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Sports Journalists as Agents of Change in Nordic Countries

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Abstract

Sports Journalists as Agents of Change: Shifting Political Goalposts in Nordic Countries identifies and describes changes prevalent in political narratives of sports journalism. Although tensions between professional autonomy and commercial influences in sports journalism persist, shifts in public expectations and increased interest in investigative journalism present new possibilities for sports journalists to reshape this field. The research in this thematic issue examines media content and considers how sports journalists reflect on their role, how gender issues are tied to, and addressed by, that role, and how critical sports journalism develops through engagement with relevant national and international sports journalist associations.

Keywords

critical analysis; critical reporting; gender; Nordic media; Nordic welfare model; sports journalism; sports journalist organisations

1. Introduction

Sport journalism is often criticised for being overtly emotional and hyperbolic. In the past, sports journalists have rarely addressed structural and processual powers in sports. This is partly due to the uniformity of content that is “a major element of contemporary sports journalism coverage in print and online” (English, 2014, p. 491), and partly due to how tightly integrated sports journalism is with the sports industry where journalists have colluded with sports organizations by routinely downplaying critical matters in their everyday conduct of covering sport (Rowe, 2017, p. 516). In-depth sports investigations have been more likely to appear in the form of documentaries or books (e.g., Jennings, 2015), particularly about drugs in sports or about corruption.

This thematic issue emphasises how political and economic interests increasingly shape sports institutions and industries, and how this necessitates a more socio-politically engaged journalism in the field. It introduces and analyses current trends and content in the Nordic media that open possibilities for more contextualized and critical sports coverage. We explore whether this coverage could create increased public debate and contribute to counteract the existence of power structures that suppress a needed democratisation of sports.

Our purpose is to elaborate on how sports journalism relates to, and narrates, socio-political issues considering the economical, structural, and professional limitations and possibilities that surround the profession. The focal point is the news media in the Nordic countries and the Nordic media system (as defined by Enli et al., 2018; Hornmoen & Steensen, 2021; Skogerbø et al., 2021; Syvertsen et al., 2014), since these have similarities in terms of media history, sports history, and sports policy. Recent heated debates about human rights, corruption, and harassment all illustrate that sports are deeply intertwined with issues of political and social change and development. Similarly, sports are used in image- and reputation-building by a variety of political figures and governments, a practice which may divert attention away from less desirable practices in governance (known as “sportswashing”).

Sports can therefore both challenge and be a driving force for societal change and political awareness. This is particularly prevalent in the Nordic welfare model, which supports national consciousness and responsibility to ensure equal access and participation in sports (Giulianotti et al., 2019), combined with a relatively high level of trust in media and innovative technological media usage (Skogerbø et al., 2021). We will argue that there has been a development within Nordic media towards a more critical and investigative take on sports journalism and consider how this resonates in a larger international context.

Through this collection of research and case studies, it may be argued that while there have been substantial efforts to transform the sports journalism field, existing norms and routines often make it difficult to introduce new formats to an audience used to a more celebratory or descriptive style of reporting. However, although the Nordic model is not always sustainable and not necessarily transferable to other political, economic, or cultural contexts, it has contributed to a more reflective and critical approach to sports journalism. Several of the articles in this thematic issue demonstrate that Nordic sports journalists are increasingly willing to engage as agents of change in issues of international significance.

2. Presentation of the Contributions in this Thematic Issue

Taking the FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) World Cup in Qatar as a point of departure, this thematic issue opens with an article by Kirsten Frandsen (2024) that analyses the changing role of national associations of sports journalists in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Through the introduction of the concept of meta-journalistic discourse and well-established media system theories, the author argues 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. This includes 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 evolving structures, identities, and practices of the national associations of sports journalists across the three countries.

Building on themes raised in the first article, Harald Hornmoen and Anders Graver Knudsen (2024) analyse how sports journalists covered the 2022 FIFA World Cup. In the media coverage of the build-up to this event, Danish and Norwegian sports journalism were at the forefront of raising awareness of problematic aspects of Qatar as a host nation due to several concerns and controversies regarding the country's human rights record. However, covering the Qatar World Cup while it unfolded created challenges for journalists when they attempted to report on an event in a wider political and cultural context. By drawing on critical discourse analysis, this article examines argumentation in sports commentaries during the World Cup event. The study finds that the commentaries reflect two distinct discursive clusters/phases. While the arguments in the first phase largely repeat critical attacks on FIFA and the organizer that were made in the build-up to the event, the commentaries in the second phase tend to argue for changes in the governance of mega-events in football.

Joakim Särkivuori and Antti Laine (2024) continue to analyse how sport is used for reputation building and soft power in the third article of the thematic issue. One of the major franchises in Finland's top division in men's ice hockey (Liiga), Jokerit Helsinki, sold its home arena and half of its shares to Finnish-Russian oligarchs in 2013. Jokerit also switched to the Russian-led Kontinental Hockey League (KHL) and competed there from 2014 to 2022. Russia's KHL project and its expansion to the West can be viewed as a form of soft power. This study delves into the journalistic coverage of Jokerit during two specific periods: its early days in the KHL and its later stages when exiting the league. These periods coincide with critical geopolitical events: Russia's annexation of Crimea (2014), Belarusian protests (2020–2021), and Russia's invasion of Ukraine (2022). The authors explore the critical socio-political coverage of Jokerit in *Helsingin Sanomat* during these periods and investigate whether the sports journalists recognized the broader geopolitical context of the KHL project and, if so, how this influenced their reporting.

The thematic issue then turns its focus to issues related to sports and gender. The next three articles consider how changes in political, social, and cultural norms have impacted sports journalism. Veera Ehrlén (2024) opens this section with an article that explores how Finnish sports media have played a key role in stimulating debate on gender equity and sexual harassment, as well as the structures and cultures that perpetuate it. This study considers the sports media's self-perception of the politicization of harassment. It is based on interviews with Finnish sports journalists who have been reporting on harassment cases in national and regional media. While the interviews highlight the changing face of sports journalism, and within it an ambition to move from entertainment and performance reporting to socio-politically critical journalism, the article also points out problematic contradictions that are embedded in sports media's ambition of addressing harassment in sports.

The Norwegian Act for Gender Equality (1978) created a strong emphasis on the importance of equal access to all cultural and welfare activities and services, including sports. In Norwegian media, there are often strong reactions to examples of discrimination based on gender, such as during the 2021 European Handball Beach Championship when the Norwegian women's beach handball team were fined for refusing to play in bikini bottoms. In November 2021, the sport's international federation agreed to allow women to compete in a similar uniform to men. Nathalie Hyde-Clarke and Birgitte Kjos Fonn (2024) analyse how the Norwegian media framed the issue for the three months between the tournament and the federation's decision (July to November 2021), thereby paving the way for broader public debate.

Aage Radmann and Anna Sätre (2024) then explore the experiences of female sports journalists in Sweden from a gender perspective. The theoretical framework is inspired by an understanding of (a) gender in a

binary system and (b) hegemonic masculinity. The study consists of 10 semi-structured interviews with the most prominent female sports journalists in Sweden. The sports journalists observe a change in the media industry, resulting in a better understanding of women's working conditions. Even so, the work is still grounded in a culture signified by hegemonic masculinity, where women need to find their own strategies to make a successful career, handle harassment, and cope with other gender challenges.

In the closing article of the edition, Alina Bernstein (2024) considers whether the Nordic model is globally relevant and if it may be applied to countries in other regions. Sports journalists can act as agents of change in society since they have a unique and powerful platform to influence public opinion. This is increasingly obvious when looking at the research generated throughout this thematic issue. However, what about countries such as Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, Spain, and Germany? Based on a review of academic writing, as well as interviews with media and sports scholars, this article assesses to what extent sports journalism may be professionalized and whether sports journalists are able to be, or even desire to be, agents of change.

In a commentary piece following the closing article, Toby Miller (2024)—professor of cultural studies and media studies and former editor of *The Journal of Sport & Social Issues*—highlights what he sees as key contributions of this thematic issue.

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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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Critically Contextualising a Mega-Event: Nordic Sports Commentaries During the 2022 World Cup in Football

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Abstract

Prior to the FIFA 2022 World Cup, Nordic news media emphasised their ambitions of persistently covering problematic aspects of this mega-event to be hosted in Qatar, a country subjected to severe criticism of its human rights breaches in the build-up to the event. Focusing on the genre of commentary journalism—a form committed to articulating opinions on social and cultural issues—this study illuminates how key Nordic news media argued for their views on the World Cup 2022. Drawing on empirical material from Danish and Norwegian broadcasters and tabloids, the study analyses commentaries (excluding “sports only” commentaries) published during the event, highlighting the types of arguments, the discourses they articulate or imply, and their attribution of agency to organisational actors. Although a critical and contextualising argumentation runs through commentaries made during the tournament, the reasoning changes its character to such a degree that it is pertinent to categorise the commentaries as reflecting two distinct discursive phases. Argumentation in the first phase sustains a critique of FIFA and the organiser. Arguments were typically formulated as personal attacks but tended to elaborate on their premises by providing fact-based background from investigations of power abuse. The argumentation in the second phase changes its character by more clearly emphasising the *action* needed to transform current problematic *circumstances* in accordance with stated *goals*, not least a reformation of FIFA. The commentators now tend to be less moralising and more diverse and reflective in how they argue for changes in the governance of mega-events in football.

Keywords

FIFA; FIFA World Cup; mega-events; Nordic news media; political agency; sports commentaries; sportswashing

1. Introduction

Media coverage in the Nordic countries' build-up to the 2022 World Cup in football gave clear signals of a new tendency in sports journalists' approach to covering global sports events of this magnitude. Increasingly in the years after Fédération Internationale de Football Association's (FIFA's) decision in 2010 that Qatar was to host the event, sports journalists published critical stories raising awareness of problematic aspects of Qatar as a host nation, and the role of FIFA's executive committee in the decision process. If not by any means alone in doing so, Danish and Norwegian sports journalists were at the forefront with news stories about human rights breaches in Qatar, e.g., in the treatment of migrant workers, as well as stories on corruption in FIFA's executive committee (Molnes & Delebekk, 2022). In this way, they contributed to debates about boycotting the event among football supporters, corporations, organisations, and politicians.

The journalistic approach stood out as different from what had been seen as a traditional inclination of sports journalists to concentrate on the sports competition and the competitors involved when covering major sports events (Boyle, 2012; Broussard, 2020). Studies point to traditional failures to engage systematically in critical and investigative roles crucial to the profession, whether practised in Anglophone, Nordic, or other nations. This has earned sports journalism a reputation as the toy department of news media (Rowe, 2017), and more recently, of online sports journalism as the toy department within the toy department (McEnnis, 2020). According to Rowe (2017, p. 526), coverage of the politics and economics of sports "which might...illuminate corruption and questionable sports governance" has not been an integral part of sports journalism practice. Sports coverage has been "weighted to information provided to journalists through routine channels or by other institutional entities," and sports journalists "actively or passively collude with sports organisations by routinely neglecting or downplaying critical matters" (Rowe, 2017, p. 526). Sports organisations have become more financially powerful, particularly in the high-profile sports that dominate the market through broadcasting deals. Sports organisations also possess power over season schedules and fixture lists, access to key athletes, coaches, and administrators, and produce their own content. This provides them with the power to dominate other players in the field, including sports journalists (Schultz-Jorgensen, 2005).

1.1. Prerequisites for a More Critical Sports Journalism

When political and economic interests increasingly shape sports institutions and industries, this necessitates more socio-politically engaged journalism in the field. For a media scholar such as Boyle (2012), sports matters because of what it tells us about aspects of society rather than the nature of sports competition. Sports relates to all kinds of societal issues and discourses, e.g., economics, health, politics, environment, gender, climate change, and drug use. Based on an analysis of textbooks mostly authored by sports journalists with positions in North American and British universities, Weedon and Wilson (2020) call for sports journalism that highlights the social, cultural, and political significance of sports, and inherits more from a vision of journalism as a democratic project intended for the betterment of society, than from "the allure and prestige of covering sports" (p. 1396). In line with Rowe (2017), Weedon and Wilson emphasise the inclusion of sport-related societal issues and debates in sports journalism programmes as a precondition for an improved journalistic practice. According to interviews conducted by Broussard (2020), American sports journalists may now be moving towards a more critical and issue-based approach. Respondents "said they enjoy covering social or political issues related to sports" (Broussard, 2020, p. 1640), although lack of time and resources plays a role in whether reporters cover such issues.

1.1.1. Nordic Principles and Associations

Given sports reporters' traditional orientation, Nordic sports journalists' willingness to contribute to raising public awareness of problematic aspects of the 2022 World Cup in the build-up to this event was noteworthy. Their critical stance, however, did have its prerequisites in both thorough and expository journalism about international sports organisations such as FIFA, conducted by a few investigative journalists (e.g., Blake & Calvert, 2017; Jennings, 2015), and a gradual change in sports journalists' perception of their own role in the coverage of the sports field.

For example, in Norway, critical and investigative sports stories in recent years have increasingly appeared in newspapers such as *VG* and *Dagbladet*, some of them receiving awards (certificates) at the annual conference of the Norwegian Foundation for a Free and Investigative Press (SKUP). In 2016, *VG* received a Norwegian Foundation for a Free and Investigative Press award. Their journalists' series of articles, *Relentless Transparency (Nådeløs åpenhet)*, focused on a closed management culture in Norwegian sports federations (Welhaven et al., 2016).

A Nordic welfare model for sports practice and organisation (Giulianotti et al., 2019) provides a frame for understanding how Nordic sports journalists engaged in scrutinising and critically contextualising FIFA's and the Qatar organiser's role in the allocation and build-up to the FIFA World Cup 2022. Nordic nations have a tradition of promoting welfare society principles such as participatory democracy, political transparency, and human rights in low- and middle-income countries. Nordic welfare model values along with journalistic ideals are also reflected in the associations of Nordic sports journalists. These associations cooperate to secure transparency, free speech, and independence from economic and political interests in sports. Frandsen (2024) points out how the associations now engage more in the content produced, and in securing access for independent journalists to powerful sports organisations and athletes. She also draws attention to how the development of professional values is expressed through the Nordic associations' fellowships, annual conferences, and awards that may set standards of journalistic excellence and recognise the importance of teamwork in critical journalism.

1.2. Research Questions

Before the 2022 World Cup, key Nordic news media emphasised how they not only would cover the sporting competition but also maintain their critical and contextualising coverage of what they considered problematic aspects of the event's organisation (see, e.g., Davidsen, 2022; Nielsen, 2022). Several scholars argue that negative side effects receive more attention and resonance in Western media when the hosting country is non-Western (Grix & Kramareva, 2017; Swart & Hussain, 2023). It remains a question, however, how Nordic journalists followed up on their critical build-up coverage when the World Cup event finally unfolded in late 2022.

To illuminate the way perspectives and opinions were articulated in Nordic media commentaries during the competition, we pose the following overarching research questions:

RQ1: How did commentaries in key news media of Nordic countries argue for their views on the World Cup 2022 during the unfolding of the event?

RQ2: Are there any signs of an implicit reflection by the commentators on their role as the event unfolded?

We choose to focus our analysis on the genre of commentary journalism as this is the form that conventionally is most strongly committed to articulating opinions on social and cultural issues in news media. The journalistic commentary goes beyond the mere reporting of news in the interest of context, explanation, and analysis (Morlandstø & Mathisen, 2022). In other words, it can illuminate and deliberate on social issues in a critical and contextualising manner. While investigative journalism often provides the factual basis and in-depth understanding of an issue, commentary can build upon these facts, offering interpretations, critiques, and personal perspectives.

1.3. Research Assumptions and Key Literature

Commentaries may therefore ideally satisfy the criteria of being critical, as implied by Harding (2015) by her concept of “strong objectivity.” Harding ties her concept to scientific research, but it is also applicable to journalists, who tend to see themselves as an “outside group” needed to hold other social groups and institutions accountable (Weedon & Wilson, 2020). Based on Nordic sports editors and journalists explicitly stating their ambition of covering the whole of the World Cup 2022 critically, we assume that sports journalist commentators consider it their duty to write critical commentaries throughout this global mega-event. As Frandsen et al. (2022) point out, mega-events are driven by networks of national, political, and economic actors that are interested in obtaining exposure but often possess diverse and conflicting strategic interests and values. In accordance with Harding’s (2015) concept of strong objectivity applied to journalism, we expect that sports commentators in our material strive to disclose and contextualise conflicting values, interests, and assumptions of such key actors in the mega-event.

As several of the commentators in our material were personally present in Qatar and writing their commentaries based on first-hand experiences of the World Cup, this may have had an impact on how they developed their opinions and the arguments upon which they were based. One assumption is that being present and exposed to the event as it unfolded, as opposed to writing from the vantage point of their home nations, could contribute to more nuanced perceptions than the univocal negative criticism in the build-up to the event. Therefore, we expect that critical positions of the Nordic commentaries may encompass a reflective awareness of how the values they expose might be emanating from a specific cultural context and geocentric location.

The term “sportswashing” grew in prominence in journalistic media prior to the World Cup (Skey, 2022, p. 2). In recent literature on sportswashing, authors such as Boykoff (2022), Grix et al. (2023), and Skey (2022) have nuanced common conceptions of the dynamics of sportswashing, thereby informing our approach to understanding how the arguments made in journalistic commentaries in our material may have evolved or changed during the World Cup event. Grix et al. (2023) note that the term in general is used pejoratively towards large corporations or non-democratic regimes “with journalists making up one of the largest groups employing it” (p. 4). A similar pejorative usage is found in journalistic media of Nordic nations. When the Language Council of Norway (Språkrådet) chose “sportswashing” as the word of the year in 2021 based on its media appearances, it was defined in the following way: “when officials in authoritarian countries use major sporting events to put themselves in a better light or seek to achieve the same by acquiring or sponsoring popular sports clubs” (Språkrådet, 2021).

Definitions in Danish media resemble the Norwegian one. For example, the daily *Kristeligt Dagbladet* (Frank, 2021) emphasises how sportswashing is a practice in which companies use sporting events, purchases, and sponsorship to improve their reputation. Theoretical literature may elaborate on such conceptions by drawing attention to how sportswashing resonates with the concept of “soft power.” According to Nye (2004, p. 5), soft power is about “attracting people to one’s values and ideas rather than compelling them with hard power in the form of military threats or economic penalties.” Mega-events such as the 2022 World Cup can provide the host country with an opportunity to rewrite its history. Boykoff (2022, p. 243) sees sportswashing as something political leaders use to appear “important or legitimate on the world stage” while “deflecting attention away from chronic social problems and human rights woes on the home front.”

Boykoff stresses that sportswashing can emerge in both authoritarian and democratic regimes. Skey (2022, p. 12) asserts that if sportswashing is to become a useful analytical concept it needs to be applied to other parts of the world than a narrow range of non-Western actors. For our analytical purposes, however, we find that Grix et al.’s (2023) conceptualisation of sportswashing is particularly useful. By providing empirical examples of sportswashing arrangements, such as the World Cup 2022, these authors conceptualise sportswashing as “a process involving an inherently bidirectional phenomenon which benefits both the illiberal regimes and the Western sports brands and organisations who collaborate in it” (Grix et al., 2023, p. 16).

They point out that it is through encouragement and opportunities afforded by democratic global capitalism and the “West” that sportswashing strategies are made available to non-democratic regimes. The arrangement consists of those who possess cultural power and prestige (usually the West) and those who wish to have it (usually non-Western states), and “equally, those in possession of cultural power and prestige want economic power and prestige in exchange” (Grix et al., 2023, p. 6). The authors further highlight distinct phases of a “sportswashing” arrangement. It usually passes through three “waves”:

1. It encounters sustained critique, buoyed by the media;
2. It is characterised by a prolonged period of negative narratives and counternarratives fought out in the press and social media, raising concerns about differences in values, norms, and culture of the actors involved;
3. It marks the “normalisation” of the arrangement in which the media coverage of “Wave 1” and the critique of “Wave 2” rarely feature (Grix et al., 2023, p. 20).

For our analysis, we assume that the authors’ presentation of this three-wave process is useful for tracing possible changes in the Nordic commentators’ stance through the event. A question for our discussion, then, is whether and how such waves apply to the commentaries of the event in our material.

In the following, we first elaborate on our material and our approach to analysing the texts. Then we present key analytical observations before we relate our findings to our initial assumptions in the concluding discussion.

2. Material and Methodological Approach

We have limited our material to commentaries presented by Danish and Norwegian broadcasters and tabloids. Media in these two nations are interesting to analyse because they voiced extensive criticism of FIFA and

the host nation Qatar in the build-up to the World Cup. Furthermore, both nations have strong traditions for sports coverage and commentary through their public broadcasters and tabloid newspapers. We have included broadcasters with TV rights to the games, one public and one commercial in both countries (DR and TV 2 in Denmark and NRK and TV 2 in Norway), and the tabloid papers with the most extensive sports coverage (VG in Norway and *Ekstra Bladet* in Denmark).

The material we included was produced from the day before the tournament started till the day after it ended. We chose individually written commentaries that expressed the author's own arguments and opinions, not reports reproducing opinions or primarily quoting other experts. We also excluded "sports only" commentaries. To be selected, they were to include a standpoint on a political, social, or cultural issue that the commentators tied to the event. Based on these criteria, we narrowed down our corpus from 64 commentaries to 39 relevant commentaries.

We chose our material for analysis based on our understanding of the commentary genre as deliberation by means of *argumentation* in which a standpoint, an idea, or a suggested way of acting is supported through reasoning. In our chosen sports commentaries, its *discourses*—understood as ways of signifying experience from a particular perspective (N. Fairclough, 1995a, p. 135)—may be identified in the premises of the arguments (I. Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012; Walton, 2007), or through the commentators' attribution of agency to the main actors they discuss in their texts. We use the term *agents* primarily in the sense of text participants (persons, groups, organisations, etc.) who are represented by the commentators as those who initiate actions that strongly influence the framing, organisation, and execution of the event. Identification and analysis of textual arguments, the discourses they articulate or imply, and the agency they attribute to different actors, are all considered components of critical discourse analytical approaches to media texts (N. Fairclough, 1995b; I. Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012).

We initially ordered the material by close reading of the 39 relevant articles. For each article, we identified the main topic(s), the commentators' main argument, their attribution of dominant discourses, and attribution of agency and patiency (those affected by agents' actions). As the main topics were suggested by the main arguments made, and patients (e.g., persons or organisations affected) were implied by the attribution of dominant agents, we chose to emphasise the above-mentioned discursive components of the texts. We then formatted tables of two different discursive phases of the tournament that we identified in the texts. We used the tables to present the main arguments extracted from the commentaries made in the different news media. This paved the way for analyses of forms of the arguments made in the two phases we observed, and how different discourses were articulated in the arguments and through attribution of agency to the main actors in the texts.

3. Analysis and Findings

Our identification of two distinct discursive clusters in the reading of the different media commentaries structure the following analysis and presentation of findings. Although discourses of the two different clusters may be identified at various stages of the tournament, we choose to designate them as respectively a first and a second phase because they are essentially expressed as such chronologically.

3.1. First Phase

The first phase is comprised of comments that maintain and perpetuate the criticism of FIFA and the host country Qatar which was dominant in the period leading up to the championship. In Table 1, we provide distillations of the commentators' main arguments in the first phase based on our interpretations. We present the arguments in a form that exhibits the claims of the arguments and premises that support them.

Table 1. Criticising FIFA, the organiser, and football teams' compliance with prohibitions.

	News media	Main argument(s) of commentators
Danish tabloid	<i>Ekstra Bladet</i> Commentaries: 8 Timespan: 19.11.2022– 10.12.2022	Organisers' and FIFA's PR campaign in the World Cup build-up is deceptive, as it covers up several criticisable aspects of the arrangement, not least human rights violations. The Danish team and union are cowards as they do not use "one love" armbands signalling opposition to homophobia and racism. There is no reason to trust media mogul and Qatar Investment Fund President Al-Khelaifi's argument of a non-political event, as he has partaken in political gambits leading up to and during the event.
Norwegian tabloid	VG Commentaries: 12 Timespan: 22.11.2022– 14.12.2022	The teams' compliance with FIFA's prohibitions of "one love" markings is a sign of cowardice, as endorsing all-encompassing values is an expression of human rights. It is difficult to grasp what is genuine and "constructed" views of people that journalists interview in Doha, as the organisers strive to control the creation of an image of a successful event. It is impossible to get a common trustworthy number on the death toll of migrant workers, as the organiser and FIFA lack a will to sufficiently map deaths and compensate bereaved families.
Norwegian broadcasters	TV 2 Commentaries: 3 Timespan: 17.11.2022– 21.11.2022	FIFA president Infantino is devoid of credibility as he cooperates with Saudi to reach his goals and refuses to take criticism of his new home country, Qatar, seriously. Qatar should not have been awarded the World Cup, as this has led to human rights violations and made football an attractive political weapon for authoritarian regimes. Threatening players to silence is an abuse of power by FIFA, as its own statutes state that discrimination has no place in football.
	NRK Commentaries: 2 Timespan: 19.11.2022– 21.11.2022	Infantino's pre-opening rhetoric of a "football only/no politics" World Cup expresses a political gambit serving to polarise nations due to his accusations of Western football nations as hypocritical and to his silencing of human rights violations. Infantino's ties to leaders of autocratic nations, e.g., Bin Salman of Saudi Arabia, is an <i>ominous</i> sign of an awarding of the World Cup in 2030 to Saudi, given the country's willingness to use sportswashing to conceal severe human rights violations.
Danish broadcasters	TV 2 Commentaries: 1 Timespan: 24.11.2022	A small but visible act of protest from the Danish team is desirable, as this may secure attention to freedom of speech and fair play with an impact on FIFA, Infantino, and football in general.
	DR Commentaries: 1 Timespan: 18.11.2022	Infantino's identifying himself as, for example, a homosexual and a migrant worker in his speech was absurd. If he were homosexual, he would have broken the region's law. Had he been a migrant worker, it is not certain he would be there today.

3.1.1. Arguments

In this first phase, negative criticism is highlighted by the arguments made in the various news media commentaries. The Qatar organisers and FIFA are criticised for their public relations campaign, which is alleged to obscure various objectionable aspects of the World Cup, especially concerning human rights abuses. This includes claims that the organiser lacks a will to map the death toll of migrant workers, and the initiative to compensate bereaved families. In the argumentation, commentators in news media as diverse as the Danish tabloid *Ekstra Bladet* and Norwegian public broadcaster NRK deconstruct and condemn the organiser's claims of the event being non-political, especially with reference to FIFA President Gianni Infantino's ties with autocratic leaders and his rhetoric of a "football only, no politics" World Cup.

This stance is seen as a political manoeuvre aimed at silencing discussions about human rights violations and polarising nations. The teams' compliance with FIFA's prohibitions, particularly regarding the "one love" armband, is regarded as a failure to stand up against discrimination. In this, they expose what a Danish commentary in *Ekstra Bladet* sees as "collective cowardice":

They should be ashamed. When the Danish national team players step onto the field for their first World Cup match today, both they and the entire Danish Football Association assume the figures of cowards. The Football Association is hereby tossing its entire whining strategy of "critical dialogue" with the "arch-regime" overboard faster than a Nepalese slave worker's passport can be confiscated. (Kastrup, 2022)

Although negative criticism of organisational actors abounds in the claims of the arguments, they emanate from a position that supports universal values and implicitly argues that human rights should be a fundamental aspect of international football. FIFA's actions, such as threatening to silence players and the alleged collaboration with countries known for human rights violations, are viewed as contradicting its own statutes that prohibit discrimination in football. Infantino's attempts in his pre-opening speech to empathise with marginalised groups (e.g., "gay" and "disabled") are seen as disingenuous, highlighting the dissonance between FIFA's public statements and the realities of the host region.

Several arguments made across the different news media in this first phase, then, may come across as variants of personal attack—or what rhetorical literature terms *ad hominem* arguments (Walton, 2007). Rhetoric literature tends to consider such arguments as fallacious and counterproductive by not inviting dialogue when the character of another person making an argument is attacked rather than the argument itself. We do find personal attacks in our material, particularly in *Ekstra Bladet* with its condescending descriptions of FIFA's president and key agents among World Cup organisers (e.g., Infantino and Al-Kelaifi as "spinning an idiotic gambit"; Jensen, 2022b). Nevertheless, the arguments made across the news media tend to elaborate on their premises, e.g., by providing fact-based background from investigations and revelations of breaches and power abuse in FIFA leadership and among the organisers in their build-up to the event. Frequent commentary attacks on the continued hollowness of the leadership's media rhetoric when the World Cup opens are careful to provide an allegation of inconsistency, thereby weakening the plausibility of the rhetoric. This kind of circumstantial *ad hominem* argument can be seen as a reasonable way of questioning the attacked person's credibility (Walton, 2007). Circumstantial allegations of inconsistency are typically of a kind characterised by the expression "he does not practice what he preaches," a form we trace in several of the arguments presented in Table 1.

3.1.2. Dominant Discourses

Our mapping of main arguments allows us to identify dominant discourses, as they are articulated or implied in the arguments of the first cluster/phase. In the commentaries' arguments, what we extract as the dominant discourses typically express the commentators' ways of seeing and experiencing the conduct of key powerful actors/agents of the tournament, whether they are based on how these actors have been represented in media or on more direct physical observation. Underlying the commentators' arguments are their own sets of values, such as transparency tied to democratic leadership and humans' rights to freely express their opinions.

We identify three dominant discourses: discourse of corruption and autocratic governance, discourse of political agency and sportswashing, and discourse of exclusion and selective inclusion. Discourse of corruption and autocratic governance is a dominant discourse articulated by repeated references to "corruption," "abuse of power," "authoritarian governance," and "strategic silence." It encompasses concerns about the democratic legitimacy of FIFA's leadership, as well as the accusation that FIFA and related authorities may be engaging in practices that lack transparency and accountability, often with reference to the host country's human rights record. This discourse of corruption and autocratic governance also includes commentators' ridiculing of the accusatory responses of local authorities to "Western" news media's "derogatory" coverage, and a critique of how FIFA's actions and affiliations negatively impact its reputation and governance.

Discourse of political agency and sportswashing is evident in the critique of FIFA presenting the event as non-political (e.g., Jensen, 2022a; Welhaven, 2022). It questions the sincerity of FIFA's claim to unity and inclusivity, particularly when excluding specific groups or when FIFA's leadership is accused of sympathising with oppressive regimes in a "discourse of selective political favouring." It challenges the notion that sports can be separated from politics, implying a "discourse of inseparability of politics and football" underlying the commentators' arguments. The recurring term "sportswashing" implies that the sporting event is being used to distract from or cleanse the negative aspects of the involved parties.

Related to the above, a discourse of exclusion and selective inclusion focuses on the selective nature of inclusivity purported by FIFA, as noted in the material by the exclusion of "homosexuals, women, and migrant workers" from the discourse of unity promoted by the organisers. It highlights a dissonance between the proclaimed values of inclusivity and the actual practices, which may exclude or silence certain groups and criticisms.

In sum, the dominant discourses and agency that the commentators attribute to key organisational actors in this first phase, suggest a dynamic where powerful organisations and individuals (such as FIFA, Qatar, and Infantino) enact policies and narratives that significantly and negatively impact various stakeholders in the football world, from individual players and teams to human rights advocates and actors in the football community pushing for more organisational transparency.

3.2. Second Phase

Table 2 provides a distillation of the main arguments made in a second discursive phase, in which commentaries to a larger extent reflect on future organisational changes in football and culturally divergent perspectives of

Western and Arab nations. We note that two of our Danish news media do not include commentaries that fit into this thematic pattern.

3.2.1. Arguments

In this second phase, which mainly appears in the last stages of the tournament, the criticism raised in the first phase persists. However, in this phase, we also identify commentaries that implicitly reflect upon, acknowledge, or propagate counterarguments against what may be perceived as Eurocentric or Western moralising, particularly regarding the host country's breaches of human rights and the corruption and undemocratic governance of FIFA. In this phase, commentaries also reflect on ways forward, contemplating how FIFA and international football can be reformed to ensure governance that is more democratic and in alignment with universal human rights.

Table 2. Commenting on culturally divergent perspectives and arguing for future changes in football's organisation.

	News media	Main argument(s) of commentators
Danish tabloid	<i>Ekstra Bladet</i>	None.
Norwegian tabloid	VG Commentaries: 3 Timespan: 08.12.2022– 19.12.2022	Reduced sponsor money may scare Infantino, as sponsors risk weakened market value due to FIFA's behaviour. Claiming football and politics as separate entities is simplifying, since both "Western" and Arab voices have used matches to promote political viewpoints. A corruption case against an EU parliament member can trigger a rematch on Qatar's reputation, as it could end with a conviction in which Qatari interests are central.
Norwegian broadcasters	TV 2 Commentaries: 3 Timespan: 25.11.2022– 07.12.2022	Infantino will continue to divide and rule if European football leaders do not have credible suggestions to level the differences between Europe and other continents. To reform FIFA, the North European countries need to change their old Eurocentric discourse of "we have a better understanding of how you should live your life." The World Cup creates a sense of community and pride in the Arab world, but the main criticism of Qatar persists: violation of human rights and treatment of migrant workers.
	NRK Commentaries: 1 Timespan: 08.12.2022	The North European criticism of human rights breaches lacks sufficient force to have an impact on the reputation of Qatar, as most of the world is enjoying the matches.
Danish broadcasters	TV 2 Commentaries: 2 Timespan: 07.12.2022– 12.12.2022	To avoid unfair elections and potentially corrupt leadership in the future of FIFA, changes must be initiated by its members, the Danish football organisation will have a slight impact on FIFA by itself. Traditional football nations should not be favoured forever. Therefore, the coming World Cup tournaments should be expanded to 48 nations. Sports organisations should not be tempted by bribery by autocratic regimes. Therefore, core democratic nations should put more pressure on the major international sports organisations (such as FIFA).
	DR	None.

Commentaries now more explicitly argue for the intertwined nature of football and politics, acknowledging the sport as a platform for political expression globally. A Norwegian TV 2 commentator (Berg, 2022b) argues for the football community's responsibility to put pressure on FIFA to follow explicit criteria with clear expectations when awarding football mega events to host nations. This commentator also draws attention to the sense of community and pride in the Arab world, necessitating a balanced approach that respects cultural differences while addressing legitimate criticisms regarding human rights. According to Norwegian TV 2's commentator:

It is...obvious that this year's World Cup builds community among people from the Arab world. Many Muslims feel an enormous pride over this championship. They also say that the World Cup feels safer and more comfortable because it avoids the prejudices and Islamophobia that unfortunately characterise Europe. At the same time, this World Cup feels much less safe for queer supporters. Both are true. (Berg, 2022b)

This strain of argumentation includes a call for ethical governance in sports, ensuring that international events like the World Cup are not used as tools for "sportswashing" by regimes with poor human rights records. A Danish TV 2 commentator argues that the Western world with its continued status as a core region of international sports must use this standing to reform international sports organisations (Andersen, 2022). In contrast to this, a guest commentator on Norwegian TV 2 with a Brazilian background argues for a shift away from a North-Eurocentric discourse towards a more inclusive and empathetic approach to understanding diverse cultural and governance perspectives. Advocating for more inclusivity and equity in international football, the argument emphasises the importance of broadening the understanding of diverse cultural contexts within international football governance, moving beyond traditional biases and favouritism towards Western nations to embrace a global perspective that recognises the significance of events like the World Cup in various cultures:

The debate about corruption in FIFA and human rights violations in Qatar fades the further away one gets from the well-functioning welfare states in the wealthiest part of the world. If FIFA is to be reformed, this debate must step out of the North European echo chamber and communicate with the rest of the world....To reach more of the member countries in FIFA, the North European countries that have been at the forefront of this campaign must understand the complexity of the issue and adapt their communication from a regional to a global, but also a local perspective. (Doria, 2022)

The arguments made in the second phase, then, tend to be less moralising in their continued critique of the organisers and FIFA, and more diverse and reflective in the way they argue for changes in the governance of mega-events of football. A political thrust now comes across in a more constructive form in some of the arguments made. Commentators more clearly reason about—and suggest—*actions* (e.g., clear allocation criteria in FIFA) needed to enable the transformation of current *circumstances* (e.g., unclear allocation criteria in FIFA) in accordance with some stated *goals* and *values* (e.g., greater organisational transparency). We observe far less critical arguments than "sports only"—commentaries in the last weeks of the tournament. However, several of the arguments made in this second discursive phase suggest that the sports journalists now more distinctly act as reasoning participants—or *agents of change*—in processes of deliberation.

3.2.2. Dominant Discourses and Agency

Consequently, although the “negative” discourses attributed to the organisers in the first phase reappear, discourses underlying arguments made in the second cluster may be different, and closely reflect the values of the commentators. These can for example be formulated as discourses of “diverse experiences and opinions,” “community and pride in the Arab world,” “the inseparability of politics and football,” and a deliberative discourse of “greater equality between different parts of the football world,” pointing to how the UEFA must be willing to redistribute more financial resources beyond Europe (Berg, 2022a). In other words, a desired *agency* implied in discourses of the second phase may be attributed to other key actors than in the first phase. In these discourses, bringing about changes towards more equality in the football world—and reform of FIFA—is seen as a chief responsibility of hegemonic bodies such as UEFA.

4. Concluding Discussion

We have analysed commentaries made by sports journalists in key Danish and Norwegian news media during the unfolding of the mega-event FIFA World Cup 2022. Although a persistent critical and contextualising argumentation runs through the commentaries made during the tournament, the commentators’ reasoning changes its character to such a degree that it is pertinent to categorise the commentaries as reflecting two distinct discursive clusters/phases. In these phases, changes can be traced in (a) the form of the arguments, (b) the discourses they articulate or imply, and (c) the agency they attribute to different actors. In the following, we elaborate on how our analysis answers RQ1.

As regards the form of the arguments, argumentation in the first phase repeats the critical attacks on FIFA and the organiser that were made during the build-up to the event. These are typically in the form of personal attacks, so-called *ad hominem* arguments, although commentators frequently elaborate on their premises or provide reasonable circumstantial allegations of inconsistency in the form: “He does not practice what he preaches.” The argumentation in the second phase changes its character by more frequently and clearly emphasising the *action* needed to transform current problematic *circumstances* in accordance with stated *goals* (e.g., reforming FIFA).

As regards (b) and (c) above, articulated or implied in arguments of the first phase are typically discourses of corruption in FIFA and political agency and sportswashing attributed to the organisers, suggesting how these actors effectuate policies and narratives that may cleanse negative aspects of the involved parties while also impacting various stakeholders in the football world negatively. In contrast, discourses in the second phase may more clearly express “diverse experiences and opinions” of distinct cultures participating in the World Cup and “greater equality between parts of the football world.” These discourses reflect how arguments—and counterarguments—of the commentaries now call for changes in the organisation of global mega-events, changes that can involve strengthening a self-critical stance of North European pundits of football and a desired new role and agency for European football organisations such as UEFA. We also observe a notable change in the *agency of commentators* implied in the second phase. The political thrust of arguments presented by some journalists makes their commentaries appear as intended to impact essential changes in the organisation of football.

Changes we detect in the second discursive phase also answer RQ2 (see Section 1.2) by confirming that there are signs of implicit reflection by the commentators on their own role as the event unfolded. Both Danish and Norwegian commentators increasingly display a willingness to take counterarguments into consideration, and some of them more clearly acknowledge and emphasise the value of cultural differences. By discussing the diverse cultural views and values expressed by supporters and teams during the event, they also practice a sports journalism that normatively aligns with Harding's (2015) concept of "strong objectivity" (see Section 1.3). In the case of Norwegian TV 2, we believe that the sports staff's inclusion of commentators with backgrounds in politics (Mina Finstad Berg) or a non-Western culture (Leo Doria) contributes to achieving such a multi-perspectival dimension in their texts.

Moreover, the two phases we identify correspond to the first and second "waves" typical of a sportswashing arrangement as suggested by Grix et al. (2023; see Section 1.3), that is, a first wave of sustained media critique followed by a prolonged wave of negative narratives and counternarratives raising concerns about different values/cultures of involved actors. However, although negative criticism of the organisers' "sportswashing" is maintained throughout the second discursive phase of the World Cup event, we have also noted how some commentators—if not explicitly reflecting on or acknowledging a bidirectionality of sportswashing as conceptualised by Grix et al. (2023)—afford a key responsibility to European football bodies to improve the conditions and organisation of international football by redistributing financial resources and modifying their own Eurocentric thinking.

In the aftermath of the mega-event, one could argue that the third wave conceptualised by Grix et al. (2023) as a "normalisation" of the arrangement—and a strengthened position of Qatar in international business—has occurred, due to a lack of critical comments about the World Cup organisers or Infantino's continued FIFA leadership in the opinion journalism of sports sections in Nordic news media. However, in concluding this case study, we choose to emphasise how several Nordic commentators not only followed up their criticism of the organisers in their build-up to the event in a way that we believe will contribute to a continued improvement of how migrant workers are treated in events arranged by regimes with poor human rights records. When commentators could also argue for how powerful European football organisations and actors need to develop their ways of seeing and acting in global football, this testifies to a strong willingness among Nordic sports journalists to rethink and strengthen their role as agents of change.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Journalistic Framing of Finnish Ice Hockey Club Jokerit in the Russian-Led Kontinental Hockey League

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Abstract

One of the major franchises in Finland’s top division in men’s ice hockey (Liiga), Jokerit Helsinki, sold its home arena and half of its shares to Finnish-Russian oligarchs in 2013. Jokerit also switched to the Russian-led Kontinental Hockey League (KHL) and competed there from 2014 to 2022. Russia’s KHL project and its expansion to the West can be viewed as a form of soft power. This study delves into the journalistic coverage of Jokerit during two specific periods: Its early days in the KHL and its later stages when exiting the league. These periods coincide with critical geopolitical events, such as Russia’s annexation of Crimea (2014), Belarusian protests (2020–2021), and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (2022). Our data consists of Jokerit-related articles in the newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* as well as interviews of the journalists who followed the team closely. We explore the critical socio-political coverage of Jokerit in *Helsingin Sanomat* during these periods and investigate whether the sports journalists recognized the broader geopolitical context of the KHL project and, if so, how this influenced their reporting. Utilizing the framing theory, we identified five frames under which to divide the articles: (a) sports events, (b) international relations, (c) power and governance, (d) business, and (e) unity. The sports event frame predominated during the early KHL era, whereas international relations and power and governance frames only emerged later. These shifts were not initiated by sports journalists but resulted from the efforts of journalists in other fields and increased the societal scrutiny of ties to Russia.

Keywords

ice hockey; Jokerit Helsinki; Kontinental Hockey League; newspapers; Russia; sports journalism

1. Introduction

Sports played a crucial role in shaping the Soviet Union's folklore and identity (Backman & Carlsson, 2020; Borrero, 2017; Forsberg, 2021; Kiseleva, 2015). Soviet authorities invested huge resources especially in ice hockey to showcase the superiority of the communist system to capitalism (Backman, 2018; Baumann, 1988; Jokisipilä, 2015). The newly-born country of Russia started to boost its soft power strategies in the 2000s (Forsberg, 2021; Kiseleva, 2015) and included sports as a crucial part of this (Arnold, 2018). The Kontinental Hockey League (KHL) project emerged in the early 2000s with the explicit support of President Vladimir Putin (Konttinen & Rantanen, 2014). Putin mobilized significant financial resources from loyal oligarchs and corporate sponsors, such as Gazprom, to establish the league. As a component in Russia's soft power arsenal, the KHL's political and cultural mission was to project Russia's influence in the post-Soviet territory and foster better relationships with neighboring countries (Forsberg, 2021; Jokisipilä, 2011; Tynkkynen, 2016). As Finland shares a long history with its Eastern neighbor—both conflict and co-operation-wise—it has become accustomed to Russian and Soviet-style expertise in sports over the decades, particularly in ice hockey (Sihvonen, 2004).

On June 28, 2013, three businessmen—Gennady Timchenko, Harry Harkimo, and Roman Rotenberg—announced that Jokerit Helsinki, one of the biggest brands and most successful clubs in Finnish ice hockey, would switch to the KHL from the 2014–2015 season onwards. Timchenko and Arkady Rotenberg would acquire a 49% share in Jokerit, Roman Rotenberg was to take the role of the chairman, while Harkimo would retain the majority ownership (Backman & Carlsson, 2020; Forsberg, 2021). Having maintained close connections to Russia before (Lempinen, 2019), Harkimo's autocratic moves sparked massive criticism behind the scenes in Finnish hockey (Forsberg, 2021). However, the move received generally excited reactions from the Jokerit's fanbase and the press (Laine & Hemmi, 2019).

1.1. *Russian Roulette Backfires*

Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 led to targeted sanctions for Gennadi Timchenko and Arkady Rotenberg. This forced the duo to sell their shares in Jokerit and Hartwall Arena to Roman Rotenberg. In 2019, Harkimo bought Rotenberg's Jokerit shares and afterward sold all the Jokerit shares to Jari Kurri, a Finnish National Hockey League legend. Kurri then quickly sold 40% of the shares to Norilsk Nickel Harjavalta Oy, a Finnish subsidiary of Norinickel, a multinational company owned by the oligarch Vladimir Potanin, who was not under sanctions (Backman & Carlsson, 2020). While the newly appointed Jokerit CEO Eveliina Mikkola stated that "Jokerit stays in 100% Finnish ownership" (Touru, 2019, para. 26), the arrangements were calculated moves resulting from sanctions imposed on oligarchs (Backman & Carlsson, 2020; Forsberg, 2021; Lempinen & Paananen, 2019). Timchenko reportedly invested around 50 million euros in Jokerit between 2014 and 2019 and employed a "loss guarantee" strategy as well, which was common among oligarch owners across the KHL to offset financial shortfalls (Backman & Carlsson, 2020; Hepojärvi, 2021). Jokerit amassed roughly 93 million euros in losses from 2014 to 2021 (Rajala, 2016).

Intense protests erupted in the spring of 2020 in the Russian satellite state of Belarus, especially in its capital city Minsk, when dictator Aleksandar Lukashenko's victory in the presidential elections was widely interpreted as fraudulent. Jokerit's season in the KHL was supposed to begin with an away game against Dynamo Minsk. The Finnish press closely followed the situation in Belarus, and the public put Jokerit

under intense pressure: Playing in Minsk was generally seen as capitulation to Lukashenko’s power politics and, more broadly, as overlooking the human rights abuses that had been consistently occurring in Russia and its sphere of influence throughout Jokerit’s KHL journey (Forsberg, 2021). This can be considered a milestone in journalistic and public criticism regarding Jokerit’s eastern endeavors. Finally, after Russia launched a full-scale attack on Ukraine in February 2022, it was an inevitable decision for Jokerit to withdraw from the KHL. A summary of Jokerit’s ownership arrangements between 2011 and 2023 is presented in Figure 1.

Through the KHL, Russia aimed to shape narratives and challenge Western hegemony via economic, cultural, and political aspects (Backman & Carlsson, 2020; Forsberg, 2021). According to Forsberg (2021, p. 220), the KHL had “a normalizing effect” on Finnish-Russian relationships, particularly among younger hockey fans. From the KHL’s perspective, Jokerit was a success story until 2020. Jokerit was the first team in the league from a country that did not belong to the Soviet Union’s satellite states during the Cold War and gained status as a strong brand within the KHL. Backman and Carlsson (2020) state that Jokerit’s leap to the KHL can even be seen as a logical extension of Russian influence in Finnish sports. According to Backman and Carlsson (2020, p. 517), the whole rationale of the KHL is hard to grasp “without considering Putin’s political ambitions and strategies” while Jokerit should be handled as “an individual case within a more extensive and enthralling master plan.” Forsberg (2021) concludes that while researchers should be careful not to exaggerate the KHL’s political purposes, the league’s message of keeping politics and sports separate aligns with the technique of “cultural statecraft” and was effective in Finland for a long time. It was also remarkable how, the Finnish political elite remained silent regarding the political role of the KHL, with only a few public statements warning against being too naive about Russian presence (Forsberg, 2021).

1.2. Soft Power and (Sports) Journalism

The concept of soft power refers to the means to success in world politics, emphasizing attraction beyond national borders through cultural interaction (Nye, 2004). While Western hegemony has long been based on universal values such as democracy, human rights, and equality, Russia has shifted its focus from universal values to cultural dimensions. Striving for an alternative narrative to the West, Russian leaders consider soft



Figure 1. Jokerit’s voyage to East and back to West. Source: Authors’ work based on Backman and Carlsson (2020), “Ensin myytiin Hartwall-areena” (2014), and Suvinen (2023).

power a political instrument for indirect control and manipulation of foreign populations, leading to a blurring of lines between cultural means and propaganda (Kiseleva, 2015).

Media plays a crucial part in disseminating soft power by shaping countries as partners or enemies (Nye, 2008). Research on media and journalism from the soft power perspective is quite extensive, especially in relation to the US (Blondheim & Segev, 2017; Hearn-Branaman, 2017; Segev & Blondheim, 2013) and China (Ittefaq et al., 2023; Li & Rønning, 2013; Wasserman, 2016; Wright et al., 2020; Yellinek, 2022) as well as other influential countries, such as the UK and Qatar (Wright et al., 2020), Russia (Szostek, 2014), and Brazil (Jiménez-Martínez, 2023). Elite sports, especially, are an effective way to spread narratives and desired messages (Koch, 2016). Sports media as a tool of influence has been recently studied by Connell (2018), Correia et al. (2021), Dubinsky (2018), Hasbani et al. (2021), Schler and Dubinsky (2020), as well as Yoon and Wilson (2016), to name a few. The nation-branding of Finland through sports media has been extensively studied by Tervo (2001, 2002, 2003, 2004). For Finland, sport was arguably the most influential tool to differentiate itself from the Russian empire before gaining independence (Viita, 2003).

2. Research Design and Methodology

2.1. Research Questions

In this article, we study Finnish journalists' coverage of Jokerit during the team's KHL era from a socio-political perspective. There are two research questions: What kind of critical socio-political coverage about Jokerit was published in *Helsingin Sanomat* (*HS*) during 2014–2015 and 2020–2022? Did the sports journalists of *HS* recognize the broader geopolitical context of the KHL project, and if they did, then when and how did this affect their reporting?

2.2. Data

Our main data consists of Jokerit-related articles in the Finnish daily newspaper *HS* during two time periods: February 13, 2014, to June 12, 2015, and August 20, 2020, to May 14, 2022. In the initial timeframe, Jokerit's relocation to the KHL in 2014 coincided with Russia's annexation of Crimea. In the second time period, the Belarusian protests unfolded from 2020 to 2021, followed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, after which Jokerit left the KHL. In our data, we included all the articles from the two time periods that did not solely concentrate on sports performance, such as match reports.

HS was chosen as the source of material as it is the most read and largest subscription-based print newspaper in Finland, and its overall reach (both print and digital versions total 2,187,000 weekly) is the third biggest in the country after the tabloids *Ilta-lehti* and *Ilta-Sanomat* (Media Audit Finland, 2023). According to a news valuation survey (Müller, 2024) conducted in 2023, *HS* is the second most trusted news source in Finland after the public broadcasting company Yle and, with the print and digital versions combined, also among the most important news sources in the country. *HS* can thus be considered a respected, reliable, and influential journalistic voice in Finland. Moreover, *HS* is published by Sanoma Media Finland, a market-leading cross-media business, which is part of Sanoma, the biggest media enterprise in Finland by revenue (Sanoma, 2023).

Our supplementary data consists of two interviews with *HS* sports journalists who covered Jokerit's time in the KHL the most, and one background interview with another *HS* (non-sports) journalist, who wrote an extensive report about Jokerit's ownership arrangements for the *HS* monthly supplement *Kuukausiliite*. All informants agreed to participate without anonymity. Sports journalist Heikki Miettinen (HM) was interviewed on October 10, 2023, sports producer Tero Hakola (TH) on October 12, 2023, and journalist Sami Sillanpää (SS) on October 12, 2023. We utilize phrases from the interviews in our results and discussion sections (Sections 3 and 4).

2.3. Framing Theory

News and media frames provide angles and narratives through which issues or events are portrayed. These define problems, interpret causes, and make moral evaluations. This happens through journalists selecting, emphasizing, and contextualizing specific aspects of a story. By identifying different frames, scholars identify trends and discourses (Babiak & Sant, 2021; see also Goffman, 1986). Recent examples of utilizing the framing theory in sports journalism research include Bell and Coche (2022), Broussard (2020), Parry et al. (2023), Pedersen (2017), Peterson and Muñoz (2022), and Sadri et al. (2022). Additionally, Hartmann et al. (2023) have aptly described how the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar highlighted the paradox inherent in elite sports entertainment and its underlying structures. While few would dispute Qatari sports washing, it must simultaneously be acknowledged that not everyone engages with sports in this critical manner, highlighting a paradox in how these events are perceived and experienced globally. Subsequently, it is also presumed and seen as natural that the proliferation of socio-political and critical frameworks in sports journalism does not occur at the expense of frames that positively and enthusiastically depict sports results and events (Hartmann et al., 2023).

2.4. Data Analysis

In our framing analysis of the newspaper data, we followed the four-stage model by Chong and Druckman (2007). Ultimately, we were able to employ an analytical framework of five frames under which to divide the articles:

- (a) The sports event frame consists of articles that focus on the team and the staff, and the match events of Jokerit (that did not solely concentrate on sports performance, such as match reports).
- (b) The international relations frame examines the geopolitical implications of the KHL.
- (c) The power and governance frame investigates issues such as corruption, governance structures, and the impact of political interference in the KHL and Jokerit.
- (d) The business frame highlights the role of ownership arrangements, marketing, and sponsors, as well as Jokerit's financial indicators.
- (e) The unity frame includes narratives that promote a sense of unity and solidarity through sports, most commonly referring to the fanbase of Jokerit.

We did not conduct a thorough analysis of the interview data, as the purpose was to use interviews as supportive material.

3. Results

In Table 1, we present the classification of the newspaper articles into the five frames and the number of articles in each. While it may be unsurprising that the sports event frame dominated both time periods, it is crucial to remember that we excluded all coverage solely focused on sports performance, such as match reports. Next, we explain the main themes and narratives in the frames during the two time periods.

3.1. First Time Period: February 13, 2014, to June 12, 2015

The majority of the coverage in the first time period handled Jokerit taking part in the KHL positively, focusing on how the Finnish-Russian collaboration would benefit Finnish hockey in general. Headlines said that “Businessman Roman Rotenberg promises to bring world-class entertainment to Helsinki” (Miettinen, 2014a) and “Finnish Liiga was too small for Jokerit” (Saarinen, 2014). Before the first home game, lyrics of the Russian national anthem were even printed in *HS* (“Jokerien pelit alkavat,” 2014) to help the spectators sing along (the anthem was played at every match throughout the KHL). Within the sports event frame, only two articles in the sports section can be seen as taking a critical stance: “Putin’s men have seized Jokerit” (Saarikoski, 2014) and “Liiga’s chairman Puttonen sees the KHL league as a risk because it is a tool for Putin’s assertion” (Nieminen, 2014). The former is a deliberately separate column by a political journalist, and the latter is an interview where no real stance is taken on the statements given by the chairman of the Finnish Liiga—highlighting the rivalry that existed at the time between Liiga and Jokerit. *HS* even published a response interview by the Jokerit CEO a couple of days later, where all geopolitical influence was unsurprisingly denied (Seiro, 2014). The journalists we interviewed described the early stages of Jokerit’s KHL journey as follows:

HM: In the beginning, I approached it from a sports perspective, although I was aware of Putin’s support. Putin wasn’t as much of a monster in the West back then. I wanted to give an interesting new league a chance. As things progressed, my eyes opened, and the tone changed.

TH: Heikki attended matches a lot, and I did editorial work. We probably looked at it from different angles....If you regularly follow certain events and individuals, it can influence your writing.

Two articles in the power and governance frame stand out due to their investigative approach. However, neither of these was the work of sports journalists. “Spies, power politics, and manipulators—Putin’s KHL is

Table 1. Number of articles in five frames during the two time periods.

	Sports event frame	International relations frame	Power and governance frame	Business frame	Unity frame
First time period (February 13, 2014, to June 12, 2015)	50	1	15	29	2
Second time period (August 20, 2020, to May 14, 2022)	32	27	14	8	9

more than just hockey” (Konttinen & Rantanen, 2014) explores Putin’s involvement in the creation of the KHL, which is seen not just as a sports league, but also as a geopolitical tool for soft power and influence. “Ettekö te tiedä, kuka minä olen,” (2015) on the other hand, sheds light on Roman Rotenberg, and the meteoric rise of the family’s business ventures during Putin’s era. Contradictions with the sports pages’ coverage are revealed in numerous instances in our data, where Jokerit’s athletic appeal overshadows its ownership arrangements: “Critics immediately raise their hands: it’s easy to play around when Moscow pours the rubles. Be that as it may, but the team is strong and plays enjoyable hockey” (Miettinen, 2014c, para. 9).

The business frame includes a reasonably large number of articles. However, this mainly results from a sponsorship conflict between Jokerit, the state-owned gaming monopoly Veikkaus, and the Maltese gaming company Unibet. The related debate reached the highest levels of government and led to a large-scale investigation. It is rather telling that this case stirred even the top politicians, while the soft power perspective of the KHL or the ownership arrangements behind Jokerit did not attract attention. On top of that, *HS* even encouraged Liiga’s clubs to take influence from Jokerit as a positive example (Miettinen, 2015) in the business sense. Regarding the financial and administrative connections, the journalists acknowledge that Jokerit got off lightly, although they also note that other Finnish companies operating in Russia might not have been critically evaluated enough at that time:

HM: Hakola saw the KHL much more as a monster than I did. In the early stages, I said, “Why criticize one team when you could criticize Fortum’s [Finnish energy company, one of the largest in the Nordic countries] operations in Russia?” At least Jokerit contributed millions in taxes to Finnish society, while Fortum caused tremendous losses for the taxpayers.

TH: I have a memory that sports were given a somewhat moralistic role regarding the KHL, compared to how the economic sections wrote about Fortum’s investments in Russia in the 2010s.

TH: I recall being critical from the early stages, but once the KHL gained momentum, it was probably mostly approached from a sports perspective. When you look at it now, the treatment that the KHL and Jokerit got was probably too gentle.

3.2. Timtsenko Is Putin’s Joker

We found out that one extensive report published outside of our time frames, “Gennadi Timtšenko is Putin’s Joker” (Sillanpää, 2018), was an influential turn in the critical scrutiny of Jokerit’s KHL era. It offered the most critical and insightful examination of Jokerit’s ownership arrangements and political motives within the KHL at that time. This cover story in the *HS Kuukausiliite* featured Jokerit’s logo with Putin’s face photoshopped on it (see Figure 2). Jokerit threatened to sue *HS* for this, and such controversy significantly gave the story increased attention. The text above the logo states that “Vladimir Putin’s inner circle has paid tens of millions of euros for the losses of Jokerit Helsinki.” The author of the article, Sami Sillanpää, was already convinced at that time that Jokerit’s involvement in the KHL, and especially the owners’ connections to Putin, required more thorough reporting:

SS: Sports as a political tool is an underexplored topic. It personally bothered me that the whole picture regarding Jokerit wasn’t presented. Articles often lacked information about the true role of Russian



Figure 2. Picture of the cover of *HS Kuukausiliite* (September 1, 2018).

financiers within Putin's inner circle, and how they had made their money...And I thought that Harry Harkimo's dual role as a member of the Finnish parliament and a partner of Putin's cronies had never been critically examined properly.

Both Miettinen and Hakola stated that people in the sports department of Helsingin Sanomat knew very little about this comprehensive report that was one of the first of its kind with its investigative and socio-political tone:

HM: I wasn't aware of the article before its publication.

TH: I probably knew at some point that the article was coming. Earlier, information often didn't flow well within the *HS* office.

3.3. *Second Time Period: August 20, 2020, to May 14, 2022*

The sports event frame was the most common also in the second time period, but these articles too began to adopt more critical tones. However, both this and the increase of articles in the international relations frame are mostly explained by Belarusian protests, which sparked a veritable storm of moral dimensions associated with Jokerit's participation in the KHL. There was a slight increase in the number of articles in the unity frame as well. This is explained by several articles covering the reactions that Jokerit's fanbase had to Jokerit's final stretch in the KHL. These articles emphasized the unity amongst the supporters in opposing the KHL.

Altogether, the increased critical perspective in the reporting is evident in our material. This is exemplified in the headlines of articles such as "Day of celebration, declares Jokerit, as the dictator's favorite child comes to

town” (Moilanen, 2021): An open jab at Dynamo Minsk’s visit to Helsinki. Tero Hakola recalls that the articles began to take on a more critical tone more frequently, especially during the time of the crisis in Belarus: “At some point, there was a shift towards a more socially critical and problem-oriented approach. For instance, during the Belarusian uprising, we wrote very critically.”

However, it is crucial to emphasize that sports journalists were not those proactive in the rise of socio-political coverage. In fact, they reactively jumped onto a moving train after critics started to emerge elsewhere. It even seems that, instead of self-criticism, sports journalists lectured Jokerit’s team, who did not condemn the Belarusian dictatorship straight away. For example, it was stated that:

Hockey players’ comments and seemingly self-centered values stigmatize the entire sport...If human rights are not of particular interest, Marjamäki and Lehtonen [Jokerit’s head coach and star player] should at least consider the well-being of their Belarusian colleagues and their loved ones. (Hakola, 2020, para. 12–15)

Such criticism towards one coach and one player is understandable and accurate, but at the same time questionable when we look at how little the geopolitical aspirations of the KHL had been examined by sports journalists earlier. Having said this, we also want to bring the voices of the journalists we interviewed to the forefront in the sense that they themselves acknowledge a certain naivety at the beginning of Jokerit’s KHL journey: “With my current knowledge and experience, I can certainly say that we should have written about Jokerit and the KHL more critically from the beginning. It’s easy to say now, but perhaps I was somewhat naive back then” (HM).

Relations between the West and Russia went into deep freeze on February 24, 2022, when Russia launched its full-scale attack on Ukraine. Naturally, following this, the departure of Jokerit from the KHL was only a matter of time, and after a brief period of silence, Jokerit owners also assured that they were seeking the fastest possible way to withdraw from the league, while still respecting KHL regulations. Concerning our data, after February 2022, the sports events frame naturally disappeared entirely, and discussions concerning Jokerit shifted to political contexts, as seen in headlines such as “Russian website reports chilling letter: KHL clubs instructed to support the war” (Kalmari, 2022), and “Jokerit denies SVT’s information that players aren’t allowed to comment on the war in Ukraine” (Uusitupa, 2022). This critical coverage mostly revolved around the club’s ownership arrangements and financial indicators. Both of these gradually began to reveal aspects that sparked strong criticism from sports journalists, as Jokerit began to reorganize its ownership structure and cleanse its name from Russian associations (see Figure 1).

4. Discussion

4.1. Critical Socio-Political Coverage of Jokerit on HS

We utilized a five-part-categorization of criticism in sports journalism by Laine (2011, pp. 236–237), focusing especially on criticism directed at sports organizations (questions on financial, political, and governance-related factors), and criticism towards the sport’s societal status (discusses sports from a broader societal context) to measure the critical socio-political coverage Jokerit received during their time in the KHL. Based on our analysis, we conclude that the sports event frame articles lacked a critical stance on

the KHL's arrival in Finland. The few critical socio-political articles were published within international relations and power and governance frames, mostly focusing on the oligarchs' shady business history and the KHL's personal importance to Putin. However, until the Belarusian protests, these were published in other *HS* sections than sports.

Business frame articles mainly discussed the sponsorship controversy involving Jokerit, Veikkaus, and Unibet. Additionally, the "discount prices" of Jokerit match tickets were frequently mentioned, yet this coverage failed to delve into the broader impact these pricing strategies had. The unity frame slightly discussed the broader societal context—however, this frame only became relevant after the Belarusian protests. In summary, the most critical perspectives surfaced outside the sports section of *HS*.

4.2. Recognition of the Broader Geopolitical Context of the KHL by Sports Journalists in *HS*

It appears that there was a distinct division of labor within *HS*: Critical socio-political journalism regarding sports was published in politics and business sections, while the coverage focusing purely on sports events was the duty of the sports department. However, our interviews revealed that the sports journalists did recognize the geopolitical dimension of the KHL but chose not to write about it much. On the one hand, these topics were not perceived as interesting enough from the readers' perspective, and on the other hand, prevailing attitudes towards Russia and Putin were—understandably—at first more neutral. Despite this, we argue that aspects such as Jokerit's financial indicators and ownership inevitably received too little attention. Roman Rotenberg himself wondered how few questions the Finnish press posed about the whole ownership model ("Ettekö te tiedä, kuka minä olen," 2015). Based on our interviews, while this resulted from the naivete of individual journalists, it also had roots in the internal culture at *HS*:

HM: We had two rounds of layoffs in 2014–2015. Many journalists were let go, especially from sports....There was an event at Sanomatalo [*HS* commercial building] where Antero Mukka [editor-in-chief] announced that the sports department is not an important part of *HS*.

HM: All in all, sports has a weaker sensitivity to delve into societal issues....And when we do, we portray it like we were the first on the topic. But this isn't limited to sports; it's a broader issue at *HS*.

Finally, as awkward as it is to see the lyrics of the Russian national anthem in Finland's largest newspaper, this could somehow be explained by the general "KHL frenzy." However, Russia was already at war in Eastern Ukraine back then, which makes the article look rather disturbing: "In retrospect, it [publishing the lyrics of the Russian national anthem] does seem embarrassingly naive. I remember that the idea came from outside the sports department, from the higher-ups, and we in sports took the bait with humor" (TH).

4.3. Finnish Sports Journalism's Steps Towards a More Socio-Political Approach

Sports journalism has struggled to fully shake off its reputation as the "toy department of journalism," as it has for example been accused of uncritical reporting and excessively close relationships with its topic of interest (e.g., Boyle, 2012; Cassidy, 2017; Hutchins & Rowe, 2012; Weedon et al., 2018). Morgan (2010) has even summarized the main discourse of sports media as "bullshit." Finnish sports journalism has also been characterized as non-analytical and overly enthusiastic in its coverage (Laine, 2011, 2023; Laine & Turtiainen,

2018). However, based on our findings, we conclude that while these characteristics still exist, there is light at the end of the tunnel.

As Finnish sports journalists gradually became more attuned to the geopolitics and soft power dynamics behind the KHL, they undoubtedly advanced in grasping the socio-political contexts and highlighting those for the readers. Having said that, it is important to note that we only observed the sports journalism frames in one—albeit influential—Finnish newspaper, and with a small sample focusing on one distinct phenomenon. The data is also partly 10 years old. Nevertheless, both the change in tone over time in our data and the views expressed by the journalists interviewed led us to the conclusion that Finnish sports journalism has taken steps toward a more socio-political approach. And, while the so-called new generation of sports journalists was outside our scope, it is to be believed that they are more willing to frame their topics in societal contexts and are not afraid to take a critical approach:

TH: There have traditionally been and probably still are people in sports departments whose journalistic career has been exclusively spent there. And if they have a sports background on top of that, there is a danger of getting immersed only in the sports world. But I don't think young journalists face this problem. Current sports journalists are more socially aware and multidisciplinary.

Potential threats to this progress include measuring the reach of articles purely through “click metrics,” thus following the market logic that does not encourage the use of resources for in-depth and investigative sports journalism. In the interviews conducted for this study, sports journalists expressed the view that especially in online reporting, content is driven by what gets the clicks. These articles still typically focus on quick reads and draw inspiration from entertainment news by focusing on famous athletes, dramatic or dramatized details, and colorful language and headlines. Nevertheless, as academic research on the topic is lacking, we can only offer serious reflection rather than conclusions regarding the stance that consumers of sports journalism have on socio-political reporting. It also seems that blame should not be placed solely on the professional ambitions of sports journalists, but also on the preferences of sports followers and the commercial logic followed by media companies: “The number of clicks determines everything. At least for me, that has been burdensome” (HM).

This raises the question: Do consumers of sports journalism have an interest in socio-political reporting? In our literature review for this article, we did not find Finnish studies specifically addressing this issue. However, one similar study provides insights. Laine and Turtiainen (2018) examined how sports journalism serves as a “societal watchdog” in Finland, using the state-funded development project of high-level sports as a case study. While all newspapers covered the project, relatively few articles were published, given the project's duration and the controversies surrounding it. These initial articles were also relatively tame. Once the controversies gained wider attention outside of sports media, sports journalists began to publish more articles about it—often with a critical perspective. This example suggests that when there are intriguing socio-political topics, sports journalists presume they will interest readers. Interestingly, sports journalists were not proactive in identifying these topics; rather, they responded to external cues (Laine & Turtiainen, 2018). A similar pattern emerged in our case with the cover story in *HS Kuukausiliite* (Sillanpää, 2018), which garnered extensive coverage and public interest in Finland. Following its publication, sports journalists also began reporting more on similar issues.

Opposing interpretations of consumer interest in socio-political reporting have also been made. A German study by Lünich et al. (2021) revealed that one-quarter of the broadcasting time allocated to the Rio de Janeiro Summer Olympics 2016 by German public broadcasters was dedicated to covering the host country's political and economic situation, global issues associated with mega sporting events, such as corruption, and other phenomena presenting broader socio-political contexts. This type of reporting was aired for a total of 10 hours during prime viewing times. However, the research showed that viewers did not desire coverage of such negative phenomena as part of Olympic broadcasts. In fact, the group of viewers who did not follow the Olympics closely reacted even more negatively to problem-focused reporting than sports fans themselves. It appears that extensive socio-political reporting does not attract individuals disinterested in sports to follow the sports broadcasts. Consequently, socio-political reporting may repel consumers, at least from televised sports journalism (Lünich et al., 2021).

We also pondered the often-repeated idea of how much investigative journalism on elite sports happens outside sports media. As this work has begun to shift towards sports departments, there may be a risk that comprehensive journalistic exploration of these phenomena falls solely to people who are already struggling with the flood of sports events, click metrics, and fast-paced desk journalism (Boyle, 2012). Eventually, responding to the evolving landscape of media consumption habits may lead to a decrease in socio-political sports journalism. Delving into societal issues and crafting extensive narratives can prove arduous, as deadlines exist around the clock and large portions of readership prefer shorter content in a fiercely competitive media industry (Laine & Särkivuori, 2023).

5. Conclusion

In this study, our goal was to examine *HS*'s coverage of Jokerit's transition into the Russian KHL league during a few politically turbulent periods. We aimed to understand how the KHL's expansion into the West was perceived as a tool of Russian soft power, particularly within sports journalism. Initially, coverage on the sports pages of *HS* was positive and fan-like, lacking critical socio-political analysis. Such a journalistic approach was rare outside the sports desk. However, the tone shifted over time, notably during the Belarusian crisis in 2020, leading to increased critical discourse on Jokerit's involvement in the KHL, even from sports journalists. This development is reflected in our results, with the sports event frame dominating initially, and gradually shifting towards frames crucial for socio-political analysis, namely the international relations frame as well as the power and governance frame. Nevertheless, this shift was not instigated by sports journalists but was a response to Finland's evolving societal and journalistic climate. The growing recognition of the KHL's significance in Russia's soft power arsenal contributed to this change. Jokerit's participation in the KHL began to feel uneasy as Finland's eastern neighbor adopted increasingly autocratic and aggressive stances towards its neighbors, amidst escalating political crises on its borders.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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“It’s a Balancing Act”: Contradictory Ambitions of Journalistic Media in Addressing Harassment in Sport

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Abstract

Over the last five years, the Finnish sports media has played a key role in disseminating information and stimulating debate on gender equity, sexual harassment, and the structures and culture that perpetuate the latter in sport. Triggered by the Me Too movement, the handling of harassment cases has shifted from the private domain to the public debate in the media, making it political. In this article, I study the perception of the politicisation of harassment within sports media. The article utilises interviews with 16 Finnish sports journalists who have been reporting on harassment cases in national and regional media houses. In the thematic analysis, the facilitators and constraints of harassment reporting are examined in relation to the prevailing power structures, culture, and attitudes in the professional sports environment. While the interviews highlight the changing face of sports journalism and, within it, an ambition to move from entertainment and performance reporting to socio-politically critical journalism, the article also highlights the problematic contradictions embedded in the ambition within sports media to address harassment in sport. The findings of this research suggest that when studying the outcomes of news reporting, it is important to pay attention to news production processes and the gendered aspects that influence them.

Keywords

digitalisation; gender equity; hegemonic masculinity; identity politics; sexual harassment; sports journalism

1. Introduction

This research originates in publications by the Finnish Center for Integrity in Sports from 2018 to 2022 revealing the widespread nature of sexual harassment across the sports field. According to a report

pertaining to all sectors of Finnish sport (Lahti et al., 2020), every third female and every fifth male in sport have encountered sexual harassment. Arguably, the investigations that led to the aforementioned publications may not have taken place without the media's active role in reporting on individual cases of harassment and pointing out that they reflect a larger problem in sport. This was particularly evident in the events of March 2022, when the public service media company Yle reported that there had been undisclosed internal cases of sexual harassment within the Finnish Olympic Committee (Suopuro, 2022). Due to the increasing media coverage and public pressure, a top official of the committee resigned, and yet another report investigating harassment within the Olympic Committee was released.

In this article, I understand sexual harassment as unwanted sexual behaviour that violates the mental or physical integrity of another person (see Burn, 2019). It is widely understood that sexual harassment in sport is closely linked to the power structure and culture of hegemonic masculinity (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2002; Krauchek & Ranson, 1999). The increasing journalistic sports coverage of harassment has put pressure on political figures in Finland to react and issue demands for the implementation of sports policy measures (see e.g., Arkko, 2022; Vainikka & Hyyppä, 2020). By bringing violence and the abuse of power to the public's attention, the journalistic sports media has politicised sexual harassment (see Seippel et al., 2018). Yet the role of the media and individual journalists in this context has remained unrecognised both in research and sports policy debates. In this study, I examine how sports journalists perceive the reporting of harassment incidents and what supporting and constraining factors are involved therein. This article thus aims at identifying structural, cultural, and attitudinal points of change in journalistic work that may impact harassment and gender equity issues in sport.

While criticism surrounding sporting performance has always been an integral part of sports journalism, critical journalism directed at the socio-political issues surrounding sport and done by the sports departments of Finnish media houses, has been scarce in the past (Laine & Turtiainen, 2018). The journalistic sports media, as understood in this article, includes media houses and actors producing sports news content in accordance with journalistic principles, such as the quest for truthfulness, objectivity, and accuracy (see Cooper, 1990). In Finland, the journalistic sports media has traditionally reported on sport from a nationalistic, entertaining, and success-focused value base (Laine & Särkivuori, 2023). This stems from the historical lack of criticism in reporting on the national heroes of competitive sport (Laine & Särkivuori, 2023). Internationally, sport has long been seen as a distinct entity, which has led to the absence of journalistic reporting on the social context of sport and has earned sports journalism the reputation of being the toy department of media houses (McEnnis, 2020). The lack of criticism in reporting has led to the maintenance of the status quo regarding sports politics and power positions (Broussard, 2020). Evidently, this has been particularly disadvantageous from a gender equity perspective.

Equality in Finnish sport is known to have been promoted through legislation (e.g., Act on Equality, Sports Act) and funding (e.g., grant conditions), but so far, the role of the media has received little attention. In this study, I approach the treatment of gender equity and harassment in sports journalism, in contrast to the usual approach, not from the perspective of news reporting but from that of journalists. In this article, I additionally consider how the prevailing power structures, culture, and attitudes in the professional sports environment affect and are reflected in the work of sports journalists. I argue that taking a wider perspective on gender in the context of reporting on harassment is crucial because the working body of journalists is constructed in relation to the media content they produce, and because embodiment, sexuality, and gender are argued to

be present in the daily work of journalists (Kivinen, 2016). This study thus makes visible the work of sports journalists and the cultural and structural constraints associated with it and broadens our understanding of the ways in which the professional sports environment can be changed in a more egalitarian direction.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Digitalisation and the Change in Sports Journalism

Outlining the change from “stick to sports” journalism (Broussard, 2020) to socio-politically critical sports journalism requires an understanding of the changing media environment. In this respect, addressing the changes induced by digitalisation is of utmost importance. In the digital era, print journalism is being supplemented or replaced by online journalism, and there is increased competition for the public’s attention as the audience has simultaneous access to various global media content around the clock. Digitalisation has thus made journalism more vulnerable and dependent on the attention and expectations of the public because journalists are constantly competing with other media actors (Kunelius & Reunanen, 2016). In this competition, an increasing number of media players, such as global scoreboards, sports blogs, and in-house media, are challenging the place and legitimacy of journalistic sports media (English, 2022; McEnnis, 2016). Moreover, through social media, athletes can report on events and raise issues in their own words without media interference and set the discourse for public discussion (Cooky & Antunovic, 2020). Often, content produced by athletes is also used by sports journalists in their news production (Nölleke et al., 2017). Therefore, if journalists want to frame a news event or a social media topic differently, they face the urgency to define the news narrative before they are tuned into the discourse established on social media.

Taken together, this reflects that the role of (sports) journalists as gatekeepers of news information has weakened (Nölleke et al., 2017). Today, (sports) journalism is under pressure to be more open and accountable to audiences and is under scrutiny as its actions and operations are critically monitored by audiences, stakeholders, and competitors alike (Kunelius & Reunanen, 2016). Digitalisation has thus led journalistic sports media into a situation where it is forced to redefine its role and re-establish its professional legitimacy (Suggs, 2016).

Conclusively, previous literature indicates that the growing ambition to do socio-politically critical sports journalism constitutes a two-level response to the diversification of the media landscape. On one hand, due to growing competition, the journalistic sports media is forced to reinvent itself with a new kind of journalistic content production (English, 2022; Perreault & Nölleke, 2022). On the other hand, the journalistic sports media seeks to meet societal and audience expectations, and by doing so, attempts to secure legitimacy and authority in the public eye (McEnnis, 2020; Suggs, 2016). The choice to address sexual harassment as a topic can be seen as a prime example of this. Due to changes in the cultural discourse around sexual and gender-based harassment (led by the Me Too movement), new opportunities created by digital media (e.g., athletes constructing their own narratives), and challenges caused by a diversified media environment (e.g., growing competition), the Finnish sports media now has the ambition to address sexual harassment in sport. The existing literature (e.g., Broussard, 2020) provides a comprehensive account of the reasons why the change in reporting has been underway in recent years, but there is scant research on how this is perceived by journalists themselves and under what conditions this is done. Therefore, the first two research questions of this article are as follows:

RQ1: How do Finnish sports journalists perceive their own agency in promoting gender equity and addressing sexual harassment in relation to audiences and sports organisations?

RQ2: What are the factors that support or constrain reporting on harassment in sport and how do they relate to each other?

2.2. Hegemonic Masculinity and the Media's Politicisation of Harassment

Hegemonic masculinity refers to a society's valuing of certain traits and behaviours associated with masculinity, which over time become normative (i.e., expected or accepted; Connell, 1987). Hegemony does not require the use of force but implies a wide acceptance of actions and practices that institutionalise men's dominance over women (Connell, 1987). Hegemonic masculinity is thus recurrently constructed in relation to both femininity and to subordinate alternative forms of masculinity (Connell, 1987). As an ideal, it is not sought to be fulfilled per se but is sustained because it benefits men's dominant position in society (Connell, 1987).

Sports culture is often seen as the bastion of hegemonic masculinity because it has been constructed materially and symbolically in ways that have naturalised the hegemonic position of men (McKay et al., 2000). In sport, the hegemonic ideal of a strong, victorious, and disciplined body can, at least up to a certain point, be embodied, which makes the sporting environment a fertile ground for the practice of hegemonic masculinity (see Connell, 1987). This bodily sense of masculinity is also used to subjugate others, as evidenced by the extent of sexual harassment of women in sport (see Lahti et al., 2020).

Deeply ingrained views of sport as virtuous, fair, and non-political, and as an arena for public confrontation between men, have for long inhibited actions to address sexual harassment in sport (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2002). However, in recent years, media politicisation has moved the issue of sexual harassment from the private to the public domain (see Seippel et al., 2018). The politicisation of sexual harassment is closely linked to fourth-wave feminism and the associated Me Too movement that originated in the US in 2006 to raise awareness about the sexual harassment of women of colour and marginalised people and became viral and global in 2017 when people started posting their own experiences of harassment on social media under the hashtag #metoo (see Chandra & Erlingsdóttir, 2021). In sport, the movement changed the climate of the debate on gender equality, first internationally and, later on, in Finland (Bachynski, 2020; Lahti et al., 2020).

Based on Connell's (1987) theorising on gender and hegemonic power, in this article I approach the media's politicisation of sexual harassment from a broader conceptual framework called the trinity of gendered discourses (Figure 1). Within this framework, I understand that historical gender norms are not just reproduced in the sports culture but are also embedded in sports newsrooms and reflected in sports news coverage (see Whiteside & Hardin, 2012). For example, in the journalistic sports media, both vertical and horizontal segregation have been identified as taking place, meaning that there is a gendered division in the organisational hierarchy in sports newsrooms and in the tasks and types of stories assigned to journalists of different genders (Schoch, 2022). Additionally, studies (e.g., Hardin & Shain, 2005; Schmidt, 2018) consistently indicate that female journalists face discrimination and harassment in sports newsrooms. Inequality in sports reporting has, in turn, been shown to exist not just in relation to the quantity but also to the quality of sports coverage (Bernstein, 2020; Cooky et al., 2021; Fink, 2015), and in research, the media has long been criticised for trivialising and sexualising women's athleticism (Krauchek & Ranson, 1999).



Figure 1. Trinity of gendered discourses.

To sum up, prior literature shows that long-held values and attitudes in sport that stem from the ideals of hegemonic masculinity still affect the whole sports culture and manifest in daily practices across the sports field. Sexual harassment, as such a practice, is rooted in the abuse of power dynamics in sport—that is, those in more vulnerable positions across the cultural and structural environments in sport more often face harassment (Mountjoy et al., 2016). Arguably, the trinity of gendered discourses in sport is self-sustaining, and a closer examination of the roots and outcomes of gendered thinking in newsrooms is, therefore, needed to understand how journalists perceive their own position in addressing sexual harassment. The gendered body of a media professional is seen as more vulnerable than ever when it is reproduced under the cross-pressure of the media organisation, the product and the audience, and especially when the content that a journalist produces deals with (abusive) embodied experiences (Kivinen, 2016). Based on these premises, the third research question of this article is as follows:

RQ3: How do the prevailing power structures, culture, and attitudes in professional sports environments affect and get reflected in the work of sports journalists?

3. Materials and Methods

Data for this study were obtained through expert interviews. From March to May 2023, I interviewed 16 Finnish sports journalists who had reported on harassment between the years 2018 and 2022. The sampling procedure combined purposeful sampling and snowball sampling approaches. The first round of expert recruitment entailed systematically scanning news articles in the sports sections of three national news media houses from the past five years using the keyword “harassment.” Next, I sent emails to journalists who had written extensively on the subject. The second round of expert recruitment relied upon peer recommendations from the interviewed journalists.

The research was conducted according to the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity. According to the guidelines, an ethical review statement for the study was not needed and it was therefore not sought. On first contact, participants were sent a research notification (a brief description of the study) and a privacy notice (a description of the processing of personal data), which they were asked to read before

agreeing to be interviewed. Informed consent to participate in the study was explained and obtained verbally from the interviewees at the beginning of the interviews. The interviewees were given the option of being interviewed face-to-face or by video call. Five interviews were conducted face-to-face in public or private spaces and the rest were conducted over the Funet Miitti (Zoom) video call service provided by the university.

Altogether, the interviewees represented six different national and regional news media houses. The interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. Eight interviewees self-identified as female and eight as male. Female journalists were over-represented in the interview data as, in Finland, women account for an estimated 10–20% of all people working in sports journalism (E. Hatunen, personal communication, 13 November 2023).

In the interviews, I asked the journalists about how they see their role and responsibilities as changemakers and how they perceive reporting on topics outside of the usual sports news, which might evoke strong emotions and stances, or even stigma. Examples of the interview questions include the following: What led you to start producing content on harassment in sport? Do you think the media or individual sports journalists have a responsibility to report on social and cultural problems, such as harassment? How have you been received by athletes and people with influence or power in sport when you have collected material for reporting on harassment? What kind of feedback have you received when producing content on harassment-related topics? Do you think your gender has any influence on how you are able to do your work or are perceived as a sports journalist?

The interviews were semi-structured in nature, meaning that all predetermined questions were asked in each interview, but their order varied and they were supplemented by other questions depending on the course of the discussion. An interview guide provided a structure to the interviews and enabled cross-interview comparisons in the coding and analysis phases. At the same time, the flexibility offered by the method enabled a deeper exploration of the interviewees' insights and experiences and allowed them to discuss personal and sensitive issues, such as harassment, on their own terms. The interviews were recorded and later manually transcribed using intelligent verbatim transcription. During transcription, all direct identifying information, such as the names of people and media, as well as passages in which interviewees described in detail unpublished information from publicly covered harassment cases, were left out of the transcripts.

A systematic analysis of the research data was undertaken using applied thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012). In line with the research questions, I examined the data from two overlapping thematic perspectives. On one hand, I sought to identify factors raised by the interviewed journalists that either supported or constrained reporting on harassment in sport. On the other hand, I sought to identify how the prevailing power structures, culture, and attitudes in the professional sports environment affected and were reflected in the sports journalists' work. Table 1 shows the final coding scheme of the main themes that emerged in the two parallel analyses. In the first analysis, the codes had mirroring dynamics: Each factor supporting critical sports journalism had a counterpart factor constraining it. In the second analysis, journalists' agency in relation to gender formed the main coding categories, and each category had subcategories describing the relationship between gender and reporting on harassment. Section 4 outlines the joint understanding of insights from the two analyses.

Table 1. Coding categories.

1. Supporting factors	2. Constraining factors	3. Gender perspectives
1.1. Societal change	2.1. Permissive culture of harassment	3.1. Agency of female journalists 3.1.1. Experience of belittlement or harassment
1.2. Generational change	2.2. Generational gap	3.1.2. Responsibility for covering women's sport
1.3. Changing face of sports journalism	2.3. Reputation of sports journalism	3.1.3. Responsibility for covering harassment
1.4. Cooperation and trust	2.4. Proximity and tensions	
1.5. Employer support	2.5. Realities of work	

4. Results

4.1. Agency of the Sports Media in Addressing Harassment

The interviews indicated that reporting on societal issues through sport lies at the core of today's sports journalism. Interviewee (henceforth IW) 5 reflected on how covering harassment cases is "admittedly emotionally draining" but also "makes work meaningful" because "it clearly has an impact." Nevertheless, in combination, the information gained from reviewing national news articles dealing with harassment and from the interviews indicates that reporting on the grievances of sport falls not on the shoulders of everyone but on those of certain journalists. According to the interviewees, younger sports journalists, more and more of whom are female, come from more educated backgrounds and have more of an interest in raising awareness about societal issues. IW1 explained:

In the morning meetings, I keep women's sport on the agenda a lot and then these social issues. Certainly, even if I were a man, I would bring up these topics. But I have yet to meet a man who would be so keen to promote these issues....The victims have often been either the same age or younger than me. I think about those experiences I've had myself. It's rare for a male journalist to have similar experiences. If you were born and live as a man, it's hard to understand the position of women.

Female journalists expressed that their own adverse experiences in sport have contributed both to their interest in raising awareness about harassment and to their competence in reporting on it. They also linked this to the fact that the vast majority of victims of harassment about whom they had reported were women. IW14 noted that "It has been easier for athletes to talk if there has been a female journalist on the other side." IW16 elaborated, stating that this may also be an assumption that has led to "the desire to prepare the interview situation in such a way that there would not be any walls right away" because "those situations are really difficult anyway."

Reporting on harassment also requires a new type of knowledge and skills, the lack of which can be reflected in journalists' professional identity. IW2 elaborated:

For the previous generation of journalists, professionalism was about watching the game and writing about it. They may have asked the coach why you went from a four-defender line to a five-defender line. That was their professionalism. And all of a sudden, they should have some idea about, say, the post-George Floyd protests or how a coach should treat a female athlete. Suddenly, they are required to have a kind of competence and a mindset that they may not have accumulated at all in their lifetime. It's quite a difficult place to be.

Furthermore, there is a pronounced gap between generations that is seen to cause friction in sports departments. As IW12 summarised, "The old sports journalistic tradition, which has always respected the masters of sport, who are good sources of news, feels reluctant to shake up the system it has become accustomed to living with." IW13 noted that "there hasn't been a collective change in attitudes yet, but everywhere, it has already started" because "big media houses cannot afford to fall behind the changing world." According to the interviewees, the editorial management of media houses broadly endorsed addressing harassment. The interviews revealed both the economic logic and the virtuous motives of the media. IW12 elaborated:

This is where I see the future of sports journalism. It involves reaching out to new audiences. It's a lifeline for us to survive and even an opportunity to strengthen. Each sports department is trying to gain a stronger foothold in its own media house—to be an important part of the editorial meetings and not just a curiosity....If you spend 40 years writing about seconds and metres, it's not really meaningful work. It has to be inspiring and important. Journalists usually enter the field with a strong desire to improve the world. That's coming into sports journalism now.

Journalists had seen the impact of their work when they reported on incidents of harassment, which motivated them to do more stories. IW2 noted that "usually, when these cases come up and are discussed, it leads to something, for example, to an anonymous line to report incidents to," or as IW9 described, it "prompts the federation to change its rules." The interviewees explained how the coverage of harassment cases in the media alone puts pressure on clubs and sports federations to examine their own environment. One way to increase this pressure, according to IW7, is to "follow up on what the sponsors have to say about it." Another way, according to IW16, is to later on "challenge the federation on whether it has been able to deliver on its promises."

Overall, the interviews highlighted the changing face of sports journalism and, within it, an ambition to move from entertainment and performance reporting to socio-politically critical journalism. At the same time, the interviews revealed contradictions regarding resources, integrity, and gender that are embedded in the sports media's ambition of addressing harassment in sport. In the following subsections, I unpack these observations.

4.2. Contradictions in Critical Sports Journalism

4.2.1. Contradiction of Resources

The first contradiction that emerged from the interviews relates to the commercial logics guiding journalists' daily work. IW12 described harassment cases as "sort of jackpots for the commercial media" because they "don't just come out of nowhere" and are thus "wanted and fished for." Unearthing cases of harassment was

unusual and often required considerable effort and mental capacity that the interviewees compared to undertaking investigative journalism. IW8 elaborated, “It’s a lot easier to do a couple of really catchy Instagram stories than it is to tackle topics like this” because “you can’t write them with your left hand.” As IW3 explained, covering harassment requires resources that are not in line with the shrinking size of journalistic editorial teams:

You need to get something productive done during the shift. When it’s your writing shift and you think, “I’m going to dig up stories about sexual harassment,” if there’s nothing to grab on to or no answers to be found, there’s a blank piece of paper in front of you after your shift. It doesn’t do much for the newspaper. The editorial staff has been reduced. Nowadays, there are not as many journalists in the entire sports department as there used to be in the Olympics. With that kind of workforce, if you had the resources and used them efficiently, you could or should get a lot more done.

The interviewed journalists could not see how to address harassment also when there are no individual cases to report. According to IW2, “Readers are not very interested if we talk about distant issues or if we talk about problems in general” and that leads to “a loss of commercial interest in doing them.” Additionally, the journalists acknowledged that in order to address harassment as a topic, it must be attractive to readers, and the attractiveness often comes from scandalising it. IW8 reflected:

When you are a journalist in [X media], you are constantly aware that you have to sell the story with the headline and the details and the horror. It’s like having an angel and a demon on your shoulders. After years of doing it, you know the rules of the trade. And of course, as a journalist, you want the story to be read and clicked on. That’s what you do it for. But then there is a human being in the middle: the victim, a young woman in this case. You want to write respectfully. I haven’t written the most terrible details in many cases. Some of them are certainly important, but you don’t have to write about all of them. It’s a kind of balancing act with such topics.

Some journalists, such as IW14, questioned the commercial logic of media:

In a way, I’ve been really worried about how the commercial media in particular, but also the public media, sometimes fall into the trap of trying to do things quickly and efficiently. We think about the external and commercial factors, how much the stuff sells. That’s the starting point for valuing everything.

Following that, IW4 had taken concrete steps to “keep this issue in the spotlight, so that it doesn’t stay in that one story,” although the general understanding among journalists was that follow-up stories on harassment are not commercially profitable. Some journalists also raised the need to portray female athletes in ways other than via tragedy. IW9 reflected:

What I personally wish is that, sometimes, we could focus on something else in women’s sport other than how small a bikini they have to play in or how they get harassed out there or what kind of pregnancy rules they have. It seems to me that we are still in a situation where women’s sport is not that interesting. What is interesting is that they are harassed, humiliated, and bullied.

Conclusively, the observed contradiction of resources is that the journalistic sports media is ambitious about discarding its toy department reputation by doing socio-politically critical journalism; simultaneously, it wants to create profitable entertainment for the audience, for example, with scandalous headlines and stories about harassment.

4.2.2. Contradiction of Integrity

The second contradiction that emerged from the interviews is the journalists' proximity to sports culture and organisations. The interviewees explained that reporting on incidents of harassment often relies upon a long-standing close relationship of trust with the athletes and the surrounding sports community. IW7 elaborated:

It's not just about ensuring that if a journalist wanted to dig something up, they would need the time to do it. Typically, in such cases, there must be some kind of trust between the person who has been harassed and the journalist, so that the person will talk to the journalist. Of course, it is much more natural to talk to someone who has interviewed you 20 times at sporting events than to someone who is just a voice on the phone once a year and whose name you don't remember...Then it's also about which media can afford to be there and send journalists to these events year after year.

Being close to a certain type of sport provides sports journalists with a unique vantage point that enables them to observe both the success and the grievances in sport. This also allows them to report on the problematic aspects of the sport, but this proximity may sometimes also prevent them from doing that. IW9 reflected:

I would like to see the media watching the sports field, but in a way, it's also an extension of the field. You should have some kind of contacts or relations with these people, so that you can get interviews from them, so that you can write stories. So, it is a bit of a balancing act. In a way, you should stay in touch, but you should also be able to be very critical and also write about the unpleasant things.

Locality is another aspect that was problematised in the interviews. Journalists representing national media houses could see their advantage in reporting on stigmatising topics, such as harassment, because they do not have to think about their relationship with the local sports clubs and teams. As IW16 noted, local and regional media actors are "seen as entertainers" and are expected to "go and report the game and not interfere with anything else" because, otherwise, "you're suddenly seen as the one who's fouling your own nest." IW4 was of the opinion that "you still have to have the courage to tackle even the most unpleasant topics, even if you burn a few bridges." Further, IW15 wished that journalists "would at least tell someone else, if they don't feel that they are capable of reporting."

When covering harassment cases, journalists' attempts to maintain contact and cooperate with sports federations varied widely. IW14 stated that "the federation's reaction was a shocking disappointment" because "they belittled the issues that the athletes brought up." IW13 said that "it is typical that sports federations are afraid of the damage to their reputation," and to prevent that, they "internally try to sweep such issues under the carpet." With regard to national sports organisations, journalists were even more cautious. IW13 continued:

The way this small circuit runs Finnish top-level sport....There is this powerful little clique out there that defines and belittles and acts in a very arbitrary way. There are pretty strong means at their disposal to influence that [critical] stories would not be done....By no means can it be said that there is intimidation or anything, but it is implied that if this kind of [critical] stuff comes out, then any kind of cooperation or communication will be broken. This is not said directly, but....It's difficult to put into words, but you can sense it clearly in the messages you get.

IW12 stressed that when addressing grievances with national sports organisations, it is important to act as a united front:

It is always the case that if one media outlet goes off in a strong direction and doesn't get support from the others, it becomes a pathetic crusade by one single media [outlet], which actually turns against that media [outlet] because then it's made to look like a chase.

Conclusively, the observed contradiction of integrity is that learning about harassment cases requires close relations with the sporting community, whereas too much closeness and goodwill in networks could predispose journalists to uncritical journalism or silence.

4.2.3. Contradiction of Gender

The third contradiction that emerged from the interviews concerns gender. Interviews revealed that both male and female journalists wished for a more diverse editorial staff. As IW3 expressed, "A more diverse voice in sports journalism, from a wider range of backgrounds, is needed to ensure that topics are covered as widely and as richly as possible." Nonetheless, women, for example, were perceived as not wanting to enter the profession because of the poor reputation of sports journalism.

The interviews revealed differences in how female and male journalists described their profession in relation to their identified gender. Male journalists did not largely view their gender as affecting how they are perceived or able to do their work as sports journalists. Insightfully, IW6 pointed out how significant it is to be male in this field by saying his gender "has no effect whatsoever—in other words, you could say that it has quite a lot of effect." Conversely, being female still had multiple, often negative, impacts on the sports journalism profession. Female journalists experienced more pressure to prove their professional competence compared to their male colleagues. They also talked about their heightened responsibility to ensure that women's sport and athletes are covered in the sports media according to the equality guidelines set by the media houses. Additionally, female journalists described instances of being looked down on, questioned, or harassed by athletes, male colleagues, audiences, or influential people in sports, especially in the earlier stages of their careers. IW10 shared the following:

It can be difficult for many [female journalists] to hang around locker rooms. I don't know if some players do it on purpose or if they just don't care when you meet them there, and they walk around naked—all that kind of stuff. And then, back when I entered the industry in my 20s, a couple of sports journalists who were in a relationship sent me really loaded messages: something along the lines of "I would have wanted to kiss you today." It was only later on that I realised it wasn't really okay. Also, players sometimes make suggestive remarks to me through private messages on social media. I understand that it can be really distressing for many.

The interviews reiterated how the new generation of female journalists in particular has been attempting to change the social climate and language use in newsrooms. IW13 reflected:

In the media houses, it has been customary for some key figures to throw around a bit of lowbrow humour at morning meetings. Everyone laughs and it is generally accepted. But then, when a new generation comes along, someone can find it really distressing. Later on, they might say to their manager that they find it really strange that this is happening, and that they feel disgusted by such things. That's when you realise that a new generation is coming along. Someone else may have sometimes felt uncomfortable with this kind of culture but then thought it was just the way things were and didn't take it further.

The changes promoted by younger journalists were well received by many of those who had been in the industry longer, but a generation gap was also evident. IW11 shared that, "Nowadays, if you want to make a joke, you have to be quiet. At least I don't dare to say anything outrageous in the editorial office anymore, unless I know it's really a good friend." At times, the consequences of advocating for an equal and safe culture in sports and in newsrooms could be severe. IW2 divulged how a female journalist who had covered equality topics was "treated with quite a lot of hostility" and "called names in a WhatsApp group for male journalists."

In addition to newsrooms, journalists witnessed disturbing behaviour in the sports environment. IW16 shared:

This is the kind of job that, as a woman, you have had to toughen up a bit. It has been really difficult for me, especially at the beginning of my career, when men of a certain age would criticise the appearance of female athletes. It has been such an everyday way of talking to criticise their weight and breasts. And I probably have the reputation of being a bit of a tight-ass, because I have pointed some of my colleagues out...I have written a lot about how people talk about female athletes, but I have never, not even in any of my columns, referred to my own colleagues and their behaviour.

Conclusively, the observed contradiction of gender is that the journalistic sports media, from the perspective of an employer, encourages covering harassment cases, while negative manifestations of hegemonic masculinity are present in the work environment for female journalists.

5. Conclusion

In recent years, the Finnish sports media has played a key role in disseminating information and stimulating debate on sexual harassment in sport and the structures and culture that perpetuate it. This study indicates that media houses view socio-politically critical sports journalism both as a moral imperative and an opportunity to redefine and relegitimise their competence and authority and also, importantly, to grow their audiences and revenues and thus strengthen their market positions. The journalistic sports media seems to be in a situation where it (is forced to) act as an intermediary between the society and the sports organisations. On one hand, society puts more pressure on sports journalists to be more critical of the sporting culture and, on the other hand, sports journalists put more pressure on sports organisations to be more transparent, reactive, and proactive.

This study shows that Finnish sports journalists perceive their own agency as influential in addressing sexual harassment: Although reporting on harassment incidents is resource-consuming and emotionally draining for the journalists, it is also a rewarding and deeply meaningful experience that is seen to have an impact. At the same time, the journalists recognise how their individual agency is conditioned by the commercial logic of media, which, according to this research, is visible both in the commercial and public service media and is reflected, for example, in the way competition drives the fast-paced news environment.

From a broader media perspective, this article has highlighted contradictions embedded in the sports media's ambition of addressing harassment in sport. What makes these contradictions particularly problematic, in my view, is that gender seems to be an integral part of every contradiction. The resources allocated for covering harassment cases existed reactively, instead of being used proactively to keep the topic on the table. Instead, the topic of harassment was scandalised through female suffering as this was financially beneficial for the media houses. Furthermore, the sports media was deeply engaged in politicising harassment by shifting the topic from the private to the public sphere; at the same time, female sports journalists were perceived to be more capable of writing about it because the topic fell within women's private domain. Finally, female journalists felt the need to toughen up to be able to maintain mutual integrity with sports organisations and co-workers alike.

Referring to the proposed framework of the trinity of gendered discourses, this study shows how important it is not just to look at the news coverage but to pay attention to the news production processes and the gendered aspects that influence them. A recurring narrative in this study concerns the fact that young female journalists entering sports newsrooms often come from more educated backgrounds and have a strong interest in raising awareness about societal issues in sports. However, in the newsroom, they are compelled to use a considerable number of resources to prove their professional competence, to make sure that women's sport is covered, and to change the social climate and language use in the newsroom, all while they are being looked down on, ridiculed, or harassed. I argue that this combined with the requirements of a fast-paced news environment likely does not afford them much capacity to do socio-politically critical sports journalism.

This study has mainly examined the upper part of the above-mentioned framework—that is, the roots and outcomes of gendered thinking in newsrooms in relation to the coverage of sexual harassment. In future research, orienting the triangle differently would provide a complementary understanding of the gendered media sports dynamics. Moreover, an international comparison of the role of sports media reporting on sexual harassment would shed light on the situation beyond Finland. The main limitation of this study is its focus on one national context, and therefore the results cannot be straightforwardly extended to other countries. Yet this study contributes to the existing literature on the changing landscape of sports journalism by highlighting how the gendered body of a media professional is indeed vulnerable to the cross-pressure of the media organisation, the product, and the audience (see Kivinen, 2016) and should therefore be considered when outlining this development in different countries.

By grasping the structural and attitudinal points of change found in this study, I argue, it is possible to better support the work of individual journalists in promoting gender equity and addressing sexual harassment. In practice, this would, for instance, require the journalistic sports media to more consciously name its gender equality goals, facilitate an ongoing discussion about well-being at work, discuss the guidelines for

story production, develop an editorial policy for monitoring harassment cases, provide more journalists with the opportunities and time to do socio-politically critical journalism, invest in support for the work community, and make the media's role unambiguous to the surrounding sports community.

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Challenging Norms and Practices in Women's Beach Handball: The Bikini Debate

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Abstract

Since 1978, the Norwegian Act for Gender Equality has created a strong emphasis on the importance of equality in all parts of society. This implies equal access to all cultural and welfare activities and services—including sports. In the media, we often see strong reactions to examples of discrimination based on gender, such as during the 2021 European Beach Handball Championship, when the Norwegian women's beach handball team was fined by the European Handball Federation for refusing to play in bikini bottoms during their final matches. Media attention was given to the ensuing international outrage, which included well-known music artist Pink offering to pay on the team's behalf in a gesture of solidarity. In November 2021, the sport's International Federation agreed to allow women to compete in a similar uniform to men. This study analyses Norwegian newspaper coverage of the responses from Norwegian women athletes, politicians, and the international sports/media community from July 2021 to March 2022. It also provides an opportunity to determine to what extent the media framed and participated in calls for change.

Keywords

beach handball; gender; Nordic model; Norway; sports journalism

1. Introduction

Beach handball has become a popular sport in international tournaments, but its popularity has also shown itself in unintended ways. For instance, until 2022, the regulated attire in women's beach handball was a bikini, which led to an unwarranted focus on the athletes' bodies both in the media and among the public. This article goes through the course of events that built up to and surrounded the Norwegian team's protest at the 2021

European Beach Handball Championship and the Norwegian newspaper coverage of this protest, eventually resulting in the official decision to discontinue enforcing bikinis for female beach handball players.

The athlete uniform regulations for all beach handball teams are decided by the International Handball Federation (IHF; see Figure 1). As of 2021, the IHF (2014, pp. 91–95) stated that:

Team members must wear identical shorts/bikini bottoms. Male athletes must wear shorts as per the enclosed graph. The players' shorts, if not too baggy, can be longer but must remain 10 centimeters above the kneecap. Female athletes must wear bikini bottoms that are in accordance with the enclosed graph, with a close fit and cut on an upward angle toward the top of the leg. The side width must be a maximum of 10 centimeters.



Figure 1. Athlete uniform regulations for beach handball. Source: IHF (2014, pp. 94–95).

The IHF was formed in 1946 and is the highest overseeing authority of the sport. It has a congress that meets once every two years with representatives from all member federations, organised by region and by country. They agree upon and create the regulations and guidelines for all athletes and teams competing at the international level. To be a member of the IHF, one also must be a member of the regional branch. This means that Norwegian athletes are represented at three different levels: at the national level by the Norwegian Handball Federation (NHF); at the regional level by the European Handball Federation (EHF); and at the international level by the IHF. The relevant federation is also responsible for organising and overseeing

competitions and events at the related level. This is why the EHF was mostly involved in the 2021 case since it was a tournament hosted by the region. That said, any concern raised by the athletes related to international rules and guidelines would need to serve at all three levels before a final ruling may be taken. Once it is accepted in the IHF, it applies to all members and teams across the world irrespective of region or country.

The NHF first lodged a complaint about the uniforms for women with the EHF and IHF in 2006 with no result. They argued that handball is a sport that requires players to body block shots, and therefore the uniforms did not offer the necessary protection for players. Their request for the uniform to be reviewed was supported by other European members in the EHF, including Sweden, Denmark, and France (DuBose, 2022, p. 1141). However, at the time, there was no unified understanding among the players at the international level about whether the outfit was a problem or not, which was also evident from the Norwegian debate. In 2007, after a lot of media focus, the bikinis became one centimetre longer (von der Lippe, 2013, p. 143).

Before the Championship in 2021, Norway again proposed to the EHF that the rules should be changed. Athletes continued to describe the uniform rules as “sexist, discriminatory and exclusionary” (Lie, 2021). Reasons included the embarrassment caused by the media capturing and sometimes commenting on exposed underwear, body hair, or body shape, worry during the menstrual cycle when needing to wear skimpy or white bottoms, and exclusion of players on religious grounds as the uniforms were “insensitive to cultural norms” (DuBose, 2022, p. 1141).

Ongoing pressure to review the uniforms at that stage had continued for well over a decade, and the EHF announced that the issue would be addressed in a meeting in April 2021. However, the discussion was delayed until August 2021 when a new commission was appointed (DuBose, 2022, p. 1141). It was with this in mind that the Norwegian beach handball team went to the June–July 2021 European tournament in Varna, Bulgaria. When there was no indication that the change had been implemented, they planned a demonstration, as they wanted to be able to play with shorts that covered more of the thigh. Then they learned that they would be fined 50 euros per person per match. In total, the costs would come to 50,000 euros. The NHF was prepared to pay but, at a technical meeting, it was later claimed that they were told they would have to pay interest and faced the possibility of disqualification. The EHF has since said that this was a misunderstanding (Lie, 2021). The team ended up warming up in shorts but had to play matches in bikinis (Haarstad & Sandholt, 2021). In the bronze final of July 18, they decided to play in shorts. The team received a fine of 1,500 euros (Leerstang, 2021).

The case took a special turn on July 25 when pop artist Pink (Alecia Beth Moore) announced her decision to pay the Norwegian women’s national team’s fine. Pink is known for her commitment to feminism and women’s rights. “The European Handball Federation should be fined for sexism,” she wrote on her Twitter account, which at the time had over 31 million followers (Mjelstad, 2021). Pink praised the protest of the Norwegian players: “I am VERY proud of the Norwegian female beach handball team FOR PROTESTING THE VERY SEXIST RULES ABOUT THEIR uniform. The European handball federation SHOULD BE FINED FOR SEXISM. Good on ya, ladies. I’ll be happy to pay the fines for you. Keep it up” (as cited in Mjelstad, 2021).

Many others also offered to pay the fine. However, the NHF elected to pay the fine themselves and donated the money received from the public to a foundation that works for equality in sport (NTBb, 2021). The Norwegian team finished in 4th place in the tournament, but they got far more attention for this issue.

International reactions were reported in *The Independent*, the *BBC*, the *New York Post*, the *Washington Post*, *Der Spiegel*, and *Bild* (With, 2021). The bikini rule was finally changed in 2022, after considerable pressure from the NHF and others (Gamlemoen, 2022). In 2022, they became the first team in the world not to play beach volleyball in bikinis. They chose to play in shorts from the first tournament in 2022 on.

This study analyses the Norwegian newspaper coverage (print and online) of the responses from Norwegian women athletes, politicians, and the international sports/media community from July 2021 to March 2022, while awaiting the final decision. We consider whether and to what extent Norway's position as a "country of equality" played a role in how the discussion was reported in Norwegian media. We also give a short analysis of the photo material in the articles. We do this by analysing the news frame employed in the articles in light of previous research on beach handball coverage in Norwegian media.

2. Literature Review

Both sports organisations and the media have global reach and are social institutions (Fink, 2015; Kian & Hardin, 2009; Parry et al., 2023). Sports coverage therefore has the potential to influence opinion on a broad scale. While often delegated to the back pages or last segment of broadcast news reports, sports events have been shown to have intense political, economic, and cultural ramifications. Sport, particularly men's, has benefitted from increased media investment, but has also been changed by it (Parry et al., 2023, p. 594). There have been modifications to rules to benefit television audiences, and commercial channels are keenly aware of how they should package events to appeal to their audience. It is therefore not unexpected that research has found coverage of women's sports to continue to be problematic (see Parry et al., 2023). Patterns that dominate include the small number of reports about women's sports as compared to men's, and the sexualisation of women athletes. Hardin et al. (2002) found that men were depicted twice as often as women in editorial sports photos. Scholars, especially from liberal-feminist traditions, refer to this as the "symbolic annihilation" of women (a term first coined by Gaye Tuchman in 1978). There is some evidence of change, but the proportion of coverage given to women's sports is still lower than men's (see Kian & Hardin, 2009; Parry et al., 2023). Female athletes are also evaluated differently than males (Lewis & Weaver, 2015).

Some research has suggested that women journalists are more likely to challenge and improve existing norms (see Kian & Hardin, 2009). This is supported in Parry's (2023) study, where media in the UK were starting to change more traditional frames by allowing for deeper and more critical reviews of female sports players and teams. It was noted that female journalists were more likely to express concern for the players or humanise the teams, and that most reports on women's sports were by women journalists. This may not be as obvious in a Nordic setting, as constitutionalised principles of equality mean that women have played a long and pivotal role in Norway and other Nordic countries. Yet, despite such state support, scholars in Nordic countries note that there are still slight discrepancies in terms of participation, recognition, and political influence (Pfister & Sisjord, 2013). This is more noticeable when women compete on the international stage where there may be competing philosophies and perspectives on the importance of women in sport. The question of what is deemed to be acceptable attire is one area where the difference is most apparent.

While there is a large and rising amount of research on sports journalism, and journalism on and by women in sports is becoming more common (as shown in this thematic issue), there is previously little research on beach handball from the Nordic perspective. However, Gerd von der Lippe, a prominent Norwegian sports

researcher, conducted two studies that make it possible to compare national media coverage and attitudes to women's uniforms over time (von der Lippe, 2005, 2013).

According to von der Lippe (2013, p. 141), women athletes' dress codes are often tied to the date when women were introduced to sports in an organised way: "Thus, there is often a relationship to the general fashions of women's clothes." This is also the case with male athlete outfits, but it is likely that the particular focus on the female body in Western culture has had a more profound effect on female athletes. Beach volleyball started in the United States in the 1920s, developed further in the 1970s, and became an international sports game in the 1990s, with its introduction in the 1996 Olympic Games. It is therefore not surprising that the bikini became the dress code for women at a time when the fashion industry's message was to "show more female skin" (von der Lippe, 2013, p. 143). A quote from the Fédération Internationale de Volleyball from 1996 states openly that the outfits were designed to put the players' bodies on display:

The Permanent Committee recommends that the fabric used allows men's shirts and women's tops to be tight fitting: The design should be with open arms for men and with open back, upper chest and stomach for women. Also, the length of men's shorts and width of women's bathing suit bottoms has been defined to suit the beach volleyball image and not to hide the athletes from public, media and sponsors. (as cited in von der Lippe, 2013, p. 143)

The fact that this game is played on the beach and under the sun and high temperatures may be one reason for the clothing, but that does not explain the different rules for women and men. One aspect of this rather revealing attire is how it has been communicated to the public—not only have the curves, shapes, and skin of the players attracted attention, but photographers have also tended to focus on the players' bottoms. This has often been accompanied by the "excuse" that the players tend to give each other signals behind their backs (Associated Press, 2021; von der Lippe, 2013, p. 144).

The outfit was first discussed in the Norwegian press in 1998 when two Norwegian players took part in the Olympic Games. Von der Lippe (2005) then analysed the Norwegian media debate in 2004, after a final decision on the dress code in women's beach volleyball. She found three different opinions: a feminist discourse; an equal rights discourse; and the so-called neoliberal discourse. The last was characterised by a belief in "free will" and "free competition," and a willingness to adapt to the current culture in the field, a culture that was also largely taken for granted. The argument was that the athletes were free to choose and chose the bikini because it was the best solution (even though they were dependent on sponsors to carry out their sport, von der Lippe points out). The difference between the feminist and equal rights discourse was primarily determined by whether the regulating body emphasised restrictions and rules that were meant for both sexes, or the power imbalance between the female players and the (often male-dominated) sports field (von der Lippe, 2013, p. 144). This is in line with well-known differences within feminist or gender equality thinking (see, e.g., Holst, 2017).

Interestingly, in 2004, some Norwegian female players were strong advocates of what von der Lippe calls the neoliberal stance. One player was quoted in the VG newspaper saying:

We are playing in the costume that suits us best, and that looks best. I could never have played in shorts, that's quite old fashioned....I am satisfied when I am playing in a bikini, and I think that all the other girls feel the same. (as cited in von der Lippe, 2013, p. 145)

The research also indicated that newspapers at the time wrote that the players “scoff at the criticism,” whereas a male player stated that “sex appeal is part of the sport” (von der Lippe, 2005). The study goes on to report that an external sports commentator stated that there were eight reasons to watch sand volleyball: four bikini tops and four bikini bottoms. He was reported to have said this with “a grin.”

The image analysis in von der Lippe’s (2005) study is also interesting for our research, as the (possible) discussion about the attire was soon interpreted by the tabloid media as an opportunity to show photos of female players in bikinis. Both the major Norwegian tabloids made the discussions front-page material, with large photos and the word “sex” in large types in the headlines.

Our research therefore builds on this earlier study by examining Norwegian sports coverage about the matter in 2021.

3. Method

This study utilises framing to understand how the information was shared with the public. Frame analysis refers to how a situation is defined following “principles of organisation, which govern social events and our subjective involvement in them” (Goffman, 1974, as cited in Carter, 2013, p. 3). Robert Entman, one of the most important architects of the framing notion, built on this by adding that framing entails the selection of specific aspects of perceived reality to imbue them with importance when communicating. According to Entman, frames often appear as packages, consisting of (in particular) four important elements: a problem definition; a causal explanation; a (moral) evaluation; and a proposal for a solution (see Van Gorp, 2007, pp. 64–65). The media effectively utilises frames to indicate to the public what is important and how it can be understood in the greater scheme of things. Journalists can influence how audiences understand or engage with issues through the choice of images and words they use (Lewis & Weaver, 2015; Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2019). Framing scholars argue that the repetition of themes means that frames persist over time and structure social relationships (Kian & Hardin, 2009, p. 188). While journalists may not intentionally decide to use specific frames, they do select which narratives or images to employ based on the need to explain complex stories in a limited time and within certain constraints (Lewis & Weaver, 2015).

On the other hand, it is important to note that journalists do not write in a vacuum. Framing can take place both *by* the media and *through* the media (Van Gorp, 2007, p. 68). The obvious example is when strong (economic or political) organisations or other powerful social actors influence media frames strategically, but frames may of course also be a result of communication with other, less powerful, actors in society. It is therefore a more symbiotic relationship than any cause-effect study may imply and should be viewed accordingly. Van Gorp (2007, pp. 68–69) however goes on to point out that the choices of the media are always important. Although not always intentional, they are active choices.

Media coverage is therefore important in shaping how the public perceives and assesses certain issues. This is of particular interest in this study on how the beach handball bikini debate was covered, and whether sports journalists presented information in a way that was affected by social trends, public sentiment, and calls for change.

This study was based on a critical analysis of Norwegian newspaper coverage (print and online) from July 2021 to March 2022. Media articles were identified as part of a retriever search using *beachhåndball* (beach

handball) and *kvinne* (women) as search terms. The corpus included 33 articles from 14 different local and national newspapers. It is interesting to note that the corpus included reports from the major national papers to local and regional newspapers in West, South, and Mid-Norway. We also decided to include opinion pieces for context and insights into the public state of mind but found only one. With a relatively small total sample, we were able to close-read all articles in the corpus and assess all the images. The articles were written in Norwegian and have been translated into English by the research team for this study. Every effort has been made to keep the wording as close to the original as possible.

One reason for the small sample may be that the European tournament took place only days before the Summer Olympic Games in Tokyo started and, as mentioned earlier, beach handball is not as big a sport in Norway as ordinary handball, for example. A lot of the sports coverage was therefore concentrated on the Olympics. It is also important to note that, in the summer, when most of the public is on holiday, more newspapers than usual use the services of the Norwegian News Agency. Recently, there has also been a considerable concentration across the local and regional levels with a certain degree of collaboration between newspapers in the same media houses. It is therefore not unusual to find the same or similar article replicated across different publications.

Not all articles name their journalists; some simply refer to the press association that first ran the story. Of the sample, 19 have clearly specified journalists. A slight majority (10) were written by male journalists, the remaining being written by female journalists (7) or a mixed team of male and female journalists (2).

4. Findings and Discussion

Notably this study demonstrates that from July 2021 to March 2022, there was one dominant news frame used to report this story to the public across all the newspapers examined. It was one of overwhelming support for the call to change the rules. The dominant topic of all the articles in the coverage was the fact that the Norwegian beach handball team had protested against the rules by playing in shorts and were fined for it. Subsequently, this was also the problem definition. The causal explanation for the players' act of civil disobedience (playing in shorts and not bikinis in protest) was the strict rules for clothing in the sport imposed on the female players by the IHF, and that previous and sustained challenges to these rules had not been addressed.

There is not one single article in the corpus that has a different frame or interpretation of events. Arguably, it could have been possible to offer an alternative frame, if desired. Two pieces of information could have been interpreted differently: One was that the EHF had accepted the Norwegian proposal for change for discussion at their forthcoming meeting that August; the second was that, by signing up for the tournament in July, the Norwegian team had agreed to abide by the existing rules in place at that time. Therefore, had the general social and political mentality been different, a second frame may have been used: The Norwegian players overreacted and chose civil disobedience instead of waiting for the result of the formal process. However, this perspective does not appear at all.

One reason for the dominant frame could be attributed to a lack of variety in opinions. Nearly all sources are either female players, their (organisation) spokespersons, or people outside the handball field that support their cause. We have already alluded to the fact that in contrast to 2004, no player in the corpus defended the

bikini rule. There are two possible ways of understanding this complete consensus. It could point to a general agreement about the attire. However, one would be remiss not to point out that there may be an element of self-censoring due to the very public act of disobedience taken by the team—any bikini defender may not have been willing to take the social cost of uttering it. That said, it is likely that if there were players who were in favour of the existing rules, the journalists would have tried to contact them, as conflict is one of the key requirements in present-day journalism. Instead, we interpret what appears in the quotes as the players' unified agreement regarding the dysfunctionality of those rules, which is echoed by international players and their organisations' spokesmen.

Some journalists apparently tried to include opposing voices, as two news articles indicated an additional step to probe further into the matter: Reporters from *Østlands-Posten* (on 15 July 2021) managed to contact the EHF for a quote and reporters from *VG* (on 14 July 2021) wrote that they tried to contact the IHF but got no reply.

In the news articles, we find that most of the coverage is concerned with the moral evaluation of the problem. This is either argued to be based on concern for the players or is framed as a social and cultural concern that the uniform regulations are outdated. Since moral evaluation is of interest in this study—and this is a clear departure from previous media coverage—we focus in more depth on these elements and outline them below.

4.1. Moral Evaluation 1: Concern for Players

In the corpus, the mental and physical well-being of the players is at the core of the concern, and so the debate is not only about calls for equality. There are typically two groups of people who comment on this: the players themselves; and representatives of relevant organisations.

The players offer a variety of justifications as to why the clothing is a problem. Some point to the fact that the bikinis are uncomfortable and have made the players feel “naked” and that it has intensified the pressure on athletes in the sport (Meese & Johansen, 2021). Others again state that they would prefer to get more attention for their sports achievements rather than their clothes, and some also mention the question of culture, that the rules have prevented women from participating (Meese & Johansen, 2021; Nakken, 2021). Some players also state that women should have the freedom to choose, that it is apparent from context that none of them talks about the individual right to choose, but that female teams should also be able to choose shorts if that is what they want (as cited in Leerstang, 2021). Only one foreign player says that she does not have anything against it if other people want to play in a bikini, but that it is “incredible” (as cited in Egelandsdal, 2021). Another says that she has heard some players say that “now that we have a lot of clothes, this will be very hot,” but she also points out that the male players have played in shorts and a singlet for years, “so it should probably be fine” (as cited in Stensland, 2022a). The journalist adds that she “laughs a bit exasperatedly.”

The unified agreement among the players stands in contrast to previous studies when players were contacted for comment. Today a former world champion in beach handball, Ane Brustuen, puts it this way:

It should be equal and you should be able to play in whatever you want. In the big picture, the requirements also help to exclude some nations, with regard to women's outfits. (Johnsen, 2021)

She goes on to say that one of the important things in beach handball is the show effect: “There are shorter matches, more intensive and more ‘showing.’ Very often it is in warmer regions, so then there is sun and music” (as cited in Johnsen, 2021). To the extent that this quote—from a former player—could be interpreted as support for the bikini rule, it is the exception; a clear majority does not express anything similar.

The arguments raised by the NHF president Kåre Geir Lio used more emotive language. Lio called the bikini rule unreasonable and unwise, and pointed out that he had expected the rule to be changed earlier:

Here they sleep during class. It is shameful and unfair to the girls. Every summer I have been president since 2015, I have answered questions about this and not talked about the medals they have won and the good performances they have made. (as cited in NTBa, 2021)

This clearly points to a perception that the focus of previous media coverage has been on the wrong element of the sport, to the detriment of the players, and a strong belief that this needs to be addressed.

4.2. Moral Evaluation 2: The Need to Modernise Rules

The other prominent moral evaluation of the problem was that the rules in 2021 were outdated and out of touch with the current social, cultural, and political environment. While concern for the players and the need to modernise rules that were perceived as discriminatory against women players point in the same direction, it is important to be aware that the arguments are not necessarily identical. It is therefore important to acknowledge that this category contains responses largely from public figures. Norwegian Minister of Culture Abid Raja reacted strongly on Twitter:

OMG!...This is completely ridiculous! Damn it, there are so many changes of attitude that are needed in old-fashioned international old man rule in sports....The worst thing is that they just don't even understand the equality point. Is it even possible?! (as cited in NTBa, 2021)

Quotes are also taken from international figures, such as the French national team manager Valérie Nicolas who reacted to the handling of both the EHF and the IHF: “It is unfair. Money and fines should not have been part of the discussion. To create change, the nations must stand together, and we are doing that now” (as cited in Meese & Johansen, 2021).

The Norwegian Minister of Culture also informed the media that he had sent a letter to the Swedish and Danish ministers responsible for sports, inviting them to a joint statement against the IHF's rules for clothing in beach handball, saying:

I think it's weird that in 2021 we are still there that when women themselves say they want to choose their own clothing, they still have to be squeezed into minimal panties. It is shameful that the IHF does not consider the equality aspects of this when several people point out that it is sexist. (as cited in Johnsen, 2021)

Progress in gender issues and concern for women can be seen as two sides of the same coin. There are however different gender equality policies, and these may be interpreted and implemented differently across national

contexts. Some stress that men and women should be treated as equals in almost all respects, whereas others would pay more attention to gender-specific traits. In the extreme version of the first approach, the argument that women feel uncomfortable when people look at their (almost) naked bodies would have little impact, whereas the principle that both sexes should wear the same clothes, would have more. It is also interesting to note that the argument that something is old-fashioned had also been used to defend the bikinis in 2004, demonstrating a clear shift in societal norms and expectations in the past two decades.

4.3. Signs of Intentional Journalistic Framing

Part of our research objective was to determine whether there were any explicit signs in the articles that the journalists supported the players' cause themselves and had adopted a frame to that effect. As discussed in the previous sections, most of the media reviewed created a space where voices protesting the rules were heard, suggesting an implicit form of support. There was also a clear framing of the issue in such a way that it supported the calls for change, but there was little in terms of actual explicit content of a journalist's own perspective or opinion on the matter.

The choice of headlines and some leads indicate a clear leaning in support of the protests. All were positive to change and either encouraged the Norwegian team to continue their acts of protest or made calls to the EHF to change their regulations. As such, even if there was little independent information from the journalists themselves, the reports were presented in such a way as to show clear signs of a need for change. For example, one headline read: "Forced to undress" (Haarstad & Sandholt, 2021). Another referred to an "unreasonable rule" in the subheading (Aas, 2021).

One article (Meese & Johansen, 2021) however was worded in such a way that the reader was left in no doubt as to what the journalists thought:

Players "feel naked" and several of them feel "discomfort" playing in bikini panties, yet they are threatened with fines and punishment if they get dressed....Only a few inches of extra fabric was needed before the European Beach Handball Championship organiser threatened fines of around NOK 500 per person [to those] who did not participate in bikini panties, as well as an unspecified punishment.

In the corpus, only two articles stood out as providing independent commentary or analysis of the case. The first was an op-ed (Gulla, 2021) and the second was a news article (Stensland, 2022a, 2022b). The op-ed was written by a female board member of the youth wing of the Centre Party. It located the case in a broader debate of gender in sports, and the lack of investment in and tendency to sexualise players in women's teams. It argued that decisions were linked more to media ratings than comfort or consideration of the players' needs or wishes. It ended with the disbelief that there was even a discussion as to whether the rules should be changed, as clearly the current policy was discriminatory. While this tone stands out from the corpus, it is not that surprising to find it in the op-ed section where articles are chosen based on their provocative content. Perhaps though it is more interesting to note that it was the only one in that section, as all the other articles were news reports. This suggests that even if change was a desired outcome, and there was a clear outspoken sector in the public sphere, that debate was not nearly as rampant in the comment sections.

The second critical piece was a news article published in the regional newspaper *Porsgrunns Dagblad*. It appeared in two guises. First as an online publication and then as a print version. While the headings were slightly different, the main content was the same. The article was written by a male journalist (Stensland, 2022a, 2022b). While there was still a reliance on the quotes of one of the players, the journalists' perspective was more explicitly addressed when they referred to the need to “defy gender-segregated regulations.” This was one of the few articles where negative comments about changing the rules were also considered, and the player was asked to respond to those as well.

In all, we see that despite being parts of frames supportive of change, most of the content of the articles, outside the quotes, was presented in a neutral tone. Except for the headlines, there were only a few examples where the journalists' own views (or the fact that they were siding with the players) were revealed through their choice of words.

4.4. What Were the Accompanying Images?

Of the sample of 33 articles, 22 were accompanied by photographs, of which four had two images. Most of the photographs depicted players, with three exceptions. There was one of an EHF representative (an older man in a suit), one of the Norwegian Minister of Culture Abid Raja, and two of the artist Pink—these were head shots, with one full-bodied image of Pink.

There were 12 team photos of which four were formal group photos; in all cases, players were in the preferred shorts. The other eight were “in-game”—of these, six were “typical” photos of bikini-clad players taken from behind and two were photos where the Norwegians were playing in shorts and the opposing team was in bikinis, also taken from behind. There were eight individual shots of players, of which three were head shots, two were hand and leg shots (in shorts), and two were close-ups of the bikini bottoms. Notably, the *minority* of the images were “sexualised” like those most often associated with female sports. In cases where sexualised images were used, they were done so to illustrate the problem and acted as a visual reminder of the need for change.

This is a departure from the images used in von der Lippe's 2005 study. In 2021, the focus was more on teams (solidarity), rebellion (playing in shorts while others do not), and the individual who spoke out. In that way, the images also supported the findings in the verbal text analysis.

5. Concluding Remarks

From 2022 on, the proposed solution became the result: The rules were changed. Arguably the actions of the Norwegian players were key to bringing this change about, but it is important to acknowledge it was after years of discussion at the regional and international level, and not just based on an act of protest in 2021. And while the response to the protest may have to do with the fact that Norway is a country known for gender equality, there is no doubt that this event was given more weight in 2021 than in 2004 due to a larger change in international sentiment linked to the #Metoo movement (a global campaign that placed unwanted sexualisation of women in the spotlight).

This research concentrates on how a single actor (the NHF) was able to exert influence across time and alter how the issue was framed on a national and international level. While it is not a comparative study across nations, it does open some illuminating findings into the evolution of coverage in sports journalism. Conducted almost 20 years after an Olympic Games where the female sand volleyball players' attire became the object of in-depth analysis in a study by von der Lippe (2005), we find several departures. Firstly, instead of competing discourses, there is one overarching narrative or frame with two different moral evaluations in 2021. The first speaks to care for players' well-being and the second to the need to modernise rules. Both are packaged within the larger discussion around equality and the need for change.

Secondly, whereas the mere discussion about the players' attire attracted front-page attention and huge stories inside some of the largest news outlets in the country in 2004, the coverage could be argued to be more subdued in 2021 in terms of space and layout. That said, at its pinnacle, when the temperature of the debate increased, it took on more of a character of disbelief expressed by powerful social and political actors, as seen in the title of the only op-ed in the corpus (Gulla, 2021) as well as in the Minister of Culture's exclamation "Is it possible?"—joined with Pink's expressions of outrage against the "very sexist rules."

Thirdly, the use of images is another interesting departure from the earlier study. Although many of the photos showed players in bikinis, the sexualised images were in the minority and then used to demonstrate the point. There was more emphasis on the team and the individual who spoke. We found only one front page image in a major tabloid's sports section, and in this photo, the bikini-clad keeper looked strong, muscular, and ready to stop the ball, adopting an aggressive stance.

It is noteworthy that a majority of the articles in this study were written by male journalists or teams of journalists where at least one is male. These articles had no discernible difference in overall approach or discourse to those written by women journalists, and all were supportive of calls for change. This suggests that in Norway the gender of the journalist has less impact on whether they are likely to advocate change than was suggested in studies by Kian and Hardin (2009) and Parry et al. (2023). This may be attributed to the older, stronger, and more entrenched values of equality in the country's social and political fabric.

This study has shown that when the Norwegian team decided to be the first team in the world not to play beach volleyball in bikinis in 2021, it was the result of years of debate, negotiation, and changing norms. While there may have been the expectation that, given the headlines advocating for new rules, sports journalists would be the agents of change, in this instance this was not the case. That said, there has been a considerable movement in journalistic norms over the years when it comes to gender and sports that allowed for the media to present and word the debate so that it supported calls for change from the athletes and national federation. In this way, the media was certainly a facilitator.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Female Sports Journalists: The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the experiences of female sports journalists in Sweden from a gender perspective. The theoretical framework is inspired by Yvonne Hirdman’s understanding of gender in a binary system and R. W. Connell’s definition of hegemonic masculinity. Data consist of 10 semi-structured interviews with the most prominent female sports journalists in Sweden. The sports journalists in this study express that there has been a change in the media industry, resulting in a better understanding of women’s working conditions within the industry. Even so, the work is still grounded in a culture signified by hegemonic masculinity, where women need to find their own strategies to build a successful career, handle harassment, and cope with other gender-related challenges.

Keywords

female sports journalism; gender; harassment; hegemonic masculinity; new media landscape; working conditions

1. Introduction

Researching women’s role in today’s sports journalism is imperative for a comprehensive understanding of the field’s dynamics. Investigating women’s presence within sports journalism contributes to the discourse on representation in the media. Given the historically male-dominated nature of sports journalism, exploring the experiences and contributions of women in this domain is crucial for addressing gender disparities and challenging prevailing stereotypes.

Sweden is ranked within the top five most gender-equal countries in the world (World Economic Forum, 2021), which manifests itself in an equal number of women and men in Sweden's media newsrooms (SCB, 2020). In this article, we will explore the experiences of Swedish female sports journalists. The following research questions guide our work:

1. How do female sports journalists experience changes connected to gender within the media industry?
2. How do female sports journalists relate to gender roles and structures in contemporary sports media?
3. How do female sports journalists handle harassment due to their work?

The article is structured based on these questions.

2. Previous Research

Men have long dominated sports journalism, and when women work within the field, they are often found in less prominent roles than their male colleagues. This applies both to Swedish and international contexts (Cooky & Antunovic, 2022; Reimer, 2002; Schoch & Ohl, 2021). Djerf-Pierre (2003) has claimed that this is connected to the structure and history of journalism. Journalism was, in line with politics, the church, and science, part of the public sphere reserved for men. It was not until the 20th century that women began to gain access to journalism as a professional field. Their positions were inferior to men's positions, and men held all the influential and decision-making posts (Djerf-Pierre, 2003, pp. 31–33). In the middle of the 20th century, journalism became divided into gender-related areas of responsibility. Women were responsible for questions related to the home, household, child-care, and relationships, areas that were considered to have low status. Men were responsible for politics, economics, and foreign affairs. During the 1970s, social issues such as environment, education, healthcare, and care work grew in importance and became areas for female journalists, while men kept dominating sports journalism (Djerf-Pierre, 2003, p. 37).

Over time, the number of female journalists has increased. In 2018, 52 percent of all practicing journalists in Sweden were women, while 48 percent were men (SCB, 2020). However, these numbers are not reflected within sports journalism, where men are still overrepresented (Hovden & von der Lippe, 2019). From a global perspective, a study from 2015 shows that 76 percent are men in news media and that the areas of politics and sports are standing out as the most male-dominated spaces (Edström & Jacobsson, 2015). A study conducted in 2019 showed that only 20 percent of those who spoke in sports news were women (A. Hirdman, 2019). Swedish female sports journalists testified to an uneven work distribution within a patriarchal and discriminatory work environment, where men received better job offers and higher status than their female colleagues, even when the men had lower educational levels (Nordlander, 2018). A slightly older study, from 2008, showed that female sports journalists experienced that they had to choose between their careers or having children (Hardin et al., 2008).

One aspect of being a female sports journalist is threats and harassment. Research has shown that female journalists have received threatening and harassing comments online, and often these comments have been criticism in the form of misogynistic attacks as well as sexual violence (Masullo Chen et al., 2018). A study from 2022 showed that the most frequent comments female sports journalists received on Twitter were sarcastic, targeted their physical appearance, and involved physical threats (Demir & Ayhan, 2022). To deal with online threats and harassment, a study from 2019, showed that female sports journalists used strategies to avoid the

attacks. These strategies involved limiting audience engagement, reporting the comments, and quitting their jobs (Stahel & Schoen, 2019). A study from 2018 showed that another strategy was to connect with other female sports journalists (Everbach, 2018).

Gender scholar Kleberg (1988) has argued that the theories used to understand gender in journalism are simplified since they do not explain the complexities surrounding the field in an adequate way. She has challenged the dominant assumption that more women in news production would change the industry. Kleberg's main hypothesis is that if female journalists choose to enter male-dominated subject areas, such as sports journalism, without simultaneously changing the perspective, the content will not change. Gender differences will be concealed, and existing structures preserved (Kleberg, 1988, p. 46). According to Jarlbro (2013), it doesn't matter if there are as many women as men in the newsrooms if nothing is done about the gender routine which is conservative and contributes to maintaining the gender order. In contrast to Kleberg and Jarlbro, recent research highlights that change has occurred in the new media landscape and that researchers must focus on the media opportunities the post-feminist movement provides (Toffoletti, 2016). Post-feminism, a complex and evolving concept, has emerged as a response to and in conversation with earlier feminist movements. Post-feminism emphasizes individualism, positing that women have agency and autonomy to make their own choices and pursue their goals, free from traditional gender norms. However, this emphasis on individual agency can sometimes overshadow the systemic barriers to gender equality that persist in society (Toffoletti et al., 2018). Cooky and Antunovic (2022) claim that post-feminism itself becomes a part of the sports media narratives and the new media landscape through websites, blogs, podcasts, and social media (p. 4). Even so, sports pose a challenge compared to other social institutions and popular culture as sports are gender-segregated in their organizational structure through the dichotomy of women's and men's sports, a dichotomy we do not find in popular culture, for example (p. 11).

3. Theoretical Framework

To answer our questions, we use a theoretical framework combining R. W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity and Yvonne Hirdman's binary understanding of the gender system.

Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant form of masculinity that is culturally idealized and upheld as the norm within a particular society. It represents the set of traits, behaviors, and attitudes that are valued and rewarded within a given social context, often associated with power, dominance, and control. In the context of sports journalism, hegemonic masculinity can have a significant impact. Sports journalism has historically been male dominated, reflecting and perpetuating traditional gender norms and stereotypes. Male sports journalists often occupy positions of authority and influence within the field, while women may face barriers to entry and advancement (Dahlén, 2008).

Y. Hirdman (1988) divides men and women into a binary system, where "women" and "men" come with preconceptions and expectations, which result in reiterative patterns. That is to say, the gender system is bound to the separation of men and women and, following this, the regulation of power and order where the man is the norm (Y. Hirdman, 1988, p. 7). Central in Yvonne Hirdman's framework is a gender contract which creates conditions for gender-bound rationality and affirmation of the order. This contract can explain continuity in the gender order in history (Y. Hirdman, 2001, pp. 88–94). The gender order remains even though masculinity and femininity may be constructed in new ways (Y. Hirdman, 2001, pp. 129–130).

Yvonne Hirdman also points out the paradox of making gender a “woman’s job,” a specialty that is perceived as a perversion of the mobility women have achieved. This illustrates one of the unintended consequences of integration and gender-emphasized roles (Y. Hirdman, 2001, p. 200).

According to Hardin et al. (2008) women entering sports journalism encounter strong gender barriers through “patronizing treatment by sources and colleagues, conflicting expectations in terms of family roles and career plans, and patriarchal structures, which ultimately contribute to women’s exit [from] the industry” (Hardin et al., 2008, p. 73, also cited in Cooky & Antunovic, 2022, p. 44). This quote summarizes the challenges faced by female journalists, while also opening up towards Yvonne Hirdman’s idea of a binary understanding of gender. The association between hegemonic masculinity and sports journalism contributes to the highlighting of gender hierarchies and inequalities within society.

The purpose of employing two distinct theoretical perspectives is to endeavor to capture the complexity that mirrors today’s sports media landscape. R. W. Connell and Yvonne Hirdman each have the potential to contribute to a deeper understanding of gender structures within the industry. We use the concept of hegemonic masculinity as a theoretic concept in our analysis, and we use the binary gender system as a theoretical lens through which we understand the material and how female sports journalists speak about gender.

4. Method

In this study, we conducted ten semi-structured interviews with Swedish female sports journalists. In the preparatory work for the interviews, we analyzed Swedish media coverage of gender and sports journalism. We have chosen to reproduce some of the quotes, written by Swedish female sports journalists, which problematize the theme. Achieving in-depth understanding through semi-structured interviews involves a multifaceted approach where the exploration of personal experiences is encouraged, allowing participants to share anecdotes related to the research topic. These qualitative narratives offer a vivid and contextualized understanding of their perspectives, contributing to a richer analysis. Contextual inquiry is another critical dimension, wherein researchers delve into the factors that influence participants’ views and behaviors. Understanding the broader environment, cultural influences, and situational dynamics adds depth and context to the analysis (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). The interviews varied in length, from 40 minutes to 1.5 hours, but most of the interviews lasted for around one hour. Since we wanted to speak with the most experienced female sports journalists, we reached out to the top names, and they all responded positively. We established contact with 10 out of the top 15 most professional women sports journalists. Our participants’ ages range from 35 to 70 years old.

We used an interview guide with different themes and a set of questions. The themes consisted of changes in female presence in sports journalism, knowledge and skills, challenges within the field, equality and diversity, and perspectives on the future. We had a set of questions under each theme, but we were flexible in which turns the interviews took since we wanted the participants to be free to tell their personal stories. The interviewees’ stories differed since they all had different backgrounds and various experiences.

The interviews were conducted on video calls (Teams). We saved the audio files and transcribed them. The interviews were conducted in Swedish and have been translated by the authors. Both authors read the

interviews several times before we started to discuss topics and categories. After that, we coded the material according to different categories, such as “women in sports journalism,” “to be a woman,” “changes in the media landscape,” “language,” “social media and digitalization,” “knowledge,” “women’s sports,” “threats and harassment,” “salary,” and “challenges.” Our research questions guided how we analyzed the interviews, based on the themes. To be fair to our participants, we have tracked all the citations we use. This means that, first, we categorized according to different themes. Then, we selected citations from some of the categories. Finally, we tracked the citations back to the original transcription to make sure that the citations mirrored the bigger picture presented by the participants. The participants are numbered from interview 1 to 10.

There are limitations of the study, and due to the sample size, one can ask how far these results may be able to be transferred to other contexts. Since there are not that many female sports journalists of this high rank of professionalism, we were limited to a few names. Ten interviews with the top female sports journalists give an insight into contemporary gender and power structures from a Swedish perspective. Since each country has its own media structure and laws and regulations regarding equality, public service channels versus private channels, etc., it is difficult to generalize our analysis to other countries and contexts.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1. *The Experience of Female Sports Journalists Connected to Gender Within the Media Industry*

In the first theme, we focus on how female sports journalists experience the industry’s structural changes. Previous research has pointed out that the Swedish TV sports’ editorial office consisted almost exclusively of men in the early years, and that the few women who were found there worked as secretaries, scripters, or clerks (Reimer, 2002, p. 155). The number of female journalists has increased since then, but progress has been slow. The first episode of Sportspegeln (a Swedish public service TV) was broadcast in January 1961, but it took another 20 years for the first female presenter to be appointed:

You should remember that, in 1980, when Ann-Britt Rydh Pettersson was the first female presenter for Sportspegeln, it was still not allowed for women to compete in Vasaloppet [the world’s largest public ski race]. So, there we are. The Gender Equality Act came in 1979 in Sweden, so around that time an evolution began, and it would take some time. (Interview 5)

Just as Djerf-Pierre’s (2003) research shows, a breakthrough occurs at the end of the 20th century when women gain access to one of the most masculine-bound journalistic spheres—sports journalism. The first women in the field had to endure a lot of resistance, but the development has mostly been positive since the pioneers started, according to those interviewed. The number of female sports journalists has increased, and the interviewees express that their presence has become more self-evident and that they have been accepted. But it has been a long journey with a lot of resistance, both internally in the media industry and among media consumers:

I have absolutely been told that I only got this job because I’m a woman. You get remarks about filling a diversity quota and comments that you don’t understand sports. There are male football coaches who have called me “little girl” over the years, who use that kind of power technique to show that they know

better. But I also think that it gets better and better. I can't remember having experienced anything like that in recent years. (Interview 8)

The age span between those interviewed in this study is about 35 years, and although there are many different perceptions of how Swedish sports journalism has changed, everyone agrees that there has been a positive development in terms of gender equality and female representation within the field. Some of the interviewees point out that it has been a lonely struggle for improved conditions since neither men nor groups that otherwise work for increased gender equality (in the quote below presented as feminists) have contributed:

I think it's underreported...the revolution that this actually is, with female sports journalists. Especially in Sweden. Nobody else has given this to us, we need to talk about it sometimes—the landscape has changed so much. But sports journalists, the men, they're not that interested in this. And feminists are not that interested in sports. So, there's a bit of a vacuum here. No one pays attention to what's happening. (Interview 4)

The statement above, that feminists are not interested in sports, does not align with Cooky and Antunovic's (2022) research in the book *Serving Equality*, where they claim that post-feminism has been an important part of the increased gender balance in media reporting.

Even though there are indications of increased gender equality, the interviewees express several fears linked to the new media landscape. The new media landscape has brought about both openings and closing doors for female journalists. Social media and digitalization have diversified sports journalism and created many new arenas for the dissemination of sports, but women have restricted access to these arenas:

There were a few years when I actually felt it was going backward. Especially when social media became big, and these football podcasts came along and there was a lot of profile building. A bit outside of traditional journalism. Women were simply pushed out. Or rather, they were somewhat made invisible. (Interview 4)

The field has changed in different ways. Respect for female sports journalists has increased, according to the interviewees, and several of the interviewees highlight how important their (male) bosses have been for that development:

The mindset of the editorial staff has also improved. They have become more receptive to listening to what it's like for women in the field. And I also think there has been a greater understanding, among bosses, of how vulnerable one can be in such situations. I think everyone better understands what you can actually go through. (Interview 8)

Nowadays, the participants experience that they get support when they are subjected to gender-specific harassment, and that today's bosses have the knowledge and skills to handle difficult situations. Furthermore, the participant quoted above points out the strength of having several women working together and supporting each other:

It's a strength that we are more female sports journalists now, who can point out the essentials, what it's all about. We have more allies to vent with. We talk quite a lot about it on the editorial team, amongst us women. (Interview 8)

This quote is in line with the aforementioned study by Everbach (2018).

Although there are positive changes as discussed above, one of Sweden's leading journalists, Frändén (2017), writes that female sports journalists are vulnerable because they operate in a male-dominated environment. She claims that a female sports journalist must always be on their guard and look out for sexist and male chauvinistic editorials. Frändén (2017, p. 16) highlights the importance of discussing these issues with female colleagues:

The talk between female colleagues moves in risk-calculating arguments of the type: "He's a bit chauvinistic but still okay, but watch out for this one, especially when he's drunk," and "That boss hates and breaks down women, so don't take that job if you want to keep your health intact."

The quote is one of many examples given in the interviews of how women must navigate a structure that is marinated in a culture based on masculinity, where being female is cause enough for needing to find strategies to be able to continue working in the industry.

The two quotes above show the complexity of the field, where female sports journalists experience improvements in the field that point to a positive development towards more gender-equal sports journalism. But still, women are working in a field where the man is, and has always been, the norm. To understand this environment from Yvonne Hirdman's and R. W. Connell's theories, one can say that female sports journalists navigate the industry from a subordinate perspective "as women" and that the industry has not changed its culture, but instead, female sports journalists take part in the industry although they face structures of discrimination due to gender binarity. This conflict—to be a part of a masculine culture as a female sports journalist—results in the women using different strategies, as shown in the quote above, to survive in the field.

Schoch and Ohl (2021) write that both male and female journalists are trapped in a gender-specific role, where masculine values and practices take precedence, contributing to upholding the existing gender order within sports journalism that favors men and disadvantages women. Editors-in-chief appear to wield significant influence in this procedure, particularly through their hiring practices and biased assumptions regarding journalists' genders, consequently indicating that the gender bias in skill perception can detrimentally affect not just women's professional trajectories but also their workplace satisfaction (Schoch & Ohl, 2021, p. 278).

The participants say that many women disappear from sports journalism. One of the interviewees problematized the fact that although female presence has increased, the positions women fill are not in the higher hierarchical levels, such as bosses or editors:

What I see as a challenge, as a female sports journalist, it's still that glass ceiling. The sports pages, sports journalism, still lack female bosses. Female editors. More women need to get these positions. It's still very male-dominated. (Interview 8)

Another problematization for understanding female sports journalists' working conditions is the pressure of outstanding knowledge, leading to a lack of tolerance against female journalists:

You have to be so damn much better than a man in such an environment [sports], for the men to be like, "we accept her." And then, you can't make any mistakes. So of course, the presence of women has increased, but the criticism never waits....There are more women now [in the industry], yes. But it's still a completely different treatment and a completely different tone and a completely different tolerance for and against women. (Interview 9)

The quote shows that the tolerance towards women is lower than for men and that you cannot afford to make any mistakes if you want to survive as a woman in sports journalism.

The quotations in this section demonstrate that while women are allowed entry into sports journalism, they experience a working culture where they are relegated to subordinate roles compared to their male counterparts. Women experience that they are required to over-perform in comparison to their male colleagues.

The pendulum movement between progress and backlash is made visible in the interviews by the fact that there are more active female sports journalists today compared to before, but the interviewees still experience bias due to gender roles. Masculinity is the norm in sports journalism, and female sports journalists acknowledge this in different ways. One way is in the lack of women in certain positions within the industry, such as bosses. Another way is in the exclusionary culture, where new media channels, such as podcasts, and festive gatherings, exclude female voices without consequences. These experiences signal a persistent culture of hegemonic masculinity, which will need to be further addressed in order to change the media industry at its core.

5.2. Relating to Gender Roles and Structures in Contemporary Sports Media

In this section, we discuss how female sports journalists' individual experiences influence not only their own professional careers but also how these experiences contribute to shaping today's media landscape. We do this from a critical gendered position, understanding Y. Hirdman's (1988, 2001) binary gender system as a part of Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity, constructing gender differences based on a set of imagined qualities that leads to a separation between "men" and "women," and keeps men in a dominant position and female in a subordinate position.

The quote below shows the complexity between the individual and the structural level, where the man is the norm who sets the agenda and determines who is included or excluded (see also Y. Hirdman, 1988):

I like men, I should add. I think it's fun to work with men. But it's always the case that men are the majority, and the majority has the privilege of interpretation. And men see men, choose men, and admire men. (Interview 1)

A counterfactual quote replacing man with woman in the aforementioned quote—"I like women...And women see women, choose women, and admire women"—also illustrates the power within R. W. Connell's

concept of hegemonic masculinity, where women are subordinate to men and must constantly navigate within a masculine-coded context.

During the interviews, we found that some of our participants told us stories based on a gender-discriminating structure—hidden in the culture of hegemonic masculinity—that they themselves did not find problematic:

There is such a wonderful well-known story, when I came to do my very first presenter shift. Back then, we used to wear burgundy blazers during autumn and wintertime. And they looked at me and said: “You can take Janne Svanlund’s [a male reporter’s] jacket; we think it will fit you.” There was no question if I would wear something feminine, like a feminine jacket, or that we would have a stylist to see to it. It was just like; you can take Janne Svanlund’s jacket; it will be fine. And I mean, I didn’t react either. I didn’t demand to get anything else. In the summer we had bright yellow blazers, and the first summer I worked, I got another men’s jacket. It was not until next summer, when we were going to have blue blazers and I had been around long enough to figure out for myself that I should ask the managers if I could possibly get something more feminine than a male blazer. And then they were like: “Why didn’t we think of that before?” So really, it was mutual. (Interview 7)

This quote above is interesting from the perspective of hegemonic masculinity. The people within the industry, and the female sports journalist in question, are all mutually uncritical of the culture and the dominant masculine structures within it, and they overlook how the culture shapes women’s working conditions. The interviewed journalist told this story as a “wonderful story,” since she did not reflect on it as something other than an anecdote of the time, even though she thought about the male jacket from the beginning. It took her at least three different male blazers to feel comfortable to ask for a female jacket. Although this perspective is hers to hold, the hegemonic masculinity works in this way, keeping us blindfolded in seeing the norms upholding a masculine hierarchy.

Most of those involved in the study express an ambivalence about gender roles within sports journalism, both when referring to their own experiences and the structures they operate within. There is the everyday work that they often feel comfortable in and can handle, and then there are structures that make the working day more difficult but which the women themselves report are harder to put their finger on:

I actually haven’t experienced it [being treated differently due to gender]. I’ve always thought that I’m me. I’m [participant’s name]. I haven’t reflected so much on whether I’m a man or a woman. And I have never measured other people by that yardstick either, nor skin color, nor age. But then, there are patterns and structures. (Interview 5)

This quote shows that even if one has not personally experienced being treated differently due to gender, one is aware that there are structures that can exclude or limit women. An example of this is given by one of the participants while speaking about becoming a mother:

When you talk about women, it’s quite easy to be a part of the culture when you’re young, if you have thick skin. It’s fun when a woman comes into the newsroom, the guys also think it’s fun. And you work, and you go out, and you have no family. And then it gets harder when you have children. It all changes. Then the differences between men and women start to really show. I think a lot about that when I talk about gender equality. A lot happens, and at the same time, very little actually happens. (Interview 1)

Hardin and Shain (2005) examine women's limited presence in sports journalism and the lack of equality in the US within the field. Their study shows that female journalists often feel discriminated against and unfairly treated in relation to their male colleagues. Female journalists express that it is difficult to make a career and succeed within their field. One of the reasons discussed is the work-family dynamic, which they see as a real "career-killer." The quote above shows a gender complexity, where progress is being made in some areas, such as more women entering sports journalism, but the structures stay the same—"it gets harder when you have children." Even though Sweden is at the top of the world among comparable countries, the quote shows that female sports journalists experience the same obstacles as women do in the field in the US, which ranks 42nd place in the Global Gender Gap Index 2023 (Statista, 2023).

That a lot and a little happens at the same time is something that recurs in many of the interviews—progress is being made in several areas, but the women still answer to the same structures.

"The more things change, the more they stay the same" indicates a steadfastness in the gender order, according to Y. Hirdman (2001, p. 77). Frändén (2017) problematizes that it is always the female sports journalists who are asked why female sports journalists are marginalized:

After a few years of progress on the gender equality front in the early 2000s, the rules of sports journalism have slowly changed. The new online TV formats, podcasts, and social media channels have, it is becoming increasingly clear, meant a collective backlash for women in the profession. For many clients, it is not important if you have an obscure sponsor for your podcast, or—unthinkable in all other press ethics contexts—work extra for a gambling company. Openly cheering for a team is a good accessory! The new multi-journalist market actually favors football supporters with a media platform; those who hang out with the guys on the couch in front of the TV, live-betting on Premier League, and knowing every left-back in Wolverhampton since World War II. (p. 16)

There are several interesting observations one can make based on this quote. This new form of sports journalism, not translatable to the structure of traditional journalism, where the focus lies on journalists being supporters, opens up yet another form of exclusion of women. To talk about football in a podcast, or to hang out with the guys in front of the TV, and to live-bet is not reserved for men. However, these activities seem to take part in a hegemonic masculine environment, which disadvantages women and results in a collective backlash to gender-equal sports journalism.

5.3. Handling Threats and Harassment

The third theme—threats and harassment—demonstrates that although the majority of those interviewed can provide many examples of being subjected to threats and harassment due to their gender, their stories are complex.

Several participants have experienced threats connected to their work in sports journalism. Some point out that threats and hate have increased because of social media, but they emphasize that the threat level has increased for their male colleagues as well. The most decisive factor for the number of threats and harassment one receives is connected to the sports one covers—the specific sport means more than gender identity:

Yes, I have received threats, especially when I wrote about Allsvenskan. That was the worst. It was so nice when I stopped writing about it and moved on to write about international football. It wears on you....You are exposed, and as a woman you are always exposed in a different way, the attacks are always more personal. And there are a lot of men, when it comes to sports journalism, who are jealous, who want to be where you are. It's like a rage within them that I get to work with what they dream of. (Interview 1)

Reporting Allsvenskan (the highest-ranked football league in Sweden) seems to present the highest risk, while figure skating and equestrian sports seem to be free from a culture of hate and threats, according to our data. Another participant talked about the combination of being a female sports journalist covering male football and being around drunk men:

We had to report to the Police once when I was out covering a men's national match in football....To be at supporter gatherings, among drunk older people, there have been incidents with people groping me. And I have colleagues who have been more or less kissed on live broadcast, when I myself held the camera. (Interview 8)

In the quote above, the journalist expresses an unsafe environment while being in football matches and around drunk men. Yet another problem comes from within the industry:

Then the man that drove us says to the other man we met: "Look what a tasty little piece I brought for us." When you are in the middle of the forest with two men you don't know. And I reacted in the way I do, which means I get angry, and I just said: "Quit this shit, now." But everyone reacts differently. But I was scared. And they wouldn't have said that if it had been Lars [male name] who came along to do the report. So that sort of thing happens all the time. And the whole thing with pats on the butt and all that shit you go through. (Interview 6)

In addition to the harassment described in the quotes above, several participants bring up the issue of harassment on social media and the difference in the comments one receives as a woman versus a man. Some highlight that it is more sexist, and one mentions that it is a more raw and more violent sexist rhetoric when one can hide behind anonymized accounts. Many ugly words and epithets fall into women's various digital accounts and most often it is about them being incompetent, diversity in quotas, left-wing extremists, bitter feminists, cunts, ugly, and more. Many examples are given in the interviews:

These are the words of an "in-quoted, left bitch who has made a career sucking off Zlatan," comments like this, on Twitter. I can sometimes retweet it for others to see. That is, I can expose people who harass me. (Interview 1)

Several participants have developed their own strategies to deal with the tormentors—in this example above by retweeting and exposing the commentator. Another participant says that her strategy is to "kill them with kindness"—she responds respectfully to the harassment and asks why they write so threateningly. She says that she then usually gets an apologetic response, and that the person stops with the harassment. Kavanagh et al. (2016) write that women are more exposed to threats and sexual harassment compared to men, but that it is especially bad if they are also involved in sports. Demir and Ayhan (2022) write that one of

the main forms of harassment female sports journalists receive on Twitter are comments focusing on physical appearance.

Other examples of strategies our participants shared were that some have secret phone numbers and others have chosen different last names for their children to keep them from being connected through name. In addition, some participants make a habit of reporting incidents to the Police. One of the participants argues that threats and harassment play a part in women leaving the field:

One should remember that women often disappear from the industry, more often than men. And even if it's not always because of hatred and threats, because it's not, I think it can play a part. (Interview 4)

It seems that there may be generational differences between the interviewees in how they experience their work as journalists, as the older ones do not report as many challenges connected to threats and harassment as their younger colleagues. Which sport they report on the most is significant, and also in which media channel. The interviewees highlight that it is "nicer" in public service TV compared to the privately owned channels:

Absolutely nothing. Nothing [referring to threats]. But I also think that SVT [public service] is a bit pampered, in some way. It's still nice. Everyone thinks nicely about SVT. You have a familiar relationship with it. (Interview 3)

One interesting research finding is that some of the women who have worked the longest in sports journalism say that they have not noticed any discrimination due to gender during their long careers. One of the participants asked us: How do you know if you are treated differently based on gender identity and if you would have been treated any differently if you were a man? She also argued that some women today take the victim role in working life:

I have friends who have their tentacles out all the time, and who always think: "This is because I'm a woman; if I had been a man then this never would have happened." And I'm just the opposite. I try to think that it doesn't matter which gender we are. I rather believe it is about how I am as a person, if I'm well-read, if I'm knowledgeable, if I'm serious. Then, I'll be treated just like anyone else. That's my starting point. (Interview 3)

In addition to this, the material provides examples of having experienced the advantages of being a woman. One participant talks about the ability to more easily connect in interviews based on different gender roles:

Sometimes I feel that it can actually be an advantage to be a woman in these contexts [sports journalism] because one can be perceived as disarming. It sounds strange, or it sounds like it shouldn't have anything to do with it, but something happens. It becomes a different kind of tension, which can sometimes open up for other types of conversations. (Interview 10)

There is no consensus on how gender affects the individual female sports journalist. However, through this material, it is obvious that gender plays a central role in understanding the working conditions for female sports journalists. The participants' experiences vary a lot, but the younger journalists experience more hate than the older ones, and the journalists focusing on male football experience more hate than their

colleagues. Even though the participants have experienced harassment or gendered mistreatment in different ways, all of the female sports journalists in this study enjoy their work and speak positively about their profession.

6. Conclusion

In this article, we have given voice to ten prominent journalists who work in the Swedish sports media landscape. To understand their experiences from a gendered perspective, we used Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity and Y. Hirdman's (1988, 2001) understanding of the binary gender system as a theoretical framework in our analysis.

The participants in this study have all had strong and steady careers. They are symbols of success. But still, there seem to be many women who are being marginalized in today's sports media landscape. Cooky and Antunovic (2022) describe a "sexist backlash" characterized by "routine abuse" and "raw misogyny" directed at individual female journalists (p. 69). A. Hirdman (2019) and Hardin and Shain (2005) describe how women leave the sports media landscape due to discrimination, lack of career opportunities and/or support. Hardin et al. (2008, p. 76) note:

Liberal feminist initiatives and diversity-minded hiring in newsrooms have served women who aspire to work in sports media: They have opened doors. However, the institutions behind these doors have remained intact. The same door that turns to allow women in later turns them out.

In this study, the female sports journalists describe an increased number of women in the field, a better understanding from the bosses, and a more accepting environment. Although this is true, the culture of the industry can be understood through Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity. Firstly, our study demonstrates that the new media landscape, shaped by social media and digitalization, gives room for a new form of exclusion of female sports journalists. Several media platforms open up opportunities for multiple actors, but some of these do not include women, such as niche football podcasts. Secondly, the culture upholds men's central positions of hierarchy through a separation of gender roles. One example is the exclusion of women who become mothers, and another example is the absence of females who do not have thick enough skin to handle the industry and what follows, for example, harassment.

The participants in this study tell us about some of their strategies to avoid or limit harassment due to their career, such as exposing haters on social media or getting a secret phone number.

Two of the interviewees employ the strategy of "killing them with kindness," consistently responding to harassment with a friendly and inclusive tone, which disarms the angry men—as it is primarily men who threaten and harass.

Another research finding is the generational differences. Mannheim's (1952) generation theory suggests that individuals who experience significant historical events during their formative years share common attitudes, beliefs, and values that distinguish them from other generations. According to Mannheim, these shared experiences shape a generational consciousness, influencing their perceptions of society and their role within it. Our material shows that younger women experience a harsher work environment compared to the

older generation. Although the sample size is limited and the type of sport one primarily works with influences the work situation, the generational aspect is significant.

Although the generational differences are noticeable in our research, one must also reflect on the individuals' definitions of gender roles, discrimination, and harassment. One example from our research is an older journalist who says that she has never, during her whole career, experienced any gendered mistreatment. She proceeds to tell us the story of when she had to use a male jacket on the show she led because there were no female jackets and no one else thought of this as a problem until she found the courage to ask for it. This example could have been told as proof of gendered discrimination, but in this case, it was not. One's own understanding of the situation is crucial for the definition of it as discriminating or not. This is where the concept of hegemonic masculinity is important, since hegemonic masculinity is the shape male-centered culture takes to uphold the subordination of women (Connell, 2005). This means, for the culture to last, it must lure women into accepting it as well, hiding the hierarchical structure as much as is needed.

Our material shows stories of a changing sports journalism, but at the same time, it shows us persistent excluding structures endured by women who are thick-skinned and skilled enough strategically to be able to enjoy the field. As Y. Hirdman (2001) points out, the gender order does not change even if structures of masculinity and femininity change. Overall, the hegemonic masculinity in sports journalism can reinforce gender inequalities and limit opportunities for women to participate and succeed in the field. Challenging and dismantling norms is crucial for creating a more inclusive and equitable sports media landscape. It takes time to change norms, something that has emerged in this study. However, it is possible, and based on our research findings, leadership seems to be a very important factor. Having gender-aware managers seems to be a decisive factor in improving equality in sports journalism. Our study sheds light on the power structures and hierarchies inherent within the sports journalism industry. By examining the obstacles and challenges faced by women in the workplace, including issues of discrimination, harassment, and limited career progression opportunities, we hope to contribute to efforts aimed at creating a more equitable and supportive work environment. Understanding these power dynamics is essential for promoting gender equality within the profession.

Important research themes going forward are how the changed media landscape affects sports journalism and how this, in turn, affects gender structures in the industry. Several of the interviewees raise important issues that require more research, such as ethical issues where sports journalists are sponsored by gambling companies or where journalists are more supporters than professionals. Further research is needed around the niche media channels that are growing, such as football podcasts, and how this affect gender representation.

In conclusion, research on women's role in sports journalism serves as a critical endeavor in advancing gender equality, promoting diversity, and fostering more inclusive media practices. By addressing issues of representation, power dynamics, and societal impact, we hope that our research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the complexities within the field and advocates for positive change.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Sports Journalists as Agents of Change: An International Academic Perspective

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Abstract

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

Keywords

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. Methodology

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

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

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

The interviewees include:

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

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

3. An International Perspective

3.1. Iran

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.2. UAE

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

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

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

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

3.3. Israel

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.4. Spain

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

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

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

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

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

3.5. Germany

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. Limitations

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

5. Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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The Nordic Story

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Abstract

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

Keywords

journalism; media; Nordic countries; sports; sports journalism

1. The Background Story

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. The Nordic Issue

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

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

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

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

3. The Present and Future

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

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

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

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