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DANGEROUS CURRENTS

How public relations and advertising influence sports reporting and cause ethical problems

Thomas Schierl and Christoph Bertling

Media corporations of a Western model have two overriding goals: as social institutions the mass media are expected to create a space for public discourse and transparency through critical observation of society. Besides this they are to act as a socializing agent and ensure quality content (for example, by concentrating on values like rationality, freedom, and accountability). As a free-market enterprise, certain specifications and goals are to be met in terms of broad coverage, reach and advertising revenue. The pursuit of these two goals creates great tensions in editorial departments, because the pursuit of one goal often obstructs the attainment of the other.

These tensions, which we can boldly title self-contradictory, are increasingly apparent in sports newsrooms. This certainly seems to be related to the comparatively notable influence of public relations (PR) and advertising in sports reporting as compared to other departments. This appears to be most apparent in TV sports journalism, which this contribution will focus on. This development can be considered dangerous insofar as diverse difficulties arise for business ethics and media law that demand solutions, while these become ever more elusive. Therefore, this chapter shows a) why television reporting is at particular risk of being exploited economically by the advertising industry; b) which influences are already apparent on a number of levels in TV production of sports reporting, and c) which ethical problem areas have emerged in TV sports journalism, which must be tackled in the future.

On the schizophrenia of sports reporting

Why does TV sports reporting run a particularly high risk of being economically exploited by the advertising industry? This is chiefly the result of the extraordinary mass interest that this journalistic field holds, making it very attractive from not only a media standpoint, but also from a marketing perspective. Major sporting events like the Olympic Games, the Super Bowl, or the Rugby World Cup have a particularly high level of quantitative efficiency, meaning that a low supply level is tied to a high demand. One measure of the huge worldwide demand for major sporting events is the periodically executed *viewer track*. This international study analyzes TV coverage in the 55 most important global markets, which combined constitute over 90

percent of the global national product and advertising spending. According to the *viewer track* study, the final of the 2006 Soccer World Cup had a net reach of 254 million TV viewers; the 2010 World Cup final's net reach was even 329 million viewers. In Europe alone, 71 percent of the population in the five core markets of Germany, England, Spain, Italy, and France have a high interest in soccer, which corresponds to around 175 million Europeans (SportFive, 2009).

The continuously high demand for televised sports is clear from a look at the most viewed TV programs in the year 2009 in various countries. This was a year without any major events like the Soccer World Cup or Olympic Games and yet various sporting events were among the most viewed TV broadcasts. For instance, according to *Television 2009 International Key Facts* (IP Network, 2010), the top five programs in Russia were the New Year's Address (Genre: special event; rating: 20.4 percent; share: 42.5 percent), Russia and Germany in World Cup qualifying (sports; 17.1 percent; 44.1 percent), the New Year's Blue Lantern (variety show; 15.6 percent; 36 percent), The Mold (documentary; 15.4 percent; 34.2 percent), and Russia and Slovenia in World Cup Qualifying (sports; 14.9 percent; 49.5 percent). The top five programs in the United Kingdom were Eastenders (genre: daily soap; rating: 11 percent; share: 25.8 percent), Top Gear/Special (documentary; 8.8 percent; 18.2 percent), France and Wales in Rugby Six Nations (sports; 8.1 percent; 18 percent), Victoria Wood: Seen on TV (documentary; 7.8 percent; 16.1 percent), and Michael Jackson: Memorial Service (special events; 7.6 percent; 19 percent). Lastly, in the US, the top five programs in 2009 were Super Bowl XLIV (genre: sports; rating: 35.7 percent; share: 74 percent), the Super Bowl XLIV Report (magazine-sports; 27.1 percent; 58 percent), the Super Bowl XLIV Pre-Report (magazine-sports; 21.2 percent; 57 percent), the NFC Championship Game between Minnesota and New Orleans (Sports; 20.5 percent; 49 percent), and the NFC Championship Game Report (magazine-sports; 17.1 percent; 40 percent).

TV sports broadcasts that attract such masses can be very lucrative for commercial enterprises, particularly for manufacturers of mass-market products, because they are presented with an opportunity to reach a great number of people with their advertisements. Because professional sports embody values like success, dynamism, and performance, companies can expect a positive image transfer to their products/brand beyond receiving attention and recognition. There is seemingly no better communication platform for advertising to the buying public, with its positive connotations, transcendence of environment, and culture as well as regular, planned appearance (Schierl and Schaaf, 2007). Furthermore, commercial enterprises have a significant interest in exercising as strong an influence as possible over certain aspects of TV sports reporting, since this can optimize the effectiveness of their ads. Interestingly, the success of such influence has increased particularly strongly in recent years.

This is most significantly related to two key areas. First, there has been a loss of quality in TV journalism (including TV sports journalism). Though a global phenomenon, it is apparent that many media enterprises in Western media markets particularly have suffered financially since the financial and economic crisis of recent years (Russ-Mohl, 2009). It is becoming ever more difficult to develop high-quality programming under these conditions. Second, there has been a rise in the price of broadcasting rights to sporting events. Not only the general economic situation of media concerns, but the budgets of sports departments particularly, have been under extreme pressure in recent years. This is related to the steep rise in costs for TV broadcasting rights of many premium sports. As an example of the rise in expense of broadcasting rights to high profile sports over the last decades, we can consider the development of the cost of TV rights for the Summer Olympic Games. For instance,

according to Lamprecht and Stamm (2002), the cost of television broadcasting rights for this event has risen worldwide (for example, with estimates of US\$1 million for the 1960 Rome Games to US\$1.7 billion for the 2008 Beijing Games), in the US (for example, with estimates of US\$394,000 in 1960 up to US\$894 million in 2008), and in Europe (for example, with estimates of US\$274,000 in 1960 up to US\$443 million in 2008). If the rise in costs is calculated on the basis of the available figures, there is a global cost increase of around 330 percent between the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow and the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles, the figures were approximately 310 percent and 390 percent for the US and Europe, respectively. Calculating the price increase for TV rights between 1980 and 2008 gives a global increase of around 1900 percent, around 1200 percent in the US and around 7700 percent in Europe. Similar developments have occurred for soccer. The prices of sports rights for the German Soccer League increased by approximately 2757 percent between 1982 and 2000 and those for the Soccer European Cup went up by around 4275 percent. The price of Soccer World Cup rights even went up by 6781 percent in the same period (see Heinrich, 1999; Schellhaass and Fritsch, 2007). This is particularly problematic since although the expense of TV broadcasts has risen sharply, the number of TV viewers has hardly increased in most countries (on this, see Bertling 2009; Bertling 2011; Gratton and Solberg 2007).

The consequence of these two developments is that purchases of TV sports rights are becoming increasingly risky investments. The increased expense of the input factor has already increased so far that direct refinancing through advertising is almost impossible despite increased reach and market shares. Moreover, there are always numerous risks tied to TV sports broadcasting rights. Over the course of events one never knows how the home team will perform in a championship. Will the national team even qualify? In terms of viewer interest, the question is whether a sports star will attract more viewers. When it comes to the image of the individual sport one must ask how much exclusive coverage fosters the media company's image. In terms of the advertising market, the questions are whether lucrative advertisers can be found for the commercial break/presenter/sponsors and how the advertising market will develop in the meantime.

We can therefore conclude that it has become increasingly difficult to refinance expenditure on the purchase market through income from the advertising and public market. Owing to an ever-growing divide between reach and the price of rights, TV broadcasters must lay out their sports reporting in a way that will give them the best chances of refinancing them. As a result of these developments on the sport, media, and sports rights market, there is increasing (necessary) economic oversubscription of journalistic methodology. TV sports editors then become very susceptible to the influences of commercial companies. Within this context we must ask the extent to which the sports organizer, businessperson, and advertiser influence TV sports reporting.

Economic influences on sports journalism

It can actually be observed that sport organizers, the advertising industry, and commercial enterprises try very hard to exploit sports reporting to their own ends. How strong this influence over sports reporting has already become in many countries is clear when one takes a closer look at procurement and production in TV sport. The strong dependencies of the procurement sector are particularly clear when it comes to TV base signal creation. Numerous sport associations/organizers and sports rights agencies produce the image base signal – as in

the case of Formula 1 reporting. Journalists are then only able to comment on the live feed, often without the capacity of altering it, even subtly. Since 2006 the image production firms Olympic Broadcasting Services (OBS), T.E.A.M., and Formula One Management Limited (FOM) have produced the TV images of the Olympic Games, Soccer World Championships, and Formula 1 racing. This has taken most of the journalistic control over the live images out of the hands of TV sports journalists in the editing room. In addition, there are ever more tenuous partnerships between sports organizations and TV broadcasters globally. During rights purchasing, numerous television stations are committing themselves to broadcasting only image enhancing materials. The European Broadcasting Union (EBU), for example, committed itself to broadcasting an IOC PR report at least three times on the channel that covered the 2008 Olympic Games. It is stipulated within the contract that the 52-minute film must be shown without commercial break. It was produced by the IOC and deals with the IOC and the Olympic movement (Schraven, 2009).

The described production of the TV base signal by the organizer leads to further difficulties. When it comes to program arrangement, we are confronted with the problem of promotional images being produced by the sports organizer. Rather than containing journalistic content, strategic product content increasingly takes the foreground in programming. The fact that this methodology has been allowed into image creation is particularly apparent from the globally broadcast live feeds of Formula 1 races. The directors are instructed to maintain certain camera positions so that the advertising banners will be clearly visible. These guidelines are usually complied with, despite the reduction in production values (for example, drama, dynamism). In Formula 1, this results in certain cuts being postponed, even though the racing cars are no longer visible. This is done to make the advertising more memorable to the recipient (Bertling, 2011). Furthermore, it must be noted that there is already a mingling of advertising and programming in the so-called naming rights of stadiums/leagues and in the interviews conducted in front of sponsor walls, shirt and perimeter advertising as well as use of the split screen system during sports broadcasts. They increasingly make use of thematic and musical placements and virtual advertising. References to the programs' promotional nature are near to invisible in TV sports reporting.

One of the core tasks of program production is the actual realization of the planning, management, and execution of the production. This includes a large proportion of brandcasting measures. The word is a composite of broadcasting and brand and describes the link between editorial content and advertising cooperation. A typical example of brandcasting was the 13-part sporting goods soap opera *The Road to Sydney*, ordered by the sporting goods manufacturer Adidas for the 2000 Sydney Olympics, in which the Adidas brand was positioned strategically. There was no explicit mention of Adidas's involvement in the production. In the US, Nike built on Adidas' example and produced the documentary film *Road to Paris*. Viewers watch as the cyclist Lance Armstrong prepares for the Tour de France. Nike succeeded in selling the one-hour production to the US broadcast network CBS. Nike used this opportunity to learn something about its consumers: whoever visited the www.roadtoparis.com website, automatically entered into a dialogue with the sporting goods brand in which they were expected to share personal information. Ross Sleight of the London ad agency HHCL sees this direct dialogue with the customer as a successful extension of brandcasting (Latein and Littger, 2012).

The described influence in the production chain of TV sport shows that economic influences are at times very apparent in TV sports productions. Most of these measures are very unlikely to be noticed by the viewers. This makes a clear distinction between advertising goals and journalistic content impossible. But in the everyday working routines of sports

journalists such a separation of advertising and programming is just as impossible in many ways, since the integration of sports, media and economics is already so tightly woven. How strongly the actions of sports journalists are already limited in many media companies is apparent from developments in media enterprises. It is becoming ever more apparent that media companies have no wish to report on independent sporting events, but attempt to use integration strategies to incorporate important sporting events into their portfolios. Critical reporting is naturally unwelcome, since the object of reporting is seen as the broadcaster's own product, to be marketed in the most advantageous way. Consideration of national and international developments in sports news production shows that over the last few years numerous strategies have been developed to introduce so-called TV-sports branding, with the result that the line between journalistic and product related action becomes ever less clear. The following examples support this observation:

- product related use of sports news;
- image transfer and creation through long-term broadcasting concepts;
- brand building and creation of exclusivity through vertical integration;
- sports news as a vehicle for audience flows;
- special media formats/designs for product recognition.

Product related use of sports news

The German independent broadcaster RTL choses to broadcast a few popular sports, which are intended to bolster its image. Formula 1 has been covered extensively since the channel's introduction in an attempt to reach a young audience with purchasing power. In order to raise Formula 1's profile it is tied into news broadcasts to a great extent. Extensive news analysis shows that Formula 1 reporting is embedded into the RTL news format to a very great extent, quantitatively speaking. The strong differences indicate some extent of entrepreneurially motivated news placement and rule out chance as an explanation. Similar tendencies can be seen in various US channels (see Raney and Bryant, 2006).

Image transfer and creation through long-term broadcasting concepts

Sports are adapted ever more to the broadcaster profile. The broadcasting of particular popular sports is expected to contribute significantly to the creation of a specific image around the TV broadcaster. Often it is not the coverage, but the product fit with the broadcaster that stands in the foreground. Such strategies have been very apparent since the 1980s in the case of RTL's use of Formula 1 and boxing as well as on many of Rupert Murdoch's channels (for example, on his TV channel BSkyB and its reporting on the English premier league).

Brand building and creation of exclusivity through vertical integration

TV broadcasters seek ever more exclusive coverage of sporting events in order to place their rivals in disadvantageous positions. Many vertical integrations result from this. A few years ago ESPN-Star Sports attempted to install the Premier Hockey League (PHL) in India. This new hockey league was to develop international stars, through whom ESPN was to extend their market share on the Indian media market. Organizing developments in the U.S. show the

degree to which federations and associations are already tied to the entertainment and media industry. In recent years the U.S. companies with the biggest turnover have developed their portfolios in the media and entertainment sector by the addition of athletes and sporting events. Numerous integrations of this kind have increased quickly in recent decades.

Sports news as a vehicle for audience flows

Lately, ever-greater attention is paid to anchoring sports to which the exclusive broadcasting rights are held between the various departments in order to market them as fully as possible. In news as well as in entertainment magazines, stars and events are almost always covered positively. Not only private, but also public service broadcasters take part in these practices, especially when it comes to sports with particularly expensive broadcast rights, which therefore take great investment. Public service broadcasting operators are especially interested in attracting a young target audience to their channel.

Special media formats/designs for product recognition

Besides Rupert Murdoch and his News Corporation, his Australian competitor, Gerry Packer, has spent recent years attempting to design sporting events to be compatible with the broadcasting channel. A legendary example of this is the introduction of a cartoon duck to cricket broadcasts. The duck breaks into tears when the batsman is eliminated. Commentators repeatedly use the phrase "What a duck" and cultivate this cricketing term. The duck is also used as a lucrative merchandising product, bringing in more economic gains. The cricket broadcasts were not simply reports, but popularized a corporate identity by giving it mass appeal.

These examples show how easily a variety of tools and methods of integration can be identified which aid in TV-sports branding.

TV-sports journalists are faced with an ever-greater dilemma: on the one hand, as a journalistic area of activity, TV-sports reporting should be neutral and objective. On the other, the news must increasingly be structured for the greatest affect. This results in an ever more difficult balancing act between journalistic and product-oriented behavior.

Economic primacy – at the expense of (journalistic) quality?

Sports journalism has become closely entangled with the media's economic interests as well as those of commercial enterprises. These entanglements are often taken for granted, but they are not without their societal problems. In democracies after the Western model, the media have an obligation to create public access and transparency. They are expected to observe society and its components (of which the societal domain of sport is one) critically and to comment upon this. Their task is also to provide a corrective to the planned and stage-managed communications of businesses, such as advertising, PR, or publicity work. Advertising, legitimately and with the knowledge of the recipient/consumer, takes a one-sided perspective (generally in favor of the advertiser), seeks sympathy and tries to be persuasive. Journalism on the other hand should be neutral and independent, consider things factually and inform critically, to orient the recipient/consumer and create transparency in a complex world. And this provision of information is what the recipients of the media expect.

Insofar as sports journalism is increasingly subordinated to economic interests, even steered by these or at least modulated by them, it will no longer be capable of fulfilling its actual social function. Even if the sport itself and the reporting on it are primarily consumed as entertainment, sport – beyond the individual sporting event – holds great importance for society in the form of political, economic and cultural relations. Sport is, particularly in its ties to other social areas, far more than entertainment. It is an important area of social reality when it comes to politics, economics and culture. It is of great value to a society to be informed of these things professionally and accurately.

It is also a legitimate and really necessary demand that sport journalism a) contains balanced, impartial, and critical reporting and b) references economic interests and conflicts between the subjects of reports or between the parties involved and the subjects of reports. The clear distinction between this ideal and reality and the complete lack of transparency in sports reporting, including its orientation towards (economic) interests, can likely be explained best by an observable principal–agent problem. In the “principal–agent problem” or “agency dilemma,” *principal* refers to the contracting body and *agent* to the contractor (Eisenhardt, 1989). There are a number of principal–agent relationships in the present area of inquiry (see Figure 49.1). The recipient/consumer is the principal to various agents, namely commerce (for example, manufacturers of consumer goods who advertise), the media and the journalists. He or she contracts them and as agents expects certain products from the company; the journalistic media and journalists are expected to provide information, transparency, enlightenment, honesty, relevance, objectivity, and so forth.

But the commercial enterprises and the media are also principles in their own right, contracting other agents: commerce contracts the journalistic media to publicize their ads, PR, and public content and the media contracts journalists to create media content. The contracting of an agent by a principle generally implies an edge on the part of the agent, which is either the reason for the contracting or its result. Either the agent knows more in advance, being a professional, and is hired for this knowledge or the agent gains this knowledge through the intensive and specific assignment to the topic by the principle. This

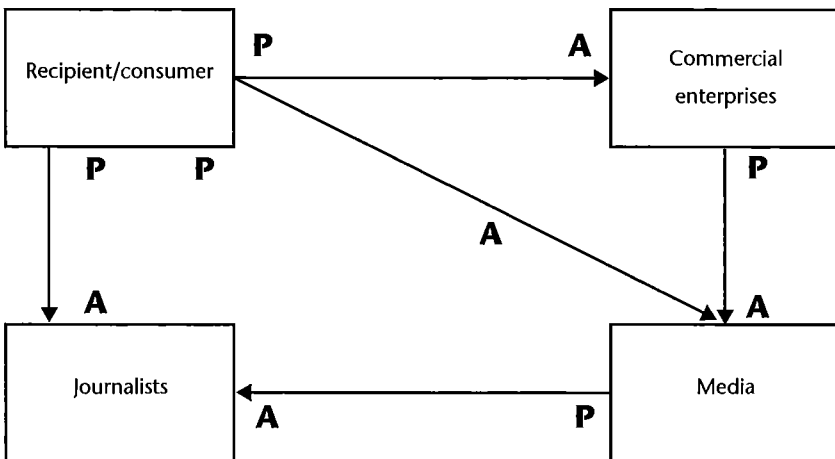


FIGURE 49.1 Principal–agent relationships in sports reporting

asymmetry of knowledge between the principle and the agent can be used to the advantage or disadvantage of the principle. It is, for instance, often used by journalists to create greater transparency for the principle. However, the asymmetry of knowledge can also have negative consequences, the agent's moral hazards for instance. Because the principle is unable to watch the agent entirely or commensurately, the agent may be tempted to act opportunistically – in its own interest, taking account of violations to contracts and norms – in ways that the principle may not approve (Mankiw, 2008). One instance of this is when the agent incorporates the untested assertions of corporations that are intended as PR or advertising, into their editorial offerings and presents this as editorial information, which cannot be checked by the recipient.

Considering the principal–agent relationships in Figure 49.1, one has the impression of several principle–agent relations existing between the four actors depicted that are generally weighted evenly. This impression is, however, misleading to the extent that the economic influences that commercial enterprises can have over the media and that the media can in turn exercise over both free and hired journalists, are disproportionately greater and far more direct than the recipients are able to bring to bear on the various actors. There are direct, process-related structures of communication between the enterprises, media and journalists, through which such influence can be exercised and the success of which can then be tested. The asymmetry of information between recipients and the other three groups of actors is far greater and there is no direct institutionalized structure of communication. Here, influence is only very indirect when it is possible at all. A drawing that is corrected to take account of this weighting of influences would look like Figure 49.2.

We can conclude that, owing to sports reporting, commercial enterprises, media, and journalists each pursuing their own economic ends in practice, sports reporting will be assessed and adapted in the most profitable way. It will only be guided by legal and ethical guidelines where these do not oppose economic goals or when their non-observance may be sanctioned (and is likely to be sanctioned). A show is made of transparency and informing the recipients of those occasions where this does not run counter to the economic interests of the

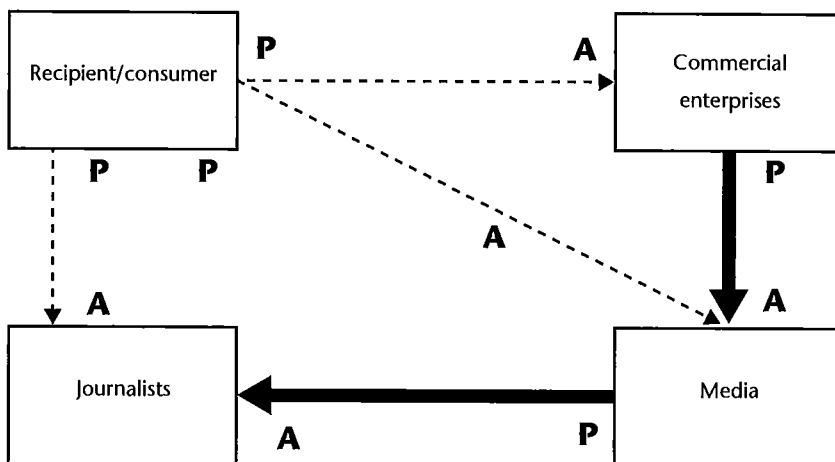


FIGURE 49.2 Principal–agent relationships and their various strengths of influence in sports reporting

various interest groups. PR and advertising interests color reporting very strongly without this becoming apparent to the recipient. Journalism is being replaced by PR contributions that are either directly or indirectly compensated.

Besides the actual social problem of a lack of transparency and information, this leads to an additional economic problem – that is, adverse selection (Akerlof, 1970). Because the market's problem with sports reporting results from the existing asymmetry of information between recipients and the media/journalists, it is not possible for the recipients to differentiate between good and bad quality sports reporting (relating to the criteria of neutrality, balance, critique, and transparency). Insofar as the recipients/consumers tend towards the cheapest offers, which are generally financed through high volumes of open as well as hidden PR and advertising measures. As a consequence products of low quality dominate the market because recipients cannot identify high-quality products. Because the consumer cannot recognize the higher quality, he or she is not prepared to pay more. The quality of the market as a whole inevitably drops despite the fact that recipients would be willing to pay a higher price for better quality.

We must then ask, how can such undesirable developments be avoided, since it cannot be in the interests of a democratic society, the media or the commercial enterprises themselves for the journalistic quality of media to fall continuously. The media must count on the long-term loss of reputation and credibility as well as the collapse of their independent identity. And such loss of reputation and credibility would in turn be a disadvantage to the commercial enterprises, as it leads the advertising effectiveness of the media to suffer. Until now, such developments have been fought, when anything at all has been attempted, using ethical codes and behavioral preambles. These were usually developed by assemblies of sports journalists in order to counter excessive PR and advertising influences. But they imply that individual sports journalists are to be held entirely responsible for the situation. In 1924, at the first international convention of the sports press in Paris, the branch's first ethical code was adopted. Until this day new ethical codes and preambles on responsibility had been passed repeatedly. Yet such an individual approach to questions of ethical responsibility does not appear adequate in the current situation. As we have attempted to show above, sports journalists have forfeited their role as *gatekeepers* to a large extent. Their journalistic contributions are mediated through an opaque mixture of data, information, and communication over which they as individuals have hardly any (to no) influence. The focus should be moved from the individuals to the institutions.

Roughly speaking, two targeted measures can be identified. The first measure is the necessity of turning away from an ethic of individual responsibility on the part of the journalists and media creators and introducing institutional ethics to deal with the questions of the extent and conditions under which institutions act morally. So, in order to defend against a broad loss of quality, the media and commercial enterprises must come to an agreement as to the moral standards they wish to satisfy in which manner. They must commit themselves to formulating accessible ethical codes on specific behavior that puts a stop to the increasing entanglement of reporting and PR/advertising messages. It is not enough to create such ethical codes and make them public, they must also – possibly by means of commissions created for this purpose – be inspected for compliance. Sanctions must be put in place against disregarding of the codes. A second measure towards quality-oriented media resulting from the principal-agent theory is *signaling*. In this case, signaling refers to an action by the knowledgeable party providing private information to an uninformed party (Mankiw, 2008). The media could assign an independent

auditor to make a neutral assessment of the reporting quality of the various providers. Such product testing of the media would make recipients able to compare media offerings. Consumers with a greater affinity for quality would then be capable of recognizing those media that meet their standards and be justified in deciding to pay a higher price.

Conclusion

To exaggerate a little, we can ponder whether or not sports journalism is suffering from symptoms of disintegration? Is it being steered significantly by PR and advertising? This chapter shows that these commercial influences are not simply strong, but are to be found on many different levels. There is a real risk of further deterioration in the quality of sports reporting through adverse selection. Owing to a high asymmetry of information, the defense mechanisms that have been developed to date can hardly comprehend, because they follow an ethical conception that is not capable of grasping the relevant ethics. Personal ethical approaches, as formulated by many sports journalists/ federations/ associations, are of scant help in the present situation.

It is far more useful – and besides society, this should also be of interest to the media and commercial enterprises – to stop the loss of reporting quality through established and supervised institutional ethics. The media and enterprise would take this obligation upon themselves (out of long-term economic interests). Similarly, quality media can stop the disintegration of the market for sports reporting by attracting a customer base with an affinity for quality thanks to the signaling of quality. Under present conditions, a strong need is given for the introduction of basic moral and socially recommended behavior and the assistance of sports journalism at (early) signs of disintegration by bringing its focus back to quality and independence.

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