

## 6.10 Big business blurs sports journalism's critical eye

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The increased commercialisation of the media is having a visible effect on sports journalism and has the potential to diminish its ability to monitor and scrutinise. With its focus on athletes and results, sports journalism has not always been the natural domain of detached watchdogs and investigative journalists. Its function extends beyond reporting scores and press conferences, however, with the requirement to analyse and interpret the work, decisions and actions of players, officials and administrators.

There is no suggestion that the contemporary commercial environment is leading to *corruption* of sports journalists or their journalism. The combination of corporate influences, reduced staffing and increased workloads has caused sports journalism to be practised differently in comparison with more traditional approaches, however. As a result, there are pressing issues in relation to objectivity, ethics, the merging of business and editorial links, and the number of in-depth investigations. These conclusions are made from a study that combined in-depth interviews with 36 sports journalists from six broadsheet/quality publications from Australia, India and the United Kingdom, with a content analysis of 4,541 articles from the sports sections of these outlets.<sup>2</sup>

Concerns outlined by the journalists, particularly in the United Kingdom and Australia, focused on the increase of commercial aspects in their coverage, as well as fewer financial and human resources to undertake investigations, or detailed analysis of issues that were previously covered.<sup>3</sup> It is important to recognise that these factors are not exclusive to the sports section, but their impact can be especially significant in sport – for journalists, supporters and those controlling the games.

Falling staff numbers are a major reason for the decline in sports scrutiny. The current economic climate, with dramatic reductions in print circulation and media advertising in Western markets, means that fewer sports journalists are doing more of the work. This can lead to a reliance on press releases and sports-administration-driven 'news' items. It also leads to there being fewer critical eyes to peer away from their computer screens or social media accounts. Therefore, most sports journalists are unable to consider issues that are not occurring right in front of them. This allows the big players, whether sports companies, agents or athletes, to operate without being monitored closely by those capable of exposing any mistakes or misdeeds.

Declining revenues in many Western media companies are having a greater influence in another way, with limited resources meaning that staged events by sports organisations are cheap and easy for the media to cover. While traditional print-based media are operating on smaller budgets, many professional sports organisations are thriving due to broadcast deals and sponsorships, providing greater control over access to sources, content and, in some cases, matches.

Athletes still provide the bulk of quotes and material for news reports, features or profiles. Sports organisations regulate day-to-day news-gathering through press conferences or media events, however, and by limiting access to athletes (often in conjunction with their agents). These organisations control the message of the players through briefings and media training. As a result, contemporary journalists can find themselves tied to sports bodies or administrators, afraid to criticise for fear of being cut off from their official source, and comfortable running the ruling company's line. This clearly impacts on the objectivity of the reporters, as well as limiting the investigation of any wrongdoing by the sporting bodies.

A further complication for sports journalists is that gaining exclusive access to athletes (news is about new or unique information, after all) can now be a complex process involving journalistic and

business forces. In some countries, such as Australia and the United Kingdom, a one-on-one interview can come with the baggage of a corporate promotion as part of the story. In these instances, the interview will not occur without the promise of a sponsor or advertising mention. At *the Daily Telegraph*, one reporter said they were “not embarrassed to use any means” when it came to utilising business and sponsors to secure interviews with elite sportspeople.<sup>4</sup> While commercial promotions may not be ‘immoral or harmful’ in journalism, they go against the tradition of newspapers being ‘promoters of public interests’ and representatives of the people.<sup>5</sup> Journalists are still in a position to ask hard questions in these interviews, but they say they are also aware of repercussions in terms of restricted or no access in future, and story opportunities being offered to rival publications. On account of financial factors, however, these organisations have adapted to the commercial environment, arguing that accepting this deal was the only way a journalist might attend such an event or interview.

The compromise of the public interest extends to advertising or funding deals to allow journalists to travel to events.<sup>6</sup> For example, a sports journalist from Australia’s *The Sydney Morning Herald* went to Europe to report on cycling races while being partially funded by Orica-GreenEdge cycling and EuroSport television.<sup>7</sup> In the United Kingdom, a senior writer from *The Guardian* was sent to interview an Olympic athlete with all flights and accommodation paid for – provided there was a photograph with sponsor’s logos.<sup>8</sup> These examples are particularly relevant given that both of the organisations previously operated under regulations that prevented travel being paid from outside sources<sup>9</sup>. A senior manager at the *Guardian* noted how the rules that existed in print were ‘starting to dissolve on the web, particularly in areas like sport’. As he said:

Let’s face it, we’re not covering revolutions and uprisings and corporate scandals, by and large, although there’s a certain extent of it. A lot of newspapers come to the conclusion – and we’re no different – that sport is one of the areas that could and should be monetised. And that will allow you that level of whiter-than-white representation around your news coverage, domestic and foreign, which you need and cannot be influenced by any sort of commercial factors if you are going to be a serious paper.<sup>10</sup>

This approach resulted in a ‘more relaxed’ relationship with sponsors in sports coverage. It must be noted that both organisations made attempts to retain their journalistic integrity in these situations. At *The Sydney Morning Herald*, a disclosure agreement was signed with the sponsors that the news organisation did not have to be supportive of the companies in print. *The Guardian* refused to give the commercial organisation copy approval<sup>11</sup>. Despite the potential for being compromised, there remained a desire to retain editorial freedom.

These types of commercial tie-ins expand the list of potential media restrictions on sports journalists. Of the 36 sports journalists interviewed in this study, almost a third were required by their organisational guidelines or individual roles and routines to mention commercial aspects in their published articles; 50 per cent did this ‘occasionally’.<sup>12</sup> Five of the 12 United Kingdom sports journalists interviewed said they were required to mention these factors, while seven of the 12 Australian respondents said they did it occasionally. There was less pressure in India to promote corporate aspects, although some journalists at *The Times of India* noted that it was important not to upset their advertisers.

The presence of commercial inclusions in stories is a key indicator of the success of corporate influence. One study shows that more than a quarter of the articles in an analysis of 4,103 newspaper and online sports stories contained business, sponsor or product placement mentions.<sup>13</sup> Examples included using a stadium title bought by a financial institution instead of the traditional name;<sup>14</sup> a cycling team name;<sup>15</sup> including newspaper advertisers in a story (for example, betting agencies);<sup>16</sup> and a tagline in an interview.<sup>17</sup> Commercial mentions were included in approximately a third of stories in the Australian and UK publications, but fewer than a quarter in India. It was clear that commercial influences had an impact on the content in these sports sections, and highlighted the increased commercialisation of sports journalism. When corporate organisations have a

presence on the sports page, and wield financial power over news organisations with shrinking margins, the upshot can be a reduction in the critical analysis of those businesses.

Interestingly, the trend towards economic factors influencing sports journalism began before the global financial crisis. A global study published in 2005, describes the sports media as ‘the world’s best advertising agency’, and goes on to say that commercial pressure has made it ‘almost impossible to work’ within journalism’s ‘classic ideals’.<sup>18</sup> Now the question is asked whether sports journalism is ‘news’ or ‘publicity’.<sup>19</sup>

The commercial creep on to the sports pages raises ethical concerns and questions over objectivity. In strict interpretations of each nation’s ethical codes, issues surrounding corporate mentions contravene the conditions.<sup>20</sup> For example, in Australia, journalists do not allow ‘advertising or other commercial considerations to undermine accuracy, fairness or independence’.<sup>21</sup> While it can be difficult to determine when fairness or independence is compromised, it is evident that by accepting commercial mentions – and at times even embracing them – news organisations have stepped away from the pure truth-telling of journalism. This shift towards a more corporate orientation has therefore created a haze over objective reporting. As one sports journalist from the *Guardian* said:

You’ve got to have complete editorial freedom and write about the stories you want to. If you’ve got a big sponsor and you’ve done something wrong, you’ve got to write about it. That’s your role as a newspaper, you can’t brush something under the carpet just because they give you someone [to interview] every now and then.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, news organisations are predominantly for-profit organisations, and work within these ideals. The landscape has changed significantly across many media markets, however. In Australia, for example, it was mentioned by the interview respondents that editorial sports staff could meet with advertisers to determine possible stories on which they might work together.<sup>23</sup> Even in recent history this would not have occurred, in an effort to keep the two departments separate. The sports journalists said that this did not mean that advertisers had a right to demand copy or approve it, but

that there was cooperation between two former foes. The blurring of business boundaries inside and outside the sports departments has resulted in the diminishing of journalistic independence.

The range of factors discussed above suggests that the traditional print-orientated news organisations are increasingly unable to focus on in-depth investigative reporting because of workloads, financial factors and commercial influences. It appears that, in most cases, the days when a reporter could spend an extended period focusing on one issue are over. In subsequent interviews with sports journalists in Australia and India, I have found that most believe that in-depth investigations are important for sports journalism, and they want to undertake them, but staff levels, time constraints and heavy workloads mean they are virtually impossible, and the focus has to remain on day-to-day news events and matches.

Overall, these issues affecting sports journalism have reduced its potency for investigation and critical analysis. In order to remedy this situation, and ensure greater scrutiny of the major forces in sport, news organisations would need to reduce their involvement with internal and external commercial interests. It would mean a return to a time when advertising and editorial were separate, and journalists were not measured by the number of stories they wrote in a day, or the online ‘hits’ they received. In reality, though, commercial influences have now become a key ingredient at many news organisations, and removing them from circulation appears to be an impossible ideal.

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<sup>2</sup> Peter English, 'Sports Coverage in Print and Web Newspapers: How Online Journalism Has Changed Sports Journalism', PhD thesis (Sippy Downs: University of the Sunshine Coast, 2014), [http://research.usc.edu.au/vital/access/manager/Repository;jsessionid=2557EC901B8B33E0BAE1D730BA91C7C7/usc:13122?exact=sm\\_creator%3A%22English%2C+P+A%22](http://research.usc.edu.au/vital/access/manager/Repository;jsessionid=2557EC901B8B33E0BAE1D730BA91C7C7/usc:13122?exact=sm_creator%3A%22English%2C+P+A%22).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Picard, 'Commercialisation and Newspaper Quality', *Newspaper Research Journal*, vol. 25 (2004).

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<sup>6</sup> Peter English, 'Sports Coverage in Print and Web Newspapers: How Online Journalism Has Changed Sports Journalism', PhD thesis (Sippy Downs: University of the Sunshine Coast, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.186.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.187.

<sup>9</sup> In interviews with the author, the sports journalists were asked how economic factors had changed over the previous five years. This covered the period back to 2007, and the start of the Global Financial Crisis.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with the author, 10 April 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Peter English, 'Sports Coverage in Print and Web Newspapers: How Online Journalism Has Changed Sports Journalism', PhD thesis (Sippy Downs: University of the Sunshine Coast, 2014), p186.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Peter English, 'Sports Journalism's Relationship with Sport's Corporate Sector: A Comparison between Australia, India and the United Kingdom', *Australian Journalism Review*, vol. 35 (2013).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 51

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 51

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 51

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 51

<sup>18</sup> Mandag Morgen (Monday Morning) (Denmark), 'The World's Best Advertising Agency: The Sports Press', 31 October 2005, [www.playthegame.org/upload//Sport\\_Press\\_Survey\\_English.pdf](http://www.playthegame.org/upload//Sport_Press_Survey_English.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> See Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (Australia), 'Media Alliance Code of Ethics', [www.alliance.org.au/code-of-ethics.html](http://www.alliance.org.au/code-of-ethics.html); National Union of Journalists (UK), 'NUJ Code of Conduct', [www.nuj.org.uk/about/nuj-code](http://www.nuj.org.uk/about/nuj-code); and Press Council of India, 'Norms of Journalistic Conduct', [www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/3.%20Press%20Council%20of%20India%20Norms%20of%20Journalistic%20Conduct.pdf](http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/3.%20Press%20Council%20of%20India%20Norms%20of%20Journalistic%20Conduct.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> 'Media Alliance Code of Ethics'.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with author, 3 May 2014.

<sup>23</sup> English (2014), p.184.