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## Abstract

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# What is Sports Journalism? How COVID-19 Accelerated a Redefining of U.S. Sports Reporting

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## ABSTRACT

The coronavirus pandemic placed sports journalism in a vulnerable state, which necessitated a reconsideration of what it means to conduct sports journalism. Through the theoretical framework of metajournalistic discourse, the present study reports on a two-step discourse analysis of metajournalism on U.S. sports journalism ( $n = 166$ ) published during the coronavirus pandemic. We argue that journalism vigorously defended the sports journalism subfield in the expectation that it would once again become newsrooms' economic engine. While historically denigrated as the "toy department," sports journalism here reflected on this designation in a positive light: after all, aren't toys what bring people together? Even without live sports, sports journalism was still perceived as a specialty emphasizing social cohesion.

## KEYWORDS

metajournalistic discourse; sports journalism; COVID-19; definition making; discourse analysis; lifestyle journalism

## Introduction

In the midst of the first global lockdown following the coronavirus pandemic, a long-standing sport YouTube channel out of the Netherlands began trending, eventually garnering nearly 2 million subscribers by April 2020. In the "Marbula One" race at Savage Speedway, animated graphics fly by, modeled after those used for reporting during the EuroCup and U.S. National Football League and then, in horse race announcing: "In their hearts, true competitors want nothing more than to do battle on the world's biggest stage and in the pantheon of marble racing, there's nothing bigger than this" (Jelle's Marble Runs 2020). As the marbles race through Savage Speedway, the announcer followed their progress with names such as "galactic" and "savage speeder." and charting their progress with statements such as "Aaaand galactic is now in third! The savage speeders will have to deal with the green ducks behind them." Similarly, in March 2020, United States sports cable channel ESPN famously aired a rock skipping competition.

All of this begs the question: what exactly is a *sport*?

This was a question taken up by journalists as well and is material within the subfield of sports journalism in order to determine the specialty's place within the field as well as the bounds of its coverage. A field here is conceptualized as a social setting in which agents

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are constantly competing for various forms of capital conferring on them different degrees of relative power. Therefore, fields are characterized by a constant struggle over positioning allowing those in more powerful positions to define what constitutes the field, who belongs to it, and which rules are taken for granted (Bourdieu 1996; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). In the present study, we examine a corpus of metajournalistic discourse ( $n = 166$ ) from the U.S. trade press as journalists undertook definition making of the sports journalism field during the coronavirus pandemic. Prior research indicates that times of crisis are ripe times for an institution to reassess the flow of power as well as who holds power. During the pandemic, the need for such reshaping seemed particularly urgent for the institution of sports journalism. The temporary suspension of all sporting competitions, absence of press conferences and impossibility of direct contact with athletes and coaches turned all established routines of sports journalism upside down (Bradshaw 2020). But while such disruption may seem unimaginably challenging at first glance, it is also accompanied by opportunities: when sports journalism suddenly lost its usual content, it was forced to reinvent itself. There is reason to believe that such reinvention was due anyway: disregarded as the “toy department” of journalism and hit particularly hard by the emergence of new digital competitors (English 2021), sports journalism had begun to increasingly reflect on its importance as a subfield of journalism before the outbreak of COVID-19 (Perreault and Bell 2022; Reinardy and Wanta 2015; Schmidt 2018). Prior to the pandemic, research has noted a movement toward professionalization and legitimization of sports journalism, evidenced by an increasing formalization of sports journalism education (Weedon and Wilson 2020), a diversification in sports coverage particularly due to a feminization of sports desks (Lauccella et al. 2017; Schoch 2020; Schoch and Ohl 2021), and a greater reflection on sport’s relation to social issues beyond results and events (Boyle 2006). It appears that the pandemic accelerated such a reshaping, potentially leading to a strengthened position of sport journalism’s role in newsrooms (Sadri et al. 2021). The crisis, therefore, provides an ideal opportunity to look not only at how exactly sports journalism has coped with the challenges and covered sports when no sports occur, but also at how it is perceived, valued and (re)defined through wider journalism in times of disruption. Consequently, this study reflects the definition making of sports journalism at the field’s most vulnerable (Perreault and Perreault 2021), making it an ideal time in which such definition making would naturally occur. Investigating the discursive construction of sports journalism in the crisis ultimately reflects what sports journalism is and should be, including the questions: Is marble racing a sport? Is rock skipping? And if they are, aren’t sports journalists normatively required to cover them?

### **Theoretical Framework: Metajournalistic Discourse**

The theoretical framework of metajournalistic discourse, simply put, is journalists talking about journalism and reflects a “site in which actors publicly engage in processes of establishing definitions, setting boundaries, and rendering judgments about journalism’s legitimacy” (Carlson 2016, 350). In this theoretical tradition, metajournalistic discourse research elaborates on the “utterances about journalism that shape news practices” and connects the “creation and circulation of journalism’s sociocultural meanings to the social practices surrounding news production and consumption” (Carlson 2016, 350). Primarily,



metajournalism is aimed toward those within the field, in other words, aimed at spurring conversations among fellow journalists; however, some of this discourse is outward-facing—reflecting journalists’ awareness of the interests of those outside the field (Vos 2016). Fields reflect the placement of social actors and are characterized by various tensions between themselves and among actors within them (Vos 2016). They are commonly inhabited by *incumbents* who hold a dominant place within the field and, at times, by *insurgents* who seek to reshape the field as they take more responsibility and authority within it (Tandoc and Jenkins 2017). Metajournalistic discourse, as the institutional conversation within a field, provides a vehicle to manifest or ease such tensions (Perreault, Perreault, and Maares 2022). Journalism, as an institution, tends to be relatively resistant to changes in norms (Vos, Craft, and Ashley 2012); hence, it is through such metadiscourse that journalism manages difficult adaptations.

Carlson’s (2016) metajournalistic discourse presents a discursive grounding for three interrelated theoretical elements: paradigm repair, journalists as interpretive communities, and boundary work. In the first element, paradigm repair is “the notion that when journalists perceive an event or situation as undermining journalists’ or news organizations’ credibility and authority they will go to great efforts to restore their image” (Steiner et al. 2013, 705–706). In the second element of metajournalistic discourse represented here—journalists as interpretive communities—Zelizer (1993) conceptualizes communities of journalists who discursively maintain, negotiate, and articulate the values of their craft. Finally, boundary work describes the work journalists do to discern appropriate practices from inappropriate practices, valid sources from invalid sources. This element of metajournalistic discourse emphasizes that actors in a profession continually establish and reestablish the “boundaries of acceptable practices through their interpretive labor” (Carlson 2015, 360).

This theoretical description in other words reflects the discursive construction undertaken in journalism about journalism itself. Such interpretive work is vital to the field in that metajournalistic discourse “stabilizes the field by norming shared experiences and perspectives within the field as a way to revisiting the normative expectations” of the profession (Perreault, Perreault, and Maares 2022, 379) and this is done through diagnosing problems (Johnson, Bent, and Dade 2020), labeling transgressive actors (Kananovich and Perreault 2021), and delineating the boundaries of the field (Perreault and Vos 2020; Vos and Perreault 2020).

A central concept to metajournalistic discourse is that “discourses morph and change” responsive to new situations and hence, manifesting new understandings within the field of the work being conducted (Carlson 2016, 353). Such adaptability allows the field to be responsive to change in an institutional terrain constructed on journalistic rules, principles and norms (Ferrucci and Vos 2017; Perreault and Ferrucci 2020). Metajournalistic discourse represents a valuable part of the overall ecosystem that reflects the definition making of a subfield such as *sports journalism* but it is worth noting a constraint of the framework: it does not reflect audience perceptions and expectations that have been shown to be at times at odds with journalists’ professional norms (Banjac 2022; Loosen, Reimer, and Hölzig 2020; Truyens and Picone 2021; Van der Wurff and Schönbach 2014a, 2014b). In other words, while numerous actors collaborate in the discussion of the ecosystem of definition making (Bélair-Gagnon and Holton 2018; Cheruiyot and

Ferrer-Conill 2018), metajournalistic discourse reflects the valuable, if singular, emphasis on reflecting the definition making conducted through the institution.

Such discourse is particularly essential during times of crisis, such as the coronavirus pandemic, given that it is such an important moment for an institution to assert professionalism and improve legitimacy in journalistic practice through normalizing practices (Carlson and Lewis 2015). This is done in particular through definition making. Definition making is a crucial arena of metajournalistic discourse where the placement of actors within the field would naturally be determined (Perreault and Vos 2020). During a crisis this definition making can occur in part because editorial policies become more lenient; hence, conversations that normally cannot occur are able to take place (Carlson 2016; Perreault, Perreault, and Maares 2022; Schudson 1982; Strauß 2022). Furthermore, research on metajournalism during coronavirus has reflected that coronavirus operated as a sort of accelerant—exacerbating long-standing vulnerabilities within journalism and by extension adding urgency to core discussions about the nature of the field (Perreault, Perreault, and Maares 2022). However, in the pandemic, there is no benefit of hindsight given that there is no precedent for a crisis such as the coronavirus pandemic. Hence, studying metajournalism on the definition making of sports journalism—during a time when no sports were held (Ferrucci 2021)—provides an opportunity to not only understand how sports journalism is perceived within the field but also how sports journalism redefined and how journalists identified the legitimate work of sports journalism.

## Sports Journalism

Basically, sports journalism has long faced a double-edged, almost schizophrenic perception within the industry. On the one hand, it is disregarded as a “toy department” staffed by “fans with typewriters” (Boyle 2006) who are just pursuing their hobby and cheering on their heroes. On the other hand, it is valued as an economic engine in newsrooms (Boyle 2017; Perreault and Bell 2022; Waisbord 2019), enabling news organizations to also report on topics that have less audience appeal but are perceived as more serious and relevant.

Both assessments clearly point to a special role of sports journalism in newsrooms. At first glance, this special role is not at all self-evident. Sports journalism, like other journalistic beats, can be considered a subfield within journalism that covers events and affairs from a specific area of society; in this case, the realm of sports. In that sense, it fulfills the function of broader journalism (Steen 2021) and perhaps extends beyond it by reflecting a key aspect of sport: a value for social cohesion (Steensen 2011). However, the difference compared to journalistic beats dealing with harder news from areas such as politics or economic is mainly explained by the mutual interdependence between sports journalism and its reporting subject: thus, the relationship between media and sports has long been described as a “match made in heaven” (Goldlust 1987, 78) and as “symbiotic” (McChesney 1989, 49), in which both sides benefit from each other’s performances. In this regard, the economic prosperity of sports federations, sports clubs, and individual athletes depends on public visibility (Birkner and Nölleke 2016; Nölleke and Birkner 2019). For a long time, this visibility could be guaranteed exclusively by sports journalism—and even in digital media landscapes, where this reliance has certainly decreased due to clubs and athletes maintaining their own media channels (English 2021; Evans 2021), sports journalism still ensures large reach and thus contributes to visibility and prosperity.

Journalism, in turn, benefits from the popularity of sport. Because of the immense audience appeal of professional elite sports, sports journalism has long been one of the most commercially important branches for media organizations (Boyle 2017). Moreover, it has proven to be a pioneer in exploring digital innovations experimenting with digital storytelling, data visualization, market structure, and the building of virtual communities and thus driving digitalization in wider newsrooms (Boyle 2017; Ferrucci and Perreault 2022; Morrison 2014). However, neither its economic power nor its status as a digital innovator has strengthened the normative status of sport journalism in the journalistic field. Instead, it has long been discredited within the industry (McEnnis 2020) as the “toy department” dedicated “to fun and frivolity, rather than to the serious function of the fourth estate” (Rowe 2007, 385)—a common critique of lifestyle specialties that has had wellbeing repercussions for journalists who attempt to dispell this perception (Perreault and Bélair-Gagnon 2022). In Bourdieusian terms, sports journalism undoubtedly reflects economic capital but often lacks cultural capital (English 2016). From the perspective of the sociology of professions (Abbott 1988), such a poor reputation poses a serious threat, as it calls into question a profession’s special function for society and thus puts exclusive rights and, consequently, social as well as economic rewards at risk. Claiming such jurisdiction is particularly challenging in the journalistic field as it lacks objective characteristics (such as credentials and licenses) indicating cultural authority within society. In sports journalism, the situation is even more difficult. While journalism, in general, signals its authority largely by referring to the norm of objectivity, sports journalism is often denied to contribute to that norm. Employing the “toy department” label, the journalistic field itself tends to dismiss sports journalists accusing them of undermining the professional standards of news colleagues (McEnnis 2020).

As McEnnis (2020) argues this label refers to sports journalists being criticized for normative, cognitive, and evaluative failure that manifest in a lack of objectivity, journalistic competence, and professional distance (Boyle et al. 2009). While previous studies have shown that sports journalists themselves reject this accusation by far (English 2017), most empirical evidence indeed suggests that sports journalism does not exhibit the rigor of other journalistic beats and that its dubious reputation is well-deserved (Oates and Pauly 2007). Only in exceptional cases do sport journalists engage in investigative work (Weedon et al. 2018)—instead, sports media content tends to focus on anticipating, describing and reflecting on sporting events, widely neglecting critical issues beyond daily sport such as doping, discrimination, match fixing, corruption, and sports politics (cf. English 2017; Horkey and Nieland 2013; Rowe 2007). Although sports journalists increasingly invoke objectivity to assert their professional superiority, research has revealed a rather narrow understanding of the concept that does not extend beyond the claim that sports journalists should not to take sides when covering games (Weedon and Wilson 2020). The doxa of sports journalism focusing on results and events is reinforced by the dominant role of male journalists who understand building on expertise and passion for sport as the proper way to cover sports (Schoch and Ohl 2021). The focus on sporting events is accompanied by a narrow range of sources—mainly (celebrity) athletes and coaches. Previous research has also found that sports journalism focuses on very few mainstream disciplines, marginalizes female athletes (Rojas-Torrijos and Ramon 2021) and religious athletes (Ferrucci and Perreault 2018), and largely excludes coverage of athletes with disabilities and leisure sports (Rojas-Torrijos



and Ramon 2021; Perreault and Perreault 2021). This reference to poor journalistic practices, which is prevalent in scholarly discourse (Schoch and Ohl 2021), does not, of course, do full justice to the diversity and recent developments in sports journalism: Different models of sports journalism co-exist—including serious reporting with investigative forms and long-reads on off-pitch issues (Tulloch and Ramon 2017). Research has also identified an improvement in the training of sports journalists who are acquiring skills and ethical orientations similar to those of their counterparts in other departments. In this context, the arrival of female sports reporters in male-dominated newsrooms (Franks and O'Neill 2016; Schoch 2020; Schoch and Ohl 2021) is particularly noteworthy. Research has found that women take a different approach to sports journalism than their male colleagues, focusing on softer stories and showing a preference for a narrative or scientific style (Schoch 2020). However, even when women sports journalists offer new angles to sports coverage, they appear to be largely restricted to human interest stories and do not necessarily contribute to more critical reporting (Schoch and Ohl 2021).

While research suggests that sports journalists do indeed suffer from their poor reputation in newsrooms (Salwen and Garrison 1998; Schoch and Ohl 2021), low prestige has been bearable in that they were assured of their economic importance to media organizations (Waisbord 2019). In digital media landscapes, however, this certainty no longer exists. The emergence of digital and social media has turned sports journalism's playing field upside down, challenging its jurisdictional control over its distinctiveness (McEnnis 2020) and subsequently leading to massive changes in the attitudes of the profession (Moritz and Mirer 2021). Other forms of sport-related media content, such as team and player media (English 2021; Hutchins and Rowe 2012; Perreault and Bell 2022) as well as enthusiast bloggers (McEnnis 2017), have entered the playing field and challenged the superior importance and legitimacy of professional sports journalism (Suggs 2016). Journalism has become interchangeable or even inferior when it comes to providing exclusive insights into teams and athletes or behind-the-scenes views (Evans 2021). What is more, audiences are no longer dependent on professional media coverage to learn about match results. It seems, then, that the usual uncritical approach and event-driven focus are no longer sufficient to distinguish sports journalism from other offerings that question its survival. In digital media environments, the boundaries to other actors in sports communication have become blurred (English 2021) and sports journalists are consequently forced to (re-)establish their professional legitimacy (Suggs 2016) and to convince the public of their occupational distinctiveness and added value (Haynes 2019; McEnnis 2020). Hence, they engage in boundary work which is basically about "how journalism comes to be demarcated from non-journalism" (Carlson 2015, 2). By excluding or including others, boundary work strives to retain the definitional power over what can legitimately be considered journalism. And being considered legitimate is crucial in order to receive material rewards such as "access to news sources, audiences, funding, legal rights, and other institutionalized perquisites" (Carlson 2015, 2). Carlson (2015) distinguishes three strategies of boundary work: *expansion*, which relates to the incorporation of new actors and practices; *expulsion*, which involves expelling deviant actors and practices; and *protection of autonomy*, which refers to defending the core of journalism against outsiders. In line with the argument that these strategies are by no means mutually exclusive, sports journalism has been shown to employ various forms of boundary work. For example, it has incorporated new practices such as tweeting (Oelrichs 2020)

and new media such as live blogs (McEnnis 2016). Sports editors have also increasingly started to recruit female reporters who they expect to develop new approaches to sports journalism that appeal to new audiences (Schoch 2020). As such approaches rely more on mainstream journalistic capital (as compared to male journalists who base their coverage on sport capital) and therefore promise greater recognition among non-sports colleagues (Schoch and Ohl 2021), they can also be considered a means of protecting autonomy from new entrants such as in-house media or non-professional bloggers. In a similar vein, McEnnis (2020) has also noted that sports journalists increasingly tend to refer to traditional norms, values and practices to protect their autonomy against emerging actors, even against online journalists in their own news organizations. Similarly, English (2021) found that sports journalism approaches sports issues more critically than in-house publications of sport organizations, thereby reinforcing the boundaries between journalism and PR. Regardless of the actual strategy, however, sports journalists seem to have become aware that they must somehow act to preserve their professional legitimacy (Suggs 2016). However, implementing new strategies is particularly difficult in the day-to-day business of numerous sporting events, on which sports journalism has traditionally focused. Therefore, the pandemic can even be seen as a welcome standstill that allowed—and even forced—sports journalism to engage in a (re-)definition of its professional identity, accelerating the already simmering processes.

When NBA player Rudy Gobert of the Utah Jazz tested positive on 11 March 2020, COVID-19 reached the world of competitive media sports and disrupted the global sport/media nexus (Symons et al. 2021) causing enormous uncertainty and hardship for sports journalists. When sporting events and leagues were canceled, when direct contact with sources became impossible, when fans were still absent from venues even after competitions had resumed, when virtually “all the toys [were] taken away and locked up for an indefinite period” (Bradshaw 2020, 3), the only certainty for sports journalism was that it was impossible to stick to business as usual. And indeed, previous research suggests that sports journalists rose to the challenge and engaged in a reshaping for sports journalism during the pandemic. They employed creative approaches to cover sports when no sports were taking place (Schallhorn and Kunert 2020) and in capturing emotional resonance of sport without fans in the stands (Majumdar and Naha 2020). They also discovered new and innovative stories about off-field matters (Bradshaw 2020). Sadri et al. (2021, 16) conclude that during the COVID-19 pandemic, “serious reporting was clearly pushed to the forefront” in sports journalism. There is also some evidence that COVID-19 may have contributed to greater gender diversity in sports journalism (Parry et al. 2021). However, findings are mixed in this regard with Symons et al. (2021) instead concluding that in the absence of live sport, journalism reverted to routine practices and continued to exclude women in sport stories.

This inevitably leads to the question of the extent to which COVID-19 has contributed to a substantial transformation of sports journalism. Are creative approaches, innovative forms of storytelling, and sports coverage that goes beyond day-to-day events limited to times of crisis and some facets of sports coverage, and only possible for a few media organizations that can afford it? Does the crisis actually contribute to a longer-term (re-)definition of sports journalism as a whole? And how groundbreaking—if at all—are these changes perceived to be across the wider journalistic field? As outlined above, definition making in journalism is a crucial area of metajournalistic



discourse. Hence, we refer to metajournalism to answer the following research questions:

**RQ 1:** How do U.S. journalists discursively construct sports journalism?

**RQ 2:** How do U.S. journalists discursively construct the constraints and opportunities of sports journalism?

## Method

Given that the framework of metajournalism considers journalism as a discursive institution, it is fitting to examine it through the lens of discourse. Discourse analysis examines texts as a “a site of struggle over meaning” through a sort of discursive “negotiation” (Fürsich 2009, 244), which would naturally occur in institutional discussion of the pandemic. Discourse analysis examines that language within its “institutional context” (Fairclough 1995, 11) and pays particular attention to language and how it is used (Candlin 1997). In short, the journalistic field undertakes a sort of collective meaning-making over time through discourse. Time is a relevant component to consider for discourse given that the sequence of texts can “explain the implications of previous discursive positions on subsequent ones” (Carvalho 2008, 163).

The metajournalistic discourse data ( $n = 166$ ) was collected from the U.S. journalism trade press using the Discourses of Journalism database at the University of Missouri. While this database is explicitly focused on the US, it has proven useful for reflecting trends with global implications for the journalistic field (see Vos and Ferrucci 2019; Vos and Thomas 2018, 2019). Articles were initially identified with the keyword searches for *sport* and *sports*, published from March 2020 to August 2021, and specifically reflected journalistic discussions of the sports journalism subfield. This was done through a two-step theoretical sampling procedure (Draucker et al. 2007) which started with the indicated selective sample and analysis of the sample, followed by a secondary analysis of the 13 distinct pieces that reflect most distinctively the “evolving theoretical constructs” (Schwandt 2001, 111). In theoretical sampling, researchers begin with the selective sample and then must determine the data drawn from the sources “most likely to provide empirical indicators needed for category development” (Draucker et al. 2007, 1138). The U.S. trade press database was developed using a web scraper to archive and download articles from 21 sites where journalists discuss journalism. The webscraper includes *Columbia Journalism Review*, *American Journalism Review*, FAIR, *Buzzmachine*, American Society of Media Photographers, *Media Post*, *Folio Mag*, *NiemanLab*, *Media Shift*, *Editor & Publisher*, *Ad Age*, Ryan Sholin, Broadcasting Cable, Poynter, RJI Online, *NiemanLab*, *Online Journalism Review*, *Columbia Journalism Review*, *WAN IFRA*, *Jim Rome-nesko*, and *Press Think*. In the first step, less relevant results (e.g., articles in which sports was a footnote as opposed to the dominant topic), were eliminated from an initial 212 results. This data resulted in a corpus of metajournalism ( $n = 166$ ) identified through the selective sampling process described above. Through a series of research meetings, the authors discussed the themes for differences and congruences and from the overall sample distilled the larger corpus to 13 distinct texts for the second stage of theoretical analysis (Draucker et al. 2007, 1138; see Appendix). Inductive analysis involved reading through the discourse, maintaining awareness of temporal context as

the pandemic developed, and as sports were able to restart during the pandemic. The coauthors each analyzed the discourse and compared themes, returning to the texts to see if themes in one part of the discourse—or in one trade publication—were apparent throughout. The authors then returned to the data to apply the themes and to ensure they best reflect the data across contexts. For the purposes of clarity, the 13 texts featured for the second stage of theoretical analysis are included in a table in the Appendix.

## Findings

In regards to RQ 1, we explored how U.S. journalists discursively constructed sports journalism. This definition making of sports journalism could not have occurred at a more vulnerable time, in that the coronavirus pandemic laid bare the vulnerabilities of the journalistic field and which would be a natural time for the journalistic field to undertake a redefinition or an affirmation of a subfield's place within the field (Finneman, Mari, and Thomas 2021; Perreault, Perreault, and Maares 2022). Here journalists reflected on the essence of sports journalism—perhaps never more exposed than when there are no sports to play (Ferrucci 2021)—and argue that sports journalism is community-building and the market driver of the field. At its best, sports journalism knits a community together given that it naturally reflects the topic of the subfield: *sports*. In other words, this sample often conceptualized sports journalism, naturally, in relation to sport. For example, Treffiletti (2021) notes in a piece on news coverage of the Olympics: “the Olympics are a way of uniting the world through sport, but they can also unite people through the stories behind the sport” (para 8).

As an audience-oriented form of journalism, it would naturally follow that journalism would seek to be where the audience is—reflected in the roles metajournalistic discourse provided for sports reporting, namely to “to reach people on an unmatched scale—not just to entertain, but also to inform and motivate action” (Stainer 2020, para. 16). As Stainer (2020) argues, through sports journalism

We witnessed team owners, coaches and players come together to help and sacrifice for their communities. New Orleans Saints quarterback Drew Brees committed to give \$5 million to his adopted state of Louisiana, which has been especially hard hit by COVID-19. (Stainer 2020, para. 13)

Indeed, it was in coverage of these stories that sports journalists sought to best fill “an empty void absent competition that naturally provides entertainment and inspiration that is impossible to replicate” (Stainer 2020, para. 12). Naturally, actual sports coverage was sparse, so from the perspective of the field, sports journalists were at their best in reporting all of the community-building activity surrounding sports that is not—essentially—about sports. This tasked sports journalists with the duty to inspire others to, like sports, work together “on one global team, to fight one momentous fight” (Stainer 2020, para. 25).

Such community building activities included coverage of the NFL's Drew Brees work for Louisiana, contributions from NBA players Giannis Antetokounmpo, Kevin Love, and the Golden State Warriors to pay the salaries of arena workers in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and San Francisco (Stainer 2020), and the NBA setting up its arenas to increase voting availability in many cities (Hickey 2020).

The discussion of sports, in its absence, was largely utopian in tone, reflecting that sports journalism had the opportunity to remind people of “the simple pleasures of sitting outdoors, soaking in the sun, absorbing the smells and sounds around us” and help people reflect on the “joy to be alive” (Elvove 2020, para. 4). Reporters, who do this well, were similarly praised e.g., “listening to Marv Albert call basketball games has long been something special” (Buckman 2021, para. 10).

In fact, community-building was even the theme for a sport-specific publication, *In Pickelball*, that launched during the pandemic. In reporting on the development of the sports magazine, journalists argued that “Coming out of this pandemic, people crave a sense of community and escape ... Pickleball is an inclusive community that welcomes anyone who wants to experience the joy of playing” (Schultz 2021) Here again, journalists made an implicit tie between the community-building nature of the sport and the *raison d’être* for sports journalism itself.

In addition, this sample reflected sports journalism as an economic driver in newsrooms. This is conversant with prior findings that the financial power of sports—financial power that sports journalists have proven able to leverage—are valuable to local newsrooms and the field as a way in which to drive the newsroom’s engine (Waisbord 2019). After discussing the challenges in local sports coverage, Hantschel notes in reference to local newspapers as a whole “you have to provide something of value to your customers” (Elvove 2020)—this a mindset obviously rooted in the need for a market-oriented rationale for sports (see Perreault and Bell 2022). In fact, much of the data identified in the present sample wasn’t specifically about sports journalism per se but it was nevertheless considered in relation to a loss of revenue. In Friedman’s (2020) article about declining funding for NBCUniversal, the author notes “NBC’s cable networks experienced a rare decline in distribution revenue—down 3.8% (to \$1.6 billion)—largely due to the loss of games and subscribers for its regional sports networks in the period as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic” (para. 5). Similarly, Buckman (2020) argued that “Questions surrounding the health of the NFL as a television attraction, and its ability to retain its traditional mass audience, stem from those issues.” And in reporting on the Olympics, Buckman (2020) noted that for the Olympic opening ceremony “various news stories reported a 36% decline in opening-night viewership compared to the opening ceremonies at the outset of the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio De Janeiro” (para. 2). Journalists mirrored this to the comparative viewing of sports during the pandemic and prior to the pandemic, which was lower—journalists argued—because there were not fans in the stands (Friedman 2021).

Other market-oriented discussions emphasized the financial value of the athletes over teams: “it really is time to rethink your relationship with sports as a sponsor. I believe the best value in sports sponsorship is in direct commercial relationships with the athletes” (Albarda 2021).

In regards to RQ 2, the constraints and opportunities of U.S. sports journalism were discursively constructed in a joint manner: in reflection of the fact that covering sports was a bit like covering all other subfields rolled into one. However, that said—sports as the actual cultural artifact—tends to not be an overly adaptable activity.

If sports then reflects the result of a number of a fields collectively, it would make sense that this would result in both breadth of reporting but also a broad degree of



responsibility for coverage. As Hickey (2020) argues, “We can’t cover sports right now, or ever, as an individual and separate thing because sports are the gift we get for making our society as just and fair as possible” (para. 1).

People like things because of who they are holistically, right? You like the TV shows you like because they relate to you in some way. You like the books you like because of the books you read early on. The same thing is true for sports. We try to talk about it as just this separate, completely independent entity. You lose a lot of why people love the sport. It’s not just about coverage, it’s also about what people get out of it. (Lenz 2020)

What Lenz (2020) argues here is similarly reflected in Hickey (2020)—that it is nearly impossible to “stick to sports” in sports reporting because of how much the subfield brings together (Hickey 2020, para. 9).

This then requires sports journalists to provide the sports angle on a rather large—perhaps unwieldy—array of stories from other specialties. For example, in a piece of meta-discourse, journalists critiqued sports reporters for not conducting more thorough reporting on pandemic practices. Lenz (2020) lays the blame for the death of local newspapers on local news coverage and in that argument lays particular blame on local sports journalism for the lack of hard-hitting pandemic coverage:

Local sports coverage by and large does not talk about the pandemic. It does not talk about who’s wearing masks and social distancing. It does not talk about which high school kids have Covid. (Lenz 2020)

So, for example, sports reporting provides an opportunity to reflect on societal inequity. Treffeletti (2021) argued that during the pandemic, sports journalists had “shine[d] a light on the inequity between men and women in sports” (para. 2) such as the stories regarding how USA track and field star Allyson Felix was been threatened with less pay post-pregnancy and stories during the 2021 NCAA basketball tournament about the vast differences between men’s and women’s athletic facilities.

Yet sports as an actual cultural activity in many cases proved too difficult to adapt during the pandemic. Indeed, it’s hard to imagine a basketball or football game that could safely adhere to social distancing protocols (Buckman 2020). Newsrooms reflected on this from a technology standpoint in promoting the use of drones for sports games in that the “drone has the capability of weaving its way through parts of the arena we don’t usually get to see, providing behind-the-scenes views that go beyond the action on the field” (Woelfel 2020, para. 8). The reference to drones indicates how much sports journalism is perceived in the journalistic field as a testing ground for technological innovations. This suggests a certain degree of appreciation in the field as a whole, as sports journalism is here credited with pioneering work for wider journalism.

## Discussion

A year into the pandemic, and following the explosion of popularity for Marbula One Racing, Jelle’s announced that it was moving into the eSports market with “Jelle’s Marble Runs—The Game!” The trailer leaned into the absurdity of the marble racing, promising “ultra-realistic physics,” the ability to build your own marble team, and stats

for “marble athletes” (Fenlon 2021). Fenlon (2021) goes on to argue that “yes, marble racing is a real sport. Yes, it has athletes—are you going to tell me Minty Maniacs team captain Minty Flav isn’t a star out on the raceway?”

And while certainly enjoyed for both the irony and its novelty, it nevertheless poses a recent version of a long-time definitional concern of sports journalism—what is sports anyway? (Perreault and Perreault 2021). Clearly, it is a question with implications not just for what sports journalists cover but also for their placement within the field. In relation to the first research question, journalists discursively constructed sports journalism as community-building and as their field’s market driver. As a community-building force, journalists pointed toward the charitable work done through sports and by extension the positive “we’re all in this together”-natured stories that emerged even in the absence of the actual sport. This finding indicates that the broader journalistic field attributes to sport an invaluable role in integrating society at times of unprecedented crisis. In this sense, metajournalistic discourse emphasized sport as a phenomenon that has the potential to strengthen social cohesion (Spaaij 2013).

That metajournalistic discourse identified sport in this manner, does not—in isolation—reflect a novel perception on sport, which has long been conceptualized in this manner (Steensen 2011). However, it remains noteworthy that in the *absence* of sport, the importance for promoting social cohesion remained a responsibility for sports journalists. Accordingly, sports journalism is ascribed a normative role that contributes to a more general public good and conveys a sense of solidarity. Strikingly, we found that metajournalistic discourse seemed to acknowledge the importance of the “toys” covered by the so-called “toy department” and thus, attributed cultural capital to sports journalism even if it does not cover hard topics. So it seems that in times of crisis, reporting on entertaining issues with huge audience appeal is revalued by the journalistic field. This implies, consequently, that the “toy department” label loses some of the disdain that usually accompanies it (Boyle et al. 2009; McEnnis 2020). Simultaneously, journalists still constructed sports journalism as the economic driver of the field—consistent with prior understandings of the subfield (Waisbord 2019). This was done discursively through pointing to specific economic hardfalls within the field—the Olympics opening ceremonies, the reopening of sports seasons after the long hiatus—largely in quantitative terms to delineate the impact on the subfield. Metajournalistic discourse also emphasized the pioneering role of sports journalism as a driver of technological innovations in wider newsrooms, reaffirming discussions of sports journalism’s function for wider journalism (Morrison 2014).

In regards to the second research question, journalists discursively constructed the constraints and opportunities of sports journalism in a joint manner: the unadaptable nature of many sports. It is, after all, impossible to host a basketball match over Zoom. The fact that sports journalism requires reflection on so many different fields allows journalists to tap into stories that touch every aspect of life, yet this also means that—within the field—sports journalists are held responsible for effective coverage of those stories. This claim, which we identified in metajournalistic discourse, corresponds to current observations on the role of sports journalism. Accordingly, it is no longer sufficient for sports journalism in digital media landscapes to report uncritically and event-oriented—as it used to do for years (Horky and Nieland 2013; Rowe 2007). Cheerleading is now provided just as well—if not better—by in-house media (Evans 2021), calling the legitimacy of journalism into question (Suggs 2016). In order to distinguish itself from

alternative offerings and to (re-)claim journalistic authority (Carlson 2017), sports journalism is therefore called to change its focus. Here, one option is to recall its original role with taking on a more critical stance and, in doing so, revealing the multiple connections between sport and other social fields. As previous research has shown, the pandemic already seems to have triggered such more serious reporting (Sadri et al. 2021). In this way, sports reporting to some degree already meets the demand of the entire journalistic field which revealed itself in the metajournalistic discourse. Accordingly, the forced absence of sporting events has now made it more visible to journalists how strongly sport is connected to other critical issues in society. This observation leads to the claim that sports journalism should address precisely these relationships and thus somewhat detach itself from its event-oriented focus. In this way, metajournalistic discourse reiterated what has recently been much discussed in light of the new entrants to the field of sports communication (English 2021; McEnnis 2020; Suggs 2016); namely that sports journalism is called to refocus on the broader function of journalism and to establish a more critical approach to its subject (Steen 2021).

Despite the significant corpus of metadiscourse initially identified, much of the overall data was relatively similar in nature—reflecting distantly on the lower numbers of sports broadly with less engagement with sports journalism specifically. This convergence of views runs counter to the tensions that exist naturally within most fields, including journalism. Indeed, one would have expected more reflection the peripheral status of sports reporters within the field (English 2021), or perhaps the *incumbent* standing of hard news journalists (Tandoc and Jenkins 2017). It seems plausible that the extensive external pressure during the pandemic—pressure to serve the journalistic audience broadly and financial pressure reflected in cutbacks and newsroom closures (Finneman, Mari, and Thomas 2021)—forced journalists to discursively respond in an orchestrated manner.

Furthermore, and through the lens of metajournalistic discourse, this begins to make a bit more sense. If indeed, sports journalism is the economic driver of a newsroom as we found in RQ 1, it would make sense that journalism overall would be a bit protective of the subfield. The rest of the field—and perhaps to some degree the financial future of the field—depends on its recovery; hence the discrepancy between number-heavy, gloom-casting pieces on sports viewership and the utopian discourse on sports journalism. The decline of sports journalism is not, for journalists, a foregone conclusion. Indeed, journalism has proven to be a field resistant to change (Vos, Craft, and Ashley 2012) and so hence when faced with a catastrophic change to the sports journalism subfield it would make sense that the overall field would cling to the hope that sports journalism would return. Conversant with McEnnis (2016), when faced with change journalists were willing to adapt the subfield's ideology. In McEnnis (2016) live sports bloggers emphasized immediacy, objectivity, autonomy and public service—in the present study, and lacking the presence of many traditional sports games to report on, journalists discursively constructed sports journalism through a public service lens. The coronavirus pandemic would have seemed to have provided the field overall the chance to cement the “toy” department status of sports journalism or even to expel it from the field (Boyle 2006). But rather what we find is more akin to a metadiscursive *protection of autonomy* (Carlson 2016) given that the change within the field afforded sports journalists a chance—in some ways—to strengthen existing boundaries (English 2021; Ferrucci 2021). Sports journalism was discursively protected because the field as a whole



depends on its survival (Perreault and Bell 2022; Waisbord 2019). This would seem to present a complicated picture of the metajournalistic discourse—on the one hand, journalists make use of the opportunity presented by the coronavirus crisis (Perreault and Perreault 2021) to reinvent their professional ideology and consider a broader definition of sport (e.g., marble racing, drone reporting for sport). It is worth noting that such discussion occurs outside of crises. On the other hand, the metajournalism would still seem to support traditional game-focused sports journalism, which holds community together and serves as an entertainment avenue. This reinforces the specific doxa of sports journalism that is somewhat different from the general journalism doxa (Schoch and Ohl 2021). As metajournalism research on the coronavirus reflected, the pandemic laid bare the vulnerabilities within the field (Perreault, Perreault, and Maeres 2022). As a result of these highlighted vulnerabilities—perhaps none more acute than the lack of in-person sports (Ferrucci 2021)—such definitional work was perhaps prioritized.

All studies have limitations and this study has several. First, in our two-step methodology the focused, theoretical sample reflected to some degree that much of the larger sample had less that spoke explicitly and empirically to our research questions. An alternative method could have been to take the second step to seek out new data to add to the existing metajournalistic corpus, but we feared this would make our sample unwieldy, given that it would have been gathered through multiple means. That said, expanding the second step through additional data may have shaped the direction of the argument in some ways. Future research should consider ways to broaden the view of sports journalism's redefinition, perhaps building on this present work through interviews or analysis of non-US contexts. Second, we know that definition making through metajournalistic discourse has limitations in reflecting a complete definition within a media ecosystem in that it doesn't account for audience perceptions and expectations, only those of producers. Finally, it is worth acknowledging that journalism in the US is not the same journalism as elsewhere (Thomson, Perreault, and Duffy 2018); and likewise, sport in the US is not like sport elsewhere. Hence, while our findings reflect processes that journalists undertook globally during the pandemic, it may be that the specific results reflected here are reflective of a US-based sample.

Sports journalism has long been denigrated through reference to "toys," however the present study would seem to reflect that this may be the precise value of sport. It is the talk of journalists, however, that helps facilitate social cohesion through the joys of sport.

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## Appendix

Title	Source	Author	Date
Athletes Make Us Rethink Sports Sponsorship	<i>Media Insider</i>	Albarda, M.	2021, July 9
Marveling at Marv Albert as he nears retirement	<i>Media Post</i>	Buckman, A	2021, July 1
At Olympics, Competitions out-rate the opening ceremonies	<i>Media Post</i>	Buckman, A.	2021a, July 28
Now it's NFL's turn to come back amid COVID-19 pandemic.	<i>Media Post</i>	Buckman, A.	2020, September 11
The Joy And Life-Affirming Beauty Of Baseball	<i>MediaPost</i>	Evolve, R.	2020, April 7
NBCU completes upfront, sees Q3 ad revenues decline	<i>Media Post</i>	Friedman, W.	2020, October 29
Defector's Kelsey McKinney on how 2020 destroyed the concept of "sticking to sports."	<i>NiemanLab</i>	Hickey, W.	2020, September 10
The real reason local newspapers are dying	<i>NiemanLab</i>	Lenz, L.	2020, December 14
New Magazine Serves Pickleball Enthusiasts	<i>Media Post</i>	Schultz, R.	2021, July 22
100 Days that changed the Game	<i>Media Post</i>	Stainer, J.	2020, April 15

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Title	Source	Author	Date
Olympic Light will shine brightly on inequities in sports.	<i>Media Post</i>	Treffiletti, C.	2021, June 30
Four reasons your newsroom needs an FPV drone.	<i>RJI Online</i>	Woelfel, S.	2021, May 6
Coronavirus Is a Reason to Worry About the Economy—the Stock Market Plunge Is Not	<i>FAIR</i>	Baker, D.	2020, March 9

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