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Sports Journalists as Agents of Change in Nordic Countries

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Abstract

Sports Journalists as Agents of Change: Shifting Political Goalposts in Nordic Countries identifies and describes changes prevalent in political narratives of sports journalism. Although tensions between professional autonomy and commercial influences in sports journalism persist, shifts in public expectations and increased interest in investigative journalism present new possibilities for sports journalists to reshape this field. The research in this thematic issue examines media content and considers how sports journalists reflect on their role, how gender issues are tied to, and addressed by, that role, and how critical sports journalism develops through engagement with relevant national and international sports journalist associations.

Keywords

critical analysis; critical reporting; gender; Nordic media; Nordic welfare model; sports journalism; sports journalist organisations

1. Introduction

Sport journalism is often criticised for being overtly emotional and hyperbolic. In the past, sports journalists have rarely addressed structural and processual powers in sports. This is partly due to the uniformity of content that is “a major element of contemporary sports journalism coverage in print and online” (English, 2014, p. 491), and partly due to how tightly integrated sports journalism is with the sports industry where journalists have colluded with sports organizations by routinely downplaying critical matters in their everyday conduct of covering sport (Rowe, 2017, p. 516). In-depth sports investigations have been more likely to appear in the form of documentaries or books (e.g., Jennings, 2015), particularly about drugs in sports or about corruption.

This thematic issue emphasises how political and economic interests increasingly shape sports institutions and industries, and how this necessitates a more socio-politically engaged journalism in the field. It introduces and analyses current trends and content in the Nordic media that open possibilities for more contextualized and critical sports coverage. We explore whether this coverage could create increased public debate and contribute to counteract the existence of power structures that suppress a needed democratisation of sports.

Our purpose is to elaborate on how sports journalism relates to, and narrates, socio-political issues considering the economical, structural, and professional limitations and possibilities that surround the profession. The focal point is the news media in the Nordic countries and the Nordic media system (as defined by Enli et al., 2018; Hornmoen & Steensen, 2021; Skogerbø et al., 2021; Syvertsen et al., 2014), since these have similarities in terms of media history, sports history, and sports policy. Recent heated debates about human rights, corruption, and harassment all illustrate that sports are deeply intertwined with issues of political and social change and development. Similarly, sports are used in image- and reputation-building by a variety of political figures and governments, a practice which may divert attention away from less desirable practices in governance (known as “sportswashing”).

Sports can therefore both challenge and be a driving force for societal change and political awareness. This is particularly prevalent in the Nordic welfare model, which supports national consciousness and responsibility to ensure equal access and participation in sports (Giulianotti et al., 2019), combined with a relatively high level of trust in media and innovative technological media usage (Skogerbø et al., 2021). We will argue that there has been a development within Nordic media towards a more critical and investigative take on sports journalism and consider how this resonates in a larger international context.

Through this collection of research and case studies, it may be argued that while there have been substantial efforts to transform the sports journalism field, existing norms and routines often make it difficult to introduce new formats to an audience used to a more celebratory or descriptive style of reporting. However, although the Nordic model is not always sustainable and not necessarily transferable to other political, economic, or cultural contexts, it has contributed to a more reflective and critical approach to sports journalism. Several of the articles in this thematic issue demonstrate that Nordic sports journalists are increasingly willing to engage as agents of change in issues of international significance.

2. Presentation of the Contributions in this Thematic Issue

Taking the FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) World Cup in Qatar as a point of departure, this thematic issue opens with an article by Kirsten Frandsen (2024) that analyses the changing role of national associations of sports journalists in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Through the introduction of the concept of meta-journalistic discourse and well-established media system theories, the author argues that Nordic sports journalism’s negotiations of professional practices and standards are shaped by a particular media systemic context with distinct Nordic welfare state-oriented features. This includes a tradition of using collective, organized social groups, like democratically based voluntary associations, as instruments for social change. The empirical study explores this through a qualitative thematic analysis of the evolving structures, identities, and practices of the national associations of sports journalists across the three countries.

Building on themes raised in the first article, Harald Hornmoen and Anders Graver Knudsen (2024) analyse how sports journalists covered the 2022 FIFA World Cup. In the media coverage of the build-up to this event, Danish and Norwegian sports journalism were at the forefront of raising awareness of problematic aspects of Qatar as a host nation due to several concerns and controversies regarding the country's human rights record. However, covering the Qatar World Cup while it unfolded created challenges for journalists when they attempted to report on an event in a wider political and cultural context. By drawing on critical discourse analysis, this article examines argumentation in sports commentaries during the World Cup event. The study finds that the commentaries reflect two distinct discursive clusters/phases. While the arguments in the first phase largely repeat critical attacks on FIFA and the organizer that were made in the build-up to the event, the commentaries in the second phase tend to argue for changes in the governance of mega-events in football.

Joakim Särkivuori and Antti Laine (2024) continue to analyse how sport is used for reputation building and soft power in the third article of the thematic issue. One of the major franchises in Finland's top division in men's ice hockey (Liiga), Jokerit Helsinki, sold its home arena and half of its shares to Finnish-Russian oligarchs in 2013. Jokerit also switched to the Russian-led Kontinental Hockey League (KHL) and competed there from 2014 to 2022. Russia's KHL project and its expansion to the West can be viewed as a form of soft power. This study delves into the journalistic coverage of Jokerit during two specific periods: its early days in the KHL and its later stages when exiting the league. These periods coincide with critical geopolitical events: Russia's annexation of Crimea (2014), Belarusian protests (2020–2021), and Russia's invasion of Ukraine (2022). The authors explore the critical socio-political coverage of Jokerit in *Helsingin Sanomat* during these periods and investigate whether the sports journalists recognized the broader geopolitical context of the KHL project and, if so, how this influenced their reporting.

The thematic issue then turns its focus to issues related to sports and gender. The next three articles consider how changes in political, social, and cultural norms have impacted sports journalism. Veera Ehrlén (2024) opens this section with an article that explores how Finnish sports media have played a key role in stimulating debate on gender equity and sexual harassment, as well as the structures and cultures that perpetuate it. This study considers the sports media's self-perception of the politicization of harassment. It is based on interviews with Finnish sports journalists who have been reporting on harassment cases in national and regional media. While the interviews highlight the changing face of sports journalism, and within it an ambition to move from entertainment and performance reporting to socio-politically critical journalism, the article also points out problematic contradictions that are embedded in sports media's ambition of addressing harassment in sports.

The Norwegian Act for Gender Equality (1978) created a strong emphasis on the importance of equal access to all cultural and welfare activities and services, including sports. In Norwegian media, there are often strong reactions to examples of discrimination based on gender, such as during the 2021 European Handball Beach Championship when the Norwegian women's beach handball team were fined for refusing to play in bikini bottoms. In November 2021, the sport's international federation agreed to allow women to compete in a similar uniform to men. Nathalie Hyde-Clarke and Birgitte Kjos Fonn (2024) analyse how the Norwegian media framed the issue for the three months between the tournament and the federation's decision (July to November 2021), thereby paving the way for broader public debate.

Aage Radmann and Anna Sätre (2024) then explore the experiences of female sports journalists in Sweden from a gender perspective. The theoretical framework is inspired by an understanding of (a) gender in a

binary system and (b) hegemonic masculinity. The study consists of 10 semi-structured interviews with the most prominent female sports journalists in Sweden. The sports journalists observe a change in the media industry, resulting in a better understanding of women's working conditions. Even so, the work is still grounded in a culture signified by hegemonic masculinity, where women need to find their own strategies to make a successful career, handle harassment, and cope with other gender challenges.

In the closing article of the edition, Alina Bernstein (2024) considers whether the Nordic model is globally relevant and if it may be applied to countries in other regions. Sports journalists can act as agents of change in society since they have a unique and powerful platform to influence public opinion. This is increasingly obvious when looking at the research generated throughout this thematic issue. However, what about countries such as Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, Spain, and Germany? Based on a review of academic writing, as well as interviews with media and sports scholars, this article assesses to what extent sports journalism may be professionalized and whether sports journalists are able to be, or even desire to be, agents of change.

In a commentary piece following the closing article, Toby Miller (2024)—professor of cultural studies and media studies and former editor of *The Journal of Sport & Social Issues*—highlights what he sees as key contributions of this thematic issue.

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