

MEDIA ACTIVITIES AND REFLEXIVITY: THE CASE OF CZECH SPORTS ACTORS¹

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary scholarship dealing with the relationship between the media and sports has focused mainly on a critical analysis of media messages relating to sport, on the political economy of media and on the transformation of sporting cultures as a consequence of globalisation, commercialisation and spectacularisation. Nonetheless attention has been paid to the ways in which sports actors actively approach or reflect upon the media. This paper addresses this gap as it analyzes different forms of sports actors' active use of and reflexivity about the media. Therefore, sports – and the term does not refer only to elite and high-level sports, but also to recreational and competitive ones – are not understood as solely subordinated to the hegemony of the media system. On the contrary, drawing on ethnographic research on three Czech sports associations (football, handball and sailing), the analysis explores different modes of active and reflexive approaches to media that appear in the sphere of sport. This analysis thus enriches the research agenda of sports media studies developed within the sociology of sport. Moreover, it provides empirical data that inform research on sports within the field of media studies.

KEY WORDS

activity – ethnographic study – mass media – reflexivity – sport – sports actor

1. Introduction

"I will be quite frank with you because you are not a journalist." These are the words that one of my interviewees used to frame his response to my question on reasons for the decreasing popularity of handball in the Czech Republic. The interview was carried out in 2007 as part of an ethnographic study on selected Czech sports associations. This statement demonstrates the trust established between a researcher and a respondent that makes an ethnographic study feasible. At the same time it reflects a feature that significantly affects the contemporary nature of sport: the narrow link between the media and sport. The term sport does not refer only to elite and high-level sports, as have often been emphasised, but also to sports that are competitive and recreational. In the course of the interview it became clear that the comment about the researcher not being a journalist not only embodies the significance that sports actors very often attribute to the media but it also provides evidence as to the ability of some sports movement representatives to *reflect* on media and simultaneously to approach them *actively*. These two qualities of sports actors are explored systematically in this paper.

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The term *sports actor* was first introduced by the Italian sociologist of sport Porro (2006), who referenced Touraine's writings. By conceptualizing the athlete as the substantive 'actor', he uncovered the disposition of sports association members to act collectively. From this perspective, Porro understands sports associations as potential spaces where the traditions of civil society and democratic decision-making processes can take place. Sport thus fulfils the role of the political arena where patterns of late modern reflexive action are established. As I indicated earlier, media can represent an object of this reflexivity and here I aim to explore different manifestations of such reflexivity in the context of Czech sports.

These active and reflexive standpoints are not representative of the Czech sports movement in its entirety. Moreover, since the analytical approach employed in this study is qualitative and prevalently inductive, the exploration of the frequency of these types of social action does not represent its main objective. What is relevant for the following arguments is the mere fact that sports actors *reflect upon* the media. This aspect has been overlooked within contemporary academic writings on the relationship between the media and sport. This is also why the main aim of this empirical study is to provide answers to *how reflexivity is expressed*. In other words, this study encompasses the plurality of forms of sports actors' *reflexivity upon the media*.

This reflects late modern macro-societal realities whereby media reflexivity has become an institutionalised means of social action. This empirical study, therefore, contextualizes a series of studies dealing with media reflexivity. Additionally, it explores general conceptualisations of the relationship between media and sport, and sheds light on sports actors' media activities. The following questions are thus addressed:

- How do sports actors *actively* intervene in the production of media messages and which media literacy competences do they rely on?
- How do sports actors *reflect upon* media representations of sports and the link between sports and the media?
- What are the implications of the findings on these questions for the conceptualisation of the relationship between sports and the media?

In order to answer these questions, this paper draws on rich empirical data collected in the course of an ethnographic study on Czech sports associations (football, handball and sailing), conducted largely in the first ten months of 2007. Several techniques were used to collect the data, including semi-structured interviews as well as participant and non-participant observations. The analysis was complemented with a systematic review of relevant primary and secondary documents.

In the following sections I first present a brief overview of contemporary conceptualisations of the relationship between the media and sport. Then I pay attention specifically to studies that – though not using the exact terms – have focused on sports actors' *activity* and *reflexivity*, and clarify the main tenets of the concept of *reflexivity*. In the following analytical sections, I focus on the ways in which sports actors actively approach the media and how they *reflect upon* them. The final discussion comments on major findings and outlines how these might shape future research.

2. Media and sport: main research areas

While three decades ago sports were 'largely off the disciplinary map' (Wenner 1998: 7) of media and communication studies, the specialisation of disciplines and differentiation of the discipline resulted in a gradual increase in research on this topic in recent years. Nowadays media-related research on sports does not only take up a substantial share

in the leading international sociology of sports journals (*International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, *Sport in Society*, and *Sociology of Sport Journal*), but it appears more frequently in academic fields unrelated to sport. In other words: when studying sports, the media matter. When studying the media, sports matter somewhat less, though still more than in the past. The increasing interest in sports also reflects the growing importance of the global sports industry and the increasing academic recognition of sports as social practice (Dunning 2004), together with another 'less serious' social sphere of popular culture.

This trend has also affected relatively new and budding scholarship within Czech media studies. Several inspiring academic essays, which explored mediated sports as a platform for the reproduction of nationalism and political ideologies, were published in a special issue of *Revue pro média* (the journal's rigorous academic style in many ways makes it a *de facto* academic journal, see Šlesingerová 2005; Laichman 2005; Binková 2005). The relationship between the media and sports is briefly summarised in Sekot's introduction to the sociology of sports. (Sekot 2006) Děkanovský's (2008) monograph *Sports, media and myths* is the first of its kind in the Czech Republic. Using approaches developed within literary theory and semiotics, Děkanovský provided a valuable insight into the mythical nature of mediated sport events and considered the relationship between sports, culture and politics. A recent article by another Czech scholar, Chovanec (2008), who analysed the poetic and interactive character of linguistic forms used in sports reports about the European Football Championship in 2004, represents another Czech contribution to studies on the media and sports.

A particular viewpoint has been provided by studies dealing with football fans, ultras and hooligans. Smolík (2007), demonstrated how the media play a role in creating a moral panic regarding hooliganism and ultras. Drawing upon Balcar's diploma thesis (2000 in Smolík, 2007) he sketched the role of media in influencing the behaviour of football fans, ultras and hooligans. Vochocová's (2007) content analysis of the subculture magazine *Football Factory* revealed ways in which football hooligans perceive violence.

Czech academics have touched upon several major themes represented in worldwide scholarship on the topic. In general, the relation between sports and the media was conceptualised in terms of a symbiosis. (Smith 1976; Frey – Eitzen 1991; McChesney 1989; Russo 2004) This metaphoric term applies for the following reasons: On the one hand, sport events provide the media with content that attracts a large viewing audience² and, therefore, increases advertising revenues. Television programmes are scheduled according to the most important mega sport events, such as the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup™, or other significant national and international sports competitions. Some researchers go further, claiming that televised sport was a key element in launching the television industry. (Forster – Pope 2004) On the other hand, the profitability of the sports industry is significantly conditioned by media exposure that guarantees income from sponsorship and the sale of broadcasting rights.³ Moreover, media broadcasts

2 This is confirmed by cumulative viewing data for the last two FIFA World Cups™, which represent the most watched television coverage. The cumulative audience of the 2002 FIFA World Cup™ in South Korea and Japan and 2006 FIFA World Cup™ in Germany exceeded 26 billion viewers. (Infront Sports & Media 2006)

3 The profit margins from broadcasting rights have increased dramatically over the last thirty years. Whereas the costs associated with NBC winning the rights to broadcast the Tokyo Games (1964) reached 1.5 million US dollars, the broadcasting rights for the Athens Games (2004) cost the same network 793 million dollars. It is estimated that the price for the broadcasting rights for London Olympic Games (2012) will be over 1 billion dollars. (Horne – Manzenreiter 2006)

can serve to reinforce the attractiveness of a sports discipline and increase the number of its practitioners. (Leška 2006)

Nonetheless, the studies that took a socio-cultural perspective implied that the relationship has not always been perceived as beneficial for both sports and the media. The 'liaison' between sports and the media can sometimes involve harmful consequences for sport. Therefore the relationship has also been understood as an asymmetrical one. (Whannel 2000; McChesney 1989) This idea has been sustained in the theoretical concepts that situated sports within wider complexes, such as the sport/media complex (Jhally 1989), the media/sports production complex (Maguire 1991) or the media/sports cultural complex. (Rowe 1999) It is not insignificant that the global nature of the sports media industry owes its existence to the concentration of capital in the hands of a small number of privately owned larger multinational media companies. (Jarvie 2006)

From this viewpoint then the media reinforce the tendency to conceive sports as a commodity that is influenced by the processes of globalisation, professionalisation and spectacularisation. These processes can ultimately suppress authentic and traditional values and overshadow the moral and ethical principles of sports contests. The media pressure towards commodification fosters the creation of a star system, pushing athletes to excessive performance. (Giulianotti 2005b)

Rowe (1999) has emphasised that, in their mediated form, sports are not separable from politics and, similarly to other authors (Stead 2003; Whannel 2000), he suggests that sports help to promote and reinforce values connected with capitalism and nationalism as well as racial, ethnic, age and gender discrimination. This is well documented by Frey and Eitzen who propose that:

[t]he media are in a sense the creators of culture, conveying information about what is acceptable and unacceptable. Thus, the media reinforced established order and value consensus by virtue of the presentation, by commentary and pictures of sport events. These presentations can influence our ideas about sport, our perception of gender, race, social relations and proper behaviours, and our adherence to certain values.

(Frey – Eitzen 1991: 507)

Scholars focusing on the relationship between the media and sports have also analysed the work of sports journalists (Smith 1976; Emig 1986; Rowe 2007), the production of media messages and their influence on the final shape of media contents. For example, Porro (2002) showed how the reality of televised sports is constructed using a set of techniques, such as camera position, angle, close-ups, lens type, cutting patterns and commentary, and how these attributes help to create the final appearance of the event.

The most radical approach to analysing the impact of the media on sports stems from postmodern epistemology. The postmodern explanations are not primarily concerned with how the 'reality' of the mass media is produced and biased. Rather, they are concerned with how the media affect the real world and real action of sport events. Postmodern interpretations of hooligans' behaviour, for example, demonstrate how mediated hooliganism prefigures and reshapes actual hooliganism. (Giulianotti 2005b) Through the lens of a postmodern perspective, sporting events are fictionalized; they happen according to media – rather than sports – logic. (Reimer 2002) Additionally, the media even imposed changes on the rules of the game. (Porro 2002; Greco 2004,

Balducci 2007) It is a well known fact that in several American sports like ice hockey, basketball, and American football there are programmed time-outs in order to open up space for television advertisers. (Bellamy 1989; Stead 2003)

3. Active and reflexive sports actors: at the margins of theoretical interest

The previous paragraphs have not provided an exhaustive account of the current conceptualisations of sports and the media. Instead, they presented the main tenets of the research agenda. The literature review shows that in terms of topic selection the writings mirror the mainstream agenda set by media, regardless of the critical academic approach that they usually expressed. Therefore they were primarily concerned with high-level and elite sports while there has been little examination of sports actors' *active* or *reflexive* approaches to the media. While activity is linked to the aims that impact on the production of media messages and the acceptance of the rules of the media system, reflexivity is in opposition to the hegemony of the media system or challenges particular aspects of media representations of sport. Notwithstanding the marginal position of these studies, several rather exceptional analyses should be mentioned.

The first of the two qualities, *activity*, was explored by Lenskyj, a sociologist of sport. She demonstrated "the ways in which social activists used the media, both mainstream and alternative, to direct public attention to negative Olympic impacts on vulnerable populations and environments and to uncover the links between the Olympic industry and global capitalism." (Lenskyj, 2006: 206) In a similar way, facets of the active approach taken by football hooligans towards the media were outlined by Vochocová. (2007) She argues that some of the contributions published in the magazine *Football Factory* indicated that hooligans could perceive the media as a tool for improving their widespread reputation and change the negative image shared by the media audience. These efforts are developed concurrently with the hooligans' criticism of how they are represented in the media. This criticism focuses on the excessive attention that the media pay to hooligans, the overemphasised seriousness that journalists attribute to hooligan's violence or the interconnectedness of the media with 'repressive institutions' (e.g., police).

Vochocová (2007) thus provides evidence of sports actors' *reflexivity*, which in this particular example concerns the institutional links to the media or the meaning of media messages. In his analysis of the coverage of riots during the football derby in the Czech first division between Sparta and Slavia on 31 March 2008 Smolík (2008) applies a similar method of deconstructing media representations of hooligans. He identified the hooligans' refusal of dominant and mediated versions of the conflict between themselves and the police. According to Smolík, some of the hooligans supplemented their criticisms of the media with ideas that 'deconstruct' the moral panic that could have been caused by mainstream media coverage of the event before the game started. Similarly, Giuliannotti (1997) demonstrated how fans of the Scottish football team Aberdeen used fanzines to oppose dominant meanings promoted by professional mainstream journalism. These fans criticised the excessive attention that national dailies paid to big clubs and they reflected upon the uncritical celebration of heroes of the local clubs in local press.

The reflexivity of sports fans was also examined as an example of an alternative way of reading a mediated sporting event. In her theoretical synthesis on sport audiences Frandsen (2008) broadly argued that sports viewing is a meaning producing process, affected by the social context. Following the concept of active audience, she understood

sports viewing as an ongoing negotiation of identity, in terms of nationality, gender, class and age. In their analysis of viewer consumption of televised professional American football games, Duncan and Brummett (1993) identified the subversive nature of sports consumption among women. According to the authors, some women were able to contest the dominant patriarchal or sexist meanings portrayed by the media by using sarcasm, irony or being only partially committed to the game. Other examples of oppositional and negotiated readings were related to hegemonic representations of race and ethnicity in sports media. (McCarthy – Jones – Potrac 2003; van Sterkenburg – Knoppers 2004)

In addition to the studies described above, which concentrated on the type of reflexivity that involves aspects of journalists' work such as media messages or lay explanations of potential media effects, sociology of sport also recognises reflexivity that encompasses a refusal of the overall media system or even reinforces the commodification of sport.

Reflexivity thus focuses on the media as transmitters of commodified culture and as a group of institutions that, in their accommodation of advertisers' interests, negatively transform the authentic feelings connected with traditional understandings of sports. The example of free climbing in France demonstrates how sports practitioners refrained from accepting patterns of western culture and capitalist economy imposed on their sport by sponsors, marketing agencies, and the media. (Aubel – Ohl 2004) Practices and attitudes akin to these rejections of medially reproduced commodification were also observed by Giulianotti, who provided empirical evidence of criticism of the market rhetoric within a sports system that was expressed by Scottish football spectators. This reflexivity was based on emotional, biographical and community-based attachment to their clubs. (Giulianotti 2005a)

In this paper the term reflexivity will represent the constitutive analytical concept for re-thinking and revisiting the relationship between the media and sports, used alongside a rather descriptive notion of activity. The theoretical overview has already outlined some attributes of reflexive social action. However, some of its dimensions still require clarification.⁴

It is worth mentioning that these studies do not systematically articulate the meaning of the term *reflexivity* and that it has only seldom been explicitly defined. In these writings reflexivity was thus understood as a pattern of social action that can contribute to understanding other topics connected with sports, such as gender or subcultural identity. The notion of reflexivity most often denoted critical, opposing, subversive or protest social action.

This empirical evidence confirms Alexander's (1996) theoretical understanding of reflexivity; he suggested that reflexivity is a form of critical social action that is connected to meaning making depending "on a continued relation with relatively non-contingent, supra-individual cultural forms. In contemporary societies," he added, "these cultural forms are more separated from ascriptive positions, whether institutional, moral or geographic, than even before". (Alexander 1996: 138)

The phenomenologically inspired understanding of reflexive social action represents a shift away from the life-world (*attention à la vie*); it is an intersection of *durée*, a disruption of a natural attitude. (Schütz 1990 [1962]) Reflexive reasoning can therefore be understood as problematising ordinary social action. (Giddens 1991) Although some

4 This section summarises some basic propositions on reflexivity which I elaborated on in a more in-depth manner in my PhD dissertation entitled *Disenchantment with the Media*, written in Czech, *Odkouzlená média*. (Numerato 2005)

authors understood reflexivity exclusively in connection to rational, contextualised reasoning and theoretical knowledge, its moral, emotional, ethical, aesthetic or experience-based source cannot be disregarded. Lash (1994) made this point, asserting that both Giddens (1991) and Beck (1994) overemphasised the cognitive dimension of reflexivity and overlooked its aesthetic or hermeneutic dimensions. He stressed that reflexive forms did not have to be deliberate, but could also be anchored in unconscious feelings, in an aesthetic replication of patterns, in pre-reflexive schema like the *habitus*. Lash's explanation therefore moved common, everyday reasoning to the foreground. Reflexivity does not necessarily mean an intended, deliberate social action.

The following analysis adheres to the idea that forms of knowledge are dual, consisting of both everyday and theoretical knowledge, which can lay behind a reflexive social action. Reflexivity about media thus expresses "detachment from the rules and structures of action defined by the media field. It includes both criticism and problematisation of media messages, and hermeneutic intersection of ordinary action within the media field". (Numerato 2006a: 183) The plurality of different forms of knowledge hidden behind reflexivity suggests an existence of different forms of reflexivity that I will present in later sections of this article. I will thus address one of the questions presented in the introduction: How do sports actors reflect upon media representations of sports and the link between sports and the media?

4. Methodology

Considering the nature of the phenomenon being studied and its primarily explorative nature, this empirical paper is based on data collected during an ethnographic study in three Czech sports associations in the Czech Republic during 2007. It was preceded by a preparatory phase that focused mainly on the collection of primary and secondary documents. This initial phase of data collection started at the beginning of 2006 and continued into 2008.

The ethnographic study has been a part of a larger project, "Sport and Social Capital in the EU", which examined social aspects of sports governance, the nature of volunteering in sports, and the links between the sports environment and public administration and decision-making processes within sports associations, with a particular emphasis on the wider membership base participation. In addition to the Czech Republic, research was also carried out in Italy, Denmark and France. The objectives of the research study, along with the possibility of comparing different countries, centred on three pre-selected sports associations: the Czech Sailing Association (ČSJ), the Czech Handball Association (ČSH), and the Football Association of the Czech Republic (ČMFS).

In the theoretical introduction I have used the term sports actors several times. For the sake of clarity I will specify the usage of the term in the following empirical sections. Sports actors are the so-called sports community, which includes both volunteers and professional employees of sports associations, or clubs who actively intervene in decision-making processes or are directly affected by them. As I will show in the conclusion, the semantic scope of the term can be even richer, denoting any social actor related to the sports field. In this sense, it can encompass players' agents, delegates of public administration responsible for sports, sports journalists, sports marketing representatives, fans, supporters or hooligans. The attitudes of some these actors are also taken into consideration in this ethnographic study. However, I have not focused primarily on their *active* or *reflexive* action.

I conducted one hundred semi-structured interviews⁵ with representatives of the above mentioned sports associations at national, local and regional levels, with sports clubs representatives and with sports practitioners, professional employees and volunteers from multisport, umbrella sports federations (Sokol, ČOV, ČSTV) and with public administration representatives responsible for sport, in particular at a regional level. The bulk of the data gathered from the interviews carried out in the Czech Republic is enriched by informal interviews and field notes made during a number of participant and non-participant observations. The latter form of observation was carried out using the technique of complete observation during annual conferences, executive committee, or expert committee meetings, as well as during sporting events, training, tournaments, matches. Participant observation was conducted in a local football club.

Given my continuous symbolic or physical presence in the sports associations, the data quality for this ethnographic study was further substantiated with a review of primary and secondary documents related to the activities of selected sports associations. These documents included minutes of meetings, statistics, annual reports, policy statements and media messages covering decision-making processes and decisions made in the sports associations.

Respondents were selected in a way that ensured the possibility of a complex examination of the phenomena being studied, combining the method of snowball sampling with theoretical saturation. The relationship of sports associations with the media was identified as one of the key aspects of the study during the first preparatory phases of the project and the review of available documents. (Numerato 2006b) The significance of the media for sports consumers and their close link to decision making processes repetitively emerged during this explorative ethnographic endeavour.

Regular meetings with sports actors demonstrated that the media played a significant role in ordinary everyday awareness of both high-level and elite sports actors, as in the case of recreational and competitive sports. Thanks to this fact the ethnographic inquiry offered a number of empirical contributions. These contributions are valuable because the data generate from ordinary everyday interaction and, therefore, are not products of pre-structured research situations explicitly focused on the media.

The research strategy was mainly inductive. During the data analysis I worked with audio recordings of interviews, with field notes and with the above mentioned documents. The data were analysed both manually and using ATLAS.ti software. Given that the study is exploratory and is inspired by grounded theory methodology, open, thematic and selective techniques of coding were employed. (Glaser – Strauss 1967)

Repetitive data reading and listening sessions contributed to creating more general categories. In the next phase I searched for links and similarities among these categories as well as tensions between them. The data analysis and data collection processes were partly driven by a constant comparison with a theoretically defined and subsequently empirically specified concept of reflexivity. The analysis was also driven by the objective of identifying various forms of sports actors' media activity.

The collected data are presented to illustrate theoretically constructed concepts through narrative, ethnographic transmission. The following analysis and interpretations should not be understood as definitive findings that could be generalised for different sporting cultures. Rather, they are meant to identify different forms of sports actors'

5 The length of each interview differed, however they typically lasted between forty five and ninety minutes.

activity and reflexivity in relation to the media. At the same time, they should contribute to the analysis of meanings that sports actors attribute to the media in various contexts. Whereas the section dedicated to activity has a rather descriptive nature and offers an introductory insight into the relationship between sports associations and the media, the section anchored in the concept of reflexivity is rather interpretative in nature.

The inclusion of quotes and respondents' statements is selective: they appear in order to illustrate symptomatic tenets of the interpreted phenomena. In the majority of cases, statements are anonymised in order not to disclose the identity of respondents. Furthermore, their colloquial style is preserved in order to guarantee a certain level of ethnographic authenticity.

5. Sport actors' activity

As I mentioned in the theoretical overview, academic meta-narratives about the relationship between the media and sports communities brought into the foreground the topic of media hegemony. Specifically, these narratives focused mainly on the global, consumerist and commodified nature of contemporary sports. Somewhat marginally, attention was paid to the ways in which sports actors negotiate their relationship with the media on the level of everyday situations and ordinary decisions or how they use the media in order to further the development of sports. These topics are dealt with in the following paragraphs.

Ten months of ethnographic research on the Czech sports environment provided me with invaluable data to facilitate an understanding of the role of the media in sports associations. The research involved non-participant observations during formal encounters, annual conferences, and general assemblies or executive committee meetings at regional and local levels. Truly ethnographic, meaning unplanned and unstructured, experiences emerged during ordinary interactions and demonstrated that the media are not separable from sports even at the lowest levels of sports governance.⁶

This applies in particular to sports association representatives' negotiations about *who*, *when* and *how* should refer to match and race results to guarantee media coverage of specific sports disciplines. This is typical of the nature of interaction between the sports environment and the media.⁷ First, it raises the practical issue of the definition of the means of communication with a journalist. Here communication refers to information transmission rather than an effort to cultivate or create a media image, or even to persuade. Second, this implies a sentiment shared by many in the sports public that "*the media are necessary for the development of sports*".

These symptoms represent only a metonymic expression of wider decision-making processes about the media activity that overcome the banal question of information trans-

6 It is worth mentioning that such an ethnographic idealisation of ordinariness has its limits and that my presence in the field could partly affect the nature of the authentic behaviour of the observed actors. More or less seriously mentioned labels that sports actors used to comment on my presence in the field include *spy*, *control or inspector* (e.g., field notes from annual conference of a regional handball association, 24 March 2007; a sailing regatta at a national level, 28 September 2007). Sometimes my presence in the field was, albeit inadequately, due to the name of the larger project perceived to be in congruence with the politics of the European Union (e.g., field notes from non-participant observation in a sailing club on 21 March 2007; an expert committee meeting of the ČMFS, 14 February 2007). These comments, however, remained only accidental and their effect was soon diminished in the flow of social action.

7 Increased or, rather, guaranteed media coverage is perceived as a means to increase the membership base, to popularise a sports discipline and, as a consequence, to attract sponsors or public funding.

mission. This notion regards these situations as denoting an understanding of the media as meaning producers rather than media as a means of information transmission. Decisions about how to alter the negative images of sports associations, how to get sports into media, or how to communicate with journalists are some examples.

The nature of these key decisions varies among different sporting cultures. Whereas the associations governing less popular sports such as handball and sailing are looking for ways to guarantee at least a minimum level of media coverage, the football association seeks to change the ways in which sports associations are presented.⁸ To overcome this unfavourable situation, the officials of the ČSH feel forced to adopt several measures that would be inconceivable for other sports movements. They are actively engaged in the media production process in order to provide media with a product that is almost ready for broadcasting. This was explained well by a handball official who was a member of the national Executive Committee.

You must provide the media with a service. You have to load them with information, statistics... We have equipped the Extraliga teams with camcorders with the format used on television [*and*] with a manual on how to successfully record tracks from games. [*Within*] 24 hours they deliver them to the television station.

The sailing association also struggles to increase media coverage of sailing. Similarly to the handball association, for the ČSJ the so-called 'medialisation'⁹ represents a key item of the policy statement of the current executive committee. (ČSH 2005; ČSJ 2006) However, this official objective is not always supported by the entire membership base. In the cases of both the ČSH and the ČSJ, the views of the membership base on the so-called 'medialisation' are rather ambivalent.

A number of interviews and observations demonstrated that a refusal of greater openness of sports associations towards media is linked to the high costs of these plans and the modest conditions of volunteering at local clubs. At lower levels of governance, the effort to increase media coverage is met with suspicion because it is perceived as a way to support the personal interests of those who initiated them or are responsible for their realization. In a sense this standpoint indicates a general absence of vertical trust. In the case of sailing, the opposition to the visibility of sports in media also relies on a discourse criticizing consumerism and commodification that justify the media coverage of sports.

Not only are the efforts to increase media visibility criticised because they exhaust resources that could otherwise be used for other projects perceived to be of greater importance (e.g., investments in sports for the young). This effort also clashes with an understanding of sailing that is determined on a generational basis.¹⁰ Some sailors view mass

8 I even witnessed a discussion about a proposal that the ČMFS should walk out after an article criticising the contemporary executive committee was published. The proposal concerned an agreement with a sports weekly about publishing a regular two-page story about youth football. (Field notes from an expert committee the ČMFS, 14 February 2007)

9 By putting the term medialisation in quotes I emphasise that it is an expression used by sports actors.

10 This is one of the ideas traditionally held by the sailing community, which was established before the Velvet Revolution of 1989. However the post-1989 development of sailing and its closeness to media introduced the trends of commercialisation and commodification. These were simultaneously accompanied by the articulation of opposing attitudes. These different approaches towards media also became one of the key attributes of the current internal differentiation of the sailing movement.

media as intrusive institutions that may jeopardise the shared rituals and habits of sports practice, increase its commercialisation and disrupt the ritualised community spirit of their sports movement. (Numerato 2009, forthcoming) The modest attitude, basically a myth to which a substantial part of the Czech sailing community subscribes, is well-illustrated in a comment made by the president of one of the best Czech sailing clubs:

It is a sport of self-sustaining and independent people and they probably do not feel a necessity to make themselves visible to the outside world. It might even seem to be unsuitable for them... We [*sailors*] are simply not made for these things.

The ambivalent attitude towards the proliferation of sailing in the media was clearly illustrated at the penultimate Annual Conference of the ČSJ. During the assembly a member of the executive committee who is responsible for PR activities proposed to schedule only one specific weekend for the national championship for all major sailing classes in order to guarantee the presence of the best sailors in one set of events and to make the sport more attractive for the media. This proposal, justified by meteorological and geographical conditions, was met with strong disagreement from association members who objected to media pressures that they believed destroy the “way of doing things as they have been done since the days of Adam and Eve”. (Field notes from the Annual Conference of ČSJ, 19 January 2007)

Unlike the cases of sailing and handball, the football community is not forced to struggle for more media coverage. The main characteristic of football actors’ media activities is different: they frequently disagree with media representations of football governance. Some top officials in the Football Association of the Czech Republic (ČMFS) have frequently criticised the ways in which media portray the governance of their sport, such as conflicts over power, and a too frequent emphasis on problems in Czech football. Their distrust of sports journalism became clear when they proposed to limit media attendance at the last General Assembly of the ČMFS. A ČMFS vice-president explained these measures in the following way (www.idnes.cz, 23 January 2007):

When the assembly opens, photographers and television staff will be allowed to enter the main hall in order to take some pictures. Afterwards, only ten journalists will stay in the congress hall. We will ask the Club of Sports Journalists to choose these ten journalists. The presence of ten people would surely prevent any information from being biased [*and*] the transparency of the General Assembly is guaranteed.

These efforts fit with broader strategies employed by the executive board of the football associations aimed at changing the public perception of Czech football. For this reason, in the second half of 2006 and at the beginning of 2007 leading officials adopted mechanisms to change these representations by organising so-called “football breakfasts”, informal meetings with journalists to push the media agenda towards positive and less controversial topics.¹¹ The expectations implicit in this move are expressed by one of the expert employees of the ČMFS:

11 Similarly to the sailing and handball associations, these strategies of media cultivation are not always accepted in a positive manner. This attitude is usually linked to criticisms of the association’s executive board.

Well, if I pay for the journalists' breakfast, some form of an agreement should exist .. that there is this, that and the other project. I think that today, for example, *Sport* is undoubtedly a tabloid and it is similar to *Blesk*, only with one difference: it is about sports. And nobody mentions things like youth or projects set up for the young.

The previous description provided insight into the sports environment. The ethnography-driven narrative captured basic features of communication strategies employed by the sports association. Considering the rational orientation of these forms of action, I can classify them as deliberate media activity.

It is worth emphasising that the media activity of sports actors does not necessarily have to be preceded by a rational assessment of potential media effects on sports development or of the public image of sports. In the course of ethnographic research I encountered several situations where the manifestation of activity towards the media represented a simple reaction to a command from above, in a bureaucratic, Weberian sense. (Field notes based on a phone interview with an employee of the press office of a sports association, 16 January 2007)

In other cases, on the contrary, the activity was stimulated from below. In these cases it is possible to understand media activity as a reaction to a broken continuity in media coverage of sporting events at a local level; e.g., shooters stopped seeing their names in regional press or club representatives miss decisions made by a disciplinary committee. (e.g., field notes from an informal meeting at a local football competition, 7 March 2007)

In terms of a substantial contribution of communication to sports representation, both cases, for different reasons, represent meaningless media activities conducted as a habit or as a duty. A more substantial contribution for a sports association – the positive effect of media coverage on a sports discipline – becomes a somewhat unintended product of those actions that are not based on media literacy.

The media literacy of those sports actors who are responsible for various levels of sports governance could be key for an understanding of the plurality of *media activities* of sports actors. I have identified six different groups of such actors in the course of the ethnographic study.

First, there are actors whose responsibility for the relationship with media is driven by necessity. These actors are responsible for PR activities because nobody else could have carried out these duties. This form of activity is frequently, but not necessarily, linked with an absence of media literacy skills and with a lay approach to the media.

Second, even though in some constellations sports actors lack media literacy skills, they do not perform a media related position because of necessity but because they were nominated for that position. A person who cannot competently deal with media may be assigned the position for different reasons: the person is easy to manipulate, an expression of a reward or gratitude, or a product of existing clientelist relationships between the nominator and the nominated. (Field notes from an informal interview, 16 November 2007)

Third, some sports association officials perform PR activities because they possess partial competencies whose shortcomings are not deconstructed. On the contrary, these competencies sometimes function as a source of the membership base's support. This is the case of managerial, technical or economic skills, which connote knowledge

of the media and fulfil the role on a superficial level but do not work in terms of media literacy. This understanding is connected to the managerial discourse about the media that constructs its own version, and therefore its own criteria, for assessing successful media praxis. Put simply, those actors who command this kind of vacuous media literacy can be seen as key actors in overcoming nebulously perceived media uncertainty on the part of sports associations. This hope stems from the fact that these actors move successfully within their professional world. To be successful means to be someone who knows how to work with media. These actors, however, only possess some kind of a managerial style of decision-making that is not motivated by a particular competence in the sphere of media. (e.g., field notes from a regional sports association conference, 24 March 2007)

The importance of the managerial discourse can also be connected to the context in which efforts to mobilize the proliferation of sports in the media appear in the post-transformation and post-communist period in the Czech Republic. First, this may be a manifestation of the increasing internationalisation of Czech sports associations, which reflects global trends in sports association governance. Second, it is a symptom of looking for new ways to finance sports with significantly increased costs following the construction of Sazka Arena¹² that forced sports associations to look for alternative sources of funding. Technical and economic competence in juxtaposition with media literacy represents an attractive, although not always effective, solution.

Fourth, another group of active sports media actors is comprised of sports association members and employees who possess partial media literacy competences obtained in media-proximate disciplines. Knowledge of the economy of the media market or language skills are typical of this sort of partial competence. They are able to employ these skills in the definition of the sports association's communication strategies.

Fifth, active sports media actors can also perform their roles because they have access to social networks in the media sphere, as did a representative of the ČSJ who handled public relations (albeit he was not a sailor originally). He explained his qualifications by referencing his social contacts: *"If someone works for twenty years, more or less, in radio and television, then you usually know some journalists."* This kind of social competence is often combined with the sixth and final type of competence, symbolic competence. Symbolic competence denotes a high level of media literacy, a knowledge of the rules of journalists' work, public relations, in general of the workings of media.

The variety of competences and the level of media literacy are reflected in sports actors' media activities and therefore also in media messages related to sports. It is not the main aim of this paper to provide an analysis of these messages, although I will include a short note on the topic. The existence of a variety of competences can explain the existence of many hybrid media forms appearing in the post-communist or post-transformation Czech Republic: these forms are the product of the intersection of professionalism with the enthusiasm of the volunteer non-profit sector, of the communist legacy with neo-liberal, global or European enthusiasm, or a calculative approach and strategic misuse of the media combined with gratuitous efforts to communicate throughout media. In this context, mechanisms that are usually considered unethical and immoral¹³ are normalised, mechanisms of the production of media messages that should have

12 It is worth noting that it is also the consequence of the amended law on VAT of 2006 which had an impact on betting and lottery.

13 A typical illustration is the above-mentioned example of football breakfasts and the expectation that these complimentary breakfasts will encourage journalists to write stories that are in line with the host's desires.

been secret so that they guarantee the potential effectiveness of communication are disclosed, and some overestimated projects are implemented because of an excessive belief in the power of the media. These are, however, only notes that supplement the study's main theses.

6. Reflexivity of sports actors

The nature of sports actors' communication strategies towards the media suggests that an active intervention in media message production is usually preceded by reflexivity upon the media, or that an active account represents an expression of reflexivity itself. Whereas activity can be put in practice under the conditions of implicit or explicit recognition of media's role and an uncritical acceptance of media messages, reflexivity represents an expression of their denial, or questioning, of selected features of the media system, or an effort to achieve an in-depth understanding of the role of media and its impact on sports. The *activity* of sports actors can, but does not necessarily have to, contribute to media *reflexivity*.

The question posed at the beginning of this paper – whether sports actors reflect upon media representations of sports and the relationship between the media and sports – can be specified further. Searching for different forms of reflexivity expressed by sports actors can be differentiated according to the *objectives* of a reflexive action, namely its *object* and the *meaning* it possesses:

- What are the objectives of the action leading towards reflexivity upon media representations of sports and the relationship between media and sports?
- What are the objects of reflexivity upon media representations of sports?
- What meanings does this reflexive action possess?

First, regarding the objectives of a reflexive action, the role of the media can be reflected by sports actors either by focusing primarily on a different aim, where reflexivity is not an end in itself, or by action whereby reflexivity represents the main objective. These two forms represent two extreme ends of a scale of potential forms of reflexivity. Any manifestation of reflexivity is thus situated on a continuum outlined by these two poles.

The differences between these objectives can be illustrated with a particular communication strategy of sports actors – a press blackout. Its primary objective can be to avoid the negative effects of 'media pressure' on sports performance before an important sporting event. Such a press blackout is a par excellence example of media reflexivity immersed within a social action. On the other hand, a press blackout can also signify a protest against a particular representation of sport. Whereas in the first case reflexivity is immersed within a social action, in the second case reflexivity represents an end in itself.

Second, the variety of reflexive forms that I observed during the ethnographic study demonstrates that reflexivity can refer to many topics characterising the relationship between the media and sport. Agenda-setting processes can represent one of these topics. Some of the members of the ČMFS active at a national level complain about the huge influence that media have on the reasoning and attitudes of local and regional volunteers (Numerato 2008) and, therefore, this stimulates a disagreement with the football federation governance or they increase the amount of attention given to some problems, such as the lack of transparency or corruption.

The nature of media messages represents another object of reflexivity. The following comment on the press coverage of sailing from 2006 is full of non-sports topics, this has

an impact on the sport itself, and the comment is typical of at least a small share of the sailing association, if not the majority of the membership base:

What should I tell you? The media are how it is and you saw – if you browse the press coverage and collect articles about sailing from last year, half of the articles are on Lenka Šmídová, aren't they? And about half of these are tabloid articles; what make-up she uses, what she eats, what she wears, how beautiful she is. So these are the contemporary media. You can hardly do something with this.

The processes affecting the production of media messages and media effects represent other objects of reflexivity. This can be illustrated with the following two critical standpoints, voiced by volunteers from the ČSJ and the ČMFS, respectively:

When they write about sports, they should know about them. [...] Sometimes they cover them in an unfamiliar and superficial way. Maybe the times will change. If they are paid for the number of lines they write regardless of what they write, no one is interested in it.

The media are very important, this is a key point. Journalists use different rhetorics than business people, lawyers. They are able to transform the [*meaning*]. They express [*things*] in a normal way to normal people who are able to absorb them.

I deliberately chose the second example to emphasise the fact that reflexive criticism means criticism in an epistemological sense, not criticism in the everyday meaning of the word. Therefore, criticism does not necessarily suggest uncovering errors and searching for negative features. It can also encompass efforts to understand the media system. Several types of framing of respondents' comments, such as "*So these are the contemporary media, you can hardly do anything with this*", "*The media are how it is,*" or "*Well, we are forced to accept it [as it is],*" help to uncover the full semantic scope of the term *reflexivity*.

Therefore, not only are they preceded by searching for negative aspects of media and their functioning, but they also represent recognition of the media. Another object of reflexivity can be the preferential treatment of certain sports disciplines in the media, as is demonstrated in the following statement by a youth coach and a key representative of the ČSH:

The second most important fact, which affects the number of children participating [*in our sport*] is television, media. Obviously, sports that are popular in the media are in a better position than those that receive less attention. If you looked at Sport [*Deník Sport* – daily newspaper on sports], you would see that it is strictly divided: 50% football, 30% ice-hockey, 10% tennis, motor and winter sports, and the rest is for others.

Sports actors' *reflexivity* is based on disclosing the links between journalists and interest groups, the commercialisation of the media and its impact on sports and its spectacu-

larisation. *Meta-reflexive* forms represent specific types of reflexivity: they reflect upon a reflection expressed by another actor, often a competitor. The following statement made by a volunteer who is active in sports governance may be symptomatic since it expresses his attitude towards the executive board of the ČMFS whose members are often negative about the media:

I do not agree with the opinion that it is necessary to educate journalists, to let them know how they should write or that to give up on them is even better because they cannot be educated anyway.

As I outlined before, the types of media reflexivity expressed by sports actors can, thirdly, be distinguished alongside the meanings they possess. Throughout a detailed analysis of symbolic forms of knowledge I identified three different ways of sports actors' media reflexivity: *particular*, *substantialising* and *substantial*.

Particular reflexivity concerns partial attributes of media representations of sporting events and is related to specific aspects of a sport, not towards sports as a general category. A distinctive characteristic of such a form of reflexivity lies in the fact that it is not oriented to reflexivity upon the whole media system, but rather to a particular manifestation. This form of reflexivity can be illustrated with the statement of an expert employee of the ČMFS, who – in a lay manner – deconstructed the circumstances of the candidacy of the former Czech football player Ivan Hašek during the association's last presidential election by comparing his actual skills with the media image:

He was more or less pushed into it [*the candidacy*] by media. He is a man who practically knows almost nothing about the football environment. He has never been an official. He is a coach, he is a good coach, but he is absolutely untouched by football organisation [...] I think that he was a figure created by the media that would come to save Czech football [...] Of course, it became a major topic for journalists when he was struggling to understand football, but this was created by the media.

If a particular reflexivity means an expression of a negative attitude to the media, it operates through the logic of concealment, in other words refraining from the media portrayal of a sport, specific for media representation, providing a biased picture of sports worlds, incorrect and exploitative.

Substantialising reflexivity is not, in comparison to particular reflexivity, focused exclusively on one particular, selected attribute, but at the same time a more abstract idea about media is implicitly imprinted in it. Substantialising reflexivity is, thus, an expression of a critical perspective on the media in general, however, reflexivity is anchored within a limited, ideologically formed symbolic universe and connected to biased ideas about the nature of media. Sports actors therefore do not assess the media in the real context in which they appear but within the frame of their own idealised or normative understanding about how they should be.

Actors acting by means of a substantialising form of reflexivity are not able to take into consideration the variety of contexts in which the media can appear. This form of reflexivity is anchored in generationally or ideologically pre-structured expectations. In the case of Czech sports associations, the legacy of the communist regime is pro-

jected onto these expectations. The media are thus understood as 'a notice board' or as 'an official loudspeaker.' Some sports actors expect that they would present official information and reflect upon media content from this limited perspective. This is formulated well in the following meta-reflexive remark of a the ČSJ volunteer:

In the last years, mainly older sailors thought that journalists should write more about the so-called youth issues, about children, etc. But this does not interest anybody, does it? Children's sports were popularised under communism.

This account not only discloses the expectation stemming from an idea about the unidimensionality of the media nourished by the communist regime. On the other hand, in a more radical version, it can also represent expectations stemming from a biased neo-liberal discourse.¹⁴ This could be symptomatic of the opinion that "*news about youth sports do not interest anybody and therefore do not to sell*". The inherently abstract nature of this kind of reflexivity might conceal differences between public and private media, which function, or at least should function, according to different imperatives.

So-called substantialised reflexivity does not necessarily have to be nurtured by a political ideology. It can appear in the form of strategic use of a reflexive rhetoric, therefore expressed as *if* it was substantially reflexive. In these cases, the main objective of reflexivity is not to reflect on the functioning of the media system, but rather to transpose the attention of sports viewers and to misuse reflexivity as a rhetoric weapon by pointing out the media shortcomings. In this form substantialising reflexivity is a rhetorical device.

In comparison with substantialising reflexivity, the notion of substantial reflexivity is broader. Such a standpoint is expressed in more abstract categories and in an effort to understand the influence of media on sports, often related to the notions of commercialisation and spectacularisation of sports. Sports actors at lower levels tend to criticise spectacularisation of sports as it was illustrated by a representative of a sailing club: "*Today it is not often about sports, rather it is about a circus.*" Substantial reflexivity is an expression of a negative attitude to media and it operates through the logic of denial, or refusal of the media system itself, within a perspective that challenges the nature of sport: its authenticity, values, traditions and collective participation. The above mentioned critical remarks on the 'medialisation' of sports represent an almost ideal-typical example of those forms of *substantial reflexivity* that are based within tradition.

Different forms of reflexivity cannot be viewed separately, they must be considered in light of their interconnections and the complexity of their dialectic relationship. Partial reflexivity might become a source of substantial reflexivity. Substantial reflexivity can provide a frame for an articulation of partial reflexivity. The substantial nature of reflexivity can therefore work as a symbolic pattern for substantialising forms of reflexivity.

7. Conclusion and discussion

The aim of this study was to empirically and theoretically substantiate social scientific conceptualisations of the relationship between media and sports. Risking simplification and reification, I can summarise the main idea by stating that the symbiosis between the media

14 This limited approach to media can result in *a priori* refusal of some proposals, unwillingness to listen to others and in misunderstandings. (e.g., field notes from annual conferences of regional sports association, 27 March and 24 April 2007)

and sports is a relationship of an unproblematised (by sports actors) liaison between both institutions, and also represents a relationship that is reflected and continuously redefined through sports actors' activities.

The interpretations of different forms of activity and reflexivity presented here not only confirm the empirical validity of the metaphorical notion of symbiosis between the media and sports. They simultaneously testify to their existence and intersections in those forms of sports that are seemingly disembedded from the relationship with media: recreational and competitive sports.

Considering the activity of sports actors, this symbiosis is not taken for granted but negotiated. Additionally, it is frequently acknowledged, criticised and problematised. At the same time it is also maintained and reproduced. Any reflexive manifestation on the part of sports actors therefore not only constitutes a denial of the role of the media, or their criticism, but at the same time promotes their recognition. If media theories define the interaction between sports and media – with a particular emphasis on macro-social links and economic indices – then the interaction must be elaborated upon, strategies that sports actors *actively* employ to influence the production of media messages must be taken into account and so do the meanings that sports actors attribute to the media through their *reflexivity*.

Media reflexivity has become an institutionalised form of social action within the macro-social constellations of late-modernity. Therefore sports actors' media reflexivity is not necessarily an expression of exclusivity but rather a symptom of normality. In these conditions the meaning of reflexive forms can be loosened because of their omnipresence and the fact that reflexivity is strategically misused in the form of substantialising reflexivity.

The understanding of sports actors media reflexivity has a somewhat exploratory value and in a way represents an agenda-setting process by defining new topics for further research. The conclusions of this ethnographic study can be further elaborated by answering the following questions: What are the impacts of media reflexivity practiced by sports actors? To what extent can sports actors' substantial and particular media reflexivity contribute to the redefinition of the meanings associated with their sport? From a historical point of view, does considering the emerging forms of strategically employed, loosened or meta-reflexive forms of reflexivity signal the arrival of a post-reflexive period? Can we find similar mechanisms of reflexivity focused on media in social spheres other than sports, such as the economy, politics and culture?

As I demonstrated in the beginning I used a narrow version of the term sports actor including sports viewers, volunteers, professional employees, or sports clubs who actively entered the decision-making processes. Further research on the phenomenon can be directed at other forms of sports actors' activity and reflexivity, such as sports fans, supporters, ultras, hooligans, and also sports journalists or television audiences, players agents, or lobby groups established in support of sporting events bids or the organisation of important sporting events.

To summarise, the forms of *activity* and *reflexivity* presented in this paper do not represent sports actors' behaviour in its entirety and can be understood as a challenge for further research. It is obvious that by understanding the term sports actor in a broader sense, other forms of media activity can be identified. Media activity can follow other objectives than sports development, including a strategic promotion of particular interests, evolving in opposition to the efforts to promote sport development, e.g., affecting the media coverage of corruption or activities linked to non-sports interests

when the potential of the media effect rests on symbolic acts of resistance, protest or political marketing. As I suggested in the theoretical overview, a broader sense of the term sports actor can also contribute to the exploration of other forms of reflexivity that were not taken into account in this study, such as supporters' chants or banners expressing a negative attitude towards media.

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