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Efficient Combating the Downward Spiral: How the Olympic Movement is Responding to the Market Failure of Sports Journalism & the Rise of Digitalization

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Sports journalism is in a deep crisis. Functional, structural and organizational deficiencies can be observed worldwide. Editorial offices are being outsourced, staff cut, travel costs minimized. These profound disruptions are resulting in inferior coverage of numerous sporting events and sports. Some sporting events and types of sport, for example, are no longer covered by established editorial teams due to cost-cutting constraints. This has far-reaching consequences for sports organizers and players. Important information is not disseminated and some information is passed on incorrectly and inadequately. Such tendencies can also be observed in the Olympic Games. As this downward spiral can have serious consequences for sports organizations such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the Olympic Movement has long since reacted to this. This paper will show how the Olympic Movement has built up its own media structures and has now (cleverly) strategically positioned itself in recent years with so-called vertical media structures. It will be shown how the IOC has managed to make itself largely independent of sports journalistic reporting and to provide its stakeholders with high-quality reporting through its own media and public relations work, while at the same time protecting the Olympic idea/movement. The increasing integration of AI technologies will most likely reinforce the trend of sports organizations establishing their own media houses and increasingly refining their media structures.

Keywords: *crisis, sports journalism, media strategies, media house, Olympic movement*

Introduction

A severe economic crisis has hit large parts of sports journalism. The extent of this crisis varies between the different types of media, but the economic basis for traditional sports journalism is deteriorating sharply in all types of media - print, TV and social media (cf. Rojas-Torrijos & Nölleke 2023, 2022, Schallhorn et al. 2022). This development can be observed worldwide and no longer stops at the big players in the profession. The billion-dollar US sports media company ESPN recently responded to a sharp loss of subscribers with a change in strategy. Part of the strategy involves laying off around 100 employees. The sports department of the "New York Times" was taken over by the website "The Athletic" and the entire sports editorial team was outsourced. The legendary, consistently high-quality sports magazine "Sports Illustrated" recently admitted to having extensively misused AI technologies.

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These are no longer exceptions (see state of research) and lead to the question: How serious and existential are the problems and disorders? And can these disruptions be remedied in the future or will they even intensify? To what extent must sports organizations react to this in order not to jeopardize their brand and image value? This requires a theoretically sound classification. Such an assessment of the overall situation and its development is of great importance for modern sports organizations - such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) - which (have to) interact with the public to a considerable extent. After all, the question arises as to whether sports organizations need to protect themselves from low-quality reporting and to what extent they can, or perhaps even have to, develop new media structures that are effective in terms of publicity.

State of Research

A comprehensive literature review shows that the cases described are not special cases, but that there are no more detailed analyses of how they came about. In academic works (see for others Rehbach 2024, Grimmer 2018, Horky et al. 2018, Bölz 2017, Neidhardt 2007, Schierl 2007, Schaffrath 2006, Schauerte & Schwier 2004, Schramm 2008, Loosen 1998) as well as in practice-oriented publications (see Beils 2023, Wiske & Kaiser 2023, Wiske 2020, Horky & Kamp 2012, Leyendecker 2006), the development and status quo of sports journalism is assessed as extremely negative. There is a broad consensus that sports journalism is undergoing fundamental change, which is jeopardizing its economic basis and journalistic quality.

The crisis conditions described in science and practice can indeed be classified as existentially threatening for sports journalism. This is particularly the case because sports journalism appears to be subject to exceptionally severe structural cutbacks, which lead to organizational difficulties and these in turn lead to highly opportunistic actions in sports editorial offices. This connection should be briefly explained (see Figure 1).

A review of the literature reveals structural disruptions in the form of multiple market failures and business restructuring of editorial units. In sports journalism, there is a significant reduction in staff and the outsourcing of entire editorial units (i.e. outsourcing processes). National sports newsrooms are being thinned out and often operate with fewer than ten full-time sports editors (see also Beils 2023, Bertling & Schierl 2020, Horky et al. 2018). Collective bargaining regulations are being undermined by outsourcing sports editorial teams and buying their content back in as newly established limited companies (cf. Beils 2023, Widmer 2023, Kraus 2021, Weissenburger 2019). Sports newsrooms are being dissolved, merged or outsourced. This was evident in 2023 internationally at the “New York Times” and in Germany at numerous smaller local editorial offices as well as at the various sports editorial offices of Springer-Verlag (cf. Beils 2023, Widmer 2023, Kraus 2021, Bertling & Nieland 2010, Mosen 2021, Weissenburger 2019).

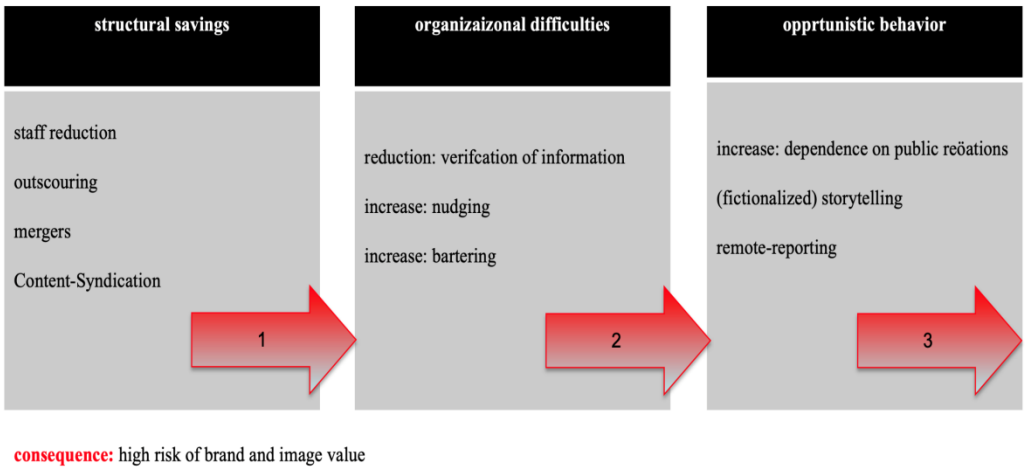
Organizational difficulties can be seen, for example, in the lack of control mechanisms and the simultaneous expansion of external supplies. For example, ready-made media content is purchased and integrated and distributed in the company's

own sports journalism products without any control mechanisms or options. The live signal is obtained from the sports broadcasters, who (can) suppress various content (such as violence, political statements, etc.) for marketing reasons (see Bertling 2024, Ludwig 2024, Beils 2023, Bertling & Schierl 2020, Horky et al. 2018, Horky & Kamp 2012).

Opportunistic behaviour is evident in sports journalistic production and services in many respects: licensing and broadcasting costs have risen so sharply in many sports editorial offices that every day, basic editorial work processes such as on-site research, verification of information, editing and quality assurance through fact-checking are no longer (or can no longer be) paid for (cf. Wiske & Kaiser 2023, Russ-Mohl 2017, Schaffrath 2009). Strong staging (through particularly accentuated storytelling approaches), manipulation and particularly strong cases of fraud in reporting as well as unreflected adoption of PR material can be observed in many cases (cf. Wiske & Kaiser 2023, Bouhs & Mathwig 2019, Grimmer 2012, Leyendecker 2006, Schauerte & Schwier 2004). Since sports journalists are often no longer on location at sporting events, but report from home using so-called remote techniques, it is often almost impossible to assess the facts and behavior of actors (cf. Beils 2023, Wiske 2020, Schaffrath 2006).

These developments, as described in many academic and practice-oriented publications, are alarming. They are confirmed by numerous experts from the sports media complex. The conclusion suggests itself that sports journalism is in a downward spiral that leads to inferior quality as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *The Downward Spiral of Sport Journalism*



In-depth analyses and theoretical classifications as to why this crisis has occurred from an economic and journalistic perspective and to what extent it will develop in the future (1) are not yet available. Such a classification and the resulting media strategy conclusions (2) are of central importance for the brand and public relations policy of sports organizations. These two aspects are addressed in this article.

Methodology & Theoretical Framing

The development and the seemingly crisis-ridden state of sports journalism can be largely attributed to a particularly strong, complex economic-journalistic interaction and interplay in this sub-sector, as well as the associated information asymmetries/ differences and shifts in the mutual transfer of goods and information between sports journalism and sports organizations.

Accordingly, two approaches of the New Institutional Economics (NIE)[1] are used to shed light on these two aspects.

a) The *principal-agent theory* can be used to explain why sports journalism is most likely heading more and more towards an existential crisis. The principal-agent theory focuses primarily on the division of labor between the principal and the agent. The suboptimal control and monitoring possibilities due to information gaps between the two (contractual) parties play a central role. Information asymmetries and trust structures are of particular importance (Akerlof 2005, Akerlof 1970). In (sports) journalism, there are numerous principal-agent constellations (with and without contractual frameworks) that are characterized by strong information asymmetries. This can lead to enormous moral risks and a market failure of journalistic functions - and thus this theory can be used to explain the first sub-question.

b) *Transaction cost theory* - and vertical integration in particular - is a good way of identifying the possibilities of a media strategy for sports organizations since digitalization. Transaction cost theory deals in particular with information and communication costs (search costs, negotiation costs, enforcement, value protection and control costs) and assumes imperfect information processes, distributions and knowledge (Coase 1960, 1937, Kiefer 2005, Schröder 2008, Williamson 1991, 1975). This theoretical approach is of central importance in the area of the sport-media complex, as sports organizations are increasingly creating media companies, which in turn provide specific presentations of sport in a journalistic context. Accordingly, transaction costs are minimized, as market activities in production and distribution are severely restricted in order to be able to set their own media standards. The digital transformation that has already taken place means that sports organizations can produce and distribute at ever lower cost. With the increasing use of AI and greater vertical integration, it will make even more sense in terms of media economics and marketing to establish their own media structures in sports organizations.

[1]In contrast to neoclassical economic theory, NIE explicitly includes social and political contexts in its economic analysis and is better able to grasp crisis-prone, imperfect situations analytically (Akerlof 2005, Akerlof & Shiller 2015). It developed from the "unease of individual economists towards the frictionless neoclassical model world" (Kiefer 2005) and addresses the interconnectedness of economic and political premises in a special way, instead of thinking of them separately as in many other approaches.

Results

Actor Constellations, Information Asymmetries and the Increasing Moral Hazard in Sports Journalism

There are a number of different principal-agent relationships in journalism. On the one hand, the recipient/consumer is the principal of various agents, namely the economy (e.g., consumer goods manufacturing, advertising companies), the media and journalists. These principals commission them and expect certain products from the companies, and information, transparency, clarification, honesty, topicality and objectivity from the journalistic media and journalists, which they are supposed to produce or deliver as agents. At the same time, advertising companies and the media are principals who commission other agents: the business sector commissions the journalistic media to publish advertising and PR content and the media in turn commission journalists to create media content (Baerns 1991, Bentele 2008, Bentele et al. 1997).

The commissioning of an agent by a principal usually involves a knowledge advantage for the agent, which is either the reason for the commissioning or its result. This is because either the agent knows more from the outset, i.e. is an expert, and is hired by the principal on the basis of this additional knowledge, or the agent achieves this knowledge advantage by subsequently dealing more intensively and specifically with the topic than the principal. This information asymmetry between principal and agent can be used to the benefit or disadvantage of the principal (Akerlof 2005, 1970, Schröder 2008).

If we look at the principal-agent relationships, we must take into account that there are various pronounced information asymmetries here. The economic influence that the advertising industry can exert on the media and the media can exert on freelance and salaried journalists is disproportionately higher and, above all, more direct than that which the recipients can exert on the various players. It is also higher because the advertising market has a stronger economic position on the network market than the recipient market.

It can also be observed that there is a direct process-related communication structure between the stakeholder groups of companies, media and journalists, which can be used on the one hand to control such influence measures and on the other hand to monitor their respective success. In contrast, the information asymmetry between recipients and the other three stakeholder groups is much higher and there is no direct institutionalized communication structure. It is only possible to exert influence here very indirectly, if at all.

In the practice of sports reporting, this ultimately means that advertisers, media and journalists, each following their own economic benefit, tend to evaluate and modulate sports reporting in such a way that it is as profitable as possible - and follow the advertising market rather than the recipient market.

In this conceptual construct, alignment with legal and ethical requirements usually only takes place if this does not run counter to economic objectives or if non-compliance can (and with a certain probability will) be sanctioned (Akerlof & Shiller 2009). Transparency and information for recipients is thus only seemingly

created and only where it does not run counter to the economic interests of the various interest groups. PR and advertising interests shape reporting to a large extent in a way that is barely recognizable to recipients. Journalism is increasingly being replaced by directly or indirectly remunerated PR contributions (Baerns 1991, Bentele et al. 1997). This danger increases with digitalization, as many media experience goods have become trust goods. Real contact (primary experience) has declined sharply, while media-only contact (secondary contact) has increased. This makes it increasingly difficult to classify a lot of information (Russ-Mohl 2017).

In addition to the actual social problem of a lack of transparency and information, this leads to a further economic problem: adverse selection (Akerlof 1970, Russ-Mohl 2017). The problem for the sports reporting market is that, due to the existing information asymmetry between recipients and media/journalists, recipients cannot distinguish between good and poor quality sports reporting (in terms of neutrality, balance, criticism and transparency and thus as an information producer). In this respect, recipients/consumers tend to go for the cheapest offers, which will generally be those that are financed to a large extent by overt but also covert PR and advertising measures. As a result, poorer quality products will dominate the market because recipients will not be able to identify good quality products. As consumers cannot recognize the better quality, they are not prepared to pay more. The overall quality in the market therefore inevitably declines. This is the case in the area of information production as a service (Akerlof 1970, Akerlof 2005, Akerlof & Shiller 2015).

From a media-economic perspective, better quality only makes sense in areas where it is visible and leads to greater customer satisfaction (cf. Christensen 1997, Ferrucci & Perreault 2021). This is the case in entertainment production. Technical innovation, camera perspectives and attractive content are visible. This leads to a reduction in quality in the area of rather low transparency.

With increasing licensing fees, it can be assumed that savings will be made above all in the area of information production and in editorial structures (personnel, outsourcing, travel costs), as there is a greater lack of transparency here. Entertainment production and its price structure is therefore very likely to have a strong influence on information production. Increased savings in entertainment production are rather unlikely, as these are media experience goods with greater transparency and are particularly important economically.

In terms of media economics, it can therefore be expected that sports journalism - especially in times of crisis - will increasingly operate in moral and legal gray areas and that the aforementioned disruptions in sports journalism will be a logical consequence. It seems unlikely that media management and sports journalism will be able to remedy these problems. From the perspective of sports organizations, strategic media action is therefore of great importance.

Make Decisions as a Sports Organizational Strategy for Effective & Efficient Media and Brand Policy

The disruptions to sports journalism described above have a significant impact on sports organizations and force them to take consistent action. This necessity can be explained by the basic ideas of the attention economy concept. The attention

economy is a concept of information economics that views people's attention as a scarce commodity. From an economic perspective, attention is important for triggering an economic cycle in two respects (cf. Downs 1972, Franck 2007). In the first cycle, attention increases public attention and social prestige. Prominence and reputation are created. These entities, i.e., social manifestations, can be transformed into economic power. Once the first cycle has been realized, an economically important second cycle can be activated for sports institutions and players. In sport, publicity, awareness, prominence and reputation activate the economic sectors of ticketing, merchandising products, licenses and sponsorship through attention. It can be concluded that the more attention sports institutions and players attract, the more likely they are to be socially and economically successful. For sport, this means that it too must fight for this increasingly scarce commodity of "attention" in order to operate profitably.

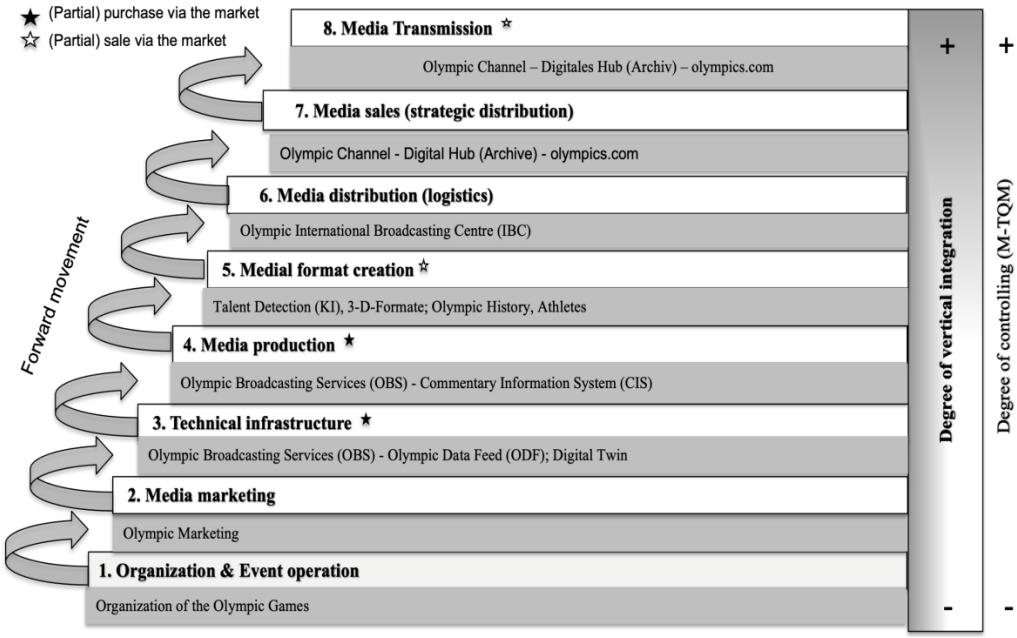
Accordingly, the media play a special role as a vehicle for attracting attention. A particularly large audience can be reached by addressing the topic in sports newsrooms. It is therefore hardly surprising that sport and its players have aligned themselves strongly with the media in many areas. Sport has laid down various "clever sugar trails", as the journalism researcher Ruß-Mohl once called them, which editorial offices are increasingly following as they too want to reach a large audience with popular content. It aligned its instruments, rhythms, arenas, players, resources, rules and variants strongly with the logic of the media - with the aim of being classified as relevant in sports editorial offices and being included in sports journalism publications (cf. Dohle & Vowe 2006). Numerous measures have been taken in recent decades in an attempt to propel sports into the media spotlight (cf. the mediatization debate Nölleke & Perreault 2023, Birkner 2017). Examples include the enlargement of table tennis balls, the shifting of competitions to prime time and new, particularly media-attractive sports such as beach handball.

With an increasing crisis in sports journalism and the associated decline in quality, such a strategy lost its meaningfulness. A lack of specialist and factual expertise, misinterpretations and overinterpretations and a severe lack of attention for the majority of sports institutions and players meant that image, awareness and brand values were increasingly at risk. In addition there is a lack of systematic media evaluation, brand controlling and media integration for strategic brand communication in both social and commercial marketing (cf. Smolianov & Aiyeku 2009). Under these conditions, it became increasingly difficult to pursue an efficient and effective brand and image policy via sports editorial offices. From the perspective of sports organizers, a solution had to be found. An adaptation according to the logic of the sports editorial offices no longer seemed to be sufficient; rather, an adaptation and further development of media structures seemed to be of great importance.

With digitalization (i.e., the switch from analogue to digital forms of communication), a new communication and brand strategy could be chosen from the turn of the millennium. Media products could be put together/combined to a greater extent, own platforms could be used/created and distributed more cost-effectively on different markets. A particularly strong degression of fixed costs could therefore be activated.

Since the turn of the millennium, in-house productions and media house concepts have been used, especially by large, globally active sports organizations, which were eventually expanded into vertical integration. Vertical integration means that "several successive value creation stages or production levels are combined in one company. The transfer of goods between these levels is not handled via the market, but is controlled within a company" (Kiefer 2002, p. 493). The structure of such a media structure can be clearly seen at the International Olympic Committee (IOC) (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. *Vertical In-house Media Structure of the IOC*



The diagram shows how the IOC has undertaken forward integration. The core competence of the original organizer of the Olympic Games was increasingly supplemented by media value creation stages and media structures were built up step by step, making the IOC independent of sports journalism. Several institutions have been created through which the IOC controls media production and distribution. The marketing program and brand policy are managed by "Olympic Marketing". This includes the management and monitoring of Olympic partners, Olympic broadcasters, ticketing and licensing.

A first incisive step towards establishing media structures was securing input for content production. The founding of the Olympic Broadcasting Services (OBS), which today employs over 500 permanent staff as well as thousands of additional employees at the International Broadcasting Centre (IBC) during the Olympic Games, created almost absolute control over production. While the host nation was commissioned to provide a host broadcaster before the company was founded in May 2001, from this point onwards it was no longer simply licensed, but put together its own production team and sold the media products it produced itself on the respective TV markets.

In addition to the production of live signals, more and more media enhancement and distribution processes were integrated into the Olympic in-house production. The launch of the "Olympic News Channel" (ONC) should be highlighted here. The 24/7 news channel provides non-stop news that can be booked by rights holders without production teams on site during the Olympic Games. There is also the "Commentary Information System" (CIS) and "Olympic Data Feed" (ODF). The CIS offers various services such as data on split times, athlete biographies, start lists and results services. These services are fed with data from the ODF. The ODF ensures a uniform data structure, real-time data provision, efficiency and scalability, flexibility and accessibility.

At the reform summit in Monaco in December 2014, the IOC General Assembly also decided to install the IOC's own Olympic channel. This channel was launched in August 2016 and was fed into 200 national TV markets. IOC President Thomas Bach explains the project idea of the "Olympic Channel", the initial implementation of which was estimated at 100 million US dollars, by saying that a platform for all Olympic sports is to be set up that broadcasts 365 days a year, 7 days a week. The IOC wants to promote the Olympic values and also show how it works with the United Nations on humanitarian issues and culture (cf. Papanikos 2024). This move to create the IOC's own TV channel and its rationale is particularly noteworthy as it further advanced the Olympic vision of a vertical media group with numerous partnership network connections. Today, the Olympic Channel is available in many formats: Live coverage and highlight clips, interviews and background reports, daily summaries and recaps, Olympic history and culture features, special reports and documentaries. A few facts illustrate just how successful these media formats are: Official Olympic social media channels have generated in Paris 2024 more than 8.5 billion engagements during the first week of the Olympic Games – 40 per cent more than the entirety of Tokyo 2020. Olympic Channel extends reach with beIN Sport launch! Olympic Channel programming is available in Middle East and North Africa, since it was extended by a cooperation within beIN Sport. 4th September, ahead of dedicated channel launch on 1st November 2018. In 2017, the channel relaunched as Olympic Channel, which continued this focus as a companion to NBCUniversal's broadcast rights to the Olympics; alongside Olympic and Paralympic sports coverage, it also carried documentaries and other programming chronicling the Olympic Games and its history, shoulder programming during the Olympics proper, and coverage of the Paralympic Games since 2018 (alongside NBCSN). In 2021, the channel aired live event coverage during the Olympics for the first time.

With such a structure, sports organizers such as the IOC can realize autonomous reporting that enables a high degree of media total quality management (M-TQM), not only in terms of product quality, but also in terms of brand policy. As the media companies buy the media products they produce themselves at enormously high prices due to a strong bidding market, it is also possible to go beyond the market in the final stages of the value chain. The product quality and brand policy can hardly suffer from this, as it is no longer a license that is being sold, but a media product. Instead, the licensee's own market promise can be disseminated by others under the guise of the respective licensee.

Discussion

This paper pointed out how the Olympic Movement has built up its own media structures and has now (cleverly) strategically positioned itself in recent years with so-called vertical media structures. It examined how the IOC has managed to make itself largely independent of sports journalistic reporting and to provide its stakeholders with high-quality reporting through its own media and public relations work, while at the same time protecting the Olympic idea/movement. The increased use of artificial intelligence in the future will most likely increase the in-house production of sports organizations. AI presents more and more opportunities for all reference groups to produce journalistic forms of presentation with technical support without having to hire staff. AI-controlled tools can already be fully automated in terms of target group approach and form of presentation. It is therefore hardly surprising that the IOC is already using AI at almost all stages of the value chain - for example, to filter and delete hate speech towards athletes, for digital room and security planning, fully automated results reporting and highlight clip playouts. It is unlikely that sports journalism will become more relevant for sports organizations in the near future. The opposite is more likely to be the case. The new communication spaces and opportunities that have emerged will make it increasingly possible to cultivate new types of communication in the future. Relationships can be established directly with the most important target and reference groups (stakeholders) and effective communication controlling (with dashboarding and KPI determination) and innovation management (with innovation laps) can be carried out. From an economic perspective, it is not (or no longer) particularly interesting for most stakeholders to connect with the nationally limited sports journalism that is editorially institutionalized in media organizations. Exclusive information can be discussed on their own platforms (owned) and/or made available to other communication partners (shared). If financially strong companies that do not come from the media sector decide to acquire rights, it is even conceivable that sports editorial offices could be excluded to a large extent in the future. Such an exclusion of sports journalism is not necessarily socially desirable. Sports journalism has an important watchdog function in our society and is therefore an important vehicle for democratic processes. It would be socially desirable for high-quality sports journalism to re-establish itself. Numerous representatives of sports organizations note this important function of sports journalism and emphasize its enormous importance. So far, however, there are few signs that high-quality sports journalism will take on a strong watchdog function in the future. Instead, it is clear that sports institutions are increasingly moving away from journalistic criticism and building their own communication worlds. The breakthrough of AI technologies seems likely to reinforce this trend.

Summary

With commercialization, sport has increasingly aligned itself with the logic of the media. In a first step, sport aligned itself with the media and thus with sports journalism. Deep rifts developed in the world of sport and a new (media) logic took

hold. Due to the lack of quality in sports journalism and the increasing possibilities offered by digitalization, the second step was to establish their own media structures. Absolutely falling costs go hand in hand with the possibility of a particularly effective and efficient brand and image policy. Modern sports management therefore increasingly requires strategic media management. Adaptation processes (in-house solutions) are increasingly being replaced by adaptations of media structures. Such vertical integrations have already emerged in globally active sports organizations. With digitalization and the associated cost reduction for media production and distribution, an expansion of such digital structures in other (also smaller) sports organizations seems very likely - AI solutions will probably play a central role in this.

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