

Sports journalism in newspapers – entertainment or watchdog?

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Aim of paper:

At a time when the media landscape is undergoing continual changes and digital media platforms such as the internet and smartphones have increasingly become central distributors of fast sports news, it is central to look into the effect of fast news on sports coverage in newspapers (Boyle & Haynes 2009). To what extent do newspapers respectively prioritise fast news focusing on performance and entertainment, and classic journalism such as background stories, investigative journalism and being the watchdog (Kramhøft 2003)?

Theoretical background:

Sport and the media have a symbiotic relationship whereby sports attract audiences to the media, while media exposure attracts money to sports (Frandsen 2008). This has had a conflicting impact sports journalists, who are now expected to write about sports as entertainment while at the same time trying to live up to classic journalistic virtues (Rowe 2004).

Research design:

The focal point of this paper is a survey of sports content conducted in six Danish newspapers (three broadsheet, two tabloid and one regional). It is part of the largest quantitative survey of sports content, the International Sports Press Survey, which involved collecting data from over 18,000 articles in newspapers from 23 countries. The Danish survey consists of 1,522 articles collected on 14 days over three months in spring 2011. A statistical analysis was done on the coded subjects ranging from, for example, numbers of photos of particular subjects to numbers and types of sources, and the data was compared to a similar survey of the Danish newspaper content from 2005 (Jørgensen 2005).

Results, discussion and conclusions:

Results from the new survey show that Danish newspapers focus on the performances of top athletes and teams participating in only a few 'TV sports'. The categories in focus are 'results and reports', 'other coverage of sports performance' and 'preview of matches/competitions'. Together these categories make up 78 percent of the subjects covered, whereas sports politics, financing of sports

and bookmaking, on the other hand, make up only five percent of the subjects covered. Similarly, persons and sources in focus in the reports are dominated by persons connected to the athlete/team's performance. Most articles have few sources with only 26 percent of all articles having two sources or more.

These results point to a newspaper medium that editorially prioritises performance and entertainment rather than aiming to dig deeper by using many sources and uncovering the many important perspectives of a billion dollar sports industry. This choice of priority may cause the journalists to overlook the important subjects that have come to play an increasing role in sports, such as financing sports business, governance in sports, match-fixing, corruption and trafficking of players.

Looking at the 2005 survey, which also indicates that performance and entertainment took up most column space at that time, reveals that while the media landscape has changed due to the development of media platforms that are good at producing fast news, the newspapers' content has not.

That the development of newspaper content has apparently not occurred alongside the development of media platforms raises a discussion about the role and relevance of the newspapers: Why buy a newspaper when you can get most of the news for free on other media platforms that deliver at a faster pace? The answer could be because the newspapers constitute a medium well suited to classic journalism – being the watchdog, setting the sports agenda and publishing background stories – giving the newspapers a strong base in the media landscape and society. But newspapers cannot serve this function effectively if they focus too much on performance and entertainment.

This does not mean distancing newspapers from entertainment all together, but instead leaving more room for other types of journalism, because the continuing dominance of performance and entertainment raises serious questions about the societal role of print news and sports journalism in the future.

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