

**SPORTS**

**JOURNALISM**  
A PRACTICAL INTRODUCTION

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## Context setting: media environments

### Chapter Summary

- The media's influence on sport
- Sport's influence on the media
- Organisation and practice of sports departments and sports journalists
- Media markets and audience awareness
- Sport's cultural significance

### Learning Objectives

- To understand the organisation and needs of the media
- To recognise the importance of sports journalism to the media's commercial success
- To identify the constraints within which media organisations operate in the sports market
- To understand what determines the sports agenda of news organisations in different markets
- To recognise how media audiences determine content and style

The media have an important and growing role in the culture of developed countries. As leisure time has expanded and access to radio, television and the internet has become almost universal, not only in the home but also in cars and in pubs, clubs, cafés and on the street, so the demand for material with which to fill the burgeoning number of media outlets has grown. The expansion of leisure has also led to an upsurge in public interest in sport, and a corresponding growth in the commercial success of major sports clubs and organisations. Manchester United, Real Madrid and the New York Yankees are no longer simply sports clubs but global brands.

If media organisations are to remain successful in an increasingly competitive market, they must reflect such movements in our culture and in the interests of their consumers. Indeed, the media not only reflect the culture in which they operate and the interests of their readers and viewers – they also help to form that culture and those interests.

## THE MEDIA'S INFLUENCE ON SPORT

Much of the recent growth of interest in sport has been driven by the media, in particular satellite television, which has bought the rights to major sporting events and promoted them vigorously as one of the most effective ways of selling subscriptions to its services. To compete, terrestrial television (and radio) channels have had to follow suit. This has driven up the cost of media rights and vastly increased the income of sports clubs, governing bodies and professional sports men and women. It has been the major factor in turning many sports clubs into big businesses.

But the money television has put into sport has also given it the power to shape sports to its own ends. Beginning with the introduction by the Australian media mogul Kerry Packer of floodlit international cricket in the 1970s, television went on to fuel the massive growth of interest in soccer worldwide and the expansion of competitions like the European Champions League. It has even turned the traditions of some sports on their heads. Rugby league, a winter game in England for more than a century, has now become a summer sport, for the benefit of the broadcasters. Television has turned sport into a commodity and a sales tool.

## SPORT'S INFLUENCE ON THE MEDIA

Media organisations have grown and adapted accordingly. New radio stations, television channels and websites have been set up devoted specifically to sport. They have developed radical new programmes such as sports phone-ins and rolling results services to attract and maintain viewers and listeners. They have also adapted the ways in which they deliver their content, to serve the ever-expanding range of mobile devices through which consumers now expect instant information. There has been a similar growth in specialist and lifestyle publications aimed at specific sections of the media audience, such as young men. They have carved out niche markets, either by covering sport in general or by devoting themselves to individual sports.

Newspapers throughout the developed world are devoting more and more space to sport. This is partly in response to the general upsurge of interest in sport, which is common to all socio-economic classes, and partly because newspapers recognise the influence of television on people's lives, and try to reflect it in their own coverage. The fact that multinational media organisations like Rupert Murdoch's International Media Group own both satellite television networks and newspapers, with their associated

websites, has undoubtedly influenced the promotion of televised sport in those newspapers. And even those newspaper groups which do not have a stake in television have been forced to pay greater attention to televised sport because their readers subscribe to satellite television channels and have come to expect that service.

With the growth of the internet and the rapid development of devices capable of receiving online material wherever the user happens to be, the number of websites devoted to sport continues to expand. The task of making them profitable through advertising or by selling online services has proved more problematic, however. Many seek to fill their space with BLOGS and other material written by fans, the quality of which is variable, to say the least.

The best and most successful websites remain those operated by established media organisations such as the BBC, and by sports clubs and organisations which use the web as a marketing tool.

## THE SPORTS DEPARTMENT

Sport is so important to media organisations that all but the smallest operate sports departments as part of their editorial teams, staffed by specialist sports journalists. In the newspaper sector, at both national and regional level, sport is one of the three traditional departments – news and features being the other two – which make up the editorial team.

The sports department is allocated its own section, either free-standing or at the back of the publication, and is responsible for filling its own pages. The department is normally headed by a sports editor, who is responsible to the newspaper's editor, and who is expected to attend editorial conferences alongside the news and features editors, assistant editors and production executives.

The editorial conference determines the news agenda for the day and the space to be allocated to each department in the following day's paper. The number of pages allocated to sport tends to vary from day to day, depending on the day of the week and the sporting agenda on any given day. The sports editor must know what he or she intends to fill these pages with (normally a combination of news, match reports, features and opinion pieces) and who is going to provide the copy – staff reporters, freelancers or agencies. Broadcast and online media follow similar patterns.

## THE SPORTS TEAM

Most newspaper sports departments will have a relatively small team of staff journalists. In addition to the sports editor there will often be a chief sports writer, whose role is normally to provide a descriptive COLOUR PIECE on the major event of the day, and who will therefore cover a wide range of sports. There may also be two or three reporters covering the dominant sport in the area, such as soccer, and perhaps a reporter

covering each of two or three other major sports, such as rugby union, cricket and horse racing. Some national newspapers will have reporters covering major sports like soccer based in specific cities or areas of the country so that they can build up close relationships with clubs and individuals in the area they cover.

Other leading sports, such as rugby league, golf, tennis and athletics, may be covered by **FREELANCE** reporters who have contracts with individual newspapers to supply daily coverage of their particular sport. A number of other freelances, some of them perhaps former professional sports people, may have contracts to provide opinion pieces or expert analysis. Many sports desks will rely on agencies for coverage of minority sports like hockey, ice hockey and basketball. And at weekends or for significant midweek sports programmes, **STRINGERS** will be asked to provide additional match reports.

The copy provided by these writers is normally handled by **SUB-EDITORS**. Their role is to check copy as it comes in for factual, spelling and grammatical errors, to make sure it fits the space allocated for it in the paper and to write headlines and picture captions. Some sub-editors may also be involved in page layout and design. The staff team of 'subs' will be supplemented at busy times, such as Saturday afternoons, when a great deal of sport takes place, by 'casual', freelance sub-editors. However, falling staff numbers are leading towards writers 'subbing' their own copy, cutting it to length to fit a template, and writing their own headlines.

## WRITING STANDARDS

Sports writing once had the reputation of being clichéd prose churned out by lazy hacks. If such journalists ever existed, they would have difficulty getting a job today.

The quality of a newspaper's team of sports writers is a significant factor in maintaining audience share in a competitive market. The standard of writing in sports sections has risen enormously in recent years, so that it now bears comparison with the best of any other forms of journalism. This is as true at the popular end of the market as it is in the 'quality' press. Some forms of sports writing, such as the contributions of writers like Neville Cardus and Alan Ross on cricket, have a long and distinguished history. Now writers on other sports have caught up, and the best modern sports journalism is among the finest writing available anywhere.

## RADIO, TELEVISION AND ONLINE

The sports team in a radio or television newsroom will operate in a similar way to that in a newspaper newsroom, although the number of staff will usually be smaller. The major difference between the broadcast and print media is that radio and television cover sporting events live. This not only calls for a different range of skills; it also means much more time and effort has to be devoted to organisation. A newspaper can cover

a game by sending a journalist and possibly a photographer. Radio can often get away with a commentator and summariser. But live television coverage of a sporting event is a major operation. In addition to a commentator and summariser, journalists and sports professionals may be needed to provide expert analysis, and camera operators, technicians and a director are needed to provide and mix sound and pictures. The appropriate number of outside broadcast vehicles is also needed. Much of the time of producers and researchers working in television, who often work for companies set up to provide sports outside broadcasts, is spent in organising all this.

Online material is often provided by journalists writing for other PLATFORMS in the organisation, although it may be processed by a specialist team for the website.

## FILLING SPACE

Journalists see themselves in many lights, from guardians of the truth and public watchdogs to entertainers and prose stylists, but the reality is much simpler than that. The basic task of any journalist is to fill space. Newspaper pages and radio and television bulletins have to be filled every day, no matter how many or how few significant events are happening in the world. Sport is a useful commodity for organisations which demand to be fed as regularly as the media because it is, in one sense at least, predictable.

We may not know when or where the next murder or terrorist outrage is going to happen, but we know well in advance exactly when and where sporting events will take place. We know they will provide the copy or pictures to fill a certain amount of space on a given day. Indeed, one of the reasons satellite television has restructured the sporting calendar is to make sure its schedules are always filled. Not all media organisations have the power to reorganise the sporting calendar to fit their needs, however.

Newspapers are the most demanding of all the media in terms of the quantity and range of sport they need to consume. But the cyclical nature of sport means that most of it tends to take place at weekends or on midweek evenings. There is rarely much live sport taking place on a Thursday, for instance, but newspapers still need to fill their pages on Friday mornings. To make sure they achieve this, they have to vary the type of sports story they carry according to the day of the week – the emphasis being on match reports after a busy weekend of activity, but with space for more news and features on ‘slack’ days.

## EXERCISE

- 1 Collect a week’s editions of your favourite newspaper, from Monday to Sunday (including a similar Sunday newspaper if there is no Sunday edition of your chosen paper). Analyse the content of the sports sections, paying particular attention to:
  - the number of pages devoted to sport on each day of the week (some broadsheet newspapers run tabloid sports sections on certain days; count two tabloid pages as one broadsheet page)

- types of story - reports of events, pre-event pieces, news stories, features and profiles
  - whether the proportion of each type of article varies according to the day of the week
  - when you have collated the information, decide whether the day of the week influences the amount of space devoted to sport, and the types of piece used on any given day.
- 2 Look at the sporting calendar for the coming week. This can usually be found in the sports sections of Sunday newspapers. Try to decide how the fixtures and forthcoming events will affect the number of pages devoted to sport on each day, and how the proportions of reports of events, pre-event pieces, news stories, features and profiles are likely to vary day by day.

## HANDLING COPY

Since hot-metal typesetting (in which each letter on the printed page was manufactured in newspaper composing rooms by printers sitting at vast machines, and headlines were set by hand from racks of metal type) was replaced by computer typesetting, the production of newspapers has undergone a radical change. Restrictive practices under which printers reset every word written by journalists before newspapers could be printed were swept away in the late twentieth century. Newspapers now operate with a fraction of the staff they once did, which is one of the reasons they can afford to increase the number of pages devoted to sport. One result of this is that the involvement of journalists in the physical production of newspapers has increased.

The typed (and sometimes hand-written) COPY, from which compositors set the printed columns of our newspapers, is now a thing of the past. The copy which journalists key into their computers is now what appears in the newspaper, but the process by which stories are tracked through the production system, and errors are kept to a minimum, has been largely carried over from the days of copy typed on paper.

Each story is given, by the journalist who writes it, a distinctive one-word CATCHLINE, so that there can be no confusion with other stories in the newspaper's system. Catchlines such as *match*, *race* or *winners*, should be avoided, as these names could refer to a number of events. Instead, specific catchlines such as *Bombaytest*, *Kentuckyderby* or *Olympichammer* should be used. This reduces the possibility of mistakes being made when stories are being collated on the sports desk and headlines or pictures attached to them.

The computer systems of many newspapers provide journalists with templates on which their copy should be written. These may have specific boxes for the journalist's BYLINE, the publication for which the piece is intended and the day on which it is scheduled to appear. Journalists FILING copy from outside the office, by LAPTOP, e-mail and occasionally still by telephone to a COPYTAKER, should include their byline at the top of the copy, followed by the name of the publication the piece is intended for and the intended date of publication.

Production DEADLINES dictate that sports reports are often filed in a number of TAKES (see Chapter 5), so the status of the copy (first take, second take or whatever) should also be indicated at the top of the story. If the story is incomplete, the words *more to come* or *more follows* should appear at the end of the copy. This is sometimes abbreviated to *mf*. At the end of a complete piece of copy, or at the end of the final take, the word *ends* should appear.

A writer's copy is usually processed by a sub-editor, who checks it for accuracy and length, before it appears in the newspaper. To avoid unnecessary queries, the writer should always ensure that unusual names or unusual spellings (Phillip instead of Philip, Macmillan instead of McMillan) are followed by the word (*correct*) in brackets. This tells the sub-editor that the name has been checked and the spelling is accurate. The sub will then remove the word (*correct*) before releasing the story for publication.

Most media organisations have STYLE BOOKS, which offer guidance on such matters as the preferred spelling of certain words, punctuation (especially the style for quotations and the use of exclamation marks), grammar, and how people and organisations should be described. They may also offer guidance on how issues like disabled people in sport, or racism, should be handled.

For ease of reading copy on screen, in-house computer systems will normally use basic typefaces like *Times* or *Ariel*. Journalists filing copy by laptop or e-mail should use similar typefaces.

Copy is then processed, cut to length, given a headline and placed in the appropriate page using a variety of computer software systems. It is at this stage that the typeface is changed to that used in the printed version of the newspaper. Pages will often have been designed in advance, with specific areas allocated to particular reports, although layouts can be changed if circumstances dictate it. A journalist's story does not become HARD COPY until the paper is printed.

There is a growing trend, however, driven by falling profit margins and smaller staffs, for writers to key their copy straight into templates, adjusting the length to fit the space available and writing the headline. This, of course, increases the responsibility on the writer for care and accuracy, as mistakes are unlikely to be rectified by someone else further down the production process.

The broadcast media have their own dedicated systems for writing scripts and putting in such information as captions and the names of the reporter, newsreader and camera operator. However, every story in a broadcast news bulletin must also have a distinctive catchline, to make sure that the correct material is used at the right time.

Spelling is less important to broadcasters (except in captions). Instead, they have to worry about pronunciation; and where mistakes can be made, scripts should offer guidance (see left) to the person who will be reading them (who will rarely be the writer).

“

The winner was ridden by John Cholmondeley (Chumlee) and owned by Mary Featherstonhaugh (Fanshaw)

”



## PRESENTATION

Journalists normally write their copy on word processors or laptop computers with horizontal, rectangular screens. The lines of copy that appear on their screens are similar in length to those in this book. The paragraphs are only a few lines long and there is plenty of white space, which makes the screen or the page easy on the eye and attractive to the reader.

But the people who will be consuming that copy – the readers of their newspapers – will be reading it in narrow columns. A paragraph of this length would be difficult to read in a newspaper because it would appear as a solid grey mass of type, with no white space. The type would be difficult to read and readers would be discouraged from picking their way through any more than the first few lines of any story because it would be so taxing on the eye. If every story were laid out in this way, the newspaper would be unreadable and it would quickly lose readers to other newspapers which laid out their pages in a more user-friendly way.

Copy written for newspapers should be broken up into short paragraphs.

A single sentence is often enough.

A newspaper paragraph should never be more than two sentences. These should be fairly short.

Copy presented in this way in narrow newspaper columns is much more friendly to the eye.

There is plenty of white space.

This makes it easier for the eye to navigate the text and avoid missing lines or reading the same lines twice.

But the length of paragraphs will vary between broadsheet (or serious) newspapers and tabloid (or popular) ones.

Short sentences, short paragraphs and short stories are especially important in tabloid newspapers.

They assume their readers will have a fairly low reading age.

**The first paragraph of a story in a tabloid is often set in larger bold type.**

The second paragraph will also often be set in larger type.

This format is another aid to easy reading. Sometimes, CROSSHEADS like the one below will be used.

### ***EASY TO READ***

Crossheads like these break the type up further.

They are an additional aid to guiding the reader through the story.

## MEDIA MARKETS

Every newspaper is competing with many others in a fiercely competitive market. The way stories are laid out is one important factor in ensuring a newspaper is attractive to the readership at which it is aimed. Most media organisations exist to make money. Almost all of them are privately owned, and they have a responsibility to provide their shareholders with a decent return on their investments. To do that, they must attract readers, viewers and listeners.

Even those media organisations which operate in the public sector, like the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) or CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation), must justify the licence fees or subsidies they receive from the public purse by ensuring that their product is as attractive to audiences as that produced by the private sector.

To succeed, they must be acutely aware of the market their product is aimed at. The products of the media are normally directed towards a specific sector of the market.

### Newspaper markets

Mainstream newspapers are normally aimed at sections of the population that share particular characteristics. National newspapers, and those in big cities which have more than one newspaper, usually target a particular socio-economic sector of the population. They may belong to a particular 'class' (working class, middle class, professional), or share similar educational backgrounds, levels of income, age ranges or political allegiances.

Regional and local newspapers are usually aimed at the whole community. Their unique selling point is that they cover local issues (and in the case of sport, local teams and athletes) that other newspapers with a greater geographical spread cannot cover in the same detail, if at all.

These are, of course, generalisations, and the readership of particular newspapers is by no means limited to their target audiences. But it is useful (not least for the journalists who are writing the copy to fill them) to divide newspapers into the following categories.

#### Up-market

These are the serious newspapers at the top end of the market. They were formerly known as broadsheets because of the large size of their pages, though many have now adopted the smaller format. Their target audience is better-educated people in professional managerial jobs who have, therefore, reasonable levels of disposable income.

The sports which these newspapers choose to cover reflect the perceived interests of their readership. They give extensive coverage to the most popular sports in their circulation areas, but they also give greater weight than other newspapers to those sports which tend to be enjoyed by more affluent people, such as golf, tennis, squash or rowing.

Examples of such newspapers in Britain are *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Times* and their Sunday versions (which in *The Guardian's* case is *The Observer*). Because the United Kingdom is a small country with a highly developed transport infrastructure, newspaper distribution is relatively quick and easy, and the newspaper market is dominated by national titles based in London. Sales of up-market newspapers, however, tend to be relatively low – typically less than half the sales of mid-market tabloids and well under a quarter of the circulations of the leading down-market tabloids.

In other countries, particularly those which span continents or subcontinents, newspapers tend to be city- or state-based. Examples of up-market newspapers in the United States include the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Chicago Tribune*. Australian versions include the *Melbourne Age* and *The Australian*, and in India, the *Times of India*.

### Mid-market tabloids

These are aimed, as the name suggests, at readers in the middle to lower end of the socio-economic structure, with average levels of income and who have probably not been educated to degree level. They are usually old enough to have an interest in politics and economics, and to have outgrown the laddish frivolity of the down-market tabloids. Their content occupies the middle ground and is often aimed at the older end of the market. They sometimes also target women, on the assumption that many more affluent households will buy two daily newspapers – a serious one for the husband and a mid-market tabloid for his wife.

Sports coverage is also aimed at the middle ground, with the most popular sports again receiving the bulk of the coverage, but often with a slant towards sports enjoyed or played by older people with time on their hands, such as bowls or Test match cricket. Sports (or sporting events) that interest many women, such as Wimbledon or Ladies' Day at Ascot, may also attract extended coverage, often focused on peripheral activities such as fashion, rather than the sport itself. Two examples of mid-market tabloids are the London-based *Daily Express* and *Daily Mail*, and their Sunday stablemates.

### Down-market tabloids

These are aimed at a working-class, and often youthful, audience. Because the majority of the population fall into one or other of these categories, the tabloids have the biggest sales. They tend to be brash and irreverent, with news values that place sex and celebrity ahead of more serious and important events. Their stories are usually short and sharp, often personality-based, written with the simple vocabulary and uncomplicated grammar that the least literate of their readers will understand.

Sport, therefore, with its high celebrity count, dramatic content and mass appeal, is a very important ingredient in the tabloids' recipe. Major sports stories will often be flagged up on the front page. The range of sports covered is heavily biased towards the most popular, such as soccer in Britain and Ireland, baseball and American football in the USA, cricket in India and Pakistan, cricket and the locally popular versions of football in

Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. This bias tends to be followed even when the most popular sports are out of season, with reporters seeking out fairly trivial news stories to satisfy the appetites of fans, often at the expense of those sports which are in season.

Typically working-class sports like boxing, darts, snooker and racing (often slanted towards betting) can also attract more coverage than they are given elsewhere. Sports with smaller followings may only be covered if an event is too big to be ignored, but because the tabloids tend to place a high value on patriotism, athletes and teams which do well on the international stage may suddenly find themselves at the centre of tabloid interest.

Examples of down-market tabloids are the *Mirror*, *Sun* and *Daily Star* in the United Kingdom – often referred to as ‘red-tops’ because of the striking colour of their mastheads – the *Daily Record* in Scotland, and the *New York Post* in the USA.

## Regional and local

These newspapers cover specific geographical areas. In countries like Britain they are in competition with a strong and well-resourced national press, and rely for their appeal on their strong local coverage, not least of sport. In bigger countries, as we have seen above, almost all newspapers are regionally based. The broadsheet and tabloid newspapers produced in particular cities may have virtual monopolies, though even the continental countries have at least one national newspaper, like *USA Today* and *The Australian*.

The regional daily press in the United Kingdom has been contracting for many years, and although some cities, like Leeds, Liverpool and Birmingham, still produce both morning newspapers (more up-market and with strong national news content) and evening newspapers (middle of the road and heavily biased towards local news), most have just one title, now normally published fairly early in the day to give them more time on newsagents’ shelves, but still referred to as an evening newspaper. These try to appeal across the socio-economic spectrum and are pitched somewhere between the mid-market and down-market tabloids.

Their sports coverage is overwhelmingly local, and their reporting unashamedly biased in favour of local athletes and teams. The most popular sports again dominate, but those with a strong local following – rugby league in the north of England, rugby union in the West Country, Aussie rules football in parts of Australia, hurling in Ireland, curling in Scotland – will also get plenty of coverage. Sports which have little following nationally will receive prominence if local athletes or teams are doing particularly well. The *Sheffield Star*, for instance, devotes a lot of space to ice hockey and basketball (neither of which are mainstream sports in England) because the Sheffield Steelers and Sheffield Sharks are leading British ice hockey and basketball teams.

## Radio and television

Radio and television channels tend also to be pitched at different socio-economic segments of the population. They often use sport as a means of maximising their target audiences. The mainstream channels try to concentrate on the most popular

sports – soccer in Britain and many other countries, American football, baseball and basketball in the USA, ice hockey in Canada, for instance. Those channels which are aimed at audiences higher up the socio-economic spectrum may choose to cover sports whose appeal is principally to that audience, such as rugby, golf or cricket.

The growth of satellite and cable broadcasting has led to a proliferation in the number of channels available, and to a narrowing of their focus. Many of them are devoted to specific types of programming, and sports channels are among the most popular.

This trend is closely linked, of course, to advertising, which is the media's main source of income. Advertisers tend to target niche markets, too – young men who drink beer, for example, or middle-aged women who buy washing powder. They know that certain sporting events can reach these markets in large numbers – almost any mainstream team sport attracts young men, while Wimbledon, gymnastics or show jumping attract women. One way advertisers have of predicting whether the media in which they advertise will attract their target audience is to look at the sports they cover and the space or time they devote to each. Sports like rugby league, boxing or baseball tend to appeal more to the blue-collar end of the market, while followers of golf, rugby union and tennis tend to be higher up the social ladder. A few sports, like soccer, appeal to all social classes.

## EXERCISE: MEDIA ANALYSIS

One of the ways of differentiating the media is the way they handle specialist interests like sport. Take a selection of daily newspapers, including up-market, mid-market tabloids, down-market tabloids and regional titles. Analyse the content of the sports pages, making particular note of:

- the number of pages devoted to sport
- the choices of sports covered
- how the sports are covered - in-depth or personality-led
- style - how the pieces are written, use of language and metaphor
- type and length of story - match reports, news, features.

Having assembled your data, analyse how coverage varies between different sectors of the market. Ask yourself:

- Do the newspapers cover the same sports, and if not, why not?
- Do they do so in the same detail and at the same length?
- Is the emphasis personality- or fact-based?
- How do these things differ between serious papers and tabloids?
- How do regional newspapers fit into the equation?
- How does the language and structure vary? What does this say about the respective audiences?

## WEBSITES

Almost all newspapers now have their own websites, which offer a similar range of material, aimed at similar markets, as the printed versions. Many also supplement this material with additional content, including video and audio clips, blogs and podcasts, and live, minute-by-minute coverage of sporting events. Because these are largely accessed on mobile devices, the audiences for them tend to be younger. This, in turn, influences the style in which they are written: the tone of such reports, even on the websites of upmarket publications, tends to be much more colloquial.

### The influence of the web

Websites have had an important influence on television sports presentation. Although sports news channels and sports report and results programmes use live presenters or ANCHORS to deliver information, they also use tools and design features from websites to increase the amount of information they are able to deliver at any one time. Their screens now resemble websites, offering constantly changing information in CRAWLERS across the bottom, and frequently updated information in SIDEBARS. They are also heavily reliant on statistics such as fixtures, league tables and score updates.

The interactivity of websites is also being reflected in the broadcast media, by radio phone-ins and text and social media messages to radio and television programmes. The print media, too, now provide much more space for sports statistics, break up sports news stories and features with sidebars and graphics, use more pictures in more creative ways, and make extensive use of material gleaned from social media sites.

## AUDIENCE AWARENESS

Because the national media target specific sections of the population, journalists working in it have to be aware of the level of education and income, and the range of interests, of their potential audiences. Regional newspaper, radio and television stations, on the other hand, tend to serve their entire communities, and the key distinguishing factor here is local interests.

Interest in sport is particularly susceptible to national, regional and socio-economic factors. Many modern sports were developed in Britain in the nineteenth century and have subsequently spread across the globe. With the exception of soccer, which has gained immense popularity among all classes and in most countries, the level of interest in the major sports tends to vary between countries and even regions, and between socio-economic classes.

In Australia, for instance, rugby league is the principal winter sport in some areas, rugby union in others and Australian rules football in others. In South Africa, rugby union is the dominant winter sport among the white population, but soccer is far more popular with blacks. In Britain, rugby union is popular in rural areas among the

higher socio-economic groups, while rugby league is confined almost exclusively to the industrial areas of northern England, where it has a largely working-class following. In Australia and New Zealand, cricket is popular among all classes and age groups, whereas in England, county cricket tends to have followers of retirement age, while Test and one-day cricket have a much broader appeal. On the Indian sub-continent, cricket has a massive and passionate following among all sections of the community. The US and Canadian media, however, provide little space for any of these sports. The agenda there is dominated by indigenous games like gridiron football, ice hockey, baseball and basketball, none of which (except for baseball in Japan) has achieved the status of national sport elsewhere.

What most developed countries have in common is a growing interest in sport, particularly among men but also, increasingly, among women. Research carried out in Britain by the Newspaper Marketing Agency (NMA) showed that 54 per cent of tabloid newspaper readers turned to the sports pages first, while over a third of all broadsheet readers did the same. This figure rose to almost 70 per cent for tabloids and 61 per cent for broadsheet readers when those who scan the front page and then turn to the sports pages are included. Sport is also a major driver for users of websites and social media platforms.

What people read there is important to their daily lives. Sport is one of the most hotly debated subjects and raises more passions than most others. It also has a cast of celebrities whose activities are often of interest to people who have no real interest in sport. Consequently, many people read the sports pages for pleasure – relaxation and entertainment – as much as for information.

## HORSES FOR COURSES

All of this, and the perceived correlation between an interest in certain sports and social rank, have significant implications for journalists. It determines not only the range of sports particular newspapers or broadcast organisations choose to cover, but the manner in which they cover them.

The choice of sports covered and the weight given to each of them will reflect the perceived preferences of their audiences. So will the style in which they are covered, from the length of individual articles to the choice of language and metaphor employed by the writers. Journalists writing for specialist journals will assume a high level of background knowledge from their readers, while those writing for general publications face the sometimes difficult task of providing audiences with all the information they need to understand the piece without ‘talking down’ to some readers. It is safe to assume that most people with an interest in sport in Britain will understand the basic rules of soccer and cricket, and people in other countries will have a similar understanding of their national sports. Minority sports will call for more explanation, and writers who specialise in them must avoid falling into the trap of expecting their readers to know as much as they do about the sport.

## EXERCISE

Take a copy of a tabloid and broadsheet newspaper published on the same day. Compare their coverage of a sporting event, paying particular attention to the style in which the reports are written, their vocabulary and sentence and paragraph length. Then select another sports story from the tabloid and rewrite it in the style of the broadsheet. Compare your version with that in the broadsheet. Then take a broadsheet story, rewrite it for a tabloid, and compare your version with that in the tabloid newspaper.

## SPORT'S CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The cultural significance of sport goes wider than its importance to the leisure and media industries. In a shrinking world in which people have a high degree of social and geographical mobility, sport helps them maintain a sense of their local and national identities. While most of the population of Europe, for instance, are citizens of the European Union and share a common currency, they can cling to their roots through their local or national sports teams. Sports journalists help to establish and maintain this cultural significance. It tends to be expressed in their attitude towards the success or failure of the national teams, for instance, and sometimes in ways that are not healthy.

Peace may have broken out across the developed world, but international sport is often presented by the media as a perpetuation of old political rivalries, and even wars. This can often be detected in the language used by journalists when England are playing Germany at soccer, or India are playing Pakistan at cricket, or New Zealand are playing Australia at rugby.

## HOW THE MEDIA DIFFER

It may seem blindingly obvious how radio, television, online and print media differ from each other, but it is worth trying to look beyond the obvious, because the specific characteristics of each medium play a large part in determining how journalists working for them operate.

### Print

Producing a piece of print journalism is a relatively speedy process. The information needed to write most stories or features can be gathered over the telephone, from contacts or other sources, or collated from the internet, without the journalist having to leave the office. Although reporting sporting events ideally involves being there (print and online journalists do sometimes report some events from television coverage), the writing process is quick.



But production and distribution of a newspaper is a slow process, and it may be several hours, or even days, before the quickly produced copy is read, a factor the journalist should always bear in mind when writing. Print journalism is presented in a modular format within a single package (although there may be several sections within the package). The modular format means the reader can skip from story to story or page to page quickly and easily. This in turn influences the length and style of stories, which vary from full-page features to single paragraph news items. News stories are written to a formula which allows readers to absorb the main points quickly and abandon the story at any time they wish.

## Radio

Although radio is often regarded as an instant medium, its news-gathering processes can be slower than those for print. Basic information can, of course, be gathered over the telephone, but putting interviews on air can take longer. Telephone interviews can be done quickly, but with a loss of sound quality, and for important stories it is often necessary for a journalist to go out with a microphone and recorder. For longer packages which require several interviews and 'actuality' sound (see Chapter 9), it can take several hours to gather the necessary material. This then has to be edited, usually by the same journalist, when he or she returns to the office.

Once a story has been assembled, transmission can be very quick – most radio stations run hourly news bulletins – or even instant. But radio is a linear medium. Unlike newspapers or websites, it is not possible for the consumer to move at will between items. It is imperative, therefore, that radio journalists hold the attention of their listeners, who have notoriously short attention spans, for the duration of a bulletin. That means keeping items fairly short – from about 20 seconds to a minute, with only the more important stories being allowed to run for longer than this. It also means cutting quickly between the various elements (voices and sounds) which make up the piece, before the listener becomes bored.

## Television

Putting together a piece of television is a slow process, involving more time, effort and personnel than any other medium. Almost any piece of television journalism involves a camera crew, a reporter, and usually both, going out of the office and travelling, often long distances, to the scene of the story. They may already have spent a considerable time 'setting up' the story, making sure the people they need to interview and the things they want to film will be where they want them, when they want them. And when they get there, shooting even the simplest television story takes time. The editing process demands that sequences are shot from several angles, with CUTAWAYS to make editing easier. It can take an hour of shooting to produce a minute of television, with additional time needed for interviews.

And shooting the pictures is only the first stage in the process. A script then has to be written around the pictures, the voiceover track (if there is one) recorded, and the pictures edited into a coherent piece of television.

Transmission is also slower than radio because television channels tend to run fewer bulletins (although some satellite and cable channels now run continuous sports news programmes). Like radio, television is a linear medium, and the importance of holding the attention of the audience again dictates short, lively pieces.

## Online

Websites can combine the techniques of print, radio and television (see Chapter 10) in a single package and in a largely modular form which can be instantly updated.

Perhaps the most important difference between print and broadcast media is in the behaviour of its consumers. If newspaper or website readers become bored with a story, they turn the page: if viewers or listeners become bored, they switch off or change channels. The channel changer is the ultimate critic of bad broadcast journalism, and more than in any other sphere of journalism, it is vital to grab the audience's attention and hold on to it. To do this, broadcast journalists must make full use of the extended and unique language that radio and television put at their disposal.

**Table 2.1** Comparing the media

	Print	Radio	TV	Online
Medium	Words	Sound	Pictures	Mix
News gathering	Fast	Medium	Slow	Fast
Transmission	Slow	Fast	Medium	Instant
Style	Modular	Linear	Linear	Mix
Story length	Varies	Short/medium	Short	Varies
Format	Single package	Bulletins News show	Bulletins Magazine	Single package

## CONCLUSION

The media are one of the easiest subjects to study because we all read newspapers and magazines, visit websites, use social media and see and hear television and radio every day. You would not be reading this book if that were not the case. Without the need to take time out from our normal activities, we can learn a great deal about how the media operate if we approach our daily consumption of the media actively rather than passively.

When you are listening to the radio, watching sport on television, accessing a website or reading the newspapers and specialist magazines, try to be aware of how specific media cater for different audiences. They all make different demands on their journalists, particularly of style. Study them carefully, and try to decide which market best suits

your own style. Study the work of writers you admire and try to imitate them. There is nothing wrong with imitation as long as it does not extend to plagiarism, and a good writer's style will provide you with a useful template from which your own voice can develop.

A more analytical approach to your daily diet of sports journalism will help you to master the skills we shall be studying in the coming chapters more easily.

## Summary

Sports journalism has expanded rapidly in recent years and is an important marketing tool for media organisations, especially satellite television and websites. Sport and the media have a symbiotic relationship. The sale of media rights has increased the income of many sports organisations and led to the increasing professionalisation and commercialisation of sport. In turn, the media have changed the way in which professional sport operates. Media organisations have specific processes for producing sports journalism and aiming it at specific audiences. The media help invest sport with certain types of cultural significance.