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SOCIAL ANALYSIS IN THE MEDIA COVERAGE OF SPORT

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Abstract

The range of sport-related topics that become news has considerably expanded over the past few decades, including a notable increase in the coverage of off-field subjects. Yet media coverage tends to focus on a small number of topics, few when compared to the variety of sport-related matters worth attention. The paper explores whether the press coverage of sports reflects the *full* extent of the sporting phenomenon. More specifically, it assesses the place for social analysis in the media coverage of sport. Sport impacts society in multiple ways. How frequently and in what ways are these impacts covered by the media? A new taxonomy of 21 topics and 131 subtopics of social relevance to media sport was developed for the purposes of this investigation. The new taxonomy, intended for use to examine any type of media, was tested on a sample of Italian print newspapers. Data on the coverage of the social dimension of sport were collected, using the new taxonomy, through the content analysis of 6,501 newspaper pages from five different artificial timeframes and a combined period of 28 days, spanning from September 2018 to April 2020. The sample included both general-interest and sports newspapers, allowing for the additional analysis of coverage differences based on the type of press. Although the importance of the research endeavour was on defining the tool (taxonomy) rather than the results of the test, the analysis of the selected corpus yielded preliminary findings worth sharing on how news media cover the social aspects of sport. The newly developed taxonomy, or matrix, lays the foundations for further research in various directions, including examining the social analysis of sport in digital and audiovisual media, non-daily news reporting, long-form journalism, the local press, citizen journalism, and other journalistic ecosystems.

Keywords: Sports journalism, Sports, Media, Social analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the journalistic coverage of sport has steadily expanded to include off-field subjects like economics, politics, and the internationalisation of sports. Nonetheless, beneath the surface of this expanded coverage, the media tend to address a relatively limited number of topics. For example, the public gets to know everything about the wealthiest sports and

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clubs, the transfer market, athletes supported by powerful sponsors, as well as gossip-worthy stories. What about the rest? Does media coverage fully capture the sporting phenomenon? It is neither surprising nor deontologically reprehensible to capitalise on the economic value embedded in sports and athletes. The emphasis on sport as entertainment is also justified: sport does provide a healthy distraction for both participants and spectators. The point is that sport is more than that. Sport reveals trends about questions that are apparently far from the game, relating for example to commerce, inequality, religion, digitalization and more.¹ Through sport, people from different generations come together around a shared passion for the same team. Sport influences personal development, for it helps build discipline and perseverance, with role models contributing to the development of citizenship, especially in young people. Sport can also be a powerful tool for promoting health and social inclusion in developing countries. The fun aspect of sport, dismissed by some critics as superficial or of light impact, is what attracts people from diverse backgrounds and contributes to its social significance. The fact that sport is also recurrently exploited to spread negative values, like racism or violence, only further highlights its pervasive influence in contemporary society.

This paper argues that while today's media coverage of sport is extensive and growing, it should broaden its scope to more frequently address the social impacts of sport. This claim involves *regular* reporting on the social matters of sport, rather than just feature articles or the occasional coverage of attention-grabbing scandals. Stories that describe the social dimension of sport hardly ever make the headlines, regardless of their relevance. The suggested approach implies a (re-)definition of what sports journalism is about, which does not necessarily entail a transformation but rather a reaffirmation of its essence. Journalism, including sports journalism, serves a social function or it is not journalism.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This paper raises three main research questions:

- RQ1: How relevant is social analysis to sports journalism? It is important not to make assumptions regarding this matter, as it directly influences the core purpose of sports journalism.
- RQ2: Are there any significant differences in the coverage of the social dimension of sport between the general-interest and sport-specialised press? This aspect is widely overlooked in academic literature due to the absence of sport-specific newspapers in key countries.
- RQ3: Is it realistic to expect that the mass media of the 21st century, affected by the economic repercussions of a rapidly changing media landscape, will cover sport social aspects on a regular basis?

3. RELEVANT THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

This study is primarily grounded in classical gatekeeping theory applied to media studies, which serves as its primary interpretative framework. To assess the role of social analysis

1 Michael Serazio, *The Power of Sports: Media and Spectacle in American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

in press coverage of sport, we must first examine the topics that journalists allow through the metaphorical “gate.” As described by Shoemaker and Vos, gatekeeping is “the process of culling and crafting countless bits of information into the limited number of messages that reach people each day [and] the center of the media’s role in modern public life.”²

Additional paradigms that may serve as auxiliary explanatory frameworks include public journalism, i.e. the approach that emerged in the U.S. in the 1990s and started “where citizens start, allowing new coverage to reflect their concerns” – as this reflects this study’s concern with the social dimension in sports reporting.³ And the business-focused literature on corporate social responsibility (CSR), although CSR studies applied to the media industry are quite rare. In his book *Social Responsibilities of the Businessman*, which is widely considered the foundational work for CSR studies, Howard Bowen described CSR as “the obligations of businessmen to pursue those policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those lines of action which are desirable in terms of the objectives and values of our society.”⁴ According to Painter-Morland and Deslandes, most scholarly publications on the media’s CSR focus on how media organisations report on the corporate social responsibility of other organisations.⁵ In other words, based on Grayson’s categorisation, they focus on corporate responsibility *in* the media as opposed to the corporate responsibility *of* the media.⁶

4. A NEW TAXONOMY

Prior to examining the media coverage of the social dimension of sport, it is necessary to clearly define this dimension and its scope. The notion of “social dimension” can be utterly elusive unless we establish a distinctive analytical framework to circumscribe it. A new classification system, or taxonomy, was created to categorise potential areas for social analysis in media sport. In practical terms, the new taxonomy is a list of topics and subtopics that describe the sport’s social aspects. This broad analytical framework is meant to highlight as many socially relevant issues in sport reporting as possible. The taxonomy is intended for use to examine any type of media.

The first step towards the formation of this taxonomy was creating an inventory of the themes that occur most frequently in commonly used textbooks offering a sociological analysis of sport. The sport sociology textbooks were purposely chosen to include both *recent* books, published or revised after 2010, and *classics* in the sociology of sport. Furthermore, some of the selected books were written by single authors, while others were anthologies gathering contributions from different experts and perspectives. Both types of books were potentially

2 Pamela J. Shoemaker and Tim P. Vos, *Gatekeeping Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 1.

3 Jay Rosen et al., *Public Journalism: Theory and Practice — Lessons from Experience*, Occasional Paper (Kettering Foundation, 1997), 8. On public journalism, see also: Davis ‘Buzz’ Merritt, *Public Journalism and Public Life: Why Telling the News Is Not Enough*, 2nd ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1998); Jay Rosen, “Public Journalism: A Case for Public Scholarship”, *Change* 27, no. 3 (1995): 34–38; and Jay Rosen, *What Are Journalists For?* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

4 Howard R. Bowen, *Social Responsibilities of the Businessman* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953), 6.

5 Mollie Painter-Morland and Ghislain Deslandes, “Reconceptualizing CSR in the Media Industry as Relational Accountability”, *Journal of Business Ethics* 143, no. 4 (2017): 665–679, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-016-3083-0>.

6 David Grayson, *Corporate Social Responsibility and the Media*, Paper (Doughty Centre for Corporate Responsibility, Cranfield School of Management, UK; co-published with Centrum für Corporate Citizenship Deutschland, 2009).

relevant to the study.⁷ Anthologies, while lacking cohesion compared to textbooks, present the additional advantage of covering a wide range of themes, which is of particular interest when mapping out these themes.⁸

The 12 recent sport sociology textbooks are:

- Defrance, Jacques. *Sociologie du Sport*. 6th edition. Paris: La Découverte, 2011.
- Digel, Helmut. *Sociological Aspects of Modern Sports*. Aachen: Meyer & Meyer Sport, 2013.
- Eitzen, D. Stanley, ed. *Sport in Contemporary Society: An Anthology*. 10th edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Giulianotti, Richard, ed. *Routledge Handbook of the Sociology of Sport*. London; New York: Routledge, 2015.
- Karen, David, and Robert E. Washington, eds. *Sociological Perspectives on Sport: The Games Outside the Games*. 1st edition. London; New York: Routledge, 2015.
- Craig, Peter, ed. *Sport Sociology*. 3rd edition. Los Angeles: Sage, 2016.
- Houlihan, Barrie, and Dominic Malcolm, eds. *Sport and Society*. 3rd edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2016.
- Woods, Ron. *Social Issues in Sport*. Third edition. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2016.
- Coakley, Jay J. *Sports in Society: Issues and Controversies*. 12th edition. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education, 2017.⁹
- Jarvie, Grant, James Thornton, and Hector Mackie. *Sport, Culture and Society: An Introduction*. 3rd edition. London; New York: Routledge, 2018.
- Duret, Pascal. *Sociologie du Sport*. 4th edition. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France/Humensis, 2019.
- Delaney, Tim, and Tim Madigan. *The Sociology of Sports: An Introduction*. 3rd edition. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2021.

The two sport sociology classics are:

- Edwards, Harry. *Sociology of Sport*. Homewood, Ill: Dorsey Press, 1973.
- Dunning, Eric. *Sport Matters: Sociological Studies of Sport, Violence, and Civilization*. London; New York: Routledge, 1999.

For the purposes of the inventory, “recurring themes” were those to which the respective author(s)/editor(s) had dedicated at least one specific section of their book – an entire chapter or part, clearly identified as such in the table of contents.

7 While meeting relevant study criteria, book selections necessarily remain arbitrary and incomplete since additional authors, languages, publication periods, etc. could always be included for review. The author of the present paper has also later published a sport sociology textbook, in Italian: Rosarita Cuccoli, *Fondamenti di Sociologia dello Sport* (Verona: Qui Edit, 2024).

8 David J Leonard, “Book Review: Sports in Society: Issues and Controversies, The Sociology of Sports: An Introduction, Sport in Contemporary Society: An Anthology, Sociological Perspectives on Sport: The Games Outside the Games and Sociology of North American Sport”, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 51, no. 1 (2016): 114–119, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690215617759>. Leonard has provided his own review of sport sociology textbooks. It includes, among others, Coakley’s (2017), Delaney and Madigan’s (2015), Eitzen’s (2015), and Karen and Washington’s (2015) books, which were also used for the purposes of the thematic inventory described above.

9 By the time of writing, Coakley’s book has reached its 14th edition, released in July 2025.

The recurring themes identified as such in the selected sport sociology textbooks formed a preliminary inventory. This inventory was then combined with themes from the European Union (EU)'s *White Paper on Sport*.¹⁰ Section 2 of the White Paper specifically describes "The societal role of sport." The list obtained was further refined with elements from the author's direct experience in the sports and journalism sectors.¹¹

The resulting taxonomy (Table 1) comprises 21 sport-related Topics and 131 Subtopics of social relevance:

Table 1: Analytical categories for social analysis in the media coverage of sport

TOPICS (Sport and/or ...)	SUBTOPICS
Charity	Charitable initiatives and contributions from athletes
	Charitable initiatives and contributions from sports organisations
Corruption	Bribes for the allocation of sports mega-events
	Conflicts of interest at the top
	Kickbacks for player transfers
	Match-fixing to a draw or a fixed score
	Money laundering through sponsorship and advertising arrangements
	Referee match rigging
Development cooperation	Tax havens
	Construction and management of sport infrastructures in developing countries
	Intercultural dialogue
	Job creation in developing countries
Disability	Peacebuilding through sport
	Barriers to participation
	Competitions
	Opportunities for participation
	Physical activity for disabled kids at school
	Unified sport

10 European Commission, "White Paper on Sport", European Commission, COM/ /0391 final 2007, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52007DC0391>.

11 Details of the author's academic and professional paths can be found in the Afterword and associated footnote.

Doping	Animal doping
	Banned drugs
	Bans and disqualifications of results
	Blood doping
	Law-enforcement
	Prevention
	Side effects (short- and long-term)
	State doping
Education	Athletes as role models / Inspirational
	Character development
	Child and youth development
	Coaching
	College sports ¹²
	Dual career training
	Moral values in sport
	Physical education at school
	Prevention of juvenile delinquency
	Sport and failure ¹³
Environment	Impact on the nature of elite and recreational sport
	Mobility: transportation and commuting to and from sports facilities
	Sports facilities: design, construction, and management
	Sportswear and equipment: sourcing, production, product lifecycle

¹² "College sports" is included in this taxonomy in connection with its social rather than economic impact.

¹³ "Sport and failure" was deliberately singled out as a separate subtopic, as opposed to considering it part of "Character development" (another subtopic within Education), to stress its importance and to challenge what Sheppard has described as the hegemonic discourse of "a world obsessed with winning, power, prestige, privilege, and various other articulations of success". Samantha N. Sheppard, "Introduction to 'Sport and Failure'", *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 43, no. 4 (2019): 267, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723519840505>

Fandom	Camaraderie
	Fan violence
	Fans' solidarity
	Identity
	Nationalism
	Political tribalism
	Stress relief
	Tickets to sports events: availability and prices
	Traditions and connections through school, alma mater, district, hometown, state, country
Gambling	Addiction
	Illegal gambling
	Match-fixing for gambling purposes
	Organised crime
	Policy and regulatory issues
Gender and sexuality	Cheerleaders
	Equal prize money
	Homophobia
	Intersex athletes
	Pay gap
	Sexism
	Sexual abuse
	Sexual harassment
	Transgender athletes
	Women's access to leadership positions
	Women's access to sport
Globalisation	Elite migrant athletes
	Evolving geography of sports
	Global audiences
	Internationalisation of club ownership
	Internationalisation of teams and leagues

Governance of sports organisations	Corporate social responsibility (CSR) policies
	Fan relationship management
	Image of sport
	Self-regulatory measures
	Sports development
	Transparency and integrity
	Women's access to governance
Health and lifestyles	Ageing
	Alcohol abuse
	Animal welfare
	Children's physical development
	Diseases associated with sport
	Eating disorders
	Fitness
	Injury ¹⁴
	Lifestyle (sedentary vs. active)
	Nutrition
	Obesity
	Overtraining
	Painkiller abuse
	Psychological and mental health
	Public health
Hosting sports events	City and country promotion
	Forced displacement of locals
	Housing gentrification
	Jobs
	Legacy
	Tourism
	Urban renewal
Illegal equipment	Equipment that may harm opponents
	Technology doping
	Unauthorised substances on clothing, person, or equipment

¹⁴ Excluding the reporting of specific match-related injuries.

Labour rights	Exploitation of underage players
	Internationalisation of athletes' careers and contracts
	Labour rights at sporting infrastructure projects
	Moral and sexual harassment of athletes
	Trafficked players
Racism	Cyber-racism (sport-related)
	Discrimination and exclusion from decision-making roles
	Display of racist banners and symbols
	Racial abuse from other players
	Racist chants and insults
	Sports initiatives against racism
Religion	Neutrality of sport
	Religious signs in actions and clothing
	Sport as religion
Social integration and socialisation	Availability of sports facilities
	Elderly citizens
	Intercultural integration
	Migrants
	Poverty and social mobility
	Refugees
Violence	Athletes' domestic violence
	Athletes' violence on the pitch
	Emotional abuse by coaches
	Hazing
	Terrorism
Volunteering	Community sport development
	Disadvantaged neighbourhoods
	Non-profit sport
	Youth volunteering at sports events

5. TESTING THE NEW TAXONOMY

The new taxonomy, or matrix, was immediately put to the test to analyse the social analysis of sport in a sample of Italian print newspapers. As pointed out by Horky et al., “in addition to live reporting and despite declining circulation over the past several years, sports reporting in newspapers remains one of the most relevant areas of sports communication.”¹⁵ The choice of print had no direct connection with the purposes of the study, which focused on the *content* (the message), not the medium.¹⁶ The focus on print newspapers obviously leaves a vast field of research unexplored for future studies. Italy provided an ideal case study due to the presence, unlike most other countries, of a strong and diversified specialised sports press: three national newspapers specifically devoted to sports. This feature allowed for the additional comparison of sport’s social analysis by type of press.

The data on the coverage of the social dimension of sport were collected through the content analysis of a corpus of newspapers covering five different artificial timeframes over a combined artificial period of 28 days, spanning from September 2018 to April 2020 (see Table 2). The total number of pages reviewed amounted to 6,501. The six sampled newspapers included Italy’s general-interest newspapers with the largest circulation when content analysis began, in February 2020 (*Corriere della Sera*, *la Repubblica*, and *La Stampa*), and all Italian sports newspapers (*La Gazzetta dello Sport*, *Corriere dello Sport – Stadio*, and *Tuttosport*).¹⁷ The five periods for content analysis were purposefully chosen to include: one so-called “neutral” period, characterised by the absence of major events, in sport or elsewhere, which would otherwise heavily interfere with the news selection process; and four periods when events did offer, in principle, a perfect reason for sport-related social analysis – for example the Special Olympics World Summer Games or sport during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the impossibility of examining the media coverage of any topic in its entirety, the choice of the five sampled periods aimed to obtain a “reasonably representative sample of material [meaning] a sample which is not skewed or biased by the personal preferences or hunches of the researcher, by the desire to ‘prove’ a particular preconceived point, or by insufficient knowledge of the media and their social context”.¹⁸

In content analysis, text is broken down or “coded” into categories, whose occurrence and frequency is then counted to draw tentative conclusions about the text itself in relation to the object of the study. The methodological tool used for the analysis was the new matrix presented in Table 1, namely a “codebook” of themes deemed relevant to assess social analysis in the press coverage of sport. The units of analysis, which in media content analysis means what is being counted, were the media items in the sampled newspapers that covered sport social aspects as defined in the matrix.

15 Thomas Horky et al., “The Toy Department Has Grown Up: The 2021 International Sports Press Survey (ISPS) in Comparison to the 2011 Survey”, *Journalism and Media* 6, no. 2 (2025): 81, <https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia6020081>.

16 Reference is clearly made here to Marshall McLuhan’s famous slogan “The medium is the message” in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, first published in 1964. McLuhan suggested that the communication medium, more than the messages it carries, should be the focus of study.

17 Circulation ranking for *Corriere della Sera*, *la Repubblica*, and *La Stampa* based on the average total circulation figures (print + digital replica, Italy and abroad) for February 2020 certified by ADS - Accertamenti Diffusione Stampa (<https://www.adsnotizie.it>).

18 Anders Hansen et al., *Mass Communication Research Methods* (London: Palgrave/Macmillan, 1998), 102–103.

Table 2: Sampled dates for the newspaper content analysis

Data set	Period	Event	Newspapers
(1)	29 September – 5 October 2018	Neutral = no major events (sporting or other)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corriere della Sera • la Repubblica • La Stampa • La Gazzetta dello Sport • Corriere dello Sport – Stadio • Tuttosport
(2)	13–22 March 2019	Special Olympics World Summer Games	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corriere della Sera • la Repubblica • La Stampa • La Gazzetta dello Sport • Corriere dello Sport – Stadio • Tuttosport¹⁹
(3)	11 April 2019	Clashes between football fans before Ajax–Juventus in Amsterdam on April 10, 2019.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corriere della Sera • la Repubblica • La Stampa • La Gazzetta dello Sport • Corriere dello Sport – Stadio • Tuttosport
(4)	6–7 October 2019	Fans' pilgrimage to show support for Siniša Mihajlović, the coach of Bologna FC 1909.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corriere della Sera • la Repubblica • La Stampa • La Gazzetta dello Sport • Corriere dello Sport – Stadio²⁰
(5)	23–30 April 2020	Cancellation of most sporting events and activities worldwide due to the COVID-19 pandemic.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • La Gazzetta dello Sport

6. PRELIMINARY FINDINGS ON SOCIAL ANALYSIS IN MEDIA SPORT

The importance of the research endeavour laid more in the definition of the analytical tool (the taxonomy) than the results of the test from content analysis. The primary contribution of the study is the taxonomy itself, which can pave the way for multiple uses and further research, as later outlined in this paper. Meanwhile, the analysis of the selected corpus yielded a series of preliminary findings about social analysis in media sport.

The content analysis of the sampled newspapers showed that:

¹⁹ Incomplete series for Tuttosport that only covered the March 20–22 timeframe.

²⁰ *Tuttosport* is not included in data set (4) because copies of the newspaper for this dataframe were not available at the time of the analysis.

- a. Both general-interest and sports newspapers engage in the social analysis of sport (27% of the pages reviewed in the neutral period) and certainly consider it relevant (RQ1), although it could be argued that social analysis deserves more space. Evaluating whether this proportion was low or high, sufficient or insufficient, was not an immediate test objective.
- b. Under ordinary circumstances (neutral period), social analysis is more present in the general press (41% on average) than in the sports press (12% on average), reflecting the natural vocation of the general press to cover a more diverse range of subjects and the different facets of society, including when reporting on sport (RQ2).²¹ In contrast, sport-specific newspapers appear to need the wakeup call of a specific event to include social analysis in their coverage, despite the fact that sport is their core business.
- c. In non-neutral periods, that is, when editors have more freedom to select the topics that become news, the general press and sports press do not display any significant differences in their coverage of the social aspect of sport. The clearest example of their similarity was evident in the lack of coverage of the 2019 Special Olympics World Summer Games, a sporting event of undisputable social relevance. The press manifested virtually no interest in the event, whether in general-interest or sports newspapers. Combining the findings from both types of newspapers, only two minor relevant media items were identified during the entire ten-day period sampled for the analysis: a short article about a quarter of a page long in *La Gazzetta dello Sport* and a photo with a five-line caption in *Repubblica*.²²
- d. In general-interest newspapers, the social analysis of sport was found *outside* of the "Sport" section in nearly half (42.6%) of the cases under review. The breakdown between sport and non-sport sections suggests that the editors of the general press cannot really make up their mind about whether or not the social analysis of sport is actually part of "sports journalism." Should we hypothesise that social analysis is considered somehow too high to mingle, at least on a regular basis, with the usual content of the sports pages, which more typically focus on results and entertainment?
- e. In general-interest newspapers, outside of the Sport section, the social analysis of sport can be found in variety of sections, which may range from general news to local news, international news, leisure, weekly features, and more. Content analysis did not identify any particular pattern in the selection of non-sport sections for covering the social

21 The presence of social analysis is calculated as the proportion of the pages reviewed (the representative sample) that display the characteristic under examination (the presence of relevant media pieces), based on the new taxonomy, in the sampled period.

22 It should be noted that things have improved in this respect since then. For example, the 12th edition of the Special Olympics World Winter Games, which took place in Turin from 8 to 16 March 2025, was promoted through a series of advertising spots broadcast on national Italian television channels – not dedicated sports channels, but generalist ones with a much wider audience. Nearly 500 media outlets representing 47 countries registered to attend Turin 2025. On March 18, shortly after the end of the Games, Italian sports newspaper *Tuttosport* published a full-page article about Special Olympics Motor Activity Training Program (MATP) skier Samuele Tron and his father Andrea, who is also his coach. For more information on the media coverage of this event and the progress it represented, see Rosarita Cuccoli, "The Media Coverage of the Special Olympics World Winter Games Turin 2025", *Sport et Citoyenneté*, 22 April 2025, <https://www.sportetcitoyennete.com/en/articles-en/the-media-coverage-of-the-special-olympics-world-winter-games-turin-2025>.

dimension of sport.

- f. Sports newspapers are quintessential “hero factories.” Based on the content analysis of the sampled newspapers, they appear to be much more interested in inspirational stories from athletes than general-interest newspapers. During the sampled neutral period, which is the most revealing of the general patterns in the gatekeeping logics of the news selection process, the Subtopic labelled in the matrix (Table 1) as “Athletes as role models/Inspirational” appeared in 17 media items in sports newspapers compared to only 3 in general-interest newspapers.
- g. Some subject areas from the taxonomy appeared to be neglected by both general-interest and sport-specialised newspapers. Those areas were: Corruption, Gambling, Illegal equipment, Labour rights, Religion, and Volunteering. What is *not* covered by the press is often as revealing as what is covered, perhaps even more revealing. Except for Volunteering, which is of comparatively limited interest to readers, every other entry in the list of the missing topics may constitute, in one way or another, “inconvenient news” that most journalists, except for some virtuous exceptions, prefer not to cover.

One of the artificial timeframes for content analysis – timeframe (5) in Table 2 – occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2020. The taxonomy, devised before the outbreak of the pandemic, proved sufficiently complete to contemplate even an extraordinary event of that magnitude since it already comprised a pertinent subtopic: “Public health.” Content analysis for this specific period, which only involved *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, revealed that “Public health” issues, almost exclusively related to COVID-19 and how the world of sport was handling them, were by far the most recurrent subject in the newspaper’s coverage, accounting for nearly half (47.3%) of the media items of social relevance in the sample. The dramatic events of the pandemic helped pave the way for broader reporting on sport, or at least greater awareness of certain off-the-pitch issues. The pandemic dictated an abrupt shift in sports coverage towards health and safety issues. As dramatic as it was, the pandemic was an opportunity and a reminder for sports journalists that serious stories are also part of the job.²³ The challenge now is to transform that expanded attention into ordinary practice.

7. TOWARDS A WIDER RANGE OF SPORTS NEWS?

Content analysis using the new taxonomy focused on legacy media, i.e. an industry with economic imperatives. To what extent can these media outlets be expected to regularly cover the social dimension of sport, considering the difficulties they are already encountering in a rapidly changing media landscape? (RQ3) According to McEnnis, the idea that “worthy journalism does not sell and is simply produced for reputation and prestige” is still mainstream among sports desks.²⁴ In fact, multiple arguments support the business viability of social analysis in the press coverage of sport. In the highly competitive media landscape of the 21st century, where sporting news is immediately available on hundreds of media platforms and largely for free, mainstream media need to differentiate themselves from other information sources. They could use social analysis to do so and ultimately, to continue to be needed.

²³ Simon McEnnis, *Disrupting Sports Journalism* (London: Routledge, 2022).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 151.

Sports journalists are ideally positioned to examine the broader picture of sport and the range of social issues associated with it. Furthermore, there is an audience for this type of coverage. The London 2012 Paralympic Games, which benefited from unprecedented media attention, proved the existence of a larger-than-expected market for “sport at large.” In the United Kingdom, the host country of that edition, one in four TV viewers watched Paralympic coverage on Channel 4 every day during the Games, marking a 251% increase from the Beijing 2008 Paralympics.²⁵ Incidentally, the role of the media is to raise public awareness of social issues regardless of, or especially when the public is not aware of them, rather than simply replicating what the public already gets and expects. Journalism cannot act as a mere marketing machine that caters to consumer surveys.

A more systematic coverage of the socially relevant aspects of sport could also help overcome the long-standing issue of sports journalism lacking credibility compared to other supposedly “more serious” types of journalism. Over time, derogatory epithets have been used to describe sports journalism and its actors, such as the “toy department” of the newsroom, “fans with typewriters”, “cheerleaders”, etc.²⁶ An expanded focus on the social aspects of sport can positively influence how sports information is received within the profession and could attract a larger number of readers and advertisers.

8. RELEVANCE OF FINDINGS AND AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The new taxonomy is primarily designed for use by the academic community. Researchers in communication sciences, media literacy, sport sociology and other adjacent disciplines can use it to identify and investigate the social dimension of media sport. Meanwhile, other categories like journalists and media executives may also find it useful in their daily activities. Journalists could draw on it to expand the news coverage of sport as a broader social phenomenon. At the industrial level, media executives could use the taxonomy as a template to explore the wider business potential of sports coverage. In his seminal book *Journalism and Society*, British communication theorist Denis McQuail highlighted the coexistence of theory and practice in journalism and remarked that “some form of theory inevitably develops out of the wider interaction of journalists and their social environment, especially as journalism becomes more complex and more significant in its potential consequences”.²⁷

The present study lays the foundations for further research in various directions. The new taxonomy can be used to examine the social analysis of sport in digital and audiovisual media, non-daily news reporting, local press, long-form journalism, citizen journalism, other journalistic ecosystems (beyond the Italian case study), and more. In addition, while content analysis was privileged over field work and ethnography in testing the new matrix, future research may complement this approach with methods including surveys and interviews.

25 International Paralympic Committee, “No. 13: Channel 4 Creates a Blueprint for Commercial Paralympic Broadcasting”, 19 December 2012, <https://www.paralympic.org/blog/natalia-dannenberg-digital-revolution>.

26 For a summary and discussion of the derogatory epithets that have been used over the years, by both journalists and academics, to describe sports journalism, see Rosarita Cuccoli, *Sports Journalism in Society* (Bologna: Bologna University Press, 2025), sect. 3.1, <https://doi.org/10.30682/9791254775424>.

27 Denis McQuail, *Journalism and Society* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2013), 5.

9. AFTERWORD

The complete results of the study, condensed in this conference paper, can be further explored in a recently published book by the same author: Cuccoli, Rosarita. *Sports Journalism in Society*. Bologna: Bologna University Press, 2025. The approach of this study reflects the author's fifteen-year journey examining the role and responsibility of sports journalism in society, within both professional and academic settings.²⁸ As such, it combines academic expertise with professional experience beyond traditional academia. It is expected to contribute to both research and the practical application of knowledge, notably within a journalistic environment and the media industry at large.

28 Rosarita Cuccoli served as the Secretary General of the International Association of Sports Newspapers (IASN), part of the World Association of Newspapers (WAN), from 2008 to 2011. The World Association of Newspapers (WAN) would later become WAN-IFRA as of July 2009 following its merger with IFRA, and was also renamed the World Association of News Publishers, its current name. For over 15 years, she has collaborated with Sport et Citoyenneté, the European think tank that studies sport's societal impact. Sport et Citoyenneté was established in Brussels in 2007, just a few weeks after the adoption of the European Commission's *White Paper on Sport*. Since 2012, she has taught sport and journalism sociology at European business schools and universities. This adds to her ongoing activity as a journalist for international sport-business publications.

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²⁹ This paper was presented at the 2025 Sport&EU Conference. This bibliography only includes the sources and authors that were directly or indirectly referred to at the conference. For a more comprehensive bibliography on the media coverage of the social dimension of sport, including over 370 references, see Rosarita Cuccoli, *Sports Journalism in Society* (Bologna: Bologna University Press, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.30682/9791254775424>.

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