

## Chapter 15

# Auntie on the Sports Journalism Dance Floor

**The corporation's quest to secure a younger audience is captured most vividly in BBC Sport, says Tom Bradshaw, where something of an identity crisis is being publicly played out**

It is no secret that the BBC, in common with other legacy media outlets, is in desperate pursuit of the young demographic. That pursuit of the under-35s is arguably at its most intense in sport. Sport is a gateway. If you attract and retain a young audience to sport, then you just might convert them to other content, too. Fail to attract and keep that young audience and, well, the audience projection charts don't look great, do they? Perilous, in fact.

These are disorientating times for sports journalism as social media continues to challenge and subvert the old rhythms and the old certainties. And like a fell-runner on new terrain, BBC Sport is in a process of trying to orientate itself in this uncertain digital habitat of Twitter storms and Instagram Stories. The teenagers and 20-something digital natives who have grown up on a diet of YouTube football press conferences, LADbible viral gaffes, and Twitter disputation over which players their club should sell or sign, are difficult for the BBC to reach. Young sports fans – football-lovers in particular – are used to a terrain of bumpily frantic transfer speculation and hollering reaction, while the BBC, traditionally at least, moves at a steadier pace and speaks in a more sober tone. *Match of the Day* retains a following of more than seven million over the course of the weekend – it has a form of cult status that shows how legacy, linear TV can still work – but BBC Sport requires reinvention if it is to be reinvigorated. Or does it?

### “Two different audiences”

In its fight for enduring relevance and appeal, BBC Sport is manifesting symptoms of an identity crisis. One of the consequences of the digital revolution is that BBC Sport is now having to speak in at least two registers – or address two different audience segments – simultaneously. There is its more traditional, ‘mature’ audience which is used to a flow of BBC sports content that embodies the corporation's long-established values of impartial, steady – some might say ‘straight-laced’ – coverage. This audience still expects those values and the register they require to be upheld. Then there is the younger audience, which the BBC is desperate to tap into more deeply: an audience that hungers for, and expects, a more informal, ‘fun’ menu of content. To this second audience, the diet of content enjoyed by the first can be stuffily indigestible. To the first audience, the diet of content enjoyed by the second is trivial, light-weight, and perhaps ‘un-BBC’.

“It's almost like two different audiences sometimes,” is how one BBC staffer put it to me during an interview for an academic paper. She illustrated the dichotomy by describing how BBC Sport might simultaneously produce a serious, weighty story about the governance of the Qatar World Cup, and a piece about a man dressing up as a fridge to be a football club's mascot. While the latter is aimed at a younger audience, there is a wariness of trying too hard – appearing too desperate – to catch the eye of the young:

*We're trying to have fun stories but not write them like we're teenagers. We still want to write them in a solid BBC way but try and get them to different audiences... We have obviously a core audience but you don't want to be the dad at the disco. That's how we always say it – you don't want to be a 40-year-old man talking the language of a teenager because it just doesn't work. And I think sometimes that's what people think we're guilty of – just trying to be young and hip, and that's not what we're trying to do. We're just trying to*

*engage with a different audience away from our core audience and I think people do struggle with that sometimes.*

Although the 'Dad at the Disco' phenomenon is one that Auntie is keen to avoid, some of the moves from BBC Sport suggest it is keen to meet its young audience half way on the sports journalism dance floor. "A couple of years ago our journalism at the BBC was pretty straight-laced," another staffer for BBC Sport tells me, but now "social media and the way that things are presented can sometimes change the way you might approach a story. Rather than telling the story in a traditional paragraph-by-paragraph way, social media sometimes means we tell the story in a way that's a bit lighter."

This sounds innocuous enough, even sensible. Isn't sport all about lightness, anyway? Groin strains, niggling dressing room spats, and all that? But the serious consequences of the belief in lightness are now being played out, not least as BBC Sport thinks about how it can reduce its spending given the inevitable budgetary challenges that lie ahead.

### **Star sacrifices**

Upon the altar of enduring relevance, BBC Sport appears to be offering big-beast sacrifices, particularly in the field of radio. There has been a bonfire of the 'pale, male and stale' at Radio 5 Live as the station has rapidly parted company with a list of successful, long-serving, nationally regarded broadcasters. First to go was John Inverdale, who took off his BBC radio headset for good following the 2019 Cheltenham Festival. Since then other world-class sports broadcasters have followed, including horse racing correspondent Cornelius Lysaght and presenter Mark Pougatch. Hit a certain age and command a certain pay packet at BBC Sport and it seems you have some very good reasons to be looking over your shoulder.

Broadcasters of a certain vintage at other outlets have raised their concerns in ways that BBC insiders, for obvious reasons, are reluctant to. Clive Tyldesley, the football commentator, has spoken out against what he terms "reflex ageism" while Jeff Stelling, the presenter of Sky Sports' 'Soccer Saturday', tweeted: "So @markpougatch not presenting on 5 live any more. Sad that his total professionalism will be replaced by someone who is considered to be more in touch with the youth of today, even if they know sod all about football or interviewing. He can't say it so I will" (9 January 2019). The assumption behind much of this is that BBC Sport is aggressively pursuing the development of a more diverse workforce – a workforce that it believes is more likely to resonate with a younger audience – but that in so doing it is jettisoning high-calibre journalists.

### **Noble intentions, ignoble journalism?**

Diversity, properly understood and applied, can be editorially invigorating. Multiple backgrounds and multiple perspectives can ensure a mind-expanding breadth of coverage for audiences. Diversity can be the oxygen for variety, the stimulant for insight. This applies on sports desks just as much as it does on news desks. As I argue in my recent book *Sports Journalism: The State of Play* (Routledge, 2020) sports journalism has not always been at the vanguard on the long march to equality, but the landscape is changing and sport – and the way it is mediated – is a potent weapon in changing social attitudes. However, we are on perilous ground editorially if the pursuit of a diverse workforce becomes a mission in which experience, insight and journalistic skill are cast aside. Noble journalism can become a casualty of noble intentions. Diversity is vital and still needs its champions, of which I am one, but it must not be allowed to become a term that is unthinkingly invoked to justify purges and ill-conceived editorial plans.

### **Game-changing decisions at BBC Sport**

During the spring and summer of 2019, the BBC ran a campaign called Change the Game which highlighted the amount of elite women's sport taking place across the summer as well as its own coverage of it. The target demographic was clear, with the corporation working with rapper Ms Banks to create an anthem for the campaign that, according to a BBC press release, "aims to empower and inspire the next generation of women who might follow in these athletes'

footsteps". Moreover, the coverage of the summer's action – of football, cricket, netball and tennis – was just the beginning, said the BBC's director of sport, Barbara Slater. Much of the content was excellent, and the coverage of the football World Cup in particular ensured women's sport acquired a new audience, a fact which is to be celebrated. But while Slater says the ambition of BBC Sport's output has never been bigger, it seems the corporation thinks it can achieve these brave new ambitions without some of its best-established names. The pursuit of a young audience (the "next generation") seems to be equating to a steady whittling down of the older generation. Ms Banks or Cornelius Lysaght? BBC Sport seems to have nailed its colours to the mast.

Then there is the issue of funding. Is the current licence fee model actually inhibiting the BBC's ability to attract a sport-loving under-35 audience? The diminishing list of major sporting events that the BBC can afford to pay the live broadcast rights for has prompted the corporation to pursue niches – which is fantastic if you like basketball or touch rugby (and it is to be welcomed that minority sports are getting coverage on the BBC), but to pull in large young audiences the BBC arguably needs a few big signings. The licence fee is not adequate to make these deals; it cannot compete with the billions Sky and BT Sport put into football, and Amazon Prime's new subscription-based venture into the Premier League makes the BBC's use of a hypothecated tax to pay for sports coverage look out of step. One suggestion is that BBC Sport's live coverage could be hived off from its sports news, with the former funded by paid-for subscription and the latter by a reduced licence fee. By pulling in a younger audience to its live coverage, the BBC might then be able to direct that audience to its sports news coverage, too – and keep it.

There are flashes of depth and perceptiveness to BBC Sport's news output. Its editor, Dan Roan, has a background as a politics, finance and news reporter, and it shows. Roan generally brings a gravitas to the BBC's coverage of the big off-the-field stories, from doping to human rights. That depth can be what helps set BBC Sport apart from many other outlets. The fear is that such depth is being undermined by the headlong chase of the young demographic. And that, ultimately, is a disservice to everyone.

### **About the contributor**

**Tom Bradshaw** is an academic and sports journalist. His latest book, *Sports Journalism: The State of Play*, with Daragh Minogue, is published by Routledge. He is a senior lecturer in the School of Media at the University of Gloucestershire, and has covered sport around the globe for a range of online and print titles. He contributes to BBC Radio's rugby output, while his academic research focuses on media ethics.