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COMMENTARY

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The Nordic Story

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Issue: This commentary is part of the issue “Sports Journalists as Agents of Change: Shifting Political Goalposts in Nordic Countries” edited by Anders Graver Knudsen (OsloMet University), Harald Hornmoen (OsloMet University), and Nathalie Hyde-Clarke (OsloMet University), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i447>

Abstract

Nordic cultural and communications studies have long been crucial contributors to numerous fields. Readers of *Media and Communication* are fortunate to have expert guides for this thematic issue on Sports Journalists as Agents of Change: Shifting Political Goalposts in Nordic Countries. Anders Graver Knudsen, Harald Hornmoen, and Nathalie Hyde-Clarke have brought together—and themselves contributed to—a veritable *tour d’horizon* of the topic, with significance both for the region and research more generally.

Keywords

journalism; media; Nordic countries; sports; sports journalism

1. The Background Story

There is a paradox confronting sports journalism: the dramatic economic success and cultural importance of mainstream sports versus the standing of sports reporters, who cover events that stir extraordinary passion, produce material that listeners, readers, and viewers devour—and have low social and professional standing.

They reside, metaphorically and literally, in the newsroom’s “toy department,” a conceptual and physical area populated by fans rather than “serious” journalists (Rowe, 2007; Steen et al., 2021). The dominant approach has three characteristics: vicarious pleasure from projecting oneself into competitions, appreciating others’ physical aptitudes, and developing exclusionary formal and informal professional networks (Reed, 2018). And their work generally appears at the end of newspapers or television bulletins, after economics, domestic politics, and international relations.

Sports deserve better. In the US, 65% of newspaper readers focus on politics, 59% on sports (Schenk, n.d.). *The Guardian's* most-read stories online from 2010 to 2014 saw football rank behind world news, but easily ahead of UK politics (Sedghi et al., 2014). Sports dominate TV and streaming ratings in much of the Anglo world (Gough, 2023).

The contributors to this thematic issue demonstrate that sports' popularity and universality mean something important should be engaged, a consequence of a paradox: simultaneously transcendent and imprisoning qualities metaphorize cross-validates sports, athletes, and nations via myths of representativeness, justice, and upward mobility that idealize political, economic, military, and social life—distorting conflict, then re-signifying it on the pitch and page, often as part of martial masculinity and prowess.

And with the advent of consumer capitalism, the sporting body has become an increasingly visible locus of media desire. The manipulation of appearance through fashion, adornment, nutrition, and conditioning has changed the daily terms of trade in the clothes people wear, the desires they feel, and the images they create and consume. Over the last 50 years, professional male sports have transformed themselves into an internationalist capitalist project. Female athletes are on the same path. New pressures accompany the spoils. Stars are soon shriveled up, their bodies broken on wheels of lies, distortions, and fantasies constructed and manipulated by complicit colleges, owners, associations, medical staff, coaches, parents, and media, and athletes' own delusions of invulnerable bourgeois individualism.

A well-remunerated elite of sports journalism—a labor aristocracy covering major athletes, teams, competitions, and, occasionally, historical and cultural dimensions—was always isolated from local reporters, who discharged proletarian functions, loitering outside dressing rooms. Key changes have occurred over the past four decades, via democracies' deregulation of the electronic media and the advent of new technology. The contradictory forces of an increasingly concentrated ownership and a relatively-open internet have diversified an ever-shrinking workforce and accelerated its rhythms. Radio and television have ceased to provide omnibus services, featuring drama, news, and so on. The emergence of channels and stations dedicated purely to sports initially gave greater prominence and power to many reporters, but those networks have lost importance, as different media buy the rights to live coverage and many “new” people cover the topic, from artisanal podcasters to energetic influencers.

These pressures further endow a powerful and unworthy tendency—clientelism—in which journalism depends on sources to the point of being their mouthpiece. The mutual imbrication of sports and media ownership, control, and practice overdetermines relatively-autonomous reportage.

2. The Nordic Issue

Women's sports and clothing have seen numerous clashes over so-called modesty, sexual display, and religious norms, especially with the emergence of more and more Muslim women in international competitions. Covering up and refusing sexualized display is a secular wish as well, as we learn here by reading Hyde-Clarke and Fonn's (2024) account of Norwegian women beach handballers resisting regulations requiring them to wear bikini bottoms amidst the bourgeois local media's historically salacious, sexist photographic coverage. Player protests initially led to Europe's Handball Federation imposing fines on the team, but eventually brought about a change of international rules, permitting women to dress per male norms. This was a triumph for direct action as well as formal advocacy.

Gender issues are also taken up in Ehrlén's (2024) interviews with Finnish journalists about how they cover sexual harassment in sports. It is clear that a gendered and generational labor process is as central to that reporting as what is being written and spoken about. Per Raewyn Connell, hegemonic masculinity pervades virtually all spheres of life (Ehrlén, 2024, p. 4), something confirmed by Radmann and Sätre's (2024) investigation of Swedish women sports reporters. Certain improvements in occupational opportunities and working conditions attained by feminist organizing have been offset by a prevailing ethos of male privilege, expressed in threats and assaults as well as subtler forms of exclusion and disempowerment.

Hornmoen and Knudsen's (2024) focus on the men's football World Cup finals looks at human-rights controversies surrounding the 2022 competition in Qatar and the conduct of the sport's governing body and the event's organizers. It suggests that reporters veered between moral condemnation of the host and proposals for reform of FIFA. Frandsen (2024) takes off from the same starting point to look at how journalists organize to protect and develop their access and research. These are rare examples of sports reporters transcending clientelism and cathectic passion.

Bernstein's (2024) contribution goes beyond the Nordic world, based on exchanges with scholars about professionalism and relative autonomy in sports journalism across various regions of the globe, while Särkivuori and Laine (2024) engage Russian oligarchs' investment in a Finnish hockey team and how coverage of that event, and subsequent incorporation of the club into Russian sports, stressed international political economy as well as sporting performance.

3. The Present and Future

This is a moment of pivotal transformation for journalism in general. Financial and technological trends are said to be adversely affecting reporters' numbers and security of employment. We are remorselessly told that only online media attract audiences, who aren't interested in news; journalism doesn't matter; and a golden age has ended. That is true in much of the Global North, not least because of the news deserts created by hedge funds assiduously stripping assets and platform capitalists depriving journalism of advertising revenue. But internationally, interest is greater than ever before, because alphabetization is rocketing upwards. Two hundred years ago, 12% of the world's population was alphabetic; 45 years ago, 68%; now it's 86% (Roser & Ortiz-Ospina, 2018; UNESCO, 2023). And people who can read, read journalism, be it about politics, war, food, finance, the environment, or sports.

The Associated Press and Reuters claim that "half the world's population" (The Associated Press, n.d.) and a billion people (Reuters, n.d.) view their reporting daily. BBC news sites attracted over a billion visits in January 2023 (BBC, 2023, p. 9). The Corporation's weekly news audience is close to half a billion, and growing by millions every year ("BBC on track to reach," 2021). The World Service alone has 364 million listeners a week, a third aged between 15 and 24 (BBC, n.d.). Two hundred million people go to CNN's website each week (CNN, n.d.), while nearly three hundred million tune in to DW (DW, n.d.).

Per those very sources, good journalism involves research, interpretation, dissemination, and mobilization (Cassidy, 2005). To protect and develop such capacities, practitioners and academics must transcend sporting journalism's dominant labor process and mythology to focus on political-economic, textual, and ethnographic approaches that are alive to cultural differences. This thematic issue of the journal performs that function admirably. I learned much from it. It shows how much work remains to be done.

Acknowledgments

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Toby Miller is visiting professor at the Complutense University of Madrid. The author and editor of over 50 books, his work has been translated into Spanish, Chinese, Portuguese, Japanese, Turkish, German, Italian, Farsi, French, Urdu, and Swedish. His most recent volumes are *Why Journalism? A Polemic* (2024), *A Covid Charter, a Better World* (2021), *Violence* (2021), *The Persistence of Violence: Colombian Popular Culture* (2020), *How Green is Your Smartphone?* (2020), *El Trabajo Cultural* (2018), *Greenwashing Culture* (2018), and *Greenwashing Sport* (2018)