



SPORTS JOURNALISM

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RAYMOND BOYLE



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To Noelle and Lauren

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Sometimes I think that I'm happiest in an empty stadium in the hours before the action begins, when the place is filled with a sense of what might be about to happen. Or when the contest is all over and the stadium has emptied, leaving only the memory of what took place. Sport exists in the anticipation and the recollection as well as in the moment, which is what makes it so rich and incremental a pleasure.

Richard Williams, Sportswriter, *The Guardian*, 2003

No wonder people burn out more quickly. No wonder you see old guys with gin bottles inside brown paper bags stashed inside their desk drawers. Queuing outside dressing-room doors, being pushed around by stewards, extracting quotes from nineteen-year-olds. It's no job for serious people.

Nobody ever told me I was a serious person though. I try not to be. There are a few things that keep you going in this game. The mortgage. The knowledge that you failed at everything else in life. The odd good quote. The rare moment of genius from a D.J. Carey or Sonia O'Sullivan.

And the anticipation. Just waiting to see how it all turns out, next weekend, next season, next year. Waiting. Watching. Wondering if you have the words left in you to fill the space that the occasion wants.

Tom Humphries, Sportswriter, *The Irish Times*, 2003.

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Raymond Boyle
January 2006

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 categorised 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

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; Wenner, 1998; Rowe, 1999; Garland and Rowe, 1999; Boyle and Haynes, 2000; Brookes, 2002; Crolley and Hand, 2002; Crolley and Hand, 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

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 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.

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.

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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.

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 within 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 a wider debate about ‘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

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 the 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