

The writing(s) of sports journalism

Introduction

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port occupies an important space in contemporary media economics. It is disseminated via specialist platforms but features prominently also in general newspapers. With its stars, results, achievements and big events recurring in periodic sequence (World Cups, Olympic and Paralympic Games), sport falls squarely within the definition of information. This however is a relatively recent phenomenon.

Bell's life in London (1823) is the first newspaper to publish sports news. The first specialist periodicals appear in the middle of the 19th century (The Field, 1853; Les Sports (1854), society newspapers; Le Sport nautique, 1860; The Sportsman, 1865) while sports results begin to feature more regularly in general newspapers, particularly through the coverage of horseracing.

The New York Herald appears to be the first general daily newspaper to cover sport in a systematic fashion, and the New York World in 1883 is the first newspaper to have a designated team of specialist sports reporters. Sports publications experience significant growth from the 19th century onwards, due to the gradual democratization of sport, which increasingly becomes part of public policy, but also because it coincides with the vested economic interests of automobile and bicycle manufacturers. With Pierre Giffard's Le Vélo (1892), its competitor L'Auto (1904) edited by Henry Desgranges, and the organization of the first Tour de

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France in June-July 1903, sport enters the media era as we still know it today.

Before World War I, sport accounts for 6% of the total content of French daily newspapers (Tétard, 2007). After World War II, sports coverage has grown to represent 13.5% of the content of Parisian newspapers and 30% of the content of the regional press (Seidler, 1964). This proportion continues to grow, as reflected in the significance of sports supplements carried by certain English newspapers such as the Daily Telegram, the Daily Mail or the Daily Express. Sport becomes the subject matter of reports and columns; it is covered by news agencies and begins to have its own dedicated staff: reporter/journalists and even discipline-specific specialists such as photographers and radio and television commentators. Despite the crisis in the press sector, new publications are launched and manage to stay in business, such as *Placar* (1970) or *Lance!* (1997) in Brazil. Competition remains fierce between the two Madrid-based sports dailies, *As* and *Marca*, as well as between digital television channels such as ESPN, Eurosport, TVA sport, Canal+ Sport, etc. Around the world, daily and weekly newspapers and the online press create and disseminate information, analysis and commentary.

In the history of journalism, sports journalism occupies a special place. The discourse on the sporting press is first elaborated by the staff of the sporting press itself, as the awareness of constituting a specific sub-category of journalism gradually develops. This observation generally derives from the overlapping of roles between journalists and sportspersons: some professional sportsmen and women turn to writing on sports, and some journalists are sports aficionados. Such crossovers have undoubtedly influenced modes of professionalization and help also to explain why encounters between sports historians and historians of the press were slow to come about.

However, in the past fifteen years, much research has focused on the relationship between sport and the press (Raney et Bryant, 2006; Clastres et Méadel, 2007; Combeau-Mari, 2007; Attali, 2009). These works have contributed to the mapping of vast territories, previously uncharted, such as inventories of the sporting press, including local and regional newspapers, histories of press stakeholders (journalists, photographers, writers), relationships between the press and both the economic and political spheres, and the rhetoric of sporting discourse. A downside of this “cartography” is the unsystematic nature of such inventories: most publications are monographs (on a particular newspaper, a sport, a period in time or a region) and do not thematize an overall argument, much less specific poetics. In this regard, writing about sport remains an open question, which has nevertheless been

brought into sharper focus through a series of recent works (Diana et Lochard, 1994; Lowes, 1999; Coelho, 2011; Souanef, 2019) alternating between prescriptive and analytical approaches.

This issue of *On Journalism* is based on papers presented during the Numapresse conference (Brussels, October 24-25, 2019), as well as articles submitted following a call for submissions in the spring of 2020. It seeks therefore to broaden knowledge of writing in the field of sports journalism having recourse to a variety of disciplinary approaches, some of which are unusual in this sphere, and to methodologies offering new perspectives, such as discourse analysis, history, digital humanities and the poetics of journalism. Mainly centred on a French and Brazilian-Portuguese corpus, with some incursions into the Anglo-Saxon world, the issue emphasizes the social anchoring of the written discourse on sport. Accompanied by headline-generating images and layout effects, sports narration cannot be conceived as a purely textual performance. But how do different elements of the media relate to and impact on each other? How is sport written about when live coverage on the radio, television or via the Internet predominates? How does competition between various media condition the narrative of their respective iterations? (Schultz, 2007; Moritz, 2014; Leal and Mesquita). More broadly still, sports writing is intertwined with representations of the world (nationalism, racism, engagement, sexism) as well as with spatial/planning policy and tourism.

Sports discourse can also be profoundly political, particularly when it coincides with colonial antagonisms (such as in the case of Anglo-French rivalry in boxing - Hadjeras), or where it engages national pride (for example when the Brazilian soccer team suffers a defeat - Casagrande). Sport is also subject to controversy, for instance when it deals or fails to deal with gender and transgender issues, or when it conveys specific ideologies and interpretations of the world (Ducournau, Thomas). All of these questions highlight how, although writing about sport cannot be isolated from the context in which it takes place, it remains an essential driver of journalistic activity in this area. The various organizational contexts of sports writing have changed over time; workspaces/places, tools, dissemination opportunities and formatting options have led to the creation of a variety of different relationships between the journalist and the act of writing about sport (Singer, 2003). Such factors are both internal and external to the production of sports information (Wille).

From an external perspective, the international coverage of sporting events must be considered,

given how it also raises questions regarding a certain form of mimicry in writing practices, amounting to a potential internationalization of the modes of sports narration. Grouped together in “pools”, attending the same press conferences, kept at a distance from sportsmen and women by the ruses of communication specialists, sports journalists have had to develop specific strategies to generate content. This is true also for newspapers, given the extent to which sport is a significant factor in competition between rival publications. From an internal perspective, sports writing has always fallen into two distinct categories: on the one hand, the events and associated results, while on the other, the commentary, investigations and reports that frame and contextualize such events. However, this differentiation is not fixed in stone. What is considered factual writing is beginning to be automated. The “robotization of journalism” that exists in the coverage of the financial sector is also being trialled in the sports sections of certain media organisations, and is leading to debates, not only on writing (its function, its importance), but also on the role of journalists (Danzon-Chambaud, 2020). More recently still, via the internet, the public interacts directly with certain media, providing online content and thereby contributing to the mediatization of sport (Singer, 2003; Martins). Writing (in the broadest sense of the term) is thus stepping outside of the established professional frameworks while at the same time contributing actively to the social and economic stakes of this particular sector.

Digital humanities enable the immense corpus of information available online in recent years to be tapped. They also raise new questions about the place of sport in the general economy of periodic printed media (publication frequencies, quantitative importance, specific forms of treatment of material), the types of journalism mobilized (from deferred reporting to live coverage, from immersionism to photographic accounts, from columns to features and colour pieces), the representation of sportsmen and women through imagery or heroic metaphorization, as well as the career paths of journalists (Aron).

From a methodological perspective, as we shall see, writing about sport deals as much with the media format (cover pages and illustrations for instance) as

with the various modes of the text itself, in the form of titles, enunciative discourses (from interviews to commentary), value judgements and stated ideologies (Ducournau, Mendes). Discourse analysis, semiotics and sociolinguistics are thus called upon to understand how sport develops its own language (Caldwell, 2016; Bonnet; Pimenta). Different registers frame how sport is written or spoken about, ranging from live narration to reconstructed monologue, from familiar conversations to more formal speech, from slang to literary pastiche (Aron). Such discourses relate to the various “players” on the sporting landscape (coaches, athletes, and spectators), the differentiation between sports themselves, the discursive traditions of many sporting events, and even the column inches dedicated to these elements in the newspaper itself.

As evidenced by the contributions gathered in this issue, and ranging in focus from the 19th century to the contemporary period, the meaning of the word “sport” has evolved greatly. Beyond the individual practices that it continues to describe, and with very different connotations, sport affects all aspects of social life, from town planning, which considers its insertion into urban spaces, to the globalized economy, causing both its personnel and its associated representations to circulate more widely. Writing about sport is an integral part of the very definition of sporting activity itself and contributes to its development and its practices. This is the case, not just for the sport of cycling from the end of the 19th century onwards, as illustrated by Hurcombe, but also for combat sports studied here through numerous contemporary Brazilian media and social networks (Martins), and even for the big global sports (Oriard, 1993). These are just some of the evolving structures that the history of journalism attempts to grasp, both from the standpoint of close proximity to the “agents” of their creation, but also with the necessary distance required to trace the evolution of a particular media or set of practices.

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