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ENGAGING WITH SPORTS JOURNALISM: CONTEXT AND ISSUES

'What a wonderful life you enjoy', sports journalists are often told by people in the pub.

Michael Henderson 'Why I dread a summer of sport', *The Observer Sports Monthly*, May (2004), No. 51

This reluctance to take sports journalism seriously produces the paradoxical outcome that sports newspaper writers are much read but little admired.

David Rowe (1999: 36) *Sport, Culture and the Media*.

Sports journalism is largely absent from histories of journalism in the UK. This chapter examines previous writing on sports journalism and looks at how this area of journalism has been positioned within the hierarchy of journalistic practice. It is also interested in identifying the wider discourses associated with how we think about, and value, sports journalism.

While focusing primarily on the UK, material is also drawn from elsewhere, for example the USA; however, the book argues that the distinctive economic and cultural contexts of UK journalism have shaped the broader trajectory and culture of sports journalism in this country. This chapter is also interested in mapping out ways in which sports journalism has altered and changed in response to changes in the media's influence on the sports economy. This particular theme is then developed in more detail throughout the rest of the book.

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SPORTS JOURNALISM WITHIN JOURNALISM STUDIES

Despite agreeing on its commercial importance, research into sports journalism is largely absent from the growing body of work that might be called 'journalism studies'. From within the arena of media and communication studies, journalism and its relationship to politics and democracy has been a central concern for as long as communication research has been carried out; however, the rise in the UK of a more specific focus on journalism as a distinct teaching discipline at university level over the last decade has helped define a more distinctive terrain within which more journalism research is being focused. The arrival of a number of journalism-specific academic journals such as *Journalism: Theory, Culture and Practice* also signifies a distinctive stage in the evolution of a particular teaching and research arena within the UK academy.

It could be argued that given the massive range of content across media platforms that calls itself sports journalism in some shape or form, the research trajectory within journalism studies has been relatively narrow and heavily informed by particular political and economic concerns. To this end it has often drawn heavily from social science and political sociology.

Within this particular research tradition there appears to be a general consensus that journalism is in some form of crisis (Franklin, 1997; Sparks and Tulloch, 2000; Hargreaves, 2003; Campbell, 2004; Kettle, 2004; Lloyd, 2004a; Marr, 2004; Allan, 2005). The extent and depth of the crisis is vigorously debated between those who see an increasingly commercial and market-driven media economy as having a detrimental impact on the quality of journalism and its ability to fulfil its key role in democratic societies and others who view the breaking down of traditional journalistic hierarchies and the advent of new communication networks, such as the Internet, as offering as many opportunities as challenges to extend the democratic function of journalistic practice in information-saturated societies (Langer, 1998; McNair, 1999). Often this debate is framed with a wider concern about the impact of journalistic standards on the democratic process.

In the wake of the sacking in May 2004 of Piers Morgan editor of the tabloid *Daily Mirror* newspaper following the revelation that pictures showing British soldiers supposedly abusing Iraqi prisoners carried by that paper were false, fellow journalist Martin Kettle argued that:

The Mirror's faked tale was not some one-off event. It was merely the latest manifestation of a widespread and in some ways peculiarly British disease. This holds that, within increasingly elastic limits, a journalist is entitled to say pretty much what he or she likes, whether or not it is precisely true, without being subject to any sanctions or professional penalties for doing so. (Kettle, 2004)

Indeed, this debate about journalistic standards extends beyond more overt political concerns and focuses on the wider cultural impact of what some have termed the ‘dumbing down’ of culture (Sampson, 1996; Bromley, 1998). While this concern about cultural and moral standards embraces a range of areas of civil society beyond the media, it is the latter which is centrally implicated in this process of decline. Both television and journalism are viewed as two of the key areas of cultural production that most clearly illustrate the concerns of lowering public standards. As Hargreaves (2003: 12–13) points out: ‘Journalism stands accused of sacrificing accuracy for speed, purposeful investigation for cheap intrusion and reliability for entertainment. “Dumbed down” news media are charged with privileging sensation over significance and celebrity over achievement.’ It might even be suggested that what Hargreaves outlines could also be a caricature of what is perceived to be the practice associated with sports journalism at the popular end of the newspaper market.

However, you do not have to subscribe fully to the ‘dumbing down’ thesis to be concerned about the current state of the journalism profession. As journalist, economist and writer Will Hutton has argued:

Journalism and the entertainment culture in which we now live are uneasy bedfellows. Facts are not always clear-cut, easy to understand and dramatic; good and bad rarely lend themselves to the demands of soundbites. Yet for those who can deliver dramatic, clear-cut stories, the entertainment culture delivers celebrity status with salaries and standing to match. The temptation to over dramatise grows by the month; to cut corners for some is irresistible. (Hutton, 2004)

Ostensibly these debates are about the impact of commercialisation on the provision of impartial and uncomplacent news, something viewed as fundamental if people are to make informed choices in a democratic society, and at their core is a concern about the quality and range of political and economic information being made available. Why then should these concerns impact on a study of sports journalism?

SPORTS JOURNALISM AND ‘TABLOIDISATION’

The rise of the preoccupation of journalism with celebrity-driven news, part of a wider ‘tabloidization’ thesis (Sparks, 2000) has seen the increasing profile allocated to sports become implicated in this wider process of ‘dumbing down’. In other words, the rise in quantity of sports coverage and its supposed attendant fixation with celebrity sports stars, particularly in the broadsheet press since the 1990s, as well as its increasing profile with mainstream

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television news, is seen as an example of 'dumbing down'. If, as Franklin (1997: 5) argues, news organisations and journalism in general is now fixated with entertainment-driven news and 'the task of journalism has become merely to deliver and serve up whatever the customer wants', then it appears increasingly what they want is sports-related news.

There remains a certain irony in this situation. The key claims now levelled at journalism in general about a decline in the standard and rigour that journalists bring to their craft have been a common criticism aimed at sections of sports journalism for decades. When a then President of Baseball's National League in the USA addressed the American Society of Newspaper editors in the 1980s, he lambasted the quality of sports journalism and its internal policing by newspaper editors. He argued that editors ignored the sports section:

They ignore it in the sense, and it is an important one, that the same set of editorial standards for accuracy, competence, distinguishing fact from opinion, rewriting, and editing are simply not applied consistently or rigorously to sports sections as they are applied to other sections of the newspaper. (Giamatti, 1988: 204)

The paradox being that at a time when similar accusations are being made about the wider culture of political and economic journalism, and the growth of sports journalism, certainly in the UK, is seen as a symbolic example of declining standards, sports journalism is probably better policed than at any time in its history. While the tabloid market undoubtedly retains many aspects outlined by Giamatti, the expanded range and coverage in the broadsheet/compact market means there has never been more systematic, insightful and rigorous sports journalism of what Rowe (1992) calls the 'reflexive analysis' type available in the UK newspaper market. Thus sports journalism interfaces with the wider 'tabloidisation' of the press thesis in an interesting manner.

Sparks (2000), in his excellent overview of the supposed 'tabloidisation' of journalism is keen to stress the historical dimension to this process and its attendant debate. He also argues that the current concerns should be seen as part of this longer process that is 'reformulating' the news media, as 'serious' newspapers in particular seek to address a changing 'readership'. This is a readership dramatically altered through a rise in educational levels and changes in the labour market and family structures. When this is combined with a more commercially aggressive news marketplace he argues that what we are experiencing is a specific staging post in the evolution of the relationship between journalism, society and democracy.

Some newspaper editors view this shifting terrain as less of a threat and agree with Sparks (2000) that what has changed is society's expectations of

what it requires from its media. To this end they argue that newspapers to a greater extent accurately reflect the breaking down of more traditional class-based barriers related to cultural taste: the public and the private and the centrality of popular culture in our everyday lives. Alan Rusbridger, editor of the then broadsheet *Guardian* newspaper¹, argued in November 2000 that changes in the broadsheet press simply reflected wider cultural shifts in taste and the breaking down of areas of supposedly high and low culture. He asks incredulously that:

You can't possibly care about debt relief and the Simpsons. If you listen to Ligeti and James Macmillan then why would you want to know who won the United game last night or which Cabernet Sauvignon to drink with your meal tonight? Get back into your box.

Something else missing from the Times of 1968 was anything to do with the home or emotional life. There is nothing about marriage, divorce, children, schools, au pairs, depression, drinking, health, drugs, teenagers, affairs, fashion, sex, successful relationships, failing relationships, interior decor, cancer, infertility, faith, grandparents – or any of the other things that make up the texture of our non-working lives. (Rusbridger, 2000)

This ties in with what Sparks (2000: 32) suggests is the need to view such broadsheet newspapers as 'bundles of serious and less serious materials'; the challenge for newspapers is getting that mix or balance correct in terms of attracting and retaining their target readership. Hence the rise in the space and resource allocated to the coverage of sports in the 'serious' broadsheet press in the UK over the last decade or so is in part explained by placing it within this wider context of the 'reformulation' of a more market-driven journalism.

However, an interesting wider theoretical position implicitly underpins much of the debate around the 'tabloidisation' and 'dumbing down' of journalism. This suggests that ultimately sports journalism (and other forms of entertainment-focused journalism) is really the antithesis of what journalism should be really about. Sparks (2000: 14), for example, places scandal, sports and entertainment on one end of an axis of 'different press fields' in contrast to politics, economics and society. It appears that sports journalism does appear still to lie beyond the boundary of 'serious journalism'. Sparks (2000: 16), however, does recognise that when a broadsheet newspaper such as *The Financial Times* carries analysis of the relationship between football and 'the business strategies of global broadcasting companies', this represents a different form of journalism. He argues that:

The true tabloid story is about the sexual antics of a footballer (any kind of football), and an operational definition of tabloidization is the process by which the press pays more and more attention to that kind of material at the expense of the coverage of public affairs. (Sparks, 2000: 16)

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This position is helpful in explaining the traditional lowly status of the sports journalist within the profession, something that is picked up and developed in the work of Rowe (1992, 1995, 1999, 2004, 2005) discussed below. However, what is argued throughout the book is that the boundaries associated with sports journalism, and say business news, have now become so stretched that categorising sports journalism has become more difficult. While certain types of tabloid stories remain an important element of sports journalism, they are not necessarily representative of an overall field that is becoming more diverse.

Political journalist Andrew Marr's account (2004) of the history of British journalism makes little reference to sports journalism. Marr admits this is an area of the print media that he does not know well, or indeed for that matter have a great deal of interest in. However, his critique of the problems facing contemporary journalism, indicates that sports journalism faces similar issues to that being experienced in other areas of the trade. Indeed, in one area, the rise of the influence of public relations on journalism (which is examined in Chapter 5), Marr argues that rather than being overly concerned with the prevalence of celebrity-driven news:

The more worrying trends in British news values are related instead to the growth of an office-based, editorial culture, rather than a reporters' journalism The trouble is office-bound journalists from modern newspapers become dependent on fixers: the PR men manipulating celebrity careers; the media-trained university experts; the polling companies with a story to sell. (2004: 115)

In this area, sports journalists tend to buck the trend. They spend less time office bound than other journalists, either being out at actual sporting events, or attending press conferences or chasing interviews. This is not to suggest that the tendency to be drip-fed information from other media sources, such as rolling sports news broadcasts and television coverage of sport, means that sports journalists are completely exempt from this general drift to stay wedded to the office, simply that it is interesting to note how sports reporting still offers opportunities to move beyond the increasingly prevalent office culture of the contemporary journalist.

What becomes increasingly evident from the research carried out on the print media, particularly in the UK, is that for many scholars sports coverage and sports journalism are not really viewed as part of what journalism (and certainly *serious* journalism) is really about. It is also worth noting that many within the profession itself also share these doubts as to the veracity of sports journalism being a legitimate part of the wider journalistic landscape. In 2002, the *Columbia Journalism Review* special issue on American sports journalism notably began its series of articles by asking whether sports journalism was indeed journalism.

Campbell (2004: 203) also notes how sports have often been grouped together with entertainment and lifestyle journalism, categories that have sat uneasily within more traditional definitions of journalism. Rooney identifies showbiz and sports as two of the key areas of content in his study of the tabloid newspapers the *Sun* and the *Mirror*. He argues: 'We should consider the *Mirror* and the *Sun* as completely separate cultural artefacts from newspapers proper. They do not offer public-affairs material, preferring instead nonserious entertainment' (Rooney, 2000: 103). He concludes his study by noting that: 'The *Mirror* and the *Sun* can no longer be regarded as "newspapers" and we must find new ways to explain their importance within working-class culture' (Rooney, 2000: 107).

While debate over the role, importance and social value of sports journalism, both within and outside the journalism profession is very much an ongoing issue, its dismissal as a form of 'nonserious entertainment' is simply to underestimate the range of material now to be found under the heading of sports journalism.

In the first instance, this approach unproblematically lumps all sports journalism together, making no distinction between the modes of address used by journalists or indeed the type of story being covered. For example, one can make a case that a report of a football match may have little impact on issues relating to public affairs (unless as some would argue it is an international perhaps between England and Germany); however, sports news coverage of London's 2012 Olympic bid or England's hosting of the 1996 European Football Championships is directly related to a range of political, economic and public policy issues, which in various guises are addressed by such tabloid coverage. At the core here is an argument about what journalism is about. If journalism is about disseminating information and facilitating discussion on a range of social, political, economic and cultural issues pertinent to a society, then sports, however much some academics may dislike it, is part of that mix. At times sport can be trivial and unimportant, at others a symbolically significant cultural form that is an indicator of wider social and cultural forces in society.

Sparks (2000) has advocated a more nuanced categorisation of a newspaper's market position driven by content and readership (into about five inter-related areas) rather than the cruder dichotomy of broadsheet and tabloid. However, these two categories remain important in shaping the mindset of journalists and readers alike, in much the same way as 'Fleet Street' remains the phrase to describe the heart of the British national press, despite the fact that it hasn't been the home of the newspaper industry for over a decade.

Thus within journalism studies research, sports journalism has largely been under-researched. As Campbell (2004: 213) has convincingly argued: 'In Britain sports journalism is both literally and figuratively on the back

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pages in discussions on journalism.' Rather, as we have noted above, the field has been concerned with a range of key themes around the defining of journalism in the 21st century: political journalism and communication and democracy; ethics and the impact of a growing commercialisation of the media on journalistic practice.

Campbell himself suggests that, on the one hand, while the rhythms of the sports calendar lend themselves to many of the requirements of news organisations in terms of regular predictable events with a clear resolution, 'on the other hand, this very routine nature of sports, the repetition of events, and the relative simplicity of those events (in comparison to say, a war or election), has left sports writing with a less important status than other forms of journalism' (2004: 214).

From within the Academy, then, we have to look elsewhere before we find sports journalism being investigated with any sustained degree of rigour or enthusiasm.

SPORTS JOURNALISM WITHIN MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS RESEARCH

Significantly, much of the most interesting writing about the culture of sports journalism has not come from journalism studies research but, rather, from those scholars engaged in the broader field of media sport research (Rowe, 1992, 1995, 1999, 2004, 2005; Whannel, 1992, 2002; Blain and O'Donnell, 1998; Wenner, 1998; Boyle and Haynes, 2000, 2004; Brookes, 2002; Blain and Beirnsstein, 2003). Often located within the media and communication studies research tradition, when media sport has been discussed, and the print media in particular, aspects of sports journalism and writing have been examined.

More often than not this research has been concerned with issues of representation and how sporting discourses connect with wider social, political and economic structures and discourses. Much of this work has focused on the print media and specifically the role it plays in constituting and reconstituting aspects of cultural and national identities in its coverage of sports and major sporting events (Blain et al., 1993; O'Donnell, 1994; Garland and Rowe, 1999; Alabarces et al., 2001; Crolley and Hand, 2002; Boyle and Monteiro, 2005; Hand and Crolley, 2005). This research has been largely concerned with the sports text, either print or, to a lesser extent, televisual, and the placing of it within a broader frame of reference that extends beyond the parameters of sports discourse and often connects it to wider discourses associated with gender, race and ethnicity and national and cultural identity-formation.

Central to this body of work is the extent to which a study of sport's relationship with the media and society illuminates wider social, political and economic factors at play in the culturally politicised arena of popular culture. In their major study of sports journalism texts across Europe in the early 1990s, Blain et al. also identified the implicit ideological conservatism of much sports journalism. They concluded that when it came to international sporting events that:

sports journalism, albeit very unevenly, is as likely to produce a turning inward toward national concerns, and a buttressing of a sense of difference, as it is to operate ideologically on behalf of a harmonious world, even, as we have seen, at that mythic habitat of the familial, the Olympics. (Blain et al., 1993: 196)

While reference in this current book has been made to the production context of sports journalism, the issue of its ideological impact is not the main focus of this particular project; yet the analysis from the early 1990s would appear to remain valid over a decade later.

Some of the most astute academic writing on sports journalism has come from Rowe (1992, 1995, 1999, 2004, 2005). While the main drive of his work has focused on the more general issues of debates about the relationship between the media, sport and culture, within this work has been a concern about the key role that sports journalists play as cultural producers of media sports texts. This work has tended to focus on Australian sports journalism, but research has also been focused on the UK situation.

To this end Rowe (1999, 2004) has argued that an understanding of the wider cultural and occupational position of sports journalists is vital to any process that is interested in understanding media sports texts. He suggests that:

Sports journalists, furthermore, are caught in a particularly difficult bind because of the different, sometimes contradictory professional demands made on them; they are expected, often at the same time, to be objective reporters, critical investigators, apologists for sports and teams, representatives of fans, and, not unusually, to have performed in sport at elite levels. (Rowe, 1999: 37)

The general perception that emerges from the research carried out by Rowe is one in which sports journalists appear to lead a relatively protected, insular and comfortable existence. Indeed we might argue that description could be equally applicable to the culture of the elite sportspeople who are often the focus of attention for these journalists.

Another issue raised by Rowe (1999) is what he calls the lack of 'sceptical enquiry' among sports journalists. The *Irish Times* sportswriter Tom Humphries (2003: 118) has identified the danger for journalists of 'travelling too close to the circus' or the intrinsic complicity of sports journalism with its over-reliance

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on access to sources among elite sports organisations and individuals (Boyle et al., 2002; Brookes, 2002: 37–8; Bower, 2003; Campbell, 2004: 215–6). This particular aspect of the contemporary culture of sports journalism is examined in some detail in Chapter 5.

Related to this concern is the extent to which the ever-growing commercialisation of elite sports, and their interplay with media institutions and interests, impacts on or helps distort news values and reporting priorities. Thus the holding of exclusive live coverage of a major sporting event by a particular television channel will certainly mean that it is more likely to carry sports-related news stories on that channel's mainstream news broadcasts or across associated media platforms. For example, when BBC TV successfully recaptured the terrestrial highlights for English Premiership football in 2004 from their rival ITV, there was clearly a greater prominence given to Premiership-related news stories than there had been when exclusivity to the television rights lay elsewhere. To the same extent, one can also see extensive cross-promotion of sporting events between newspapers that are part of the News International stable and Sky Sports, part of the same corporation (see Chapters 2 and 5 for a more detailed discussion of this issue).

Brookes (2002: 32–3) suggests that central in any attempt to map out the terrain of sports journalism is the issue of news values. In his discussion of the print media, he suggests that sports journalism is a mixture of the spectacular and routine. He argues that often when sports stories connect with wider sets of news values, such as those around? '*sports scandal, public policy issues and business news involving sport*' (Brookes, 2002: 34–5), this can lead to conflict when 'traditional' sports journalists find their terrain impinged upon by other news journalists in ways that can put a strain on relationships of trust with sports sources which may have been developed over time.

However, one of the key elements this book wants to look at is the ways in which news values associated with sports journalism are in fact changing and evolving, driven by changes not only in media organisations, but also in the wider political economy of the sports industries. In other words, to what extent have the three key areas – sports scandal, public policy issues and business news involving sport – identified by Brookes above become increasingly routinised areas of inquiry for mainstream sports journalism in a manner unimaginable even a decade ago? Or given the issues raised by Brookes about the importance of sources, do they still remain largely off limits for sports journalists and are covered by news and business reporters instead (Boyle et al., 2002)?

Sports journalism is, of course, a far from homogeneous culture. There are tensions between print and broadcast journalists, evidenced by Salwen and Garrison's work (1998: 99) which focused on US sports journalists and indicated some considerable hostility from print sports journalists towards

their broadcast media colleagues. The newspaper sports journalists argued that they felt that the rise of broadcast sports journalism had helped to diminish their professional status. From within the print sector itself, of course, tensions exist, most notably within the UK context between tabloid journalists and those working in the broadsheet/compact sector. As Rowe (1995: 159) argued:

Within the print media, a distinction is made between the 'tabloids' and the 'qualities', a split that I replicated in the typology of 'sports reporters' and 'sports writers'. The 'writer-driven' style of the quality papers is routinely contrasted with the assumed opposite, the reader-driven tabloid paper seen as cynically exploitative of sport and its personnel according to the demands of market based profit maximization.

However, to what extent is this distinction still the case today? One of the areas discussed in the book is the extent to which the blurring between the traditional boundaries of the broadsheet and the popular press, which some critics (Franklin, 1997) have argued has been one of the characteristics of print journalism in the UK over the last decade or so, has impacted on the arena of sports journalism.

PROFESSIONAL IMAGE

In his research, Rowe also examines the key issues of both professional image and the position of sports journalism within the wider journalism hierarchy. For Rowe: 'This assertion of the "quality" writing function over and against that of "hack" journalism is constantly made by those who wish to elevate media sports texts, especially of the print variety, almost to the status of art' (1999: 58). There is clearly an issue here with regard to the status of those journalists who cover aspects of popular culture. The assertion that has been made by previous writing on this area is that sports editors, for example, never become editors of newspapers. Yet the 1990s saw the elevation of Piers Morgan from a journalist covering showbusiness/celebrity issues to editor of the *Daily Mirror*, one of the major tabloid newspapers in the UK. Simon Kelner went on to become editor of *The Independent*, having once been sports editor on the *Independent on Sunday*, while the *Daily Telegraph's* columnist Jeff Randall also edited *The Sunday Business* newspaper and worked for the BBC, having served his time as sports editor with *The Sunday Times*.

It is concern with mapping this shifting in the values and status associated with sports journalism as the field itself mutates under a range of commercial and cultural pressures that runs through this book and is addressed in more detail in Chapter 8.

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While Haynes (1999) has carried out interesting research on the historical evolution of a particular aspect of broadcast sports: the sports commentary, the writing from within media sociology on aspects of radio and television forms of sports journalism remains underdeveloped. While there is clearly a relationship between what Rowe (1999) calls sports journalism, sports commentary and sports presentation, it is also true, as we note in Chapter 3, that clear distinctions exist between these categories.

There is a distinct lack of studies of UK sports journalists from within the Academy. It could be argued that Tunstall's study (1971) into specialist correspondents, which was carried out in the 1960s and included looking at football specialist correspondents as part of its range of journalists, remains one of the main studies in this field. It certainly provided some interesting historical material on the broader production process within which the football journalist operated. This study focused on print journalists, and studies examining the professional ideologies and practices of broadcast sports journalists have also been largely absent from the sociology of journalism research agenda. Tunstall's concern (1971) with understanding the constraints, professional ideologies and particular work practices that shape journalism are all elements which, in varying degrees, inform this research project.

SPORTS JOURNALISM AND JOURNALISM VALUES

Concerned with similar themes, but with a more textual orientation, Whannel's study of sport and television (1992) remains one of the few studies that embraces aspects of broadcast sports journalism. This research highlighted the tension between journalistic modes of address and a more entertainment-driven focus in television sport. He notes that while at first glance sport on television appears to rely heavily on aspects of the reportage journalistic traditions, in reality this is a more complex interrelationship. He suggests that: 'in the structure of its programmes, its modes of representation and modes of addressing its audiences, in its place in relation to scheduling and in the type of audiences it attempts to win and hold, it is also shaped by the conventions of entertainment' (Whannel, 1992: 92).

Significantly, he also argues that the traditional concerns of television journalism regarding neutrality and impartiality are extended to broadcast sports journalism. It is not clear whether domestic sports coverage is primarily being discussed here; certainly, within television coverage of international sports events, it could be argued that contemporary broadcast sports

journalism – Whannel’s research is based on the situation in the 1980s – appears to increasingly pay scant regard to issues of impartiality and neutrality. What this highlights is the extent that broadcast sports reporters/journalists appear exempt from the normal codes of professional practice. On the more commercially driven broadcast outlets, such as Sky Sports television or TalkSport radio, this type of partial journalism appears increasingly to be accepted as standard practice among sports reporting.

Rudin and Ibbotson (2002: 72) seem to suggest that impartiality is not part of the lexicon of sports journalism when they argue:

In many ways, sports reporting of actual events are [*sic*] very similar to hard news as regards attention to detail, accuracy and meeting deadlines. The main difference is that some form of comment or opinion is allowed and may involve partisanship, interviews with players, coaches and managers, comparisons with earlier encounters, fans reactions. It is worth noting that sports stories can also include personal profiles, investigative features, humorous pieces and commentary.

What is of interest here is that while Rudin and Ibbotson are primarily discussing print sports journalism, to what extent should differences exist between the traditionally more partisan print media and commercial and public service sports broadcasting? Or is more partisan journalism simply an example of how sports reporting and journalism has evolved to reflect both a changing sporting environment and differing audience expectations? These are just some of the issues that are explored in the rest of the book.

SPORTS JOURNALISM: THE INSIDE TRACK?

There have also been more discursive engagements with the culture and milieu within which the sports journalist operates. In some instances these involve reflection on the practice from those within the industry, although these remain rare within the growing library of journalistic memoirs, partly no doubt as a result of the lowly position that sports journalism has historically occupied within the industry.

Most are gentle reminiscences of the trials and tribulations associated with working in sports broadcasting, which has been viewed as a form of journalism that requires particular skills related to commentary and television presenting. The Irish sports broadcaster/journalist Michael O’Herir, for example, has occupied such a long and central location in the evolution of that country’s broadcasting psyche that any social history of Irish broadcasting or indeed Irish sport would be incomplete without reference to his cultural influence and professional flexibility that spans various sports and both radio and television (see Chapter 2).

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Beverley Turner's book *The Pits: The Real World of Formula One* (2004), however, remains a rarity among books written about sport by sports broadcasters, in that it is candid, honest and ultimately damning about the sport. She attacks both the impact that rampant commercialisation has had on Formula One motor sport, and the entrenched sexism that is deeply embedded in its sports culture and which it makes it a deeply unpleasant environment for female commentators or journalists to work within (see Chapter 7).

As noted above, there has been, of course, a hierarchy of sorts within the field of sports journalism itself. In the UK, broadsheet sports writers have been positioned towards the 'serious' and 'literary' end of the market, juxtaposed with the 'sports hacks' at the lower end of the tabloid market, a dichotomy that has both enraged and dismayed sports journalists such as Brian Glanville who throughout his long career has moved with ease across this supposed divide. He has argued:

for so many years I had insisted that sports journalism should be one seamless garment. In the magazine *Encounter* in 1965 I had published an article called 'Looking for the Idiom', emphasising the difference between British sport writing, with its quality-popular dichotomy, and American, whose chief sportswriters wrote for everybody ... My thesis was that both the 'quality' and the 'popular' writer were in some senses failures. The first because although he could largely write as he pleased, about mass-interest sports, he reached only a fraction of the public. The second, because although he reached the public at large, he was rigidly confined to a highly stylised, ultimately patronising, form of journalism, which treated the readership with implicit contempt. (Glanville, 1999: 257)

Other sports journalists, such as Richard Williams and Hugh McIlvanney, see an intrinsic truth in sporting performance. McIlvanney, still the only sports journalist to have been voted Journalist of the Year in the UK, could reflect in 1991 that:

After more than thirty years of writing on sport it is still possible to be assailed by doubts about whether it really is a proper job for a grown person. But I console myself with the thought that it is easier to find a kind of truth in sport than it is, for example, in the activities covered by political or economic journalists. Sports truth may be simplistic but it is not negligible. (BBC, 1991)

While Williams, a former music journalist, draws a comparison between sports and music journalism that is linked to notions of truth and performance. He suggests that:

To put it bluntly, the sweetest music is sometimes made by the most obnoxious people, and vis versa ... in sport, by contrast, the way people play the game is generally also the way they are as human beings, which makes it legitimate to discuss how someone's performance is affected by his or her character (Williams, 2003: 3-4).

For Williams the opportunity that covering sport allows for connecting with wider social debates about moral issues is also something that is both appealing and 'frequently uncomfortable'. Williams acknowledges that much has changed for the contemporary sportswriter and for some, sports journalism's golden age is well and truly over. In his reflections on a year in the life of a sportswriter, Tom Humphries, working for the Dublin based *Irish Times*, begins his book by announcing: 'We sportswriters are a breed in decline. We aren't endangered, there are more of us than ever before – we are just withering. We are further and further from the action and we are shouting louder and louder just to make ourselves heard' (Humphries, 2003: 3).

Humphries paints a picture of a profession in crisis, as the commercialisation of sport, its ubiquitous televisual nature and the intense competition in media markets all distort a form of journalism that was once more dignified. Crucially, sportswriters such as Humphries and the *Daily Telegraph's* Andrew Baker (2004) are no longer on the inside of modern sport, but are themselves outsiders, deluding themselves that they have the inside track on information. Humphries continues:

We know only what sportswriting shouldn't be. We shouldn't be purveyors of sports entertainment. We shouldn't be the running dogs of prawn-sandwich corporatism. Then again, we shouldn't be sour drunks, heckling all the way through the show. Sport is a form of entertainment. Sportswriting is a form of journalism. In the fog in between the ideals of sport and journalism, we have to make a living, we have to entertain. We have to do it in 900 words or less. And quickly. (2003: 6–7)

While written in a self-deprecating style, what Humphries does is shed light on the contemporary production context within which sports journalists operate. The pressures are partly institutional; the financial difficulties being experienced by *The Irish Times* threatening to lead to more cut-backs in staff, and to affect the often strained relationship the paper's sports journalists have with their sports editor. He captures the relentlessness of the modern all-year-round sports calendar, driven as it is by the demands of television and corporate sponsorship. He also notes how television and technology are altering the role of the sports journalist, by making it possible to cover a major international sports tournament without ever leaving the media centre.

His concerns are echoed in further reflections on the trade from other sportswriters. Both Leonard Koppett (2003) and Jerry Eskenazi (2003) lament the passing of an era and while nostalgia often forms a core part of any memoirs, there is a clear indication that the rules of the game for sportswriters have changed in recent years. In his insightful account of his career as a sportswriter, which spanned the pre-television age through to the advent of new media such as the Internet in his later years, Koppett notes how the

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key aspect of the press box in the pre-television age was its ability to allow you as a sportswriter to become an 'insider'. He argues that it:

Flourished in a world that existed before television, before universal access to 'up close and personal' depictions of any and all celebrities, before we assumed that everyone could and would enjoy (or endure) 15 minutes of fame. A respect for privacy and propriety, more widely felt in 'decent' society than than know, helped maintain the distance between the unapproachably famous and 'ordinary' folk, even the ones who had considerable status within their own circles. (Koppett, 2003: 4)

It will be some of these aspects of the changing journalistic sports culture and its attendant pressures that are examined in later chapters of this book.

THE VIEW FROM PROFESSIONAL SPORTSPEOPLE

Eamon Dunphy's seminal book *Only a Game?*, first published in the mid-1970s when he was a professional player in the English game, gives a clear insight into the ambiguous relationship that existed at that time between professional footballers and sports journalists. Dunphy (1987) argued that players had double standards towards journalists. He suggests: 'On the one hand they despise them, thinking they know nothing about the game. ... On the other hand, players are flattered by their attention. Flattered by the idea that this guy has come along especially to write about them' (Dunphy, 1987: 132-3). In this sense, despite the perceptions among sportswriters about the breakdown of trust being a contemporary issue, for Dunphy there has always been an element of mistrust between the people that play and the journalists who write about the game. His criticism of football journalists is implicitly related to levels of insight, knowledge and understanding. As he argues: 'Whereas theatre critics and film critics do know what the mechanics of a production are, most football writers don't. So players tend to despise journalists. ... They don't go into a story to discover but to substantiate preconceived ideas' (Dunphy, 1987: 133-4).

Dunphy's critique is interesting and raises issues about the extent to which he offers a snapshot of a relationship that has long changed, or has simply been updated to facilitate the drives of the contemporary media.

As a journalist, broadcaster and author Dunphy has been writing about sport for over 30 years. He is a former professional footballer who has successfully reinvented himself as a journalist, an author and a broadcaster working across newspapers, radio and television on a wide range of subjects from sport to politics. Dunphy has had trenchant views on the role and function of a sports journalist and has never shied away from expressing opinions in print

or on air that have cut against the dominant journalistic consensus. One such occasion was during the Republic of Ireland's campaign at the 1990 FIFA World Cup finals in Italy, when his public criticism of the team's style of play, at a time when the team was enjoying its most successful run in its history, provoked a storm of protest raged against him. In particular, the then Irish football manager Jack Charlton refused to take questions from Dunphy at press conferences. Recalling that period, journalist and author Colm Toibin noted that as a colleague he had been requested by his newspaper editor back in Dublin to look after Dunphy when he was in Italy: 'Ireland had fallen in love with Charlton. No journalist dared say anything against him. Only one did, and I was now his bodyguard' (Toibin, 1995: 140). The most telling line in Toibin's account of the vilification experienced by Dunphy in the months and years after the tournament is when he notes that for all the hassle, Dunphy realised: 'It's what happens, he understood, when you speak your mind in a small country which has invented a new set of heroes' (Toibin, 1996: 143).

In many ways this characterises some of the core tensions at the centre of sports journalism and writing. On one hand, as a journalist you face the challenge of telling the story as you find it and often have to resist the temptation to simply run with the 'media pack'. While on the other, you must recognise that at the cultural and commercial core of the sports industry is the process of myth-making, with sports journalists absolutely a central element of that process.

Sports journalism and journalists have also enjoyed cameo roles in non-fiction sports books written by novelists and journalists. Davies's account (1990) of the 1990 FIFA World Cup in Italy presents a less than flattering picture of the English football press pack abroad as they cover England's campaign. The level of disdain between players and press is clearly evident from the categorising of the press as 'the rotters', with particular contempt being reserved for those 'news journalists' sent to Italy by their papers to cover and/or seek out scandal or hooliganism stories involving players and fans.

As noted above, the relationship between football player and the press is a highly ambiguous one. Davies (1990) captures this relationship on the cusp of change, noting that the 1990s would see massive amounts of money flow into the game from television and related sponsorship, making millionaires out of the elite players in the sport. This process has clearly taken place, altering the labour dynamics within the sport as well as the relationships players have with the media. No longer do media appearance money nor the lure of a ghosted column in a national newspaper (once the staple diet of additional income for relatively poorly paid players) hold much appeal for players earning up to £100,000 a week.

Humphries (2003) brilliantly captures the impact of this new level of financial independence on the player-journalist relationship when he recalls his attempt to get an interview with the then Tottenham Hotspur and

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Republic of Ireland player Stephen Carr in the run-up to the 2002 FIFA World Cup. He writes:

As individuals, if you can separate a player from the herd, there are some fine people among them ... A couple of the older guys, in particular are capable of holding real grown-up conversations. In the main, though, when the players get together they radiate the surliness of supermodels who have just woken up to find acne all over their faces.

I once asked Steve Carr, the Spurs fullback, if he had a few minutes to spare in order to do a short piece with me. He turned around with almost theatrical slowness, looked me up and down and laughed, 'No way pal'. Off he walked, shaking his head. I'd never met him or written about him before, but I came away and bought a bell for around my neck and for weeks thereafter walked through the streets shouting 'unclean, unclean, unclean'. (Humphries, 2003: 27)

From this exchange, one can perhaps assume that unlike many of his more cash-strapped professional predecessors, Carr does not plan a career in sports journalism when his playing days are over.

Lest we think it is only footballers who have this cynical relationship with journalists, Burns's examination (1986) of the increasingly global television-driven professional snooker circuit saw the sports journalists who covered the sport and the 'stars' associated with it, being nicknamed 'the reptiles' by the players. The strained relationship between the sport and sections of the media intensified as the tabloid press attempted to run stories of scandal and sexual intrigue involving players who enjoyed a celebrity status bestowed on them through a combination of television coverage and tabloid interest. These more aggressive forms of tabloid intrusion which began to intensify in the 1980s increasingly saw news journalists view sports and sportspeople as part of their natural beat and within their orbit of influence.

At the core of much of the discursive writing about sports journalism tend to be a number of assumptions. Perhaps, not surprisingly, given that these accounts are likely to come from the print media, there is a perception that it is the written word and newspapers specifically that remain the true home of sports journalism, rather than the journalism found in sports broadcasting. When sports journalism is being discussed, the overarching frame of reference remains the sportswriter, with broadcasting and its historical connotations of impartiality being more associated with sports commentary and presentation.

CONCLUSION: SPORTS JOURNALISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY

In her foreword to *Tabloid Tales: Global Debates Over Media Standards*, Barbie Zelizer (2000: ix) noted that: 'The thrust to identify certain forms of

journalistic practice as “good” journalism and the prevailing counter-thrust – excommunicating certain practices from the elevated journalistic standard – have remained a consensual way of encountering the journalistic world.’ We have seen how this process is clearly evident in many academic encounters with sports journalism and in the role, status and position of the sports journalist within the profession.

Differing attitudes towards the status of sports journalism in specific countries tell us much about the differing status of sport in particular national cultures and societies. The ability of countries such as Spain, Italy and France to support long-term sports journalism publications and the particular status given to the sportswriter within US journalism all indicate the centrality of sport as a cultural form in helping to both shape and reflect wider national myths. In the UK, more so than these countries, class has been an important marker in shaping the wider social and cultural parameters within which sports culture and its attendant sports media have evolved and developed. As Coleman and Hornby writing in the mid-1990s have argued:

Yet those who write about sport still create a whole set of problems for themselves in Britain, many of them relating, predictably, to the subject of class. Sport in Britain has all sorts of class associations apparently absent elsewhere in the world. Cricket and (English, rather than Welsh) rugby union are ‘posh’ sports, played and watched by ‘posh’ people, and it is therefore acceptable to write in a ‘posh’ way about them; but anyone who dares to write about the more traditional working-class sports – football or rugby league, say – in a way which recognises the existence of polysyllabic words, or metaphors, or even ideas, is asking for trouble, or at the very least a great deal of suspicion. (1996: 1)

Indeed, as Glanville (1999: 269) has suggested, football has ‘enraptured’ the middle classes elsewhere in both Europe and South America for decades. Broadly speaking, this argument could be extended more generally to sports reporting and writing. Put simply, the class-based support for sports has been reflected in the way they have been covered, reported and made sense of by sports journalists and has also dictated this broader dichotomy between ‘quality’ and ‘popular’ journalism. Thus sports such as cricket have a long literary tradition associated with both its print and its broadcast media coverage, with writers such as Neville Cardus embedding the sport in mythological images of England and Englishness.

Previous research by Boyle and Haynes (2000: 176–86) has commented on the explosion in both the volume and the range of sports writing within the traditional ‘broadsheet’ print media market that became evident in the 1990s. They identify how a combination of the changing print media marketplace, increased newspaper competition, broader cultural shifts in the social position of sport (and specifically football) and new technology

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helped facilitate the expansion in the sports sections of all the national broadsheets.

Rowe's research (1999) highlighted one of the key contradictions evident from any examination of the sports journalism culture. He noted: 'it is also often the case that the economic power of the sports department (in terms of the large number and handsome remuneration of personnel; importance for circulation, ratings, advertising revenue and so on) is at variance with its cultural power (low professional reputation and esteem)' (Rowe, 1999: 62). Rowe also suggested that this was beginning to change in the late 1990s as the popularity and profile of sport across a range of media platforms increased. One of the key issues this book examines is whether the broader economic and cultural shifts in sports journalism culture, driven by media interest, has fundamentally altered the situation outlined from the research carried out by Rowe in the 1990s.

There is also a need to examine the extent to which the wider social, economic and indeed political factors that are reformulating journalistic practice (Sparks, 2000: 36) are being played out across the field of sports journalism. If one agrees with Harcup (2004: 9) that at its basic core 'Journalism is not simply fact-gathering. It involves dealing with sources, selecting information and opinion, and telling stories – all within the framework of ... constraints, routines, principles and practices', then to what extent do the wider cultural codes of journalism apply to sports journalism?

Rowe (1999: 38) has argued that it was the print rather than the broadcasting form of sports journalism that dominated this sector of the journalistic terrain, both in profile and in prominence. To what extent has the explosion in broadcast media coverage of sport over the last decade or so altered this ecology? Or is much that passes for broadcast sports journalism more accurately labelled presentation, analysis and commentary? One of the interesting areas of growth both on television and on radio is the rise of the sports news correspondent, a clear recognition of the wider shift in the news values associated with sport and its growing hinterland.

A key factor, often ignored by those academic critics of sports journalism, is the impact that the changing position of sports within society has had on the range of reporting of sports-related news. For example, the economic and political profile that was given to the successful campaign by London in securing the 2012 Olympic Games was covered across the business, news and features pages of broadsheet/compact newspapers through to the back and front pages of the popular press. Issues relating to the governance of sport and the politics associated with aspects of the industry have also become more prominent in recent years. In other words, the ongoing commercialisation and internationalisation of the business of sport, its relationship with corporate capital and national and international media companies has

resulted in those journalists who write about sport finding their traditional beat being encroached upon by business and political journalists or the broadcast 'sports news' correspondent. As sportswriter Richard Williams (2003: 4) has noted: 'The last few years in sport have been full of examples of philosophical questions overshadowing the business of straightforward games-playing.'

Closely linked with this process are the wider structural and cultural shifts that have seen elite sport increasingly located within the entertainment industries as money from television in particular has flowed into some sports, and the athletes in these areas have become stars. While the concept of sports stardom and the extent to which the print media specifically are implicated in this process is not a new phenomenon within the sporting arena (Andrews and Jackson, 2001; Whannel, 2002; Smart, 2005), what is changed is its scale and the increasingly ubiquitous nature of the process; what Whannel (2002) has called the 'vortextuality' of media sports stardom.

To this end the rise of sport public relations and the formalising of access and relationships between sports stars, clubs and various media outlets have become a significant aspect of the landscape of sports journalism in the 21st century. Informed and underpinned by the seemingly relentless commercialisation of popular cultural activity, sport has found itself at the intersection of new media technologies allowing greater exploitation of image rights and a massively expanded, highly competitive print and broadcast media sector keen to secure differing forms of sports content as they chase readers, viewers and listeners in a complex media marketplace. As we see throughout this book, at this centre of this maelstrom, being buffeted by a range of forces, is sports journalism and sports journalists, some of whom feel they no longer recognise the games they have made a living reporting on, or indeed the profession they originally fell in love with.

So, what are the processes at work that are reformulating what sports journalism is, and who sports journalists are? In this respect the book aims to identify and map out the combination of internal pressures that are occurring within media organisations as journalism adapts to both the changing patterns and expectations among media consumers and the wider structural economic and cultural shifts in what now can be called the sports economy. Other concerns also addressed include asking to what extent has the growth of the online sector impacted on the traditional sports print media?

What is also clear is that any book about sports journalism must be at least as interested in the wider political economy of both the sports and the media industries that have shaped and reshaped the profession since its inception. So it is these concerns, allied with a desire to understand the contemporary professional ideologies and production constraints that shape sports journalism, that are at the core of this book.

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In previous work, Boyle and Haynes (2000: 174–6) have examined Rowe's typology of modes of sports writing (1992), which he categorised as *hard news*, *soft news*, *orthodox rhetoric* and *reflexive analysis*. These ways of thinking about the modes of address found within print media sports journalism are important in helping to make sense of the vast outpouring of sports copy (see Chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion).

What is of particular interest in this book is the extent to which the volume of material within these categories is shifting or changing. In other words, at one end of the axis *hard news*, with its focus on a supposedly objective description of events and score lines, remains a staple part of the sports pages (although Blain and O'Donnell (1998) argue that the UK newspaper market is so saturated with politics that even this aspect of sports journalism is far from ideologically neutral), while soft news, with its fixation on speculation, comment and the centrality of stars and the star system in sports culture, continues to be the main staple diet of the tabloid sports section. At the other end of the axis is *reflexive analysis*, which places sport and the sports journalist at the centre of wider political, economic and cultural factors and influences, and is traditionally most likely to appear either outside of the sports pages or in small doses in the broadsheet press. Against the wider structural shifts in both the sports and the media industries has the balance of material within these categories altered or shifted in emphasis? Some of these issues are addressed in the latter part of Chapter 2.

Of course, historical context remains important. In their study of American sports journalists, Salwen and Garrison (1998) have argued that many sports journalists view their poor standing with their peers as being a legacy of poor past reputations. They suggest: 'That their shabby reputations cultivated over the years haunt them in this age of professional prestige and accountability. In this regard, we can see how the historical roots of sports journalism affect the field today' (Salwen and Garrison, 1998: 98). It is to these historical roots and 'shabby reputations' that we turn our attention to in the following chapter, as the broader cultural and historical frame of reference from within which contemporary print sports journalism has evolved is examined.

NOTE

1 The term broadsheet has become problematic with regard to the print media in the UK in the 21st century. By late 2005, a number of newspapers that had previously been broadsheets, such as *The Times*, *The Independent* and *The Scotsman*, were now tabloid, or compact (as they prefer to describe the change) in size, while the *Guardian* had relaunched in the *Berliner* form, which was larger

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than a tabloid, but smaller than the traditional broadsheet. Throughout the book the term broadsheet or compact is used to refer to this section of the press that still differentiates itself in terms of content and news values from the tabloid and mid-market newspapers such as the *Daily Mail*. It is this broadsheet section of the market that has seen a considerable expansion in its sports journalism over the last decade or so. In turn, this has been symptomatic at times of a blurring of the journalistic divide between the broadsheet and the tabloid press.