

Advocacy and Activism in Sports Podcasts: Expanding Journalistic Roles

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Submitted: 16 July 2024 **Accepted:** 11 November 2024 **Published:** 8 January 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Balancing Intimacy and Trust: Opportunities and Risks in Audio Journalism” edited by Mia Lindgren (University of Tasmania), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i467>

Abstract

This article examines the political turn in sports podcasting, focusing on the blurring and evolving boundaries of journalistic roles. The US-based sports podcasts *Social Sport*, *Burn It All Down*, and *Edge of Sports* offer three case studies of how podcasting opens space for politicizing sports coverage beyond scores and highlights. Podcast coverage of sports has adapted by enhancing a focus on the political implications of athletes’ personal stories. Analysis of episodic content and interview correspondence with podcast hosts focuses on how the podcast medium has opened new spaces advancing the cultural discourse on how issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion impact athletes’ lives. Our results indicate the affordances unique to the podcast medium, like temporality, have enabled the expansion of journalistic roles and performance to include advocacy functions and leaning toward more socially progressive content than traditional media coverage has allowed.

Keywords

activism; advocacy; journalistic roles; podcasting; sports media

1. Introduction

Sports and politics coverage in media has accelerated dramatically since the advent of digital production. Digital media opened new spaces for sports media to address political dimensions in and beyond the competition itself (Kroon & Eriksson, 2019; Perreault & Nölleke, 2022). Podcast journalism has provided a hothouse of storytelling innovation, enabling journalists to explore roles previously considered anathema to the detached and neutral reporting associated with journalistic objectivity (Nee & Santana, 2021). Podcasting’s expansive space and relative freedom from gatekeeping compared to terrestrial radio enabled a

robust expansion of the journalistic role into advocacy and activism on behalf of progressive politics, including news podcasting as well as Black identity (Miller et al., 2022).

Although a significant body of research is currently dedicated to sports journalism's political turn (Antunovic, 2018; English, 2017; Oates & Pauly, 2007; Schmidt, 2018), little attention has been paid to activist sports reporting in podcasting, particularly theoretical and methodological intersections of podcast and digital journalism studies. Podcast studies include the potential for a deeper understanding of podcasts' reinvention of sports journalism, especially its audience impact (English et al., 2023); digital journalism studies help answer the question of how journalistic roles are conceived and practiced by individual hosts. Building on research on sports media and social activism (Schmidt, 2018), this study examines cases in the sports podcasting industry in which journalists embrace the roles of advocate and activist (Williams Fayne, 2021). The researchers envisioned using Canella's (2023) concept of "journalistic power" to view journalism as a cultural institution whose "truth claims and editorial practices are influenced by the power dynamics embedded in the sociopolitical and historical contexts in which they work" (p. 210). Case studies examined include *Social Sport*, centering on track and field with an emphasis on gender and race, *Burn It All Down*, featuring an intersectional feminist view of a variety of international women's sports, and *Edge of Sports*, representing a form of mainstream media sports coverage with a large audience reach. While the majority of the podcast hosts are US-based, the founding host of *Burn It All Down* is Shereen Ahmed, who is Canadian-born and has Pakistani parents. While the content of all three shows includes international topics of global concern, they were selected in part due to their treatment of Title IX, the US legislation promoting sports equity.

2. Literature Review and Theory

2.1. Sports Podcasts and Journalistic Discourse

Within the field of digital journalism studies, practice theory (Bourdieu, 1977) bears immediate relevance to this study of sports podcasting's transformation of traditional journalistic roles. Production practice through this framework is understood through reflexive discourse, in addition to material contexts and activities, which combine to determine what digital journalism is as well as the trajectory on which it develops. Discursive reflexivity, which represents an important data set for this study consisting of interviews in which hosts reflect on their advocacy and activist orientations toward their craft, illuminates the producer's self-perceived societal role as, for example, custodian of conscience, watchdog, disseminator, populist mobilizer, fourth estate, interpreter, or other role conceptions (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018; Mellado, 2020).

Recent research on journalistic roles has identified the need to move beyond normative understandings according to a predominantly Western framework emphasizing media's contribution to democracy and citizenship that presumes traditional news is the only means of serving these functions (Mellado & Hallin, 2024). As Steensen and Westlund (2021) note, legacy news media is "not the only channel through which trustworthy information can flow in society and a public sphere marked by a diversity of opinions can be established," particularly through citizen journalism, social media, blogs, and podcasts, among an array of other digital communication of information that has democratized public speech (p. 65). As with YouTube and Twitch, podcasting has effectively expanded and diversified journalistic roles, which now extend into service, entertainment, lifestyle news, and sports, all of which are areas that "have been marginalized in

scholarly discourse and occasionally discredited as an unworthy other” (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018, p. 147). Digital sports news has endured the double-stigma of online entertainment as “a toy department within a toy department,” a hierarchy in which traditional sports journalists devalue their online colleagues much in the way news reporters disparage the sports desk to elevate their status (McEnnis, 2020, p. 1415).

Despite such preconceived social and professional notions of what constitutes legitimate news sources, sports reporters have increasingly turned toward politically inclined topics. This raises the question posed by gatekeeping theory regarding who decides what is newsworthy and how the digital platform can potentially influence the value ascribed to its content (Bro & Wallberg, 2015). Advocacy and activism mark a distinct characteristic of sports podcasts suggesting the development of a new beat or genre, one currently in the process of establishing its own set of conventions to distinguish it from more traditional sports coverage. As with tech workers and tech start-up companies challenging the boundaries of the journalistic world, referred to as digital interlopers on the periphery of traditional practice (Eldridge, 2017), many podcasters have similarly redrawn the boundaries of the profession to include political analysis and advocacy. Among them are independent sports podcasters, who are motivated by community building, ease of production, and freedom of individual self-expression over financial gain (Taylor, 2023). The hosts of our case studies did not migrate into podcasting via editorializing or punditry, but instead bear more rigorous intellectual pasts from academia (in the case of *Burn It All Down*) and longform reporting and writing on pertinent topics driving public debate. This pattern is evident in Dave Zirin’s work for *The Atlantic* and *The Nation* and Emma Zimmerman’s nonfiction on gender and environmental justice in the journals *Touchstone Literary* and *PRISM International*. Publications specializing in longform in-depth storytelling such as *The Athletic* have begun to invest heavily in podcast production.

This study meets the call for more scholarly attention to different epistemologies of digital journalism (Ekström et al., 2020), particularly in the development of genres, beats, and formats such as those associated with culture, human interest, and sports (Steensen & Westlund, 2021, p. 114). Such epistemological shifts arise in part due to industrial change and disruption, which can open new markets for business opportunities in digital publishing (Briggs, 2012). As producers enter these new markets, they can be self-aware of their contribution to the development of new beats and genres. Transparency has historically been leveraged by news producers as a legitimizing rhetorical convention that seeks to authenticate and validate the story’s credibility through the disclosure of the reporter’s method and judgment at key intervals during the process of production. These instances in which reporters refer to their own process of production constitute metajournalistic discourse (Dowling et al., 2022), which has become a staple of podcast journalism and other forms of born-digital news media production. Digital culture’s premium of authenticity and self-disclosure also contributes to the spread of metajournalistic discourse by producers across emerging media platforms. Metajournalistic discourse has become so integral and even requisite to podcast journalism that it has, in some cases, become a matter of performative transparency. In some cases, metajournalistic discourse is strategically deployed to occlude or justify ethical transgressions, as in the notorious case of *Caliphate*, a *The New York Times* podcast hosted by Rukmini Callimachi (Perdomo & Rodrigues-Rouleau, 2022). Such ethical concerns have contributed to a relative lack of trust in podcasts as news sources (Whipple et al., 2023) despite the sharp rise in listenership of sports podcasts (Clavio & Moritz, 2022). Metajournalistic discourse is examined in this study through interviews of hosts in which they expand on their journalistic self-perception and the extent to which they understand it as existing in tension with their show’s advocacy and activist functions. This self-perception is then compared to the actual meaning, production, and

expression of the host's podcast to determine if any discrepancies exist, allowing for a deeper understanding of any discrepancy between the producer's epistemological understandings of their craft and the exigencies of their show's ontological reality.

2.2. Sports Podcasts as Activist Digital Media

Sports radio journalist Julie DiCaro and ESPN's Sarah Spain posted a four-minute video on Facebook in 2016 in which men alternated reading, directly in front of each from a phone or tablet, actual derogatory posts made toward both journalists. The #MoreThanMean video went viral, and the women both appeared on talk shows to overwhelmingly positive coverage. Yet as the video entered mainstream discourse, discussion centralized men and limited discussion by women and for women of strategies for collective change on specific platforms (Antunovic, 2018, p. 429). The podcast *Burn It All Down* contrasts sharply with such momentary flashes of progressive political change, especially in the case that resulted in the paradoxical silencing of women on the issue. Not only did the show's intersectional feminist advocacy of women's fight for equality in sports offer a more sustained and ongoing examination on inequality and gender, women from a variety of social and ethnic origins came together as a collective. DiCaro would eventually become a *Burn It All Down* emeritus for her service to the show in the years following #MoreThanMean.

Each of our three case studies represents a counterpublic space to professional norms in sports journalism. These norms include the perception that sports journalists prioritize entertainment and fandom over critical, objective reporting (Perreault & Nölleke, 2022), in some instances demanding silence and withholding critique as a condition of freedom (McRobbie, 2004, p. 260). This expectation of silence in the face of harassment and systematic inequality reinforces hegemonic patriarchal controls of women's identity, sexuality, and expression in sports media (Antunovic, 2018). Our intersectional cases offer a clear path toward forming "self-conscious collectives that mutually acknowledge one another as having common purposes or shared experiences" (Young, 1994, p. 735) and in many ways provide an important sign of progress in feminism's continued "struggle with issues of privilege in online spaces, namely the struggle for visibility and recognition of women and feminist ideas in the mediated public sphere on their own terms" (Darmon, 2014, p. 701).

Serving this pivot toward advocacy in sports media is podcasting's emergence from longform narrative and feature writing, also known as "humanist journalism" (DeSilva, 2002). This renaissance in creative and conversational writing and reporting coincided with calls for more narrative elements in journalistic storytelling by *Quill* (Hallman, 2016) and *Nieman Reports* (Kramer, 2000). Explanatory or interpretive journalism is also linked to podcasting's broader formatting, allowing for greater control over material (Nee & Santana, 2021, pp. 3–4). Digital narratives, including podcasts, tend to engage audiences at deeper levels than traditional news, providing a sense of presence and enhancing character identification (Miller et al., 2022; Nee & Santana, 2021; Van Krieken & Sanders, 2021). Podcasting practices often espouse intimacy, presence, and narrativity (Lindgren, 2023) while retaining "core journalistic values and beliefs of balancing objectivity and subjectivity, immediacy, providing a public service and editorial autonomy" (McEnnis, 2020, p. 967). The premium on "fresh talk" (reading or performance of scripted material as if live; Goffman, 1981) and "superliveness" (emphasizing fluency, informality, and unpredictability; Kroon Lundell, 2014) from broadcasting carry over into podcasting, while the relaxed and personal production aesthetic is an idiom of sports journalism abetting, rather than undermining, sports podcasts' political efficacy. Such efficacy is

enabled through the lack of editorial constraints, allowing for deeper analysis and the pursuit of related topics and concepts unlikely to be addressed in mainstream media, leading to more nuanced patterns of discussion (Kroon & Eriksson, 2019, p. 849; Miller et al., 2022).

The departure from the “stick to sports” credo, as well as the gravitation toward complex topics such as brain injuries, sexuality, and nationality, changed the tone and tenor of sports journalism. Podcasting has increasingly fueled this transition by providing a natural space for discussion of these complex issues given its affordances such as (a) space and time, which is unlimited and inclined toward longform, narrative deep dives, and (b) intimacy inherent in the medium (Lindgren, 2023; Miller et al., 2022). In this sense, emerging media communication forms represent new technologies for journalistic production and distribution, and “new opportunities to...engage with multiple publics, and to tell multi-sided stories” (Waisbord, 2019, p. 357).

2.3. Civic Responsibility

The dramatic rise in instances of athletes advocating for a variety of political or social causes raises the question of how frequently sports media has covered such activism. Schmidt (2018) examined the extent to which sports news media cover athletes taking an activist role, finding in 2016 that “the rate at which such topics were addressed was actually higher in sport media than in news media during periods of significant activism” (p. 11). Our study was prompted by how “an increased sense of civic responsibility may be developing—not just among individual athletes, teams, and leagues but among sports media, as well” (Schmidt, 2018, p. 12). Digital outlets like podcasts showcase how “sport media are working to reflect the changing and increasingly progressive and accepting attitudes of many in society” (Schmidt, 2018, p. 12). We argue the period of growth identified in 2016 has developed by expanding the journalistic role, thus realizing sports media’s potential “to not just reflect society but also lead social awareness and promote understanding” (Schmidt, 2018, p. 12). To build on that point, the rapid change in the sports journalism field was thought to be the result of Covid-19, according to Perreault and Nölleke, who noted that sports journalism during this period highlighted important societal issues, like gender inequity, with the potential to influence public discourse (2022).

In addition, research output on journalistic role conception has been around for decades as scholars eventually moved away from the notion that journalists performed their roles as they were conceived by an industry at large (Hellmueller & Mellado, 2015). To take the matter of journalistic roles a step further beyond conceptions, academic research on journalistic role performance has surged recently due to the need to document the continuous shift in the media industry (Mellado & Hallin, 2024). Journalistic role performance is the end result—the actual practice—of journalism standards (Mellado, 2020; Mellado & Hallin, 2024).

Tulloch and Ramon (2017) examined the continued commercial and brand value of longform and narrative sports journalism as a uniquely appealing form, especially in a digital ecosystem of brief, headline-driven news tailored for mobile devices. In remediating older forms of feature writing and documentary journalism, sports podcasts with an activist inclination foreground narrativity and storytelling while also maintaining a dedication to reportorial accuracy. English (2017) also noted sports podcasting’s importance as critical watchdog reporting; our study’s podcasts also showcase how the audio sector of digital sports media has expanded the journalist’s role to critic rather than cheerleader, specifically positioning hosts to call into question institutional inequality and systematic marginalization of diverse communities.

Concern for whether, and to what extent, the critical watchdog and other journalistic roles inform self-perception and production practices of sports podcast activism led to the following research questions:

RQ1: How is activism in sports podcasts represented in the hosts' journalistic role conceptions?

RQ1a: In what ways does the content of these selected sports podcasts align with their hosts' journalistic role conceptions that advance counterpublic agendas?

RQ2: Concerning the current political turn, how have podcasting's unique affordances and shifts in the broader podcast industry enabled sports advocacy podcasts to function within the journalism boundaries?

3. Methodology

Through purposive sampling appropriate to qualitative studies in media, the researchers selected three sports podcasts explicitly engaging social and political issues. An initial factor in selecting shows was the presence of any episodes dedicated to Title IX, in some cases occasioned by its 50th anniversary in June 2022. Since this legislation is specific to the US, podcasts selected were US-based, with founding hosts bearing citizenship from the US and Canada (Shereen Ahmed of *Burn It All Down*). Episodes chosen are not narrowly focused on this issue, but resonate with its concern for equity and social justice; Title IX states, "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance" (Luther et al., 2022). Although Title IX does not mention sports, its application to "equal treatment of female and male student-athletes" by colleges and universities receiving federal assistance benefits profoundly changed athletics and represents a bellwether topic on gender issues (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2023). The presence of a Title IX episode signaled each show's dedication to progressive social change, allowing inquiry into hosts' conceptions of their journalistic roles.

After surveying social media and commentary by hosts on platforms and digital publications ancillary to each podcast's main content, selection was determined in part according to the extent to which hosts carried forward advocacy on behalf of public service through online channels. This criterion favored hosts showing robust activity as public-facing activist figures helping drive national conversations on gender equity and other political issues in sports. According to this rationale, the presence of earnest coverage of Title IX-related issues, and a strong activist web presence of hosts extending the discussion of issues raised in their podcasts, *Social Sport*, *Burn It All Down*, and *Edge of Sports* were chosen. According to qualitative methodology for in-depth analysis of smaller samples, this research makes no claims to formal generalizations based on large randomized samples associated with quantitative methods (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). However, claims made pertaining specifically to our cases bear relevance to the broader context of their sports podcast ecosystem by uniquely reflecting—rather than necessarily causing—trends toward political advocacy beyond coverage of competitive events and their outcomes. Further, these shows are presented not as universal examples, but rather as important constituents in the contemporary constellation of highly diverse global podcasts.

Subsequently, a series of eight interview questions for hosts were formulated to determine each host's conception of their journalistic roles. Host responses were collected via personal email correspondence for *Social Sport* and *Burn It All Down*. Dave Zirin, host of *Edge of Sports*, did not respond to email or social media inquiries; for that case, we accessed published interviews and online commentary to inform the analysis of podcast content. Methodologically termed "informant interviews" and host feedback offered the perspective of an insider, key player, and gatekeeper. Hosts are in privileged positions to reflect on the show's history, customs, and rituals (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 227). Regarding the ethics of our method, "when qualitative researchers interview 'key informants,' experts who are questioned about their area of expertise; or when they analyze published, public information such as X/Twitter online content, they are not considered to be involving human subjects in their research" (Meyer, 2017). After collecting interview data, the researchers reviewed each podcast's content to deduce discrepancies and/or alignment between role conception and production practice. Critical analysis was carried out on two representative episodes from each podcast.

This study's methodology thus provides qualitative critical analysis and interpretation of selected episodes from the shows. In varying degrees, case studies use paratextual online data drawn from publications and posts on platforms and channels ancillary to the main media text. The warrant for our study is supported by literature on qualitative research methods, specifically positing accurate and valuable knowledge can be gained through deeper inquiry into more carefully selected data sets and specific cases (Mahrt & Scharrow, 2013). This examination of the rhetorical nuances of the journalistic role conception of sports podcast hosts thus seeks to acquire "the deep knowledge and understanding that can be achieved when researchers engage with the units of analysis on a one-on-one basis" (Karlsson & Sjøvaag, 2016, p. 189).

Relevant paratextual data and the podcast content itself were analyzed according to the textual interpretive methodology established by Hans Gadamer dedicated to the text's specific features and its larger context (Palmer, 1969). Interpreting "webs of meaning" entails qualitative research to generate "thick descriptions" of performances (Geertz, 1973), designed to illuminate their significance for the participants (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 53). In our cases, these participants include podcast hosts, guests, listeners, and the community at stake. A key focus of each interpretive step of this study involves analysis of *discourse*, as "the ways in which narratives are patterned in both public and private conversations in reference to existing systems of power as they operate through cultural categories such as race, gender or socioeconomic position" (Clark et al., 2004, p. 532).

4. Results

4.1. *Social Sport*

Social Sport was hosted by Emma Zimmerman and published in conjunction with *CITIUS MAG*, which is dedicated to competitive distance running, particularly track and field. *Social Sport* served the international community of runners, coaches, and fans seeking more than updates on events, but also in-depth analysis, in 83 podcast episodes from April 2020 through October 2021. Zimmerman, whose longform journalism examines social justice issues related to sports, described *Social Sport* as "using endurance sports to talk about justice, equity, climate change, and mental health with some of the most inspiring, intelligent, intuitive, world-shaking people" (Zimmerman, 2021a). October 4, 2021's, Title IX episode showcased Zimmerman's journalistic role performance. Her advocacy was evident in the selection of her guest, Risa Isard, a policy

expert and sports industry veteran who developed advocacy partnerships with tennis legend and LGBTQIA+ activist Billie Jean King, Brandi Chastain, Duke women's basketball, and the WNBA's Phoenix Mercury.

This episode of *Social Sport* dedicated to Title IX showcased Isard's expertise in gender equity law in women's sports drawn from her work at the University of Massachusetts's Laboratory for Inclusion and Diversity in Sport. For example, Isard noted racial bias through language, attention, and discourse surrounding athletes "is pervasive in and across sports, and in women's sports" (Zimmerman, 2021b). Zimmerman then raised the issue of racial bias in Title IX applications since its 1972 legislation; Isard responded "Title IX has fixed things unequally when it comes to girls," explaining "Title IX has been excellent for white, middle-upper class girls like me [but] has been a lot less effective at creating equity for Black girls, Latinx girls, girls of color broadly, and girls from low-income communities" (Zimmerman, 2021b).

Zimmerman's intersectional advocacy in this episode aligned with her abiding commitment voiced through Instagram black squares posted on June 2, 2020, in the wake of George Floyd's murder. In them, she emphasized how "organizations must move beyond signaling their commitments to justice (Instagram squares) and toward long-term and comprehensive action" (Zimmerman, 2022). Her podcast accordingly advocated for such deep, structural change, especially for racial justice, as seen in many episodes such as those addressing Black liberation (July 19, 2021); Indigenous sovereignty (August 30, 2021); the next generation of BIPOC runners (May 31, 2021); anti-Asian violence (May 24, 2021); and the plight of Muslim-American women runners (May 3, 2021). Each episode contributed to social progress, because "the culture never adapts in one grand sweep. Change happens in little microcosms, little spheres," she told the researchers via email correspondence, adding, "Sports is one sphere that people care a heck of a lot about, so it has the potential to push the culture forward in a major way" (E. Zimmerman, personal communication, September 4, 2023).

An episode featuring middle-distance professional runner Elise Cranny aligned with Zimmerman's core principles regarding her activist role. Cranny opened up about her experience with RED-S (Relative Energy Deficiency in Sports), an eating disorder linked to the under-fueling injury cycle, and commented on body image and comparison (Zimmerman, 2021a). The episode underscored Zimmerman's journalistic role conception as "an analyst/mobilizer, mostly because my show was concerned with the analysts and mobilizers—the people pushing for change in key areas" (E. Zimmerman, personal communication, September 4, 2023), such as Isard and Cranny. The watchdog role functioned as the driving force behind analysis and mobilization for social change: "I think to be an analyst/mobilizer, one needs to be a watchdog in some respect. Mobilization often comes as a response to an uneven power dynamic—the watchdog element comes first," she explained, adding, "The mobilization/analysis is the response" (E. Zimmerman, personal communication, September 4, 2023).

Zimmerman's January 2022 commentary in her newsletter signaling the conclusion of *Social Sport* clearly articulated her professional role and journalism's duty to social justice, one shaped by particular media. She noted, "The symbolism of the black Instagram square is all too stark: justice worked within the confines of a 1080 X 1080 pixel box" (Zimmerman, 2022). Reflecting on the June 2020 social media posts:

Those little black squares seem like prophecies now. For my part, I promise to never shy away from justice-centered stories. I hope that more publications realize that talking about injustice (talking about reality) is not political. It's just good journalism. And it's necessary. (Zimmerman, 2022)

Zimmerman alluded to the term “political” here according to the stigma associated with activist journalism, preferring instead “injustice” and “reality.” In her view, the less confining space of podcasting “goes much deeper than mainstream news—leading wherever it may lead—philosophy, history, and various interesting places” (E. Zimmerman, personal communication, September 4, 2023). As with longform narrative and feature profile reporting and writing, “it is less concerned with being succinct and more concerned with fully hashing out the intricacies of an issue, movement, etc. and how the interviewee’s work relates to it” (E. Zimmerman, personal communication, September 4, 2023).

4.2. *Burn It All Down*

Burn It All Down began in 2017; the podcast’s unique angle was its hosting by five women who were either working journalists or college professors and well-read in sports: journalists Shireen Ahmed, Lindsay Gibbs, and Jessica Luther; and professors Amira Rose Davis and Brenda Elsey. Through engaging discussions and insightful commentary, *Burn It All Down* explored gender equality in sports, racial justice, and LGBTQIA+ issues. With their vocal commitment to challenging the status quo and advocating for inclusivity, *Burn It All Down* was a platform for underrepresented voices in sports media. Their catalog included 267 episodes, not including interviews with leaders and trailblazers in the sports industry. Currently, there are no new episodes; the last episode aired in October 2022. *Burn It All Down* was a part of the Blue Wire Podcast Network, which mostly consisted of sports podcasts.

The host Jessica Luther provided email responses to questions about the podcast’s core principles and journalistic role conceptions. She acknowledged *Burn It All Down* intentionally took up space in sports programming by providing “feminist, intersectional criticism focused on marginalized voices within sports” (J. Luther, personal communication, November 2, 2023) and, because of their diverse backgrounds, any of the *Burn It All Down* hosts could “go deep on a single topic or go broad and speak of issues that affect athletes worldwide” (J. Luther, personal communication, November 2, 2023). They spotlighted athletes not typically in the spotlight, and “incorporated pointed criticism of sports media and the narratives often used within it, but we also offered alternatives on how to think and speak about topics within sport” (J. Luther, personal communication, November 2, 2023). In Luther’s response to the potential for weightier conversations and what those conversations would focus on, she indicated:

The deeper issues are things like—but certainly not limited to—systemic inequality in the way sports organizations and institutions are created and maintained, the exclusion of marginalized athletes, the intersection of capitalism and sports and the ill effects from it, the many ways that sports and sporting institutions enable and ignore abuse, and the exploitation of athlete labor. (J. Luther, personal communication, November 2, 2023)

Luther’s website listed her media-related titles: investigative journalist, author, and podcaster (Luther, n.d.). As such, in terms of journalistic roles, she naturally embodies them in her day-to-day work, but she also mentioned her compassionate approach: “I think how I write and talk about gendered violence provides a blueprint to others on how to do it in an empathetic, knowledgeable, and careful way that can have an important impact on their everyday lives” (J. Luther, personal communication, November 2, 2023). Luther neither embraced nor fully dissociated from the role of “advocate,” but instead more strongly identified with being an “educator.” Finally, in terms of other titles like watchdog, Luther felt that was a part of journalism.

She did, however, see “my roles as journalist and co-host as very separate things, even if the content overlapped” (J. Luther, personal communication, November 2, 2023).

Burn It All Down addressed Title IX specifically in June 21, 2022’s “Episode 255: Thinking Through 50 Years of Title IX.” Luther, Elsey, and Gibbs hosted the episode, which also included a brief preview of a Title IX book; the hosts provided an overview of Title IX and discussed the beneficiality to girls and women, particularly White women. One distinction of the enactment of Title IX was the National Collegiate Athletic Association spending 10 years in litigation opposing the law with Gibbs pointing out, “Even as the NCAA was taking over women’s sports, they were fighting Title IX in court still” (Luther et al., 2022). The hosts also addressed some Title IX variances including how there are fewer women coaching college teams now than in the 1970s. According to the discussion, Title IX doesn’t have enough weight to be impactful. The hosts cautioned the law could come under threat in the current political environment in the US with attacks on both reproductive rights and transgender athlete sport participation.

4.3. *Edge of Sports*

Edge of Sports is hosted by Dave Zirin, sports editor of *The Nation* magazine; in a past interview, King (2008) noted Zirin’s focus was on “labor relations and the corporatization of sport; the prejudices and biases of fans and sportswriters, especially racism, homophobia, and sexism; and the spectacles of nationalism” (p. 334), all of which are significant topics in *Edge of Sports*. Zirin emphasized:

Sports are theoretically a meritocracy so it has always been fertile ground to challenge the idea that some are inherently unable because of their gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. This isn’t just about being able to achieve athletically, but about whether people can strive behind the scenes. (King, 2008, pp. 337–338)

The June 17, 2022, episode “50 Years of Title IX” was a longform discussion with Kim Turner, director of the Gender Equity Initiative at the Positive Coaching Alliance. A pivotal component of the discussion was Zirin emphasizing Title IX’s wording goes beyond sports, yet is largely exclusively relegated to usage within sports, despite its focus on higher and secondary education. Turner’s insights provided an immersive deep-dive into the multiple roles Title IX has played in providing gender equity, particularly in creating opportunities for girls’ and women’s athletics in places lacking those opportunities (Zirin, 2022). Zirin’s discussion with Turner also poignantly examined anti-inclusive movements in sports, particularly transgender athletics. Zirin declared this movement as “scapegoating trans kids,” pointing out hypocritical actions of using women’s athletics to justify those actions while seemingly never caring about those sports until this particular issue. Turner’s response reinforced a need for equity and representation across sports, specifically “to make sure every kid gets that chance to be physically active and play a sport, given the wonderful life lessons they can give to any child” (Zirin, 2022).

Zirin’s later personal commentary in this episode—in the segment “Choice Words”—critiqued former PGA golfers and Saudi Arabia’s involvement in the LIV Golf Tour. Zirin used this segment to examine “sportswashing,” a practice “indulged in by all governments when sports are used as a tool to achieve anti-poor, pro-development policy goals that people would otherwise oppose” (Zirin, 2022). Zirin focused on the immense social controversies in athletes joining LIV; he particularly eviscerated golfer Phil Mickelson’s

LIV involvement based on his belief of the US PGA Tour's "cartel-like" control over its players (Zirin, 2022). He then highlighted responses from September 11, 2001 families to Mickelson and golfers joining LIV to show how that tour was trying to "sportswash" past gruesome human rights and terrorism abuses (Zirin, 2022). The episode ended overlooking the Brittney Griner case in Russia. Griner was arrested in Russia in 2022 on drug-related charges and served 10 months of a nine-year sentence before a prisoner swap was brokered. Zirin called out Russia's treatment of Griner essentially as a pawn for that government's self-serving interests. As such, this episode wove together multiple advocacy issues, particularly social inequality and human rights concerns.

Sports activism and gender equality were also common themes in August 4, 2023's "The Women's World Cup and the Fight for Equal Pay," featuring US women's soccer legend Julie Foudy. Foudy noted the importance of equal pay in women's athletics and how data now exists on the return on investment in women's athletics and the success of the league (Zirin, 2023). The discussion detailed how the fight for equal pay includes decades of generations of women's soccer players, with Zirin drawing parallels to Negro League baseball players passing information to its future players on civil rights and equality.

Zirin's penultimate interview discussion with Foudy examined transgender athletes' inclusion in sports; Foudy noted this issue was extremely layered, nuanced, and divisive, yet could be harmful to women's athletics and sports in general:

We should have trans kids playing sports; why are we keeping people out of sports? We need them playing...lost in all of it is the humanity of it. These people didn't transition to win medals, they transitioned because this is who they are. And that's the thing I keep coming back to. (Zirin, 2023)

Zirin's regular "Choice Words" segment immediately after the interview expanded on social and civil liberty activism in sports, focusing on US women's soccer star Megan Rapinoe. Zirin expertly balanced his argument of the importance of Rapinoe's social activism and use of her platform to bring heightened awareness to equal rights within society, not just in sports: "The 'Rapinoe superpower' is that she is restless unless she is turning anger into action," thus "inspiring many more to be brave and fearless in the face of injustice" (Zirin, 2023).

5. Discussion

The rise and affordances of podcasting have proven to be a good fit for discussion-driven sports culture (Clavio & Moritz, 2022). Podcasting has fundamentally shifted the traditional boundaries of journalistic roles in sports podcasts, particularly in relation to activism and advocacy (Perreault & Nölleke, 2022). As podcasts increasingly center the political and social dimensions of athletes' experiences, journalists, including podcast hosts, are embracing advocacy functions that go beyond mere reporting, positioning themselves as facilitators of progressive discourse.

Social Sport actively implemented advocacy journalism as a core component of production practice, particularly through sustained attention to social justice issues. The host Emma Zimmerman consistently spoke with sports leaders and experts and provided contextualized and counter viewpoints on diverse topics (McRobbie, 2004). For example, Zimmerman's Title IX guest foregrounded the racial disparities that have resulted from the law. *Burn It All Down* focused on political sports activism by zeroing in on systems of power affecting average sports

fans, in the process disrupting broadly accepted narratives through an intersectional lens. Its Title IX discussion, in part, exuded advocacy by educating listeners about the opportunities women did *not* have before Title IX's implementation as cited in Perreault and Nölleke's work (2022). The chief mission of *Edge of Sports* is to cover political implications within sports. The podcast largely uses expert interviews; both episodes analyzed alluded to Title IX's shaping of legislation and the future of girls' and women's athletics, as well as transgender athletes' inclusion (and the dangers of exclusion) in sports.

Regarding RQ1—how politics was represented in hosts' journalistic roles conceptions—*Social Sport* revealed a clear political agenda not retreating from the advocacy role. Zimmerman persistently pressed political topics in and beyond the show into her freelance magazine journalism. Zimmerman intentionally constructed counterpublic spaces (McRobbie, 2004). In *Burn It All Down*, the host Jessica Luther spoke truth to power by singling out topics like systemic inequality and the exclusion of marginalized athletes neglected by mainstream media. In this regard, Luther displayed both feminist ideals (Darmon, 2014) and journalistic power (Canella, 2023). Since Luther is a journalist, journalistic role conceptions were intrinsic to her production practice. Most prominent among her traditional journalistic role conceptions was her mindfulness in her coverage of gendered violence. In *Edge of Sports*, traditional journalistic roles were central. During interviews, host Dave Zirin's journalistic role performance mainly deferred to his interviewees for responses, incorporating a moderator role. Zirin cultivated a shared experience environment (Young, 1994). While he did interject to provide specific insights, Zirin mainly worded his questions as prompts or requests for responses. However, in addressing RQ1a, Zirin's departure from traditional journalistic roles appeared in the "Choice Words" segment, where he more directly interjected his own perspective. Content also aligned with hosts' journalistic roles advancing progressive political agendas in *Social Sport* via Zimmerman's calculated advocacy approach. Though she acted as a digital interloper, addressing topics like injustice, environmental concerns, and running, she considered the journalistic watchdog position an accurate representation of her role.

The entire premise of *Burn It All Down*, a feminist sports podcast, flew in the face of decades of inequalities pervasive in sports media (Antunovic, 2018). As a journalist, Luther exemplified journalistic tendencies on the podcast. However, through some introspection, she also played educator and watchdog. These journalistic role conceptions and performances and *Burn It All Down's* positionality encompass what Williams Fayne (2021) would call advocacy journalism. Further, the credibility of Luther and her colleagues increased the level of respect for podcasts beyond a fringe alternative medium. Hosts and production teams were intentional in advancing progressive political agendas to foster cultural awareness and societal acceptance (Schmidt, 2018).

The primary mission of *Edge of Sports* is in-depth analysis of political implications within sports. In his podcast and written commentary, as well as social media presence (particularly on X), Zirin made clear his political views on stances such as transgender rights and gender pay equality in sports. However, this expression did not come at the expense of journalistic norms. Zirin used his journalism experience to provide insightful questions, discussions, and focus on pivotal, newsworthy issues within sports, thereby incorporating journalism's chief components of timeliness and accuracy.

Unique affordances of podcasting, like temporality and gatebreaking, along with shifts in the broader podcast industry advanced each show's advocacy/activist agendas within journalism's boundaries (RQ2). Civic responsibility is not commonly associated with mainstream contemporary sports talk programs. However, it was a focal point of Zimmerman's podcast and thus set her apart as a positive contributor to

civil society (Schmidt, 2018). She utilized podcasting to circumvent gatekeeping to book guests who could speak freely on social justice topics. *Burn It All Down* leveraged podcasting's unrestricted temporality for deep dives without the pressure of commercial breaks common in terrestrial radio sports radio programs (Miller et al., 2022). Topics such as transgender athletes and gendered violence diverted from those of mainstream sports media. Though *Burn It All Down* was a member of a network, the hosts maintained editorial authority regarding the podcast's content. Luther said she felt she was wearing her journalism cap with the hope of equipping the show's audience to be more politically aware. *Edge of Sports* utilized podcasting's relatively open time and space to incorporate personal views into production, allowing Zirin to not just espouse views on trending topics within sports, but to also balance those commentaries with insightful journalistic expert interviews.

Podcasting practices and content can advance other forms of radicalization in opposition to the values of these chosen case studies. With its expansive multi-hour series of largely unchecked and unaccountable audio-based content—which often does not bear transcripts available online—the podcast medium proliferated political misinformation in the US after the 2020 presidential election. A 2023 Brookings study found conservative hosts and figures were overwhelmingly more likely to share false claims (91%) than liberal hosts and figures (6%) on news-related shows (Dowling et al., 2022; Wirtschafter, 2023). This disproportionately high rate of misinformation spread per episode is magnified by the extraordinarily high volume of conservative podcast production of up to 2.5 times that of centrist and left-leaning podcasts (Wirtschafter, 2023). This pattern reflects the asymmetric nature of political parties in the US as identified by Grossmann and Hopkins (2016), who argue that the two parties are profoundly different given Republicans' overwhelming focus on ideology compared to the group-interest orientation of Democrats. In the podcast medium, this is evident in the lack of self-reflexivity of right-wing podcasts (Dowling et al., 2022), which move oppositely from "human journalism's" adherence to the truth-telling covenant associated with traditional journalism combined with an "effort to understand something and even, at a deeper level, an effort to heal something rather than simply a desire to tell a tale" (Spinelli & Dann, 2019, p. 194, emphasis in original). Although the podcast medium's informality leaves it vulnerable to hijacking by ideologues (Dowling et al., 2022), its interpretive form of news reporting and commentary (Nee & Santana, 2021) can serve as a deliberative model of discursive democracy (Riedl, 2019).

Although the far-right has aggressively appropriated news and politics genres of podcasting (Wirtschafter, 2023), sports podcasting has yet to be hijacked in this manner by conservative extremists. Together with the drive to understand and potentially heal associated with human journalism, progressive sports podcasts embody the diversity of the medium, which nonetheless does not in all instances evenly or consistently advance democracy. They do, however, reflect what Powers (2024) characterizes as podcasting's vocal diversity that distinguishes its performance of the news: "Podcasting has demonstrated the appeal of hosts with diverse backgrounds and presentation styles," which is currently evident in sports podcasts (Powers, 2024, p. 133). Sports consistently ranks as a top genre on the podcast charts, including Edison Research, where sports was ranked fifth in 2024 (Edison Research, 2024). Topics on Brittney Griner, sportswashing, NIL (Name, Image, and Likeness) legislation, transgender competition, Title IX, race, and body image have emerged among the central concerns of these politically oriented sports podcasts. The growing number of podcasts dedicated to advocating for diverse and underrepresented communities in the world of sports include *Playmakers*, *Girl at the Game*, *Queens of the Court*, *The BB Collective*, *In Her Corner*, *The Black Athlete*, *The Legacy of Speed*, and *Champions of Change: The RISE Podcast*.

It should be noted that, in this research, two of the three examined cases, *Social Sport* and *Burn It All Down*, have ceased production. This is reflective of the industry's fluidity, particularly with respect to the tendency in digital sports media for journalists to vacillate between platforms and media. For example, in the case of *Social Sport*, its host Emma Zimmerman opted to cease production to cultivate her print longform journalism on women's distance running. Shereen Ahmed similarly elected to pursue longform storytelling through text-based sports publications such as Canada's TSN. Like Zimmerman, Ahmed maintained her freelance writing while hosting *Burn It All Down* in addition to other media appearances such as her guest spot on the podcast *Sports as a Weapon* (July 2021), a show like *Redspin Sports* that shares the progressive political perspective of our selected cases. Zimmerman (2022) pointed to the emotional labor of podcast production as a major reason for ceasing production. This points to the broader concern for emotional performativity that podcasting entails, which is unique to vocal expression, and the desire among hosts to engage audiences with authenticity (Powers, 2024). The emotional labor of vocal performance, the sense of presence, and the maintenance of narrative intrigue specific to podcasting amplify the demands on mental health and the risk of burnout among news workers operating in other media (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2023).

6. Conclusion

The purposive cases revealed progressive politics in *Social Sport*, *Burn It All Down*, and *Edge of Sports*. The limitation of examining only three podcast productions means that our findings are not meant to be generalized. Though our podcast case studies broadened the scope of sports coverage, extending beyond conventional reporting to embrace political dimensions. Content and host interviews indicate podcasts' role in creating new spaces for advancing critical and cultural discourse on the profound impact of diversity, equity, and inclusion on athletes' lives. This exploration has revealed a significant expansion in journalistic role conception and performance, with sports podcasting seemingly embracing advocacy functions that contribute to more socially progressive content than what traditional media coverage has typically allowed. Notably, our investigation indicated an empowerment of podcast hosts and shows with unprecedented opportunities to assume advocacy and activist roles. As outlined in this research, the affordances of podcasting, including temporality, enabled podcast hosts to deeply expand on newsworthy topics, thereby providing counternarratives and discussion-driven storytelling within sports media.

Acknowledgments

We extend our deepest appreciation to our interviewees Jessica Luther and Emma Zimmerman. A special thanks goes to issue editor Mia Lindgren and the anonymous manuscript reviewers for their expert feedback and guidance.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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