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THE WRITTEN PRESS
AND SOCIAL/NEW MEDIA
PERSPECTIVES

Raymond Boyle
UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW, SCOTLAND

Introduction

The chapter provides an overview of the role of the print and online media in covering sporting events. It examines the changing nature of this particular sporting stakeholder and identifies some of the pressures and challenges they present to event organisers. The broader research context of sports journalism is also explored as is the relationship between this section of journalism and other stakeholders including broadcasters. The chapter also addresses aspects of their particular journalistic needs and wants, as well as their responsibilities, and how to manage them. It argues that technological and institutional factors are driving change among these sports journalists and that while their influence may be altering they remain an important part of the media sports ecology in the digital age.

Overview of the stakeholder group

It used to be straightforward when discussing the print media and its relationship with sport. Defining this section of sports journalism was not something which detained any event organiser for too long. In the UK, the traditionally strong Sunday newspaper market did mean that the daily newspaper journalists and their Sunday counterparts required being treated slightly differently given their contrasting deadlines and particular readership needs, but traditionally, the print sports journalist occupied a powerful position within the broader media sports environment.

While that position has not completely disappeared, the fact is that, specifically at elite level sporting events, it is the needs and demands of television broadcasters that take precedence over their print colleagues. While television, as the financial underwriter of elite sports, has become an ever more important stakeholder, the print media sports journalist has also undergone substantial transformation. Elsewhere (Boyle 2006), I have commented on how technology, commercial pressure and a more market-driven media ecology have impacted on sports journalism and this has resulted in a stakeholder group that has become more multi-task driven. In the UK, the traditional sports print journalist has become a digital journalist, often providing sports content across a range of platforms, including print, online and mobile (Boyle 2006).
Deadlines remain crucial in this area of journalism, but have become more ubiquitous in the 24/7 ‘always on’ media age. Copy is uploaded, sometimes directly onto websites, while the growth of social media has shifted audience expectations and increased the pressure to communicate with that audience in real time. Thus ‘live blogging’ from sports events has become an established part of the media hinterland of major, and sometimes, not so major, sporting events in a manner that, as discussed later in the chapter, offers a range of challenges both for the frontline journalists as well as the event organisers.

One immediate challenge faced by any organiser of any sporting event is in the process of accrediting access to this sector of the journalistic community. As the journalism industry has been reshaped by increased competition and the emergence of new outlets for media content and sports news and journalism, so defining what was a once a relatively clear-cut sector of the media industries has become more complex. Newspaper journalists are still a core component of this stakeholder group (although most work across a range of media platforms as we discuss later); while journalists working for news agencies have long been part of this environment, again many are now posting online, rather than just for print editions. In addition, a plethora of journalists are supplying copy for online and mobile outlets, some directly associated with key sponsors, or host broadcasters, others as part of the emerging sports media ecology that Hutchins and Rowe (2012) call ‘networked media sport’.

It is the broader nature of what we now mean and understand journalism to be in this converged media environment, that offers not only a challenge to working journalists, but also those tasked with trying to meet and satisfy the myriad demands that can now accompany the profession. The sports journalist today is a multi-platform journalist. Put simply, the job has gotten more complex over the last decade as convergence between media forms has become more commonplace (Meikle and Young 2011). As Hutchins and Rowe (2012: 141) note:

[A freelance journalist may be] engaged in four different types of journalism each day; filing for a newspaper website; writing a blog for a sports website; speaking for a podcast and completing a regular story for another newspaper (which would also usually place it on its website).

A central point here is the extent to which this practice of producing unrelenting ‘content’ is now an established feature of journalism culture more widely in the converged and networked environment (Curran 2011), regardless of whether you are a staffer or freelance sports journalist. This demand to generate content also has an important economic and institutional driver, commercial budgets for journalism have been squeezed in recent years as the newspaper industry continually attempts to adapt to a digital era where monetising journalism can be a significant challenge for many organisations (Brock 2013). Paradoxically in an age when more and more people are calling themselves sports journalists, those who are working in the sector appear to be having to work differently than their previous generation as they are in constant contact with editors and generate content with a greater frequency (Boyle 2006: 138).

Despite the changes in the relationship between sports journalists and broadcasters at elite events, for example television broadcasters as the rights holder are often given priority over the print media in terms of access to players and managers, the print media remain important for a number of reasons. The American sportswriter Leonard Koppett documented the rise and fall of the press box in the US, as the sportswriters found their pitch being encroached upon, first by live radio, then television and more recently the world wide web (Koppett 2003). However while they have been usurped as the key cultural intermediaries in communicating the live event, they remain important agenda-setters in establishing the central narratives that shape how an event is
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set up and made sense of, not least by other media. In other words, the print media’s importance begins long before any actual sporting event. They frame and contextualise, they highlight an event’s key aspects, and they often directly or indirectly sell the event (or even disparage the event) to a wider public. They also discuss and make sense of the event, and highlight its significance and help establish its legacy when the live coverage is over.

As sportswriter Richard Williams (1998: 2) noted in his study of Formula 1 motor racing and its media coverage in the UK:

When television turned motor racing into mass entertainment, information became currency. Nowadays the course of a rumour is pursued as avidly as the story of the race. While television coverage provides the bare bones of the narrative structure the newspaper journalists, led by the representatives of the tabloids, add the flesh of characterization and motive. The screen will show you how one car overtook another, but the tabloids will add layers of dramatic meaning by telling you exactly how much the two drivers concerned hate each other because one of them stole the other’s girlfriend, or of even greater emotional impact, stole his seat in the best car in the field.

Williams highlights the ways in which differing media interact and feed off each other in a complex manner that has become even more intense and faster paced in the digital age of always on media and real-time social media comment.

The print media still play a key role in constructing discourses and narrative around political, cultural and sporting events. (Boyle and Haynes 2013, 2014). Often, once established, these discourses can become deeply embedded in broader perceptions of these events among the public and indeed become resistant to change (Wachs et al. 2012, Santos et al. 2013). In an age of many-to-many communication and despite the allure of always on technology, we are not all journalists now (Hudson and Temple 2010). Thus professional journalists are still able to gain public attention and give traction to stories that individual bloggers and social media users are not. This is not to say that the ‘citizen journalist’ or even user-generated content (UGC) is not important; increasingly they act as a primary source of information for other journalists and often highlight stories and provide access that would be hard for mainstream journalists to obtain (Tunney and Monaghan 2010). However, it is often only when these reports are picked up and amplified by more mainstream journalism that they gain wider public prominence. The social media ecology provides an important resource for journalists, but offering accurate insight, considered criticism and compelling communication skills all remain at the core of journalistic ability and craft and mark the gap between providing content (UGC) and providing understanding and knowledge (journalism) (Kian and Zimmerman 2012, Wachs et al. 2012, Boyle and Haynes 2013, Deprez et al., 2013).

Research and case study examples

Wayne Wanta (2013: 78) in his review of journalism and sport argued that: ‘One of the most serious problems hampering the development of sports journalism research is the lack of a specific theoretical framework’. He notes how a range of theories from across communications have attached themselves at differing moments to engagements with sports journalism. These have, over the years included aspects of media effects and agenda setting and framing. Yet part of the problem remains that sports journalism remains largely under researched; and that while a recent cluster of work has begun to address this (Andrews 2005, Boyle 2006, Steen 2008, Toney 2013), much of the research, such as the recent work by Toney, remains very much practice orientated, focused
on the craft-based elements that are required of a sports journalist. This of course is important, and Toney (2013: 117) is particularly good at understanding the pressures on contemporary digital sports journalists and the ever-changing skill set required to work in an arena where he argues, ‘we are all multi-media journalists now’ and the boundaries between traditional parts of the journalistic field no longer exist as we move to a networked digital culture.

Studies into journalistic practice in the converged media environment clearly echo and resonate with changing practice in sports journalism. Thus the work of Kolodzy (2012) offers practical guidance on the challenge of cross-media storytelling, and Knight and Cook (2013) provide a detailed road map for the journalist wishing to embed the usage of social media within their journalistic practice. They also note that in the digital age of journalism: ‘Language and terminology struggle to cope with the multitude of ways in which the traditional barriers of the journalistic profession are breaking down as a result of the changes in technology brought on by social media’ (Knight and Cook 2013: 5). The rising profile given to elite sport through its relationship with television has helped ensure that sports journalists have been impacted by the shift to a digital environment at least as much as any other area of the broader journalistic profession.

The professional image of the sports journalist has often been one that views sport as an easier ‘beat’ than that of news and current affairs, and that sports journalists have often been viewed as ‘fans with typewriters’(Rowe 2005). I have argued elsewhere (Boyle 2006, 2013), however, that in the last decade or so, the pressures and practice of the print sports journalist has shared much in common with journalistic practice more widely, and that this perception of being at the bottom of any journalistic hierarchy is increasingly inaccurate and out-of-date. These journalists act as ‘cultural intermediaries’ in their engagement with sport and its mediation. As sport has become more public in profile, and at the elite end of the spectrum become an increasingly international cultural form, closely linked to the media, and connected to the worlds of business and politics, so has the range of sports journalism developed. A key aspect of this process has been to recognise the importance that a specific media institution plays in shaping the type of journalism it produces, and that content is not simply shaped by the platform on which it is disseminated. Also that the waterfront of sports journalism stretches from the simple reporting of sports events through to some of the best writing you will find in some newspapers; from the ‘beat’ reporter to the No. 1 sportswriter, thus sports journalism itself increasingly defies a simple narrow definition.

Most print journalists work for private commercial organisations driven by the need to compete in a highly competitive market place. In the digital ecology, this is a marketplace that has gotten more competitive as new platforms for delivering sports content have emerged and in so doing place a strain on the once dominant position of the print sports journalist. This shapes their journalistic culture, as does the difference of working freelance or staffing, or for a daily city newspaper as opposed to a Sunday national newspaper.

The transformative aspect of digital platforms has also disrupted established patterns of practice. A football journalist, for example covering the 2012–13 English Premier League, noted that in this specific instance all their copy was being posted on the newspaper’s website:

Arrived at Old Trafford at 11 am, departed 7 pm after one running report, one quotes piece, 25 words on every player plus something on the substitutes and a rewrite. And not a word appears in print. How our game has changed eh?

(Cited in Ridley 2012: 207)

In some ways, the traits of being a contemporary sports journalist reflect the strands of continuity that connect them with previous generations of journalists that have covered sport for the print media. So it is still about telling the story, bearing witness and finding the words to
make sense of the drama and context that inform sporting competition. In other ways, however, the increased pressures in contemporary journalistic culture that also impact on for example news and political journalists, are equally evident among those sections of the sports print media charged with reporting on contemporary sports. As Neil Harman, former tennis correspondent for the *The Times* newspaper argues:

> Work-wise there is more to be done and far less time in which to do it. I am not one to pare back willingly on quality. That has to stay, however long it takes to ‘get it up online’. There are increasing constraints on travel, and night-time tennis at every venue at almost every venue on the circuit massively curtails the old-school social delights of the job. Every opportunity to sit and discourse over a bottle of wine during a tournament is to be savoured for they are far and few between. We are slaves to the computer and its latest form the iPad. To point out these changes is not to evoke sympathy but merely to state a fact – that this job, for all of its myriad marvels, is not as much fun as it used to be.

*(Harman 2013: xiii)*

Thus sports journalists remain important cultural intermediaries between sporting stakeholders as they report, shape and promote sporting discourse. They are part of the circuit of communication within media sports and help infuse symbolic value and meaning into sports and its hinterland. In turn they are subjected to the wider political economy of media organisations that shape the context within which these organisations create sports content and journalism and disseminate it to the wider public. They are potential shapers of public opinion, and also themselves vulnerable to being manipulated for overtly commercial and public relations ends. The ‘inside track’ of the sports journalist of the past may have been a myth of sorts, and indeed was probably responsible for a degree of complicit journalism that perhaps was deemed less problematic in a more ‘relaxed’ age of sport (Bose 2012). Contemporary sports culture often appears far from relaxed, as competing interests help transform elite sport commercially and create ‘media product’ (Boyle and Haynes 2009). At the core of this shift in recent years has been the digital transformation of sports content and journalistic culture.

**The digital transformation**

The next section of the chapter examines a number of core needs and issues that directly shape the relationship between sporting events and print and online journalists. Rather than recounting individual sports, we examine a number of key themes and investigate how these play out across a range of sports events. To this end, we draw examples from major/large stadium-based events such as football matches in the English Premier League (EPL) and the Scottish Professional Football league (SPFL) and through recurring sports events that take place over large geographical area such as professional cycling’s Tour de France and mega events including the London Olympics.

**Issues of access**

As was noted already in this chapter, much has changed in the culture of the written sports media over the last few decades, yet the core needs of this stakeholder remain threefold in nature. Sports journalists require a view of the sporting action, access to the sporting participants and information around the event, and a means of delivering their copy. Some of the practice and structures required to satisfy these needs are of course changing, as we will discuss below, but it is
important that any event organiser is clear about these three key needs and thus does everything
to help facilitate their delivery.

For many experienced sports journalists the single biggest change in the profession over the
last number of years, has not been technology driven, but in the controlling of access to elite
athletes and key sporting participants (Boyle 2006). The rise of sports Public Relations (PR) has
been a by-product of the broader commercialisation of elite sport in the last two to three deca-
des. Of course PR in sport is not a new phenomenon, and the promotion of sports has been an
integral part of its culture since the late 19th century (L’Etang 2013). However, as sports have
become more financially intertwined with television and dependent on national and interna-
tional sponsors – with brands to protect and enhance – the commercial hinterland of sport has
expanded as has media interest.

As a veteran of 12 FIFA World Cups, sports journalist Keir Radnedge argues:

Sports PR was born out of commercialisation and the need of governing bodies, teams
and sponsors to find people with knowledge and experience who could help ensure
they were well represented in the media. In fact it may have gone too far as one of the
complaints (from journalists) is that they seem to think their job is to keep the press at
bay. That simply antagonises them and is often counter-productive.

(Radnedge 2012: 85)

This has led to the formalisation and professionalization of press/media relations in many
sports. The informal access to players, coaches and athletes that may have existed in some sports
is less common for journalists. In part this has been driven by practical concerns as events attempt
to control access in a more organised and formal structure because of the rise in the sheer volume
of media personnel who are now involved in covering sport and want some form of access. David
Bloomfield was the English FA’s press officer in the early 1990s and remembers this as being a key
moment when organisations began to realise that they simply were not geared up to deal with an
increasingly aggressive and growing media sector, hungry for content. He notes:

I was the only press officer in the whole of the FA. I wasn’t just dealing with the press
interest in the England team but every aspect of English football. [. . .] At an average
press conference with England I would have a hundred journalists, fifty photo-
ographers, ten or twenty TV crews and any number of radio people, who all had different
demands and needs. I constantly had to deal with umpteen requests for interviews
and God know what else. The TV crews wanted their interviews and shots and they
didn’t give a monkey’s for the written press, who didn’t give a monkey’s about them
or the radio, and then there were the photographers who didn’t give a monkey’s about
anyone. They were all naturally selfish groupings who created a highly combustible
atmosphere.

(Edworthy 2000: 43)

The resulting chaos for an understaffed media relations section of the FA, with little in the
way of media strategy, was unrelenting adverse media coverage, exacerbated in no small part by
poor results. The reputational damage done to the organisation was immense, and this was in
the analogue era of fewer media outlets. The transformative digital environment of 24/7 rolling
news only heightened interest in English football and eroded boundaries across media outlets
and also impacted on once clearly defined media deadlines (Sugden and Tomlinson 2010). The
professionalization of media relations and PR activity was in part a reaction by an organisation
such as the FA to a situation where they had not kept pace with the media environment and their changing needs and it was adversely affecting the reputation of the national association.

Another factor in the rise of a more professional approach to media relations has been the importance and value of sports rights for media organisations, which has resulted in right-holders wanting premium access, and having this access as part of their contractual arrangements with events and sports. Balancing the needs of media rights holders with non-rights media is an important aspect for any event organiser. The development at major events of the mixed zone through which participants pass, but are not of course obliged to stop and speak with the media, has been an organisational attempt to strike this balance between access for rights holders and non-rights media.

For many sports journalists, however, other routes including the ghosting of sports biographies have been attempts to offset the limits of access, not least as access plays such a central role in the image of the sports journalist having the sporting ‘inside track’ that we discussed above. Richard Williams a sports writer with *The Guardian* newspaper in the UK notes how:

One or two people I know who have taken ghosting jobs, they wouldn’t have normally, because it’s a rare opportunity to spend real time with someone and get to know them and get to see their world. So Paul Hayward did Michael Owen’s book and I don’t think he would have done it otherwise. So the last time we were with England, Owen will come over with him to have a chat, in a way that would not have happened otherwise. So there is a wall there, which is very regrettable. I am very envious of earlier generations who did the job, bought drinks with the players and talked to the players.

*(Interview with author, 10 March 2005)*

This previous era was represented by print journalists such as Laurie Pignon, who covered his first Wimbledon tennis championship in 1938 and was still reporting and writing about tennis when he retired in 1983 as the *Daily Mail’s* tennis correspondent. In 2012, he recalled:

The players of my era, like Fleet Street, are gone forever, but the biggest difference in reporting tennis in this day and age is not all the electronic paraphernalia about the place, but the contact – or rather the lack of it – between the press and the players.

*(Harman 2013: 10)*

More recently, Mike Atherton the former England cricket captain and now cricket writer for *The Times* newspaper, argued that even a sport such as cricket, where access to players and management was once relatively easy and part of the sports culture for journalists has changed. Atherton recalls the direct access and close proximity to players enjoyed by journalists such as the late Frank Keating, sportswriter of *The Guardian* newspaper and author of a number of books on sport and cricket specifically. Atherton notes how this close relationship between players and journalists allowed Keating to provide detail and insight for a readership that simply is impossible for the sportswriter covering cricket today. Remembering Keating’s (1981) insightful account of the England cricket tour of the West Indies in the early 1980s he argues that:

It is hard to think that any such book could be written now. Given the immediacy of the modern media and its all-pervasive nature, the England team guard jealously the small areas of privacy still allowed them. When, after the Durham Test, Flower was asked, reasonably enough, what was said to the team during the tea break on the final
afternoon that preceded Australia’s collapse, reasonably enough he said that such conversations must be kept private.

(Atherton 2013: 56)

The lack of trust between sports journalists and those they report on has grown over time, certainly in the UK sports press, but elsewhere in Europe as well, as the commercial pressure to get exclusives and break stories that often play out beyond the sports sections of newspapers has made proximity between press and players increasingly a thing of the past.

Gabriele Marcotti, European football correspondent for The Times newspaper suggested that this lack of trust is less evident among stakeholders in US sport. He cites the 2013 example of the response to the NFL’s Philadelphia Eagles receiver Riley Cooper’s racist comments that appeared online. Rather than the silence among team mates that accompanied racist incidents in English football in the last few years, Marcotti notes the more open reporting of reaction to this incident in the US. At the core of this is the notion among sporting gatekeepers that players cannot be trusted to speak on issues, and that the media cannot be trusted to report fairly what is being said (Boyle 2006). As overzealous sports PR’s demand ‘quote approval’ from the press, the press seek to find new angles, often to the detriment of the sport or the player. As Marcotti outlines:

From the media perspective, the lack of access not only cements the lack of trust – it is difficult to form relationships with people to whom you cannot speak – it also creates a vacuum that is inevitably filled with third-hand quotes and speculation based on off-the-record briefings.

(Marcotti 2013: 15)

And so the potential for a cycle of mistrust continues. This then is the context and the backdrop against which access to any event must be placed and understood.

Thus written-press accreditation is an important part in any event organisation, with priority given to rights holders. This is crucial in controlling access to press conferences, mixed zones and also central and satellite media centres. Depending on the scale of the event, getting this process right can be challenging. At the London 2012 Olympic Games, the British Olympic Association (BOA) received over 4000 applications for the 500 written press passes that were available (Toney 2013: 21). The challenge to sports organisers posed by the converging media landscape is identified by Toney as an ongoing issue not yet fully resolved. He suggests that:

Sports event organisers continue to struggle to define where sports websites come into the equation – considering their content is a mix of text and multimedia. Increasingly, journalists writing for websites are being accepted in to the press box – because their sites’ visitors can often exceed circulations of newspapers. But some organisers refuse to allow those with new-media credentials, viewing them as competitors of their own official website, a view that has become blurred considering the numbers of newspapers that now place equal significance on their journalists providing online copy.

(Toney 2013: 22)

We identified earlier how the multi-platform sports journalist is often no longer simply providing copy for the print edition of a newspaper. In addition, print journalists are using social media to communicate with their audiences and open up conversations, in real time, with other journalists and fans (Boyle and Haynes 2013). Organisers often try to impose certain restrictions on the amount of tweets, for example, journalists in the press box are able to post on the
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micro-blogging site during a match. I would suggest that in time these restrictions will be abandoned by event organisers as simply unworkable and counterproductive, as sports fans embed social media into their sporting experience (Brown and Billings 2013).

Again the formal access to events can vary across sports and even within sports themselves. Richard Williams, from The Guardian argued that:

Football is the hardest to cover, facilities for the press are not great, this is not true in Europe but it is here [the UK]. Access to the players after the game is restricted. I mean the EPL is so rich because of TV, and then TV takes precedence over everything. They don’t quite recognize that we do have a role, television provides the narrative, and we flesh out the characters. Other sports such as tennis, golf is much easier, because access is much easier. It’s a bit more relaxed, you have more space to work, and with football everything about it is competitive, cramped and tense

(Interview with author, 10 March 2005).

Certainly, the media intensity surrounding a sport such as football, from national to international coverage, means that venues that offer live television pictures to journalists aid them as they produce running copy as much as having clear sightlines to the action taking place on the pitch. But these facilities will vary from stadium to stadium. In many ways, the written press often feel they are the poor relations of the journalistic community tasked with reporting on sports events from football to the Olympics through to an event such as the Tour de France. Even in the mixed zone, it’s still host broadcasters and rights holders who enjoy the best positions, then radio and then finally the written press. However as we have noted the role of the sports journalist is changing and the notion of being simply a ‘print’ journalist is becoming obsolete. The challenge for organisers of sports events is to recognise this and as a result ‘print journalists’ remain an important part of the media mix, often being the key shapers of public perception in the run up to any sporting event, and a failure to recognise this role by sports organisers can be at their peril. Charlie Lambert (2012), in his overview of the print media’s coverage of the England national football team under Fabio Capello, noted how attempts to impose secrecy on the squad and keep the written press at arm’s length simply resulted in communication and texting between players and print journalists and a ‘drip drip’ impact of news that emerged, via print journalists, and was then taken up and amplified by 24/7 rolling broadcast and online news media. While there may have been other reasons such as a dislike of the manager for this to happen, social media made this leaking to the press much easier.

Indeed, access issues, often through accreditation, do raise a number of broader ethical challenges for event organisers. It has been noted how often events and governing bodies attempt to control the image and media narratives associated with an event by limiting access, or using the threat of its withdrawal to temper comment about the sport or event. Palmer (2000: 369), in her study of the Tour de France, noted how La Société du Tour de France rigorously policed its media image by denying access to journalists they thought would not cover the event in the manner they hoped, even refusing a university newspaper on the grounds that it had carried a piece criticising the commercialisation of the event. Even in the digital age, where media control is more problematic, a journalist such as David Walsh of The Sunday Times notes how even if you get press accreditation, if critical of aspects of the sport – as he was famously of the doping culture in the sport – then access is withdrawn to the riders by the competing teams (Walsh 2012). Perhaps even most alarmingly in the case of Walsh was that fellow journalists then become complicit in this act of censorship as they ostracised those journalists who dared to criticise the sport for fear of losing their own privileged access to the stars of the sport. At this point, the journalist has
simply become a cheerleader for the sport, an uncritical booster for an image of an event, which while in the short term may benefit an event or a sport, in the longer term this inevitably results in serious reputational damage both to the journalist, but also to the event and the organisation and other stakeholders associated with the sport.

While access then is crucial for the print media, dealing with this touches on a number of broader areas associated with the culture of the event and its organisers, and often its ability to deal with criticism. For the journalists themselves, the facilities and infrastructure required by this section of the media can also provide a challenge to organisers.

**Inside the box: Facilities**

For those journalists covering events such as football matches or the stadium-based elements of an event such as the Olympics, a robust infrastructure is a central requirement for the print and online media. The physical facilities for sports journalists vary across events. Services such as the provision of good catering should not be underestimated by event organisers as a factor that shapes the mood within the press/media facility. As does the ease with which pre- and post-event press conferences can be accessed and the level of information provided for journalists at these times. All these factors contribute to the smooth running of an event and allow journalists to hit those all-important newspaper deadlines.

Given the technological nature of contemporary journalism, the provision of internet access and an infrastructure fit to facilitate speedy dispatch of copy is central to the success of any sports event’s media operation. Within the controlled environment of a stadium, this should be less problematic; here cabled connections are more reliable than Wi-Fi. (Journalists I speak with often talk with trepidation about using wireless dongles, and will pay the extra – £150 at the London 2012 Olympics – to have the certainty of a cable connection). However, press photographers situated around the stadium require robust Wi-Fi connections, and this can mean identifying particular hotspots of heavy online activity. For those journalists on the road, this is more of a challenge. During the various stages of the 2013 Tour de France, some journalists found it difficult to post copy and comments due to uneven Wi-Fi coverage. Even at such infrastructure-focused events such as the 2012 London Olympics, lauded as the first truly digital Games, issues around digital capacity can still arise. Aideen Shortt notes how:

> In fact, just one day into the Games, the International Olympic Committee (IOC)’s head of communications, Mark Adams, asked tweeters to limit their output as he said a failure in broadcasting during the cycling road race was due to a throttled GPS signal on the streets of London which negatively affected the radio-frequency identification chips within the bikes.

*(Shortt 2012: 24)*

Thus, the provision of robust digital capacity is central in servicing the needs of the print media as well as the growing online-only journalist. Certain sports, such as road cycling, offer particular challenges for organisers. It is also worth noting that this capacity issue will only increase as provision for fan usage and access to the internet and social media increasingly becomes an expectation of supporters attending live events.

While some organisations provide free online access to journalists, others including the IOC do not provide free access within the ’precincts’ around the media operations facilities. The charges at London 2012 were lower than those charged at Beijing in 2008, yet they do appear to particularly hit those sports journalists from developing nations, who are often operating on tighter budgets.
As noted earlier by sportswriter Richard Williams, certain sports such as golf are less pressurised in journalistic terms, but often data- or statistically heavily dependent. Thus, the provision of such material to the media centre onsite is of importance. Some journalists covering golf and tennis specifically note how verbatim transcripts of press conferences are also provided, and in general, the more resource organisers have, the more they can provide such services for this section of the media. Interestingly however, not all journalists view this service as having improved the quality of press conferences. Tennis journalist Neil Harman notes how when covering events on the ATP tour:

There were times you had a specific question you wanted to ask but, with the transcript service at more and more events and so many appearing online almost as quickly as the stenographers took down the words, this was nonsensical and counter-productive. Why not wait and try to catch a word with the player later when they were a little less guarded and, in many cases, happier to engage?

(Harman 2013: 98).

Tailoring the media operational demands of an event to the needs of an expanding and often impatient media requires dedicated resource and planning. While we have come a long way from the ‘one man band’ era of press relations at the FA in the early 1990s, the need to recruit and train staff dedicated to servicing media demands around specific events remains important. Thus, volunteering has become an aspect of the media servicing provision for events. Media centres in particular often require 24-hour servicing at major international events, so catering for the needs of a 24/7 media operation should not be underestimated. The ability to organise and run press conferences to the strict rules and regulations that are now laid down across sporting events (such as the UEFA Champions League tournament) has also become important as more and more sports are carried live on television across Pay-TV and free-to-air (FTA) services in a number of differing countries.

Changing needs and services

The print media at sports events and associated media conferences often appear to operate as if they were a ‘pack’ of journalists (something they appear to have in common with political journalists). At times, they will take an ‘agreed line’ after a press conference regarding what the top story emerging from that event is. These journalists often travel together to cover the same events; and in so doing, form professional and personal friendships in some cases along the way, as familiar faces are greeted in the press box (Steen 2008: 80). Yet they are also highly competitive, often working for competing organisations who may be fierce commercial rivals.

Even within organisations, a hierarchy can exist, with the sportswriter employed for their comment and analysis and less dependent on daily access to key people as the newspapers sports reporter will be. The latter is more news driven, often under greater pressure to regularly deliver copy and views access to people and events as the lifeblood of their activity. Deny them this access and they are simply unable to fully carry out their job. Also, institutions shape journalists, be they sports or otherwise. Working for a red top or tabloid newspaper means being driven by an agenda set by a sports desk editor. Being employed for a broadsheet/compact newspaper or magazine often allows a greater degree of autonomy for the journalist than that experienced by their colleagues at the sharp end of the tabloid market (Boyle 2006).

Recognising that even among the distinctive print media sector differences exist is then important when attempting to service their needs. The most obvious are often between those
journalists working for daily newspapers and those working for the Sunday market. A caveat here of course is that as economic and organisational restructuring continues apace among the newspaper industry, the streamlining of daily and weekend news operations is becoming more common as seven-day structures get rolled out by media organisations.

Even so, making sure that journalists working for the ‘dailies’ and then the ‘Sundays’ get slightly differing material is always a challenge for organisers. As Patrick Collins of the Mail on Sunday has reflected: ‘Working for a Sunday is less intense than a daily newspaper would be. But in another sense because you only get the weekend chance, the intensity is quite fierce’ (Wilson 2012: 6).

There are also particular sporting events that offer heightened challenges to the sports journalistic fraternity. The Wimbledon Grand Slam tournament run by the All England Club attracts a level of non-sports print media that can cause tensions and requires a degree of organisational attention in term of media access. As Neil Harman, The Times tennis correspondent notes:

There are elements in Wimbledon coverage like no other grand slam in that it is regarded as much a social as a sporting occasion and therefore news reporters – largely present to report on who was there to see and be seen – are granted a level of access uncommon at other grand slams. This can be a particular torment for the specialist sports writer, who tends to view the news hounds with suspicion. They, in turn, think we are snobby fans.

(Harman 2013: 159)

Among the tennis players, the news journalists were often critically called ‘The Rotters’ as their focus tended to be on off-court player activity. This tendency is repeated in other sports, where for years on the snooker circuit, the news journalists who went seeking non-sports stories were known among the players as ‘The Reptiles’ (Boyle 2006). These nicknames hint at the less-than-harmonious relationship between professional sportspeople and sections of the print news media.

An important aspect in any event organisation, at whatever level, in dealing with the print media is to continually learn from previous and other related sporting events. As technology advances and makes inroads into journalistic practice, trying to ‘future proof’ an event’s facilities and services offered to journalists can be difficult. For example, in the last few years, the rise of live blogging has become an increasingly popular feature of newspaper and sports websites. Thurman and Walters note that, ‘Live Blogging is a synthesis of traditional journalism and contemporary digital technologies that is changing the way news is produced, presented and consumed online’ (Thurman and Walters 2013: 82).

They have become a feature of sports coverage as newspapers use their web presence to seek ways of competing with live sport being carried on other platforms such as television and radio. A characteristic of live-blogging in sports coverage is that the tone tends to be more casual than in news events coverage. There will also be a high level of interaction with readers in real time and those multimedia additions that are added are often not directly related to the event (often for copyright reasons) and are often added solely for entertainment reasons. So this type of journalism is more conversational and free flowing when used by newspapers, as they seek to add value, and of course drive users to their website or app. Official live blogging of events from within the stadium tends to be more factually driven and is often less interactive with supporters.

For event organisers, this form of real-time journalism often mobilises comments and material from those journalists within the press box/media centre. However the main curator is often located off site, in a newspaper office, collecting material from the live television coverage, the
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newspaper journalist at the event and tweets and other comments which are then dropped into the blog over the course of the live event. It is of course the immediacy and the ‘liveness’ of this form of journalism that are its core appeal to readers following this online via computer, tablet or smartphone. In this sense, what Toney (2013: 122) calls this ‘rolling reporter’s notebook’ mirrors what has become known as ‘chatterboxing’ among sports fans as they discuss online the coverage of a sports event they are often watching live on television.

Thus it is important for an event to recognise that live interactions between newspaper journalists and readers can be taking place as the event unfolds and this requires a robust technological capability to be factored into event management, and some monitoring of this process as part of the reputational management of an event.

Despite these changes, the live running report of an event also remains central to sports reporting in football, rugby, tennis, cricket or track and field athletics coverage. Writing a runner remains a challenge for all sports print journalists. You need to have copy ready at differing stages of the event and be able to factor in any last-minute changes that are part and parcel of the inherent unpredictability of many sporting contests. Standard practice for say a football match will be to file half your copy by half-time, another 25 percent three quarters of the way through the match and the final copy to be uploaded as you write your intro and outro in the final 10 minutes of an event.

An event that provides the best facilities and services to facilitate these needs will be popular with the print media tasked with delivering this copy. So a robust computer and internet infrastructure, excellent sightlines of the sporting action, accurate information provision and ideally some television facilities are increasingly viewed as central by the print media event stakeholders.

Covering a fast moving, geographically dynamic event such as the Tour de France, requires the provision of a range of logistical resources enabling journalists on the move to upload material. The controlled environment of a premier division Scottish football stadium offers an easier context to provide for and address the needs of the digital football journalist. While the weekly regularity of an event allows you to iron out any issues that may arise and continually improve and finesse your systems and structure. The high profile event, such as the Olympics, with its multi-site locations and high media impact, offers a particularly intense environment, with little room for error as we noted earlier in this chapter with London 2012’s experience during the cycling road race. Responding swiftly to the inevitable problems that will arise while catering for the print media is as important as any preparation and will secure you that all important goodwill which is vital for event organisers when dealing with media stakeholders who are capable of shaping wider perceptions of the event.

An area of growing importance is that around understanding and clearly communicating to media stakeholders the boundaries regarding access to the event and evolving digital practice. In other words, issues around copyright, rights planning and contracts, the relationship between the provision of live content for the event’s website and that of rights and non-right holders are all increasingly important, and often complex, in the converged media ecology of contemporary sport. Continually examining best practice and developing your engagement with the print and online sector as technology evolves is simply part of the landscape for event organisers tasked with seeking to balance and future-proof (as much as is possible) their digital engagement with key stakeholders with protecting important strands of revenue for their organisations.

Conclusion and future research

Despite significant changes in the media industries and across journalism, the print media remain an important stakeholder and cultural intermediary in the reporting and representation of contemporary sporting discourse. More accurately, we are talking about multi-platform journalists
rather than the narrowly defined print journalist of yesteryear. The key requirements across sporting events for these journalists that event organisers must address are around issues of access, information and the quality of facilities.

Digitisation of the media has brought challenges around the access that is required. The important provision of a robust infrastructure that is fit for purpose is central in allowing a multi-platform journalist to function. They have pre- and post-event demands that require them to both report and communicate their content to the specific deadlines that they will have imposed on them by their own media organisations.

Across sports, while the specific practice and infrastructure will change and evolve, from the more controlled stadium environments to reporting on multi-site events, the basic needs and demands of these journalists remains constant. Servicing these cultural intermediaries is important as they provide an important conduit in the shaping of the narratives and perceptions associated among the broader public with an event. Live television remains crucial in communicating an event, but the print/online media also play a role in constructing those crucial narratives that come to define sport and sporting events, both for the public, but also for other stakeholders, such as sponsors. Forget this, or focus too exclusively on the needs of television, and you risk reputational damage that will resonate long after the event itself has finished.

These journalists are by and large a pretty selfish group of professionals. By this I mean they are driven and focused on delivering for their organisation. Often, this is an organisation that is operating in a highly competitive commercial media marketplace, so while they may be sports fans at heart, they are also often hardened journalistic professionals with egos and expectations that require to be recognised by any event organiser. Do not make the mistake of trying to control journalists and shape their copy; it will only end badly for your sporting organisation. Journalists always have been and will continue to be driven by an agenda that is informed by the particular institutions they work for and the cultures and practice that are part of those institutions. The media ecology may be evolving and changing at great pace; however, words, be they in print or online, will remain a powerful part of the sports culture for the foreseeable future, as will the role of the multi-platform sports journalist trying to make sense of the sporting drama that is unfolding.

The evolving needs of the digital media remain a key area for future research. As converging media blur traditional boundaries, the ways in which events and organisations attempt to facilitate media will continue to evolve. Understanding more fully the implications of this process purely beyond the physical needs and infrastructural challenges for sports events is important as it raises ethical and broader strategic communicative aspects around the media sports relationship. Related to this will be a deepening of how sports journalism is changing as social media become more deeply embedded in the fabric of sports fandom and spectatorship. A better understanding of the organisational challenges faced by what we understand and expect from sports journalism will be important. As David Schlesinger, Reuter's editor-in-chief, argued to the IOC press commission in 2009:

Fundamentally, the old media won't control news dissemination in the future. And organisations can't control access using old forms of accreditation any more. The four years between Summer Olympics can see several generations of change in new media. (cited in Toney 2013: 12)

Understanding this process and its implications for events of various scope and scale must form part of any future research programme engaged with the organisers of sports events.

The increased integration of the audience, either at the live event or at home or in the office, engaging with a mediated version of the sporting contest, with the onsite journalist and the
impact of this on the construction of the narratives associated with sport is also a fascinating area that is likely to become more important in the next few years. As event planners and organisers build systems and infrastructure to allow greater freedom among supporters to share and generate content both at the live event and beyond, the rules of that new pattern of engagement will be interesting to watch develop. To what extent are existing regimes around copyright and rights more generally fit for this more fluid digital age? How do these issues play out differently across differing sports and in differing local, national and international contexts? How can organisers strike a balance between the legitimate concerns of often promotionally driven demands from stakeholders around an event, such as sponsors and those needs and agendas being driven by journalists (Hobsbawn 2010)?

Finally, this particular sector of the media will continue to present a significant challenge for all events in term of their reputation and perception. Future communication research into this area will continue to address the impact that shifts in practice have on how to conceptualise the relationship between events, media and audiences. Get the mix right in terms of access, infrastructure and services and you will probably not be thanked by the journalists. However, get it wrong in some manner and you can expect to have to deal with some unfavourable publicity, so planning for the first scenario is important, but being equipped to deal with the latter is also mandatory.

Suggested readings

References


