

## Research Paper

Jonas Schützeneder

# From outsiders to top stars to the impeded

Self-image and prospects of German sports journalists

**Abstract:** Sports journalism and those involved in it face an enormous challenge: Demand for and interest in top-level sport remains consistently high, yet competition is growing, not least from sports clubs who now offer their own media services. What impact is this technically driven, emotionally charged environment having on the work of sports journalists? From a representative pool of 1,200 German sports journalists, 195 responded to an online survey. The results clearly reflect a pessimistic view of the future: More than two thirds of those surveyed state that the increasing amount of content from clubs' press offices represents a danger to their own editorial office. In addition, more than half find that the press offices impede their own access to players, managers and other officers, especially in professional soccer. Numerous studies have already been conducted into the role concepts and self-image of sports journalists. Starting from Weischenberg's dissertation (1976), which placed them as »outsiders« in editorial offices, they then moved on to become »climbers« (Görner 1995) or even »top stars of the media sector« (Schaffrath 2002). Based on these findings, this paper comes to the conclusion that sports journalists are among those impeded by the economically driven system of top-level sport.

»Sport successfully fits into the algorithm of leisure, consumption, and mass communication like almost no other mass phenomenon,« writes Schimany (2000: 398). Twenty years on, sport remains hugely significant in modern society. Our society is determined by economics, optimized, and constantly looking for improvement. This in itself is a key reason for sport's enormous popularity: »In a society in which predictability and risk minimization are achieved through the formation of structures, sporting competitions gain enormous entertainment

value for the viewing masses, as they provide an artificial way to experience excitement« (Bette, 2011: 20). All this is made possible by media coverage of top-level sport. In Germany, soccer matches have dominated television viewing figures for many years. The ten most-watched television broadcasts in German history have all been soccer matches (cf. AGF 2019). Top of the list is the 2014 World Cup final (Germany vs. Argentina), which was watched by 34.6 million people (not including public screenings, pubs etc.). Numerous other matches, mostly of the German national team, are followed in the ranking by an episode of medical drama *Schwarzwaldklinik* (ZDF 1985) – the only fictional program to achieve similar viewing figures, with around 28 million viewers.

The effect of sports media, the use behavior of sports fans and the content of sports journalism have been examined often and from various points of view (cf. Wiske 2018: 122). Looking at the stakeholder level and the work, attitude, and challenges of sports journalists, the academic scope and concrete results were sobering for a long time (cf. Schaffrath 2011). However, new approaches and findings have arisen over the last few years. This paper therefore intends to pick up from this point and provide further inspiration on the work and environment of sports journalism. First, it outlines academic findings on the self-image and role concept of sports journalism, before developing further research questions. These are then investigated using a quantitative online survey of German sports journalists.

## How the professional image of sports journalists has changed

A brief outline of research conducted into role concepts and self-image in sports journalism show that, for a long time, the main findings lay in Weischenberg's dissertation (1976). In it, he uses a qualitative survey to locate the sports journalists as »outsiders of the editorial office.« The focus was therefore more on the content than their activities. Many have voiced the criticism that, although a professional approach is taken to sports journalism, the reporting produced tends to be more superficial and entertainment-oriented (cf. Lerch 1989; Loosen 2008; Bernhart 2009). The sports journalists were very aware of this and, at the time, were motivated in their activities by the opportunity to follow their own hobby and the characteristics of top-level sport up close (cf. Nause 1988). The attractiveness of sports journalism as a profession rose in line with the development of top-level sport. In an extensive survey with almost 2,000 participants, Görner (1995) showed that sports journalists had transformed from outsiders to climbers. The sports department had a more positive image in newspapers and on the radio, and was used by many as a springboard to higher positions. At the same time, parts of the study also confirmed the criticism of the content. The majority of those surveyed stated that they see their own role as more that of an

entertainer than of a critic or observer (cf. *ibid.*: 162ff.). In relation to the outsiders and climbers described, Schaffrath (2002) later made the sports journalists the »top stars« of the media sector, based on television journalists' growing fame and own marketing options. This was followed by studies by Bölz (2013) and Helm (2013), which used observation and surveys to add value in terms of the organizational structures in sports editorial offices in particular. With regard to the role concept, earlier studies were once again corroborated here. Postel recently brought out a detailed working paper entitled »Between fan reporters and spoil sports,« published by the Otto Brenner Stiftung. This stock-take of current sports journalists closes with the finding that, especially in a time of maximum economization and rising protests from fans against these developments, critical, constructive sports journalism and awareness among the actors is essential (cf. Postel, 2018: 52).

Further clarification comes from the question of which constellation the actors in sports journalism find themselves in. They are producers of journalistic content and thus to be pinpointed as intermediaries between top athletes – i.e. suppliers of information or competition performance – and publishing houses. The publishing houses, on the other hand, must be defined as the commissioners and funders of journalistic content. This strict distinction between media (companies) and journalism (cf. Altmeyden 2006: 201) is essential for a clear division of roles and the self-image of the actors. Media companies have long been professional economic actors. Their profits come from a business that buys and sells journalistic content. The media product of a newspaper is generally a combination of journalistic texts and advertising (cf. *ibid.*). While journalism has a duty to society in terms of democratic functions, companies' advertising space offers an opportunity to communicate their own messages in unfiltered form, outside journalistic classification (cf. Altmeyden & Bracker 2017: 245f.). However, the increasing competition and growing economic pressure is also having an increasing influence on the work of journalists. Chief editors from various media companies, independently of one another, recently demanded that journalists should be more involved in publishing houses' funding concepts – or at least contribute their thoughts (cf. Bönisch 2019; Fenske 2019). This discussion related to every section, however.

The most important recent figures on sports journalists come from a dissertation by Wiske (2017). In it, the author uses a representative survey of more than 1,000 sports journalists in Germany to demonstrate both sociodemographic trends and analytical systematizations. Firstly, according to Wiske's study, sports journalists in Germany are 48 years old on average, usually hold permanent contracts (63%), are usually university graduates (54.1%), and are most commonly employed by a newspaper (41%). Sports journalism remains dominated by men, with just 9.5% of respondents being women. Earlier surveys by Görner and Helm are thus largely corroborated in this regard.

Table 1

### Sociodemographic features of sports journalists in studies by Görner, Helm, and Wiske

Features of those surveyed	Görner (1995) N = 1739	Helm (2010) N = 166	Wiske (2015) N = 1006
Mean age	38	48	48
Percentage of women	6,3 %	11,5 %	9,5 %
Permanently employed	50,6 %	70,9 %	62,8 %
Employed by newspaper	56,7 %	39,2 %	41,1 %
University graduate	34,4 %	46,2 %	54,1 %
Traineeship	63,1 %	71,6 %	67,1 %

In a more extensive systematization, Wiske uses her findings to put the sports journalists into clusters based on an image model (Wiske 2017: 255). This results in three groups: elite, established and outsiders. The elite group comprises the television and online sports journalists, who tend to be younger than their colleagues and generally more satisfied with their position. Their colleagues from newspapers, radio and agencies are classified in the established group. Lastly, the newspaper journalists in the sports section are in the outsiders group. They are significantly more skeptical regarding their choice of profession and see failings in the cross-media implementation of key developments.

In addition to the academic studies mentioned, practitioners have also increasingly spoken up in recent years, critically examining the developments in sports journalism. One example is a report by the Bavarian Association of Journalists (BJV), which, in one of its focuses, uses various examples to draw the conclusion that sports journalists increasingly find themselves stuck »between attraction and risk« and »on the sidelines« both in terms of career opportunities and working conditions (BJV 2017).

These trends could be seen as a template for our own access to this field of research, which is to focus more strongly on the environment and prospects of sports journalists. In addition, the plan is to distinguish whether the starting position of those surveyed is also linked to the type of sport they report on most, which has not been covered in this form in data collection up to now.

### Research questions and method

In order to investigate the findings of various studies described above and to develop new results focusing on role concept, environment and prospects, this survey was guided by the following research questions (RQ):

- RQ1: Can the sociodemographic features from earlier studies (particularly Wiske, Helm, and Görner) be confirmed in this form?
- RQ2: How do those surveyed see their role on the tightrope between sports journalism and sports communication?
- RQ3: How do they see and assess the consequences of the increasingly professional press offices of professional clubs?
- RQ4: Do the processes and options for sports journalists differ depending on the sport and league?

The instrument used for the investigation was a quantitative online survey. According to Scheufele and Engelmann, this is a method »in which a large number of people are surveyed systematically, i.e. in line with rules defined in advance, on features that are relevant from a social or communication science point of view – for example their media use – and then provide their own responses on these features« (Scheufele/Engelmann 2009: 119). In order to achieve a sample of subjects that is as representative as possible, pools were first formed based on employer and then adjusted to achieve the correct proportions based on the data from Wiske's data pool (2017). It had been decided in advance that the basic population would consist of those that regularly produce and publish sports journalism content for a German medium in the form of (print and/or online) texts, moving images, and/or audio. The Association of German Sports Journalists (VDS) estimates this population to be around 4,000 people. This population was also used as the base in the aforementioned study by Wiske.

In it, 41 percent of the 1,006 people surveyed were employed by a newspaper, while 20.2 percent worked in television and 13.6 for an online service. These were followed by magazines (12.6%), agencies (7.1%), and radio (5.6%). For feasibility reasons, the pool here was initially limited to 1,200 sports journalists for German media services. Via the editorial offices and telephone contacts, the potential participants in the survey were then compiled and noted as lists (1,000 precisely by his distribution, another 200 selected at random from the VDS-Datenbank Freie Sportjournalisten [Database of Freelance Sports Journalists], in order to reflect the estimated proportion of 15-20%. The resulting sample thus comprised the following

- 400 newspaper journalists (regional and national)
- 120 magazine journalists
- 140 online journalists
- 60 radio journalists
- 200 TV journalists

These were joined by the direct contact to news agencies dpa (sports editorial office) and sid (sports information service) (combined share of total pool: 7%). The participants from this pool were then contacted via email and asked to take part. At the end of the survey period (November 2017), 195 fully completed and usable questionnaires had been received (return rate 16%). In view of various test samples, this sample was implemented in as much detail as possible in terms of economy and results. The results also show that the population compiled and the ultimate sample are very close to the results of earlier studies.

## Results

The subjects are a little over 38 years old on average, and 89 percent of them are male. In the question of their position in the company, the subjects could choose between trainee, freelance, freelance with contract, permanent contract and managerial position. Almost half of all those surveyed are not in permanent employment; 26.3 percent are freelancers and 22.2 percent are freelancers with contracts. This is compared to 51 percent who are permanently employed – precisely the same proportion as was found in the study by Helm (2010). Among those permanently employed, 6.7 percent are trainees, 11.3 percent in managerial positions, and the majority, with 33.5 percent, in a »normal« permanent position. Over a quarter (26%) work for a public service provider. If one compares these positions with the gender of those surveyed, there is only one noticeable difference: All 22 subjects who state that they hold a managerial position are male. Among the women (n=22), most are in permanent employment (n=8) or freelancers with contracts (n=6).

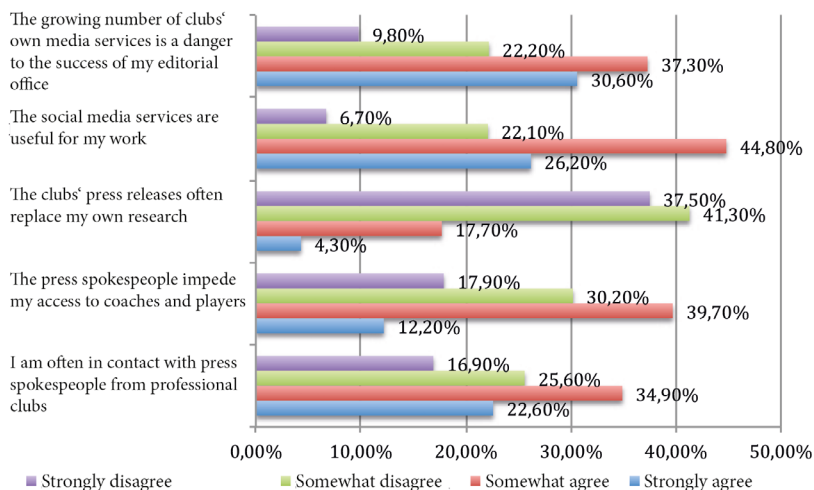
The questions regarding the conditions and external influencing factors under which the subjects work on a daily basis confirm the presence of new challenges and the image of a transformation of the production conditions in sports journalism.

Newspapers, television channels and online portals have long been joined by other competitors in the publication of entertaining, critical or background content in the sports sector. More and more clubs and associations are using strategic communication to attempt to attract an audience of sports fans. Those surveyed are concerned about this development, with more than two thirds agreeing strongly or somewhat that clubs' own services represent a danger to the success of their own editorial offices. Despite this, they like to make use of social media channels and press releases, seeing these as useful in their everyday work (71% agree strongly/somewhat).

However, as a large majority emphasizes, this does not replace their own research. There is no doubt that contact and good connections to a club's press

office are extremely important, especially when reporting on the major leagues: the soccer Bundesliga, ice hockey (DEL), basketball (BBL), and handball (HBL). Just 17 percent of those surveyed stated that they never have contact with the press spokespeople or PR departments of the aforementioned leagues. Those who do have contact give a mixed assessment of this collaboration. Slightly more than half of those surveyed (52%) find that press spokespeople are increasingly preventing access to players, coaches and those responsible, thus making their work in sports reporting more difficult. To some extent, these results corroborate those of a 2014 study by Grimmer entitled *Cooperation or control?*, which used surveys to find that the balance of power in professional sport (especially soccer) is shifting ever more towards the press spokespeople (cf. Grimmer, 2014: 260). This represents a new facet of the attribution of roles among sports journalists within their system of professional sport. Based on Weischenberg's *outsiders* (1976) and Görner's *climbers* (1995), in 2019 one could speak of the *impeded* – sports journalists who, in the increasingly economically driven conflict of priorities between sports journalism and sports PR, note with frustration that the audience, faced with such a large number of services, has become less loyal and the clubs increasingly use their own channels to bypass journalism as critics, observers and gatekeepers.

Figure 1  
**Way of working, research and self-reflection among sports journalists (N=195)**



This description can be interpreted both as the central finding of the study and as the main problem facing sports journalists in Germany. The various points can be explained in more detail and illustrated using the results shown below:

- The economization of sport has led to a transformation in its significance. Actors from within the system act less from the point of view of sporting competition (fair play dispute about the result), and more in terms of economic competition (highest possible budget, internationalization of the brand and sponsoring). In order to increase the value of their own brand, clubs are ramping up active club communication and putting sports journalism under pressure with these services. This applies particularly to soccer.
- Sports journalists' frustration is seen in this study largely in the fact that it is increasingly the clubs, not the editorial offices, that dominate the topics, interviewees and general discourse about top-level sport.
- A look at the audience confirms this. Media use among sports fans is becoming increasingly heterogeneous and digital. This results in significant drops in print sales, while clubs' own services on social media or video channels become even more important.
- On these channels, fans find impressions that they perceive to be exclusive. In reality, they are usually strategic publications that are ultimately intended to reinforce and bolster the image of the brand in a positive way. This club television never deals critically with problems and shortcomings. When conducting journalistic research into them, editorial offices are finding it more and more difficult to gain interviews with those responsible at the clubs.

In order to underpin these skeptical views even more, the sports journalists were asked further questions about their attitudes as the study progressed. For example, looking at their weekly time budget, the subjects were asked to state the types of sport and the leagues that they report on regularly. Their specific responses then led on to the question of how their working conditions have changed in recent years. There is a clear difference between the types of sports and leagues in this regard (see Table 2).

Almost 90 percent of the sports journalists who regularly report on the soccer Bundesliga state that their work today has become somewhat or very difficult compared to a few years ago. In contrast, the colleagues that regularly write about handball, ice hockey and basketball take an entirely different line, saying that their work is now very or somewhat easy in comparison. One thing is clear: The enormous competition, which is further exacerbated in soccer by the clubs and their own channels, has an enormous impact on the environment and working methods of sports journalists. The more intense competition is also reflected in the question below:



Table 2

**The working conditions in sports journalism by league**

	Very easy	Somewhat easy	Somewhat difficult	Very difficult
Soccer Bundesliga (n=128)	0,8%	10,9%	63,3%	25,0%
DEL (n=33)	5,9%	58,8%	35,3%	0
HBL (n=26)	19,2%	76,9%	3,9%	0
BBL (n=24)	25,0%	58,3%	12,5%	4,2%

Question: »Over the last few years, work has become ... for me.«

Table 3

**The competition situation by league**

	Very easy	Somewhat easy	Somewhat difficult	Very difficult
Soccer Bundesliga (n=128)	2,3%	35,9%	43,0%	18,8%
DEL (n=33)	20,6%	61,8%	17,7%	0
HBL (n=26)	42,3%	53,9%	3,9%	0
BBL (n=24)	62,5%	33,3%	4,2%	0

Table 4

**Danger from clubs' own media by employer**

	Regional newspaper	National newspaper	TV	Online	Magazine (print)	Radio	Agency
Value	2,02	1,76	2,00	2,63	2,50	1,65	1,88
n	42	17	32	57	14	23	8
Variance	,869	,752	1,14	,975	1,29	,832	,641

1= strongly agree; 4= strongly disagree; n=191

Here, too, the sports journalists who regularly report on the soccer Bundesliga emphasize that their situation is a significant challenge in terms of competition. On the other hand, the other subjects state that the situation in handball, ice hockey, and basketball has become much more pleasant.

The results of another question on working conditions by league are very similar. The question is »Researching exclusive content has become ... for me.« 90 percent of those who conduct research in the soccer Bundesliga give the response »almost impossible.« Once again, colleagues from the other types of sports state that they are able to work much more easily and research exclusive content more often. Finally, to pinpoint the results further, the generally skeptical mood

among the sports journalists surveyed is to be examined in more detail. To do this, it makes sense to cross-reference the question of the danger from increasing club services with the employers of those surveyed.

Here it is clear that those employed in radio, agencies, television, and newspapers are especially skeptical towards this development, while employees of magazines and websites are more relaxed about it. The statistical correlation between the employer and the estimated danger of clubs' own media can also be calculated: There is medium correlation (Cramer V 0.289 at 0.000 significance) with a clear significance (chi squared in accordance with Pearson 0.000). A similar division is seen when the question of how work has developed in recent years is cross-referenced. Here, newspaper, television and radio journalists are more likely to find that their work has become significantly more difficult (more than 90 percent in each case), while online journalists take a more relaxed view, with 23 percent even finding that working conditions have become easier.

## Outlook

At the start of the method, this paper posed four central research questions:

- RQ1 Can the sociodemographic features from earlier studies (particularly Wiske, Helm and Görner) be confirmed in this form?
- RQ2 How do those surveyed see their role on the tightrope between sports journalism and sports communication?
- RQ3 How do they see and assess the consequences of the increasingly professional press offices of professional clubs?
- RQ4 Do the processes and options for sports journalists differ depending on the sport and league?

The first result of the quantitative online survey of 195 German sports journalists (from a representative pool of 1,200) is clear: The sociodemographic distribution in terms of age, gender, employer, and career seen in earlier studies by Wiske (2017), Görner (1995), and Helm (2010) is largely corroborated. Those surveyed in this study were 38 years old on average, 89 percent male, and divided almost equally between freelance employees (with contracts) and permanent staff.

Given the developments of recent years, they tend to take a skeptical view of their own role. More than half think that club press offices are increasingly impeding access to players, coaches, and those responsible. In addition, a large

majority says that their work in relation to the soccer Bundesliga has become very/somewhat difficult in recent years. However, the perception of their own possibilities varies widely depending on the type of sport. While sports journalists in the Bundesliga see few opportunities to research exclusive content and increasingly difficult working conditions, sports journalists describe a very different situation when reporting on handball, basketball, and ice hockey – the majority here is able to make contact with athletes and develop exclusive content at almost any time. A clear majority also says that their work in these leagues has become significantly easier in recent years. Most (58%), however, report regularly on the Bundesliga, where they do not see good prospects for sports reporting.

Based on Weischenberg's outsiders (1976) and Görner's climbers (1995), in 2019 one could speak of the impeded: sports journalists who, in the increasingly economically driven conflict of priorities between sports journalism and sports PR, note with frustration that the audience, faced with such a large number of services, has become less loyal and the clubs increasingly use their own channels to bypass journalism as critics, observers and gatekeepers. This could be taken as the starting point for future research. From an organizational point of view, the changed situation is forcing media providers to adapt their procedures and hierarchies. At the same time, sports journalists' role concept and way of working are changing all the time. It would be possible to develop greater academic depth here, especially using qualitative methodological access.

## About the author

**Dr. Jonas Schützeneder** (\*1991) is a research assistant at the Chair of Journalism Studies at the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt. Contact: Jonas.Schuetzeneder@ku.de

*Translation: Sophie Costella*

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