



## Article

# Social Media Publishing Strategies of German Newspapers: Content Analysis of Sports Reporting on Social Networks by German Newspapers—Results of the 2021 Social Media International Sports Press Survey

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**Abstract:** Newspaper sports departments in Germany are reacting to changes in social media by expanding their offerings and employing a variety of publishing and engagement strategies. In this constantly evolving media environment, it is important to understand how newsrooms utilize social media to inform their audiences. This study examines the approaches German newspapers apply to publishing sports content on social media, and outlines how users interact with these posts. In analyzing these aspects, this paper applies theoretical elements of agenda setting and audience engagement, gender in media, and quality and diversity of published content. Social media posts were examined across eight German publications, totaling 3633 posts from Twitter and Facebook. Results in the study, which is part of the global 2021 Social Media International Sports Press Survey, highlighted how most of the content published by German newspapers on social media aimed to redirect users to the publications' websites. The findings also reflect how social media is used less as an editorial space and more as part of a campaign to increase the audience. These results demonstrate challenges for the quality of sports coverage distributed via social networks in Germany.

**Keywords:** social media; sports journalism; audience engagement; agenda setting; diversity; quality; International Sports Press Survey



**Citation:** Seeger, Christof, Thomas Horky, Jörg-Uwe Nieland, and Peter English. 2023. Social Media Publishing Strategies of German Newspapers: Content Analysis of Sports Reporting on Social Networks by German Newspapers—Results of the 2021 Social Media International Sports Press Survey. *Journalism and Media* 4: 599–611. <https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia4020038>

Academic Editors: José Luis Rojas Torrijos and Daniel Nölleke

Received: 14 January 2023

Revised: 24 April 2023

Accepted: 11 May 2023

Published: 16 May 2023



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## 1. Introduction

Social media is playing an increasingly important role in sports communication (Billings and Hardin 2016) and sports journalism across the world. In Germany, the sports departments of newspapers are reacting to this change by expanding their offerings on social media by using a variety of publishing and engagement strategies. These possible strategies range from simply distributing the content published in print to changing it into special online content, to content created specifically for social media channels. The connection with club and association, league, or competition content plays a special role. The use of fans, clubs, or athletes on social networks has been studied worldwide (cf. Abeza et al. 2021; Grimmer 2019) and, as a result, social media can be understood as a new form of distribution by digital media companies (Schneider 2013) and newsrooms. This expansion differentiates the program of sports journalism with regard to digitization (Newman 2011), with the content contributing to the digital business model of formerly exclusively analog newspaper brands, mostly in an uncertain way (Wikström and Ellonen 2012).

Newspaper editors seem to use different strategies when distributing content via social networks. On the one hand, the goal can be to increase the reach of an article; on

the other hand, there is an opportunity to increase journalistic diversity and ultimately, the quality of sports journalism. The first function can be understood as addressing the audience in the sense of audience engagement. Changes, including the expansion of topics, the focus of content, sources, or different authorships, would mean an increase in diversity in newsroom coverage. In the constantly changing media environment, it is important to understand how newsrooms are utilizing social media to inform and engage with their audiences and which kinds of strategies are used by newsrooms. The results can help assess the importance of digital content in sports journalism. As a result, this study examines the strategies newspapers in Germany apply to publishing sports content on social media. It also describes how users react to this content through their interactions with the newspapers' social media posts. In examining the types of posts and the proportion of photos or videos, as well as the interaction with users in the form of answers, likes, shares, or retweets, these results have been utilized to evaluate the relevance of social media for sports reporting in traditional newspapers in Germany.

In summary, the study analyzes the following research question: How do traditional newspapers in Germany distribute the content of sports reporting via social networks? Special focus is placed on the form of audience engagement and the variety of reporting. In order to answer the question, the study on the global comparison of sports reporting in print media, the International Sports Press Survey (ISPS), was expanded to include social networks as a form of distribution.

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Approach

Sports journalism and media scholarship have often focused on content, including in previous versions of the ISPS (Schultz-Jorgensen 2005; Horky and Nieland 2013; Rowe 2007, 2013). While this approach continues to be important in tracking changes in sports publishing, it is also vital to examine social media content to understand how official organizational publishing is applied on this growing platform that can be increasingly important to some media. In the evolving digital environment, newspapers have been described as “multi-platform enterprises” (Ju et al. 2014, p. 3), with their journalists operating as “multi-media gatekeepers”, by determining which content is directed to print, online, or social media, and which information is ignored (English 2017, p. 493; cf. Nölleke et al. 2017). The roles of journalists and editors have been expanded to include social media on top of traditional routines (Abisaid and Li 2020), with duties including publishing news, stories, and various content on these newer types of platforms to increase readership and hits, allow direct contact with users, and receive reactions such as likes, shares, or replies.

Pavlik (2000) examined the influence of new technologies, such as social networks, on journalism and was able to identify four changes: “(1) how journalists do their job, (2) the content of news, (3) the structure of the newsroom and the news industry, and (4) the relationship between news organizations and their publics” (p. 236). Wilson (2008) demonstrated the importance of Facebook for journalism in the early years after its launch in 2004, and, in her analysis of the different production of sports news in print and online, Reed (2013) examined Facebook and Twitter and identified different strategies of news gathering and their impact on the profession. Schultz and Sheffer (2010) were able to show how, in sports journalism, the social network Twitter, in particular, was used for distribution and thus for increasing reach.

Burggraaff and Trilling (2020) examined the strategies of distribution using a quantitative content analysis of Dutch online and print news articles. The focus of the automated analysis of nine media was on news production and the different news values in print and online. They found “significant differences between online and print news” and argued “that they can be explained by focusing on the journalistic routines” (p. 125). Some editors even published more reports online than offline (in print), and the authors referred to the faster way of working in these evolving newsrooms. Reference was made to the thematic focus in terms of the different quality and the variety of sources. As a result, the authors

concluded, there were “visible differences between online and print news in terms of news values” (p. 126).

### 2.1. Audience Engagement

Media content is distributed via digital media, such as social networks, in order to reach a larger audience. Media organizations utilize social networks primarily to bring topics to a broader public, to increase the audience, and start a dialogue with the audience. In addition to the possibility of reaching a younger audience, [Cassilo \(2021\)](#) describes various strategies for audience engagement in the field of sports journalism and social media:

“[...] successful engagement strategies on social media allow news organizations to spread their content to a wider audience, including people who do not normally visit that publication’s website . . . Furthermore, by engaging with an audience via social media, journalists and media organizations will foster a relationship with their audience. [...] Finally, engagement helps sports journalists do their reporting” (pp. 293–94).

From this perspective, various questions arise, such as the frequency, type, and form of presentation of the topics that are disseminated in sports by traditional media via social networks. Furthermore, it is important to understand which topics attract the greatest attention from the audience and which types of posts receive the most interaction from readers.

This form of media content dissemination to reach a bigger audience can also be explained by the theory of agenda setting ([McCombs 2004](#)). [Fortunato \(2008\)](#) and [Zimmerman et al. \(2011\)](#) employed this approach to examine sports organizations and, since the existence of social networks, there has also been analysis of agenda setting in digital media, including intermedia agenda setting ([Anderson and Caumont 2014](#); [Sayre et al. 2010](#); [Groshek and Groshek 2013](#)). The theory of agenda-setting in the field of social networks has also been examined several times in relation to sports ([Abeza and Sanderson 2022](#)). In contrast to athletes, clubs, or associations, media organizations have rarely been the focus of attention ([Oelrichs 2022](#)).

Another shift in contemporary media is that journalists—and sports journalists—have become an important target group for social media content, especially in relation to human interest stories on athletes ([Oelrichs 2022](#)). Sportspeople are a key component of sports coverage (see [Horky and Nieland 2013](#); [Rowe 2013](#); [Schultz-Jorgensen 2005](#)), and with their increased presence on social media—and, in some nations, reduced traditional media appearances—their posts can be repurposed as news content, with social media becoming a source ([Oelrichs 2022](#)). [Abisaid and Li \(2020\)](#) note how social media is a more relaxed style of communication by journalists, especially compared with the more rigid rules based on objectivity in traditional sports media. Other studies have examined social media as a means of self-portrayal by athletes, clubs, or associations ([Lebel and Danylchuk 2012](#)), as a form of distribution to circumvent the traditional information service of sports journalism ([Nölleke et al. 2017](#)), or with different content and forms of sports reporting ([Kian and Clavio 2011](#)). Social media is often understood as a marketing tool to spread information and engage fans ([Bowman and Cranmer 2014](#); [Boyle 2012](#)). [Moritz \(2015\)](#) analyzed the influence of digital media on the flow of news (cf. [Wigley and Meirick 2008](#)).

Twitter has been found to be a popular and effective tool for reporting in sports journalism, with the platform’s ability to break news quickly, providing commentary and opinion being quickly recognized by journalists (see [Abisaid and Li 2020](#); [English 2016](#); [Nölleke et al. 2017](#); [Schultz and Sheffer 2010](#); [Oelrichs 2020, 2022](#)). [Ju et al. \(2014\)](#) examined the social media accounts of 66 American newspapers, finding Twitter to be the most influential social media network, with a greater audience reach than Facebook. However, editors doubted the effort and subsequent results of including social media in the journalists’ roles and routines. [Oelrichs \(2022\)](#) notes how German journalists generally appeared reluctant to utilize social media compared with other nations and that this approach also applied in sports. Previously, [Oelrichs \(2020\)](#) outlined that German sports

journalists were reserved in their Twitter and social media usage (see also [Nölleke et al. 2017](#)), with low use of personal accounts, and the conclusion that sports journalism in the nation was less controversial and less suited to social media than political reporting. Despite the journalists' apparent reluctance to use social media, [Oelrichs \(2022\)](#) found that 16.1 percent of articles in three online German publications contained social media as a source. The rate of usage was lower in soccer, other team sports, and winter sports. In India and Australia, [English \(2017\)](#) found that sports journalists balanced the demands of giving their opinion and reporting factual information on Twitter, despite little formalized organizational guidelines or controls. However, more opinion was included in their social media posts, compared with content in traditional media stories. It is important to note that in this area of sports media, less is known about how news organizations utilize social media platforms for their publishing and engagement and it is a key reason for this study.

## 2.2. Quality and Diversity

Examining the quality and diversity of sports media is another important aspect to consider in contemporary sports media research. [Voakes et al. \(1996\)](#) noted diversity as an enduring concept in the context of mass media. They introduced a variety of sources and topics as the main elements of diversity in newspapers of different sizes and scopes. Looking from the recipient's perspective, [Urban and Schweiger \(2014\)](#) explained diversity, relevance, ethics, impartiality, objectivity, and comprehensibility can be employed to define the quality of news. The issues of quality and diversity are particularly important in the changing media environment, which in the different market conditions, has involved combining editorial desks and experimenting with new business models. For example, the general global decline in readership, subscriptions, and advertising seems all but irreversible. The intermedial competition, including live reporting on television and the constant potential for online and social media reporting updates, place an additional burden on the work of newspaper editors and staff. As a result, they have to generate content and illustrate perspectives that have not been previously provided to viewers. In this environment, newspapers have to include important background details in stories and offer more information than purely live commentary, otherwise, the existence of print journalism will be endangered. By examining the types of posts newspapers publish on social media, this study provides an indication of the relevance of this medium in German sports journalism.

The variations in coverage of genders in sports reporting can be described as an important aspect of diversity and also quality. In research, gender diversity has already been examined several times with regard to the authorship of articles and as a thematic focus of reporting. The male dominance of sports reporting and sports content has been a regular focus in media research, including in newsrooms and reporting. Based on the ISPS, [Rowe \(2013, pp. 235–9\)](#) wrote about the “under-representation of female sports writers” and “a profound masculine bias” in sports journalism. This theme has been consistent across media across the world, including Germany, the US, Spain, and Australia ([Abisaid and Li 2020](#); [Horky and Nieland 2013](#); [Ihle 2022](#); [Kian and Clavio 2011](#); [Ramon 2016](#); [Rowe 2013](#)). For example, in German television news, less than 10 percent of coverage has been dedicated to women's sport, reflecting the organizational view that there lower overall newsworthiness for female athletes and competition ([Ihle 2022](#)). This finding is consistent with previous work examining gender inequality in sports, with [Ihle \(2022, p. 22\)](#) concluding there is a “systematic disadvantage” in women's coverage. The disparity between male and female content in sports was also found on social media. [Abisaid and Li \(2020\)](#) examined Twitter usage by male and female sports journalists in the US to investigate how they communicated with their audience. They found that while both sets of reporters tweeted at the same rate, statistically, they employed the social media platform in different ways as part of their reporting routines. Male journalists were more likely to post about sports, but less likely to tweet about women's sports, and applied an “assertive language style” ([Abisaid and Li 2020, p. 769](#)). Female journalists were more reluctant to post about



sports and used less assertive language. They found that only 2.3 percent of sports tweets were about female sports and athletes.

“One of the most promising and touted features of social media is its potential to democratize information to the masses. In the case of sports journalism, this would mean that women’s sports would be given equal consideration with men’s sports. This has proven not to be the case” (Abisaïd and Li 2020, p. 772).

This previous research allows for important comparisons with how German newspapers utilize social media in relation to the diversity by gender of athletes and teams.

### 3. Methodological Approach and Survey Design

Since it was founded in 2005 (Schultz-Jorgensen 2005; Horky 2010), the ISPS has been providing data on the quality and structural diversity of sports reporting by print media. In the 2011 survey, a worldwide international comparison was provided with an analysis of 81 newspapers in 14 nations. The central findings were that men report on male sports, topics apart from current event reporting played a minimal role, and the quality of research was low (Horky and Nieland 2013). How about the situation ten years later? Could there be any changes or development? When considering the sports events and coverage within this decade, there appear to be significant challenges and a shift in the quality of reporting. Major events during this period include the first World Cup on African soil in 2010, the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics in Brazil, and the 2018 World Cup in Russia. Each mega-sport event opened up a debate on sports reporting and its contents. More and more investigative reporting, including doping scandals and corruption by FIFA, was visible and gained increased focus on the impact of sports journalism. Taking these changes and developments into account, it is worth examining the situation ten years later to provide comparisons and outline changes in the industry.

In 2021 a new edition of ISPS was initiated, with a quantitative content analysis of sports reporting in print media. At least one country was included from each continent in the period from April to July 2021. At least three publications were selected from each country: One nationwide distributed (quality) newspaper, one tabloid, and a regional newspaper. For Europe, there were 14 papers coded (8 for Germany, 3 for France, and 3 for Greece). For the 12 participants plus coding teams, a good intercoder reliability coefficient, according to Holsti (0.94) was calculated after a pretest and several training sessions (Krippendorff 2018). The analysis of the entire sports coverage (not just the sports section) comprised 18 variables on a structural and content level. These 18 variables are the same as those used (and tested) in the previous ISPS studies. The 2021 data set of eight countries contains a total of 6720 articles (2011: 6452, see: Horky and Nieland 2013).

Related to this examination, for the first time, an additional quantitative content analysis of social media accounts was conducted by examining eight German newspapers, called the 2021 Social Media International Sports Press Survey (SM-ISPS). Facebook and Twitter, two of the most popular social networks in the German population as a whole, were selected for the analysis. Facebook, as a network for public discussion, is the biggest social network in the country by number of users, while the social messaging service Twitter is very often used in the context of (sports) journalism like a news agency (Grimmer 2019). The implementation of the SM-ISPS was applied in the same way as the print study, within the same investigation period, carried out by the same group of coders as at the ISPS. The intercoder reliability for this social media analysis was as good as the print analysis, according to Holsti (0.94), and was calculated, depending on the variables, between 0.7 and 1.0. The analysis of 3633 articles posted by the newspapers on Facebook and Twitter included 11 variables taken from the print ISPS. These were the form and content of the contributions and the distinction between text, video, or photo content covering athletes or teams, as well as the type of sport, the authorship of the contributions, including gender of authors (i.e., named journalists or news agencies), different topics, such as fans or results, the importance of nationalism, and the type and number of sources. These variables

enabled us to describe the characteristics of the posts on the social networks on the one hand, and to draw a comparison with the print posts on the other.

Similar to the ISPS, the data were collected between 15 April and 2 July 2021 on an artificial week on 14 coding dates. If the article on the social networks linked to an article on the homepage, this article was analyzed. The analyzed media brands were selected by deliberate sampling. The media studied were also selected by deliberate sampling, taking into account the various media genres in Germany, from national titles to regional newspapers. The media brands contain the nationwide paper, the tabloid BILD, and the quality (broadsheet) papers *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, as well as the left-wing *tageszeitung*, and regional papers *Hamburger Abendblatt*, MOPO (Hamburg), *Stuttgarter Nachrichten*, and *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*. The newspapers with the highest circulation were selected in each category, representing the newspaper landscape in Germany. For each media brand, the accounts of the sports department on both networks were analyzed. The posts were collected manually, and after 24 h, each post was examined for user reactions. To evaluate these interactions, the number and type of reactions by users were counted. The study period was after the COVID-19 sports lockdown in Germany, but the ongoing pandemic likely had an impact on the results for sports journalism (Finneman and Thomas 2022).

Applying these guidelines allows an analysis of the development of sports reporting in this 10-year time frame and provides an understanding of the challenges of print media due to distribution channels like social media, including decreasing circulations and income and the increasing impact of digital technologies.

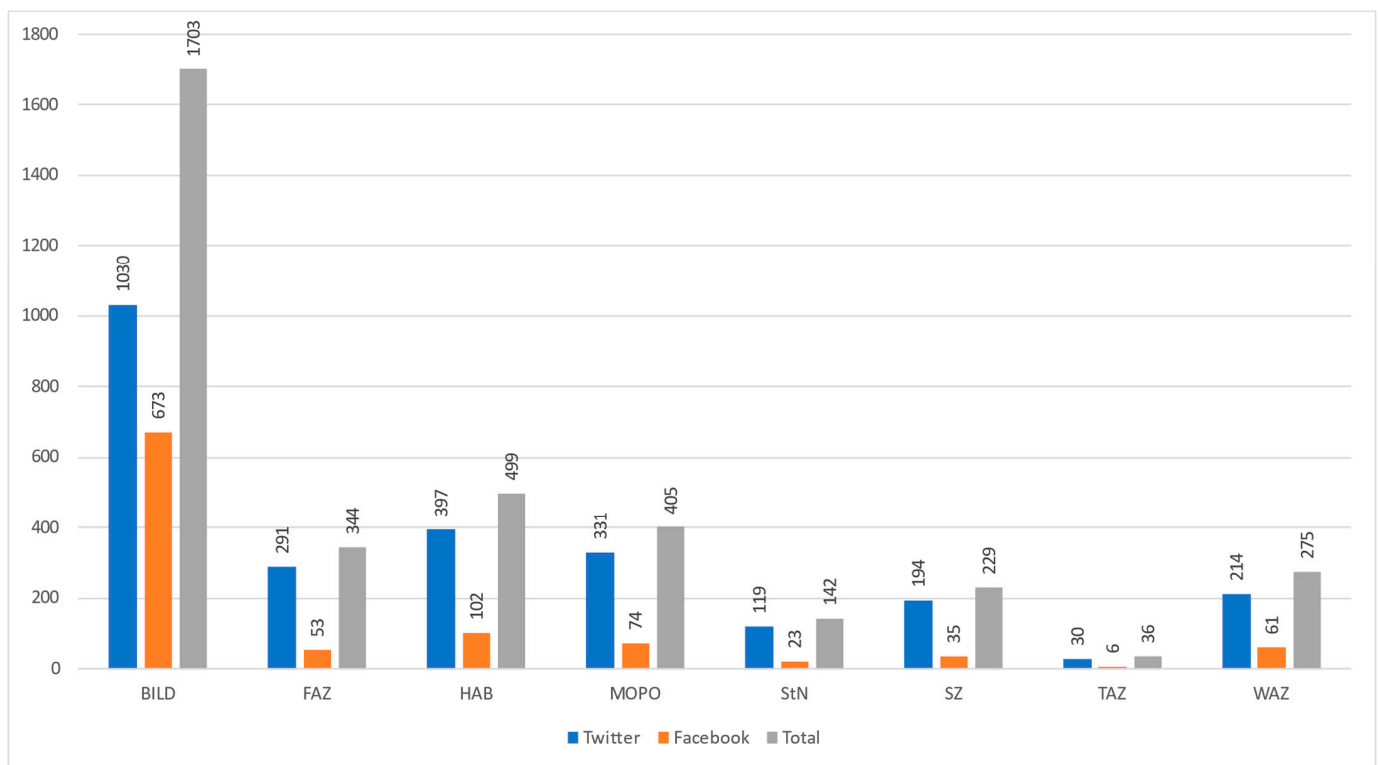
#### 4. Results

The entire sample contains 3633 posts on social media. When looking at the number of published posts on Facebook and Twitter, it is striking that 71.7% of the articles were published on Twitter, while 28.3% were published on Facebook. Even if the number of published articles were very different in relation to the different media houses (e.g., BILD: 1703 articles and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 229 articles), Twitter posts were more frequent (see Figure 1). Due to the large differences between the number of posts in the individual newspapers, a comparison of the different strategies between the individual editorial offices will not be made in the following results.

The content of the posts was rarely created exclusively for social networks, with most referring to existing articles: In 96.0% of the cases, the online articles are not original content, but the user is redirected to the publisher's homepage. About 2.0% of the posts on social media were a link to a video that had already been published online. Less than one percent represented articles created exclusively for social media. The visualization of the articles was mostly to be described as traditional, with 87.5% of the articles on social media illustrated with a photo and only 5.5% with a photo and a video.

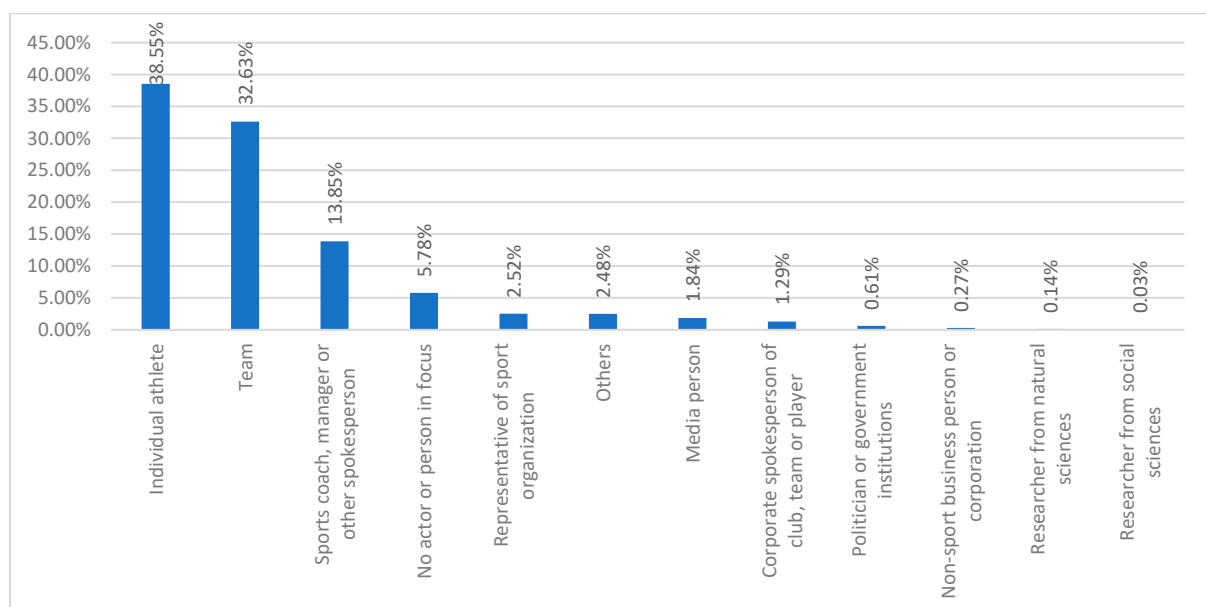
In addition, another 15.0% of the linked articles were behind a paywall and could not be read without a paid subscription. Almost every second article was marked with a name and thus written by a journalist (48.7%), 11.7% of the articles were agency news, while 87.2% of articles had a picture, and only 5.5% had an additional video.

Similar to the study of print editions (ISPS), there is a very large imbalance in terms of the gender of the authors in the SM-ISPS. 90.9% of the articles could be assigned to male authors, and only 5.3% were by females. While the number of articles by male authors is significantly higher on social media than in print media (72.6%), there is minimal difference for female authors compared with print media articles (5.9%).



**Figure 1.** Sample of 2021 SM-ISPS.

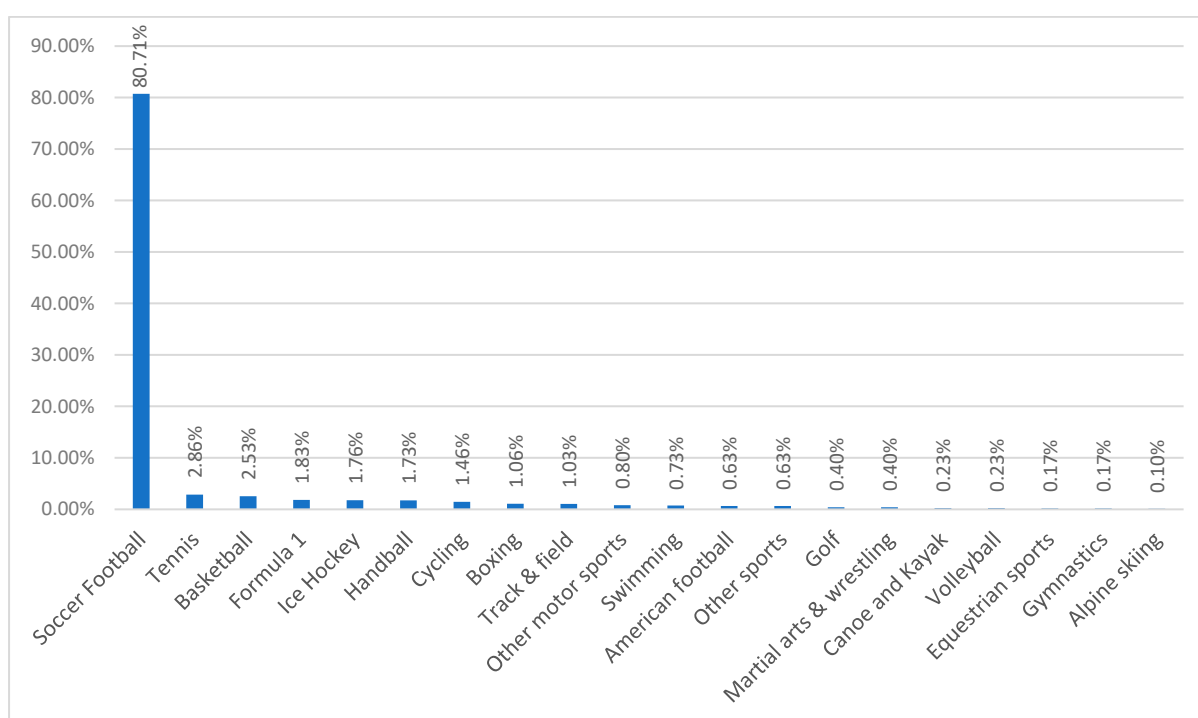
On social media, 38.6% of the articles reported on individual athletes, while 32.6% reported on a team. Sports officials, such as coaches or managers, were reported on in only 13.9% of the articles (see Figure 2). On the other hand, sports officials were identified as sources in 47.9% of the articles, and athletes themselves were identified with similar frequency (47.0%). The gender imbalance of named authors can be found with athletes too: 94.5% of the individual athletes were male, most of them obviously soccer players or men's teams. These results thus confirm the results of the 2021 print study of the ISPS.



**Figure 2.** Focus of reporting (2021 SM-ISPS).

Regarding the quality of articles on social media, the number of sources found in the coverage was low. In 52.5% of the articles examined, one source was quoted, 19.8% named two sources, and 17.6% no source at all. The sources of the contributions came mainly from the sports system itself. Sports coaches, managers, or other spokespersons (47.9%) and individual athletes (47.0%) were the most cited sources in the articles examined, with all other sources below ten percent. This result, with regard to the sources, is also comparable to the 2021 ISPS.

An interesting aspect could be observed in the selection of the reported sports (see Figure 3). In print and on social media in Germany, there is a strong focus on football/soccer as the main media sports in the country. However, with ISPS and SM-ISPS, both examinations show an interesting difference. While in the print publications, every third article was not about soccer, this is different on social media. 80.7% of the examined articles had soccer as a topic, followed by tennis (2.9%) and basketball (2.5%). In the analysis of the print editions, football accounted for 66.0% of content (Horky and Nieland 2013).



**Figure 3.** Covered sports disciplines on social media (2021 SM-ISPS).

A feature of social media posts is they offer the audience ways to react to articles. The most frequently used function for interaction is a like to express that the user likes the published article or just wants to keep the focus on it. The opposite can also occur, with a dislike, if the article is most obviously not liked. Disliking on Twitter does not exist as a function, but there were 11 dislikes on average on articles posted on Facebook.

With reference to the PESO approach of paid, earned, shared, and owned media (Kost and Seeger 2020; Xie et al. 2018), the forwarding and sharing of content as another form of interaction is particularly interesting. Publishers use social media to increase the reach of the core digital product as a form of audience engagement. Even though 7 out of 10 articles have been published on Twitter, the interaction rate with five average likes per article is significantly below the average of 108 likes on Facebook.

Posts with high audience engagement, i.e., a large number of interactions, can be an indication of importance for strategic decisions of the newsrooms. By far, the article with the most interactions and with that the biggest audience engagement in the sample, was a post by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on 21 June 2021 (see Figure 4). The post is a satirical topic of problems for the European Football Association (UEFA), with fans showing the rainbow



colors of diversity and tolerance inside stadiums (translation of headline: “Perceived Truth. Which UEFA has a problem with” ... “traumatized teams continue to play despite a player suffering cardiac arrest”, “an autocratic ruler can hold EM games in the Near East for his own PR”, “open right-wing hooligans form a “black block” in the stadium”, “packed spectator tiers without distance or masks during a pandemic”, 100%: “A stadium should light up in rainbow colors as a sign of tolerance”). The post on Twitter received 15,534 likes and was shared 3868 times. The post is part of a very popular series of posts like this published by the editorial department. It is part of a series of humorous, politically motivated posts that are very popular in Germany in this newspaper. With its large number of likes and shares, it represents an exception in the study. All in all, posts about popular football got the highest rates in audience engagement, mostly by liking the post.

76

3.868

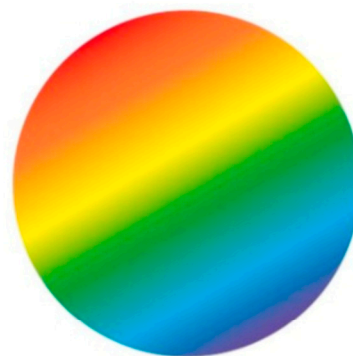
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## Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin

### GEFÜHLTE WAHRHEIT

Womit die UEFA ein Problem hat



- *Traumatisierte Mannschaften spielen weiter trotz Herzstillstands eines Spielers*
- *Ein autokratischer Herrscher kann für Eigen-PR in Vorderasien EM-Spiele austragen*
- *Offen rechte Hooligans formen einen »schwarzen Block« im Stadion*
- *Vollgepackte Zuschauerränge ohne Abstand oder Masken während einer Pandemie*
- *Ein Stadion soll als Zeichen für Toleranz in Regenbogenfarben leuchten*

**Figure 4.** The post with the most interactions. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Twitter, 21 June 2021 (2021 SM-ISPS).

## 5. Discussion

The analysis of articles on social networks as part of the International Sports Press Survey proved, above all, the high function of the audience engagement of the newspapers examined. As described by [Cassilo \(2021\)](#), an essential publication goal is to increase the reach of articles already published on the website (and, often, already in print). Results in Germany show that most of the content published by newspapers on Twitter and Facebook aims to redirect users to the publication’s website and that social media is used less as an editorial space and more as part of a campaign to increase the audience. The ways the news publications post content on social media provides a strong indication that there is no explicit social media strategy in the editorial offices but that these channels are only used for traffic generation, and thus, as reach suppliers. This is confirmed by the results of [Oelrichs \(2022\)](#), who called the process of utilizing social media as one of “copy and paste”.

Regarding the interaction on different social networks, one explanation could be that there is more content in a Facebook post than on Twitter due to the possible publication size (number of characters)—but at least enough for the user to make an assessment of whether they want to like, dislike, or share. Another explanation is the sociodemographic characteristics in the respective social media. Facebook reaches a rather bigger and with that older target group, which may also be closer to newspaper subscribers, and therefore, this part of the audience may identify more with the topics being posted about. Twitter, on the other hand, has a proportionally younger demographic in Germany (Koch 2022). As a result, the willingness to interact might be higher on Facebook. This is also reflected in the comments left on posts (an average of 51 on Facebook and 1.5 on Twitter), as well as in the forwarding, retweeting, and sharing of posts. However, it is difficult to make an overall statement about these user engagements as the interactions differ greatly between the various brands. However, this form of audience engagement can be described as a strategy for distribution.

In addition, the results on interactions also highlight a form of audience engagement, with the reach being increased primarily through content from the entertainment and satire sectors. The post with the most interactions confirmed the results of other examinations about agenda setting by satirical websites during the 2014 Sochi Olympics (Nölleke et al. 2017). Satire seems to be a very successful style for posts to produce an intense interaction and increase the reach of articles through social media. However, the post of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, which had a particularly wide reach, highlights an important example of audience engagement that is usually lacking in the newsrooms.

The strong thematization or the intensive focus on football/soccer when comparing sports is evidence on the one hand of the high level of mediatization of football in Germany, and on the other hand, of the audience building and social media agenda setting (Wiske and Horky 2020). The agenda of sports on social media in Germany is set by football, with the game dominating coverage. Additionally, when analyzing the coverage of different sports, the Corona Pandemic could have had a small impact because, unlike professional football, many other sports have been affected by the sports lockdown.

We would like to speak here of a *Narrowing Effect*. The mediatization of soccer also helps this sport in terms of digitization. In the day-to-day editorial work of digital newsrooms, not only have the classical models and methods based on news values (Burggraaff and Trilling 2020) long been used but much of the newsroom's roles and routines are controlled by key performance indicators (KPI) like page impressions, number of unique users, number of shares and likes. In other words, the topics published tend to be those that are also clicked on most by the user community. This inevitably leads to a reduction in the range of topics and supports the effect of echo chambers since the selection algorithms only suggest what is read. However, on the other hand, only what is suggested on a user's timeline can be read. The conclusions of the editors in the selection of topics are then possibly distorted. One can say serendipity, i.e., the accidental confrontation of a user with content that they had not initially thought of but which he might nevertheless find interesting, is becoming increasingly unlikely.

In summary, these results show that newspapers largely lack a strategy when it comes to distributing their content via social networks and that there are challenges for the quality of sports coverage distributed via social networks. In addition to the thematic narrowing, there is also a clear lack of diversity, and thus, quality in the number and type of sources used and the type of contributions in terms of forms of presentation or visualization. The results of the social media study are similar to those of the print study, this means that the opportunity to improve quality through the other form of distribution via social networks has not been used. The narrowing effect, in the sense of thematization through the focus on high-click media topics such as football, leads to a further loss of diversity. Men's football, which is mostly observed journalistically by men (Horky and Nieland 2013; Rowe 2013), also contains a strong focus on male authors in terms of gender diversity. This is

particularly significant when one considers the fundamental infinity of digital editorial space, and thus, of journalistic offerings when distributing content via social networks.

Overall, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic during the SM-ISPS seemed to be small, with nearly all professional sports leagues covered in the German newspaper running competitions. However, there is an effect related to the 2021 Football European Championships, which dominates the coverage—particularly in Germany. This impact might also help explain the dominance of soccer in the survey of social media content.

To answer the research question, this study demonstrates that there is a missing strategy for distribution of sports reporting via social media. Thus, the study provides valuable insights for consideration and assessment of future distribution of sports reporting via social networks, with audience engagement as a main factor. Furthermore, in terms of diversity, the study highlights a comparable lack of quality in sports journalism when it comes to distribution via social media.

## 6. Conclusions and Limitations

This is the first time since the start of ISPS that the SM-ISPS has been included, with the addition of a survey on distribution of articles on social networks. The main purpose of this additional examination was to demonstrate strategies for distribution and the influence of digitization on sports journalism. A difference in quality, variety, distribution, and reception was detected between the print editions and the articles shared on social networks. The differences mainly related to the issue, which is triggered by paying particular attention to KPIs on social networks. This narrowing effect entails subsequent problems, such as less variety in terms of topics, authors, and thus, overall quality.

It is also apparent that there is a missing editorial strategy in the distribution of articles via social networks: Editorial decisions are rarely made by sports journalists but rather by editorial management, which is primarily intended to increase audience engagement. In the future, this result should be the focus of quality research with regard to journalistic content on social networks.

Of course, this SM-ISPS study has some limitations. Only German newspapers were examined as media brands, and the situation seems to be significantly different in other countries and continents. Although different editorial departments and their strategies were examined with national quality and tabloid newspapers, as well as several regional newspapers, the market for sports information is significantly more extensive and other organizations like associations, federations, or athletes, could have different distribution strategies.

In addition, the quantitative analysis was limited to the frequency of content and, as a result, the reasons for the decisions to post could be very different (human or economic resources). In addition, the study was limited to an investigation period in which mainly so-called summer sports have their competition events, so no statement can be made about winter sports. A reproduction over a longer period of time and with a more extensive sample would be desirable.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, C.S., T.H. and J.-U.N.; methodology, T.H. and J.-U.N.; writing—original draft preparation, C.S., T.H. and P.E.; writing—review and editing, C.S., T.H., J.-U.N. and P.E. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy restrictions.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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