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Editorial:

Sports Journalism: Changing Journalism Practice and Digital Media

Sports Journalism

A paradox exists at the heart of sports journalism. On one hand it has over the years often been viewed as the poor relation within journalism, lacking the integrity that journalists often like to associate with their self-image. Sports journalism has been characterised as a form of 'soft' journalistic practice, lacking the rigour and credibility of other forms of 'hard' journalism. It was an area of journalism that was viewed as an uncritical booster and promoter of sport and its culture rather than a sector that called the powerful in sport to account. It was a journalism that was more often going to ask the easy and banal question, rather than the penetrating and pertinent one.

At the same time, and here lies the paradox, sports journalism was often one of the most commercially important parts of the newspaper industry. Simply put, while other journalists and academics often decried the lax journalistic standards that they argued could be found in the 'back of the book', it was sports journalism's ability to deliver readers, particularly young male readers, that made it such a crucial and integral part of the commercial success of many newspapers.

Of course this rather stark critique around sports journalism and the journalists who played their trade in this sector, often obscured more than it illuminated. As has been argued elsewhere, sports journalists often had more in common with other areas of journalistic practice than many journalists cared to acknowledge (Boyle, 2006). As in other areas of journalism there are huge variations in the range, diversity and quality of the output that gets tagged as sports journalism. The group mentality of the journalistic pack that travels and works closely with its key sources (whose access is crucial) and the conflicts of interest that accompany such relationships are not things specific to the hermetically sealed world of elite sport, but common in political and business journalism. Crucial also in shaping the tenor and tone of the journalism is the institution that work for and which sets the parameters within which you produce your journalism. The tightly run sports desk of a UK tabloid newspaper offers little latitude for wayward journalistic digressions, while by way of contrast a compact or broadsheet newspaper, often later in coming to valuing its sports coverage, offers more latitude for individual shaping of the tenor of the journalistic output.

National media cultures also shape experience. The sports writer in US journalism occupied a differing more elevated space than for example their UK counterpart did until the last decade or so. Like all journalism, sports has a hierarchy with the No 1 or sports writer being at the top of the pyramid, while the local sports beat reporter (completely reliant on access to local clubs or associations) traditionally toils at the base of the pyramid.

The last twenty or so years has seen a number of key moments shape sports journalism. The UK in the 1990s saw a growth in more demand led journalism driven by Pay-Tv

that was financially underwriting elite sport. As a result promotion and the expansion of the coverage in sport (football in particular), saw more journalism (in all its forms) about sport and offered more opportunities for those wishing to develop a career as a sports journalist. An example of the expansion that took place, saw the 1986 FIFA World Cup in Mexico, featuring the national teams of England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, covered by the UK Guardian newspaper with one page of journalism devoted to events in Mexico, a situation simply unthinkable today.

The digital turn of the 1990s has also dramatically reshaped the journalistic landscape, with sports journalism often being at the leading edge of this transition as journalism moved online and many new (often fan based) sources of information become available around sports culture. The business crisis in print journalism has arrived at the sports journalists door somewhat later than for other sectors, but arrive it has. As the funding of journalism moves centre stage as a driver in shaping the new trajectories of journalism, those working in sports also have had to adapt and re-invent themselves and it is this process that is the focus of this special issue of Digital Journalism.

Mapping the Field

Running through this collection are a number of themes relation to sports journalism in the digital environment. These include aspects of disruption to; established norms of journalistic practice, institutional allegiance, the authority and primary definer role of journalism and the career structure and development for journalists writing about sport. These articles draw on empirically led research that mixes qualitative and quantitative approaches and seek to better understand and position what is going on across contemporary sports journalism. In so doing, this collection identifies change, but also areas of continuity as well as new opportunities for journalists.

Hutchins and Boyle, revisit Zelizer's (1993) 'community of practice' conceptualisation of journalism practice as their starting point for an examination of shifting practice and culture of sports journalists in the mobile age of content production, distribution and consumption. This contribution and that of Sherwood et al's investigation, highlight the growing complexity that exists between sport and journalism as the media become more embedded in the financial structure of elite sport at a time of technological change. The position of public relations and the importance of sustained institutional support for journalistic output are all highlighted as the front line of sports journalism is examined.

The rise of social media and its impact on culture and practice in differing media markets is the focus of the contributions by English, McEnnis and Vimierio. These identify some of the major themes touched on at the top of this editorial around journalistic rigour, but also the impact that the changing nature of news values and patterns of news consumption are having on journalistic practice and the working environment for the digital sports journalist. Themes of technological disruption as well as new opportunities are examined in research from Germany that tackles debates around the growing impact of data on journalistic practice, while the growth of elite

football organisations becoming sports and media business are examined in work from Horky/Pelka and Grimmer. While the neglected area of sport photo-journalism is positioned centre stage by Haynes et al as they draw from shifting practice in this area from around the globe and highlight the particular challenges that digital practice present in terms of preserving what has been a key (although undervalued) component of sports journalism over the decades.

Finally, in an edition of Digital Journalism that will often focus on the prominence of the short, online, mobile friendly mode of sports journalism, Tulloch and Ramon through their study of long form sports journalism (and its continued commercial and brand value) remind us that the journalistic environment remains diverse and that patterns of continuity can also be found in what is a fast changing journalistic landscape. This collection then offers a snapshot of a journalistic sector undergoing change, but also one that is adapting to covering one of the most enduring and media saturated forms of contemporary popular culture, elite sport.

References

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- Zelizer, Barbie. 1993. "Journalists as Interpretive Communities." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 10 (3): 219-237.