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SPORTS AND MEDIA IN SERBIA IN THE MIRROR OF SPORTS JOURNALISM STUDENTS

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Abstract: Starting from the fact that journalism in Serbia is a reflection of the times we live in, as well as the fact that the domestic scene is overloaded with tabloid discourse and the clientelistic role of the media instead of one that includes the media role as a corrective mechanism of society, it is clear what challenges many representatives of this profession to face in daily work. That dominant image shapes and broadens the attitude in society about this profession, that is, a stereotypical view that thus undeservedly includes numerous representatives who adhere to ethical standards. Therefore, as part of the journalist's guild, the media and media workers who focus on sports live in such an environment as a particularly prominent segment of society through which many others permeate, such as politics, economy, crime, etc. On the other hand, the fact is that technological changes have led to a much larger quantity, namely the possibility of a significant expansion of the body of journalists, including those specialized in sports, and therefore to increased interest in that profession, bearing in mind the rapid growth of the number of media newsrooms in general, as well as special sports newsrooms. This paper aims to form a kind of cross-section of the current situation through a series of attitudes measured on a Likert scale, videlicet insights into how, bearing in mind everything previously said, students of sports journalism in Serbia, as a specific segment of journalism, see this profession today and in the future, their place in that profession, as well as sports and media in general.

Keywords: sport, media, journalism, sports journalism, students of sports journalism.

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Introduction

Global changes in the 21st century, primarily the digital revolution, have led to drastic transformations in sports and journalism, which can only be imagined with numerous technological tools. On the one hand, the media landscape has undergone significant changes with the advent of the internet, which "represents the most radical annulment of the boundaries of time and space that have hindered communication among people since the time we left the savannahs and learned to use language" (Makner, 2005: 290). On the other hand, sports have long held immense significance in people's daily lives, shaping the lives, lifestyles, identities, and values of a large number of individuals as "an activity and spectacle" (Koković, 2008: 8). In understanding this aspect of life, the mediatized version becomes increasingly essential.

Consequently, indirect experience, created through various media platforms, is significantly more influential in shaping the image of sports in society than the experience of directly attending events. Indirect knowledge is proper when it comes to "elite sports," perceived as a segment of popular culture and the entertainment industry, or something that "encompasses a media-profiled, commercially appealing, high-quality sport, in line with the laws of late capitalism" (Biti, 2012: 32, 34, 44). In other words, it is "associated with modernity and interpreted in the dimensions of globalization, mediatization, commercialization, and celebrity culture within its social, cultural, political, and economic context" (Biti, 2012: 218).

Considering those above, "sport is no longer just a segment of society, but something that significantly contributes to shaping public opinion through identification with successes and failures, mass connectedness, and therefore, easier permeability of various messages" (Bajić and Petrović, 2019: 30)" (Bajić, 2021: 18), the significant role of journalists in shaping the image of sports in society becomes apparent. Namely, this characteristic reflects the intensity of interweaving and spillover between sport and other social aspects (Penezić, 2020: 546). In other words, it primarily refers to sports journalists, who set the media agenda in this segment daily.

Journalists themselves are "conveyors, intermediaries, and critics in society and the state" they are the "public eyes and ears, observing and listening to the public and public spirit" (Čupić, 2010: 11). Therefore, it is clear that today they face unique challenges, considering "the time when the fundamental principles of valid journalistic work have long been under serious scrutiny, and the ideals of this profession are often completely sidelined" (Petrović and Penezić, 2023: 118). The media scene in Serbia, dominated by newspaper media and sensationalist reports, significantly undermines the reputation of the journalism profession in society. In this chaotic state of the media market, there is a necessity for more than the informative role of journalists. Instead,

one of the goals in the overall commercialization and profit-driven competition is for journalists to think about economics as well (Petrović, 2014; Selenić, 2022: 146). Given this reality, it's clear that anyone who chooses this profession must have extraordinary patience to deal with numerous challenges, including those in journalism primarily focused on sports.

"Envisioning the journalistic profession, young people often see themselves as rebels and vagabonds who constantly wander the world and metropolises, moving from plane to plane, changing taxis and trains, luxury hotels and prestigious theaters. They capture interesting events, unusual human destinies, terrorist actions, ecological disasters, record political revolutions and processes, glamorous gatherings, sports spectacles, and similar important events with their cameras, laptops, microphones, digital cameras, and increasingly rare pens" (Jevtović, Petrović, and Aracki, 2014: 35).

This romantic view from the book "Genres in Contemporary Journalism," published a decade ago, is complemented by further notes stating that they are correct, "but at the same time, they are wrong, neglecting the difficult and professionally challenging path that needs to be taken to reach the highest levels of this wonderfully seductive, attractive, noble, and minerally tough profession" (Jevtović, Petrović, and Aracki, 2014: 35). On this professionally challenging path, there are livelihood concerns and, in general, considerations about the present and future of this profession. In one of the earlier studies (Selenić and Vulinović, 2021: 63), conducted among journalism students at the Faculty of Sport at the University "Union – Nikola Tesla" and the Faculty of Political Sciences at the University of Belgrade, it was emphasized that "the low income and lack of free time due to the volume and description of the job" were cited as the biggest drawback of sports journalism. Following this line, this paper examines the current perspective of young people who have chosen the journalistic profession, specifically through specialization in sports journalism, and their thoughts on sports journalism and the work of a sports journalist.

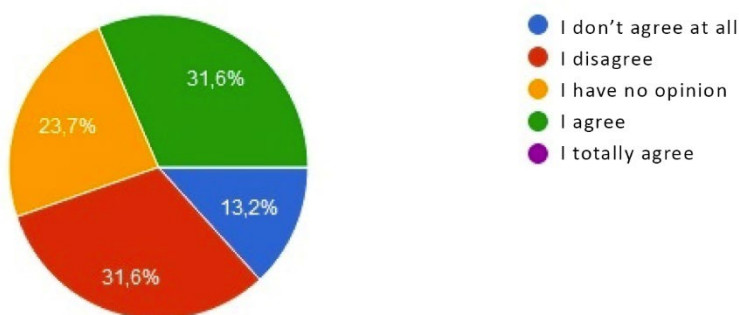
What do students and graduates of sports journalism say?

The research examined a series of statements using the Likert scale, measuring agreement and disagreement with them. The analysis involved students in their second, third, and fourth years of sports journalism at the Faculty of Sport, University "Union – Nikola Tesla," as well as graduates from the last few years (this institution recently celebrated a decade of existence and is unique in Serbia precisely for its sports journalism studies), whose total proportion among the respondents (out of a total of 38) is 10.5 percent. The participant structure is diverse in terms of the level of formal journalism education, as well as in terms of previous experiences in journalism.

Looking at the present situation, more than half of the respondents "generally positively value the field of sports journalism and the work of sports journalists in Serbia" (52.6%), while just under a third express the opposite view (31.6%), and 15.8 percent do not have an opinion on this matter.

However, a prevailing negative attitude emerges when the focus sharpens towards journalistic norms, i.e., the statement that "generally speaking, sports journalists in Serbia adhere to the principles of the profession and journalistic codes," as seen in Chart 1. Namely, 31.6 percent of respondents agree with this statement, while a total of 44.7 percent "disagree" or "strongly disagree," and nearly a quarter (23.7%) have no expressed opinion.

Chart 1. Attitudes of students and graduates of sports journalism regarding the statement that "generally speaking, sports journalists in Serbia adhere to the principles of the profession and journalistic codes."



So, although there is a relatively positive view of sports journalism in local media, the number of those who believe that sports journalists in Serbia fully adhere to journalistic principles and codes is not proportionally high. Opinions are divided regarding the statement that "generally speaking, sports journalists in Serbia have a significant influence on public opinion." Agreement with such a statement prevails (55.2%), with a solid opposing stance (31.6%), and 13.2 percent of respondents have no opinion. However, despite their influence on public opinion, more than half of the students and graduates of sports journalism (52.6%) emphasize that "sports journalists in Serbia are not adequately respected in society, generally speaking." Close to a quarter of respondents (23.7%) disagree, and practically the same proportion has no opinion on this statement. Moreover, these responses also reflect their perception of these issues, providing an objective insight into the current journalistic reality from the perspective of future media professionals.

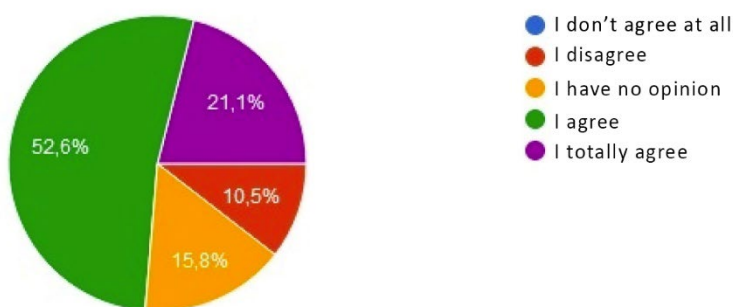
Moving forward and considering the challenges faced by media professionals, respondents are almost unanimous in their view that sports journalists need to be adequately financially compensated by employers in our country for their work in this profession. Financial security is undoubtedly one of the foundations of journalistic independence and everything else that stems from it. Thus, nearly 87 percent of respondents supported the statement that "sports journalists are not adequately paid for their work, generally speaking" (with nuances, as 44.7 percent "completely agree" and 42.1 percent "agree"). On the other hand, only 5.3 percent of respondents hold the opposite view, while 7.9 percent have no opinion on this statement. Also, it points to the motives that may dominate their long-term professional direction. It may be a litmus test for the initial stages of journalistic careers, which, as known to all in the profession, often involve longer unpaid internships or work for minimal fees and a long-term status as freelancers. Since the participants in this research are primarily at the beginning of their journalistic careers, most have encountered (or are still experiencing) this management approach in media newsrooms.

Considering this, young sports journalists in Serbia, both current and future, also identify a challenge related to the finances of newsrooms, namely instability in terms of funding. A lack of opportunities to resist external influences sufficiently negatively impacts their integrity, work, and credibility. Journalism, media organizations, public interest, and society suffer significant damage. Thus, the statement that "a significant problem in sports journalism in Serbia is of a financial nature – the inability of newsrooms to be financially independent enough to ensure autonomy from external influences" was supported by a staggering 94.7 percent of survey participants, differing only in nuances regarding whether they "agree" (57.9%) or "completely agree" (36.8%).

The research also confirmed that one of the major problems of the journalism profession is the adherence to professional self-regulation and better organization. A significant 81.6 percent of students and graduates of sports journalism agreed with the statement that "a significant problem in sports journalism in Serbia is a weak mutual organization or the lack of a strong professional organization at the state level that could protect sports newsrooms and sports journalists from pressure." Only 2.6 percent disagreed with this. In comparison, 15.8 percent had no opinion on this statement. These responses to the report followed that "a significant problem in sports journalism in Serbia is that sports journalists are not sufficiently mutually supportive, meaning they do not adequately protect each other from unjustified attacks and other pressures." Almost three-quarters of survey participants (73.7%) confirm this statement's correctness, 7.9 percent disagree, and the remaining have no opinion (18.4%). This problem is, in fact, much broader than the isolated segment of sports journalism and permeates the entire field of journalism in these regions. It also shows

that it is not only a systemic or professional issue but also reflects individual relationships and understanding of the importance of defending the journalism profession.

Chart 2. Attitudes of students and graduates of sports journalism regarding the statement that "a significant problem in sports journalism in Serbia is that a significant number of sports journalists in this sector are not adequately educated and prepared for this profession."



It is essential to emphasize, as seen in Chart 2, that research participants recognize the importance of formal education for performing tasks in the field of sports journalism, given the predominantly positive attitude towards the statement that "a significant problem in sports journalism in Serbia is that a significant number of sports journalists in this sector are not adequately educated and prepared for this profession." Formal education is often overlooked, quite tendentiously (even insidiously), with a simultaneous emphasis on the undisputed importance of journalistic practice. However, more is needed to maintain the significance of thorough and thoughtful journalistic training and maturation through higher education focused on this field.

Today, this has become one of the leading causes of the gap between different types of media professionals: young and experienced journalists, journalists and editors, editorial teams, the business part of the management sector, media theorists, and media practitioners. This rift within the media reality becomes the vacuum that traps many media workers and organizations, indirectly causing immeasurable damage to their functioning and future. Moreover, in this case, it is a phenomenon not unique to this region and the domestic media landscape (not even the area) but a trend that has prevailed globally in media and journalism for quite some time.

Therefore, nearly three-quarters of the participants in this research need to recognize the importance of this factor and understand the potential issues that may indirectly arise if they wholly disregard this factor. Or if certain other shortcomings, paradoxically stemming from the same functional framework, are intentionally devalued to divert attention. These shortcomings often manifest in the absence of nurturing and applying principles in fundamental categories of performing this profession, visible through the lenses of journalistic ethics and professionalism. Today, they are also evident in the sphere of adequate reflection and adaptation to the challenges of the 21st century that journalism and media face, especially those of a technical and technological nature.

Respondents also have concrete suggestions for improving the functioning of sports newsrooms and the quality of working conditions. They believe that more significant investments are necessary in human resources, i.e., increased investment in their professional development and adequate financial compensation for their work (salaries). They also emphasize the need for better personnel selection (both journalistic and editorial), preferring more professional solutions rather than those who "blindly follow management." At the same time, the importance of monitoring and increased investment in the technical and technological domain is highlighted, along with the significance of "implementing ideas and working methods from leading world sports newsrooms" and analyzing successful editorial models worldwide. However, this should be done not to copy them but to learn from them about the importance of respecting the profession, public figures, traditional journalistic techniques, and innovation in work.

The participants in this research also provide insights into possible improvements in content preparation and dissemination, emphasizing the importance of "avoiding formality and templates, i.e., originality," as well as a "different way of organizing and disseminating content." There is also an insistence on developing an editorial culture through "direct communication, openness, understanding of others and new ideas," and "advocacy for their journalists and greater courage when it comes to sensitive topics."

After such assessments, potential paths for improving sports media in Serbia are expected (in terms of quality, extraordinary reputation, and more). Some responses on this topic closely follow what was expressed in the previous corpus, emphasizing more excellent material investment in employees, their working conditions, development, and salaries. On the other hand, some respondents admit that a good starting point is to begin with oneself ("Let's start with ourselves. Strive to be better every day").

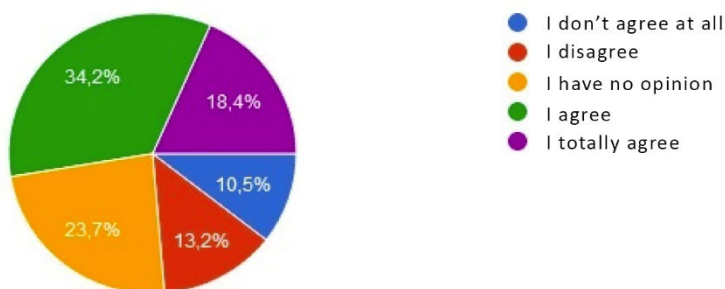
It is particularly significant that the importance of a different approach to reporting and content dissemination, based on truth, objective reporting, and adherence to ethical codes of the journalistic profession, is recognized and emphasized. Significantly, the importance of a different approach to reporting and disseminating content based on truth, objective reporting, and respect for the ethical codes of the journalistic profession is recognized and emphasized. A different approach involves "reducing sensationalism" and "tabloid behavior, "spreading unverified information." Consequently, the discussion leads to the importance of creating higher-quality content, which is a commonplace but a topic of enduring significance and a fundamental strategy for success in the media market, even in current, rather challenging circumstances, both locally and globally. Numerous practical examples and a growing number of media theorists highlight the importance of this factor and the acceptance of the so-called content-first²⁹ strategy in managing media organizations.

Strictly from the perspective of domestic sports, some participants emphasized the importance of giving more space to different content and reducing the dominance of those focusing on the two largest local sports organizations (Red Star and Partizan). They propose "more coverage of national teams and the importance of playing for one's country throughout the season."

There is also a recognition of the negative impact of "political influence" on editorial offices, which is crucial for changing the current situation. Furthermore, the necessity of "full media freedom," facilitated by better financial aspects of work, is highlighted. However, compared to some earlier responses, a confusing, even contradictory impression arises concerning the statement about a "positive outlook on the future of sports journalism in Serbia." Namely, the same group of respondents who view the current state of sports journalism more positively than negatively has a different outlook on its future. Almost half of them (47.4%) do not share such a view, while slightly less than a third (31.6%) agree, and the rest have no opinion. In conclusion, considering everything mentioned and the fact that these are current sports journalism students and recent graduates, their attitude towards the statement "I see myself as a professional in the field of sports journalism in Serbia in the long run" was examined.

²⁹ Global instruction to media organizations in the 21st century that in the light of deciding on the development of a particular media platform and giving preference to one of them (content on that platform), they must first deal with the content that will be placed there. This indirectly suggests that the quality of content and its applicability for a specific type of platform or media is fundamentally important and a priority topic in deciding which of them will have priority and how they will develop in terms of infrastructure.

Chart 3. Attitudes of students and graduates of sports journalism regarding the statement, "I see myself in the long term as a professional in the field of sports journalism in Serbia."



As seen in Chart 3, almost a quarter of the respondents already admit, at this stage of their professional development, that they do not see themselves in the long term in the field of sports journalism in Serbia. More than 10% of them are almost explicitly against this statement (completely disagree with the stated assertion), while more than 13% also specifically mention having such an opinion. The percentage of undecided individuals is exceptionally high, accounting for almost a quarter of the surveyed. Such a percentage of individuals already leaning towards this view is certainly not optimistic, and it also indicates the realities and trends that prevail in the world of journalism and media, not only locally but as a global trend that has been present in this field for quite some time. In developed media systems and economically wealthier societies, for about two decades, there has been a noticeable trend where journalism students lose interest in this profession during their studies and turn to other occupations. The most common "escape" route in this regard is the field of public relations or PR. Therefore, this is mostly a calculation stemming from the logic of anticipated earnings in journalism and the numerous challenges accompanying this profession. In societies where the position of journalists is even more complex and under external pressure and where the economic (financial) factor is even more modest, such disappointment is even more expected and frequent. The balance toward optimism is grounded in the fact that more than half of those currently (and still) confident that their professional future lies in the role of a sports journalist—a solid result considering that among the respondents, a significant number are already "eating the journalistic bread with seven crusts" (given that a considerable number of academics gain practical experience during their studies) and are well aware of all the circumstances that accompany this profession and industry.

The primary motivations for respondents to "stay" in sports journalism in the long term are expectedly the love for sports and the profession of a sports journalist, as well as the "adrenaline" and unique experiences that come with this job. Other positive aspects include travel, professional contacts, and socializing. People also desire to "change the image of sports journalism in our country" and explore the "possibility of achieving greater objectivity in sports journalism because journalism in this country must be objective, and media houses should not poison people with false information for the sake of profit." Respondents also mentioned the wish to "contribute personally to the media popularization of less popular sports" and "the general popularization of sports," as well as "following the development of journalism from the front lines"...

However, not a small number of those have essentially given up on pursuing sports journalism, which could be expected based on their attitudes regarding certain statements above. Among them are those who emphasize that they already "lack the motivation to stay in journalism in the long term," as well as those who explicitly state that they "will not engage in journalism as long as the state of journalism in Serbia is like this," and those for whom the primary motivation for such a professional orientation would be an improvement in the financial circumstances that accompany this profession (better salaries, primarily).

Concluding considerations

Considering the participants' structure, this research covered a diverse and representative sample within the journalism segment associated with sports. The conclusions reached are a significant source of information for the journalism profession to understand the perspective of those coming, or in other words, the future of journalism.

The cross-section of opinions indicates that the survey participants, to some extent, lament that sports journalists in Serbia undeniably influence public opinion, yet despite this, they are not adequately valued and compensated. Recognizing such an attitude as a diagnosis could lead to further research to analyze the causes of such a reality.

The concerning attitude toward their continued engagement in this profession, coupled with the previous responses regarding financial instability, a less influential journalism community, which consequently cannot strongly advocate for the adherence to ethical norms within the profession itself, and insufficiently quality interpersonal relationships contributing to the betterment of the work, are calling for alarm for the current generations of sports journalists. It signals that change is necessary for their well-being and the benefit of future generations.

It is crucial not only to reduce the number of disillusioned individuals but primarily to retain the majority of respondents who see their future in sports journalism in Serbia, especially considering the importance of academically educated professionals. The most common motivator among them is the love for sports and the desire to follow and understand sports events. Particularly interesting are those who emphasize the goal of contributing to the promotion of sports and preserving the ideals of truth through sports journalism. The journalistic profession needs to take a series of actions to elevate its reputation and influence. It's important to note that journalists are not all-powerful and, practically, are following a negative trend in society, struggling to fulfill one of the functions of journalism—to be a corrective factor in society.

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