

Thesis Booklet for PhD Dissertation

**Identity patterns and media in
contemporary sport culture**

Énekes András Előd

Thesis supervisor: Dr. Fodor Péter



UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN

Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies

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Background, objectives and outline of the thesis

As one of the most important and most adaptive social subsystems of the last century and a half, sport has shown its ability to adapt to the paradigm shifts of changing times in the 21st century. The concepts of the mass society and the society of spectacle, among others, have also been applied to sport, just as it is now taken for granted that we are talking about media sports and less media-ready sports, i.e. that technological developments are also shaping sport, which is an integral part of our economic and cultural reality.

The complexity of media and changing attitudes are a much more difficult phenomenon to grasp in contemporary sport culture, this dissertation therefore sets out to unravel and interpret some of the contexts that characterise the changing patterns of *sport production* and *consumption* through the 21st century examples.

The fact of mediation is so self-evident in the dimension of sport that it is almost hidden from us in everyday practises. Sporting competitions emerge so naturally as a real and realistic experience thanks to the optical media that it is worth looking at the relation in a different point of view. What is the guarantee that

highlights do really contain the most important moments of a game? Why is it so obvious that the television coverage of the most prestigious competitions is objective and that what we see on the screen is identical to what is happening in the stadiums? Does sports news write about the realistic cause and effects of the events, or they rather focus on stories what grab the readers' attention? These questions framed the thesis topic, which first had the form of an OTDK paper, and then I further refined the framework and the examples of the research during my PhD studies. I started by taking account of the highly nuanced relationship between sports and the media at the age of rapidly changing technology – an example of this and the difficulty of synchronous research, is that during the PhD course, several events occurred which made it necessary to rewrite sections what were supposed to be finished.

The early 2020s are witnessing a significant transformation in the international media landscape. Notably, the global social distancing and quarantine measures implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the increased utilization of digital devices, have markedly influenced the consumption of sports content. Traditionally dominated by television for many decades, sports media has seen a substantial

rise in the availability and consumption of digital platforms that offer genre-specific, league-specific, and team-specific content. This trend signifies a departure from the previous era, where sports blogging in the 2000s emerged as a pioneering force, notable for its linguistic and stylistic advancements in sports journalism and its challenge to the hegemony of conventional 'professional' media and television.

In the contemporary context, sports media is no longer confined to a single medium or genre. Instead, the concept of 'multiplatform' media has gained increasing relevance, best understood through the framework of media convergence. Media convergence in this context involves the integration of established regularities, styles, and often complementary genres of sports content across various platforms.

Since the early 2010s, there has been a notable transformation in the media landscape. Broadcast rights have predominantly remained in the hands of television networks, but sports content creators have diversified their platforms. For instance, bloggers with growing followings on Facebook have expanded their reach through additional content. YouTube vloggers now host analytical shows, while Twitter authors share succinct commentary and statistical insights. Additionally,

Instagram accounts offer behind-the-scenes glimpses and visual content leading up to major sporting events.

Despite the rapid development and growing audiences of these diverse channels, television continues to be the dominant medium for sports viewing. This is true even in the face of numerous crisis narratives concerning the changing broadcasting market. Furthermore, the rise of discourses around e-sports, which are increasingly successful in the market, underscores significant shifts in power dynamics. These changes elicit strong reactions from various value-based groups within the sports-consuming public. They also highlight the complex relationship between the expanding digital platforms and content offerings and traditional consumer attitudes within global sports culture today.

The growing concern for the future and quality of certain sports is largely a consequence of value-based cultural perspectives that view the increasingly complex web of mediated sports consumption not merely as a challenge but also as a potential threat.

In addition to the transformation of media economic models, it is crucial to acknowledge the striking phenomenon that, while the traditional broadcasting structure of sports

television influences the genre of each new digital platform, the television model itself appears to be the least adaptable in terms of content. The 'ancillary content' that thrives on digital media platforms, such as YouTube channels featuring topical discussions or in-depth tactical analysis, websites offering comprehensive summaries of competitions across different sports, and websites fostering strong fan communities with distinctive journalistic styles and accurate information, highlights this trend. Meanwhile, authors of thematic Facebook pages, utilizing detailed statistical sources, not only provide supplementary content to television broadcasts but also offer quick, comprehensible, and even humorous audiovisual satisfaction in an increasingly saturated attention economy. This approach contrasts with the traditional viewing experience of spending one and a half to two hours watching matches, or even several hours in the case of tennis.

In Hungarian television studios, for example, the emergence of sports bloggers has already introduced complications. The novelties introduced during broadcasts often fall short of making television programs more engaging, indicating a struggle to compete with the diverse and dynamic content available on digital platforms.

The main objectives of this work are to gain a deeper understanding of the transformational processes briefly touched upon here, by selecting key examples from the history of global sport culture over the past two and a half decades. The events and phenomena discussed in this dissertation facilitate an examination of the triple paradigm of cultural studies: text, institution, and public. Each case study addresses the components of this triad and explores the dynamics between them, though in varying proportions. In this context, sports media act as a filter through which one can analyze sports films, statements, autobiographical books, social media entries, and technical innovations produced as texts; the relationships between sports journalists and sports channels as institutions; and the interactions between these entities and the consumers, who are the intended audience. This analysis allows for the mapping of the complex, mutually influential relationships and identity constructions within the sports media landscape.

Hybrid identity patterns are emerging among digital media, athletes, media institutions, and members of the sports-viewing public, with the boundaries between these entities becoming increasingly blurred. In my research, I have endeavored to illustrate this complex interrelationship through a variety of

media texts, while also shedding light on the media ecosystem of late modernity. This exploration highlights the intersecting roles of various actors within this ecosystem. For instance, the analysis focuses on the case of the star athlete who repeatedly presents themselves across multiple sports media platforms; the construction of the professional career and image of the journalist or expert in the role of mediator; the self-representation of ordinary individuals who showcase their engagement with sports in diverse ways; and the works created by media techniques that challenge the traditional modes of sports consumption that have been established over the past century.

In the first case study, I examine the evolving patterns of identity associated with sports at the level of sports media. The second case study focuses on identity at the level of athletes, while the third explores this concept among ordinary individuals and everyday practices. In the fourth and fifth case studies, the issue of mediality becomes more prominent. The middle section, titled *"The Athlete's Body as an Everyday Spectacle in Contemporary Media Culture"* serves as both a methodological bridge and a nexus for the agency of the analyzed media, facilitating the exploration of different media cultures.

This section acts as a connecting thread between the various case studies, reflecting how the athlete's body is portrayed and perceived across different media platforms. It emphasizes the transition of the athlete's body from a specialized domain to an everyday spectacle within contemporary media culture.

The research corpus in the first three stages of the dissertation encompasses a wide range of sources: from articles and communities of professionalizing amateur fan blogs to athletes' self-reports and autobiographical novels, as well as social media posts detailing ordinary people's exercise routines. Through these diverse materials, the study delves into increasingly complex media theory issues, examined through fictional and experimental (documentary) film works and the analysis of virtual "prosthetic" techniques. These techniques provide a critical lens for understanding the multifaceted relationship between media representations and identity construction within the context of contemporary sports culture.

Outline of the applied methods

Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the dissertation topic, several methodological approaches were available, but in the end, the embedding in philosophical discourses and text analytical practices rather than the toolbox of social science research motivated the framing of the thesis. Five different case studies were included in the thesis, which were prepared using mixed methodologies, but it was primarily the analysis of different media texts that served as the basis for deep drilling by incorporating theoretical formulations into the interpretation that seemed to be inescapable from the perspective of contemporary cultural studies. Thus, in most places, the argument draws on the work of authors who have established and reinterpreted the theoretical tradition of German media studies, media anthropology, and deconstruction and poststructuralism.

The keywords in the title, such as mediality and changing patterns of identity, have not by chance become the focus of social science and humanities research in recent decades. The subject of sport as a social subsystem, however, has so far attracted relatively few interpreters, as far as (medial) cultural studies are concerned. Péter Fodor's books (*Térfélcseré* - 2009, *Újrajátszás* -

2019), which are indispensable for research on the topic in Hungary and come from the fields of literature and media studies, provide ammunition on the subject, but the broader understanding of physical culture and physical techniques seems to be increasingly emphasised by scholars from various disciplines in Hungary in the 20th century. In addition to the work of important thinkers of the 20th century such as Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, or the author of the literature of feminism, Judith Butler. Bourdieu has written extensively on sport, and his most important work on the subject, apart from his lectures on television, is perhaps his essay on the sociology of sport, entitled Proposal for a programme for the sociology of sport, which is the written material of a lecture he gave in Paris in 1980. Perhaps his most quoted statement that the world of sport is not a self-contained universe has stimulated the Anglo-Saxon cultural and media studies workshops of the last three decades, which have begun to focus more on the symbiosis of sport and media, when *media sport* became a term in its own right.

The insights and research on sports media in the English-speaking world provided a fruitful framework for this dissertation. Equally significant was the presence of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, a German-born literary and cultural scholar who has

long resided in the United States. His writings on sport offer critical perspectives in a less explored area of Western cultural studies, viewing professional sport as an aesthetic phenomenon often overshadowed by industrial mass culture. Gumbrecht's theoretical works emphasize the physicality of athletes and the collective presence of bodies in stadiums, contrasting mediated sports consumption as a form of absence.

This paper aims to contribute to contemporary sport culture through a media anthropological lens that integrates insights from recent decades of media studies with the essayistic research approach characteristic of Gumbrecht. It seeks to bridge disciplinary boundaries within an inherently interdisciplinary field, synthesizing diverse approaches into a cohesive scientific language.

The relevance and exemplary value of the case studies lie in their exploration of regional and global innovations or trends in sports media, spanning from the early days of broadband Internet penetration to the present era of pervasive digital media.

Summary of the thesis results

Digitalization has brought about changes in global media culture, including sports media, across multiple phases and through various media simultaneously. The primary contribution of this thesis is to illustrate the different stages of this transformation through case studies.

For athletes, sports journalists, and amateur sportspersons/consumers alike, there are increased opportunities to showcase their performance and attitude, thereby shaping their persona and image in the competitive arena for attention. Amidst the process of media hybridization and platform expansion, sports actors and the associated media economy have swiftly adapted. This evolution reflects Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the *industrialization of sport production* in the early 1990s, which has now become multipolar in the era of digitalization.

Alongside the evident reorganization on the production side, there is also an expansion of offerings at the platform level and a diversification of identity representations facilitated by platform logics. Notably, major international sporting events are scheduled to avoid overlapping seasons, influenced significantly

by conglomerates that own television channels and prioritize profit maximization.

The proliferation of channels is inseparable from the discourse of economic competition, with almost all social media platforms operating under specific logics adaptable to sports-related content. This includes platforms crucial for official communications at the level of sports organizations (e.g., Twitter, Facebook) and those enabling individual expression by professional or amateur athletes (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, fitness apps), as well as platforms utilized broadly within sports journalism.

Overlap between these platforms exists, as well as crossover among media and various content producers. Chapters focusing on football bloggers in Hungary and figures like Lance Armstrong underscore how participants in public sports discourse – including amateur opinion leaders – play pivotal roles in shifting audience platforms and mobilizing consumers.

The theory of deep mediatization is central to the final three chapters of this dissertation, drawing on ideas expressed in Andreas Hepp's work to support key arguments. A significant theme shared across these sections is the concept of observation in the Foucauldian sense – both being observed and the act of

observation itself – and its contemporary manifestations. This theme is exemplified in various contexts, such as the sharing of personal or group training achievements in recreational sports, technologies for self-optimisation, and the portrayal of the everyday life of a fitness star in the film *Sweat*. These examples illustrate how digital power exerts a panoptic gaze, invisibly controlling individuals' lives.

In *Zidane, A 21st Century Portrait*, surveillance is a fundamental theme explored through experimental and documentary traditions, challenging viewers' capacity for attention. The film portrays surveillance not merely as a method of control but as a pervasive aspect of modern existence.

The virtual audience, discussed in the final case study, underscores the sophistication of digital technologies in mediating sporting events. During the 2020 pandemic, viewers were increasingly subjected to the manipulative influence of media companies, highlighting the evolving nature of mediatised sports consumption. These insights extend beyond Foucault's concept of surveillance to include Hepp's notion of 'interveillance', which reflects how digital platforms enable constant monitoring of individuals' digital traces – whether celebrities, friends, family, or oneself. Platforms like Instagram,

TikTok, Strava, and other fitness apps play a crucial role in shaping self-perception, self-representation, and identity formation.

One of the key findings from the case studies is that traditional sports broadcasting, which historically assumed a passive audience, is now part of a paradigm shift characterized by what Axel Bruns terms 'produsage' – a blend of production and usage in digital content delivery.

The thesis explores the evolving relationship between television and sport at multiple junctures. Initially, identifying sports broadcasting as a sub-genre of television served as a foundational starting point for this research. However, it also emerges as a crucial conclusion when viewed through the interpretative lens of media convergence and platform expansion. While traditional television sports broadcasting fits comfortably within genre categories based on seriality and consistent textual, editorial, and reception elements, its identity has undergone significant transformation over the past fifteen years.

Chapter 2.2 specifically analyzes the relationship between Hungarian sports bloggers and television studios, highlighting a shift toward data-driven sports analysis during live broadcasts. Commentators increasingly supplement matches with diverse

statistical insights, accompanied by proliferating data visualizations such as heatmaps, tactical diagrams, and picture-in-picture displays.

The most notable characteristic of this transformative phase in sports broadcasting is the frontier-like integration of streaming platforms, as discussed in the introduction. Streaming services are progressively securing substantial portions of championship broadcasting rights, posing challenges to traditional linear TV providers. This trend underscores the encroachment of new media technologies into the traditional domain of televised sports.



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List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian book chapters (3)

1. **Énekes, A. E.:** Mediális transzgresszió és eseményyszerűség a Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait című filmben.
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