

# Sports Journalists as Agents of Change: An International Academic Perspective

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## Abstract

Sports journalists can act as agents of change in society since they have a unique and powerful platform to influence public opinion, raise awareness, advocate for various issues through their reporting and commentary, and overall promote positive change in society. This is perhaps more obvious when looking at recent research from the Nordic countries. However, are sports journalists able to be, and do they even wish to be, agents of change in countries such as Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Spain, Germany, and Israel? Based on academic writing and interviews with media and sports scholars, this article examines the academic discourse that tries to assess to what extent sports journalism may be professionalized in a select number of countries in the European Union and the Middle East. Respondents were asked to speak about how they, as academics, perceived the extent to which sports journalists in each country have substantial autonomy from the economic and political systems and to what extent they are agents of change in their country.

## Keywords

academic discourse; agents of change; international perspective; Nordic model; sports journalism

## 1. Introduction

It could be argued that sports journalists can act as agents of change in society since they have a unique and powerful platform to influence public opinion, raise awareness, advocate for various issues through their reporting and commentary, and promote positive societal change. In fact, where they have the freedom of speech, it could be possible for them to highlight social issues such as racism, gender inequality, disabilities,

and other social matters that intersect with sports. By shedding light on these and further topics, they could foster discussions and encourage positive change within the sports community and society at large. This could be possible by covering athlete activism, highlighting the achievements of athletes from diverse backgrounds, covering the impact of sports on the environment, and promoting sustainable practices within the sports industry (see, for example, Forde & Wilson, 2018; for an interesting perspective based on an interview with the critical sports journalist Dave Zirin about the US context see Agyemang et al., 2020). Moreover, sports journalists could act as watchdogs, uncovering corruption and unethical practices within sports organizations and advocating for transparency and accountability. By using their influence wisely and responsibly, it may be possible for them to contribute to a more equitable, inclusive, and compassionate sports landscape and, by extension, influence broader societal attitudes and values.

This may indeed be the case in Western free and liberal countries, or, in the case of this thematic issue, more precisely, the “Nordic model,” which, according to a seminal book by Hallin and Mancini (2004), belongs to the Northern European or “democratic corporatist” model. However, some argue that the media system in the Nordic countries has its own distinctive characteristics. The Nordic model refers to the combination of economic and social policies and cultural aspects found in the Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. It is a mixed-market system, meaning it blends elements of capitalism (private ownership, free market) and socialism (government intervention, social welfare). As far as economics is concerned, businesses operate largely in private hands, promoting innovation and competition; public services such as healthcare, unemployment benefits, and childcare are funded by taxes. This aims to ensure a basic standard of living for all citizens. Moreover, strong labour unions negotiate wages and working conditions, leading to relatively high wages and good employee benefits. Social policy aims to reduce income inequality and promote equal opportunities for all citizens, regardless of background; publicly funded education systems prioritize high-quality education for all, fostering a skilled workforce. Overall, there is generally a strong sense of trust between citizens and the government, enabling cooperation for the collective good. It is important to note that the Nordic model is not rigid, and each nation applies it with variations. Also worth noting is that it is often the subject of debate, with supporters praising its social achievements and high levels of well-being, while critics question its economic sustainability and potential for hindering innovation (Ervasti, 2008; Iqbal & Todi, 2015; see also Skogerbø et al., 2021).

In the field of media studies, some scholars have categorized the five Nordic countries as constituting a media welfare state model (Syvertsen et al., 2014), while others have observed similarities with media systems in other Northern European countries, describing them as democratic corporatist (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, 2016) or even likening them to North American media systems (Ohlsson, 2015). When it comes to media, some features can be highlighted, such as the strong public service broadcasting (NRK in Norway, Yle in Finland, and SVT in Sweden) that is independent of commercial interests and political influence, aiming to provide high-quality, diverse, and non-partisan content for all citizens. Their funding comes from a combination of license fees and government subsidies. Besides strong public service broadcasting, there are private commercial media and alternative/community media, which create a pluralistic media landscape that allows for diverse viewpoints and content, catering to different tastes and needs. Adding to this is the support that exists for journalism and media production, such as government grants, tax breaks, and other forms of support that aim to promote quality journalism, media production, and content creation (Ohlsson, 2015). As in the Nordic model in general, when it comes to media, it is important to note that the Nordic model is not uniform; each country implements it with some variations. Regarding sports journalism,

research reveals an imbalance in sports coverage, with women's sports, for example, not receiving the same balanced and representative treatment as one would expect: Hovden and Von der Lippe (2020) show that even in the Nordic region, with its strong focus on gender equality, systemic biases persist within sports media. These biases perpetuate a gendered hierarchy, where male athletes are normalized as the standard, and women's sports are sidelined and presented through stereotypical lenses. However, this study does suggest potential shifts and increasing complexity in how Nordic sports media represents gender. So, while the Nordic model holds promise for promoting equality in sports journalism, its current application reveals a gap that needs further attention and proactive measures to align with its core values.

Yet, what is true in these countries may not necessarily be true in others. As Hovden (2023, p. 690) puts it: "The large majority of research is done on Western countries, raising concerns about the relevance of the concept for less differentiated societies." Thus, this article aims to reflect on the notion of sports journalists as agents of change in the Middle East and Central and Southern Europe and compare them to the Nordic countries, attempting to put forward different voices and perspectives. More precisely, this article aims to answer, from an academic perspective: To what extent is sports journalism professionalized in a given country? And then, to what extent do sports journalists in each country have substantial autonomy from the economic and political systems? Is there state intervention and protection of press freedom in that country? Furthermore, as academics see it, how do sports journalists view their roles in these respects? And, in the context of this thematic issue, to what extent do sports journalists act as agents of change?

The decision to base this article on interviews with scholars rather than journalists is grounded in the notion that scholars may possess a broader and more critical perspective of the current state of affairs. In contrast, many journalists may not share the same viewpoint or, in certain countries, may not be free to express their views.

## 2. Methodology

This article examines the state of sports journalism in non-Nordic countries, including Iran, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Israel in the Middle East, and Spain and Germany in Europe. It is worth mentioning that Hallin and Mancini's (2004) work includes Germany in the 18 media systems of Western democracies alongside the Nordic countries (and further Northern European countries). However, the German case seems different from the Nordic model concerning sports journalists as agents of change.

The information about these countries is based on academic and popular writing and written interviews conducted by email with media and sports scholars. In the Israeli case, a former sports editor with extensive field experience, who is not a researcher like the other interviewees but rather a lecturer, also contributed an academic perspective. All interviews, except one, were conducted in late July and early August 2023. It is important to note that these interviews with key scholars allowed them to express more criticism about relevant practices than the traditional academic channels currently afford them, especially in autocratic countries. The decision to base the article on interviews with scholars stems from a well-established practice in disciplines such as education, sociology, psychology, and organizational studies. In these fields, researchers commonly incorporate interviews with academic colleagues as part of their qualitative research methodology. Such interviews are used to gain in-depth insights, perspectives, and experiences from experts or professionals within a particular domain. Across these disciplines, a significant body of academic writing

focuses on and utilizes interviews with academic colleagues. For instance, case studies in some of these fields often involve interviewing academic colleagues to understand specific situations, practices, or phenomena from their perspectives. These interviews serve various purposes, including exploring the scholars' viewpoints on a particular issue or topic of interest (see, for example, Buys et al., 2022; Trowler, 2011).

The interviewees include:

1. A colleague from Iran was interviewed on July 21, 2023, and initially gave his permission to be named. However, after the October 7 massacre and following events, he withdrew this permission, although he agreed to be quoted anonymously.
2. Pam Creedon, a professor emeritus from the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Iowa and formerly the director at the Higher Colleges of Technology in Abu Dhabi, UAE, was interviewed on July 18, 2023.
3. Carola Richter, a professor of international communication from the Institute for Media and Communication Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin was interviewed on July 18, 2023.
4. Xavier Ramon, interviewed on July 23, 2023, a media and sports scholar from Spain. He is head of journalism studies at the Department of Communication of the Universitat Pompeu Fabra.
5. Thomas Horky, interviewed on August 20, 2023, a media and sports scholar, affiliated with the Sports Communication Department at the Macromedia University of Applied Sciences in Hamburg, Germany.
6. Daniel Nölleke, a media and sports scholar from the Institut für Kommunikations- und Medienforschung Deutsche Sporthochschule Köln, Germany, was interviewed on February 22, 2024.
7. An Israeli media and sports scholar who writes about sports journalism was interviewed on July 28, 2023. He was highly critical and extremely forward with what he said about sports media in Israel, so much so that later he asked not to be named in the article.
8. Haim Hagay, a media and sports scholar from Kinneret College, Israel, was interviewed on July 19, 2023.
9. Shlomi Barzel, interviewed on July 19, 2023, is currently head of communication at the Israel Football Association, former editor of the sports section of the Israeli left-wing broadsheet newspaper "Haaretz," and lecturer at the School of Media Studies at the College of Management Academic Studies.

Based on these interviews, relevant scholarly work from the interviewees, and further academic sources, this article aims to answer the questions detailed in the Introduction, guided by the main research question: According to academic discourse, are sports journalists agents of change in countries in the Middle East and in non-Nordic European countries?

### 3. An International Perspective

#### 3.1. Iran

The discussion of the Iranian case is based on an interview with an Iranian sports scholar. As he put it, "regrettably, it is important to note that there are no official or documented regulations specifically pertaining to journalism in Iran as a whole." In fact, the Media Landscapes site, which offers expert analysis of the state of media worldwide, describes Iran as a country where the media are tightly controlled and censored. Journalists and bloggers face a high risk of arrest, interrogation, and imprisonment for their activities. Iran ranks 177th out of 180 countries on the World Press Freedom Index (WPF) of Reporters

Without Borders in 2023, alongside Saudi Arabia at 170, Bahrain at 171, and Syria at 175 (Mohnblatt, 2023). Moreover, the state has a monopoly over all television and radio broadcasting, with all TV and radio stations broadcasting from Iran being under regime control. Despite this control, millions of Iranians illegally follow foreign-based stations using satellite dishes. Additionally, authorities have blocked many websites and social media platforms such as Telegram, Facebook, Twitter (now X), and YouTube. However, Iranians access these platforms through anti-filter systems, highlighting the persistent efforts to circumvent censorship (see also Ghanbari Baghestan & Hassan, 2010; Nabavi, 2014).

If professionalism is described through criteria such as academic prerequisites, completion of internships, availability of career progression, adequate income, insurance coverage, compensation, and retirement regulations—all this does not exist in Iran, according to the scholar I interviewed, regarding sports journalism. Moreover, in the realm of journalism, including sports journalism, a significant number of individuals engage in this field purely because they are interested in writing about sports and have managed to be employed by news agencies and newspapers. Due to the absence of a business plan and model for journalism in Iran, most practitioners rely on state funding for their livelihoods. In fact, in the 2007 book *Journalism in Iran: From Mission to Profession*, the author Shahidi (2007) charts the development of professional journalism in Iran since the 1979 revolution that replaced the monarchy with an Islamic Republic. Shahidi argues that print journalism is the only segment of Iranian media where independent journalism has had an opportunity to develop. According to him, the ability of a journalist to make a living outside of the state is the main determinant of press independence. However, in a book review, Will Ward writes that:

[This argument] is not sustained strongly throughout the book, and political, structural and ideological factors come to the fore at various points in the narrative. Another difficulty with the “sustenance” argument is that little information is cited about the relative incomes of journalists over the years or their personal circumstances. (Ward, 2008, p. 2)

As the interviewee stressed, there is currently a lack of formal reports or scientific documentation regarding the interventions made by the state in Iran. However, it is widely understood that sports journalism, much like other forms of journalism and media entities in Iran, cannot operate independently. Consequently, the private sector, which ideally would function autonomously from governmental influence, is not granted permission to operate. Furthermore, most news agencies and newspapers in Iran receive sponsorship from the state. Considering the censorship of social media platforms such as Twitter (now X) within Iran, any discussion regarding the preservation of press freedom appears futile. It would be intricate to distinguish the cognitive frameworks of journalists from the operational guidelines of news agencies (or newspapers) with which they are associated. In any case, it is plausible to assume that individuals employed within state-owned enterprises tend to adopt a conservative individualistic perspective.

Most of the information that can be gathered is not from academic writing; from other sources, the situation regarding journalism and journalists seems bleak. For example, in February 2023, under the headline “Iran: Heavy Jail Terms for Journalists Amid New Arrests,” the International Federation of Journalists reported that:

Thirty-four journalists are still in detention in Iran after being arrested since the outbreak of the national protests following the death of Mahsa Amini on 16 September 2022. Some have received heavy jail terms, including one journalist jailed for up to 18 years. (“Iran: Heavy jail terms,” 2023)

However, some research-based literature does exist. For example, Dabir-Moghadam and Raeesi (2019) conducted a study investigating sports media in an Iranian context to reveal how power relations and ideologies are reflected and strengthened. By employing Fairclough's three-dimensional model on sporting texts, this study revealed that Iranian mass media use language to reproduce and legitimize dominant ideologies associated with groups in power and to challenge and delegitimize opposite views. Language was also found to be an instrument to exercise power and control. Furthermore, at a broader level, as the findings indicate, sports and sportspeople are seen as ways to strengthen dominant ideologies (such as the Iranian government's invincible principle of not recognizing Israel as a state). This is by no means accidental because "today, sport has the loudest voice in the world and can function as a messenger of the Islamic revolution" (Dabir-Moghadam & Raeesi, 2019, p. 91). It is worth noting, however, that in his study, Ranji (2022) highlights the complex realities of journalism in a restrictive context. As he shows, Iranian journalists grapple with diverse role conceptions, navigate limitations through various coping mechanisms, and find ways to maintain a sense of professional identity and purpose within the constraints of their environment.

To conclude, in Iran, it seems that sports journalism is not very professionalized; sports journalists also do not have substantial autonomy from political systems, and there is state intervention. It can hardly be argued that sports journalists in Iran are, or indeed can be, agents of change. It may be argued that, given Iran's rank on the WPMI, almost in the last position, this is obvious. However, it is worth directing attention to the academic discourse that does exist regarding journalism, specifically sports journalism in Iran, which provides a slightly more nuanced and complex perspective on a context that is arguably the most opposite to the Nordic model.

### 3.2. UAE

The UAE, 145th place on the WPMI in 2023, is described thus: "The government prevents both local and foreign independent media outlets from thriving by tracking down and persecuting dissenting voices. Expatriate Emirati journalists risk being harassed, arrested, or extradited."

Regarding the question of how professionalized sports journalism is in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, my interviewee, Pam Creedon, said that when Zayed University admitted male students only—not quite a decade ago—they planned to teach a major in sports journalism. However, according to the university site, it seems they did not. Regarding press freedom, she said it is not protected in the UAE. The promotion of sports, the honouring of national players, or anything that builds tourism is considered "the name of the game" in the UAE. Creedon notes that everything in the UAE is linked to what has been referred to, at least in the West since 2015, as "sportswashing": the act of sponsoring a sports team or event to distract from issues elsewhere (see, for example, Swart et al., 2021). Viard (2021) gives as an example the case of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, where the Russian government used the event to showcase the country's modernity and progress despite ongoing human rights violations. Similarly, the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar has been criticized for its use of sportswashing to distract from the country's poor labour conditions and human rights record (Viard, 2021). In this context, it is not surprising that, according to Creedon, there is government intervention, resulting in journalists avoiding criticism in their writing. For example, she notes that publications such as *The National* do not include any negative sports coverage or anything considered critical. As she points out, if a team loses, the focus shifts to the future and the steps it should take to win.

As far as scholarly work is concerned, it is worth noting that according to Carola Richter from the Institute for Media and Communication Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin, a few articles are being prepared on the global south, including Arab countries, by a group of scholars in the Journalistic Role Performance project. Some of them are, in fact, about sports journalism, like Kozman and Liu's study "Sports News in Five Arab Countries: A Comparative Study of Journalistic Role Performance Across Platforms and Source" (Kozman & Liu, 2024). They clearly show that, although in the West we tend to look at all Arab countries as similar, there are, in fact, differences between them, including in journalistic practices in general and sports in particular. As they put it, the Arab region has traditionally carried the label of authoritarian, which is reflected in the loyalist role the media plays. Moreover, despite the traits shared among various nations across the expansive Arab region, this portrayal does not represent every single country. Although they note that recent scholarship has started to scrutinize the journalistic role performances in relation to the countries Arab media represent, they draw attention to the fact that these studies tend to focus on politics and public affairs and not on sports. Their article examines how journalists perceive and carry out their roles across six nations (five Arab countries spanning the Gulf region, the Levant, and North Africa) and explores the connection between these journalistic roles and the media platforms and sources utilized. Their analysis points to significant effects of country and source diversity in some role performances but not all. Thus, it is important to note that what is true for the UAE is not necessarily true for other Gulf, or indeed Arab, countries.

In conclusion, sports journalists in the UAE do not have substantial autonomy from the economic and political systems, and, according to academic discourse, there is state intervention in this country. Overall, it seems that in the UAE, as in Iran, sports journalists are not, or indeed cannot be, agents of change. In this case, the WPFI ranking (145th) also makes this clear. However, it does support Kozman and Liu (2024) in the idea that journalism in different Arab nations differs, and, although in the discussed respects sports journalism in the UAE is not like the Nordic model, it is not identical to the situation in Iran.

### 3.3. Israel

Israel is considered a Western country in many respects, yet it is part of the Middle East. Some describe Israel as a nation with a Mediterranean identity (see Nocke, 2006). On the WPFI, Israel was ranked 86th in 2022, making it the highest-ranked country in the Middle East. This ranking can be attributed to its more pluralistic political system with stronger democratic checks and balances (Mohnblatt, 2023). However, it is important to note that, in 2023, Israel dropped to the 97th place due to concerns about the destabilization of its media landscape following the rise of a government that threatens freedom of the press. By 2024, Israel had dropped to the 101st place.

According to Shlomi Barzel, no professional requirements exist for becoming a sports journalist in Israel. As a former sports section editor and current lecturer in the School of Media Studies at The College of Management, he mentioned that he would probably prefer to employ someone with a college degree in the sports section. However, it is not a threshold requirement in Israel. One highly critical Israeli media and sports scholar said in the interview that it is not only that in Israel there are no formal requirements to become a sports journalist, but also, according to him, that there are actually no professional standards. In most cases, the reporters, editors, and presenters start at the bottom of the profession and gradually become integrated with no theoretical or practical training, relying solely on what one can describe as "the university of life." Moreover, according to him, the criteria have changed over the years, and professionalism is not a top requirement. Media organizations

now look for individuals who can speak, even shout, and who can be simplistic and relatable to the general public. In this context, it is worth mentioning that in the UK, for example, journalism is practised by graduates: 86% of professional journalists are university-educated, and for early career journalists (those with three or fewer years in employment), the figure is 98% (Thurman et al., 2016). While this is general data, it will likely apply to sports journalism.

This scholar also mentioned that sports journalists in Israel have far more freedom than journalists and editors in other news departments. He attributes this to the fact that nobody asks them to do any cross-checking or even fact-checking. Much of what is printed—and even more so online—is subjective and speculative, and some sports journalists are considered “keyboard fans” since they are emotionally tied to the subjects of their writing. Moreover, the involvement of editors is extremely low due to the fierce competition between the various sports sections and internet sites. Another outcome of this fierce competition is that editors encourage scoops and clickbait, leading to situations where articles are posted about events that did not actually occur. Over the years, the role of sports journalists has changed tremendously in Israel. While in the past sports media reported on sporting events and results, nowadays they are mainly asked to be opinionated and even get involved in the world of sports itself. The shift from reporting to expressing opinions is evident in the many radio and television programs that have become sports talk shows. This change is also reflected in the PhD thesis of media and sports scholar Haim Hagay. One chapter of his thesis investigates the editorial decisions in sports departments and shows—as mentioned by other interviewees—that, in recent years, clickbait has become a central criterion for determining news value (Hagay, 2021). So, it is clear that in the Israeli case, a commercial model prevails. Regarding political influence, he did not encounter such influence in his observational study or in the interviews he conducted. The sports sections are considered less important in the journalistic hierarchy; thus, the same is likely true for the political field. This was also echoed by Shlomi Barzel, current head of public relations at the Israel Football Association. He added that he is unaware of any political influence on the work of sports journalists.

The above-mentioned critical scholar believes that sports journalists in Israel certainly consider themselves agents of change within the realm of sports and are convinced that they can influence Israeli sports reality. In fact, sports teams, especially in men’s football, use sports journalists for their own ends to influence what is happening in the world of Israeli sports. For example, a sports journalist can publish information received from a sports agent, which then becomes part of the contract negotiations for that player. Teams and players “leak” information and use journalists to influence the sports reality. While journalists in other news areas are seen as professionals, within sports departments journalists have more influence on the events they cover. However, regarding being agents of change in the sense discussed in this thematic issue, whether on local or global matters, the scholar believes Israeli sports journalists do not see themselves in that role. In fact, the opposite is true. He argues that they preserve the current situation, including the small politics and the “one hand washes the other” mentality that is part of Israeli sports, and they do not act to change it. They also perpetuate chauvinism and identify with the masculine and sometimes violent aspects that, according to him, characterize Israeli sports. As such, they do not act as agents of change. While they may speak against negative phenomena in television studios, their day-to-day coverage and conduct do not align with being agents of change. In simple terms, according to this highly critical scholar, Israeli sports journalists do not try to change the world. No one even presumes they can, certainly not globally.



Indeed, a clear example supports these claims and relates to the issue of sports journalists as agents of change more generally. This example pertains to the critical journalist and columnist Ouriel Daskal, who announced he would not continue writing about sports. Previously, he had written about human rights in general and LGBTQ rights in the context of sports. However, in an article titled “Final Whistle,” published on June 8, 2023, he announced his departure from sports writing and explained his decision:

At one point in my career, I realized I cannot write only on the entertainment side of sports...if you focus solely on sports coverage, from the “professional” standpoint, you are no longer a journalist; you are an entertainer. And if you refuse to be an entertainer, you are attacked multiple times by readers, viewers or individuals with vested interests who say things like “Why do you mix politics and sports?” or “Stay focused on sports”....That is not what I wished for when I entered sports journalism. (Daskal, 2023)

He clearly felt he could not be an agent of change. However, Daskal is an exception, and very few sports journalists attempt to be agents of change. One example is the previously mentioned Barzel. As a sports editor, he tried to increase the coverage of women’s sports. Indeed, some studies, such as Tamir and Galily (2011) and Tamir and Bernstein (2013), show that there is a potential for sports journalists to contribute to change in Israel, particularly in promoting women’s sports. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that there are more critical voices advocating change on social media platforms.

In Israel, sports journalism is not highly professionalized in terms of formal requirements such as higher education to become a sports journalist. While there is substantial autonomy from the political system, the economic system exerts a significant influence. It appears that aside from rare individual journalists, sports journalists in Israel are not agents of change. Therefore, it can be argued that in the Israeli context, the economic model prevails over a model similar to the Nordic one.

One event considered highly noteworthy and that received significant media attention was the speech by Barak Bahar, the Israeli head coach of Crvena Zvezda (Red Star Belgrade), on October 24, 2023. In his speech, Bahar expressed dismay with major European clubs such as Real Madrid, Barcelona, and Liverpool for their tepid response to the massacre on October 7, 2023, in the south of Israel. He concluded by saying: “My country is bleeding, but no one will break the Israeli spirit, *Am Israel Chai* [the people of Israel live]!” (Hapoel Beer Sheva Fans—Vesarmilya, 2023). This speech, delivered at the start of an official Champions League press conference, was broadcast multiple times on Israeli television, reported in newspapers, and widely shared on social media. However, despite these significant events, by the time of writing, the opening page of the online webpage of Channel 5 looked similar to any other year around this time of the sporting calendar.

This case clearly shows us that the usual pattern of sports journalism is disrupted only by extraordinary events, and then only temporarily before it re-establishes itself. This suggests that if sports journalists aim to effect any change within the system, their efforts would need to be consistent over a prolonged and sustained period and have the support of the sports structures themselves.

### 3.4. Spain

On the WPFI, Spain was ranked in 2023 in the 36th place and is described thus: “Political polarization is reflected in the media, which dangerously blurs the line between information and opinion, thereby fuelling

a tendency to denigrate journalism. Press freedom is also threatened by an increase in SLAPPs against the media and journalists” (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.-a).

In the Spanish case as well, according to Xavier Ramon, there is not much literature about sports journalism and its professional roles in Spain. However, in Ramon’s co-authored chapter with Rojas-Torrijos, “Mapping Ethical Dilemmas for Sports Journalism: An Overview of the Spanish Landscape,” they focused on the ethical dilemmas that sports journalists face in Spain (Rojas-Torrijos & Ramon, 2022). The chapter provides an overview of many problems affecting sports journalism practice in the Spanish context: lack of diversity on the agenda, blurring of boundaries between sports reporting and show business, self-promotion, excessive dependence on and proximity to sources, and the lack of independence and subordination to the clubs’ sports departments. According to Ramon, this lack of independence is not exclusive to sports journalism, as dependence on economic powers has historically characterized the Spanish media system.

In another chapter co-authored by Ramon, Rodríguez-Martínez, Mauri-Ríos, and Alsius titled “Professionalization of Journalism and the Prevalent Degree of Political Parallelism,” the authors do not specifically focus on sports journalism, but the chapter can, according to Ramon, be easily applied to sports journalism (Ramon et al., 2022). Polarization, low professionalization, economic pressures, and dependence on official sources also directly apply to sports journalism in Spain. Furthermore, an article by Humanes (2023) focuses on the performance of professional roles in sports journalism. According to this article, the professional roles that are more present in Spanish sports journalism are the interventionist, the infotainer, and the loyal facilitator.

Sports journalism in Spain is professionalized and enjoys substantial autonomy from political systems. However, economic powers hold significant influence. It appears that sports journalists in Spain do not often act as agents of change. While the existing academic literature on sports journalism in Spain, especially publications in English, is limited, based on the interview and the publications mentioned above, it can be argued that the Nordic model cannot be directly applied to Spanish sports journalism.

### 3.5. Germany

On the WPFI, Germany ranked 21st in 2023, dropping five places from 2022, and the situation was described thus: “The overall environment is favourable to journalism, but violence and verbal attacks are rising. Draft bills threaten the protection of journalistic sources, access to information is fragmented, and media pluralism has been decreasing” (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.-b).

In the context of this article, rooted in academic discourse, it is worth noting that access to scholarly literature for non-German speakers is limited, as most publications are in German. As Daniel Nölleke put it:

The problem with your research is that results about German sports journalists are rarely published in English.

According to Thomas Horkey, sports journalism in Germany is highly professionalized. Due to the country’s history and constitution, everyone is entitled to freedom of speech, including freedom of the press. Consequently, anyone can work as a journalist without needing specific education or other prerequisites to

become a sports journalist. This sentiment is echoed by Nölleke, who added that although it is not compulsory to study a course to become a sports journalist, there are universities and universities of applied sciences that offer special programs in sports journalism. Another indicator of professionalization is the presence of the Association of German Sports Journalists in Germany, along with several awards specifically dedicated to sports journalism.

Hauer's (2012) dissertation, also published as a book titled *Sports Journalism in Germany From Market Crier to Missionary: The Professional Self-Image of Sports Journalists in Germany*, delves into the evolving role of sports journalists within the German media landscape. She writes that the importance of sport in the German media landscape is extraordinary and that the once "outsiders of the editorial team" have advanced to become "stars of the media industry." However, some think they are simply "fans who have made it over the barrier." In her study, Hauer interviewed 47 sports journalists to explore their self-image. The resulting typology reveals diverse perspectives among journalists. On one end are those who see themselves primarily as entertainers, while on the other are those who adopt a more critical stance. Hauer connects these different self-conceptions with the specific media platforms in which journalists operate. For instance, television reporters may view themselves as fans who are allowed to support Germany openly. In contrast, editors at major newspapers may maintain a more detached stance, refraining from overt displays of enthusiasm even after significant victories.

Slightly earlier, in 2010, Schaffrath published an article titled "Intermediaries, Marketers and Sellers: Empirical Study on the Professional Self-Image of TV Sports Journalists" (Schaffrath, 2010). The article examines the transformations within sports reporting brought about by the establishment of private television, the rise of pay TV, the emergence of sports channels, and the development of IPTV and web TV. These shifts have changed sports reporting considerably. The main consequences of these processes include the commercialization, economization, tabloidization, and entertainization of sports reporting. Schaffrath's study focused on the self-image of TV sports journalists in Germany, surveying 101 television journalists to explore their perspectives. The findings revealed that these journalists perceive themselves not only as advocates of broader societal interests but also as representatives of various personal and professional interests. They identify themselves as "providers of information," "sellers of program content," and "marketers of themselves." Importantly, the study underscores that sports journalism is interconnected with broader journalistic practices, shedding light on overarching structures, functions, and processes within journalism as a whole.

Sports journalism in Germany is indeed professionalized and enjoys substantial autonomy from the political system. According to the Media Landscapes site, "political parallelism in the press has been traditionally low since 1945 in Western Germany. The journalism profession has since achieved effective self-regulation and established ethical standards, which were set in the *Presscodex* of the self-governed *Presserat* (Press Council)" (Media Landscapes, n.d.). Nölleke further supports this, emphasizing there are no political constraints; moreover, one could even argue that political and judicial decisions support sports journalism, as sports reporting is seen as a public service. Some events (e.g., the FIFA World Cup final or the Olympic Games) must be broadcast on free TV, but this is the only aspect that can be considered state intervention. Nölleke notes that politicians occasionally express their opinions on sports journalism (e.g., on the coverage of the World Cup in Qatar; on the broadcast of the Women's World Cup on free-to-air TV), but they do not (or cannot) interfere at all. He, too, attributes this hands-off approach to the experiences of the 1930s, which shaped the German media system to be autonomous from any kind of state intervention.

However, like in other Western countries, the economic system exerts considerable influence over sports journalism in Germany. According to Nölleke, this applies in particular to major media sports such as soccer, where varying broadcasting rights create a hierarchy among sports journalists regarding event access. As sports journalism's survival and success depend largely on access to sporting events, sports journalism also largely avoids being too critical for fear of losing access.

It is evident from Nölleke's perspective that German sports journalists do not perceive themselves as agents of change. Instead, they typically view their role as that of providing neutral information, as well as offering relaxation and entertainment to the audience. According to him, this traditional approach of focusing on sports coverage remains predominant in Germany. Considering the academic discourse, it can be concluded that while aspects of the Nordic model may apply to Germany, especially regarding professionalization and autonomy from political influence, it does not fully align with the model. The emphasis on neutrality and entertainment in German sports journalism diverges from the more critical and change-oriented approach often associated with the Nordic model. Nevertheless, among the countries discussed in this article, Germany appears to be the closest to the Nordic model, albeit with distinct characteristics and priorities in sports journalism.

#### 4. Limitations

Importantly, this exploratory study aims to gain insight into several countries (as a sample) to show an understanding of how sports journalism is not a monoculture but manifests itself in different ways in different contexts. Its limitations are in size and scope, with relatively few interviewees and countries analyzed. Further research could help deepen the understanding of the aspects raised in this article and should expand the number of countries and interviewees.

#### 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this article, based on academic discourse, examines the role of sports journalists as agents of change in different parts of the world, offering a nuanced perspective beyond the Western or Nordic context. Exploring Iran, the UAE, Israel, Spain, and Germany provides insights into the professionalization, autonomy, state intervention, and the potential for sports journalists to act as agents of change. Importantly, the choice to center this article on interviews conducted with scholars instead of journalists is grounded in the belief that scholars will likely offer a broader and more discerning perspective on the present state of affairs. This stems from the recognition that journalists may not necessarily hold similar viewpoints and, in certain countries, they might face restrictions in expressing their opinions freely.

In Iran, the challenging media landscape, lack of formal regulations, and state control limit the professionalization of sports journalism. Journalists face risks and constraints, making it difficult for them to be effective agents of change in a society marked by restricted press freedom. The UAE presents a scenario where sports journalism is intertwined with tourism and government interests. The emphasis on promoting sports for economic reasons limits journalists' autonomy, leading to a lack of critical reporting. State intervention and the prioritization of positive narratives hinder the transformative potential of sports journalism in the UAE.

In Israel, the sports journalism landscape is characterized by a lack of formal requirements and professional standards. Journalists enjoy a degree of freedom but are influenced by competition, leading to sensationalism and subjective reporting. While some individual journalists may attempt to be agents of change, the overall sentiment suggests a preservation of the status quo and a reluctance to challenge societal norms. Spain exhibits political polarization in media, including sports journalism, with ethical dilemmas impacting the profession. Despite professionalization, the influence of economic powers and blurred lines between information and opinion contribute to a less proactive role for sports journalists as agents of change. With a favorable environment for journalism, Germany sees sports journalism as highly professionalized. The historical context and constitutional provisions support freedom of the press, allowing for substantial autonomy. Economic influences are present, but sports journalists in Germany may have the potential to act as agents of change, aligning with the Nordic model.

In diverse global contexts, the article underscores the importance of understanding the unique challenges and opportunities faced by sports journalists. Their potential to serve as agents of change is shaped by the interplay of political, economic, and cultural factors within each country, challenging assumptions about the universal role of sports journalism in promoting positive societal transformations.

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### Data Availability

World Press Freedom Index (WPI): <https://rsf.org/en/index>

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