

TARGETS AND CHALLENGES OF SPORTS JOURNALISM IN AZERBAIJAN

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Nəşr tarixi

Qəbul edilib: 1 iyun 2019

Dərc olunub: 5 iyul 2019

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Abstract: Sports journalism in Azerbaijan does not enjoy a high reputation, currently inciting much debate. This paper grew from the potential to explore an alternative assertion, that the development of sport journalism in Azerbaijan may have the power to increase interest in sport at both local and international levels. The questions thus arise: What are the current status and prevailing attitudes towards sport journalism in Azerbaijan, and which factors may lead to further development in this area?

The paper will explore a survey conducted among 11 leading sporting journalists. Analysis of this survey seeks to reveal what challenges face sport journalism in Azerbaijan and answer the question: How does our sport journalism compare with other countries.

One overwhelming conclusion from the survey is that sport journalism in Azerbaijan at present does not have enough depth of experience to compete with other countries. Training emerged as an issue and journalists felt that this could be a key factor in the development of their profession.

Key words: sport; journalism; challenges; training; practice

Introduction. Given the local and global interest in sport, sport journalism occupies a place of considerable power and influence. As in other forms of journalism, sport journalists are focused on topical issues, as well as personal and lifestyle-related stories. In the case of sport journalists, this is centred around the challenges and achievements facing

athletes, coaches, organisations and all those involved with the sporting industries. Some sport journalists pursue a career as reporters, while others may be editors. In some countries, this type of journalism is regarded as highly specialised, requiring long-term development of skills and techniques. However, this approach is not generally reflected in Azerbaijan. More precisely, some experts believe that the sports media remains in the shadow of other fields of journalism. Nevertheless, it should be noted that, despite certain shortcomings, progress has been observed in the sporting media of Azerbaijan in recent years. There are a growing number of dedicated TV channels, magazines and online portals. As Azerbaijan gains a global reputation for sporting innovation, there is a growing need for this focus on innovation to be reflected in the field sport journalism. Put simply, Azerbaijan has become a worldwide sporting success story. And it needs world-class journalists able to tell that story.

Phil Andrews in his book "Sports journalism a practical guide" writes: "Sports journalism is a specialist form of writing, and it is broken down into narrower specialisms. The major sports, such as soccer, cricket, rugby, racing, golf, tennis and athletics, are usually covered by specialists in these fields. Why? Because fans know their sports and their teams inside out, and unless sports journalists want to look foolish and ill-informed, they need to be equally knowledgeable. Keeping abreast of the daily developments in a major sport is a full time job. Only a few journalists are able to pick and choose the sports and events they cover. These are usually the brightest, wittiest or most incisive writers – columnists or feature writers with a roving brief to provide 'colour' pieces about the key moments in the world of sports areas" (1, p. 10).

In Azerbaijan, a major challenge is that sport journalists do not specialise in specific sporting fields. Knowledge is therefore limited, and fans quickly recognise this. For example, in our country, there is great public interest in wrestling, judo and boxing. To

create reports that are authoritative, accurate and trustworthy, the journalist needs detailed knowledge and personal contacts. Too often, the success of the completed story is compromised through lack of knowledge, even though the journalist may be, in general terms, professional and experienced.

This paper focuses on the environment necessary to stimulate increasing knowledge and awareness among sport journalists. For example, the unrivalled experts in sporting knowledge are the athletes, coaches and teams and organisations they represent. They know better than anyone the effectiveness of training, the chances of success, the challenges and opportunities. This knowledge must in all cases provide the most reliable foundation of information that fans and wider audiences demand. It is therefore reasonable that athletes and sporting organisations themselves should take some of the responsibility for improving the knowledge of sport journalists.

Another factor influencing the understanding and authority of sport journalists is travel. Sport journalists should travel regularly not only to enhance their sporting experience and knowledge, but to be exposed to journalism techniques and approaches in other countries. Travel provides different perspectives and greater understanding of sport in its international context. It also enables journalists to develop their professional networks, both within sport and among the international media, helping to provide stronger and more diverse sources for their future work.

In addition to knowledge, personal communication skills are critical, especially for journalists engaged in television or radio commentary. In this field, commentators in Russia have wide broadcast experience to draw on. More recently, Turkey has made great efforts to improve the delivery of sporting commentary. But while Azerbaijan is sometimes regarded as lacking in these skills, the style of Russian and Turkish commentary may not be most appropriate for Azerbaijan. Subjective factors are also involved in the assessment of commentators. The most popular commentators develop a highly-

personal style, but that style may not suit everyone. It comes down to personal taste. There is no doubting the power and influence of sport commentators.

In their book "Converging Media" Pavlik and Mcintosh write: "Today, for many, sport and television go hand in hand. Every year international sports competitions held in our country draw a large television audience." They quote television commentator Les Brown, who explains that television sport is "at once topical and entertaining, performed live and suspensefully without a script, peopled with heroes and villains, full of action and human interest and laced with pageantry and ritual" (2, p.330).

However, while the personal style and communication skills of sport commentator are important, the need to be specialised and highly knowledgeable remains paramount.

Sport thrives in a constantly changing environment. This adds a dynamic and exciting quality to sport that drives its popular appeal. At the same time it provides a challenge for professional sport journalists. In order to maintain their topical knowledge and authority, sport journalists have no option but to be avid consumers of sport at all levels, constantly updating their understanding by monitoring TV, online and print media, attending live sporting events and engaging informally with a wide network of contacts.

Increasingly, the international language of sport is English. Foreign language skills are therefore another important factor if a sport journalist wishes to succeed. Sport is not only confined to the borders of Azerbaijan, but is a global phenomenon. Speaking foreign languages - not only English - empower the Azerbaijan sport journalist to acquire new skills, new understanding, new knowledge, new networks in a far more efficient and beneficial manner.

It is not uncommon that young people, or professional journalists, are attracted to sport because of the opportunity to meet heroes and champions. It is a valid start point, but not sustainable as a driver of quality, ethical and professional sport journalism at the highest level. More commitment, more experience,

and higher levels of skill are required.

In general, Azerbaijani sport journalists have the potential to work to the highest international standards. We witnessed this potential in action during the first European Games in 2015, when journalists had the opportunity to work in an intensive way during the competition. Going forward, sport journalists need the incentive to reach for higher standards, gaining the experience essential for operating at the level of the Olympic Games, world and European championships.

In recent years, the importance of sport in Azerbaijan has increased dramatically. This is primarily due to events such as Formula 1, the European Games and Baku Islamic Solidarity Games. Sport has grown in influence within the social sphere, and taken a higher profile in the lives of citizens throughout the country. Accordingly, sport journalism began to develop more actively. Sport journalism is an integral part of the greater ambitions of journalism, not only reflecting sporting events or limited to the analysis of sports, but including the theoretical and methodological analysis of social processes related to physical culture and sports. Sport journalism, together with other areas of journalism, has entered the era of modern media communication, using multimedia and interactive technologies.

According to many experts in this field, sport journalism at its highest level in Azerbaijan is comparable to that in other countries of the Caucasus region. In their opinion, sport journalism in our country lags behind only Russia in the post-Soviet countries. The main focus now for those seeking to influence the development of Azerbaijan sport journalism is comparison with, and study of, the principles of journalism in the developed countries of Europe. Experts believe that organizing seminars and training for students in Europe would positively influence the development of sport journalism in Azerbaijan.

The lack of specialization among Azerbaijani sport journalists is an accepted challenge. Interest in sporting media stems from an

interest in sport. It is unreasonable to expect a journalist who does not have an understanding of sport to become a professional in sport journalism. To address this, sport journalism should become more aligned with the development of the country's sports, in order to improve skills and promote positive changes in attitudes towards sport. This requires a much closer cooperation between journalists and their network of athletes and sporting organizations.

One of the basic principles of sport journalism is the effective informing of readers about sporting news. In order to do this, sport journalists should pay attention to recent changes in the field of sports and be aware of the progress and outcomes of sporting events relevant to their specialist field of interest.

By engaging with athletes, sporting organizations and events, sport journalism serves an important function in the development of sport, in the context of sporting achievement and the wider social and cultural impact.

The development of the Olympic movement and the sporting movement more generally, combined with an increasing interest in healthy lifestyle, combine to make sport journalism one of the most powerful areas of media. As the prestige of Azerbaijan as one of the world's sporting leaders, hosting competitions such as the first European Games and Formula 1, brings into increasing focus the need to develop the field of sport journalism, by improving the training and retraining of sports journalists.

Therefore, it is believed that the development of sport journalism as a speciality in the Azerbaijan State Academy of Physical Culture and Sports will help increase the interest of young people in this field and further increase the number and quality of professional sport journalists in our country. The academy's new MA Sport Journalism programme can be considered an important step in a positive direction for sport in our country.

The Academy of Sport has also established a relationship with Sheffield Hallam University, one of the UK's most dynamic universities for sport, including sport

journalism. Students studying MA Sport Journalism in Baku have the opportunity to spend time at Sheffield Hallam during a two-week study tour, also including visits to major organisations such as the BBC. The Azerbaijan State Academy of Physical Education and Sport is committed to diversity and equality of opportunity, and welcomes applications from those with disabilities. The program is based in the academy's new Media Centre, a separate building on the academy campus that combines television and radio studio facilities, with a flexible learning space designed to encourage collaboration and innovation (3).

In the classroom, students receive modern knowledge of sport journalism in Azerbaijan and abroad. A significant place in the curriculum is occupied by disciplines including the language and style of sports journalism, genres and methods of sports journalism (radio, television, online, photography). Practical and theoretical learning is also carried out to give students a foundation in ethical journalism, as well as the business and marketing skills required to pursue a career as a modern communication professional.

Their aim is to make sure graduates feel confident while working in modern newsrooms and other media environments, able to handle cameras, microphones, studio lighting, and production desks. Through this program, students will be able to learn how to edit video and audio by using both mobile apps and industry standard software. Mobile journalism has an increasing impact on their audience and this is reflected by its prominence at the centre of the programme.

Today in our country one can feel the dynamism and development of sport. Journalists working in the field of sports need more training, more experience and more practice. The opening of this programme at the Academy of Sport is not an isolated initiative, but part of a wider national strategy to harness the power of sport for the nation's benefit. MA Sport Journalism students are able to study alongside and practice their skills in collaboration with other learners who are athletes, coaches, physical education

teachers, managers and rehabilitation specialists.

Today, it is encouraging that Azerbaijan is known as one of the world's sporting capitals. The successes of our representatives in international competitions as well as the prestigious competitions hosted by Azerbaijan confirm the country's growing sporting prowess. Undoubtedly, journalists play a large role in highlighting the achievements and recognition of our athletes. A few years ago, sport journalism was dominated by men. Now there are an increasing number of women sport journalists, adding a greater diversity and quality to professional sport journalism.

The rising number of international competitions hosted in our country contribute to the experience and thus professionalism of Azerbaijan's sport journalists. As more people become interested in sport at all levels, so the number of athletes and professional journalists is growing, bringing with it increased success.

Conclusion. In conclusion, it can be stated that teaching and/or learning should go hand in hand with practice and experience. When sport journalists are able to demonstrate a high level of skill, leading to increased engagement, a wider audience and enhanced reputation, their value to media organisations and the sporting establishment will increase. Higher salaries will attract a higher calibre of journalist. Higher quality of sport journalism will have a positive impact on the national sporting strategy.

To reach this point, more training is required - both inside and outside Azerbaijan, as is greater access to international experience. Sport journalists need the chance to specialise in order to earn the trust of athletes, coaches and managers, and gain authority among their audience. The field of sport journalism is still young in Azerbaijan. But it has every opportunity to grow in importance and quality as it matures.

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Azərbaycanda idman jurnalistikasının hədəfləri və problemləri *Zərifə Bayramova*

Açar sözlər: idman jurnalistikası, çətinliklər, təlim, təcrübə.

Xülasə: Azərbaycanda idman jurnalistikası yüksək nüfuza malik deyil və hazırda çoxsaylı mübahisələrə səbəb olur. Bu məqalə Azərbaycanda idman jurnalistikasının inkişafı yerli və beynəlxalq səviyyədə idmana marağın artmasına səbəb ola biləcək alternativ bir iddia araşdırmaq imkanı qazanmışdır. Sual yaranır ki, Azərbaycanda idman jurnalistikasına qarşı mövcud vəziyyət və üstünlük təşkil edən mənasibətlər hansılardır və bu sahədə hansı amillər daha da inkişaf edə bilər?

Məqalədə 11 aparıcı idman jurnalisti arasında aparılan sorğunun nəticələri müzakirə olunacaq. Bu sorğunun təhlili Azərbaycanda idman jurnalistikasının qarşısında duran çətinlikləri müəyyənləşdirmək və suallara cavab vermək üçün nəzərdə tutulub və sual yaranır ki, idman jurnalistikası digər ölkələrlə necə müqayisə edilir?

Tədqiqatın ən əhəmiyyətli nəticələrindən biri də, Azərbaycanda idman jurnalistikası hazırda digər ölkələrlə rəqabət aparmaq kimi təcrübəsinin olmamasıdır. Təlim bir məsələ kimi ortaya çıxdı və jurnalistlər bu peşənin inkişafında əsas amil ola biləcəyini hiss etdilər.

Цели и проблемы спортивной журналистики в Азербайджане *Зарифа Байрамова*

Ключевые слова: спортивная журналистика; проблемы; обучение; практика.

Аннотация: Спортивная журналистика в Азербайджане не пользуется высокой репутацией, и в настоящее

время вызывает много споров. Эта статья выросла из возможности исследовать альтернативное утверждение о том, что развитие спортивной журналистики в Азербайджане может повысить интерес к спорту как на местном, так и на международном уровнях.

Возникают вопросы: каково текущее состояние и преобладающее отношение к спортивной журналистике в Азербайджане, и какие факторы могут привести к дальнейшему развитию в этой области?

В статье будет рассмотрен опрос, проведенный среди 11 ведущих спортивных журналистов. Анализ этого опроса призван выявить, с какими проблемами сталкивается спортивная журналистика в Азербайджане, и ответить на вопрос: как наша спортивная журналистика сравнивается с другими странами.

Одним из важнейших выводов исследования является то, что спортивной журналистике в Азербайджане в настоящее время не хватает опыта, чтобы конкурировать с другими странами. Обучение стало проблемой, и журналисты почувствовали, что это может стать ключевым фактором развития их профессии.