, a journalist at SportsJOE commented, "Things have changed in that way where the sports teams that we report on are almost in competition with us for the audience and the views and clicks".

Linked to this, but which is perhaps better considered *immunization*—i.e., building institutional capacity—is a perceived shift towards direct-to-consumer business models within larger sports organizations. As the name suggests, this strategic reorientation involves efforts to develop *direct* relationships with audiences and fans rather than relying on intermediaries. The motivation here is primarily about commercialization, monetization, and data collection, and involves a shift in strategic thinking towards intellectual property and media assets. However, an associated and logical consequence of such an orientation is an increase in the development of in-house content. For example, the cycling correspondent of *The Irish Times* commented, "cyclists have sponsors and sponsors want publicity, but journalists aren't as needed to tell cyclist's stories, because teams can tell stories themselves, directly to fans. So that has cut down on the access we get." Similarly, a sports journalist at *The Times UK* commented:

> "Athletes and sports stars are often treated like assets that are to be protected by the sports organizations and teams they are employed by. A lot of sports teams now see themselves as competitors to media outlets. Clubs have their own media teams and do their own interviews, and as a result of that they are less inclined to give interviews or give us information. The media's role as conduit between clubs and fans is much less than it was before. There used to be a time when the only way a club could connect with its fans was via a newspaper, but that's not the case now."

3.4. Steering

Our analysis in the preceding sections offers some empirical support for the defensive mediatization strategies identified by Nölleke et al. (2021). As already established, these authors describe three categories of defensive mediatization strategies (*persistence*, *shielding*, and *immunization*), which are mutually reinforcing and operate across the micro-, meso-, and macrolevels of an organization. However, our analysis suggests another potential category that is related to (and nestled between) *shielding* and *immunization* but is subtly different to both. We have labelled this category *steering*. *Steering* differs somewhat from *shielding* and *immunization* in the sense that it is neither a strategy of merely 'blocking' nor 'developing capacity' but more accurately about 'guiding' media towards desirable ends. Clearly, the development of in-house or 'team' media (see above) is partly motivated by the same aim, but it is also motivated—perhaps more so—by the aims of maximizing revenue, monetizing audiences, and generating data. *Steering*, we suggest, is more narrowly focused on controlling media narratives and is, therefore, a more proactive strategy than *shielding*. Our interviews with journalists suggested a number of examples of *steering* at each of the three institutional levels, as illustrated by Figure 2.
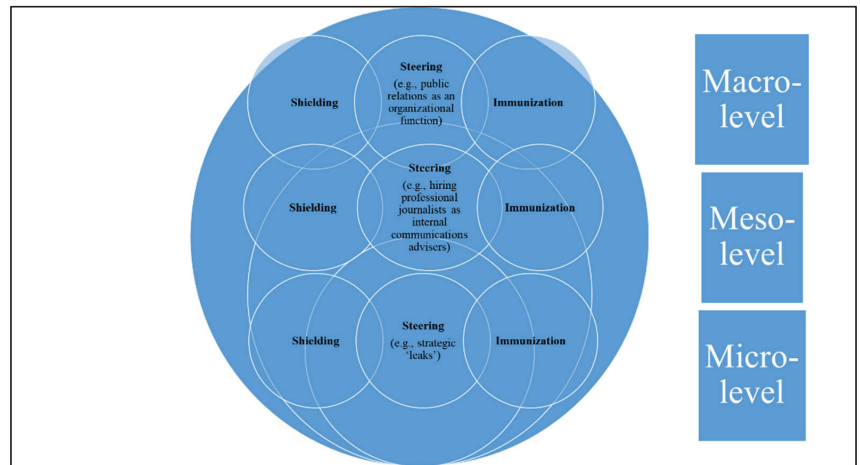
Figure 2. *Steering* at each institutional level.

A microlevel example of *steering* is when athletes follow a corporate brief in interviews or are given specific lines to use. For example, a sports broadcaster at Virgin Media described such interviews as little more than "media trained answers". He suggested that they are not only of limited journalistic value but can actually be counterproductive for athletes, who can "come across as quite robotic and lacking personality". The cycling correspondent at *The Irish Times* similarly suggested that such interviews are often highly "sanitized" and result in "boring, bland quotes". Other examples of *steering* at the microlevel include issuing media packs, media releases, and other prepackaged, 'ready to use' information subsidies. On this point, a broadcaster at RTÉ Sport commented, "Sports organizations have become such experts in their communications. The IRFU (Irish Rugby Federation) will craft and perfect a press release to such a high standard nowadays that media publications can almost publish them straight away without the need to edit them or change anything. The easier you make a press release to use, the more likely a journalist will use it, and the more chances it will be used in the way you sent it out from your organization."

Such attempts at agenda setting do not end with the careful crafting of press releases but extend to strategic considerations of *who* should receive them. For example, an online journalist at RTÉ Sport remarked, "Some sports organizations will send information to every journalist, but others are a bit more *selective* over who they send information to. Different sports organizations have different approaches over who gets certain stories". Relatedly—and providing another example of *steering* at the microlevel—is the strategic 'leaking' of information. On this, an online journalist at RTÉ Sport remarked, "It is tricky when you are leaked information, because you know the sports team that has leaked you the information has a certain agenda." A sports writer at *The Irish Times* elaborated on the difficulties such leaks present for journalists:

> "Leaks happen all the time in sports journalism. But there are some journalists who are leaked stories by teams, and they are essentially doing the team's bidding for them, being used by the team. Journalists will get *exclusives* that make them look like fantastic reporters. But, when you look at it closely, the journalist is basically working for the sports team, doing their bidding, working in tandem with them. As a journalist, you get leaked information all the time, but it's what you decide to do with that information that really matters. You have to be aware of the fact that as a journalist, you are being used by the leaker. You have to question their motivation. They want run to run a story that meets their needs and objectives, and you have to be aware of that."

A mesolevel example of *steering*, which to some extent also fulfills the overlapping functions of *shielding* and *immunization* (as indicated in Figure 2), is what informants described as the deliberate hiring of professional journalists as internal communications advisers. This switching of role positions, which we coded 'poacher turned gamekeeper', can be interpreted as an attempt (by the sports organization) to not only harness journalistic expertise and develop internal capacity but also neutralize and *redirect* it—or "control the story", as a broadcaster at RTÉ Sport put it. In a similar vein, a sports journalist at *The Irish Independent* commented, "Who better to manage your media than somebody who works, or worked, in the media themselves? They know how to manage the media and what to prevent. Poacher turned gamekeeper, it's the perfect foil." Some informants expressed a degree of indignation towards such individuals, implying that compromised ethics had pushed them beyond the 'boundary' of professional journalism (see Mirer 2019). For example, a sports columnist at *The Irish Examiner* commented, "Sometimes it does piss people off, because you get the impression that some of them have forgotten their roots as journalists". However, most acknowledged that a journalist's decision to 'switch sides' is often motivated by the simple desire for a more "stable career path", as a sports broadcaster at Virgin Media put it. Nevertheless, the reasons for this switching of role position are potentially manifold—as expressed by a sports journalist at The Athletic UK:

"I think it's always happened in media. Most club's comms teams are full of former journalists. Many Premier League clubs have former journalists working for them who worked for their club's local papers, or national newspapers too. It happens for a number of reasons. One reason is that they are better paid working for Premier League clubs than local media organizations. Maybe they fancy a new challenge, especially with access diminishing. Maybe a journalist wants to be closer to the actual action".

Another example of *steering* at the mesolevel is the *continued* use of Zoom for press conferences, even though pandemic-related health risks have diminished considerably. Our informants interpreted this as another means of maintaining control and suggested that sports organizations often limit invitations to hand-picked journalists, are selective when answering questions, and sometimes even 'mute' journalists to avoid follow-up questions. For example, a UK-based freelance journalist commented:

"[Zoom] really interrupts the flow of the press conference and prevents good information and answers being brought forward. It stifles it, and maybe that's the motive and the intention [of the sports organization]. The more interruptions, the more they can control the environment, limit the number of questions, not allow follow-up questions, it all means they can control the message better, from the sports organization's point of view, to the detriment of us as journalists and our audiences and readers too."

Similarly, a multimedia journalist for RTÉ Sport commented:

"Sports organizations can control things a little bit more, because so many press conferences and interviews are now being held over Zoom, since the Pandemic. It's a lot more convenient to host them that way, but it means that they can choose who attends, who gets to ask questions, and the opportunity to ask follow-up questions isn't there, because on Zoom they can just mute you. If it's an in-person press conference, it's a bit easier to ask a follow-up question and hold people accountable, in that way."

Finally, a macrolevel example of *steering* at a sports organization is the establishment of public relations as an organizational function alongside other functions such as planning, staffing, and so on. Our informants suggested that PR plays an increasingly important role across all sports organizations and that those working in a PR capacity are paid to control the message, to promote positive messages, and to avoid "content that will make their employers *look bad*"—as an online sports journalist at RTÉ Sport put it. However,

the increasing role of public relations and related developments, such as the emergence of in-house media, do not of course *guarantee* that *steering* will be successful. For example, a multimedia sports journalist at RTÉ Sport claimed that audiences and fans are now much savvier about the content they consume:

> "I will watch an interview done with an in-house sports media team, and then see the same player interviewed by an independent media publication or journalist, and I know which one I'm going to prefer. You can tell which interview is the fluff piece and which one is more likely to have a bit of a story behind it . . . I think the public and the audience are still very self aware about what content is authentic and which one is biased, and bland and PR."

4. Discussion

Our aims in this article were twofold: first, to develop and further theoretical discussion of defensive mediatization strategies and provide some empirical grounding for future research; and second, to use this theoretical construct as a lens for reflecting on the challenges facing professional sports journalists in the postbroadcast age. The institutional approach followed here posits that as media are integrated into other institutions, *both* sets of logics are transformed. As Hjarvard (2014, p. 219) puts it, 'the particular outcomes of these reciprocal accommodations should be examined empirically, and the logics of the media are certainly not always the most influential'. In the same vein, the concept of defensive mediatization strategies highlights that actors individually and collectively 'not only take measures to attract media attention but also employ strategies to protect against it' (Nölleke et al. 2021, p. 744). In other words, mediatization is not a simple, one-way, or uniform process but more accurately entails offensive *and* defensive strategies. However, Nölleke, Scheu, and Birkner argue that while the offensive and defensive goals of actors often overlap, it is important that we at least try to distinguish them, as this will help us to explain how mediatization processes are *proactively shaped*. We share their view that journalism studies can benefit from 'an extended concept of mediatization that incorporates defensive adaptations' (ibid., p. 753).

Our findings point to a number of challenges facing sports journalists in the postbroadcast era, many of which have already been identified in the extant literature. Some of these challenges relate to the changing nature of work in an increasingly hybrid media environment. For example, all our informants suggested that social media have transformed their work practices and day-to-day routines, if not necessarily their core values. They suggested that social media offer networking and storytelling opportunities but also come with risks, including hostile feedback and misinformation/disinformation, and that the line between content produced by professional journalists and that produced by individuals who may be masquerading as journalists has blurred. This last point has a direct bearing on journalistic claims to professional authority and raises questions about the value and distinctiveness of sports journalism. Indeed, McEnnis (2021, p. 2) argues that sports journalists are experiencing 'fundamental, existential concerns' and that their professional base is now threatened 'by new actors who have adopted its norms, practices, codes, routines and values' (p. 2). More broadly, it suggests that the profession's future sustainability depends not only on continued demand, but also on the audience's ability to differentiate "PR and journalism"—as the online sports editor at RTÉ Sport put it. Informants also highlighted difficulties around maintaining journalistic accountability across an array of work practices (filing stories, live tweeting, posting to Instagram, podcasting, etc.) and new pressures brought on by social media metrics.

In addition to these environmental challenges, our informants spoke at length about the defensive practices of sports organizations, which we analyzed using Nölleke, Scheu, and Birkner's framework. Based on an extensive secondary analysis of previous data, Nölleke, Scheu, and Birkner identify and describe three categories of defensive mediatization strategies. *Persistence* refers to efforts by actors to 'persist in or strengthen already-established structures, regulations, routines, etc. even if they individually or collectively

perceive that the media and the public would prefer if they changed' (p. 744). *Shielding* involves efforts to curtail or avoid media attention. 'To shield against media demands means that actors consciously implement structures in order to minimize public attention' (ibid., p. 744). Finally, *immunization* describes efforts to develop capacities in handling the media and thereby avoid or lessen 'dysfunctional consequences' (ibid., p. 745).

At the microlevel of daily interaction, our informants reported experiences of being blocked, ignored, and in some cases denied access by media managers. Naturally, issues around access were particularly concerning for them, given their reliance on sources to produce work; however, it also raises more fundamental questions about their ability to produce quality, unbiased work. For example, McEnnis (2021, p. 3) observes that the fear of having 'access revoked' puts pressure on journalists and can sometimes lead them to produce more 'unquestioning stories'. Issues of access have also arisen in relation to videoconferencing technologies such as Zoom—a finding that is also reported by Gentile et al. (2022). At the mesolevel—the level of organizational departments and resource allocation—our informants commented on several developments, most notably the rise of in-house or team media at sports organizations. Many suggested that the ability to create their own content and use their own channels and platforms has made sports organizations somewhat less cooperative with independent media—a finding that has been reported in other studies. As McEnnis (2021, p. 3) puts it, 'What used to be a rather balanced relationship, in which clubs and organizations relied on sports journalists for the oxygen of publicity, has given way to a lop-sided power dynamic whereby these gatekeepers now have their own digital and social media channels and are therefore less reliant on independent media'. Our analysis also found evidence of what we call *steering*, which is related to, but different from both *shielding* and *immunization* insofar as it is more narrowly focused on controlling media narratives. Our informants offered a number of examples this, including strategic leaks, information subsidies, hiring professional journalists as internal communications advisers, and increasing levels of selectivity when working with journalists. Again, similar findings have been reported in other studies. For example, Sherwood and Nicholson (2017) find that many of those working in media relations and communications roles within Australian sports organizations hail from journalistic backgrounds. Likewise, they find that when organizing media conferences, some Australian sports organizations are highly strategic and selective when it comes to inviting journalists (see also Suggs 2016). Such occasions are, therefore, not simply about disseminating information but are increasingly 'viewed by professional sport organizations as an opportunity to set the media agenda' (p. 147).

As noted above, our interviews proved of limited use when it came to the macrolevel, though several of our informants remarked that sports organizations were transforming 'from facilitators for media to *competitors* and publishers with a dominant market advantage' (English 2022, p. 856, our emphasis). The absence of commentary on macrolevel strategies is an interesting finding in itself and suggests that in focusing on busy day-to-day tasks and interactions, these Irish and British-based journalists may be less cognizant of macrolevel decisions that have a direct bearing on their work. For example, in the US context, research by Fortunato (2000) on the National Basketball Association (NBA) has shown that rules and policies around access to athletes, media relations training, and other media-related activities are generally part of macrolevel strategies. For instance, he notes that rules on access to players and coaches 'are provided as a league-wide standard timing format' (pp. 487–88). He also notes that media relations training is a mandatory requirement for all players entering the NBA and forms a core component of the Association's Rookie Transition Program.

The research presented here has a number of limitations, foremost of which is that our analysis tells only one side of the story as it were. In other words, as important and illuminating as they are, the views of sports journalists can (and likely will) differ in some respects from those working on behalf of sports organizations. As Johnson (2002, p. 105) observes, interviews often highlight that individuals or groups involved in the same line

of activity can 'have complicated, multiple perspectives' on the same phenomena. It is important to add that interviewing as a research method suffers from a number of limitations and is, therefore, often triangulated with other sources of data. Moreover, the journalist–organization relationship examined here clearly does not exist in a vacuum, and crisscrossing and extending beyond this relationship are the complex, converging practices of multiple agents across a multiplicity of media forms (see Frandsen et al. 2022). Such agents—including fans, citizens, and interest groups—are increasingly willing and able to direct negative feedback or 'flak' (Herman and Chomsky 1988) to all sorts of organizations, including sporting and news-making ones. Finally, it important to note that the study described here focuses on 'sports journalists' but takes little account of individual differences of gender, race, ethnicity, and other categories of social identity—nor does it give adequate consideration to potential differences regarding national contexts, institutional cultures, or wider media systems. We suggest that these sources of potential variation—and how they might affect an individual journalist's 'possibilities to act' (Hjarvard 2014, p. 208)—are given greater attention in future studies of defensive mediatization strategies.

Despite these limitations, our analysis helps to illuminate some of the challenges facing sports journalists in the current conjuncture. Efforts by sports organizations to evade public attention, to avoid or steer media coverage, and to protect autonomous decision-making can make rigorous and quality reporting more challenging and can ultimately make it more difficult for journalists to hold such organizations to account. It is worth adding that 'traditional' journalistic jobs are in increasingly short supply relative to those in the professional sports environment and that many media organizations are under considerable financial pressure. Indeed, given such fraught circumstances, a broadcaster at RTÉ Sport claimed that he was entirely unsurprised that many journalists are leaving the industry to work in sports organizations:

> "I'm not one bit surprised. You get better paid, you have less hassle, and you can control the story without having to go and *look* for a story. And there's a multitude of factors that have caused this trend: the lack of access to players, the drop in salary, the job losses in our sector. Those of us who are left working in sports journalism are basically *survivors* at the moment. The slow death of newspapers and the re-emergence of digital subscriptions ... it's a battle out there for media outlets to stay alive. I'm not surprised that so many people have left journalism."

A larger question that arises from this study is how sports journalists can best navigate these myriad challenges and secure their profession going forward. For McEnnis (2021, pp. 3–4), it is essential that they commit to 'serious journalism', which requires (a) building institutional autonomy from sources; (b) providing depth and rigor in reporting; and (c) ensuring their work is socially responsible and reflective of the interests, lives, and values of diverse communities. McEnnis' insistence on holding power to account and maintaining professional standards is undoubtedly correct; however, as we have seen, defensive mediatization strategies make these goals significantly harder to achieve and ultimately impede, undermine, and obstruct the work of journalists. Tension—and perhaps a degree of mutual suspicion—has always been a vital and necessary element in the relationships between journalists and those they report on. However, our findings suggest that the increasingly competitive and, at times, hostile relationship between journalists and sports organizations is making investigative work much more difficult. As a sports journalist at *The Irish Times* commented:

> "It's an adversarial relationship. Sports teams want media when they can use us for what they need ... When they can use us, the media, then it's a positive relationship for them, but they hate the media actually doing deep, investigative reporting on how they operate. The media are a nuisance to them. It's purely adversarial. They don't want us around if we're going to ask difficult questions. I think sports organizations now relish the fact that they can now control the

message a lot more. They can do a lot more without the media than they ever could before. That, to them, must be heavenly."

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Article

Fans, Fellows or Followers: A Study on How Sport Federations Shape Social Media Affordances

Lovisa Broms

Department of Sports Sciences, Faculty of Education and Society, Malmö University, 205 06 Malmö, Sweden; lovisa.broms@mau.se

Abstract: Increased in-depth knowledge on how sport federations shape their social media affordances to build relationships with their audiences will develop the understanding and ongoing discussion on the effects of social media in organized sports. The aim of this study was therefore to investigate in what way sports federations shape their social media affordances to create an increased understanding of how they interact with their audiences through social media. Three sports federations, the Swedish Basketball Federation, the Swedish Skateboard Association, and the Swedish Equestrian Federation, were investigated through semi-structured interviews as well as digital ethnography. The analytical focus lies on in what way the organizations shape *social media affordances* as well as in what way they *imagine* social media *uses and users*. This study shows that the federations' imagination of who their users are, what they would like to see and how these users act and react defines their affordances. Further, the results reveal that the federations have differing approaches to in what way they imagine their users (as *fans, fellows or followers)* as well as what their incentives are for using social media. To learn how ongoing mediations mold long-term changes for sport federations, it is of importance to look beyond mediatization and learn more about their current structure and operations, their history, and traditions, as well as their view of their users.

Keywords: sport federations; social media; affordances; imagined affordances; audiences; basketball; skateboard; equestrian sports; mediatization

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Aim

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and, more specifically, Social Network Sites (SNS) have made an impact on the society of sports. Ever since the early years of social media, researchers have studied the cultural, social, commercial, economic, and technological impact on sports through the lenses of social media (cf. Billings et al. 2019; Filo et al. 2015; Geurin 2017). According to the 2022 edition of the International Sports Federations (IFs) Social Media Ranking, aiming to capture the social media footprint of IFs, the federations generally show a consistent growth in terms of social media numbers. The federation with the highest number of followers is the international Cricket Council, with over 92 million followers, followed by FIFA (51 million followers) and the International Basketball Federation (15 million followers). Even if the development and importance of social media use among sports federations is evident, the latest report published on the Swedish sports confederations' website, focusing on social media in relation to the development of the sport movement, dates back to 2012. The report emphasizes the possibilities and challenges of using SNS and concludes that the use of social media can support the sports movement to build networks and relations with audiences, and through this, enhance its position in society (cf. Westelius et al. 2012). The probability that social media use looks the same way among sports organizations today as it did back in 2012 is slim, and research on national sports federations' utilization of social media is scarce.

The aim of this study was therefore to investigate in what way national sports federations shape their social media affordances to interact with their audiences through

social media to develop the understanding on organizational mediatization among national sport federations.

In a study on Danish national sports federations' use of SNS, Frandsen (2016) shows that digital media are a major concern among federations but that the response towards this influence differs across organizations. For some federations, the operation of digital media is centralized, while others outsource communication tasks, and for many federations, it is difficult to navigate in what way they can best utilize opportunities brought to them through digital media. One of the significant effects of digital media is, according to Frandsen, "a dispersion of communication involving more people and concurrent increasing internal complexity in many organizations" (Frandsen 2016, p. 398). It is important to include a wider range of sports and organizations that traditionally have been excluded from the mass media over the years to extend the knowledge about the effect of digital media (Frandsen 2016); this as marginalized sports are under pressure to adapt to the perceived media logic, by communicating with their audiences through social media to increase their media presence (Nölleke and Birkner 2019). Following the advice from previous research, the three sports federations studied in this article are the Swedish Basketball Federation, the Swedish Skateboard Association, and the Swedish Equestrian Federation. All of these are sports that to some levels have been marginalized (Andersson 2003; Oczki and Pleskot 2020) from the mass media in Sweden.

The mediatization of sports has been developing over the past two decades, and it has led to an increased presence of sports organizations on digital platforms (English 2022; Schallhorn et al. 2022; Nölleke and Birkner 2019; Frandsen 2016). Research shows that this is moving the boundaries of sports media and sports journalism, resulting in strong divisions between the coverage produced by the sports organizations themselves, i.e., PR in the shape of in-house publications mainly published online, and the coverage produced by journalists (Frandsen 2016; Birkner and Nölleke 2016; Nölleke and Birkner 2019; English 2022). Previously, sports organizations relied on news publications and journalists to reach out with news and reports to their audiences. Now, these organizations are scaling up their own communication departments, and at the same time, a decline in sports journalism's traditional capabilities is seen (English 2021). However, not all sports have a history of receiving high media coverage in traditional media, and not all sports organizations have the resources to upscale their communications departments. Even if there is a new wave of mediatization taking place in sports, there are still differences regarding the levels and effects of mediatization in different organizations (Frandsen 2016).

To further investigate the effects of digital media on sports organizations, this study focused on federations' aims and strategies of using SNS. The results are interpreted and discussed with support from the theory of imagined affordances (Nagy and Neff 2015) and the four-item taxonomy of affordances including visibility, editability, persistence, and association (Treem and Leonardi 2013). First, the federations' social media affordances are investigated by introducing their views on why they use social media and what platforms they have chosen to be an active part of:

RQ1: What are the incentives for sport federations to use social media?

Second, the federations' creation and affordance of their social media accounts are focused by analyzing the federations use of social media:

RQ2: In what way do sport federations shape their social media affordances through their strategic work with communication on social media?

Third, the interaction with the federations' audiences is focused by investigating the federations view on—and interaction with—their users:

RQ3: How do sports federations perceive—and interact with—their social media audiences?

1.2. Theoretical Framework

James Gibson (1979) developed the term affordances, which has become a commonly used notion in communication technology and social media studies (Nagy and Neff 2015;

Shaw 2017; Manzerolle and Daubs 2021). Traditionally, affordance describes what the environment offers the animal. In his book The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception (1979), Gibson defines it as follows:

> The affordances of the environment are what It offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either good or ill. The verb to afford is found in the dictionary, the noun affordance is not. I have made it up. I mean by it something that refers to both the environment and the animal in a way that no existing term does. It implies the complementary of the animal and the environment (Gibson 1979, p. 127).

In media and communication studies, the notion of affordances allows researchers to "talk about the imbrication of culture and technology" (Shaw 2017, p. 595; Nagy and Neff 2015). One can think of interactive media technologies in terms of imagined affordances, and an extension of the affordance theory can support communication theorists to focus on the construction, mediation, and materialization of power and social relationships (Shaw 2017; Nagy and Neff 2015). *Imagined affordance* helps to explain how people shape their media environments, perceive them, and have agency within them because of imagined affordances. Shaw (2017) emphasizes that "designs and environments like media representations do not tell us what to think or do, but they do shape what we think with" (Shaw 2017, p. 596). Ronzhyn et al. (2022) further raise that the main advantage of using the affordances perspective in social media research is that it underlines the role and agency of humans in the use of technology. This is done by looking into both the contextual and the individual aspects of technology use to investigate "how social media usage is shaped by the properties of actors and their context" (Ronzhyn et al. 2022, p. 14). The following definition of social media affordances is used to create a more coherent understanding of what affordance means in social media research:

> "Social media affordances are the perceived actual or imagined properties of social media, emerging through the relation of technological, social, and contextual, that enable and constrain specific uses of the platforms" (Ronzhyn et al. 2022, p. 14).

In this study, imagined affordances will be used to investigate in what way sports federations, by shaping their social media affordances, are mediatized in the way that they act and communicate with their audiences. This means that the focus in the analysis of the practices among the federations does not lie on a media-centric perspective of using mediatization to understand the sports federations' role in society, but rather seeing mediatization as an internal process in the organizations' quest to create bonds and relationships with their audiences. Further, according to the theory of imagined affordances, the focus of the analysis lies in what way the federations perceive or imagine their uses of social media, i.e., their social media practices, and their social media users, i.e., their audiences.

> "The point is not solely what people think technology can do or what designers say technology can do, but what people imagine a tool is for. Imagination connotes perception, not just rationality, a distinction that is missing in how communication scholars currently use the term "affordance." (Nagy and Neff 2015, p. 7).

According to Treem and Leonardi (2013), "defining social media by enumerating its affordances may allow for a nuanced understanding of when, why, and how social media occasion change in organizational practice" (p. 147). To conduct the analysis of the federations' imagined uses and users (cf. Nagy and Neff 2015) of social media, the four-item taxonomy including visibility, editability, persistence, and association, developed by Treem and Leonardi (2013), is used. Visibility is tied to the amount of effort people must undertake to locate information and explains in what way social media afford users the ability to make their behaviors, knowledge, preferences, and communication network connections that were once invisible visible to others (Treem and Leonardi 2013, p. 150). Persistence explains how communication stays accessible to its audiences after the actor

has finished her or his presentation, and the persistence of content on social media allows individuals to contribute to the technology "to develop and remain available over time" (Treem and Leonardi 2013, p. 156). Editability is a focus on the fact that individuals are able to spend time and effort to produce and develop a communicative act before it is presented to its audiences. "Editability is a function of two aspects of an interaction: communication formed in isolation from others, and asynchronicity" (Treem and Leonardi 2013, p. 159). Finally, associations are established connections between individuals, between individuals and content, or between an actor and a presentation. There are two forms of associations in social media, where the first is created from one person to another individual (i.e., a social tie), and the other is created by an individual to a piece of information (for example, a wiki contribution or tagging of an article) (Treem and Leonardi 2013, p. 162).

1.3. Mediatization and Sports

According to Frandsen, mediatization is a process that is in operation at many levels and at various speeds, and it takes organizations in diverse directions (Frandsen 2016, p. 398). Mediatization as a concept and theory has proven to be popular in recent years, not only in terms of its overall visibility but also regarding the range of topics it has been attached to (Skey et al. 2018, p. 591). This has, according to Deacon and Stanyer (2014), resulted in the use of mediatization offering simplistic narratives of social change that tend to be overly media-centric. To keep the relevance of using the term, Livingstone and Lunt (2014) suggest that mediatization studies should be focusing on domains of society that have their own institutional logic or cultural order, their own entrenched governance regimes, rules and norms, resources and expertise (Livingstone and Lunt 2014, p. 706). The actor-centered approach with actors who have been influenced by various media over time supports mediatization studies to move away from the critiqued media-centrism, focusing on activities of groups and individuals rather than media and its presumed impact (Skey et al. 2018; Moores 2013). The current study is focusing on organizations (i.e., sport federations) that operate in an organizational environment (i.e., the organized sports sector) that indeed has its own logics, governance structures, rules, norms, as well as expertise and will focus on an actor-centered approach rather than a media-centric approach. This is mainly done by focusing on the sport federations' practices, activities, and views on their own use of social media rather than the influence of media on these organizations. To move further away from media-centrism and the simplistic use of mediatization (cf. Deacon and Stanyer 2014; Birkner and Nölleke 2016; Skey et al. 2018) and to increase the understanding of the sports federations and their mediated communication with their audiences, the theory of affordances will be used as the main operating theoretical approach in this study. Mediatization and the previous studies on sports and mediatization are used to contextualize and discuss the findings in the present study.

1.4. The Swedish Sports Movement

The Swedish sports movement is governed by the Swedish Sports Confederation (SSC), an umbrella organization divided into 72 national sports federations (NSFs) and 19 regional sport federations (RSFs). Sweden is populated by 10.5 million people, and overall, the sports movement involves 3.3 million individual members of around 19,000 associations in the 72 NSFs (Riksidrottsförbundet 2021). The administrative structure of the SSC is voluntary and membership-based and receives an annual budget from the Swedish government. The budget is allocated to the various divisions and RSFs of SSC and further distributed to the NSFs, which ultimately divide the funding towards their member associations. Traditionally, the relationship between the Swedish Sports Movement and the Swedish government is defined by an "implicit contract" where the government defines the extent and the purpose of the funding, and the recipient (i.e., the sports movement) determines the details of the distribution and administration of the funds. Autonomy and self-determination of the sports movement is an important cornerstone of this relationship (Norberg 2011; Fahlén and Stenling 2016). However, research shows that an increased

demand on performance outputs and a wider social responsibility for organized sport have led to a system for follow-up and control of the government support to the sport movement colored by governing mechanisms associated with neoliberal ideologies. These trends are putting the implicit contract between the sports movement and the government to the test (Fahlén and Stenling 2016). Nagel et al. (2015) defines professionalization of sport organizations "as an organisational process of transformation leading towards organisational rationalisation, efficiency and business-like management" (Nagel et al. 2015, p. 407). Ever since the 1970s, professionalization and commercialization have been dominant trends in the world of sports, including the sports movement in Sweden. However, the processes of professionalization and commercialization of organized sports in Sweden have been outweighed by the unique balance between democratic fostering and competition fostering. According to Peterson (2008), the balance between democratic fostering (representing a mix of voluntary work, state support, and democratic work forms) and competition fostering (following the logics of sports) represents a cornerstone for the present and future success of the Scandinavian sports model. Further, in a report on future trends of the leadership and organization within the Swedish sports movement conducted by the SSC, the balance between the voluntary-based system with its unique values and professional and commercial trends is raised as crucial for the future development of Swedish sports (Welander 2020).

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Data Collection

2.1.1. Sample Selection

In this study, three national sports federations were investigated: The Swedish Equestrian Federation, The Swedish Basketball Federation, and the Swedish Skateboard Association. These sports have been selected to give the study a nuanced picture of sports federations' mediatization and use of social media. The underlying selection criteria are the social profile of the participants in the different sports, focusing on gender distribution, for how long the specific sport has been a member of the Swedish Sports Confederation, and the number of member associations, individual members, as well as the number of staff members working for the federation (Table 1).

Table 1. Profiles of the National Sport Federations.

Federation	Formed Year	Number of Member Associations	Number of Individual Members	Gender Distribution among Members	Number of Staff Members
The Swedish Equestrian Federation	1912	841	168,599	92% female 8% male	41 (33 female 8 male)
The Swedish Basketball Federation	1952	321	142,516	45% female 55% male	19 (6 female 13 male)
The Swedish Skateboard Association	2012	100	29,796	22% female 78% male	4 (1 female 3 male)

The Swedish Basketball Federation (SBF) was formed in 1952, and today, their office consists of 19 staff members. SBF's communication efforts are based in a department called marketing, event, and communication. The persons interviewed in this study, Marc, and Dan (the interviewees names have been replaced with fictive names for the purpose of confidentiality), are both working in this department and have strategic and practical experience working with social media and communications. SBF uses several ICTs as platforms for their communication efforts (see Table 2). The Swedish Skateboard Association (SSA) was formed in January 2012, and since 2014, the office has grown from one to four staff members, two full-time staff who are the two interviewees, Sam and Jessie, and two staff members working on specific projects. There is no specific communications department, all four staff members are at some level involved in social

media engagements. The Swedish Equestrian Federation (SEF) was formed in 1912, and today, their office consists of around 40 staff members. The marketing and communication department consists of 10 persons, and the two interviewees, Lisa, and Sophie, focus on communication efforts through social media. Lisa mainly focuses on grassroots sports-related communication and educational material with riding clubs and riding schools as target groups, whereas Sophie works more with content related to sports and competitions.

2.1.2. Interviews

Semistructured interviews (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018) with two representatives from each federation, of which three were male and three were female, were conducted in April–May 2020. An interview guide including three sections guided the interviews. The first part included open introductory questions focusing on the interviewees' background and role at the federation. The second part focused on the federations' audiences and target groups, and the interviewees were asked to describe, rank, and elaborate on the federations' target groups. Part number three was the most extensive part, focusing on the federations' work with social media. Questions about the federations' communication strategies and their work in relation to social media were posed. The interviews led by the author lasted between 50 and 90 min, with an average duration of 76.55 min. All interviews were conducted through Zoom and were recorded and transcribed.

2.1.3. Digital Ethnography

To further investigate the sports federations' work with, and presence, on social media, netnographic observations (Berg 2015) of the three federations' official social media platforms were conducted. The observations were conducted for two months: March 2021 and January 2022. Multiple social media platforms were observed (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok) and the material was collected through field notes. The field-note diary includes a detailed description of the posts (text, video, image(s)), the number of likes and comments, and a caption of the comments.

2.2. Data Analysis

The transcribed interviews were thematically analyzed (Clarke and Braun 2018) and coded using the qualitative computer-assisted software NVivo. The following themes were identified in the analysis: Appropriation (sub-codes: Guidelines, Policy, Practical work, Strategy), Audiences (sub-codes: target groups, reception, and influencers/profiles), Content, Development (sub-codes: Success factors, Threats, Challenges, Development areas), and Information-Federation. Further, the material collected through the digital ethnography of the federations' SNS was also coded and analyzed using NVivo. Finally, quotes representing the themes were added in the Results section. According to Corden and Sainsbury (2006), adding quotations in the results may be a useful tool to assure that the research participants are given agency by including their voices. However, it is important to keep a thoughtful balance between quotes and the analytical text conducted by the researcher. In this study, it has been of importance to include the interviewees' voices, as their views on strategic communication through SNS form one of the foundations of the data collected and are a cornerstone in the analysis.

The data collected through the digital ethnography were analyzed through four queries conducted using NVivo: the number of posts per SNS for all federations (Figure 1), the number of posts per federation and SNS (Table 3), and content produced by the federations (Table 4 and Figures 2–4).

2.3. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations have influenced the approach of the study. Informed consent has been collected from the interviewees, who were thoroughly introduced to the research project before commencing the interviews. The interviewees were also informed that they could stop the interview at any time or choose not to respond to certain questions.

For the purpose of confidentiality, sensitive and personal information is safely archived. The interviewees' names have been replaced, and other indicators that could reveal their identity have been removed or altered. Regarding the digital ethnography, the official platforms of the three federations are used, and there has been an active choice not to include observations from, for example, closed groups formed by individuals on SNS. Further, representatives from the federations have, during the interviews, been informed that the federations' official SNS will be observed and included in the study.

3. Results

3.1. The Federation's Social Media Affordances

3.1.1. Aims of Using Social Network Sites

All three federations in this study are convinced that SNS are an important part of their communication efforts and that it is necessary to use SNS to reach out with their information. They do, however, have slightly different views on why they use SNS. Thus, it is likely that they shape their social media affordances in various ways. To uncover the federations' social media affordances, the reasoning behind their use of the platforms is presented. The focus lies on investigating how the organizations shape their media environments (cf. Nagy and Neff 2015). For the Swedish Basketball Federation (SBF), the use of SNS is necessary to stay relevant for a younger audience but also to develop the brand Swedish basketball and to reach more fans. Throughout the interviews, organizations such as the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) are mentioned as inspirations for SBF's work with communication through SNS. In the excerpts below, one of the interviewees from SBF, Marc, expresses the importance of staying on top of the developing social media landscape and the potential in reaching out to, specifically, a younger basketball audience through SNS:

> Marc: If we look at one of the challenges that we face . . . is that we want to keep young players involved in basketball. We don't want young people who play basketball to stop playing because other things get in the way. We cannot fully succeed in this unless we have a brand and communication channels that appeal to and interest the young audience. Because the probability of staying in the sport is much greater if they see that we stand for interesting content, an interesting brand, and interesting content on social media. There you can draw inspiration from many different sources. For example, the NBA in the US has done a fantastic job with that. They have been at the forefront of digital development all along and have worked very successfully in raising player profiles and engaging young fans in an extremely effective way (Interview with Marc, SBF).

The results show that SBF, through its *visibility* on SNS, aims to strengthen its brand to retain young players and engage with new audiences. For the Swedish Skateboard Association (SSA), it is also important to use SNS to increase its *visibility*. However, it seems even more important for them to, through SNS, afford an environment where they can create *associations* between themselves and their audiences. The representatives from SSA express that they use social media to create a sense of community and intimacy with their target groups. An example of this is that they have chosen to, instead of setting up an official Facebook page, create a group as the official channel on Facebook. They believe that a group allows their followers to communicate more freely, which creates a better feeling of togetherness, as it allows everyone to have a voice and space to express their opinions. In other words, they wish to afford an environment driven by *associations* between the organization and its audiences. Further, this shows that a platform such as Facebook affords different possibilities for organizations and that it, in cases like this, indeed reflects the organizational aims and strategies that stand behind the shaping of the platform's attributes.

Even if it is evident that social media is a very important part of the Swedish Equestrian Federation's (SEF) communication department, there seems to be a paradox regarding the traditional aspects of the equestrian industry and the developing digital communication

landscape. On the one hand, there are patterns showing reluctance, and sometimes even fear, towards communication through SNS, and on the other hand, SNS are raised as important forums for the equestrian community. In the excerpts below, Lisa elaborates on this paradox and raises the development potential regarding "thinking more social" as she puts it:

> Lisa: I also think that we are a bit behind, we operate in a very old-fashioned way in general. So, when we make strategies for different projects and communication plans, we don't always think social, but things are starting to happen. If you have a pile of money, you should put at least half of it to buy outreach if you want to reach out properly. Because it's not possible to rely on organic outreach anymore. So that there is, of course, a development potential in that as well. To think more social in our plans and strategies.

> Lovisa: Why do you think it's so old-fashioned in your sport?

> Lisa: Honestly, I think there are a lot of good people . . . but we are such a super analog industry. I don't think it has anything to do with age either, there are also young people who become analog like that. There's sort of a strength in it as well, but it lags a bit. You do what you've always done.

> . . .

> Maybe we're a bit slower than others because we have a bit slower sport, I don't really know, because we are very hands-on as well (Interview with Lisa, SEF).

The equestrian industry is expressed as quite analog and traditional, but at the same time, the interviewees see great potential in reaching out to the target groups of the federation by using social media. SNS are seen as powerful tools to build better relationships with their target groups, and one of the interviewees expresses that this has slightly transformed the image of the federation, from being seen as a very bureaucratic organization to being more accessible toward its members. In the excerpts above, Lisa also elaborates that it is necessary to have resources in terms of money to afford outreach through SNS and that it is impossible to gain organic outreach today.

### 3.1.2. The Federations' Choice of Social Network Sites

To further analyze the social media affordances of the federations, it is necessary to look at their choice of SNS or perhaps, more importantly, the reasoning behind their choice of the use of different SNS. All three federations use multiple SNS; Facebook together with Instagram are seen as central platforms of their communication through social media. The number of followers on the federations' different SNS is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Overview of the federations' SNS.

Federation	Facebook	Instagram	Twitter	TikTok
The Swedish Equestrian Federation	66,000 followers	76,300 followers	3600 followers	-
The Swedish Basketball Federation	10,700 followers	17,500 followers	5160 followers	9600 followers
The Swedish Skateboard Association	3400 group members	3170 followers	-	-

Number of followers per federation and SNS, 20230320.

Figure 1 and Table 3 below present results from the digital ethnography and show the three federations' activity on their different SNS during the time of the observations.
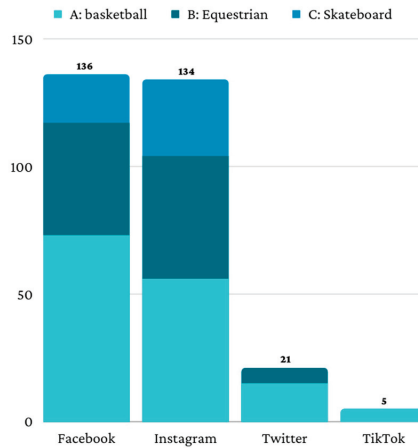
Figure 1. Number of posts by all three federations on the different SNS.

The results show that the federations were, at the time of the observations, publishing the most posts on Facebook (n = 136), closely followed by Instagram (n = 134), while Twitter (n = 21) and TikTok (n = 5) were more rarely used by the federations. To compare the use of SNS between the organizations, the number of posts per federation and SNS was collected, analyzed, and summarized. As shown in Table 3 below, SBF published the highest number of posts (n = 148), followed by SEF (n = 92) and SSA (n = 49). SBF and SEF published the most posts on Facebook, whereas SSA was more active on Instagram, and the only federation active on TikTok was SBF. These results show that it is not the federation with the most resources in terms of staff who are the most active on their SNS. However, the observations reveal that SBF often publishes multiple posts per day and platform just like SSA (on some occasions they both post up to six posts per day on Facebook or Instagram), whereas SEF seems more restrictive regarding multiple posts per day and platform. On some occasions, SEF published up to four posts per day on a platform but not more than that.

Table 3. Number of posts per SNS divided by federation.

	A: Basketball	B: Equestrian	C: Skateboard
1: Facebook	73	44	19
2: Instagram	56	48	30
3: TikTok	5	0	0
4: Twitter	15	6	0
Total	148	92	49

The interviewees were also asked what platforms they are using and why they have chosen to be present on these SNS. As shown in the results from the digital ethnography above, the federations use multiple platforms, and SBF is the most active organization by measuring the number of active platforms and number of posts. Interestingly, the interviewees from SBF raise Instagram as their largest SNS with the most followers; however, they are not most active on this platform, they are posting more on Facebook in comparison to Instagram. Twitter is also used by SBF but has fewer followers than the other SNS, and, in the interviews, TikTok was raised as a potential new platform for the federation. Later, the digital ethnography revealed that a TikTok account indeed was set up and active (see Table 3 above). Like the Basketball Federation, the Skateboard Federation mainly uses Facebook and Instagram together with their website as their main communication

channels, and they also have an account on YouTube. They do not use Twitter or TikTok. The interviews show that the respondents from the Equestrian Federation, just like the respondents from the other two federations, see SNS as important recourses in their external communication efforts.

3.1.3. Background and Traditions

The results above show that all federations today see SNS as important recourses. However, one of the interviewees from the equestrian federation reveals that she had to struggle to get her colleagues and bosses to accept that the federation should be present on social media back in 2011. The Equestrian Federation has a history of battling with a rather suspicious attitude towards communication through SNS; this is also in line with the argument made previously regarding the traditional nature of this federation and the sport in general. However, the results also show that the will to be present and *accessible* to the members and followers often seems to win over the rather hesitant attitude toward new ways of communicating.

For the skateboard federation, communication through social media is used to guide new members or people who are curious about "how the sport works." In the excerpts below, a respondent from the skateboard federation, Jessie, elaborates on how skateboarding is different from other sports in relation to traditions and path dependency:

> Jessie: I think that a sport that has been part of the Swedish Sports Confederation for a long time has its pathway already set out. They're probably like, it has always been like this, it's not questioned. I think that for us, who attract people who are not used to the way things are in the organized sports movement or understand what it's about, communication on social media is important (Interview with Jessie, SSA).

There are differences in the three federations' approaches regarding their choice of SNS. On the one hand, SBF sees it as an important task to follow the developing social media landscape and open up new platforms continuously if they see that their target audience (i.e., young people who are (or potentially will be) interested in basketball) is present there. This approach is evident both from the results of the interviews and the digital ethnography. On the other hand, and in contrast to SBF, SEF and SSA are quite clear that they do not see the need to be an early adopter of new platforms. The interviewees from SSA stress the importance of knowing where the organizations' target groups interact and mean that it is better to follow the target groups rather than set new trends regarding digital platforms. The interviewees from the Equestrian Federation are, just like the Skateboard Association, convinced that the organization does not need to be an early adopter when it comes to testing new social media platforms. In the excerpts below, one of the interviewees from SEF explains that she sees the potential in developing new platforms of communication but also stresses that it is very time-consuming to keep multiple accounts active:

> Lisa: We sort of feel like we don't want to be everywhere (on all different social media platforms, authors remark) and we don't need to be the first ones present at a new platform. We still must be able to keep up with the work, so we haven't been very keen on starting up all new platforms at the same time. There is a huge potential that we just don't really have time for today (Interview with Lisa, SEF).

Time and recourses are barriers for the Skateboard and Equestrian Federations to set up new SNS; interestingly, these two federations are the smallest, respectively, and the largest federation in terms of practitioners, members as well as staff members, which indicates that the size of the federation is not the only factor defining the number of platforms federations are active on. Just like the Basketball Federation, they see potential with new platforms, but they would rather prioritize their work with their existing SNS.

The results in this section show that the federations have both similar and different approaches to what their social media affordances are and need to be. These results are in line with results from Frandsen (2016) study on Danish sports federations' level of

mediatization in relation to social media use, showing that mediatization is a process that takes organizations in diverse directions (Frandsen 2016, p. 398). However, the results in this study show, in contrast to Frandsen (2016) as well as English's (2021) study, that all three federations are operating their media in-house and do not outsource these tasks regardless of their size and resources.

3.2. The Federation's Uses of Social Media

In this section, results in relation to the federation's affordances of social media are discussed by analyzing their uses of social media. This is done by presenting their producer practices and strategies related to their use of SNS as well as an overview of the content produced by the federations.

3.2.1. Social Media Strategies

All three federations expressed that they were in the middle of producing new communication strategies or improving existing strategies. At the time of the interviews, SBF was in the final phases of putting a marketing strategy together. Although the marketing strategy was implemented recently, SBF has an existing communication plan describing the practical guidelines for the work with SNS. This plan describes which communication channels the federation uses, different categories of communication (such as decisions related to competitions, strategic decisions, crisis information, information about educational programs, etc.), and in what way they should use the different platforms of communication. Further, the communication plan covers the tone used and the different target groups in focus for the different platforms of communication.

All four staff members at the Skateboard Association are in some way involved in communications, and this is generally seen as a strength by the interviewees; it can, however, also be a challenge. In the excerpts below, Sam describes a situation that accentuated the need for more structured communication efforts among the four staff members.

> Sam: We don't want to overload our channels, we managed to do that...not last Friday but the Friday before that. Then it was just like, on our Facebook, I just, what happened now? There were like six posts on the same day, which meant that the most important thing that we needed to communicate that day was just lost and got fewer likes or lost integration, what is it called?
>
> Lovisa: Outreach?
>
> Sam: Yes, it just drowned because there was so much else that came up and then we had to have a meeting at the office, and just talk about, what happened now? I want us to post a lot of stuff, but you must have a bit of structure. So, check the page before you blurt things out. But it's learning by doing, of course (Interview with Sam, SSA).

The interviewees at the skateboard federation express a clear need to structure their work with SNS. They have therefore created a communications plan that, at the time of the interviews, was almost finalized. This plan includes a description of the different SNS used by the organization as well as a SWOT analysis of their communication efforts. However, interviewees from SSA elaborate on the importance of not structuring things too much. The results reveal hesitance or a slight resistance from SSA to destroy the work that they are already doing by overstructuring things. Even if they know that they need to better structure their communication efforts, they seem afraid that this might negatively affect the things that they do well today.

SEF is the only federation that already had a communication plan, including strategies for their communication on SNS, up and running. They were at the time of the interviews in the process of updating and improving the communication strategy. The document includes a social media strategy, working as guidance on the frequency of posts on different platforms, guidelines on at what time it makes sense to publish on different platforms, etc. The interviewees argue that it is indeed helpful to have this document as support,

specifically when a crisis hits them. The interviewees also acknowledge the need for updating the document frequently, as the algorithms for the different SNS change continuously, which influences the effects of, for example, at what time during the day posts get the most outreach. Interestingly, it is only interviewees from SEF who refer to what SNS affords them, in terms of technical possibilities and obstacles. Further, the interviewees at SEF express that it is important for them to have a continuous dialogue regarding content for their platforms; they have daily calls regarding the production and publication of content for their SNS.

3.2.2. Content Produced by the Federations

To further investigate the federations' uses of social media, data on the content produced by the federations were collected and analyzed. The digital ethnography revealed 10 categories of content most frequently posted by the federations on SNS. In Table 4 below, the categories are presented together with a short example of what type of content this category contains.

Table 4. Categories of content on the federations' SNS.

Category	Example
1: Support to associations	Posts containing information to associations and updates from associations
2: Competition	Posts related to competitions, such as news and updates on results and information about rules
3: Elite sports	Posts related to elite sports and elite athletes
4: Games and activites	Posts introducing online activities or games, such as quizzes
5. Influencers and profiles	Posts introducing individual influencers and profiles, such as athletes or profiles connected to the federation
6. Knowledge exchange	Posts raising knowledge in relation to the federation or the sport in general
7. Media	Posts forwarding content from other media channels
8. News and updates	Posts containing official information and/or news from the federation
9. Social initiatives and projects	Posts containing information on noncompetitive initiatives and projects
10. Collaboration and sponsors	Posts containing information and updates from sponsors and partners

Figures 2–4 below present results on the frequency of the categorized content produced and published on the federations' SNS, divided by federation. The SNS posts collected through the digital ethnography were analyzed and coded according to the categories; one post can contain numerous categories. Therefore, the figures below represent an overview of the most frequent categories observed.
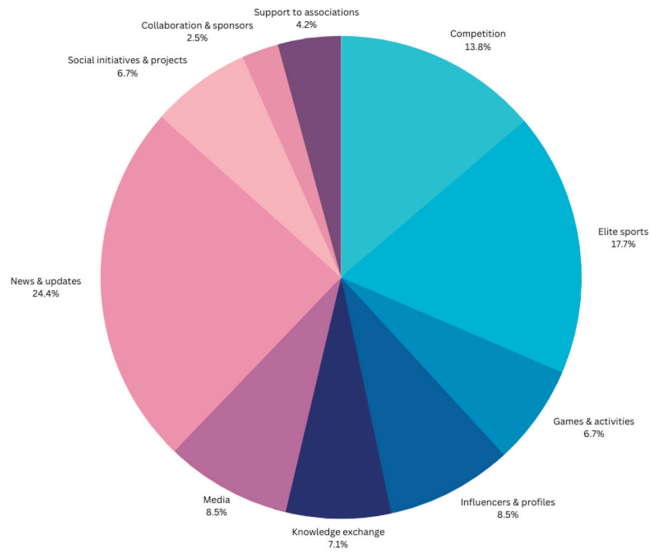
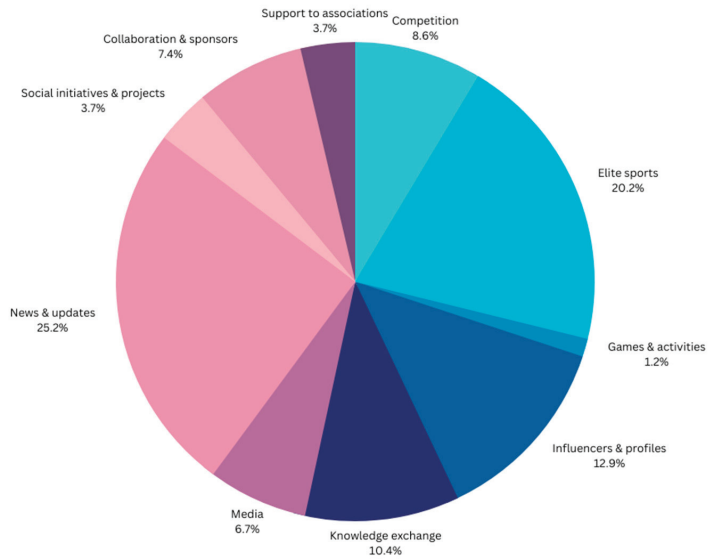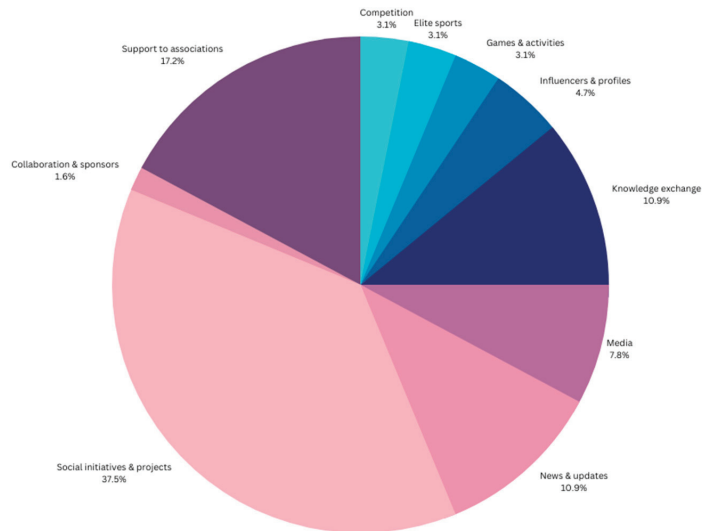**Figure 2.** Content of the Swedish Basketball Federation.

Figure 3. Content of the Swedish Equestrian Federation.

Figure 4. Content of the Swedish Basketball Association.

A comparison of the results presented above reveals that the Basketball and Equestrian federations publish a high number of posts on SNS relating to competition, elite sports, news and updates, and influencers and profiles, whereas the Skateboard Association focuses on social initiatives and project as well as support to associations.

3.2.3. Tone and Language

The equestrian federation is the only organization that expresses that they have a strict policy stating that they solely communicate from the official channels of the federation. It is stated in their strategy that the staff members, in their professional role, never should engage in discussions in external groups or forums on SNS. Another policy is that staff members never sign a social media post with their own name. This is to protect the staff members from being criticized or assaulted. In the excerpts below, Lisa raises that there have been incidents where staff members have been assaulted by people on social media:

> Lisa: For example, we have a strategy around never answering with a name, for our employees, we get quite a lot of angry comments like that, it's a bit unpleasant. There have been a few trolls throughout the years who have targeted individual employees. So, it's probably mostly to avoid that kind of harassment and stuff, this is where we need our policies.
>
> Lovisa: I'm a bit curious, why do you have this strategy, of never answering with your names?
>
> Lisa: In general, Facebook has probably succeeded better, I don't really know this, but I feel it that way because we notice a significant difference in how they clean, very rough words and such. Because people get very angry. It could, for example, be about changing a rule, or moving a competition, it can be things like that where people want to reach individuals and decision-makers (at the federation, authors remark). It can be harsh words too, now maybe it's not so much towards individuals right now, at the moment it's more that we are stupid in general. Haha.
>
> . . .
>
> Sometimes if it's a spokesperson or our sports director for example, then, of course, it can happen that they go after individual employees, and we'd rather not have that of course. We are happy to respond to it collectively and sometimes

the power of a chairman's words or something is needed, but we do not want to put individuals in vulnerable positions (Interview with Lisa, SEF).

Evidently, the tone can be quite harsh on the Equestrian Federations' SNS; therefore, the organization has implemented strategies to protect individual employees from being put in positions where they might be criticized or even harassed. This challenge could create a barrier between the organization and its followers. However, the interviewees attest that SNS are important to building relationships and creating a bond between the federation and its audiences. In fact, one of the interviewees raises the tonality in their communication on SNS as a success factor, and the explosive force in the equestrian community seems to be a strength as much as a threat.

Tonality is also something that is important in the Skateboard Federations' work with SNS, which aims to develop a tone, language, and image that feel natural and communicates who they are and what they do. SSA see a need to translate the language and tone from a bureaucratic tone in the messages from, for example, the Sports Confederation to a language that speaks more directly to their member and audiences:

> Sam: . . . it's a very important role that we need to translate the sports confedera-
> tion's words into words that are relevant and can be received by the associations
> and practitioners. In some cases, we may not always use the term sport, it is
> important that we replace it with skateboarding. There must not be too many
> complicated bureaucratic words going on. The text needs to be . . . for example,
> when we communicate with municipalities we use a certain language, it is impor-
> tant that we can speak their language too but when we talk to the associations, we
> say the same thing but translated . . . it's not like they don't understand anything
> of what we say. It's not like that, it's more about the fact that certain words may
> have a negative connotation for some and then we can just replace that word with
> something that is more relevant within the scene (the skateboard scene, authors
> remark). Then it is received better (Interview with Sam, SSA).

Regarding tone and language, terms such as brand, consumers, fans, storylines, and coolness factor are used repeatedly by the interviewees from the Basketball Federation. The language that the two representatives from SBF uses expresses a more commercial tone than the other two federations.

3.3. The Federation's Perceptions and Interactions with Their Users

To investigate in what way sport federation's perceive and interact with their social media audiences, the interviewees were asked who they see as their target groups and in what way they communicate with these groups through their SNS.

3.3.1. Target Groups

The Basketball Federation's primary target groups are people who already are active in basketball such as practitioners, participants, leaders, and coaches; in sum, persons who need to be reached by practical information linked to the operations of the federation. External target groups such as basketball consumers, fans, and the general public with an interest in basketball are expressed as the secondary target groups. It is, however, expressed by Marc that the federation works on adapting the content on SNS to appeal to this secondary target group to a greater extent:

> Marc: . . . Regarding social media, it is a combination of these target groups, but
> we try to adapt the content on social media to appeal to the external target group
> to a greater extent. So that we reach those who are not yet very into basketball.
> So, I would probably sum it up that the strategy is to start from those of us who
> already are important target groups in basketball in Sweden, but we also try to
> attract target groups outside who can be seen as future basketball consumers
> (Interview with Marc, SBF).

Like the Basketball Federation, the Equestrian Federation also aims to reach out to a broad target group by communicating through SNS even if they prioritize their members and practitioners. However, in contrast to SBF, they express that they do not make any difference between members and nonmembers in their communication efforts:

> Lisa: . . . when we think of social media channels, we don't make such a big difference between members and non-members. We want more members, and we want more people to be interested in our federation, and the organized equestrian sport. So, we think we should be as generous and open as we can.
>
> Lovisa: Okay, I have a follow-up question, could you please rank these target groups?
>
> Lisa: Oh yes..the associations. It's the associations, those who are elected representatives in the associations, and those who are involved and run them, they are of course most important to us. But it really is very different over time, what stakeholders in society are most relevant. But traditionally we work via the associations, and then their members, first the organization and then the individual member. Then we have, media, media is quite prioritized (Interview with Lisa, SEF).

Equestrian sport is the second largest youth sport in Sweden and SEF is, according to the interviewees, determined to reach out to a broad target group through ICTs and sees a big potential in this. However, the interviews reveal that a lack of time and recourses stands in the way of being present on platforms where they know that the younger target groups interact.

Just like the other two federations, SSA prioritize their already-existing target groups and emphasize that it is important to acknowledge members and practitioners. However, they admit that they have gotten comments from members of their main target group, that they feel a bit neglected as the federation has focused a lot on communicating pictures and videos portraying a more diverse group of skateboarders:

> Sam: We work very much on gender equality and inclusion in the skateboard federation. However, the typical skateboard practitioner is white, young- or middle-aged men, at least in Sweden, so we work a lot on bringing awareness that we welcome everyone and that we want to have fifty-fifty girls and boys. We want to promote a diversity of skateboarders because it's still a very "white sport", we know that . . . we're at least aware of it. Something that is very interesting is that we've gotten some input from a few of the "middle-aged white men" that they don't really feel included as we mainly focus on female- and LGBTQ practitioners in our communication for example in our social media channels (Interview with Sam, SSA).

As expressed in the excerpts above, members of a certain group of skateboard practitioners have raised that they do not always feel included in the image that SSA communicates through their SNS.

3.3.2. Opportunities with SNS

To further analyze in what way the federations are working with SNS and how they shape their social media affordances, the interviewees were asked to elaborate on their thoughts on their future work with SNS and to identify opportunities related to communication through social media. In this quote, Marc elaborates on the role of SNS in the future and SBF's ambition related to communication through SNS:

> Marc: Basketball In the future as I see it . . . If our ambition is to build basketball partly through connecting sports to fashion, music, and all that . . . if we want to succeed in that then social media will be crucial to get where we want to go. We want basketball to stand for more than just the sporting aspect and more seen as a cool and societal phenomenon . . . a force. We will be able to do that

much better by using social media . . . So that's where we see a lot of potential. It's connected to the fact that we see our sport as a brand that includes more than just the games and the players. It's a brand connected to what they do off the arena and connected to general things. Basketball promotes integration, equality, and inclusion. Tearing down walls in society is what we stand for. This can be communicated in a completely different way through social media than we would otherwise would've been able to and that is fantastic (Interview with Marc, SBF).

Again, the basketball federation sees social media engagements as a great opportunity to develop and ultimately expand the brand Swedish Basketball with more attributes than "just" the sport itself. They see social media as a great resource to make basketball into an exciting and cool societal phenomenon. This will be done by connecting the sport with fashion and music and to show that the brand Swedish Basketball is so much more than only what happens in the arena or what the players do. Further, the interviewees highlight the strength of basketball as an inclusive and equal sport that can tear down walls in society and that social media is a great resource to communicate these strengths.

For the Skateboard Association, learning by doing is a term that is used several times to express the need to develop their communication efforts without overstructuring things. Meeting their audiences at their level without being "too populistic", as Jessie expresses it in one of the interviews, is also important for the federation. The democratic aspect of allowing people to interact at the same level is an important aspect of social media. Again, the interviewees from SSA express the potential in using social media as a tool to interact at the same level as their audience and the democratic aspects of being able to say what you think and spread information. In the excerpts above, Sam also raises the benefits for organizations to host digital meetings such as the general assembly to allow more people to join and have a say. Throughout the interviews, SSA show that they are imagining the affordances of their SNS to be tools to create spaces where they can create a more equal and democratic space for them to interact with their audiences.

For SEF, *accessibility* is once again raised as being a great opportunity with strategic communication through social media. SNS are raised as great platforms to reach out with important yet accessible information. Another aspect raised as a success factor in the federation's work with SNS is the love for the horse. The interviewees mean that, in comparison to other federations, SEF can use the common love for horses to build bonds with their users through SNS.

The results in this section show that the three federations have quite a similar view on who their target groups are, but the results show that they have different strategies on how to approach these groups. SBF is working to adjust their communication towards potential new basketball consumers, SEF does not make any difference between members and non-members, and SSA prioritizes minority groups.

4. Concluding Discussion

With the background that communication through social media is a major concern among national sports federations, the use and effects of digital media vary widely across these types of organizations (Frandsen 2016), together with knowledge that the pressure to adapt to the media logic by communicating with their audiences through social media is increasing for sports organizations that historically have been marginalized from traditional media (Nölleke and Birkner 2019). I argue that increased in-depth knowledge on how sport federations shape their social media affordances to build relationships with their audiences will develop the understanding and ongoing discussion on the effects of social media in organized sports. The aim of the current study was therefore to investigate in what way national sports federations shape their social media affordances to interact with their audiences through social media to further develop the understanding on organizational mediatization among national sport federations.

With regard to the first research question, *What are the incentives for sport federations to use social media?* previous research shows that there has been an attitude change among Danish sports federations concerning the needs of daily communication efforts, regardless of the sport. Previously, only the more professionalized federations such as the football federation have had a communication manager, whereas the smaller and less-professionalized federations relied on traditional media to spread information and news about their activities. Today, communication is regarded as highly relevant and necessary for all Danish sport federations (Frandsen 2016). However, the need and pressure on smaller federations to scale up their communication efforts is connected with the growing field of media landscape, is demanding, and may create a "digital-divide" among organizations (Hutchins and Rowe 2012; Frandsen 2016). It is highly interesting to compare Swedish sports federations with Danish as the Scandinavian sports model, with its roots embedded in amateur ideology and ideals on democratic fostering (Peterson 2008) having a similar and unique history and approach. Similarly, to the federations in Frandsen (2016) study, the federations in the present study all are attesting to the importance of using social media to communicate with their audiences, and they are all prioritizing an increased structure of their work with SNS. However, instead of outsourcing their communication efforts (cf. Frandsen 2016), they see social media communications as an important in-house task. This is in line with previous research showing that sport organizations are mediatized in their way of using SNS to communicate to different audiences instead of relying on journalists (cf. Frandsen 2016; Birkner and Nölleke 2016; Nölleke and Birkner 2019; English 2022).

The general aim of the federation's communication through social media is to reach out to and build relationships with their existing members and practitioners. There are, however, secondary aims revealed in the results showing differences between the three federations studied in this article. For the Equestrian Federation, it is highly important to, through their communication efforts on SNS, reflect a stable and trustworthy base offering information and updates that can benefit their followers in their equestrian interests. The Skateboard Association wishes to accentuate the spontaneous and democratic aspects and nature of the sport through their SNS communication, whereas the Basketball Federation wishes to utilize their strategic communication through SNS to strengthen the brand Swedish Basketball.

These results show that background, traditions, and recourses play a certain role when the federations shape social media affordances. Thus, it is of importance to create an understanding of sport federations' background and traditions to further understand their mediatization. The Equestrian Federation and the Basketball Federation have more resources to allocate for communication and social media engagements as they are larger organizations. In other words, the strategic communications in these organizations are professionalized to a higher degree than in the Skateboard Association. Even so, the largest federation in terms of members, practitioners, and staff, namely, the Equestrian Federation, sees recourses as the largest barrier standing in their way to develop their social media engagements by, for example, opening accounts on new platforms such as TikTok. The interviewees stress that it is more important for the Equestrian Federation to be a reliable source of information and knowledge on their existing platforms than using recourses to develop new SNS. On the one hand, they stress that they do not have enough recourses to develop new social media accounts and platforms even if they wish to do so. On the other hand, they mean that it is a strategic decision to use existing resources to operate existing platforms and assure their quality. These results can be explained by the traditional nature of equestrianism. Stable cultures are, to some extent, defined by a military heritage and institutionalized governance structures leading to slow development pathways (Thorell and Hedenborg 2015).

The Skateboard Federation, which is the smallest organization, sees structure as the most important development area in relation to their work with communication. However, it is important for this organization to not fall into patterns and pathways set out by more traditional sports, and they aim to build relationships with their audiences defined

by community and democracy. These results can be explained by the background of skateboarding as a self-organized lifestyle sport defined by urban subcultures. Previous research shows that skateboarders use SNS to learn, perform, and discuss their authentic identities resulting in the maintenance of boundaries for authentic behavior (Buckingham 2009; Woermann 2012; Dupont 2020). For the Basketball Federation, the most important area in regards to developing the communication through social media is to strengthen the brand Swedish Basketball and to show that it is more than "a sport". These results can be related to the commercial focus of the federations' strategies and practices, which further can be explained by the mediatized and commercial nature of the federations' role model, NBA (cf. Secular 2019).

The study on Danish sports federations shows that communication still is treated as a low priority support function in terms of structure and allocated recourses in many federations. In regards to organizational change and level of mediatization, Frandsen (2016) argues that a clear and implementable communication strategy is a relevant marker for where in this process an organization stands. Among the Danish sports federations, a vast majority of the larger organizations were, at the time of the study, already in possession of a communication strategy, whereas only 24% of the smaller federations felt the need or had recourses to create and implement this type of strategy (Frandsen 2016). Interestingly, all three federations in this study attested to being in the process of developing a new (Skateboard and Basketball), or updating the existing, communication strategy. Thus, regardless of the size and professionalization of the federation, strategic communication seems to have developed in comparison to the study conducted by Frandsen in 2016. To further investigate sport federations, I argue that it is necessary to further investigate what the work on SNS means for the federations. Therefore, the federations' creation and affordance of their social media accounts are focused by analyzing the federations' use of social media. By investigating the federations' communication strategies, the content produced by the federations and the tone and language used on SNS by the federations, the second research question: *In what way do sport federations shape their social media affordances through their strategic work with communication on social media?* is investigated.

Results reveal that the Equestrian Federation has afforded an environment on SNS defined by *visibility*. Since the very beginning, they have been cautious towards letting their audience co-create content with them through SNS, meaning that their affordances are shaped in a way that do not fully accommodate their audience to be involved, which ultimately has led to a relationship between audience (i.e., *followers*) and federation partly defined by suspicion. The Skateboard Association, which has afforded an environment on SNS defined by *association*, is fully focused on co-creating content and democratic ways to interact, but with whom? They have a clear imagination of their users and afford an environment thereafter. However, this imagination does not seem to match their actual users and the question is if they can reach their goals and aims if they do not include their actual users to an increased extent. Finally, The Basketball Federation, which has afforded an environment on SNS defined by *visibility*, has a clear goal to empower their brand through SNS and to engage more people in basketball. Their imagined users (i.e., *fans*) are young people interested in what is going on both inside and outside of the basketball arena and ready to consume fashion, music, and other trends related to basketball.

To further investigate in what way sport federations shape their social media affordances, the interactions between the federations and their audiences were focused through the third and final research question: *How do sports federations perceive- and interact with their social media audiences?* The results reveal that, for the Skateboard Association, it is highly important to build a sense of community and intimacy where everyone who is interested in skateboarding can express themselves freely through the federation's SNS. The Skateboard Association imagines their users as *fellows*, who co-create content together with the federation. It is however questionable who they really are communicating to. The interviewees attest that they have gotten comments from members of their main target group who do not always feel included in the federation's communication efforts. The results reveal that

the Skateboard Association is prioritizing a more diverse group of skateboarders in their communication efforts.

In contrast to the Skateboard Association, the Equestrian Federation chooses to be very formal in their communication through their channels. They see their audiences as *followers* who benefit from consuming the messages and knowledge presented by the federation through social media. This seems to be grounded in a suspiciousness from what happens when individuals do not agree with the content communicated by the federation. Thus, even if the Equestrian Federation wishes to be the stable and trustful source of information and knowledge, their relationship with their users does not always seem to be built on mutual trust. Finally, the Basketball Federation imagines their audiences as consumers and *fans* to a greater extent than the other federations. With NBA and FIBA as role models, their goal is to recruit more basketball *fans* by reaching out with highlights and focusing on the coolness factor surrounding basketball and the culture around the sport. It is however questionable whether the Basketball Federation engages their existing audiences such as members and practitioners with this approach.

To conclude, the analysis in this study has focused on in what way sport federations shape *social media affordances* (cf. Ronzhyn et al. 2022; Shaw 2017; Treem and Leonardi 2013), as well as in what way they *imagine* social media *uses and users* (cf. Nagy and Neff 2015). The present study shows that the federations' imagination of who their users are, what they would like to see, and how these users act and react defines their affordances. Further, the results reveal that the three federations have differing approaches to in what way they imagine their users as well as what their incentives are for using social media.

To create an understanding of in what way the mediatization of sports federations mold long-term changes for these organizations (cf. Lundby 2014; Frandsen 2016), an increased understanding on the federations' (imagined) social media affordances in relation to their (imagined) users is crucial. In other words, the level of mediatization in the different organizations is not the focal point. It is the organizations' choices and practices to shape their mediatized environments to build relationships with their audiences that form the central part of this study. Thus, it is of importance to look beyond the overarching theory of mediatization to understand how sport organizations, such as national sport federations, can develop through social media engagements. To learn how ongoing mediations mold long-term changes for sport federations, it is of importance to look beyond mediatization and learn more about their current structure and operations, their history, and traditions, as well as their view of their users.

5. Research Limitation and Future Research Directions

A limitation with the present study is that a limited number of sports federations has been investigated. For future research projects on sports federations' strategical communications through SNS, it would be interesting to include a higher number of organizations. Further, it would be interesting to expand the comparison between sport federations in different countries and contexts. It could also be argued that another limitation with the present study is that the analysis relies to a high extent on the actors' own views of their strategical work with SNS. Although strengthened by the data collected through digital ethnography, the interviewees' voices have a clear focus and heavy weight in this article. However, given the interviewees voices, a high level of space and agency is a conscious and important decision to fulfill the aim of this study and at the same time keeping a conscious ethical approach.

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