

From Social Clubs to Champions for Sports Journalistic Identity and Integrity

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Abstract

Taking the FIFA World Cup in Qatar as a point of departure, this article analyses the changing role of national associations of sports journalists in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Introducing the concept of meta-journalistic discourse and well-established media system theories, it is argued that Nordic sports journalism’s negotiations of professional practices and standards are shaped by a particular media systemic context with distinct Nordic welfare state-oriented features. One such feature is a tradition of using collective, organized social groups, like democratically based voluntary associations, as instruments for social change. The empirical study explores this through a qualitative thematic analysis of the changing structures, identities, and practices of the national associations of sports journalists across the three countries. This illustrates how the organizations in particular during the last two decades have started very similar processes of transformation away from being mainly social clubs. The associations have used their collective frameworks and bargaining power to ensure independent journalists’ access to sports organizations and athletes, and they have engaged in negotiations of what sports journalism is and what constitutes sports journalism in a sports media landscape shaped by strong combined forces of digitization and politicization.

Keywords

boundary work; digitization; FIFA World Cup; media system; meta journalistic discourse; politicization; sports journalism

1. Introduction

The Olympic Games in Beijing 2008 was a turning point for many Western media, resulting in a growing focus on working conditions for reporting journalists and the sociocultural contexts of both the Beijing games and

following sporting mega-events. In 2022, Danish media intensified the critical angle during the FIFA World Cup in Qatar and broke a significant pattern from coverage of previous mega-events: When the sporting actions in Qatar commenced, interest in the sociocultural context of the sporting competitions did not cease. Before the event, four large media outlets actually urged the Danish Football Association (DBU) to boycott participation in the games, and a survey provided for the national broadcaster, TV 2, and the national news outlet *Politiken* just before the games, documented that 43% of Danes thought that the association should have boycotted the event. But only a few media ended up boycotting themselves. Like the minor niche and left-wing news outlet, *Information*, who decided not to cover any aspects of the games, and instead solely focus critically on events outside the field up until and during the event. And also the regional news outlet *Nordjyske Medier*, which decided not to support the event by sending journalists to Qatar, and instead covered it at a distance from Denmark. Still, the big majority of Danish media followed the agenda set by the DBU, who after dialogue with Amnesty International and Danish Trade Unions, argued that they would use the event to put political pressure on the host and engage in a critical dialogue for change of both human rights and worker's rights. Thus, Danish media decided to send journalists to Qatar to cover both the games and the context. As the chief editor of one of the largest news outlets, *Politiken*, Anne Mette Svane, explains: "This is a very unique World Championship. In general, sport and football cannot be kept separate from politics, and that is why we think it is an important event to cover" (Carn, 2021).

So, in the first week of the event, several media—including the two public service broadcasters who shared the rights to live coverage—combined a traditional sports journalistic focus on the tactics and performances of the Danish national team and other participants with a dedicated interest in human rights issues in the hosting nation.

This integration of sporting and political perspectives was a culmination of years of coverage in which media, on the one hand, had paid attention to the varying scandals surrounding the organising sporting body (the International Federation of Association Football [FIFA]), including its decision-making processes and the conditions for workers building stadiums for the event in Qatar, and, on the other hand, in which Danish media had also engaged in regular intense coverage of the successful qualification matches of the Danish national team. The co-existence of these two perspectives illustrates how Danish media and journalists in their practice currently navigate ambivalences and dilemmas in relation to sporting mega-events (Horne & Manzenreiter, 2006; Roche, 2000) which are hosted for political reasons by illiberal regimes.

Concerns about the contexts were articulated by journalists, media managers, fans, sports organisations, and politicians, and this was not unique to Denmark before the Qatar games. Yet, in a Nordic context, they were brought to a head by the Danish national team's participation, and they were widely shared across the media, sports, and political sectors in Denmark. Thus, sports journalists' networks with actors in sports, politics, other media outlets, audiences, and different sorts of journalistic organizations were activated in both informal and public discussions and debates about the journalistic line and legitimacy in relation to the event. In a Nordic context this type of processual "boundary work," where journalists interpret and negotiate their journalistic role through discussions of "topics for news coverage and normative commitments" (Carlson, 2016, p. 360) with various external actors, is underpinned by a media-political culture characterized by shared norms regarding the independence of journalism and pragmatic cooperation between main stakeholders in and outside the media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Syvertsen et al., 2014). As expressed when the DBU, the Danish Union of Journalists—Media and Communications, and the Association of Danish

Sports Journalists collectively invited a public debate about the coverage a couple of weeks before the event. In the invitation, they expressed their shared normative concerns:

Can journalists cover a World Cup, which is normally about enthusiasm and excitement, when it, in this case, is also about corruption and breaches of human rights? And how will the Danish Football Association manage communication when the men's national team is sent to a hosting nation which is subject to serious critique from politicians, organisations and football fans? (Davidsen, 2022b)

Taking the Qatar Games as a point of departure, this article analyses how Nordic sports journalists' actual responses to such dilemmas need to be seen from a wider media systemic perspective. In doing this, the article goes behind the scenes, focusing on the particular role of the national associations of sports journalists in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden.

2. Meta Journalistic Discourses and Media Systemic Characteristics

Before the games started in Qatar and during the first week of the event, the hybrid journalistic approach in Denmark's case was fuelled by the DBU, the coach, and the captain of the team. At press meetings and in interviews, they explicitly articulated concerns about the hosting nation's human rights violations and announced political protests during the event. Yet, FIFA announced that such actions would be sanctioned, and, as the Danish team's first match later ended in a draw making sporting success more doubtful, those topics were removed from the association's communication agenda and managers and players refused to answer journalists' persistent questions regarding these aspects.

On one of the public broadcasters, TV 2, a popular Danish commentator (educated journalist and former professional footballer) followed up on the matter, pointing out that such continued critical approaches to the event and the host were absolutely not a concern shared by the majority of media covering the event and its games. From his on-site observations, it was mainly a small group of journalists from the Nordic countries (Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland) and a few Northern European countries (e.g., Germany and the Netherlands) which had a focus on such contextual issues at press meetings. According to him, the vast majority seemed to be mainly concerned with the games, celebrating football, and the festive dimensions of the event.

This "meta journalistic discourse" (Carlson, 2016; Ferrucci, 2022), where journalists provide "public expressions evaluating the texts, the practices that produce them, or the conditions of their reception" (Carlson, 2016, p. 350), suggests that sports journalists from the Northern European region share similar values. It illustrates that the Qatar games were a "critical incident in the industry" (Ferrucci, 2022, p. 2065), which caused many journalists from the Nordic region to reflect on how they perceived themselves as different from the rest of the professional global community present in Qatar. Sharing such reflections publicly serves to legitimise a journalistic practice, illustrating that journalistic values are constructions rooted in ideals which are assumed to be shared and co-constructed among the wider national audience.

Following up on these anecdotal observations, this article argues that such discursive constructions of authority are part of a regional picture, where Nordic sports journalism is in transition due to ongoing processes of digitisation, ongoing commercialisation, and, not least, renewed politicisation of sport. These

are all well-documented global trends affecting sports journalism in different ways; however, in a Nordic context, some of the responses and processes take shape from distinct features in the Nordic political culture and media system. One such characteristic is “early democratization, a history of organized political pluralism and corporatism” (Schröder et al., 2020, p. 24). This means, for instance, that the region has (relatively) strong unions and a wide range of formalised, democratically based civil society movements and organisations which remain important instruments for social change. The continued significance of such organisations became particularly evident in the Nordic debates relating to coverage of the Qatar games, as the voluntary, democratically based national associations of sports journalists in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden all engaged in internal and/or external public debates on this. However, their recent engagement has to be seen from a historical perspective: Across the Nordic countries, these organisations, which are not unions but interest organisations with long histories, have undertaken significant processes of redefinition over the last decade. In different, but also very similar ways, they have taken on more responsibilities for the development of professional identity, standards, and ethics. Their endeavours to support the developments of sports journalism in times of both structural and political change have also entailed an increased focus on cross-national organisational collaborations.

3. Media System Models and Sports Journalism

Northern European sports journalists’ perception of having diverging interests from the rest of the professional community in Qatar illustrates how journalistic culture and practices are very much shaped and informed by the media’s systemic context. Further, it indicates that sports journalism—with the increased politicisation of sport—may become more diversified across nations and regions in compliance with larger, historical differences in political cultures and media structures. Such differences are suggested by Hallin and Mancini (2004) in their seminal book *Comparing Media Systems*, in which they propose a model for comparing media systems in the Western World. Their focus is on hypothesising a relationship between political systems and media systems, based on qualitative analyses of the histories of media systems in North America and most of Western Europe. Their model is helpful for us as they argue that media organisations “at each step of their evolution past events and institutional patterns inherited from earlier periods influence the direction they take” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 12). Their basic idea is that organisations and individuals in different media systems are connected with different but “socially shared conceptions about state and society, objectivity, the public interest and the like” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 9). This is illustrated by the Danish commentator who shared his observations in Qatar press meetings with not only colleagues but also the public.

Hallin and Mancini introduce three media system models which are “ideal types,” meaning that “the media systems of individual countries fit them only roughly” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 11). Each ideal type covers a grouping of national media systems, which share characteristic patterns but also vary on some dimensions. The three suggested models are the Mediterranean or polarized pluralist model, the Northern European or democratic corporatist model, and the North Atlantic or liberal model. The three models are distinguished by characteristics regarding: (a) the newspaper industry and circulation of the press; (b) patterns of political parallelism (the interrelationships between the media and political systems); (c) the professionalisation of journalism; and (d) the role of the state in the media system. As the interest lies in understanding the role of media in relation to politics, their model may not be considered relevant at first sight for analysis of sports journalism, which scholars have recurrently described as less professional: a kind of “soft news” or

low-status entertainment journalism (Boyle, 2006; English, 2018; Rowe, 2007). Nevertheless, Baum (2003) has argued that soft news is of political relevance as they make less educated or informed audiences more attentive and opinionated to political issues. This could count for segments of the sports audiences, which are not interested in coverage of politics, but may become more attentive to geopolitics through sports media's intense coverage of this kind of politicised mega-events. Besides, Hallin and Mancini's understanding of the relationship between media and politics as reflections of deeper cultural characteristics means that it makes sense to consider interrelations between actors in media and powerful sports organisations as affected by the same culture. So, when journalists from the Northern European region took a more critical stance in Qatar towards both the hosts and the role of FIFA, it reflected a systemic culture.

Hutchins and Boyle (2017) have used sports journalism as a case to illustrate how journalism in general is transforming due to media systemic contexts and digitisation. They argue that sports journalists constitute "a community that justifies its contribution and value by seeking to adapt traditional precepts of journalism to a changeable context in which digital and mobile media continue to alter the presentation, economics and parameter of news" (Hutchins & Boyle, 2017, p. 500). Now intensified politicisation of sport, which includes geopolitical tensions, soft power strategies, and identity political issues, adds to such a combined process where sports journalists both adapt to the digital condition and hegemonic norms in journalism.

4. The Nordic Media Systems: Journalistic Freedom and Professionalisation

The Nordic media systems belong to the Northern European or democratic corporatist model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). This model comprises media systems that are geographically close to each other and have had lots of contact. It includes the Nordic countries, the low countries, Austria, Switzerland, and Germany. With the exception of Germany, they are relatively small national states, and their media systems are characterised by (a) high mass-circulation of news and high levels of news consumption, (b) developments of a neutral commercial press and of public broadcasting systems with substantial autonomy from the political system, (c) strong professionalisation of journalism and institutionalised self-regulation, and (d) strong state intervention—but with protection for press freedom. The four dimensions are somehow interrelated, and language and market sizes are factors which connect some of the dimensions in these North European media systems because they "have important implications for the number of media outlets, and hence for both state regulation of media and the relation of media outlets with political actors" (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, pp. 25–26). The small national markets explain why the Nordic media systems have a distinct "co-existence" of strong freedom of the press and very strong state intervention in the media systems in the form of publicly owned broadcasting institutions and state subsidies to private news outlets: the state must play an active role to ensure "equal opportunities of communication" (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 197).

The dimension regarding the professionalisation of journalism is particularly relevant to the present analysis. Hallin and Mancini suggest identifying the level of professionalism in journalism by looking at three key aspects:

1. **Autonomy:** To what degree are the working processes and authority to decide governed by journalistic and collegial values—in contrast to being instrumentalised by internal or external commercial or political interests?

2. Distinct professional norms: To what extent do the journalists share norms and ethical principles (e.g., obligations to protect sources, maintain separation between commercial/political interests and editorial content, follow shared news criteria, or define criteria for excellence in professional practice)?
3. Public service orientation: To what extent are the journalists oriented towards ethics of working in the service of the public, meaning defining their roles ideologically in relation to society (such as a society based on democracy) and manifesting such orientations through systems of formal or informal self-regulation?

Hallin and Mancini tend to single the Nordic countries out as a separate cluster in the Northern European or democratic corporatist model. Thus, 10 years after their book, other scholars have elaborated on their framework, arguing that while the small Nordic media systems may have been idealised they should still be considered in a separate cluster. Brüggemann et al. (2015) draw on updated data and argue that these countries have taken over from the North American/liberal model as frontrunners regarding journalistic professionalism—not least due to press subsidies and dominant positions of public broadcasting institutions. Norwegian scholars argue that values underpinning the societal model of a welfare state and a “socio-democratic information culture” (Syvertsen et al., 2014, p. 15) inform processes of digitisation. The countries have a strong focus on protecting and securing all individuals’ free access to information—in the digital age on many platforms. In their description of a Nordic “Media Welfare State,” they observe that Nordic media have historically been “perceived more as a vehicle for information and culture and less a vehicle for entertainment” (Syvertsen et al., 2014, p. 44). They make “institutionalized editorial freedom” one out of four bearing principles in the Nordic countries’ media systems. As the analysis will illustrate, this has been a focus point for the Nordic associations of sports journalists in relation to more recent debates about journalistic standards and in particular to the Qatar games.

Despite strong processes of commercialisation and globalisation across the Nordic countries, Ahva et al. (2017) conclude that there is a strong sense of professional autonomy among Nordic journalists, attributing this to the combined forces of the strong role of public service broadcasters, substantive subsidies for the private press, strong journalist unions, and press laws. Even though sports journalism has historically been a field also serving important commercial interests (Boyle, 2006; Rowe, 2007), and thus an object of both external and internal instrumentalisation, this broader journalistic culture seems to inform recent discussions among Nordic sports journalists.

5. The Empirical Study

The analysis presents findings from an explorative qualitative analysis of aims, values, practices, and ongoing policy-making processes in and among the national associations of sports journalists in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. While Finland also has a national association which is under transformation, it has not been included for pragmatic reasons as the Finnish language is very different from the other Nordic languages. The analysis is inspired by communication policy research, which involves a study of policy debates and processes in policy-making (for a further introduction see Puppis & Van den Bulck, 2019) and employs various documents in the analysis (Karppinen & Moe, 2019). The material which has been used for analysis consists of public interviews, websites, various information about the organisations published on their websites, analogue publications from the associations, and interviews with chairs.

The analytical approach to the material has been a thematic analysis inspired by Herzog et al.(2019) in which researchers, based on close reading and coding across the collected material, “develop a matrix of cases and recurrent concepts and themes” (Herzog et al., 2019, p. 387). In contrast to the suggested grounded theory approach to coding, the coding process has not been entirely inductive as the conceptual understanding of the associations as somehow informed by the particular media systems has influenced the coding and analysis.

6. Professional Self-Responsibility in Times of Transformation

Historically, all three organisations were, and still are, organised as informal, civil-society-based associations based on paid membership, voluntary commitment, self-responsibility, and transparent democratic election procedures to the managing boards. This type of self-organisation follows a tradition in the Nordic countries, and, at the time of their establishment, they reflected existing strong localised structures of the press in the Nordic countries. In the first place, their purpose was to serve the social- as well as practice-oriented and pragmatic interests of journalists, at a time when sports journalism in general had not yet been cultivated into an institution of its own with public and professional legitimacy and identity (Frandsen, 1996, 2008; Lowrey, 2018; Wallin, 1998). For example, the Danish association, Club of Copenhagen Sports Journalists, was established in 1922 at a Copenhagen restaurant by a group of journalists—formally in order to ensure sports journalists access to the upcoming Olympic Games in Paris 1924 (Davidsen, 2022a). In 1964, the Danish association changed its name to Danish Sports Journalists as the organisation merged with a later club of sports journalists from the provinces. In parallel, the Norwegian association, The Association of Norwegian Sports Journalists, was established as The Club of Sports Journalists at the end of 1921, whereas the Swedish Association of Sports Journalists was founded in 1949 as an umbrella organisation for a range of already existing local/regional clubs. Both the Norwegian and Swedish organisations reflect that their countries are large and have a Nordic cultural and political orientation towards strong state support in order to sustain locally oriented press structures. Accordingly, as recently as 2017, the Swedish association was restructured, now defining itself solely as one national interest organisation for individual sports journalists, and not an umbrella for local organizations. The goal of this re-organisation was to establish one organisation able to arrange new types of professional activities and not only social events, which until then had been the main activity in many of the small local clubs (Petter Nilsson, spokesperson and board member for Swedish Association of Sports Journalists, personal communication, April 3, 2023). The need for a stronger national organisation relates to the ongoing structural transformations of all media systems. Hence, an increasing number of sports journalists face isolated and individualised working conditions and new professional challenges. The Norwegian association has addressed these issues:

The whole industry has changed, and the technology has changed. Our identity now is that we are an interest organization for approximately 550 members. With a greater focus on the content in sports journalism than before, where we were more a kind of practical association, taking care of accreditations, traveling, membership [AIPS] and things like that. (Reidar Sollie, former chair of The Association of Norwegian Sports Journalists, personal communication, March 23, 2023)

The shared ambitions also imply balancing the historical roots and digitised future as articulated by Jimmy Bøjgaard:

The association remains a social thing, and we enjoy that part. But we would also like to push the association in a new direction. We want to progress and not just be a social meeting place for pensioners. We want to protect young sports journalists. For instance, we have a lot of discussions about the digital journalists who are out there but not necessarily members. (Jimmy Bøjgaard, chair of Danish Sports Journalists, personal communication, December 16, 2022)

The emerging responsibility for colleagues engaged in the production of sports content for a still-evolving range of digital media sports platforms is important for the associations as they face diminishing membership bases. During the 1980s and 1990s, the Danish association, for instance, was constantly growing; however, since 2001, the number of members has decreased from 624 to around 420 in 2022 (Davidsen, 2022a).

One aspect of the ongoing adaptation to a digitised and mediatised condition (Frandsen, 2020; Kammer, 2013; Kunelius & Reunanen, 2016) is how they define being a sports journalist and how this is negotiated and implemented in the requirements for membership. With digitisation, sports organisations have become mediatised and build up their own media units (Edmondson, 2022; Frandsen, 2020; Grimmer, 2017; Sherwood et al., 2017). This entails that a growing number of journalists work for sports organisations either part-time or full-time. The three associations have responded to this development in slightly different ways, illustrating that sports journalistic identity and autonomy is currently negotiated. First, until 2023, the rules for Danish Sports Journalists set formal membership of the union, Danish Union of Journalists—Media & Communications, as a prerequisite for membership. In that sense, the association has a historic, formal orientation towards general professional journalistic standards. Currently, politicisation of sport means that this is a relationship which is of increasing importance. This formal requirement is now historic because the association focuses on attracting new digital colleagues, of which many are not members of the journalists' union. This Danish approach is in line with the Danish union's approach to the transformation of the profession, as the union has accepted communication professionals for some years as members in a separate division. The Danish chair, Jimmy Bøjgaard, explains "it [The Danish Union of Journalists] has many divisions today...so, journalistic identity is under development. Influencers are also integrated" (Jimmy Bøjgaard, chair of Danish Sports Journalists, personal communication, December 16, 2022).

This pragmatic approach is only partly shared by the two other Nordic associations. Neither of them have had a similar, historic, formalised relationship with the national unions, but they stress the independence in their rules. The Swedish association explicitly addresses this in a comment in their recently revised rules:

The question is who is regarded a journalist. The association's interpretation is that the goal of the sports journalist is to convey independent journalism. In a fan club, for instance, the goal is to make the club popular, and the work in a communication unit also entails a different goal. Therefore, the Association of Swedish Sports Journalists doesn't accept people who work in fan clubs or communication units as members. (Svenska Sportjournalistförbundet, (n.d.-a)

The Norwegian association also links to values of media freedom, defining sports journalism as "free, independent practice of journalism according to the norms set by the Norwegian Association of Journalists" (Norske Sportsjournalisters Forbund, n.d.-a) in their rules for membership. Still, in line with the Danes, the Norwegian organisation only requires members to have sports journalism as their primary field of occupation, and they accept freelancers. Yet, from 2014, they accepted members who receive less than half

of their income from independent sports journalism because “there are fewer permanent positions in the industry” (Association of Norwegian Sports Journalists, Regulations § 4).

7. Safeguarding Content and Professional Standards

As mentioned, the associations now engage more in the content produced. This way the organisations take more responsibility in safeguarding journalistic content and in the shaping of norms and criteria for excellence in Nordic sports journalism. This is caused by digitisation: Sports organisations and other social actors in sports have developed new communication platforms, eroding independent sports journalists’ historic, powerful role as gate-keepers of communication about sport. Digitisation has also prompted: a diversification in formats, genres, and platforms; increased the working pressure; and added further dimensions to the already multidimensional role of sports journalists (Boyle, 2017; English, 2021; Frandsen, 1996, 2008; Hutchins & Boyle, 2017).

For these reasons, securing access for independent journalists to powerful sports organisations and athletes has been an important focus for the associations. This is an immediate continuation of the organisations’ historic roles. Yet, the context and needs for organised bargaining power are different as sports organisations with strong resources now find independent journalists less useful. Hence, the associations consider it an increasingly important task to negotiate and regularise independent journalists’ access to both national and international organisations and athletes. This entails justifying the particular societal role of independent journalists. The associations have to “work closely with them [big organisations] to make the job of our members easier...It is sometimes hard to understand how little they understand about journalism” (Petter Nilsson, spokesperson and board member for the Swedish Association of Sports Journalists, personal communication, April 3, 2023). The practice reflects a distinct feature in the Nordic societal model, where organised social and political forces have been crucial (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), and where the media systems entail “a preference for consensual solutions that are durable and involve cooperation between main stakeholders” (Syvertsen et al., 2014, p. 17). Cooperation builds on mutual understandings on the organisational meso-level, as expressed by the Danish chair: “I can easily have meetings with the Danish League and the Danish Football Association coincident with *Politiken* grilling them” (Jimmy Bøjgaard, chair of Danish Sports Journalists, personal communication, December 16, 2022). For Bøjgaard, the association has an important function as a buffer between individual journalists and increasingly powerful sports organisations, and organisational meso-level collaboration is vital for maintaining a productive relationship—also on the micro-level.

Development of content and fine-tuning of professional standards and values are directly expressed through awards and fellowships. Since the 1970s, the Swedish association has awarded stipends to members in order to support and promote the development of sports journalism beyond what is normally possible for the individual journalist (Svenska Sportjournalistförbundet, n.d.-b). The Norwegian association has just recently introduced a high-profile annual conference, where topics like gender, working conditions, methods, and ethics are discussed, and where the sports journalistic work of the year is awarded. The aim of this award is not only to set standards of excellence in the journalistic product but also to recognise the importance of teamwork, because, “We learn that any revelation now is more frequently based on teamwork” (Reidar Sollie, former chair of The Association of Norwegian Sports Journalists, personal communication, March 23, 2023).

The Norwegian award initiative has been inspired by a tradition in the Danish Association, where The Sports Journalist of the Year/The Golden Pen has been awarded annually since 1962. The award has been awarded to:

One or more members who, in the preceding year, have excelled in sensational and significant performance in words or pictures, and who, by such achievement, have commanded respect for Danish sports journalism and improved the reputation and credibility of the profession. (Davidsen, 2022a, p. 207)

The focus on significance and “reputation” has served to connect Danish sports journalism closer to hegemonic norms and standards in the journalistic profession and work against sports journalism’s low status. It leaves room for pragmatic interpretation and does not focus entirely on revelations or critique. However, the prize has been perceived as biased towards sports print media. Therefore, a range of digital awards was launched in 2014, now recognising younger content producers and how sports content in the digital age is diversifying, resulting in new formats and genres. The chair explains that “the most important aspect has been to start focusing on it. That you have an occasion where you can articulate: what kind of digital projects have we seen? Who are the most talented?” (Jimmy Bøjgaard, chair of Danish Sports Journalists, personal communication, December 16, 2022). This elucidates an adaptive approach very similar to Hutchins and Boyle’s (2017) observations among individual Scottish and Australian sports journalists. Here, however, it is put into operation in a collective process and framework, supporting journalistic excellence in the long term to become more diverse, and with innovation foregrounded as an important professional value. Implicitly, this illustrates how values favouring collective, cooperative, and consensual processes are put up against deeper processes of fragmentation in the profession.

8. Networking and Inter-Relational Negotiations of Journalistic Autonomy and Authority

Across the three Nordic countries, the Qatar games raised public debates in which the associations took agency, discussing the upcoming coverage internally and externally with managers from the journalists’ unions, the national football associations, media and research organisations, and Amnesty International. Such debates reflect how the authority and legitimacy of sports journalism are inter-relational and negotiated in boundary working processes between journalists and non-journalists (Carlson, 2016; Ferrucci, 2022) and not shaped in isolated autonomy, as Hallin and Mancini (2004) may suggest. However, a media systemic component pushes the profession’s discussions about the Qatar coverage in a certain direction. In all three Nordic countries, public service broadcasters had the rights to cover the event, and their status as politically regulated “cornerstones” in the Nordic media systems with hegemonic influence on journalistic ideals (Syvertsen et al., 2014) motivates and shapes such extended debates—including the sports journalistic definitions of legitimate and illegitimate practices. Since the Beijing games, it has been common practice by these companies to use ordinary news journalists in the coverage of sporting mega-events. Even though Nordic sports journalists already from the 1990s started to cover social and cultural contexts of big events, the recent engagement of public service news departments has been regarded as an internal professional recognition of the field of sports journalists: “They are not competitors but a supplement to our coverage. This is the interpretation today. It also shows that sport is more than just sport” (Reidar Sollie, former chair of The Association of Norwegian Sports Journalists, personal communication, March 23, 2023). The management of the associations supports this ideological re-orientation towards contextual issues, which is driven by a consistent belief in independent journalism being in the service of the public interest:

If you look at Swedish sports journalism, it has changed a lot in recent years. Because the audience doesn't accept today...we got to cover this....The most important thing today is not to cover the game, the competition, but to cover all the questions around them. That is perhaps because people are consuming sports journalism in a different way. The media companies can see what people are interested in because they get statistics every minute. And, of course, there are big conflicts in the world right now: sport is politics. (Petter Nilsson, spokesperson and board member for Swedish Association of Sports Journalists, personal communication, April 3, 2023)

The various association managements have had regular meetings for many years, including the Finnish and recently the Estonian associations. During the last decade, organisations have started to use this informal network strategically to push the standards of sports journalism internationally. Specifically, this has taken place within the organisational framework of the International Sports Press Association (AIPS), where the Nordic organizations are members of the European division. Since its establishment in 1923, The AIPS has been working for the improvement of working conditions for sports journalists at big sports events like the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cups. It has established itself as a collaborator with the largest international sports organisations and subsequently an important gatekeeper for access to big international sports events. Through national member associations, it has issued paid membership cards for individual sports journalists, which, it has been argued, are essential for gaining access to press facilities at high-profile sports events. Until more recently, the Nordic associations did not pay much attention to this international network though they have been critical:

The first time I participated [in the AIPS international congress] I got a shock. It was more of a social activity fellowship for pensioners compared to the business I run on a daily basis. It has gradually improved, but there are big cultural differences regarding the kind of representatives who are sent to the congress....For many years, the representatives from Nigeria were people from the Nigerian football association who came to promote big events in Nigeria. (Reidar Sollie, former chair of The Association of Norwegian Sports Journalists, personal communication, March 23, 2023)

As seen from a Nordic journalistic perspective, the historically close relationship of AIPS with the big international governing bodies has become increasingly problematic. One example of this was the 2004 AIPS nomination of the former FIFA president, Joao Havelange, as an honorary member, despite him being accused of corruption. Supporting a motion against this nomination was, according to the Norwegian chair, regarded as disrespectful. In 2016, the Nordic associations decided to make a shared presentation at the world congress after collaboration with Belgian and Dutch associations. Here, they argued that the AIPS congress should have more focus on the development of journalism. This was mainly met with critical comments from the AIPS management. However, the AIPS has subsequently started to engage in such discussions of journalistic standards, now publicly stressing independence in its missions—though still co-financed by contributions from international bodies and federations.

Diverse opinions in the AIPS regarding how to practice journalistic ideals about independence triggered an open conflict in the spring of 2022. The AIPS announced in May that their upcoming award show would be hosted by the FIFA World Cup hosts, Qatar, in Doha. This raised intense debate among Nordic sports journalists on social media, and the associations were asked to make their stance clear. Seen from the associations' perspectives, the AIPS had failed: "It is totally unacceptable to do this, like the AIPS organising

this in a country without a free press” (Petter Nilsson, spokesperson and board member for Swedish Association of Sports Journalists, personal communication, April 3, 2023). In Denmark, the debate involved the union and spread further to public media. In Sweden and Finland, it also moved into the public arena. Journalists from leading Danish news outlets who were supposed to go to Qatar for the upcoming games and who were among the most engaged in critical journalism took a lead in the Danish debate, sending a public note to the Danish association asking for a resignation of the organisation’s AIPS membership. Just after this, the AIPS announced that a group of journalists from a leading Norwegian news outlet, who were nominated for a prize but were very critical towards the Qatar hosts and therefore refused to travel to Doha, could not keep their nomination or receive a prize if they did not attend the show in Doha. Formal protests against this stance were sent from Nordic associations to the AIPS, but the effort “was ill-received” (Jimmy Bøjgaard, chair of Danish Sports Journalists, personal communication, December 16, 2022). In the early autumn, the Danish association organised an extraordinary general meeting to execute its resignation from the AIPS—preferably before the Qatar games. The AIPS membership is part of the Danish association’s rules, meaning a resignation would entail a formalised change of the statutes. Yet, only a small group of members attended this meeting, and the board’s recommendation was not passed because, at that time, a small majority of the attendees took a stance very similar to that in the two other Nordic associations: Membership is a gateway to impact the professional ethics in the long term. The AIPS subsequently announced that they would host future award shows independently, and they have launched an ethical committee and asked the former Norwegian chair, Reidar Sollie, to become a member. Another outcome of this professional dispute has been the invigoration and expansion of the informal professional sports journalistic networks across not only Nordic but also several northern European countries. As the Danish chair expresses the outcome:

People have become informed. There is a lot of talk going on in the corners when people meet out there. But in Denmark, this became a topic in the media, which was not the case in other contexts. We have no need to be a pioneer—but this is what we somehow have turned into. (Jimmy Bøjgaard, chair of Danish Sports Journalists, personal communication, December 16, 2022)

Seen from his perspective and that of his Nordic colleagues, the disputes around the Qatar games have set the scene for future professional debates and disputes about ethics and autonomy in a profession that, while it may be more fragmented, includes an emerging and better-educated generation of journalists.

9. Fighting With One’s Back to the Wall?

So far, we have seen that a strong tradition in the Nordic countries for using collective, organized social forces as instruments for social change, together with a pragmatic collaborative approach to both internal and external stakeholders, is now becoming of increasing significance in Nordic sports journalism. The concept of boundary work has briefly been touched upon to describe how such collaborations are facilitated on an organizational level and entail processes of mutual recognition and negotiation of journalistic legitimacy when sports journalistic associations engage in collaborations and public debates with both other journalistic actors and actors from sports and politics. In the Nordic small national contexts, networks are relatively small and the related power practices are informed by both values of equality and widely shared norms regarding journalistic independence. This no doubt stimulates such boundary working processes.

The analytical focus on illustrating the perspectives and negotiations of an ongoing ideological rearmament in the national voluntary associations of sports journalists, as seen mainly from leading opinion leaders like the chairs and those speaking up in the public or semi-public professional debates, entails, of course, a risk of painting a biased and too idealized picture. To get a more nuanced picture of the state of Nordic sports journalism's relationship with both media managements and powerful sports organizations, a systematic mapping and analysis of the actual coverage is needed. In the Danish case, journalists' disappointment with the football association's decision not to let the players engage in activist performances and not the least lack of sporting success may have influenced the coverage significantly and provided a broader or different space for critical approaches throughout the games. Like when the independent, influential football podcast, Mediano, in collaboration with the Royal Theatre organized and covered two public debates with large attendances, thematizing ambivalent emotional experiences of the event during the games. Or when the public broadcaster TV 2 recurrently reported on controversies regarding journalists' freedom to cover events in the streets in Doha, migrant workers' engagement in the event, or integrated a critical debate in the pregame show before the final match. Only comparative analysis of the actual coverage across media and nations can inform us whether and how the ideological state of mind and role conception with both journalists and media in the Nordic contexts in the case of sports remains as informed by welfare state ideals, as for instance Syvertsen et al. (2014) and Ahva et al. (2017) claim.

Diminishing—though currently stabilized—membership bases, and members who, like in the Danish conflict around AIPS membership, perhaps demonstrate more cursory engagement when more tangible support for the ideological work of the management is needed, points to some of the problems these organizations face in a process of professional ideological re-making. While politicized mega-events like the Qatar games establish ideologically unifying arenas for different sorts of legitimizing boundary work with other stakeholders—who in a Nordic context had almost similar reservations against the Qatar games—the organizations may seem invigorated but also engaged in a fight with their backs to the wall. Because, sports journalism is, in particular in small highly digitized markets like the Nordic countries, becoming an increasingly fragmented and individualised freelance profession. Besides significant cut downs of sports departments in many traditional media outlets, such fragmentation may be further stimulated by many media's current intense interest in investment in sports rights for purely instrumental, economic reasons. This will put journalistic autonomy under further pressure. Still, the survey among Danish audiences regarding opinions on a boycott of the Qatar games and data on audiences' sports content consumption indicate that Nordic audiences are divided on matters regarding sports and geopolitics and possibly also regarding journalistic approaches to both such events as well as more ordinary everyday sports. This points to the need for future research in sports media audiences.

10. Conclusion

This article has offered an analysis of the processes of change within Nordic sports journalism, arguing that current transformations have to be seen in the light of the particular Nordic media systemic context. On the basis of media systemic theory, it is argued that one dimension of this regional context is a strong tradition for using civil-society-based organisations as instruments for social change and high levels of professionalism in journalism. Therefore, the article has analysed the particular role of national associations of sports journalists in three Nordic countries, elucidating how they—in response to combined forces of digitisation and increased politicisation in recent decades—have engaged in processes of redefinition of their

organisational role and sports journalism. The analysis illustrates how this process implies ongoing negotiations of what sports journalism is and what constitutes sports journalistic excellence in a digitised and mediatised media landscape. Significant dimensions in the associations' transformations away from being mainly social clubs include increasing focus on independence in ideals, practice, and securement of access to athletes and organisational sources for individual, independent journalists. In those processes, Nordic media systemic traditions for collaboration with different stakeholders and strategic use of the associations' collective bargaining power and networking across national borders are currently becoming increasingly important for the association's engagement in influencing sports journalism not only nationally but also internationally.

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