

Journal of Motorsport Culture & History

Volume 1 | Issue 1

Article 1

2019

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Recommended Citation

Robeers, T. (2019). Environmental Sustainability And The Framing Of Formula E Motor Racing In UK And Flemish Newspapers. *Journal of Motorsport Culture & History*, 1 (1). Retrieved from <https://ir.una.edu/jmotorsportculturehistory/vol1/iss1/1>

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Environmental Sustainability And The Framing Of Formula E Motor Racing In UK And Flemish Newspapers

Prof. Dr. Timothy Robeers

Abstract

Developed in cooperation with the Fédération Internationale d'Automobile (FIA) as motor sport's governing body, the fully electric racing series Formula E represents itself as a driving force in making the motor sport and automotive industries more environmentally sustainable (hereafter: ES). However, the question remains whether such ES efforts are picked up on by the media, and more specifically newspapers that are still considered a benchmark for in-depth and reflective journalism, despite a dramatic rise of online and social media coverage of sport. Combining a quantitative content analysis with a qualitative framing analysis, this article identified, compared and contrasted frames, and the significance of ES herein, in a range of UK and Flemish quality and popular newspapers. Results indicate that, although ES did not constitute a frame in itself, it was significantly part of other frames that represented Formula E both positively and negatively. Additionally, results uncover distinct differences in reporting on (ES in) Formula between UK and Flemish newspapers. This article suggests such differences are related to reasons of a historical and regional nature and subsequently affect the representation of ES in Formula E.

Keywords

Environmental sustainability, newspaper analysis, mixed-method, framing approach, Formula E

Introduction

By means of a quantitative content and qualitative framing analysis, this contribution studies how the notion of environmental sustainability (hereafter: ES) is represented in the coverage of Formula E in UK and Flemish newspapers. To this end, it combines insights from environmental communication, media studies and motorsport studies.

ES implies the ability to steer developments so as to meet current needs met without compromising the needs of future generations (United Nations, 1988). As such, ES is increasingly important to the public, governments and businesses alike. Sport related organizations and businesses too have started paying attention to ES, either through their own initiative or as a result of external pressures (Dingle, 2009; Gholami et al., 2016; McCullough, 2016). In recent years, the Fédération d'Automobile Internationale (hereafter: FIA), functioning as motorsport's governing body has stepped up its efforts to monitor and improve the environmental and socio-economic aspects of motorsport and the mobility sector in general, as well as to promote environmental campaigns (Fédération Internationale d'Automobile, n.d.). This intention to manage and market motorsport as sustainable has led the FIA to introduce the novel racing series Formula E. This fully electric racing series promotes itself as the future of motorsport by aiming to attract urban audiences and by embracing ES (Formulae, 2018). To achieve these goals, Formula E requires maximum exposure of its ES efforts. One way of realizing this has been to promote and manage its ES identity through its own website (Robeers, 2018). However, it is first and foremost legacy and social media that provide effective means for sporting organizations to access audiences worldwide (Standaert & Jarvenpaa, 2016). For example, a majority of people that follow motorsport do so primarily through media such as TV, radio, newspapers, magazines and/or social media coverage of sport and its wider points of interest (Boyle & Haynes, 2009; Robeers 2019). Aware of this, Formula E has provided media organizations with information and access free of charge (Chauhan, 2015). However, despite communicating its image and identity through its website, the media control the amount and nature of coverage and subsequently the visibility of Formula E and of its ES efforts. Bearing this in mind, the current study analyses the coverage of Formula E by means of a quantitative content and qualitative framing analysis of a sample of British and Flemish newspapers.

Where Environmental Sustainability and Motorsport Meet

During the first decade of the 21st century, awareness pertaining ES grew along with a subsequent pressure for businesses to adopt more environmentally sustainable *modi operandi*. As a result, academic research has focused on the effects of ES in a wide range of areas of business and society (Kolk, 2016; Lester, 2010; Orlitzky et al., 2011; Schaltegger et al., 2017). ES in professional sport has also received considerable attention as professional sport's close relationship to consumerism is seen to create much of the environmental problems faced by contemporary society (Dingle, 2009). So far, research has

focused predominantly on more traditional popular sport and sporting events, such as football (e.g. Costello, 2017; Death, 2011) and the Olympic Games (e.g. Boykoff and Mascarenhas, 2016; Paquette et al., 2011). Yet, despite the motorsport industry having endured criticisms on account of its negative impact on delicate eco-systems that arise as a result of staging major (motor) sporting events, the issue of ES in motorsport has received little attention (Hassan, 2011). Still, a few notable exceptions apply.

For one, scholars Hassan and O’Kane (2011) focused on the Paris to Dakar Rally and the impact of ES as part of Corporate Social Responsibility (hereafter: CSR) within motorsport. They noted that ES efforts of the Dakar Rally organisers were seen by some media and environmental groups as insufficiently offsetting the event’s environmental impact. This led to a depiction of ES efforts as a smokescreen to divert criticism regarding the (un)sustainability of the event (Hassan & O’Kane, 2011). Earlier, Dingle (2009) found that there has been doubt about whether motorsport credibly manages and markets itself as sustainable. For one, in professional sport, such sustainability efforts often clash with the goal to sell an authentic or nostalgic experience to fans, hence organizations’ measures can only be implemented up to a certain level before it affects fan experiences (Crabbe & Brown, 2004)., This is exacerbated by motorsport’s dependence on natural resources and is indicative of motorsport’s relationship with unsustainable patterns of consumption that are linked to global environmental change (Dingle, 2009; Mallen & Dingle, 2017). Therefore, for motorsport to remain relevant, it should be directed and managed ‘in such a way as to drive technology for the betterment of mankind’ (Turner & Pearson, 2008, p. 57). In response, the motorsport industry has started implementing environmental and social sustainability measures. For example, the FIA is now an active participant in the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Agenda, where it participates in the global debate on climate change. In addition it uses motorsport to help promote its environmental campaigns such as the ‘Make Cars Green Campaign’. For this, Formula One drivers endorsed the latter campaign, generating worldwide exposure (Fédération International d’Automobile, 2007).

The FIA’s most recent effort in this regard is Formula E. This annual racing formula builds on a global tradition of professional motorsport series such as Formula One whilst aiming to establish itself as a global entertainment brand. It is distinct in that it features fully electric race cars powered by green electricity which results in significantly reduced noise levels and carbon dioxides emissions (Formulae, 2018). This considered ‘green selling card’ (Robeers, 2019) allows Formula E to target city audiences, enabling them to experience motorsport within city limits and (potentially) to learn about electric mobility (Chauhan, 2015). As a result, environmental groups such as Greenpeace have commented positively on Formula E’s ES efforts (Jarvie, 2018).

A study by Robeers (2018) analysed the self-representation of Formula E in relationship to ES on its website. This study suggests that the series indeed integrates a ES significantly as part of its own organizational identity in a number of ways. Yet, it also maintains pre-existing motorsport values and associations with glamour and celebrities which results in an equally significant level of commodification and potential criticisms of greenwashing (Robeers, 2018). Regarding the latter, a complementary study by Robeers (2019) also looked at Formula E's organizational image as constructed by live-television broadcasters. It found that the framing of Formula E as environmentally sustainable only occurred in an initial stage. This rendered ES in Formula E as a 'green selling card' to be used to complement frames based on more established motorsport values (Robeers, 2019). However, beyond this, no study has looked into the extent and ways in which the identification of Formula E as a motorsport committed to ES is picked up by news media. Therefore this study aims to complement earlier work by analysing *if and how Formula E's ES efforts are represented in mainstream media's coverage of the sport*.

The Role of the Media

Setting the Agenda on Formula E

A key reason for ES becoming a topic of global and public debate is its omnipresent, if rather subdued, position in people's everyday life through continued media attention. Lester (2010) claims that news coverage of ES-related issues is rarely granted priority as a dominant topic. Cox and Pezzullo (2015) relate this to ES's limited newsworthiness, i.e. its limited ability to attract readers. ES-related news is primarily event or novelty driven, at which point it obtains considerable coverage (Lester, 2010). Yet, this tends often to be followed by a dying down of media attention as the novelty wanes (Lester, 2010). As a product of their own environment, media pick up on novel items that evoke general interest such as the emergence of an environmental issue or of a new sport. Subsequently, they often contribute to a further growth in popularity. Furthermore, media monitoring and scrutiny can pressure organizations to speed up or reinforce adoption and development of environmental practices (Trendafilova et al., 2013). In the case of (motor)sport, media engage in an ethical necessity to 'expose the reluctance which some sports governing bodies appear to display in either acknowledging or dealing with any problem they may have' (Boyle & Haynes, 2009, p. 120).

These examples refer to the wider studied agenda setting power of media, a process of news selection through which media can influence public opinion and public policy priorities by telling people *what* to think about (Claessens, 2013; Jensen, 2012). There are a considerable amount of studies dealing with media agenda-setting of environmental issues (e.g. Liu et al., 2009; Schweinsberg et al., 2017) and of sport (e.g. Frederick et al., 2015; Garcia et al., 2018; Scheerder & Snoeck, 2009), yet studies of the way in which media help set the agenda with regards to sport and environment are rare.

Therefore, this study *analyses if media pick up on Formula E's image efforts, in other words if ES in motorsport make news reporting on Formula E more newsworthy?*

Framing Formula E

Scheufele (1999) and Lester (2010) indicate that it is not enough to understand that media push what people think about, but also how they should think about it, i.e. how an issue that is selected to become news is presented to audiences. One way of looking at this is through the lens of framing: how do media frame a particular news item? The notion of frames refers to 'persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organise discourse, whether verbal or visual' (Gitlin, 1980, p. 7). Framing, then, is the process of attributing meaning to events or occurrences and in doing so 'function to organise, experience and guide action' for audiences through selection, emphasis, exclusion or modification (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 614). Van Gorp (2010) distinguishes between dominant frames (occurs most frequent), counter-frames (opposing the dominant one) and neglected or marginal frames.

Framing has not only proven a popular approach to analyse media coverage of the environment and of sport but also a productive approach for comparative research. Such comparative research provides fertile ground to use a framing approach in the analysis of the representation of ES in Formula E coverage, the focus of this study. For example, Good (2008) analysed how American, Canadian and other international newspapers framed the notion of climate change, while Dirikx and Gelders (2009) used framing in relationship to global warming in Dutch and French newspapers. Similarly in sports media research, framing has been used for comparative research. For example, Jakubowska (2017) used framing to determine Polish newspaper coverage of male and female athletes during the Sochi Winter Olympics. More regarding motorsport, Daigle et al. (2014) used framing to analyse street racing coverage in Canadian newspapers. So far though, only Robeers's (2019) study has used framing in relation to Formula E. Beyond the rather 'neglected' ES-related frame, this study revealed broadcasters constructed frames to establish Formula E as both novel and traditional motorsport. However, this study only focused on a single UK broadcaster. Considering Formula E can be categorized as a sport with a global outreach, it too can be made sense of through a local (i.e. national) media lens (Boyle and Monteiro, 2005), making international comparison highly relevant to gain a better understanding of how Formula E and ES is covered. While the choice of cases for international comparisons often (semi-) pragmatic, a predetermined set of similarities and/or differences between national media regarding a certain research topic can contribute to an interesting data set. For example, the United Kingdom prides itself at featuring a world leading motorsport and aeronautic industry (House of Commons Business, Innovation and Skill Committee, 2010). In their study on the development of motorsport during the 'Belle Epoque', Ameye et al. (2011) attribute this to

longstanding tradition of motorsport, aviation and engineering that developed in a post-colonial and industrializing world nation. Belgium found itself in a similar position during the first years of the 20th century but, unlike the UK, was unable to maintain or further develop this pioneering role (Ameye et al., 2011). Thus, the UK and Belgium share a similar motorsport heritage but have evolved in different directions, both as an industry and as a culture. In our case, this means media from the UK and Flanders are likely to generate different frames regarding ES in Formula E. Finally, framing studies confirm the continued relevance of studying newspaper coverage. Indeed, despite the ongoing crisis in (the business model) of press, sports reporting in newspapers remains strong as newspapers use sport coverage to generate new audiences (Boyle & Haynes, 2009). Therefore, this study analyses *how UK and Flemish newspapers frame ES in Formula E*.

Methodology

Constructing the Sample

Analysis focuses on two regions, i.e. the UK and Flanders (the Dutch speaking part of Belgium). For each case, we constructed a corpus of articles from the two bestselling quality and popular newspapers based on national circulation ('De Standaard Versus de Morgen', n.d.; Ponsford, 2016; Snoeys, 2016; Turvill, 2015). For Flanders, this includes coverage from *De Morgen*, *De Standaard*, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, and *Het Nieuwsblad*. In the case of the United Kingdom, newspaper selection includes *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Sun*, and *The Daily Mail*. Newspaper articles were accessed by means of GoPress Academic (www.academic.gopress.be), the online database containing all Flemish newspapers and magazines, and LexisNexis (www.academic.lexisnexis.co.uk), a similar database containing UK newspaper articles. Articles were selected by means of a search of keyword 'Formula E' for UK coverage and of keywords 'Formula E' and 'Formule E' (Dutch language) for Flanders for the period 12 January 2012 – the date the first article on Formula E appeared in the corpus - until 11 November 2016. All editorial content including hard news, features, editorials and opinion pieces - included on the basis that the editor's decision to include them in the newspaper reflects the editorial line of the newspaper ideology - that contained the key words were selected (Gan et al., 2005). The eventual sample therefore consisted of 259 articles, i.e. 106 Flemish and 153 UK newspaper articles.

The Coding Process: From a Quantitative Analysis ...

To analyse the data, we opt for a mixed approach combining a quantitative content analysis – allowing for a general overview of occurrences - with a more in-depth, qualitative framing analysis. Although qualitative and quantitative data are known to vary in character, they do share a common area of meaning in terms of the object (Van den Bulck et al., 2008), in this case: of how Formula E and ES are portrayed in the selected newspaper content.

For the quantitative content analysis, we started with a list of seven variables and their subcategories, found in the literature (e.g. Gan et al., 2005; Horky and Nieland, 2013; Rowe, 2007; Tang, 2012). The categories include date of publication, dominant sport, article topics (with a maximum of 5 per article), article type, sources, article valence, and title valence. These categories were tested on a subsample of 60 of all 249 articles (24%) to evaluate the usefulness of selected, and the need for additional, (sub) categories.

The unit of analysis was a paragraph, which usually included a number of sentences but in some instances just one or two sentences. When a paragraph was found to be too lengthy, containing various ideas, it was carved up into smaller, meaningful segments.

Reliability of results was controlled by means of a second coder who, after being briefed and familiarised with the coding instructions, coded 5% of the material. Using Cohen's K we calculated the intercoder reliability with an average of 0.81 to be high.

... to a Qualitative Method: Framing Analysis

To obtain a more detailed, in-depth understanding of how ES is being dealt with in relationship to Formula E in the Flemish and British newspaper coverage, we selected all articles that made explicit mention of ES. This resulted in a sample of 66 ES related articles (UK: 60 and Flanders: 6) that were subjected to a qualitative framing analysis. Analysis is based on the identification in each article of framing devices and reasoning devices as developed by Gamson and Modigliani (1989) and Entman (1993). The latter refers to the definition of the issue, the causal interpretation, the consequence, the moral evaluation and the treatment recommendation. The former involves analysis of word choice, stereotypes/metaphors, catchphrases and depictions.

Findings were translated into frame packages in a signature matrix (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). As a means of validation, first, each frame had to provide a clear definition of what is meant by the integration of ES as well as what the causal and treatment recommendations were. Second, frames had to be mutually exclusive and provide a clear insight of the roles attributed to Formula E and ES.

Formula E and ES in the UK and Flemish Press

In what follows, we will first set out results based on the quantitative data. Following this, results of the qualitative framing analysis are presented.

Quantitative Analysis: the Prominence of Formula E in the UK and Flemish Press

Of all articles analyzed ($n = 259$), 48,05% features Formula E as the dominant sport, with 58% of all UK articles ($n = 153$) and 33,96% of all Flemish articles ($n = 106$) focusing foremost on Formula E, a first indication of the difference in attention to the sport in Flanders and the UK. In 10,55% of all 259 cases, Formula E was mentioned in articles dominated by Formula One. This was

significantly more the case in UK coverage (16,67%) than in Flemish coverage (just 1,89%). Results further suggest a more dominant interest in Formula racing in the UK press compared to its Flemish counterpart where it mostly appears as part of mixed sports coverage.

The results regarding article topics provide further elaboration on the situation. Flemish articles focus predominantly on results/match reports (27,30%) and other sport-related content such as sporting/performance aspects (8,55%). Similarly, UK articles focus on motorsport news (26,94%) and performance/sporting aspects (10,68%). Yet, UK articles also focus on technology and development (12,62%), environmental sustainability (10,44%) and marketing (7,28%). This indicates UK reporting on Formula E combines a more engineering-based and business-like angle with actual sports topics whereas Flemish articles tend to focus more on what the sport generates in terms of entertainment. This tendency is confirmed by analysis of sources mentioned in the articles. 328 sources ($n = 328$; either mentioned or quoted) were found in 132 Flemish and UK articles. A remarkably small sample of Flemish articles ($n = 30$) featured few sources and an exclusive focus on athletes (60%, ex: Jerome D'Ambrosio). This confirms that notions of banal nationalism and the notion of bringing it home in sports reporting (Billig, 2010) extend to Formula E. Although sources in UK articles (UK: $n = 298$) also focus on British athletes (5,70%, ex: Sam Bird) other sources included corporate executives (26,17%, ex: Sir Richard Branson) and politicians (9,06%, e.g. former UK prime minister David Cameron). Additionally, scientists from the natural and social sciences appear in UK and Flemish articles to a lesser extent as well. Specifically, these scientists contribute to creating narratives of scrutiny against ES.

Some interesting observations arose from an analysis of the date of publication. Figure 1 shows a number of significant peaks in articles on Formula E in the sample of the UK press. The first peak in the period of March 2013 coincides with the notification of the press by the FIA that the Formula E championship would start in the autumn of 2014. The peak periods November 2013-January 2014, and the same period in 2014-15 and 2015-16 are related to the organisers and teams releasing information. The growing number of peaks in press coverage suggests an increase in attention for Formula E over time, probably as it became better known. This media attention was further helped by the deliberate decision to schedule the Formula E championship during a period (winter) when most professional racing series are on a break, thus encouraging media exposure. What then explains the peaks in interest in the spring and summer months? The period of July 2014 coincided with the lead-up to the start of the (then new) Formula E series in September 2014, while the peak in May – July 2015 represents (the lead-up to) the season's finale in London. The limited attention in the same period in 2016 may be related to the fact that criticism after the first London finale meant that 2016 would be the last year that Formula E would visit that location in London.

Figure 1: Number of Formula E articles (on ES) published based on date of publication in the UK.

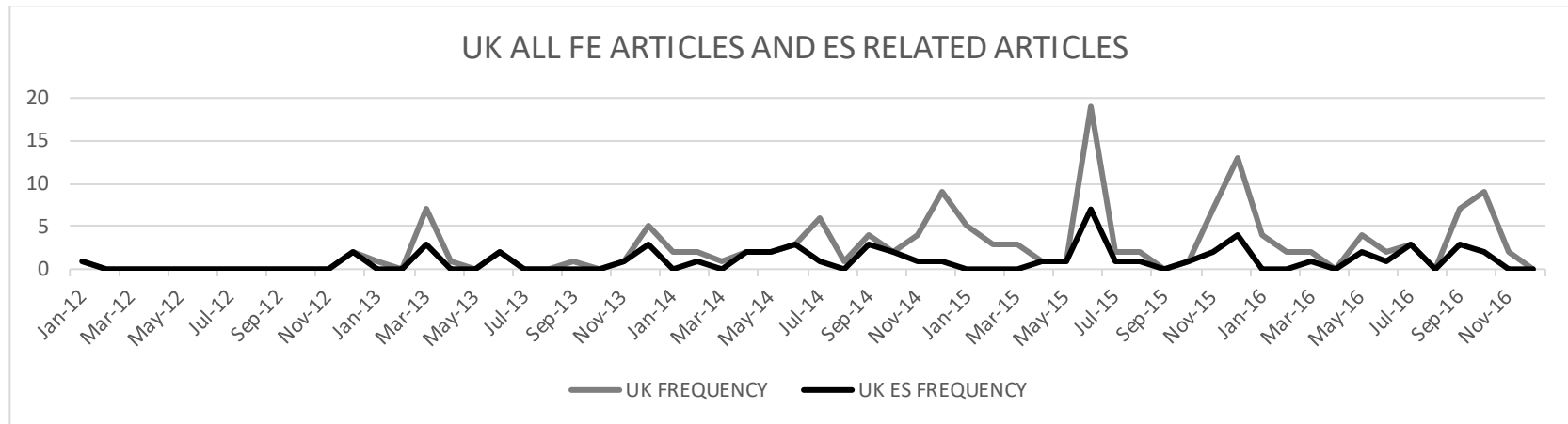
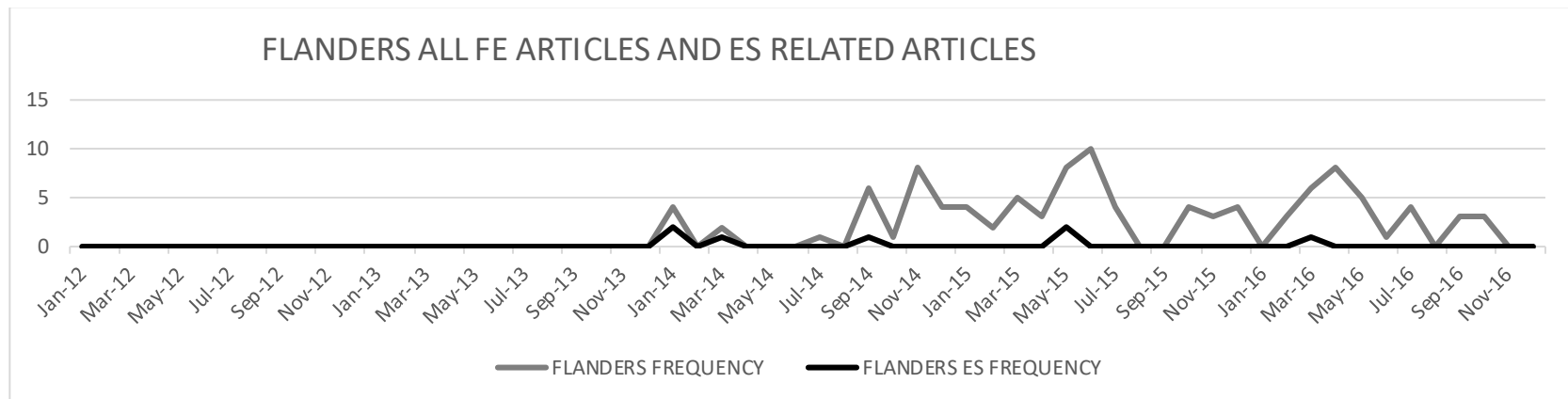


Figure 2: Number of Formula E articles (on ES) published based on date of publication in Flanders.



Some interesting differences with the Flemish coverage, shown in Figure 2, can be noted. Not only does the first Flemish article appear one year later than its British counterpart, Flemish coverage overall is less frequent and less substantial than UK articles, showing a lack of interest in the introduction of the sport. Yet, the most significant periods roughly appear for the same reason as and correspond to the situation in the UK: September 2014 - January 2015 and May – July 2015. Only the period of March – May 2016 sees a larger volume of publication than the UK at that time. Looking especially at the mention of ES, figure 2 shows that it generates an original focus of attention (January 2014 – March 2014) in the Flemish press, when the highest peak can be noted, after which attention for ES dwindles. This seems to confirm Cox and Pezzullo's (2015) observation that focus on ES wanes as the novelty wears off. However, as figure 1 shows, this does not apply to UK articles where a level of attention to ES is maintained diachronically. More so, a tendency was noted for ES-related articles to proportionally follow article publications on Formula E in general, indicating a level of reflection on the theme.

Qualitative Analysis: ES in Formula E Coverage in UK and Flemish Press

Of all coded articles ($n = 259$), 66 articles revealed a textual reference to ES, 60 articles originated from the UK and just 6 articles from Flanders. Further analysis showed that the coverage of ES is mostly limited to a mention of just a few lines, particularly so in Flemish articles (5 out of 6 as opposed to 33 out of 60 in UK articles). Particularly in UK articles, the focus on ES often includes the dominant topic of efficiency and/or technology (28 out of 60 articles):

No motor racing could ever be described as environmental [...] but Formula E racers use a lot less fossil fuel than their petrol powered counterparts. (Bennett, 2015)

Framing (ES) in Formula E

Complementary to this, a qualitative frame analysis resulted in two dominant frames, two counter-frames as well as one secondary frame. Importantly, before analyzing each frame in greater detail, we need to point out that ES does not constitute a frame in itself in either UK or Flemish articles. However, ES discourse is of significant importance in some of the other frames we found, as the analysis below shows.

The Dominant Frame of Formula E as 'A Potential Threat to Formula One'

This frame features predominantly in UK articles and revolves around the issue of Formula E as having found a green gap in motorsport, even though it needs to develop further in order to pass by Formula One, 'They [Formula E cars] should look more like the communications of tomorrow [...] and less like those of the Seventies.' (Bennett, 2015). The rise of Formula E is attributed not just to its own strengths but to the fact that Formula One has been faltering as a sport for some time: 'Formula One is dysfunctional, conservative and traditionally

averse to major changes in sustainable technology' (Briggs, 2014). In presenting Formula One in this way, the frame puts Formula One and Formula E in antagonistic positions: 'stuttered on a querulous path' (Eason, 2014a) versus 'powering ahead' (Johnson, 2014) or 'mired in gloom and uncertainty' (Johnson, 2015) versus 'exudes quiet confidence' (Eason, 2015). This reverberates the imminence of the threat posed by Formula E, depicting Formula E as a 'rebel without a decibel' (Plets, 2014) and as 'Formula One's Waterloo, and not the train station' (Eason, 2013). Consequently, Formula E is positioned as a serious contender, combining well-known engineers, manufacturers, drivers, celebrities and politicians: 'People, celebrities, sponsors and city councils are flocking to the idea' (Eason, 2012). ES discourse was found to contribute to the frame only in relationship to Formula One's lack of embracing ES compared to Formula E.

The Counter-frame of Formula E as 'Child's Play'

A counter-frame to the previous frame and a sub frame to the secondary 'EV Image Problems', this frame presents Formula E as no match for traditional racing series and is present in Flemish and UK articles. It starts from the idea that Formula E is difficult to be taken serious as 'it is simply too slow' (Johnson, 2014) to watch. This is attributed to the fact that it is doubtful whether the series will manage to bring the same sporting factor for (young) adult fans associated with other autosport series: '[...] don't think of it as autosport. Rather as a show in which the audience participates' (Bossuyt, 2014). The notion of seriousness is further compromised by means of framing devices that compare Formula E to forms of 'silly' pseudo-sport entertainment such as 'lawnmower racing' (Eason, 2015) or a 'scalextric' toy race track (Burrows, 2014). To the extent that a solution for Formula E out of this bad situation and image is presented, reference is made to - particularly battery-related - technological advancements that provide greater speeds and autonomy: 'the cars don't even last the whole of a race yet, which is where research and development should be concentrated (Bennett, 2015). ES discourse, finally, is entirely absent from this frame.

The Dominant Frame of Formula E as '(Promoting the) EV Revolution'

This second dominant frame was found in UK articles and presents Formula E inherent to an electric revolution. The issue is that a necessity for legislation is pushing manufacturers to correspond to lower emission norms and subsequently making them 'enter the electric arena'. An implied cause is that (an increased acknowledgement of) ES has provided politics and mass audiences with a significant incentive and made 'screaming, petrol fueled cars seem at odds with the aspirations of both carmakers and buyers' (Eason, 2012). Consequently, development of alternative, i.e. zero-emission, energy sources and EV technology is improving, yet is still suffering from a negative aura. In other words, Formula E is presented as a solution that can help mainstream and boost the image of EV's by showing urban audiences it does not need to be boring, slow, ugly costly and impractical: '[Formula E can] jump-start the stalling

electric car revolution' (Robert, 2013). In doing so, the series is presented as legitimizing itself further by providing a cause to the spectacle in motorsport: 'Johnson and his ilk, who want the spectacle but need a cause (Eason, 2013). The frame further acknowledges the need for motorsport to adjust to the trend for businesses to become more sustainable: 'recognition that the world is changing fast and that motorsport has to change with it' (Eason, 2014b). What is more, Formula E is presented as playing into this necessity for motorsport to become more relevant to ensure its survival for the future: i.e. 'a motor-racing revolution (Eason, 2014a). Underlining the potential of Formula E, it is also presented as combining the ES notions of a lack of carbon emissions and significantly reduced noise level with the entertainment and speed factor of traditional motorsport series: 'have fun and go fast, but without the penalty of exhaust fumes or noise that would keep babes awake in a 50-mile radius' (Eason, 2013). A further observation is that promotion and marketing, i.e. capitalist tools, are implicitly presented as inherent necessities for the EV revolution and are as such free of criticism in articles.

The Counter-frame of Formula E as a 'Green Farce'

Both a sub frame of 'EV Image Problems' and a counter-frame to '(Promoting the) EV Revolution' in Flemish and UK articles, this frame presents the series as falling short of its own goals due to significant negative consequences: 'Formula E cannot live up to its eco credentials and the positive consequences do not compensate for the negative consequences' (Ekins, 2015). As such, ES efforts are depicted as cancelled out. The cause of this is placed with the 'unrelenting noise [and the] damage and disruption to natural areas and traffic' (Fernandez & Strick, 2016). In this sense, Formula E's goal of using its 'green card' (see also Robeers, 2019) is presented as similar to what Hassan and O'Kane (2011) referred to as a smokescreen in relation to the Paris Dakar rally. For example, Formula E is presented as an example of 'how marketing and hype can create delusion' (Bossuyt, 2014) and how 'everything is about attracting big business and commercial sponsorship at the expense of quiet enjoyment' (Fernandez & Strick, 2016). Further, this frame is strengthened by the use of a negative vocabulary that functions as a framing device: 'destructive forces [...] ruin (Ekins, 2015), and 'terrible idea' (Elliot & Eason, 2014).

The suggested solution to this problem is that no form of motorsport should be allowed in urban spaces. Consequently, in order to truly make an impact in reduction of carbon emissions, motorsport 'should stick to the dedicated race tracks and leave our streets for ordinary Londoners to enjoy' (Elliot & Eason, 2014). In this sense, the intrusive essence of Formula E is presented as no different from other motorsport series.

The Secondary Frame of 'EV Image Problems'

This frame is present in both Flemish and UK articles and contains the sub frames 'Child's Play' and 'EV Image Problems'. In this secondary frame, the issue presented is that EV's suffer from skepticism arising from an aura of

negativity caused by what are considered to be significant downsides: no better way to indicate that limited autonomy remains EV's most significant problem' (Bossuyt, 2014), 'electric cars are expensive [...] but by far the biggest barrier is the range of electric cars' (Stansfield, 2015) and consequently, mass adoption of EV's remains difficult: 'Sales in the UK of pure electric vehicles [...] still a pitifully small number in an overall market that has grown' (Stansfield, 2015). The solution here is that EV's will need to equal or better characteristics of fossil fueled cars to become practically viable: 'cutting battery costs and increasing their range will give electric vehicles a new spark of life' (Stansfield, 2015). The moral evaluation remains carefully critical to avoid making evaluations that can be proved false in the near future: '[...] it'll take some seriously bright sparks to convince Irish motorists to ditch their oil-burners' (Lennox, 2016).

Discussion

These results suggest a number of meaningful implications. First, ES does not take up a dominant position in UK or Flemish news reporting on Formula E. This initially corresponds with Lester's (2010) and Cox and Pezzullo's (2015) claims that ES is rarely granted priority as a prominent topic due to its limited newsworthiness in news media coverage. However, some media attention for ES was maintained over time. This was found to be proportionally associated with the amount of Formula E articles in general, and UK newspaper coverage specifically. As such, it seems that where often the novelty factor of ES wanes after initial exposure (Cox & Pezzullo, 2015; Lester, 2010), with Formula E it remains noticeably present. Even in Flemish articles ES does not wane completely. This more regular, albeit subdued, association of ES with Formula E suggests two things. First, ES is able to add to the story of a novel motorsport series set within a global narrative of increasing necessity for more environmentally sustainable solutions. Specifically so in the transport and automotive sectors. Second, inhabiting this novelty space as a(n intended) premium and global sport, Formula E serves as a platform for ES to gain more regular exposure. This helps to overcome ES's inherent problem of limited newsworthiness and suggests ES and Formula E share a symbiotic relationship that positively influences the newsworthiness of both actors.

Second, the 'Potential Threat to Formula One' and the '(Promoting the) EV Revolution' frame hail the adoption of ES as part of motorsport. The frames assist in reinforcing Formula E's adoption of ES rather than scrutinizing the series for the lack of it (Cox & Pezzullo, 2015). The '(Promoting the) EV Revolution' frame specifically hints at the advantages of the series and functions as an acknowledgement of driving technology to benefit future societies.

As Turner and Pearson (2008) have indicated, this is a necessary requirement for motorsport to be at the cutting edge of automotive engineering.

At the other side of the spectrum, the 'EV Image Problems' frame indicates that Formula E (the 'Child's Play' frame) and specifically ES in Formula E (the 'Green Farce' frame) are subject to significant criticism. Inherent to Formula E's marketing strategy, ES is largely aimed at enabling city

audiences to learn about developments and benefits of electric cars and subsequently about wider electric mobility through motorsport (Chauhan, 2015; Robeers, 2018). However, in particular the ‘Green Farce’ frame voices a smaller, alternative view on motorsport’s negative impact on rather delicate ecosystems (Hassan, 2011) and urban societies. Much like Hassan and O’Kane (2011) noted in their study on the Paris Dakar Rally, ES seems to be identified as a smokescreen. In doing so, the blame attributed by the frame is aimed directly at Formula E’s individual urban racing events. Therefore, it deviates from Pfahl and Bates’s (2008) findings regarding the ‘farcical’ 2005 United States Formula 1 Grand Prix whereby it was unclear which actors were to blame for the crisis. Further, such direct dismissal of Formula E’s technological and ES adequacy to offset its impact serves as an indication that some newspapers do scrutinize and pressure motorsport to rethink its ‘sustainable’ approach (Trendafilova et al., 2013). To a certain extent this even indicates that printed media express doubts as to the ability of Formula E and motorsport as a whole to credibly manage itself as sustainable (Dingle, 2009; Miller, 2016).

Third, the promotion and marketing of EV’s through EV racing are both indicative of capitalism (Carvalho, 2005). Still these did not generate much (negative) reaction in newspaper articles. This could imply articles either do not pick up on this or, more likely, implicitly deem such commercialization a prerequisite to EV’s success. The study by Robeers (2018) on Formula E’s organizational identity indeed identified this to already be the case on Formula E’s website. More so, it revealed concepts inherent to the process of commercialization such as commercial advertising and celebrities contributed to the commodification of ES in Formula E (Robeers, 2018). Further, it can be said that, by effectively endorsing the promotion of EV’s as consumer products, newspaper articles significantly contribute and further the commodification of ES initiated by Formula E itself.

Fourth, it is worth considering the differences in news reporting on Formula E between the UK and Flemish press. While Flemish articles focused rather exclusively on results and race reports, UK articles added greater technological and businesslike emphasis. Moreover, ES features much more in the UK than the Flemish press coverage. This might be explained by looking at wider regional differences. First, the UK has a cultural and historical association with motorsport dating back to the early 1900’s (Ameye et al., 2011). Second, the UK is considered to have the largest motorsport industry in the world (House of Commons Business, Innovation and Skill Committee, 2010). Flanders shares a similar historical interest during the first half of the 20th century (Ameye et al., 2011). Yet, this trend did not extend into the 21st century. Neither does it house a technological/engineering industry as does the UK. Although these reasons may not be exclusive, these differences do at least partially seem to result from each region making sense of Formula E and ES through a national (i.e. regional) media lens (Boyle and Monteiro, 2005).

Conclusion

As the first of its kind, this study looked specifically at how newspapers from the UK and Flanders integrate and represent ES in Formula E during a period in which ES has reached unseen levels of global acknowledgement and action, both public and political in nature. The aim of this study was to add to existing work on the representation of ES in motorsport (e.g. see Dingle, 2009; Robeers, 2018; Robeers, 2019) by gaining a deeper insight into the media's appraisal of Formula E's ES efforts. By combining results from a quantitative content analysis and a qualitative framing analysis it was possible to provide a clearer picture of the function and importance that ES holds in newspaper reporting on Formula E. This revealed that both Formula E and its relationship to ES have received attention in the British and Flemish press, be it in different ways.

This study's findings and implications hold specific value for the fields of motorsport management and communication. Although more research is needed on other series, a sustained communication of ES in motorsport by news might incite adjustment of motorsport's more traditional marketing strategies accordingly. As advancements in EV and sustainable technologies continue, such adjustments could not only contribute to reducing criticisms of ES in motorsport but also in providing motorsport with greater relevance. That said, the author acknowledges the limitations in terms of generalization and exclusiveness of this particular case study, which was restricted to the UK and Flanders. Considering the limited availability of articles in Flanders, future research would benefit from not only expanding the scope of reference to integrate more regions and countries in Europe and beyond, but also further monitor the progress of media reporting on ES (efforts) in Formula E and other forms of (electric) motorsport. Despite its shortcomings, the author believes this study's findings raises relevant empirical insights that allow to further the understanding of concepts such as (the commodification of) ES in (motor)sport and contributes to an area of increasing academic interest.

Limitations

The author acknowledges some limitations inherent to this study and its findings. Most importantly, the sample size of Flemish newspapers remained limited due to a significant lack of Flemish coverage. Additionally, the exclusive focus on newspapers does not allow for the generalization as relevant media exposure by other UK and Flemish media on Formula E and ES could differ.

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