

The Fall Of The Queen Of Nordic Skiing — A Comparative Analysis Of The Scandinavian Media Coverage Of The Theresa Johaug Scandal

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Aim

In October 2016, it was announced that Norwegian cross-country skier Therese Johaug, one of the world leading female skiers, had tested positive during an out-of-competition test. By using this case and based on the insights outlining the relationship between sports scandals, doping and different Scandinavian perspectives on doping and cross-country skiing, this paper intends to compare how Scandinavian mass media in three countries cover the incident. We do so by investigating the Norwegian media coverage which by far is the most extensive, and subsequently we compare this to how Swedish and Danish media approach the same scandal. Our aim is twofold: first we want to detect similarities and differences and second, we want to explain these similarities and differences by contextualizing how cross-country skiing and doping incidents are framed, embedded and understood in the three Scandinavian countries and by discussing which managerial consequences this may have.

Theoretical background

A sport scandal can be described as a process involving several stages (Storm & Wagner, 2015). First of all it contains an act of transgression that collides with existing expectations of how to act in a sporting context, but it is not until this act of transgression is disseminated to a wider audience, i.e. makes it observable for others, that it becomes a scandal. The transition to a third phase involves moral discussions and articulations of opprobrious discourses. This situation can be defined as the dissolving of the existing order of discourses (Fairclough, 1992). That implies the emergence of new, competing and occasionally conflicting narratives. According to Wenner, "the frame is more important than the game" (Wenner, 2006, p. 55). Thus, Wenner wants to emphasize how the story of the sport is told, and who tells it. The interesting aspect here is that the frame is rapidly under change and has suddenly become challenged by the act of transgression e.g. extensions of subjectivity understood as the positions for utterances and intertextual references become important parts of the analytical design as alternative versions are given a voice.

Research methods

We compare three contexts related to Scandinavia i.e. societies with a common social-democratic welfare state heritage (Esping-Andersen, 1990). We do so by focusing on the period running from the press release (October 13th, 2016) to the announcement of the ban (March 7th, 2017) and as our analytical foci points we will in particular draw attention to a) questions about guilt, b) subjectivity, and c) inter-textuality which then leads us to d) a wider discussion about how the sport discipline is rooted in the national context as part (or lack) of a national identity construction. The first stage is to analyze Norwegian media coverage from Aftenposten, VG and NRK, no — altogether 620 articles. This is followed up by a systematic reading of Swedish media coverage from Expressen.se and svt.se and Danish media coverage from dr.dk and eb.dk. By using these sources we are not claiming full representation of media, although we deliberately use media sources ranking from tabloids newspaper to national-tax-payers financed public service homepages.

Results and implications

Preliminary results of our study indicate that Norwegian coverage is heavily engaged in critically questioning the actual guilt of Therese Johaug by emphasizing the role of her physician and rule inconsistencies. Furthermore the Norwegian texts provide space for several voices such as national and international experts on doping, Norwegian law experts, Norwegian and international skiers, other elite athletes, family and support team of Johaug, official leaders from Norwegian Skiing, and also other prominent persons within sport, politics, history, ethics and national and international journalists. Contrary to this the innocence of Johaug is questioned and debated in encompassing Swedish media coverage where the story of Norway as an anti-doping role model is seriously challenged. The case attracts significant less attention in Danish media where the controversies between Norway and Sweden seem to play a not-insignificant role often containing clear intertextual references to harsh contrasting views found in Swedish and Norwegian media.

The case points to the managerial dilemma in a nation like Norway where cross-country skiing is closely related to a national identity construction and being a leading anti-doping pioneer. The positive test not only challenges the national identity construction but also undermines its anti-doping profile. Simultaneously

the rivalry with cross-country skiing neighbour Sweden gains momentum. The Danish approach is much more reluctant which can be partly explained by the insignificant role of skiing, but also that Denmark has a richer history of doping incidents and experiences first and foremost among it professional road cyclists.

References

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