

INTRODUCTION: SPORTS JOURNALISM AND JOURNALISM ABOUT SPORTS

I'm a sportswriter. I watch all sorts of sports in all sorts of countries, then write reports and feature articles about them which are published in a newspaper. This is a fine and privileged occupation, and one to be disclosed with tact. People who do respectable, important jobs don't like to hear about it. They get grumpy, or vindictive. Sports writing is categorized alongside beer-tasting and aphrodisiac-evaluation. People say: 'More of a hobby than a job, isn't it?'

Andrew Baker, Sportswriter, *The Daily Telegraph*, (2004: ix) *Where Am I & Who's Winning?*, London: Yellow Jersey Press.

OPENING UP

Sports journalism in many ways remains a paradox. In the hierarchy of professional journalism it has been traditionally viewed disparagingly as the 'toy department', a bastion of easy living, sloppy journalism and 'soft' news. Within the British context sports journalism, until recently, has been largely absent from journalism education and practice and similarly invisible among the growing critical literature from within media and communication studies which examines issues in and around journalism.

However, commercially sports journalism has always mattered to newspapers and the popular press specifically. What has changed in the last decade in the British newspaper market has been the explosion in the volume and range of sports journalism that one now finds across the media. For some, the fact that newspapers such as *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph* now regularly

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can devote up to a third of editorial space to coverage of sports is another example of the 'dumbing down of society', with journalism heavily implicated in this process.

This book argues that this expansion in sports journalism actually says something more complex about the evolving relationship between journalism, the media and popular culture, and offers challenges to both critics and educators involved not only in teaching about journalism but in critically evaluating its wider cultural, social and political impact.

Sports journalism has also been implicated in the construction of various sporting discourses that often connect with wider issues of gender, race, ethnicity and national identity formation. Within media and communication studies a body of work concerned with the role of the media, and in part sports journalism, in this process of identity formation is now well established (Whannel, 1992; Blain et al., 1993; O'Donnell, 1994; Garland and Rowe, 1999; Wenner, 1998; Rowe, 1999; Boyle and Haynes, 2000; Brookes, 2002; Crolley and Hand, 2002; Hand and Crolley, 2005). Much of this work has focused on the various texts produced by forms of sports journalism and broadcasting and these debates about the role of sporting representation and society have been well addressed by such work. As a result, concerns about representation are not the main focus of this book, although reference is made to this issue where appropriate.

This book is also not a practical guide on how to become a sports journalist. Neither is it overly concerned with outlining the specific aspects of the job that inform the day-to-day working practice of those engaged in sports journalism although, of course, reference to these issues is made where directly relevant. These issues are admirably addressed by Andrews (2005) in his book on sports journalism, in which he examines in detail the challenges and skills involved in the craft of sportswriting across the print, broadcast and online media environments.

Rather, this book is about identifying sports journalism's wider place within the broader field of journalism and journalism studies. The book attempts to offer a historically informed snapshot of some of the issues, debates and challenges that are reshaping the boundaries of contemporary sports journalism, specifically, but not exclusively, within the UK media context.

There are three implicit strands that run through the book, and while they may not always be addressed directly in every chapter, they are important factors in shaping the environment within which contemporary sports journalism operates. These forces are reconfiguring both the sports and the media industries from within which sports journalism emerges. Their varying impact on journalism may be disputed, but globalisation, digitisation

and marketisation are key underlying aspects of any analysis of contemporary journalism.

GLOBALISATION

There is no doubt that sports have become increasingly global in the contemporary mediated age. The fusion of sports and the media, and television in particular, has helped propel and transform major events such as the FIFA World Cup and the Olympic Games. This is also a process in which sports journalism is deeply implicated.

The American political journalist Franklin Foer (2004) argued that the global nature of sport offered the possibility of the construction of some form of global identity. However, the reality that he found on his travels around the world was a global cultural form that acted as a vehicle for the expression of conflict, tension and a range of deeply rooted local identities. This tension between the global aspect of sport as a cultural form and its intrinsic national or local dimension has also been noted by Rowe (2003). These processes are informed by economic, cultural and ethnic factors, and often reinforced by sports journalism.

Sports journalism offers a fascinating case study in how global and local media interact in contemporary societies. Sport can at times appear global and outward-looking, and can also be local in focus and intensely domestic in its concerns. While this book is primarily centred on the UK experience, it will also be noticeable the extent to which the development of sports journalism in, say, the United States has helped influence British sports writing. Echoing the earlier point about the local and the global, the book will, however, reinforce the extent to which sports journalism is heavily shaped by the particular patterns of social, cultural and political evolution that shape both the sports and the media industries in the UK.

DIGITISATION

Related to globalisation is digitisation. Digitisation has clearly impacted on journalism in various forms. Within the arena of sports journalism, it has seen the emergence of an increasingly sophisticated battle for control of sports and how they are delivered, reported and made sense of for readers, listeners and viewers.

Previous research (Boyle and Haynes, 2004) has examined the ways in which sports clubs and organisations are attempting to use the new media

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platforms of the Internet, digital TV and mobile telephony to deliver exclusive content and journalism to spectators. In so doing, many are seeking to bypass the traditional journalistic communication structures and speak directly to their audience. In the digital age, the sports industry increasingly attempts to police its image through the control of its intellectual property (IP) and the growing use of public relations and other aspects of media management.

For sports journalists, the issue of access to players and information has become more difficult as the commercial stakeholders in the game attempt to use the digital landscape to usurp and bypass traditional sports journalism.

There seems little doubt that over the next few years the battle lines will continue to be redrawn as sports seek to extract commercial value from all their assets, while media institutions (in particular those not holding specific coverage rights) will argue for the importance of continuing to journalistically report on all aspects of the sports industry.

MARKETISATION

Marketisation has impacted on both the sports and the media industries. The reporting of the political and economic dimension of sports has become more important in recent years as the commercialisation of the industry across the globe has developed. The sports industry now regularly involves major media and financial institutions as well as government intervention. This process has helped blur the boundaries between traditional notions of sports journalism and journalism about sports-related activity. The increased centrality of the market in the media industries has helped propel the expansion of a celebrity culture, into which sports stars increasingly find themselves drawn. This development has also shaped aspects of sports journalism where there has been an increase in the number of journalists both freelance and staffers reporting and commenting on this aspect of sports.

Sports journalism and writing is now also seen as a key element of the wider branding of most newspapers as they reposition their appeals in attempts to attract new readers. The general dismantling of a more paternal media system in the UK, and its replacement with a more commercially driven demand-led entity, has both benefited and constrained sports journalism. However, without the introduction of increased competition in the UK television market, and the corresponding explosion in the coverage of sport, there is little doubt that the expansion in sports journalism that is so evident in the UK media market would simply not have happened to the same degree.

A combination of the global expansion of sport, the new opportunities offered by digital media and sport's growing commercial value have helped

to extend the range of opportunities for those graduates seeking to break into sports journalism.

And of course, the expansion of the sports industry and the range of commercial and political stakeholders involved also mean that rigorous, uncomplicit journalism is required in this area as never before. This represents a major ethical challenge for contemporary sports journalism.

The book is also concerned with the professional context within which sports journalism is positioned. Is the often used analogy of the 'toy department' still valid? Are sports journalists simply 'fans with a typewriter' or laptops as it would be these days? Or, as the range of sports journalism has expanded is it more accurate to talk about journalism about sports, in its entire wider context, rather than simply a narrowly defined and niche form of journalism, labelled, sports journalism.

THE BOOK

Before visiting China in late 2004 I was struck by the fact that the most perceptive and insightful journalism about the wider political, economic and cultural context of the inaugural Chinese Formula One Grand Prix, which was taking place in Shanghai, was to be found not in the political comment section but, rather, in the sports pages of the London-based *Independent* newspaper. Such a perceptive political and economic analysis of a sporting event would probably not have found a home in the sports pages even ten years ago.

Clearly sports journalism in Britain is changing and this book attempts to map out the organisational, technological and cultural factors driving this process. While the book looks at sports journalism, inevitably a large element is devoted to football-related journalism. In part, this is because in the UK the expansion in sports journalism has been driven by expanded football coverage, and also it is football that overpowers other sports in terms of resources and coverage. However, the book examines sportswriters, who by their very nature are writing across a range of sports, of which football will often be only one, albeit important, part of their portfolio and profile.

Chapters 1–3 place the growth of print and broadcast sports journalism in some historical and academic context. This is not a social history of sports journalism but, rather, an attempt to highlight the key moments that have shaped the trajectory of sports journalism in the UK. Chapter 1 also looks at the extent to which this aspect of journalism history remains chronically underdeveloped despite the growth of journalism studies research over the last decade.

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Chapters 4–6 focus on the issues and challenges faced by contemporary sports journalists as they deal with major changes in both the sports and the media industries. Areas looked at include the shifting boundaries of sports news, the rise in public relations and issues of access and the impact that the digital media environment is having on modern sports journalism.

The last two chapters before the Conclusion focus on the changing professional image of the sports journalist and examine whether in the UK it remains an area of journalism characterised by a significant gender imbalance.

The range of sports journalism that exists across broadcast, print and online media platforms is now considerable. This book attempts to get to grips and make sense of the changing milieu within which this contemporary journalism is produced and consumed.