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A Bite-Sized Public Affairs Book

The Virus and the Media

How Journalism Covered the Pandemic

Edited by

John Mair

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Chapter 15

Sports journalism should toy with some different ideas

The pandemic is reshaping sports journalism's future by demanding that the skills of the past are sharpened and re-applied, believes sports journalist and academic Tom Bradshaw, who argues that coronavirus offers sports desks the chance to shed their 'toy department' tag

What does the 'toy department' do when the all the toys are taken away and locked up for an indefinite period? No balls are being kicked, passed or struck in anger. No press boxes, with their heady atmosphere of deadline-induced adrenaline, are open. No managers are dropping indiscretions in the immediate aftermath of a new VAR outrage. And mid-week press conferences – those bywords for platitudes, obfuscation and occasional one-upmanship – are a distant memory.

The Lego and the Transformers have been packed away and shelved. What good can come of this for the Toy Department? Well, hopefully, an end to the use of the hackneyed 'toy department' sobriquet itself.

Who called them toy boys (and girls)?

The description of the sports desk as the 'toy department' of a news organisation was used in the 1973 *New York Times* obituary of the mid-20th century American sports columnist Jimmy Cannon, and ever since the term has been a persistent means of gently goading, unfairly maligning and sometimes accurately describing sports journalists. And it can be fellow journalists who use it the most, deploying it as a device to smugly castigate their lightweight, ball-chasing colleagues. One Irish sports journalist – now sadly disgraced – wryly captured this newsroom disdain for sport reporting colleagues. "They loathe us and our dim-witted ways," wrote Tom Humphries in his 2003 book *Laptop Dancing and the Nanny Goat Mambo: A Sports Writer's Year*. "They despise our unstructured jobs here in the paper's Toy Department. They assume

that we spend all day, every day, flicking towels at each other's butts and talking about Pamela Anderson. Especially, they abhor our expensive habit of travelling abroad to cover events that are on TV anyway. When times are hard, their loathing of us increases as an exponential of the paper's diminished revenue and circulation."

Pandemic times now.

Times don't get much harder for sports desks, or for the media generally, than those caused by the pandemic. There is certainly no travelling abroad for sports reporters, and cash and audience figures are under tremendous pressure as a consequence of the restrictions on movement and the economic fallout of lockdown. And social distancing has ended the towel-flicking of posteriors, if it ever happened at all.

Many sports journalists have faced – and are still facing – hardship and uncertainty. The great sports writer Hugh McIlvanney referred to sport as “our magnificent triviality”, but there is nothing trivial about being furloughed and the uncertainty of not knowing when – and if – your job will be open to you again. I spoke to one promising young sports journalist recently who had made what appeared to be a fantastic career change just a few weeks before coronavirus arrived in Europe. Once the disease hit the UK he was quickly furloughed. It is unlikely his post will remain intact.

Time to think and reshape the craft?

There has been, and will be, individual hardship for individual sports journalists, but – taking a longer view – there are reasons to believe that the virus could result in some positive changes, indeed a reshaping, for sports journalism. And there are signs that this reshaping is already under way.

Covid-19 has heralded a time where the innovative, the creative and the well-connected sports journalist can prosper, whereas those who are habituated to a culture of over-reliance on the weekly merry-go-round of press conferences and matches are more likely to struggle. There have been some inspiring examples of just what sharp, creative sports journalists can do. Some freelancers have shown up their staff colleagues by using their extensive network of contacts to extract interview pieces and dig out exclusives. Rather than going to the big names or the big clubs, they have approached issues more broadly. Ross Heppenstall is one such example. A sports journalist with a well-honed

news sense, Heppenstall has scooped other journalists and provided compelling human interest stories by taking some non-routine reporting routes and working his contacts. Heppenstall has gathered some unique perspectives from sports lawyers on the fuzzy area of contracts in the Covid era, revealed the medical contribution by some players towards tackling the pandemic, and sourced exclusive interviews with some of sport's past greats. It turns out that the traditional qualities of phone-bashing and contact cultivation – nurturing the germ of story ideas into fruition – are essential. Being stuck at home with the gift of some time on their hands, rather than charging to press conferences and regurgitating a manager's quotes, has allowed some sports journalists to flourish in an alternative habitat.

Off-field contacts and off-field imagination

A tale involving a colleague of mine, another freelancer, is instructive. He turned up at a leading Midlands football club's ground on the day – so it was to turn out – when it was announced that professional matches were being suspended. Just as he was preparing to get out of his car and attend a press conference, his phone pinged with a text message from the club PR officer saying that, due to the virus, there would be no presser. Nor would there be any chance to do any interviews remotely. No football, no press access. The reporter still had a 1,250-word piece to file. He sat in his car for a while, had a think, made a few calls, and then – having secured an interview with an eccentric kit man who had plenty of tales to tell – set off on the long drive to Telford. And a colourful, insightful piece it made too. This all took place just as the Covid-19 crisis was gathering pace and before lockdown was introduced, but the qualities exhibited have been the ones that sports journalists – in common with other journalists – have needed to display and deepen: outside-the-box approaches, fresh ideas, and the persistence to see a story through amid very significant obstacles.

Post-Covid, the sports media environment could – and should – be a promising one for freelancers who have displayed such application and creativity. Moreover, the reporting techniques that led to such hard-won stories being published deserve to be widely recognised and emulated, all of which could trigger an uplift in the quality of the content. The sports media in the UK would sorely benefit from more original content, rather than the diet of churned, clickbait material that was standard fayre in many quarters before lockdown. The lack of on-field action during the pandemic has led to more stories about off-field

matters and more off-field perspectives. Once the action is up and running again, the lens will inevitably shift back to the field of play – but in parallel with that it is essential for the vitality and depth of sports journalism that the off-field terrain isn't neglected.

New horizons?

The lazy, quotes-based culture of much sports journalism, where the banal and the plain boring gets manufactured into a 'story', will hopefully suffer a blow as a consequence of Covid. Once the sporting calendar returns to something approximating normality, the fact that well-known sports personality X has said Y about Z, even if Y is completely unexceptional and non-newsworthy, will hopefully not be enough for sports journalists to still run a 'story'. The pandemic has starved sports journalists of the diet of easy quotes that they can get from press conferences, instead forcing them to go to more challenging places for their quotes and sustenance. This has been liberating for some, unshackling them from the tedium of stage-managed pressers. Let's hope the shackles remain off. A sharpening up of sports reporters' news sense, and the accompanying judicious use of quotes rather than a verbatim provision of the dull and mundane, would best serve editors and audiences.

Old habits die hard.

Of course, lockdown has not entirely been a golden era of detailed, original sports reporting. There have been many – some might say, far too many – nostalgia pieces, and enough *Best Ever World XI*-type pieces to sate even the most devoted anorak. Many of them have been insightful and well-written, but it's fair to say it's been a congested market.

Sports commentators have reached out to new constituencies during lockdown, and this could reel in fresh audiences once live sport is on again. Rugby commentator Nick Heath has seen his social media followings explode with his witty #LifeCommentary posts, while Andrew Cotter's commentaries on Twitter involving his dogs have attracted millions of views and turned Mable and Olive into mutts of universal renown. In doing this, these sports broadcasters have reached the screens of those previously outside of the sporting realm.

Some sports news outlets were better prepared for the total suspension of sport than others. *The Athletic UK* – the self-styled "new home of

football writing” – launched in August 2019 with the agenda of providing long reads that contained unrivalled detail about clubs. The outlet eschews traditional match reporting and places an emphasis on original material: inside knowledge and insightful, elegantly crafted behind-the-scenes features. For *The Athletic*, the suspension of sport was less of a grievous blow than it was to many other sports outlets, simply because its content is not dictated by – or even built around – match reporting.

The Athletic's editor, Alex Kay-Jelski, thinks the match report is dead. The traditional match report is, he believes, an oddity, an antique, and an irrelevance for those who have seen the goals, followed the game on *Twitter*, and heard the post-match interviews. This crisis may prove him wrong. Once live sport is back on, the thirst for high-quality, cultured, informed match writing is likely to be sharper than it has been for a long time. If the best sports writers, in the best traditions of sports writing, can capture these events then reports of the match report's death could turn out to be much exaggerated.

Life after the pandemic for sports journalists

In common with all branches of journalism, and in common with all industries, sports journalism faces change and challenge as a result of Covid-19. But there are ways in which sports journalism can revivify itself for the benefit of both its practitioners and its audiences, despite the grim effects of the pandemic.

About the author

Tom Bradshaw is a freelance writer, broadcaster and editor who has covered sport around the globe for outlets including the BBC, *The Times* and *The Guardian*. He is also an academic based at the University of Gloucestershire's School of Media, where he runs undergraduate and postgraduate courses in sports media. His book *Sports Journalism: The State of Play* (Routledge, 2019), co-authored with Daragh Minogue, contains many of his ideas about the future of the industry.



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